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EU-BALKAN OBSERVATORY HIGHLIGHTS

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EU-Balkan Observatory Highlights 2024-2025

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Resistance, Culture, and Everyday Politics

THE EU-BALKAN OBSERVATORY: RETHINKING A REGION IN TRANSFORMATION

Ivana Stepanović & **Jody Jensen**

The Balkans have long been imagined as Europe's backward region (Todorova, 2009), and a space of intersections and ambiguities, both inside and outside the European project, both familiar and other. Yet the region's persistent redefinition of itself makes it one of the most dynamic laboratories for observing political, social, cultural, and technological change. The EU-Balkan Observatory emerges from this awareness: as a platform for dialogue, reflection, and research. It aims to trace the multiple and often contradictory pathways through which the region precariously and continuously redefines itself, engages and disengages with Europe. It is through the Balkans, as the eternal periphery and the other, that Europe continues to be contested and reimagined.

This publication brings together a set of concise and diverse research contributions. It does not aspire to a single narrative, rather it recognizes the plurality of experiences, crises, and creative responses that mark the contemporary Balkans – from environmental degradation to anti-corruption protests, and new reconciliation efforts. What binds these contributions together is an understanding that the region is not merely a geographical entity or a transitional space "on its way" to Europe, but a complex ecosystem of social imaginaries, historical continuities, and new global entanglements. Beyond stereotypes that marginalise and devalue this culturally rich region, the Balkans is also a place where radically new and unorthodox ideas are born, both in online spaces and offline in real+-world contexts.

Several recurring themes had emerged. One is the ongoing tension between *integration* and autonomy. As the papers on EU enlargement and democratic backsliding reveal, the process of aligning with European norms remains as much a political performance as a structural transformation. Between aspirations of progress and the realities of "stabilitocracy," (Bieber, 2018) the Western Balkans continue to oscillate between reform and fatigue, between the promise of Europe and the pressures of internal stagnation. Yet, there is still a strong belief among regional actors and citizens that European integration is not only desirable but necessary for prosperity and belonging.

The Balkans have often functioned as a laboratory for the toxic interplay of nationalism, populism and memory politics. It is a space in which war-time mythologies, and ethno-populist mobilisation converged with alarming intensity. In the 1990s the region experienced the catastrophic culmination of nationalist myth-making, where collective memory was used for identity politics and mass mobilisation. What followed were decades of populist governance that fused nostalgia, victimhood, conspiracy theories and symbolic politics into everyday regimes of power. These dynamics now echo across the Global West, where performative populist spectacle has entered mainstream political culture (Brentin & Trošt, 2016; Jensen, 2021). In this sense, the region anticipated important features of the populist surge in the global West. It exposed populism not as a deviation from liberal democracy, but as one of its logical mutations, where identity politics, unresolved traumas and media-spectacle become a form of governance. The Balkans sent warning signs in the nineties, pointing towards bleak futures when unhealed historic traumas resurface. And when populism gets digital amplification, it can create disturbing shifts in global politics (Asavei et al. 2020; Hadžić, 2021).

Another theme is the emergence of new political subjectivities, innovative forms of protest and the transformation of traditional concepts of democracy and diplomacy. The analyses of youth activism, protest movements, and digital practices point to a generational reconfiguration of dissent. From student blockades in Serbia to creative acts of resistance on social media, a new political language is being forged: one that blends spontaneity and strategic communication, personal and political. These movements articulate a demand not simply for regime change but for the re-evaluation of ethical values, and the reclaiming of the public sphere. They illustrate the growing role of Generation Z in redefining what justice, democracy, and participation mean under hybrid regimes.

Equally crucial is the role of media and technology as agents of transformation. The region's digital landscape demonstrates that new platforms can re-open closed histories, enable transnational connections that deliver new narratives to the public discourse via social media. In a part of Europe still haunted by the memory of conflict, online spaces have become arenas for peacebuilding, informal diplomacy, and unprecedented levels of empathy, solidarity and interethnic cooperation. These digital interactions often unfold beyond the reach of formal institutions, challenging the boundaries between civic engagement, activism, and creativity.

The Balkans is inseparable from global challenges. From climate change and disruptive technologies to armed conflicts and the changing world order, global grievances deeply impact the fragile peace in the Balkans. With systemic gaps in capacity, education, and governance, the region is struggling to survive the tectonic shifts in world politics and environmental challenges. Environmental policies appear to be a mirror for the wider struggle between aspiration and implementation, echoing the region's broader dilemmas of modernization and sustainability. Addressing these gaps requires a shared ethical framework rooted in justice, cooperation, and intergenerational responsibility.

Together, the EU-Balkan Observatory Highlights offer more than a collection of case studies. They form a mosaic of lived Europeanization (Elbasani, 2013) a process as cultural and affective as it is institutional. The Balkans, in this sense, are not Europe's "unfinished business" (Zielonka, 2006) but its testing ground for new modes of belonging, governance, and solidarity. Whether in the form of youth resistance, feminist activism, digital creativity, or climate policy reform, the region continually produces knowledge that transcends its borders.

The *EU-Balkan Observatory* seeks to sustain this dialogue by bringing together scholars, practitioners, and citizens who approach the region not through stereotypes of instability, but as a space of innovation and resilience. The following pages invite the reader to see the Balkans not as a periphery, but as an observatory as a vantage point from which the complex interplay of democracy, technology, identity, and ecology in Europe can be understood.

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Regional Futures and Geopolitical Outlook

EU INTEGRATION PROCESSES IN THE WESTERN BALKANS AND FACILITATION POSSIBILITIES OF CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPEAN STATES

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The aim of this research was to conduct a comparative and holistic study and review of the dynamics of the EU integration processes and the ensuing political, economic, social and cultural implications for the Western Balkans. It also provides a picture of how the European perspective in the countries of the Western Balkans is shaped, promoted, or challenged.

METHODOLOGY

The research was conducted to provide a comprehensive review of contemporary economic and political relations between Western Europe and Central and Eastern European states. In order to capture broader information from different "actors," a specifically designed electronic questionnaire was prepared and shared via e-mail and social media.

THE QUESTIONAIRE

The questionnaire was divided into several topics:

- Personal information: nationality (citizenship), age, gender, education, profession etc.
- Questions about the EU integration of the Western Balkans
- Questions about the closeness and the distance between EU states, Western Balkans (WB) and Central Europe (CE), Russia, and China (emotional, cultural, political, economic links)
- Questions about the experiences of CE states in the EU integration process regarding the facilitation of the integration process of the WB.
- Questions about the expectations about the upcoming EU Parliament elections and about the Hungarian presidency of the EU in the second half of 2024 regarding the enlargement process.

GENERAL TRENDS

Some general trends and positions can be derived from the survey:

- A significant majority, 74%, of those surveyed think that the Western Balkan countries should become members of the EU by 2030.
- Only 23% of respondents had a negative opinion about Macron's proposal for the European Political Community, and 28% disagree that the inclusion of the WB countries into the EU should happen together in a "Big Package".
- Regarding the strict fulfillment of the "Copenhagen Criteria", only 30,8% of those surveyed reject the idea of a "fast-track" EU accession for the WB countries.
- More than 50% of those surveyed believe that issues such as the fight against corruption and organized crime, free competition, and the rule of law "should not be compromised."
- Social and cultural distance questions show that the perceived distance between people from the Balkans and Central European countries is negligible, although 26% of those surveyed answered neutrally to the question of whether the WB countries should have veto power in decision-making once they become EU members.

- Responses regarding proximity indicate an overall level of trust toward people from the Balkans, though a high percentage (32,5%) gave neutral answers to the statement "the Balkans are cunning and resourceful people".
- The majority (over 50%) of those surveyed use internet portals and social networks to obtain information about WB countries, which increases the risk of disinformation and fake news.
- According to respondents, Slovenia is most likely to help the facilitation of the EU integration of the WB countries, although all other countries also have advantages in making important contributions to the processes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The future of the EU and its development is closely related to the timely integration of the Western Balkans. However, the integration process faces many obstacles, some of which are very challenging, like anti-corruption measures, rule of law, free competition, environmental policies, education, science, energy, and many others. It is crucial to research connections between the Balkans and Central and Eastern Europe for several reasons. The first is to examine how public discourse in both Central and Western Europe reinforces the historically negative image of the Balkans. The post-Cold War image of the Balkans as a region is predominantly associated with nationalism, ethnic violence, mass murder, corruption, and underdevelopment that was greatly influenced by the wars in the 1990s. However, things began to shift at the beginning of the century.

With the hostilities in the Balkans gradually coming to an end, opportunities arise to strengthen relationships between Central Europe and the Balkan region as well. Moreover, the Balkans, but once constituted the traditional "Other" upon which "Europe" was constructed, they have also adapted to become part of the European integration process. The opportunity to join the EU has been extended to every Balkan nation. Considering that the countries of Central Europe are among the most ardent advocates for the Western Balkan membership in the EU, it is imperative to examine the factors contributing to this support. In this context, the role of Central European states is crucial in facilitating and achieving social cohesion and EU standards in the Western Balkans states.

THE EU'S NEW FRONTLINE: RE-ARMING CIVIC RESILIENCE

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INTRODUCTION

Hannah Arendt states that democracy survives only when citizens remain "present" in the political process, not merely governed by it. That idea still resonates today in an increasingly securitized regional environment—shaped by hybrid interference, geopolitical tension, and shrinking donor support. In such circumstances, our societies need informed, constructive, and resilient civic actors more than ever. The citizen incorporates the character of the *civis*. Only the presence of other people confirms to us that our perception of the world as well as of ourselves is anchored in reality.

Civil society in the Western Balkans faces persistent threats. Donor priorities are shifting, civic space is contracting, and yet the need to strengthen the analytical and organizational capacities of youth, local organizations, community groups, and independent media has never been greater—these actors are the engine of meaningful reform. They cannot remain mere observers or passive citizens.

The benchmarks of the EU Growth Plan under the Reform and Growth Facility (RGF) for the region will be implemented in an environment where the civic voice is both underfunded and overstretched. The question is no longer whether civil society is important—it is whether we are prepared to "equip" it with the same seriousness and commitment we devote to hardware, infrastructure, and deterrence. This challenge is acute across the Western Balkans, and particularly in Kosovo, where around 92% of citizens continue to support EU and NATO membership. Preserving that aspiration requires a resilient civic ecosystem—one capable of withstanding political pressure, engaging with complex reform processes, and remaining active even as traditional funding streams dwindle.

From Donor Shock to Structural Vulnerability in Kosovo

What has happened over the last year is not business as usual in development cooperation. From 2020 until the end of 2024, the United States invested US$1.7 billion in aid in the Western Balkans Six, supporting civil society organizations, and state institutions, and projects ranging from human rights and media to energy efficiency. The sudden suspension of USAID assistance in early 2025 halted more than $120 million dollars in active programs across the Western Balkans.

This was not a marginal portfolio: before the freeze, USAID anchored multi-year initiatives in governance oversight, media freedom, human rights, youth engagement, and anti-corruption, forming a kind of "soft infrastructure" of democratic resilience. In Kosovo, the numbers are brutally clear. Out of $28.22 million in active US-funded contracts, estimated losses reached $11.6 million, and CSOs faced an urgent six-month survival gap of around $1.66 million. For many organisations, USAID represented 10–30% of their annual budgets; its withdrawal did not just postpone activities, it threatened institutional continuity, staff retention and long-term planning.

Kosovo's civil society was already structurally fragile before this shock. Nearly half of CSOs operate with no funding, and another quarter function on under €10,000 a year. Foreign donors

remain the primary lifeline, yet their support is declining, while domestic private donations reach fewer than 20% of CSOs. Public funding exists but is fragmented, and during crises—such as COVID-19—CSOs received no additional government support. In this context, the USAID freeze acted as a pressure test. Organizations cancelled grants mid-implementation, laid off staff, and suspended services in areas like social protection, democracy education and human rights. Youth organizations, grassroots initiatives outside Prishtina and community-based groups working on sensitive issues were hit hardest, because they had the fewest alternatives.

The political fallout is equally severe. As the BCSDN report notes, the funding withdrawal has been weaponized by domestic actors who already distrust independent NGOs, fuelling smear campaigns that label CSOs as "foreign agents." This has increased the reputational cost of donor dependence and made some organizations more cautious and less willing to challenge power. Meanwhile, non-traditional actors are expanding their influence through state-linked institutions, infrastructure projects, and cultural or religious networks. Their involvement bolsters government-organized NGOs and normalizes state-controlled "civil society," often pushing narratives that undermine EU democratic norms.

In today's hybrid war environment, this is not peripheral—it is part of the battlefield.

For Kosovo, where EU integration is both a geopolitical and generational priority, this trend is especially risky. A financially fragile civic sector, reliant on a few donors, struggles to mobilize youth, monitor reforms, or counter anti-democratic narratives. When nearly half of CSOs operate with no funding, it is unrealistic to expect them to combat sophisticated disinformation or to meaningfully engage in the Growth Plan's benchmarks.

The EU Step-In and Intermediaries

The obvious question after the USAID retreat is: who steps in? The uncomfortable answer is that no single actor can, but the European Union is now both the anchor and the test case.

Through the new Growth Plan, the EU is offering up to €6 billion for the region from 2024–2027 (€2 billion in grants and €4 billion in loans), tied to Reform Agendas with clear benchmarks on rule of law, digitalization, and the green transition. If Kosovo meets its commitments, it could receive around €882.6 million in grants and investments by 2027, or up to €945 million including loans. Yet this major "macro carrot" is not matched by a comparable investment in the civic ecosystem that must monitor and shape these reforms. While IPA civil society and media programmes provide valuable support, they represent only a small share of overall assistance and remain heavily project-based and centralised. Field Delegations, including EUOK, understand local needs, but their ability to tailor support is constrained by Brussels-level centralisation and burdensome procedures.

The European Endowment for Democracy provides fast and flexible support to media and activists, but its limited mandate means it cannot replace the long-term funding USAID once offered in the Western Balkans. In this context, domestic and regional intermediaries have become increasingly important. In Kosovo, the KCSF serves as a key local hub, able to re-grant funds quickly and reach grassroots actors that larger donors often miss. Regionally, the OSF– Western Balkans helps sustain cooperation, research networks, and enlargement debates. Yet these intermediaries also face constraints. They depend on a shrinking pool of democratic donors, many of whom are reducing budgets or shifting priorities. Donors are channelling more funding through big implementers, which local groups see as reducing transparency and ownership. And concentrating too much responsibility in a few hubs' risks sidelining actors—

especially youth groups and organisations outside major networks. This is why the debate about an EU "step-in" cannot be only about replacing money; it must also rethink the funding architecture itself.

A Strategic "Re-armament" of Civic Space (and why 150 million euros matter as much as tanks)

The language of security is already everywhere in our region. Military spending is rising, procurement deals are headline news, and hybrid threats from Russia and others are rightly taken seriously. ***But if we only respond with hardware, we miss the deeper battle: the resilience of democratic societies themselves.*** This is where the numbers become politically useful, and uncomfortable. A single modern main battle tank like the Leopard 2A7+ can cost between €13 and €15 million, while the latest 2A8 versions ordered by Germany are priced at around €29 million per tank. Depending on the configuration and contract, the Javelin anti-tank missile ranges from roughly $80,000 to over $200,000 per unit. If we take a high-end figure of $240,000 per missile, then €150 million, the kind of envelope the EU could realistically mobilise for civic space and media support in the Western Balkans, roughly equals the cost of around 600 Javelin missiles. Using tank prices, the same amount is about ten or eleven Leopard 2A7+ tanks, or five of the newest 2A8s.

Viewed through that lens, directing €150 million into independent media, watchdog organisations, youth initiatives and civic hubs in Kosovo and the region is not extravagant. It is a strategic reallocation of a tiny fraction of Europe's security spending towards the social infrastructure that actually keeps societies aligned with EU values. Especially when we remember that the USAID suspension alone halted more than $120 million in ongoing programmes, including youth empowerment, media literacy, and justice initiatives.

What Could This Money Concretely Do if Designed Well?

The EU and its partners could build on existing regional hubs—such as BCSDN's Regional Hub, the Western Balkans Fund, SMART Balkans, and the EED—to create a dedicated Civil Society Resilience Fund for Kosovo and the wider region. These mechanisms have already shown that trusted intermediaries can reach smaller groups and respond faster than centralized EU calls. A Resilience Fund would extend this model by pooling EU, bilateral, and domestic contributions; linking support to Growth Plan and Reform Agenda benchmarks; and simplifying access for youth-led and small local CSOs that struggle with IPA-style procedures. Structured as a transparent pooled mechanism with multi-stakeholder governance, the Fund would provide predictable core support to organizations, contributing to democratic oversight, EU reform monitoring, and community resilience, alongside flexible rapid-response grants for emerging threats such as disinformation, media attacks, or local crises. A dedicated window would prioritize youth-led initiatives, student groups, informal networks, and community media across the region, not just in capitals. By reducing duplication, devolving decisions to trusted national intermediaries, and streamlining procedures, the Fund would combine EU legitimacy with the flexibility and accessibility that grassroots actors urgently need.

The Fund should be explicitly linked to Kosovo's Growth Plan and Reform Agenda, ring-fencing a share of RGF resources for civic engagement in key reform areas—judiciary, anti-corruption, labor market, energy transition—so citizens can actively monitor, analyze, and co-design policy. Intermediaries like KCSF and regional hubs should devolve, not centralize, power, while the Fund encourages diversification to local foundations, municipal mechanisms, and under-

served areas where youth are most vulnerable to apathy or radicalization. Donors must learn from the USAID freeze: plan exits transparently, invest in CSO resilience before phase-out, and avoid over-securitizing support, ensuring independent watchdog and participatory functions remain strong.

Conclusion

Strengthening civil society is not a secondary concern—it is central to the resilience and credibility of EU integration in Kosovo and the Western Balkans. By investing strategically in grassroots actors, youth-led initiatives, and trusted intermediaries, Europe can ensure that reforms are monitored, contested, and co-owned by citizens. In doing so, it transforms passive beneficiaries into active participants, fortifying democracy against disinformation, apathy, and hybrid threats while sustaining the long-term legitimacy of the Growth Plan and the Reform Agenda.

Most importantly, youth should lead the way. They cannot be at the margins. Kosovo's demographic profile is still an opportunity, not a threat – if young people see that civic engagement can influence real reforms, from labor market measures to education and climate policy. If they instead experience a shrinking civic space, precarious NGOs, projectized activism, and constant disinformation, the EU narrative will erode even if formal benchmarks are met. If civic space is not treated with the same strategic seriousness as tanks and missiles, the next wave of hybrid threats will meet Europe with empty hands. Reinvesting €150 million in civil society and youth across Kosovo and the region is not charity—it is Europe's own javelin, aimed not at armour, but at apathy, disinformation, and democratic fatigue.

WHY CONVERGENCE IN THE WESTERN BALKANS REMAINS SLOW: THE CENTRAL ROLE OF INSTITUTIONS

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Convergence, defined as the equalisation of development levels among countries (Palánkai 2010), has been a defining goal of the European integration process since its inception. The European Union (EU) has developed a comprehensive framework to support this process, including cohesion policy, structural and investment funds, and, later, the Copenhagen criteria (1993) for transition economies. These instruments rest on a long-standing expectation: once a country is anchored in the EU's institutional and economic environment, convergence will follow through deeper trade integration, rising investment, and improved institutional quality.

To assess the current state of convergence in the Western Balkans, this paper relies on the wiiw Convergence2EU Dashboard, a comprehensive tool developed by the Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies. The dashboard tracks convergence across eight pillars and a wide range of indicators, allowing for a more systematic assessment of where the region is advancing and where it is falling behind. Its multidimensional structure makes it possible to distinguish between areas driven primarily by market dynamics and those that depend on institutional capacity — a distinction that proves crucial for understanding Western Balkan performance.

Within this broader understanding of development equalisation, economic convergence is often treated as the main indicator of success because it reflects whether poorer countries are catching up with richer ones in terms of living standards. Sigma and beta convergence measures therefore remain central to empirical research, showing whether income dispersion narrows over time and whether poorer economies achieve faster per capita growth (Barro & Sala-i-Martin 1992). Earlier EU-wide analyses likewise found evidence of income convergence, though with marked heterogeneity and crisis-related divergence (Rapacki & Próchniak 2009; 2019). Similar results emerge for Western Europe, where sigma and beta convergence analyses for 1995–2013 show periods of catch-up alongside divergence during the crisis years, pointing to the existence of convergence clubs (Šiljak 2015).

The experience of the Central and Eastern European Countries (CEECs) shaped early optimism about the EU as a "convergence machine" (Ridao-Cano & Bodewig 2018). These countries underwent a rapid transition from planned to market economies, attracted substantial foreign direct investment (FDI), and strengthened their institutional frameworks. Their EU accession accelerated structural reforms, and many achieved high growth rates in the first two decades of the twenty-first century. Even after the 2008/2009 global financial crisis slowed convergence, most CEECs continued to narrow the gap with the EU-15 (Matkowski et al. 2016; Grela et al. 2017; Cieślik & Wciślik 2020).

The Western Balkans, despite sharing many characteristics with the CEECs, have not followed a similar trajectory. Their transition process began at roughly the same time but has now extended for more than three decades. Convergence has been slow, uneven, and periodically reversed (El Ouardighi & Somun-Kapetanović 2007; Tsanana et al. 2012; Stanišić et al. 2018; Bicanic et al. 2016). Wars, delayed privatisation, low FDI inflows, and persistent institutional weaknesses have all contributed to the region's slower transformation, although most of them are candidates for EU membership (Bohle & Greskovits 2007; Berend 2016). The similar situation

can be observed in other candidate countries, specifically Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine (Nielsen & Šiljak, 2025).

To understand this divergence more clearly, recent analyses examine whether the Western Balkans have converged toward the EU-27+1 since 2004, and how the financial crisis affected this process. The emerging findings provide a consistent picture: Western Balkan countries do make progress in the market-driven dimensions of convergence, but their institutions are not efficient enough to translate these improvements into stronger growth (Estrin & Uvalić 2013; Popović et al. 2020; Šiljak 2022; Šiljak & Nielsen 2025). In other words, the problem is not the absence of economic convergence per se, but the inability of domestic institutions to convert that convergence into meaningful development outcomes.

This paper brings together the key insights from these analyses and related literature to explain why the convergence process of the Western Balkans remains slow. It argues that weak institutional capacity — not merely economic factors — is the decisive barrier preventing these countries from catching up with the EU.

ECONOMIC CONVERGENCE: GRADUAL PROGRESS BUT INSUFFICIENT SPEED

Economic convergence is the cornerstone of broader development equalisation and the natural starting point for assessing progress. Western Balkan per capita GDP remains far below the EU average — ranging between 29% and 54% across the region — and at current growth rates, closing this gap would require several decades (wiiw Convergence2EU Dashboard 2025). Other core indicators paint a similarly constrained picture: the average wage reaches only 21–39% of the EU level, minimum wages stand at 14–45%, and average pensions amount to just 9–20%. Productivity — the key determinant of long-run growth — ranges between 42% and 57% of the EU average (Ibid), underscoring the structural limitations that slow the catch-up process.

Although β-convergence analyses indicate that poorer economies in the region do grow faster than richer EU members, the pace is modest (Šiljak & Nagy 2019). These rates fall well short of those observed in the CEECs during the 1990s and early 2000s. The 2008/2009 financial crisis further slowed the process, producing a marked decline in convergence rates across the Western Balkans (Meksi & Xhaja 2017; Krstevska 2018; Rapacki & Próchniak 2019). Despite some improvements in macroeconomic stability, weak institutions continue to constrain investment quality, distort resource allocation, and undermine long-term economic activity (Šiljak & Nielsen 2025). As a result, the growth impulse remains too weak to generate sustained productivity gains. The message from the economic pillar is clear: convergence is occurring, but far too slowly to meaningfully narrow the gap with the EU.

WHERE INSTITUTIONS MATTER, CONVERGENCE SLOWS

Across the Convergence2EU pillars, a consistent pattern emerges. The Western Balkan countries make progress primarily in areas where domestic institutions play a limited role. Digitalisation is the clearest example. Most countries reach 64-95% of the EU average, and full convergence in some areas appears attainable within the next decade (wiiw Convergence2EU Dashboard 2025). This outcome reflects the fact that digitalisation is largely driven by technology diffusion and market forces rather than by the capacity of public institutions.

Although trade integration is not included as an indicator in the wiiw Convergence2EU Dashboard, it remains one of the most widely used variables in the economic literature on convergence. Numerous studies show that greater openness is positively associated with

higher growth and faster catch-up (Szeles & Marinescu 2010; Stoica et al. 2019; Popović et al. 2020). In the Western Balkans, trade integration has increased steadily, particularly following the implementation of the Stabilisation and Association Agreements. This aligns with conditional convergence findings, which suggest that countries with higher trade exposure tend to grow more rapidly.

However, in pillars where institutional performance is essential, the pace of convergence slows significantly:

- Education indicators remain between 60–80% of EU levels, with minimal improvement over recent years.
- Health outcomes have improved, yet health systems — financing, workforce, and service capacity — still reach only 58–87% of EU averages.
- Environment is the second weakest pillar, and several indicators show divergence rather than progress toward EU standards and the countries reached between 22 and 54% of the EU average.
- Infrastructure develops slowly despite substantial donor engagement and long-term investment programs, with current performance reaching only 14–39% of the EU average (wiiw Convergence2EU Dashboard 2025).

This asymmetry highlights a broader structural issue: convergence is limited in areas that require sustained institutional capacity. Where institutions must plan, coordinate, and implement reforms, progress has been slow and uneven.

GOVERNANCE: THE CORE STRUCTURAL BARRIER

The governance pillar is the weakest area across the Western Balkans and the clearest explanation for why convergence remains so slow. The Convergence2EU Dashboard shows that the region performs substantially below the EU average on every major governance dimension. Voice and accountability ranges between 60–79% of the EU level, while political stability reaches 69–86%, reflecting persistent volatility and limited policy continuity. More capacity-intensive indicators perform even worse: government effectiveness stands at just 44–80% of the EU average, and regulatory quality falls between 62–69%, indicating that administrations lack the ability to design and implement predictable, growth-enhancing policies. The legal foundations of governance are similarly weak, with rule of law at 61–69% and control of corruption between 56–70%. Together, these figures reveal a structural deficit in state capacity and institutional credibility—precisely the areas that matter most for investment, productivity growth, and sustained convergence (wiiw Convergence2EU Dashboard 2025).

Earlier studies already showed that governance-related variables often had weak or statistically insignificant effects on growth in transition economies, a pattern also observed in the Western Balkans (Estrin and Uvalić 2013; Šiljak & Nielsen 2022; Šiljak & Nagy 2023). The broader institutional literature strongly supports this view: institutions are the fundamental determinant of long-run development, shaping incentives, investment, and economic performance (Acemoglu, Johnson & Robinson 2005; Acemoglu & Robinson 2012).

These weaknesses are not anomalies — they are structural. The Western Balkans exhibit the same pattern: governance systems lack the credibility and autonomy needed to sustain convergence. The Convergence2EU results confirm that the pillars that require strong institutions are exactly the ones where convergence is weakest.

CONCLUSION: CONVERGENCE REQUIRES INSTITUTIONAL MATURITY

Across all available evidence, the central conclusion is clear: Institutional maturity — not formal alignment with the acquis — determines whether convergence can succeed. The Western Balkans show measurable progress in areas where institutions matter least, but stagnation or divergence in sectors where state capacity is essential. Economic convergence remains slow; structural convergence is incomplete; governance convergence is minimal.

The assumption that EU membership alone will trigger convergence does not hold for this region. Even if Western Balkan countries were admitted today, their administrative systems would struggle with the obligations of membership, and the benefits of EU integration would remain only partially realised.

In addition, the region's economies are still not competitive enough to function as full member states. Productivity remains low, investment patterns are skewed toward non-tradable sectors, and export structures lack the diversification needed to compete in the Single Market (Šiljak & Nielsen 2025). Put simply, neither the institutional foundations nor the economic structures required for successful membership are yet in place.

The path to meaningful convergence will require deeper institutional transformation, including credible governance, effective enforcement, and simplified public administration, before economic catch-up can accelerate. Without this foundation, convergence will remain limited, uneven, and in many areas unattainable.

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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)

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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—through concrete actions and practices that go beyond declarations and political statements. 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 Dzananovic (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].

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.

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 a 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.

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.

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

ALBANIA'S ROLE IN MEDITERRANEAN GEOPOLITICS: RETHNIKING ALBANIA'S STRATEGIC WEIGHT

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Introduction

The Mediterranean has long served as one of the world's most strategically significant regions, functioning simultaneously as a conduit for commerce, a battleground for competing empires, and a junction linking Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa. In contemporary geopolitics, it continues to host overlapping interests among global and regional actors, including the European Union, the United States, Turkey, Russia, China, and various Arab countries. Against this backdrop, Albania, despite its modest territorial size and population, occupies a position of disproportionate geopolitical importance. Its location along the Adriatic and Ionian Seas and its proximity to Italy, Greece, and the Western Balkans give it a role that exceeds conventional measures of power.

This research report examines how Albania's geography, historical legacy, alliance structures, and diplomatic behavior shape its influence in Mediterranean geopolitics. By analyzing its Cold War experience, post-1990 transformation, energy transit role, and engagement in regional security, the report shows how states with limited material capabilities can gain relevance by strategically leveraging their position, partnerships, and interests.

Geographic Position as a Source of Strategic Relevance

Geostrategy today is no longer confined to traditional notions but has expanded into new dimensions: land, sea, space, and time.[1] Albania's coastline along the Adriatic and Ionian Seas provides direct maritime access to the Mediterranean, enabling it to sit at the intersection of key north–south and east–west corridors. Its ports, most notably Durrës and Vlorë, connect the Balkans to European and global markets. This geography positions Albania as a natural bridge between Southern Europe and the Western Balkans, while the Strait of Otranto, located only dozens of kilometers from Italy, remains a critical transit point for commercial shipping, energy flows, and security operations. Just as terrain must be analyzed to enable 'clever positioning' for tactical and operational advantage[2], Albania has learned to use its geographic position to cultivate smart and security-enhancing partnerships that reinforce its strategic relevance.

Historical Legacy and Its Geopolitical Implications

Albania's strategic importance is not a recent phenomenon; it is deeply rooted in history. In antiquity, its territory connected Roman and Byzantine trade networks, serving as a passageway for goods, culture, and military campaigns. During Ottoman rule, Albania's coastal position

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[1] Belmadi, Sofiane. (2025). Introduction to Geostrategic and Geopolitical Studies Foundations and Concepts.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/394880905_Introduction_to_Geostrategic_and_Geopolitical_Studies_Foundations_and_Concepts/citation/download

[2] Geoffrey Sloan, Geopolitics, Geography and Strategic History (London: Routledge, 2017), p. 24. 10.4324/9780203489482.

influenced imperial administration and shaped a multicultural and multi-religious identity that still characterizes the country today.

The Cold War underscored Albania's importance despite its self-imposed isolation. After breaking with the Soviet Union, Albania's Adriatic position placed it on the front line of NATO's southern flank. Its location opposite Italy and near major NATO installations meant that developments in Albania—whether political alignment or military activity—had implications for naval circulation, air-surveillance patterns, and early-warning systems across the central Mediterranean.

Post-1990 Integration: From Isolation to Regional Actor

After the fall of communism, Albania transitioned from isolation to active integration into Western institutions. Its accession to NATO in 2009 was one of the most important milestones, granting it collective security guarantees and aligning it with Euro-Atlantic defence structures. Albania contributes to joint military exercises, regional missions, and broader NATO operations, enhancing the alliance's reach in the Adriatic–Ionian region.

Energy Transit and Infrastructure as Strategic Assets

Albania's role in the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) illustrates how infrastructure can enhance its geostrategic importance. By hosting a crucial section of a pipeline transporting Caspian gas to European markets, Albania contributes to the diversification of Europe's energy sources. This role generates diplomatic leverage, as European states and energy companies depend on the reliability of Albanian territory for uninterrupted transit.

From its very inception as a tool to combat the weaponization of energy by Russia, TAP has highlighted a spotlight on the dynamic geopolitics of energy security in Europe today and the conflicting aims that often accompany it. Within the Southeast Europe (SEE), TAP has proved to be simultaneously a boost to integration within the region and with the EU, a vital opportunity to diversify energy supplies and suppliers, a cause for conflict due to competing supply routes and contentious politics in Turkey and Italy, and a possible captive to shifting geostrategic priorities with the rise of the EastMed pipeline project.[3] Being a transit hub is not enough; therefore Albania must combine geography with good governance, diplomacy, and adaptability to avoid the vulnerabilities that have harmed other energy transit states.

Security and Regional Stability

Albania plays a stabilizing role in the Western Balkans, a region marked historically by ethnic tensions, political fragility, and unresolved disputes. Its cooperative stance toward neighbors, playing a very constructive role in good neighborly relations, and participation in international peacekeeping missions contribute not only to regional security but also to broader frameworks of stability.

The Mediterranean's competitive environment requires Albania to balance relationships with multiple major powers. The United States maintains a robust presence in Southern Europe;

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[3] Patrick McGrath, "Albania and the Geopolitics of the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline: Regional and Domestic Dimensions," IDM Albania, 3 October 2018. https://idmalbania.org/sq/news-cpt/4925/

Turkey has strengthened economic and cultural ties; China has invested in infrastructure within the region; Russia seeks influence through energy and political links in the Balkans.

Conclusion

Albania's trajectory illustrates how geographic position, institutional integration, and diplomatic engagement can compensate for limited material capabilities. Its Adriatic-Ionian location, long-standing function as a Mediterranean gateway, active participation in NATO and EU structures, and contributions to regional stability collectively afford Albania a degree of relevance that exceeds what traditional metrics of power would predict. In this context, pursuing a constructive and cooperative foreign policy has been an organic strategic choice, allowing Albania to benefit from multilateral institutional frameworks, advance its EU membership aspirations, and maintain responsible relations with neighbors, notably without making territorial claims or harboring revisionist ambitions. Nonetheless, sustained progress on the domestic front remains essential. Strengthening institutions, combating corruption, and improving economic opportunities are critical prerequisites for consolidating Albania's credibility and enhancing its capacity to act within regional and international arenas.

Policy Challenges and Governance

PROGRESS ON CLIMATE ACTION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS: A REVIEW OF EVIDENCE BASED ON NDC- VNR ANALYSIS

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The EU's ambitious goal to become the first climate-neutral continent by 2050, in line with the 2015 Paris Agreement, depends on both internal efforts and cooperation with neighboring countries. The Western Balkans, in particular, can play an important role in accelerating the EU's climate aspirations. Given growing international pressure for climate action in this region, the study assesses whether countries demonstrate political will for climate change action and possess the capacity to fulfil their climate commitments. It also aims to identify specific policy measures, challenges, and capacity needs. Based on desktop research and qualitative content analysis of publicly available documents— specifically, Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) under the Paris Agreement and Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development—this paper provides new insights into the region's progress in implementing international climate agreements. The findings from five countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia) indicate a renewed commitment by governments to align with global sustainability goals and to implement the necessary reforms for climate mitigation and adaptation. However, except for Albania, the region struggles to meet its 2030 climate targets. Despite advancements in the legislative, policy, and institutional frameworks, critical gaps persist in: 1) aligning national legislation with international standards and implementing policies; 2) addressing deficits in human, technical, institutional, and financial capacities; and 3) raising public awareness of climate issues. Given the crucial role of international assistance in advancing climate action in the region, mobilizing further efforts relies on greater cooperation and involvement from international organizations (IOs). While expert interviews could complement and validate these findings, expanding the research sample to include Eastern Balkan and Central European countries would enable broader comparisons in the context of EU membership. Further research is needed to understand IOs's role in capacity building and to assess the effectiveness of related programs and projects.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVE

A state of climate emergency has been increasingly declared by scientists, activists, and governments over the past two decades. Despite early warnings and the 2015 Paris Agreement goal to limit global temperature rise, progress has been slow. In this context, the effective implementation of climate policies is a growing global concern. The European Union (EU) has set an aspirational goal to become the first climate-neutral continent by 2050, requiring coordinated efforts not only within but also beyond EU borders. The Western Balkans, in particular, play a crucial role in supporting and advancing these climate ambitions.

The term "Western Balkans" typically refers to six countries in Southern and Eastern Europe covered by the EU enlargement policy (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Serbia). The region is one of Europe's top air pollution hotspots mainly due to outdated coal power plants and old vehicles, with transboundary pollution affecting neighboring EU countries (EEA 2024; CEE Bankwatch Network 2023; UNEP 2021; COM 2020). It

is also highly vulnerable to climate change, with significant temperature increases projected (RCC 2018). This dual challenge calls for accelerated action to combat climate change and its impacts in the region. Despite the Western Balkans' growing role in international climate commitments and potential impact on the European Green Deal (Knez et al. 2022), the region has received limited attention in climate policy research. As candidates for EU membership, parties to the UNFCCC and Paris Agreement, and signatories to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the countries have pledged to climate action. Yet, it remains unclear whether they genuinely intend to deliver on their promises and if they have the practical ability to meet their climate targets. This study aims to assess the region's prospects for achieving climate targets by 2030 and identify progress, challenges, and capacity needs in the field of climate policy.

METHODOLOGY

The potential for reaching the climate targets by 2030 is assessed based on current trends using data from the Enhanced NDCs and the World Bank. The study further employs a qualitative approach to explore progress and challenges in climate action in the region through document analysis, building on the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs). Although VNRs are government-led and not necessarily independent and unbiased, they can effectively complement the analysis of the NDCs, focusing particularly on SDG 13 on climate action. Data from both documents are combined to summarize the key insights on the progress made (measures and good practices), as well as the barriers and capacity needs faced by the countries in Western Balkans. The present study focuses on five countries recognized as EU membership candidates: Albania (2014), Bosnia and Herzegovina (2022), Montenegro (2010), North Macedonia (2005), and Serbia (2012). Kosovo is excluded from the analysis as it has not officially submitted a VNR or NDC.

FINDINGS

Despite increased climate change mitigation ambitions, most countries are falling behind their climate targets, except for Albania, which has already exceeded its GHG reduction goal (see Fig. 1). Additional measures are needed to meet their targets by 2030. While the EU has shown a consistent decline in emissions since 2005, the Western Balkans have a slower pace of GHG reductions, where binding reduction targets were only recently introduced.
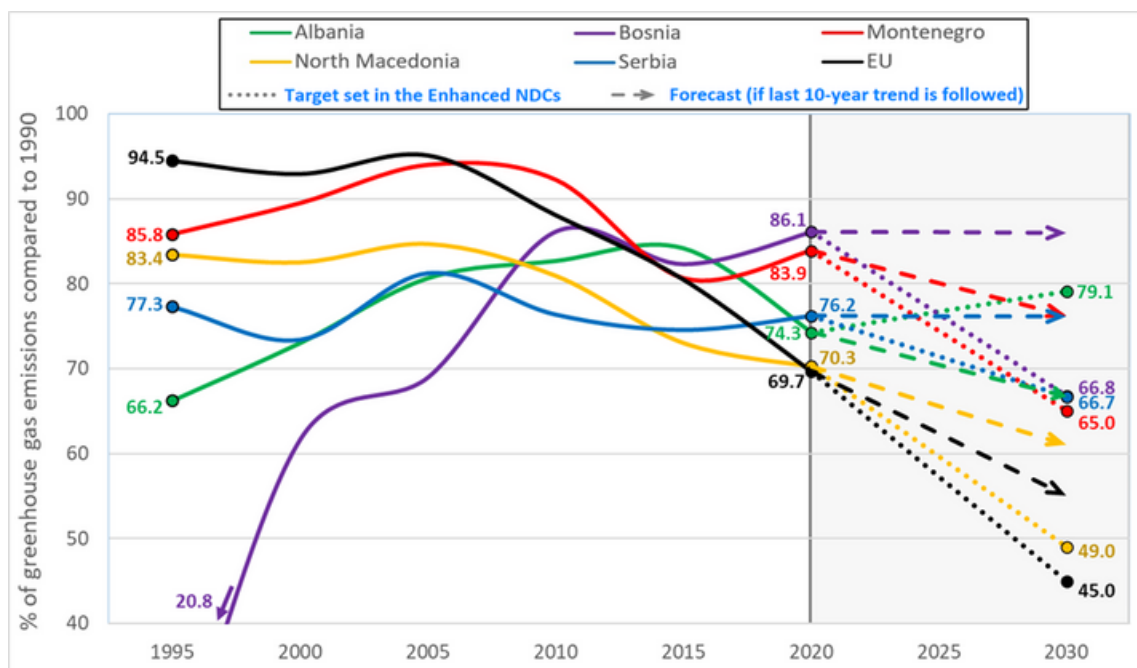
Fig. 1. Progress in achieving the Climate Reduction Targets set by countries in the Western Balkans based on the Enhanced NDCs (% of GHG emissions compared to the baseline year 1990), Source: World Bank (own calculations).

POLITICAL COMMITMENT

The document analysis points to a strong political will for complying with international agreements relating to the Paris agreement, the 2030 Agenda, and the EU accession process. Moreover, these processes are seen as interwoven and complementary. As countries work towards EU accession, they also advance the SDGs, with notable synergies between the two agendas. Many SDG targets are strongly linked to EU policies and acquis chapters, especially in areas like the environment, rule of law, and social policy. Some of the NDCs establish a connection to the 2030 Agenda, noting that there are more synergies than trade-offs between the Paris Agreement and the Global Goals.

ACTION TO COMBAT CLIMATE CHANGE

In the Western Balkans, the enhanced NDCs cover a broader range of sectors, including energy, industry, transport, waste management, and agriculture, with focus on land use and forestry when data is available. The region has started developing greenhouse gas inventories based on IPCC methodology, focusing on CO_2, CH_4, N_2O, and HFCs. Implementation approaches vary, with significant progress in legislative and institutional frameworks, including Serbia's new climate law and Albania's moratorium on forest clearing. New climate coordination mechanisms have been established in Albania and Montenegro, while North Macedonia assigned new responsibilities for preparing GHG inventor and climate research. While climate change policy in the Western Balkans has traditionally focused on mitigation, there is now a noticeable shift towards adaptation in the enhanced NDCs. North Macedonia plans to incorporate adaptation strategies in future reports, while Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina have strengthened their efforts following the severe impacts of climate change over the past decade. National adaptation plans now include early warning systems, infrastructure improvements, and changes in agricultural practices. The adoption of local adaptation strategies has been generally slow, yet some good practices can be found, such as Bosnia and

Herzegovina's 'Vrbas River Basin' project on flood protection across nine local government units.

The Green Climate Fund supports projects in the Western Balkans to advance climate policy, such as Montenegro's initiative to develop a national adaptation plan and North Macedonia's program to enhance stakeholder engagement. Young people across the region are becoming more active, urging governments to prioritize climate change and include it in formal education. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Feminist Action for Climate Justice Action Coalition represents good practice in promoting social dialogue and equal participation of girls and women in climate decision-making.

CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The analysis identifies three main challenges for climate action in the Western Balkans.

- First, there are legislative and policy shortcomings, as stronger political will and better national ownership are needed to achieve NDC targets and align with international regulations, including the EU climate acquis.
- Second, insufficient human, technical, institutional, and financial capacities hinder progress, emphasizing the need for further international support and capacity development.
- Third, limited public awareness of climate change restricts climate action, making climate education and greater inclusion of women in decision-making crucial. Raising public awareness and securing alternative funding sources, beyond reliance on donors, are critical for success.

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 a 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.

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BEYOND CONSTRUCTIVE AMBIGUITY: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE ASSOCIATION OF THE KOSOVO SERB MAJORITY MUNICIPALITIES

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This paper outlines a proposed framework for establishing the Association/Community of Serb-majority Municipalities (A/CSM) in Kosovo, a vital component of the ongoing dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina. The framework encompasses the creation of a Commission comprised of community representatives and civil society, the launching of a public information campaign to address misconceptions, and the drafting of a Statute for the A/CSM with the involvement of relevant political and municipal bodies.

Furthermore, the proposal includes the establishment of a new Serb-majority municipality to ensure adequate representation for Serb communities in specific regions. The authors emphasize that the A/CSM should not be viewed as analogous to the Republika Srpska, as this parallel undermines the unique context and framework of Kosovo's institutional landscape.

Beyond these procedural elements, the authors suggest designating Gračanica/Graçanicë as the headquarters for the A/CSM, given its status as a cultural and political hub for Kosovo Serbs. Additionally, the framework proposes the establishment of liaison offices in Serb-inhabited areas outside of Serb-majority municipalities to facilitate enhanced coordination. To promote inclusivity, it is recommended that reserved seats for non-majority communities be incorporated within the governance structure of the A/CSM, alongside the creation of a dedicated office for preserving Kosovo Serb cultural heritage and a department to address the shortcomings of language law implementation.

Crucially, the establishment of the A/CSM represents a critical opportunity to advance the stabilization of Kosovo and foster the normalization of relations between Serb and Albanian communities. By facilitating inter-ethnic cooperation and addressing the rights of non-majority groups, the A/CSM has the potential to significantly enhance Kosovo's political landscape. However, the authors emphasise the necessity for a proactive approach and unwavering commitment from all stakeholders, particularly Kosovo's political leadership, to ensure the successful implementation of this initiative.

WHY AN ASSOCIATION/COMMUNITY OF KOSOVO-SERB MAJORITY MUNICIPALITIES?

Policy recommendations authors outlined in their research aims to respond to the question: how can Kosovo Serbs be included in Kosovo's legal frameworks while respecting their legal and constitutional rights?

The A/CSM, as a concept, is generally viewed negatively by much of the general public in Kosovo and its potential positive effects on inter-ethnic relations, reconciliation and the overall institutional and political health of Kosovo are largely ignored. The rhetoric of many political actors in Kosovo has fed into negative pre-conceptions that the A/CSM would constitute a threat to the Albanian majority. Furthermore, it is a fact that large and often violent protests are

reflective of entrenched opposition to the idea. This is largely due to popular misconceptions of what the A/CSM would actually be, what powers it would have and the role that it would play in political life and in the state-building process in Kosovo. In this section, a number of main arguments for the A/CSM will be outlined and elaborated upon.

THE KEY BENEFITS OF THE ASSOCIATION/COMMUNTY OF SERB-MAJORITY MUNICIPALITIES (A/CSM)

The A/CSM has the potential to centralise a wide array of concerns and interests by creating a systematic means of addressing them; It could provide instruments for facilitating local solutions for local problems for the Kosovo Serb community to address issues affecting their communities directly (i.e pollution of the River Gračanka/LumiiGraçanicës, construction of small hydro-electric power plants in Štrpce/Shtërpcë and other similar problems.)

It could facilitate communication between central-level governing institutions which has previously either been absent or partial; It could facilitate and streamline communication between Belgrade and Pristina by providing a sustainable conduit for information-sharing and cooperation; It could significantly reduce the pressure and stress on other Kosovo institutions By creating a go-between local governing authorities and the political centre – in other words, it would be a body with enough competencies to effectively protect many community rights both at the local as well as at the central level 2It could act as a body that is able to articulate the needs of the Kosovo Serb community in the sense that it would institutionalize the relationship between a non-majority and majority community.

It could greatly contribute to the integration of Kosovo Serbs by providing them with adequate institutional protections and a layer of governance that will increase the level of trust and decrease feelings of alienation; It could have a degree of autonomy that would allow it to exercise 'overview' and control over areas such as education, healthcare, social welfare and cultural heritage by removing the controversary over so-called 'parallel institutions.' It would do so by officialising and legalising support provided to Serb communities in Kosovo by the Republic of Serbia; It could have a markedly positive impact on the health and safety of all communities by creating new channels of official contact and communication between health and welfare providers; It could create more quality and equality within the Kosovo Serb community by reducing the discrepancies between the amount of funding and attention received by the four northern municipalities as opposed to those south of the River Ibar, which would further contribute to the concept of decentralisation in Kosovo by transferring more responsibilities to the level of local governance; The A/CSM could be a realistic, achievable and humane alternative to territorial exchange/partition because it unites the Kosovo Serb community under one umbrella, while not posing a threat to the territorial integrity or the constitutional orders of Kosovo or Serbia; The A/CSM can be an example of providing realistic solutions to ethnic disputes while avoiding the more obvious pitfalls of partition such as regional instability; If Kosovo wishes to remain multi-ethnic then it should create a mechanism for retaining members of all of its communities the first step of which would be the creation of the A/CSM;

The A/CSM could be a facilitator in the peace-building process between Kosovo and Serbia potentially becoming a success story for the Western Balkans region (having in mind unstable inter-ethnic relations); It could create an additional channels of communication between Kosovo Serbs, Pristina, and Belgrade, that is capable of giving a voice to Kosovo Serbs in the dialogue process thereby giving the overall framework for talks a much more grassroots

dimension; It has the potential to generate additional economic opportunities that would motivate Kosovo Serbs to remain there; It could concentrate funds for development and infrastructure under a single umbrella that could lead to the more even and equitable distribution of economic and other forms of material assistance, particularly to those communities that have not yet had access to such resources as is the case with the Development Fund for the North of Kosovo; It could ensure a more sustainable and safer returns and reintegration process by making the A/CSM the principle arbitrator and facilitator in that process in close cooperation and coordination with the Ministry for Communities and Returns.

CONCLUSIONS

The Association/Community of Serb-majority Municipalities is a unique opportunity to provide a tangible solution to many of Kosovo's current challenges and to significantly contribute to the normalisation process between Belgrade and Pristina. However, doing so will require a significant and pro-active approach on the part of all relevant stake holders as well as a new willingness for inter-ethnic cooperation. It will also demand a commitment on the part of Kosovo Albanian political elites to actively work to reduce anxiety among their constituents and assuage fears that the A/CSM would pose a threat to Kosovo's stability and territorial integrity. The current political instability in Kosovo as well as the stalemate in negotiations between Belgrade and Pristina only deepens and aggravates overall institutional dysfunction in Kosovo. By adapting a legal framework that consecrates the rights of non-majority communities, Kosovo made a promise that it has thus far failed to keep, the A/CSM can rectify this.

Society, Media, and Memory

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN PEACEBUILDING AND RECONCILIATION IN THE BALKANS

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Social media are powerful tools for shaping public discourse. The reconciliatory power of these platforms lies in their ability to create communities and interconnected digital spaces that transcend physical boundaries of states. In the Balkans, a region with a complex history of ethnic tensions and conflicts, social media presents both challenges and opportunities for peacebuilding. This mini paper explores the critical role of long-term observation and analysis of social media communications in the Balkans, emphasizing the influence of social media influencers in shaping public opinion and promoting cross-border cooperation. It provides strategic recommendations for governments, civil society, and international organizations to utilise the potential of social media for promoting regional stability and interethnic relations.

NEW AVENUES OF DIGITAL PEACEBUILDING AND RECONCILIATION

Social media have transformed the way post-conflict societies engage with the concepts of peacebuilding and reconciliation. As Kostovicova et al. (2021) argue, advancements in technology have profoundly reshaped how transitional justice is studied and practiced. The vast availability of new data, from court transcripts and archives to social media engagement offered by algorithms and computing power have together produced what the authors call a *digital turn* in post-conflict research. Additionally, the same technologies enable informal, everyday modes of communication and cooperation that can promote peacebuilding reconciliation beyond institutional frameworks. Influencers, content creators, as well as their audiences engage through collaborative projects generate new spaces of connection and empathy. These practices, even though they are not overtly political, reflect an everyday peace (Mac Ginty, 2014) grounded in shared cultural production and affective encounters. By promoting remote friendships, perpetual communication, and forms of creative labour that transcend ethnic and national boundaries, social media reimagine reconciliation as an ongoing relational process rather than a finite political goal.

Reconciliation itself remains a highly contested and ambiguous concept. Scholars and practitioners alike have criticized it as a vague, catch-all term that conflates justice, forgiveness, and coexistence, often stripped of its political and ethical complexity (Kostovicova, 2023). In many post-conflict contexts, formal reconciliation initiatives have failed to achieve genuine transformation. Instead, they became performative gestures devoid of commitments. Against this backdrop of disillusionment, social media provide an alternative space where reconciliation can occur indirectly, through continuous online communication, cooperation, and creative collaboration. Practices such as joint livestreams, influencer collaborations, participatory challenges, or cross-border projects blur boundaries between entertainment, commerce, and activism. These mediated interactions often generate affective relationships that are occurring in the public space. As a result, social media produce remote friendships and solidarity networks that are central to what might be described as *algorithmic reconciliation* (Stepanovic, 2025).

While online cooperations via social networks may not explicitly address political reconciliation directly, they cultivate conditions of coexistence and empathy. They do this through repeated,

informal contact via posts, comments, collaborations, and other forms of shared participation in the digital sphere. These activities can erode stereotypes and improve cross-ethnic relations both intentionally and unintentionally. The participatory architecture of social media also allows individuals to reimagine collective identities beyond national frames, contributing to what could be seen as a post-national sphere of dialogue.

Thus, despite the conceptual instability of reconciliation, social media enable its reconfiguration as an ongoing social process rather than a final state. Through digital creativity, relational play labour (Fuchs, 2014), and transnational collaboration, online spaces make reconciliation a lived and practiced phenomenon. Even though it comes across as partial and fragmented, it is still tangible in its everyday manifestations.

SIGNIFICANCE OF LONG-TERM SOCIAL MEDIA OBSERVATION

Social media platforms are dynamic spaces where public and private spheres converge, allowing for continuous tracking of political undercurrents and societal shifts. Long-term observation of this online field provides a nuanced understanding of how social media and the built-in algorithms impact interethnic relations and peacebuilding efforts in the Balkans (Stepanovic, 2025).

Digital ethnography offers a necessary counterweight to data-driven but decontextualized monitoring methods. Unlike keyword scanning or AI-based moderation, ethnographic methods prioritize context, nuance, and the everyday practices of users (Hine, 2000, Murthy, 2008; Marcus et al. 2012; Pink et al. 2015; Caliandro, 2018; Kozinetz, 2019;). Long-term observation of online spaces and phenomena allows researchers to gain deeper insights. It is possible to track how extremist content circulates, how it is interpreted by various audiences, and how it evolves over time. It also reveals the blurred boundaries between symbolic meanings that are often invisible to automated tools.

Digital ethnographers can embed themselves in online communities (open and semi-closed), analyse linguistic codes, trace visual and narrative patterns, and observe platform-specific dynamics. These insights can inform not only content moderation practices but also public education campaigns, platform accountability, and reconciliation and peacebuilding strategies.

Ethnographic research of AI systems is critical because they are central to digital selves (Cheney-Lippold, 2017). Built into the design of social media, they not only navigate visibility but profoundly impact how they perceive collective and individual identity. Digital ethnography reveals the hidden role of AI, showing how it populates digital ecosystems but also dictates the content style and online behaviour while navigating user engagement. Ethnography of AI can crack open these black box technologies and reveal how they impact their users (Bucher, 2019, Ruckenstein, 2023). Ultimately, all content is a man-machine co-creation, as content creators always operate in dialectical interaction with the algorithms. This new, digital public sphere is significantly influencing societal narratives and challenging the official political discourse exemplified in state policies and traditional media. Long-term social media observation enables policymakers to identify and respond to emerging trends.

STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS

Ethnographic research can help the region pf the Balkans to effectively leverage social media for peacebuilding and reconciliation. Strategic recommendations include:

1. **Establish Permanent Digital Ethnography Research Groups**

   - Invest in long-term digital ethnography to monitor social media trends and influencer activities.
   - Utilize research insights to inform policy decisions and peacebuilding strategies.

2. **Develop Regional Networks for Content Moderation**

   - Foster collaboration between governments, civil society, and influencers to combat hate speech.
   - Implement standardized content moderation practices across platforms to ensure consistency.

3. **Collaborate with Influencers on Peacebuilding Initiatives**

   - Partner with influential social media personalities to disseminate positive narratives and promote interethnic cooperation.
   - Utilize influencer platforms to educate audiences about the dangers of hate speech and the importance of reconciliation.

4. **Enhance Algorithmic Transparency and Accountability**

   - Advocate for social media platforms to disclose algorithmic processes and prioritize content that fosters social harmony.
   - Implement policies that require platforms to minimize the spread of divisive or harmful content.

5. **Promote Regional Digital Literacy**

   - Develop and implement digital literacy programs to empower citizens to critically engage with social media.
   - Educate users on identifying misinformation and engaging in constructive online dialogues.

CONCLUSION

The transformative power of social media in the Balkans presents a unique opportunity for Peacebuilding and reconciliation. By investing in digital ethnography, fostering regional collaborations, and leveraging the influence of social media personalities, policymakers can harness the positive potential of digital interactions. Addressing the challenges of regulatory gaps and algorithmic biases is essential to mitigate the risks associated with social media. This comprehensive approach not only addresses current issues but also paves the way for a more peaceful and cooperative future in the Balkans.

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KOSOVO'S PATH THROUGH MEMORY: FROM AUTONOMY TO INDEPENDANCE

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Introduction

Contemporary global events, accompanied by new forms of conflict, often give the impression that societies remain trapped in cycles of war. From 'A Memory of Solferino' (Henri Dunant) to the Kellogg–Briand Pact and key United Nations documents, the international community has continuously attempted to regulate warfare and protect civilians. Yet, as the war in ex-Yugoslavia and the case of Kosovo demonstrate, norms are persistently challenged.

The collective memory of Kosovo unfolds along two intertwined historical tracks. First, the memory tied to Kosovo's constitutional and socio-cultural position within the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY). Second, the memory shaped by the 1990s war and the path toward independence.

Kosovo's earlier historical track is inseparable from the broader trajectory of the Yugoslav Federation—its integration, internal reforms, rising nationalisms, and eventual disintegration. Understanding these phases is essential to understanding how Kosovar identity and collective memory have been formed.

Kosovo within the Yugoslav Federation: Integration, Decentralization, and Decline

Following the formation of Socialist Yugoslavia, constitutional reforms influenced the balance of power among republics and provinces. Two main theoretical lenses help interpret these developments:

Centralist Theory Period (1945–1966)

Changes to the constitutions of **1946**, **1953**, and **1963** consolidated power in Belgrade. These centralist reforms restricted the autonomy of Kosovo Albanians and contributed to cultural and political discrimination. For many Albanians living in Kosovo, this period is remembered as one of limited rights and structural marginalization.

Decentralist Period (1966–1980s)

After *1966*, reforms followed a decentralist trajectory. The *1974* Constitution granted Kosovo significantly expanded autonomy—almost equal to that of the republics—though without the status of "republic" or full recognition of Kosovars as a constituent nation. From a Kosovar perspective, these reforms marked a brief period of political advancement, cultural development, and institutional empowerment.

However, this progress was short-lived. In 1989, under Slobodan Milošević's rise to power, Kosovo's autonomy was revoked, followed by extensive political repression and cultural restrictions. These extreme measures reversed the reforms of 1974 and intensified national grievances, contributing to the broader disintegration of Yugoslavia.

From Disintegration to Integration: War, Refugees, and the EU Perspective

The dissolution of Yugoslavia triggered a decade-long cycle of wars, producing one of Europe's largest refugee crises since World War II. Millions fled not only active battlefields but also widespread fear, persecution, and state-driven campaigns widely documented as ethnic cleansing. Kosovo's conflict escalated later than those in Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Kosovo declared independence in 2008, after nearly a decade under UN administration (UNMIK), but its political trajectory was already shaped by earlier developments.

The 2003 Thessaloniki Summit launched the EU integration perspective for all Western Balkan states, including Kosovo. This marked a political shift from the fragmentation of the 1990s toward a framework of regional stabilization and Europeanization.

Today, many individuals who fled Kosovo during the war have become professionals abroad and key voices in preserving and narrating the memory of the conflict and its liberation.

Collective Memory of the War: KLA, KSF, and NATO Involvement

The war in Kosovo (1998–1999) is remembered through intertwined legal, political, and emotional dimensions. The Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), formed as an armed resistance movement, later became foundational for the development of the Kosovo Security Force (KSF)—a professional force trained in accordance with international standards to contribute to peace, stability, and territorial defense.

Following the withdrawal of Serbian forces and the entry of NATO's KFOR peacekeeping mission in June 1999, Kosovo entered a new phase of reconstruction and state-building. Independence in February 2008 symbolized the culmination of a long collective struggle for freedom and self-determination. This moment remains a central, positive memory that Kosovars hold with enduring pride.

Waiting, Pain, and Loneliness: The Memory of the Missing

One of the most painful elements of Kosovo's collective memory is the unresolved fate of its missing persons. Over 1,600 individuals from the war remain unaccounted for.

A powerful symbol of this trauma is the experience of Ferdonije Çerkezi from Gjakova, who lost her husband and four sons during the war. Every evening, she sets the dinner table for them, preserving hope for their return. Her home—now transformed into a museum—serves as a living testimony to loss, resilience, and the emotional burden of waiting. Ferdonije represents thousands of families who still do not know where the remains of their loved ones lie.

Sexual Violence as a Weapon of War

Despite international humanitarian law, including norms rooted in Henri Dunant's early appeals after Solferino, wartime atrocities persist. In Kosovo, sexual violence was systematically used as a weapon of war. Estimates suggest that up to 20,000 women and men were subjected to sexual violence during the conflict. In tribute to these survivors, Kosovo built the "Heroinat" (Heroines) memorial in Pristina, composed of 20,000 metal discs, each representing a victim of wartime sexual violence. The monument stands as a reminder of both the gravity of the crime and the strength of survivors.

Newborn: Symbol of Independence and Renewal

The NEWBORN monument, unveiled on the day of Kosovo's declaration of independence (17 February 2008), symbolizes the birth of the new state. Initially painted with the flags of countries recognizing Kosovo's independence, it is repainted annually with new themes reflecting societal transformations. NEWBORN has become an evolving marker of optimism, identity, and international belonging.

Conclusion

The act of remembering—individually and collectively—is central to preserving the experiences of those who endured the war in Kosovo. These memories shape national identity, inform political culture, and influence the intergenerational transmission of trauma and resilience.

For younger generations who did not live through the conflict, collective memory provides a crucial link to understanding their history. ***When grounded in facts, dignity, and a commitment to peace, memory becomes a tool for reconciliation, social cohesion, and the prevention of future violence.***

In Kosovo's case, the traumatic events of the 1990s profoundly influenced the emergence of a national identity rooted in struggle, endurance, and the pursuit of freedom. By preserving and responsibly narrating these experiences, Kosovo continues to honour the past while building a stable and democratic future.

INTERGROUP RELATIONS AND THE PERSISTENCE OF CONFLICT NARRATIVES IN THE WESTERN BALKANS: A NARRATIVE-BASED QUALITATIVE REFLECTION

Sanja Angelovska, Independent Researcher"

The Western Balkans remains a region where historical conflicts and ethno-political divisions continue to shape collective memory and social interactions. Understanding how narratives of intergroup conflict persist in this region requires a nuanced approach, one that accounts for both structural and individual-level dynamics. Drawing on in-depth qualitative interviews conducted with intellectuals and individuals with significant intercultural contact in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and North Macedonia, this reflection explores how perceptions of the "other" are constructed, maintained, and, in some cases, critically assessed.

One of the key patterns emerging from the data is the role of historical narratives and collective memory in framing intergroup relations. Across interviews, participants consistently referred to historical events, such as the wars of the 1990s, the Ottoman legacy, and the complex political developments of the 20th century, as central to how they understood contemporary interethnic dynamics. These historical narratives were often highly localized: individuals emphasized experiences and interpretations that were dominant within their own ethnic groups, yet also reflected awareness of broader regional implications. This underscores the persistence of conflict narratives, even among individuals who are highly educated and socially mobile.

DISTINGUISHING GROUP NARRATIVES FROM PERSONAL EXPERIENCE: A MARKER OF REFLEXIVITY

An important pattern emerging from interviews in Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia was the participants' ability to clearly distinguish between widely shared narratives within their ethnic group and their own personal perceptions shaped through education, contact, and professional engagement. This is not a distancing from their group identity, but rather a sign of developed reflexivity — the capacity to recognize that collective narratives and personal beliefs are not always identical.

Participants frequently made statements such as:

- "This is how most people in my community talk about the issue, but my personal experience is different."
- "I understand why this stereotype exists historically, but it doesn't match what I have lived."
- "My group often views them through this lens; however, I interpret things differently based on my interactions."

These insights demonstrate that participants could observe their own group's discourse analytically, showing self-awareness and non-biased reflection. Methodologically, this is crucial: it highlights that the sample cannot be treated as fully representative of the general

population. A broader sample, including individuals with less intercultural contact or lower levels of formal education, might reveal very different perspectives. Therefore, the findings here are indicative rather than generalizable, and broader claims would require triangulation from at least three independent data sources, which at the stance of this research were not available or approachable.

INTERGROUP CONTACT AND ITS EFFECTS

Another prominent theme is the role of direct intergroup contact in shaping perceptions. Interviewees frequently emphasized that their attitudes were influenced not only by education but also by sustained engagement with individuals from other ethnic groups. Many noted that exposure to alternative perspectives helped them critically evaluate stereotypes and understand the socially constructed nature of prejudice. This aligns with well-established social-psychological theories suggesting that contact across group boundaries can reduce intergroup bias, particularly when it occurs in contexts characterized by equality, shared goals, and cooperative interaction.

However, the interviews also revealed the limits of contact. While participants could articulate more nuanced and balanced views, they were fully aware that the broader societal environment often reinforced ethnic boundaries. Media discourse, political rhetoric, and segregated social networks continue to perpetuate simplified or antagonistic narratives. In this sense, even intellectually reflective individuals are not fully insulated from collective narratives; rather, they navigate them consciously, reflecting a complex interplay between personal and collective cognition.

PERSISTENCE OF CONFLICT NARRATIVES

Despite their reflexivity, participants consistently described the enduring impact of collective memory and historical narratives. Stories of past injustices, victimization, and interethnic tension were recurrent reference points. Importantly, these narratives were often intertwined with moral and identity-related considerations: participants recognized that collective memory serves not only as a historical account but also as a mechanism for affirming group cohesion and identity. This explains why certain narratives persist even when individual attitudes might be more critical or nuanced.

Furthermore, participants in Kosovo highlighted how political and institutional contexts shape perception. Here, ethno-nationalist narratives are often embedded in education, local governance, and civic life, reinforcing intergroup distinctions. Intellectuals navigating these narratives must therefore exercise continuous reflexivity, balancing personal experience with socially endorsed collective narratives.

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

It is important to stress that the views captured here are those of intellectuals and socially mobile individuals with extensive intercultural exposure. They are not representative of the broader population, and the findings should not be generalized without further verification. Indeed, generalization in social research requires triangulation across multiple independent sources, a condition not met in the present study. The reflections offered here should therefore

be interpreted as in-depth narrative insights, providing a window into how certain segments of the population engage with intergroup narratives rather than definitive conclusions about the societies as a whole.

Moreover, the ability of participants to distinguish between collective narratives and personal beliefs underscores the importance of sample characteristics. Their self-awareness and analytical capacity highlight the ways in which education, professional experience, and direct contact can shape intergroup perceptions, potentially mitigating bias even within historically divided contexts. Future research would benefit from exploring these dynamics in more diverse populations, including individuals from less mobile or mono-ethnic backgrounds, to understand how widespread these reflective capacities are.

CONCLUSION

The qualitative insights gathered from intellectuals in Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, and Kosovo reveal a complex landscape of intergroup relations, shaped by history, memory, and social context. While conflict narratives remain persistent at a societal level, many individuals exhibit critical reflexivity, separating their personal perceptions from dominant group discourses. This demonstrates that attitudes are neither fixed nor uniform, but are influenced by education, intercultural engagement, and conscious reflection.

Methodologically, these findings illustrate the value of narrative-based qualitative approaches in capturing nuanced social realities. They also highlight the need for caution in interpreting results, reminding us that individual-level insights, especially from a highly educated and mobile sample, cannot be automatically generalized. Understanding the Western Balkans' intergroup dynamics thus requires continued exploration across multiple populations and sources, always attentive to the interplay between collective memory and personal experience.

FROM POETIC JUSTICE TO MORAL REHABILITATION: CRIMINALITY AND WAR IN SERBIAN CINEMA

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At the end of 2025, a disturbing controversy re-emerged in relation to the 1992–1995 siege of Sarajevo. Media reports and documentary testimonies revived allegations that, during the siege, foreign civilians paid members of the Bosnian Serb forces to be taken to sniper positions surrounding the city and to shoot at Sarajevo's residents for sport, a practice that has come to be referred to as "sniper safari." Following the renewed public attention to these allegations, Italian judicial authorities announced the opening of a preliminary investigation into the possible involvement of Italian citizens in war crimes during the siege (Mohamed, 2025). While the investigation is ongoing and no judicial conclusions have yet been reached, its very existence has reopened the conundrum of how to account for the entanglement of war, profit, and spectacle, and for the figures who moved between these domains with impunity.

What the renewed attention to such allegations exposes is not only the brutality of wartime violence, but also the enduring difficulty of publicly confronting the actors of the 1990 Yugoslav wars who operated in the shadowy zones between paramilitarism, organized crime, and state structures. While international tribunals and historiographies (Baker, 2015) have largely privileged questions of ethnic violence, sovereignty, and victimhood, the role of organized crime has remained marginal, fragmentary, or politically inconvenient (Morrison, 2011). However, at the level of everyday knowledge, the criminal dimension of the wars has never been absent. Across the post-Yugoslav region, there exists a widely shared emic category of ratni profiter (war profiteer) that has been used to describe individuals who accumulated wealth, power, and social capital through wartime smuggling, looting, sanctions-busting, and the exploitation of violence. The term widely circulates in informal conversations, media commentary, and popular culture, reflecting a broad social awareness that the wars were fought not only along ethnic or ideological lines but also served as lucrative economic opportunities for particular actors (Andreas, 2005; Strazzari, 2007).

Yet, despite this pervasive recognition, official transitional justice mechanisms did little to account for this dimension of the conflict (Vukšić, 2023). Legal frameworks and international prosecutions have focused primarily on crimes against humanity and violations of the laws of war, leaving wartime profiteering, organized criminal networks, and their entanglement with political and security institutions largely outside the scope of accountability. As a result, many figures associated with wartime criminality not only survived the conflicts but also successfully translated wartime capital into postwar economic and political influence. Their continued presence in public life, often accompanied by flashy displays of wealth, has contributed to a profound disjunction between social reality and institutional inertness. This gap between collective awareness and formal accountability has shaped how the wars are remembered and narrated, pushing the figure of the war criminal/profiteer into an ambiguous cultural space where social condemnation coexists with fear, irony, and normalization.

In the backdrop of the state's failure to address the role of organized crime through legislation or systematic knowledge production, post-Yugoslav cinema became the main space of articulation of the criminal dimensions of the Yugoslav wars. Rather than offering factual reconstruction, post-Yugoslav films tend to translate socially circulating knowledge, rumors, suspicions, and shared assumptions about wartime profiteering into fictional narratives. In doing so, they both register the widespread awareness of criminality during the wars and shape its postwar intelligibility. Film thus becomes a substitute arena of memory and judgment, where unresolved questions about responsibility and complicity are displaced into the realm of popular culture.

Treating cinema as a compensatory arena of memory, however, also requires attention to historical change. Filmic representations of crime and criminality are not static responses to the past; they evolve in dialogue with shifting political contexts, generational distance from the wars, and changing regimes of responsibility. As time passes and legal accountability remains limited, the narrative functions assigned to criminal figures are reworked, redistributed, and, in some cases, profoundly transformed. Rather than simply repeating established moral judgments, post-Yugoslav cinema progressively re-negotiates the place of the criminal within the social imagination, reflecting broader processes through which wartime violence is normalized, displaced, or re-signified. It is within this evolving cinematic negotiation that Serbian cinema charts a significant shift in the moral and symbolic status of the criminal: from tragic and violently self-destructive figures in the immediate postwar productions of the 1990s, through ironic and disposable characters in the early 2000s, to rehabilitated, or even morally authoritative, figures in early 2010s films. This transformation mirrors a broader social accommodation of wartime criminality under conditions of limited accountability, in which former perpetrators and profiteers are gradually detached from their wartime roles and reinserted into narratives of social order, reconciliation, or moral instruction.

Some of the most striking representations of this shift can be found in a series of widely circulated Serbian films produced between the mid-1990s and early 2010s, including Lepa sela lepo gore (Pretty Village, Pretty Flame, 1996) and Rane (The Wounds, 1998), both directed by Srđan Dragojević; Podzemlje (Underground, 1999), directed by Emir Kustirca; Sivi kamion crvene boje (The Red Colored Grey Truck, 2004), directed by Srđan Koljević; and Parada (Parade, 2011), again directed by Dragojević. Reading these films comparatively allows us to observe not only a diachronic shift in the representation of criminal figures but also an internal evolution within Dragojević's cinematic corpus, whose work provides a useful lens for examining broader transformations in the postwar moral economy of criminality.

Shortly after the end of the 1991–1995 wars, Serbian director Srđan Dragojević released two films that would strongly shape subsequent cinematic engagement with the 1990s: Lepa sela lepo gore (Pretty Village, Pretty Flame, 1996) and Rane (The Wounds, 1998). Both films are set during the war years, though in markedly different spatial and social contexts. Pretty Village, Pretty Flame unfolds on the Bosnian battlefield, where war is experienced directly through combat, looting, and the suspension of moral and legal constraints. Violence here is overt and routinized, embedded in the everyday practices of paramilitary units whose actions blur the line between military engagement and criminal predation. By contrast, The Wounds takes place in Belgrade, far from the front lines, where war is present not as direct combat but as a pervasive

social condition that reshapes urban life. The film follows a group of young men whose gradual descent into organized violence and criminality is mediated not only by nationalist rhetoric and the normalization of brutality in the public sphere, but also by the seductive appeal of a local criminal figure whose lifestyle is staged as glamorous and aspirational portrayed through showoff of wealth, media visibility, and a romantic relationship with a turbo-folk singer. This aestheticization of criminality situates violence within a broader popular-cultural economy, in which crime becomes intertwined with celebrity, desire, and masculine success (Radović, 2009).

Both films trace how war permeates everyday life, either by directly producing criminal actors on the battlefield or by indirectly cultivating them in the metropolitan rear. In each case, criminality emerges not as an aberration or moral deviation, but as a structurally enabled response to wartime conditions, in which violence becomes a viable form of social mobility and recognition. The trajectories of the protagonists suggest that war does not merely coexist with crime, but actively generates it as part of its social economy. Both films conclude with tragic endings that restore moral order through final and spectacular acts of violence. Drawing on an Aristotelian logic of poetic justice, the criminal protagonists are punished through death, thereby reaffirming a clear moral boundary between acceptable and unacceptable forms of violence. In these early postwar cinematic narratives, death serves as symbolic closure, enabling the films to condemn criminal excess while containing its broader social implications.

One of the most extensively analyzed films of the period is Podzemlje – Bila jednom jedna zemlja (Underground – Once Upon a Time There Was a Country, 1995), directed by Emir Kusturica and awarded the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival. The film achieved remarkable international and regional acclaim and quickly became a key reference point in debates about the cultural representation of Yugoslavia's collapse. At the same time, it has been subject to sustained scholarly criticism for its historical reductionism, reliance on ethnic and cultural stereotypes, and its tendency to collapse complex political processes into allegorical excess (Murtić, 2015). These tensions between global recognition and critical unease already position Underground as a revealing case for examining how criminality and war are narratively entangled. Structured around three temporal moments -1941, the 1960s, and 1992- the film traces the intertwined lives of two communist protagonists, Marko and Petar Popara - Crni, from their anti-fascist resistance activities during the Second World War to their role in the violent disintegration of Yugoslavia. The narrative hinge of the film lies in Marko's long-term deception: after the war, he imprisons the wounded Crni and a group of comrades in an underground bunker, convincing them that the war is still ongoing while exploiting their labor to run an illegal weapons factory. Presenting himself publicly (in the overground) as a partisan hero and later as a nationalist authority, Marko inhabits a double role that fuses political legitimacy while unlawfully accumulating capital through exploitation of Crni (in the underground).

In this sense, Marko's character functions as a paradigmatic figure of the war profiteer, embodying the convergence of criminal entrepreneurship and political power. His activities are not portrayed as marginal or oppositional to the state, but rather as enabled by shifting ideological regimes, suggesting a continuity between socialist-era authority, wartime nationalism, and criminal accumulation (Homer, 2009). The underground weapons factory operates as a powerful metaphor for a society sustained by deception, in which violence is continuously reproduced in the name of obsolete or fabricated causes. The film, like Dragojević's earlier two, resolves the narrative through spectacular acts of punishment. Marko

is killed in flames in front of a church, while Crni dies by leaping into a well, staging the deaths as both inevitable and morally necessary. These grandiose endings reinforce a symbolic universe in which betrayal, profiteering, and historical blindness demand sacrifice, allowing the film to restore moral order through destruction rather than accountability. In doing so, Underground exemplifies an early postwar cinematic logic in which criminal-political entanglements are acknowledged and dramatized, yet ultimately contained through allegory and fatalism rather than systematic reckoning.

With the democratic transition of the 2000s, representations of criminality underwent a notable transformation. Organized crime did not disappear from Serbian cinema; rather, its narrative function was recalibrated. In contrast to the tragic and cathartic deaths of criminal figures in 1990s productions where violence was framed as historically consequential and morally weighty, films of the early 2000s increasingly portrayed criminal involvement as provisional, contingent, and often banal, emerging from wartime uncertainty and social collapse rather than ideological commitment. A key example of this shift is Sivi kamion crvene boje (The Red Colored Grey Truck, 2004), directed by Srđan Koljević, set during the first days of the war in 1991. The film opens with a comical prologue in which four arms smugglers kill one another in a farcical dispute, rendering their deaths abrupt and almost meaningless. Unlike the grandiose finales of earlier films, this violence lacks moral gravitas; criminal actors are eliminated not through symbolic justice, but through their own incompetence and greed. Criminality here is stripped of its tragic aura and reduced to an object of irony.

The narrative then shifts to a petty criminal and a hitchhiking woman who unknowingly transport a truck filled with hidden weapons across a country on the brink of war. Their journey unfolds against a backdrop of disintegration, checkpoints, and emerging frontlines, emphasizing the ordinariness of their predicament rather than heroic transgression. Crucially, their eventual punishment is not tied to ideological alignment or explicit participation in organized violence, but to their moment of recognition and choice: once they become aware of the weapons and decide to profit from them, they cross an invisible moral threshold. The film thus distinguishes between survival within chaos and conscious profiteering from war. In this narrative economy, criminality is no longer epic or historically decisive, but ironic and disposable. Death functions less as a tragic reckoning than as a narrative mechanism that reasserts moral boundaries at a smaller, individualized scale. By relocating criminal responsibility from paramilitary elites to marginal figures, Sivi kamion crvene boje reflects a broader post-2000 representational shift, in which the structural entanglement of war and organized crime recedes from view, while moral judgment is displaced onto ordinary subjects navigating collapse. The film thereby marks a transitional moment: criminality remains present, but its political weight is diminished.

This shift becomes most pronounced in Parada (Parade, 2011), directed by Dragojević, where former paramilitaries from the 1990s are portrayed in a radically different register. The film follows Limun, a former paramilitary soldier of the Yugoslav wars who, in the postwar period, runs a private security business and a martial arts gym. Despite his wartime past, Limun occupies a precarious social position: his gym operates without a license, effectively relegating him to the status of a petty criminal, and his financial instability prevents him from satisfying the escalating demands of his fiancée, Biserka, during the preparations for their wedding. Parallel to the wedding narrative, the film depicts the struggle of the LGBT community to organize a Pride parade in Belgrade, an effort repeatedly obstructed by the refusal of the police to provide protection (Horvat, 2023). Biserka befriends Mirko, one of the Pride organizers and a

professional wedding planner, and an informal exchange emerges: Mirko agrees to organize the wedding, while Biserka persuades Limun to provide security for the Pride. Motivated by personal loyalty to his wife rather than ideological transformation, Limun agrees, suppressing his overt homophobia in order to please Biserka.

Unable to rely on his local homophobic associates, none of whom are willing to protect the event, Limun travels across the former Yugoslav region to recruit former wartime adversaries. He eventually assembles a team composed of the Bosniak Halil, the Croat Roko, and the Kosovo Albanian Azem, all of whom fought on opposing sides during the 1990s conflicts. The film frames their willingness to join not as a political conversion, but as a form of pragmatic solidarity grounded in shared wartime experience. Although the antagonisms of the war remain implicitly present, they are narratively subordinated to a functional alliance built around a common repertoire of militarized masculinity and familiarity with marginal, semi-legal postwar economies. The climactic scene at the Pride parade crystallizes the film's moral reconfiguration. While the former paramilitaries successfully secure the event and survive the violent confrontation with a neo-Nazi group, Mirko, the liberal civic activist and Biserka's friend and wedding planner, is killed. Moral sacrifice is thus displaced away from the former war criminals and onto a civilian figure associated with liberal activism. The film presents the survival of the paramilitaries as a form of moral transformation: with Mirko's death, their homophobia is symbolically extinguished, and they emerge as newly "democratized" subjects, now positioned as protectors of social order and tolerance.

Dragojević's three films offer a particularly explicit illustration of how the image of the wartime criminal shifts in Serbian cinema - from a figure whose death restores moral order to one whose survival underwrites new forms of legitimacy. Read against this cinematic trajectory, the renewed attention to allegations such as the "sniper safari" does not appear as a sudden or isolated revelation, but as a belated re-emergence of a problem that has long circulated at the level of social knowledge while remaining institutionally unresolved. The idea that war could become a site of profit, spectacle, and even entertainment is not foreign to the post-Yugoslav imaginary; it has been repeatedly articulated, displaced, and domesticated through popular culture.

What Serbian cinema reveals, however, is not simply that criminality was present during the wars, but how its moral status has been progressively reconfigured, from tragic excess demanding sacrifice, to ironic aberration, to a condition that can be rehabilitated and rendered socially functional. In this sense, the scandal surrounding "sniper safari" does not rupture an otherwise settled narrative of the past; rather, it exposes the enduring consequences of a long-standing failure to confront the entanglement of violence, profit, and impunity. Cinema, as this analysis suggests, has filled the vacuum left by transitional justice not by resolving these tensions, but by making them narratively manageable, sometimes condemning, sometimes normalizing, and sometimes quietly accommodating figures who moved between war, crime, and power.

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Resistance, Culture, and Everyday Politics

YOUTH PROTEST IN THE AGE OF AUTHORITARIANISM: GENERATION Z AND NARRATIVE RESISTANCE IN SERBIA

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There is a rich body of literature on student uprising, stretching from the 1968 demonstrations to anti-apartheid and pro-democracy movements in the 1980s, to more recent mobilizations like Black Lives Matter, the global climate movement, and the protests against Israel's genocide in Palestine. Still, while transitional and liberal-democratic settings have received considerable examination, far less attention has been paid to how young people mobilize under entrenched authoritarian conditions. What unites these efforts is their capacity to articulate dissent and imagine alternative futures. In the Serbian context, student activism has long occupied a contested space, either as a vanguard of democratic change or as a residual force subject to co-optation or marginalization by dominant political actors (Bešlin, 2025; Jansen, 2000; Klasić, 2012; Popov, 2008; Prošić-Dvornić, 2000; Spasojević & Lončar, 2023; Tomić, 2011; Vladisavljević, 2014).

Unlike previous student movements in post-Yugoslav Serbia, the 2024/2025 one is notable for its explicitly anti-political stance. Students have refused alignment with any political party, instead emphasizing moral appeals, horizontal organization, and institutional accountability. This positioning complicates conventional political science categorizations and calls for a reassessment of how youth activism functions in contemporary authoritarian settings (Jerkov et al., 2025). In response, the government systematically securitized the student uprising through delegitimizing discourse, labeling peaceful protestors as extremists, foreign agents, or destabilizing actors. This framing enabled the regime to justify repressive actions ranging from surveillance and intimidation to direct police intervention. Protestors resisted not only through occupation and sound action but by reclaiming symbolic language, digital space, and public narratives, challenging the state's monopolization of legitimacy and discourse.

At the core is Generation Z, often dismissed as politically apathetic, that is disillusioned with representative democracy. These young activists have emerged as a politically innovative actor, blending radical organizational forms with liberal-democratic demands, and engaged in what can be termed "counter-securitization"—a resistance strategy grounded in transparency, procedural fairness, and participatory democracy. They embrace non-institutional forms of activism, relying heavily on digital tools and affective mobilization. A central concern of this movement is control over public narratives. While the government presents itself as a modernizing force, incidents such as the Novi Sad tragedy, when on 1 November 2024, the newly renovated canopy of the main railway station collapsed, killing 16 people and severely injuring several others, expose systemic failures rooted in corruption and disregard for public welfare. The regime's attempts to deflect responsibility were quickly countered by independent media and student-organized campaigns, emphasizing moral framing and emotional resonance. This aligns with the framing theory (Benford & Snow, 2000; Razsa, 2015; Tilly, 2006),

which highlights the importance of defining problems, assigning blame, and articulating morally resonant solutions. Generation Z protesters have proven adept at this. Their digital fluency and decentralized organizing strategies allow them to counter state narratives in real time, generating a form of "narrative resistance" independent of traditional institutions. In Serbia, where mainstream media is largely captured, this capacity is both disruptive and vital.

The protests also reveal the authoritarian reflexes of the Serbian state (Stojanović et al., 2025; Vučković et al., 2025). Rather than engage with demonstrators' demands, government officials have responded with mockery, repression, and securitization. The regime increasingly frames the movement as a foreign-funded destabilization effort, using labels like "terrorism" and "color revolution" to discredit protestors and justify repression. This supports the argument that illiberal regimes reinterpret dissent as an existential threat (Rutzen, 2015). Using the concept of securitization (Balzacq, 2011; Floyed, 2019; Williams, 2003), we see how the state shifts protest from the domain of political disagreement to that of national security, enabling exceptional measures like surveillance, arrests, and broader criminalization of dissent. This discursive strategy taps into post-Yugoslav anxieties around sovereignty and foreign influence. The portrayal of youth protesters as "foreign agents" activates nationalist sentiment and delegitimizes domestic civic action. It mirrors patterns in other authoritarian-leaning regimes, where youth-led mobilization is reframed as orchestrated subversion.

To situate this further, the framework of competitive authoritarianism is crucial. As argued elsewhere (Christensen & Weinstein, 2013; Levitsky & Way, 2010; Petrova & Tarrow, 2007), such regimes preserve the appearance of democracy—elections, parties, media—while hollowing out institutional integrity. Serbia fits this model: elections occur, but are neither free nor fair; opposition parties exist, but face structural disadvantage; independent media is present, but largely marginalized. This presents a dilemma for protest movements; while seeking change through democratic means, they operate on a severely tilted playing field (Benford & Snow, 2000; Chemaly, 2024; Johnston, 2015). The 2024/2025 protests attempted to navigate this by rejecting direct political competition, eschewing party formation or candidate support. Yet this risks marginalization: without institutional pathways, protest movements can face burnout, fragmentation, or co-optation. Still, Generation Z—shaped by digital-native culture, post-pandemic precarity, and global awareness of injustices—has fostered resilient solidarities online and offline. As suggested by some accounts, its activism is relational rather than individualistic (Jerkov et al., 2025). It draws strength from shared identity, collective emotion, and performative resistance, all allowing rapid mobilization even in hostile environments.

Finally, the EU's subdued response to the protests highlights the external constraints facing democratic actors in Serbia. While the EU continues to promote itself as a normative power championing democracy and human rights in the Western Balkans, its tacit accommodation of authoritarian practices undercuts this image. The absence of meaningful EU criticism, particularly when student leaders were branded as national security threats, suggests a strategic preference for stability over democracy. This has direct implications for youth politics. A generation that perceives both national and international institutions as complicit in preserving illiberalism may increasingly reject traditional political channels. While the EU's silence emboldens further autocratization by signaling impunity, it also prompts young activists to reconceptualize politics, citizenship, and resistance for the 21st-century Balkans.

Overall, the above debate prompts the question of how regimes use "populist securitization" to reinforce hegemonic narratives and conflate dissent with threat. In this context, the securitized referent object is the ambiguous notion of "state stability," which serves to legitimize repression

by aligning regime survival with national security. In response, the 2024/2025 student movement in Serbia offers broader insights into how youth-led protest movements operate under conditions of illiberalism and hybrid authoritarianism. It has also introduced "counter-securitization" as a discursive strategy through which protestors resist official narratives and reclaim legitimacy by invoking democratic norms. In fact, in May 2025, the protesters started demanding free and fair parliamentary elections, indicating that the regime's modus operandi represented a grave danger to the future of the country (Petrušijević, 2025). Understanding this provides a crucial dimension to the debate on protest under repression, showing how narratives are used both to frame resistance and to protect movements from co-optation or criminalization. Bearing in mind the literature on "stabilitocracies" and democratic backsliding in the Western Balkans, the analysis of student protests in Serbia, as both a democratic corrective and a cultural challenge to authoritarian normalization, reasserts the relevance of youth agency, protest resilience, and bottom-up democratization—phenomena that are increasingly relevant in a world witnessing democratic erosion and the normalization of authoritarian practices.

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FORMATION IN RESISTANCE: RECLAIMING POLITICAL AGENCY IN SERBIA

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The Serbian student uprising is more than a protest. It is a process of political reconfiguration in which citizens refuse to be represented and instead enact a politics of presence, horizontality, and solidarity. Their power lies not in submitting demands to the state but in forming a commons, a shared political horizon built through collective practices of care, resistance, and imagination. By occupying universities, participants turned spaces of bureaucratic inertia into spaces of invention. What emerged was not simply opposition to authoritarianism but the formation of new political subjects and new ways of living democracy.

The uprising emerged in a country where institutions were eroding, state violence had become normalized, and authoritarian rule was presented as stability. Serbia's regime controlled the media, manipulated elections, repressed protests, and devalued education and critical thought. Universities, once somewhat independent, were subordinated to political loyalty. Faculty were appointed on partisan grounds, student bodies were depoliticized, and knowledge was reduced to a commodity. After years of scandals, violent police crackdowns, and cynical exploitation of tragedies, students and other civic actors who had long been dismissed as irrelevant suddenly took to the streets and occupied university buildings. What began as a reaction to specific issues quickly turned into a refusal of politics as usual.

The regime tried to impose its narrative. State media labeled participants as troublemakers, critical voices were silenced, and nationalism was mobilized to portray the protests as foreign-driven. During the summer months that followed, state authorities escalated repression. Peaceful protesters were beaten by police, disciplinary and criminal proceedings were initiated against participants, and public sector employees faced dismissals for their involvement. Despite these pressures, citizens persisted, demonstrating resilience and the capacity to maintain collective action under constant threat.

Through collective practices, participants constituted themselves as political subjects. They were not passive recipients of repression but agents of new forms of politics. In occupied halls and improvised assemblies, decisions were made by consensus, tasks were distributed, and care became a political principle. Meals were shared, legal aid was provided, mental health was addressed, and cultural events were organized. The university became a commons, a living political laboratory where citizenship and cooperation were tested in real time.

This horizontality was a source of strength. By refusing leaders and fixed demands, participants resisted cooptation and created a different democratic grammar rooted in dialogue, mutual recognition, and inclusivity. New solidarities emerged, most notably the Solidarity Network of IT Serbia, created to ensure that educators who resisted state pressure could continue to receive support. This unprecedented initiative allowed others in society, who otherwise could not participate in such direct action, to engage in the resistance, establishing an alternative model of civic action. The large response of donors confirmed that solidarity was understood as a political act, in which responsibility for achieving a shared political goal is collectively assumed. In a context where years of anomie had deeply shaped civic life, this initiative restored agency to participants, demonstrating that neither poverty nor deprivation could prevent them from acting as active members of the political community. In this sense, resistance was not only opposition to power but also creation of alternatives.

At the core of the uprising was a dense emotional economy. The protests grew out of anger, exhaustion, fear, and humiliation, but these emotions were transformed into solidarity and care. Occupied spaces became places of healing as much as resistance. Participants recognized emotional labor, spread tasks to prevent burnout, and created rituals of togetherness such as singing, sharing meals, or moments of silence. These practices turned vulnerability into resilience.

The uprising unfolded simultaneously in physical and digital spaces. University occupations were places of assembly and identity formation, while social media, messaging apps, livestreams, and memes enabled organization, communication, and expression. Digital tools allowed for rapid coordination, but also for irony, humor, and art that undermined authoritarian narratives while building community. Online debates informed offline strategies, and viral posts became calls to action. This interplay of digital and physical spaces gave the movement flexibility, allowing it to adapt under repression. What emerged was a new civic imagination that combined local practices with global networks.

The Serbian uprising demonstrates that political change is not only about resisting power but about imagining and building new ways of living together. Transformation begins with formation: the creation of new subjects, spaces, and practices. Young people and other engaged citizens were central to this process because they retained the imagination to envision different futures and the courage to commit to them. Their capacity to learn through struggle and their

dedication to solidarity show that imagination is not utopian detachment but a practical force of resistance.

As civic actors across Southeast Europe confront hostile conditions, the Serbian experience offers a lesson that resonates more widely. Democracy cannot survive without imagination, solidarity, and the commons. These participants remind us that frustration can give way to formation, and formation can create the shared horizons on which political futures depend. A striking symbol of this tension is the sculpture "Span in Tension," which embodies the precarious balance between pressure and resistance. Serbian society lives in a similar balance, stretched thin but still enduring. The student uprising demonstrates how pressure can transform into creative resilience, where emotional investments become active forces that sustain political life.

THE PERSONAL IS POLITICAL: SOLIDARITY, FRIENDHSIP, AND OTHER RESISTANCE NARRATIVES IN THE TIMES OF HYBRIDIZATION

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Nowadays, younger generations are faced with various existential challenges: unfavourable housing policies and scarce possibilities on the real estate market together with precarious job market are pushing their transition into becoming independent deep into their thirties. The toll these global processes are taking on current and future generations of young people, their creativity and procreation have already been well assessed by Umberto Galimberti calling these generations nihilist and passive. On the other hand, taking into consideration the social engagement of younger generations in resistance movements all over the region of Southeast Europe, it seems that the youth decided to raise their voices and fight for change.

My analysis focuses on three research blocks according to three prevailing ingredients in narratives of hybrid regimes worldwide: historical revisionism, misogyny, and nationalism.

In spring 2020, a movement called the Friday protests (also known as the Friday bikers) began to express their discontent with COVID-19 restrictions and the government led by Slovenia's now former prime minister Janez Janša which was known for his cooperation and sympathies for the regime of Viktor Orban. The movement held weekly protest on Friday afternoons and has been active for more than two years. While the general idea of the movement was always the critique of the government and ridiculing its affairs and flops, individual protest had more centred focuses such as expressing solidarity with Ukraine, expressing support with the Erased and quite often, proclaiming the protest as a move against the resurgence of fascism and (neo)Nazism. The partisan-collaborant divide was namely one of the strongest division narratives incited by the outgoing government, which is why some of the Friday bikers often protested using the symbol of the red star or even the Slovenian communist party flag.

Retrospectively, historical revisionism was one of the most notable political traits of the right-wing government agenda, and hence tenanted a large space in public intellectual debates as well. This process was even more evident with naming the historian dr. Jože Dežman as firstly the director of the Slovenian Museum for Contemporary History and secondly the Chairman of the government commission for solving the issue of mass graves containing the victims of Partisan post-war liquidations. The museum became the target of many protests; one of the most well-known acts of rebellion was the appearance of the white graffiti sign "shame" written in front of the museum entrance. In a similar selective account towards interpreting history, the government run by the Slovene Democratic Party (SDS) refused to announce the year 2022 as a commemoration year in honour of the birth of the Slovenian partisan and poet Karel Destovnik – Kajuh (1922 – 1944). However, one of the most well-known projects launched by the right-wing government was the establishment of the Museum of the Slovene Independence. This was an attempt to glorify Slovene politicians close to SDS as the bearers of the struggle for the country's independence, especially Janez Janša for his involvement in the JBTZ trial. This museum was recognized as a political project rather than a cultural or historical one. Dr. Asta Vrečko, the new cultural minister in the government of Robert Golob has already decided that the Museum of Slovene independence will be merged with the Slovenian Museum for Contemporary History into one public institution.

Apart from the Friday Bikers, one of the most notable platforms of resistance against the SDS lead government was the 8th of March Institute directed by Nika Kovač. Its representatives have positioned themselves as born after the independence of Slovenia, hence understanding themselves as representatives of the Slovenian youth. In their parliament speech in summer 2022, their representative Tina has explicitly undertaken an anti-historical stance, accenting the need for the younger generation to have a clear future rather than participating in ongoing feuds related to the past.

I am a representative of the generation of independent Slovenia. I never knew Yugoslavia. Yugonostalgia seems funny to me. I am amused that Mr. Janez Janša was a prominent member of the Communist Party. I have never had a fight with my peers over collaborants and partisans. We are not interested in such topics. However, I am grateful for the heritage of our past. Public healthcare, education, accessible kindergarten... I know that my life is easier and better thanks to solidarity mechanisms. I wouldn't live anywhere else. I am a representative of the generation of precariousness, instability and insecurity. This is also the generation that everyone accuses of passivity and inactivity. Which supposedly does not value democracy. Supposedly, we only care about ourselves. We have often debunked this myth. We observe the world around us, we understood what happened in Slovenia in the last two years.

In Rijeka, one could observe similar contesting historical narratives in the framework of the city becoming the Cultural Capital of Europe in 2020. Together with Istria, Rijeka was one of the first cities in the world to give resistance to fascism and during World War II, it was part of the antifascist front. Since 2010, Rijeka and Trieste are sister cities, a status which evokes friendship and collaboration between the two cities. In 2019, celebrating the centennial anniversary of the occupation of Rijeka by the forces led by Gabriele D'Annunzio, Rijeka commemorated the occupation with an exhibition narrating these events through a contemporary antifascist position. On the other hand, the Italian city of Trieste glorified the memory of D'Annunzio and held an exhibition "Disobbedico" ("disobedient") as well as a monument to his praise. The youth of Trieste responded by issuing an open letter addressed to the youth in Rijeka expressing their discontent with these events, rejecting ethnic hatred, and strengthening their cooperation and friendship among inhabitants of both cities.

On the other hand, the anti-fascist heritage of Rijeka is not an unconditional value for all of the city's inhabitants: on the 20th of September 2020, artist Nemanja Cvijanović erected a giant red start artwork entitled the Monument of Red Rijeka. It marked the decision made by the State Anti-Fascist Council for the National Liberation of Croatia, the highest authority in Croatia's anti-fascist movement, which in 1943 concluded to retrieve the city of Rijeka from the Nazis who controlled it after the capitulation of the Italian fascists. A representative of the Croatian War Veteran organization, however, argued that the red star represents the greatest evil in Croatian contemporary history and interpreted it as a symbol of the Yugoslav People's Army which in the 1990s war assaulted Croatia.

As noted by Dubravka Žarkov (2007), the public discourse which in Yugoslavia fuelled ethnic divisions and nationalism established itself from the 80s forth: the purpose of such hostile communication represented in the media war was the creation of ethnicity "with notions of femininity and masculinity as its essential ingredients". While Yugoslavia legalized women's suffrage in 1945, the rise of nationalist politics fuelled by the war in the 1990s paved the way to (sexual) violence and male domination, which made women "nearly invisible, unless they [became] much publicized victims of the Enemy Nation." While it seemed that the retroactive calls for women to return to their households and have babies was a characteristic of countries

transitioning from socialism to liberal democracies in the 90s, it is now becoming evident that these transformations might also be interpreted as a shift taking place on a global scale and was particularly reinforced by the 21st century global hybrid regimes: while not long ago, people in Croatia were protesting and expressing their solidarity with Mirela Čavajda who was rejected the right to abort her heavily damaged fetus, people across the USA are protesting against the decision of the Supreme Court to abolish the women's right on abortus which American women gained in 1973.

The specifics of protest for women's rights in Croatia were framed by two opposite protest movements: The Walk for Freedom (Hod za slobodu) which was organized by activists from Rijeka to promote the preservation of existing human rights. At the other side of the Korzo square, The March for Life, following the example of the similar movement in the USA, was opposing women's rights on an abortus.

As noted by I.D. (personal conversation, 2024), one of the founding members of The Walk of Freedom, the said protest has evolved as a "grassroot initiative that arose as a reaction to very strong signs of clericalization of society and retrograde movements that primarily attacked women's rights and are still attacking them". It has been established in 2018 as a reply to the attempt to organize The March of Life in Rijeka and has taken place in the city annually ever since. In the discussion with my interviewee, it comes to light that The Walk of Freedom Initiative also rests upon a certain shared values and consciousness of its organizers: these are primarily connected to understanding their own city as a place which supports progressive values, a feature which supposedly distinguishes the city and its inhabitants from other Croatian inhabitants.

Many of us became revolted, outraged by the March for Life in Rijeka. On the one hand, this may even have something to do with the fact that Rijeka has always been a liberal, progressive city and the fact that something like this is happening, we should not have allowed it, because Rijeka does not support these values. Compared to the rest of Croatia, people really feel safe in Rijeka, Rijeka is a city in which topics are discussed that might not be discussed so freely elsewhere, from various artistic events to the academic scene so that we it seemed kind of spontaneous. /.../ We were really a group of people who at some point came together in the feeling: hey, we have to do something.

Similarly, my interlocutors have pointed out that the anti-fascist history of Rijeka should be understood as a value. Hence, the organizers decided to transform a historical symbol from the city's monument into an emblem of the protest.

We used one of the symbols of the city: it is a monument on the Delta with partisan fighters, where there is also a woman with a raised fist. And then there are these layers: on the one hand, this fist represents the anti-fascist struggle, on the other, it is a woman who holds this fist and thus dominates the monument. For us, anti-fascism is one of the fundamental values, I think it should be considered a civilizational achievement. In addition, it is a local monument, so it has a threefold meaning. It is known that this is a left-wing protest and that people who do not believe that Yugoslavia was the greatest evil in the world gather at it. On the contrary, anti-fascism should live on today and there should be no debate about it.

 Members of youth movements in Slovenia and in Croatia would agree that narratives of historical resentments are a common strategy used by hybrid regime governments to redirect their attention from solving more existential issues to creating imaginary smoke-screen issues

and new enemies. While in Slovenia, the main division narrative unfolded around the partisan-collaborant divide, my correspondents in Croatia sensed that portraying the Serbs as national enemies remains a strategy which should divert attention from the government's flaws and incompetence in solving actual problems.

According to L.P. (personal conversation, 2024), "Every time something comes up that the authorities don't want to discuss, when the authorities want the spotlight off, there's always a topic. Something related to the war. And Vučić does the same from the other side, and so does Plenković. Every time there is no answer, how to take care of your society and when you want to avoid something, immediately: Serbs [are the real problem]. He [Plenković] could talk like that for the next thirty years. But this is what is official. Is it also private in people's minds? Well... we are different. I don't think it really matters that much to most people. Unless, of course, there are some hardened right-wingers or people who have suffered in war or lost someone, then it is very difficult for them to distance themselves from such a way of thinking. But this younger generation, which is perhaps a little distanced from it, I think they would like to slowly move on to some other topics that concern them more, how to realize yourself in society and finally move away from these things".

By focusing on resistance narratives of younger generations in hybrid regimes, I wanted to detect the place historical narratives and their manipulations have in current Southeast European societies. While it could be said that young activists are conscious of the power of historical heritage to bear values for a more responsible and a quality future, it is also true that they are very sensitive to damaging historical narratives which deepen divisions between people. While the politicians spreading them are trying to keep people caught in the past, the younger generations are demanding new narratives, such which will have a value for their future, and such which will help them find their place in a deeply precarious and uncertain world.

I think the engagement of the younger generations with political projects and public interpretations of the past could be a topic relevant for further discussions, not just in terms of comparing how different generations understand historical symbols differently (the red star, in particular, would have very diverse meanings not only generationally but also geographically, differing heavily from Slovenia to Macedonia). Also, this would be interesting in trying to unfold which historical symbols are interpreted as symbols of value for generations which are not directly connected to them. Furthermore, comparisons of youth movements in different republics of the former Yugoslavia reveal that young people share similar problems and concerns, and that these issues should be addressed in relation to global events on one hand, and particular national contexts on the other.

LETTERS OF BELONGING: CYRILLIC AND THE SYMBOLISM OF SERBIAN IDENTITY

Caleb Waugh, Researcher at NGO Aktiv, Kosovo

The introduction of print enabled the mass dissemination of language and the codification of vernaculars, allowing states to construct national identities through linguistic uniformity (Coulmas, 2013). As language became a vessel of nationhood, it was employed both to consolidate and to distinguish identities. In France and Italy, linguistic standardisation reinforced state cohesion, while in the former Yugoslavia, language often became a tool of division. Croatian linguistic purists sought to distance their language from Serbian by reviving archaic terms or inventing new ones. Bosnian Muslims, in turn, sought to forge a distinct "Bosnian" language as a mark of nationhood.

Among Serbs, the debate over language took a subtler form. Robert Greenberg (2004) identifies three main currents: those who see Serbian as an outgrowth of Serbo-Croatian; the neo-Vukovites seeking to restore Vuk Karadžić's nineteenth-century reforms; and the *nationalist-orthodox faction*, for whom Cyrillic is integral to cultural authenticity. The alphabet's symbolic importance stems largely from its association with Karadžić and the idea of linguistic purity (Karadžić, 1847/1969). With the modern Serbian state now designating Cyrillic as its official script, the key question becomes whether its use constitutes an assertion of national identity and how far it represents conscious political and cultural choice.

The early 1990s witnessed a broader re-embrace of mythologies long suppressed by the communist regime. The re-adoption of Cyrillic paralleled the revival of national symbols and historical memory that accompanied Yugoslavia's dissolution. It has been argued that the disintegration of Serbo-Croatian and Croatia's linguistic purification spurred Serbs to reclaim Cyrillic as the "original" Serbian alphabet. Neo-Vukovite scholars such as Radoje Simić and Miloš Kovačević (2002) argued that the alphabet's reassertion strengthened Serbian linguistic identity, distinct from both Yugoslav and Croat variants.

Theorists of nationalism underscore the centrality of language to national consciousness. Benedict Anderson (1991) viewed print capitalism as enabling nations to "imagine" themselves, while Karl Deutsch (1966) saw language as the communicative infrastructure of nationhood. Yet in the Serbian case, the focus is not on creating communication but on symbolising difference. Cyrillic's significance is thus primarily symbolic: a visual emblem of authenticity rather than a practical linguistic necessity. Its revival reflects a desire to reinforce rather than disseminate identity—a reaffirmation of continuity with a perceived cultural essence.

The uneven presence of Cyrillic in contemporary Serbia illustrates this duality. State signage and official documents typically employ it, yet advertising, branding, and much media output favour the Latin script. Among the younger generation, the Latin script dominates informal communication. This imbalance reveals that the re-establishment of Cyrillic as the state script has not translated into uniform social practice. Rather, its persistence owes more to ideology than utility.

Political usage reinforces this divide. Parties with nationalist or conservative leanings—such as the Democratic Party of Serbia—tend to employ Cyrillic, while liberal, pro-Western parties prefer Latin. Though this pattern should not be overstated, it suggests that alphabet choice carries ideological resonance: Cyrillic signifying cultural rootedness and Latin some sort of

cosmopolitanism. Similarly, media outlets align along comparable lines. The coexistence of both scripts, without legal compulsion, demonstrates that alphabet usage functions as a marker of identity and orientation.

The use of Cyrillic among Serbs thus exemplifies a broader pattern of post-communist societies redefining identity through linguistic symbolism. For Serbia, Cyrillic serves as a mnemonic device of continuity, linking modern statehood to a pre-Yugoslav heritage (Simić, 1997). Its use by many conservative and nationalist actors reveals how language remains intertwined with political orientation. Yet because Latin remains pervasive, especially in commerce, youth culture, and international communication, Cyrillic's role is less about exclusivity than about assertion: a visible declaration of belonging amid heterogeneity (Bugarski, 2004).

Debates over the alphabet mirror wider tensions between tradition and integration, authenticity and pragmatism. While the symbolic value of Cyrillic endures, its practical dominance is uncertain. Whether future generations will continue to see it as a marker of identity or as an anachronism will depend on how Serbia balances its cultural heritage with the realities of global communication.

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