

THE INTEGRATION OF THE WESTERN BALKANS INTO THE EU

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Abstract: This article examines the intricacies of European integration for Western Balkan countries, exploring the unique challenges each state confronts on its path to EU membership. It delves into the political, legal, and diplomatic reforms required, emphasizing the pivotal role these play in aligning with EU standards. Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Serbia, Montenegro, and Kosovo are analyzed in terms of their distinct obstacles, such as internal political stability, judiciary reforms, dispute resolution with neighbors, and anti-corruption efforts. For instance, North Macedonia's settlement of a historical name dispute with Greece underscores the importance of diplomacy in the region. Serbia's bid for membership is complicated by the necessity to normalize relations with Kosovo amidst internal and external tensions. Montenegro's recent political transitions illustrate its dedication to democratic principles and Euro-Atlantic alliances as it pursues EU accession. Kosovo's journey is marked by its unique international recognition issues and the implications of recent EU sanctions following ethnic conflicts. The article argues that while progress has been made, the EU accession journey for these nations will require sustained commitment, comprehensive reforms, and adept negotiation to surmount the hurdles ahead. It is through such concerted efforts that the Western Balkan countries can advance towards achieving their EU membership goals, with the collective process shaping the region's European perspective and integration.

Keywords: European integration, EU accession, Western Balkans, reforms, diplomatic relations

1. Introduction

The Western Balkans region is a complex area with mixed interests and occasional opposition from leading countries like the USA, Russia, and individual EU states. China's increasing influence in energy and infrastructure adds to the geopolitical dynamics [1]. The US's reduced presence has impacted the region's stability. Due to the global economic crisis and shifting spheres of interest, the USA's influence has declined, leading to uncertainty. This has also affected the EU's stance and its relations with the Balkans, creating ambiguity in their positions. The US has reduced its presence in the region, while the

EU lacks a backup plan for ongoing stabilization efforts. The US's strong backing of countries like Albania, North Macedonia, and Montenegro in their NATO membership goals is crucial for security in the Western Balkans.

Currently, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Montenegro are candidate countries for EU membership. Kosovo's candidacy is unique. In 2003, at the Thessaloniki summit, the first four countries were recognized as potential EU membership candidates. Montenegro, following its independence declaration, sought EU membership in 2008. Subsequently, the EU Council

initiated accession talks with Western Balkan countries meeting the Copenhagen criteria.

2. Albania

Albania's aspirations for EU membership have undergone changes in outlook and strategies over time, as reflected in the literature on EU policies towards the post-Socialist countries. According to the sources, Albania has shown a consistent desire for EU membership despite challenges and changes in strategies [2].

Albania has made progress on its path to European integration, yet it still faces various challenges. While the country demonstrates a consistent commitment and desire to join the European Union, it must continue to meet the political criteria established by the European Commission. This includes upholding democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. The hurdles in this process include the need for substantial reforms, as well as addressing security issues that have implications for Albania's EU integration. The success of these efforts is monitored through periodic reports from the European Commission, which assess Albania's alignment with the required standards for EU membership [3].

The 12th Stabilization and Association Council meeting on March 16, 2023 in Tirana acknowledged Albania's progress in EU acquis adoption, market economy development, and the importance of completing these processes. The EU reaffirmed commitment to provide financial aid under the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance, granting 229.1 million euros and 305.1 million euros in loans in the last 3 years [4].

3. Bosnia and Herzegovina

Bosnia and Herzegovina, similar to Albania, is a country in the Western Balkans with aspirations for European Union membership. The country's path towards EU integration has been complex, mainly due to political and ethnic divisions

that have made it difficult to implement necessary reforms consistently. Unlike Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina's progress towards EU membership has been slower, and it faces unique challenges such as the need to address the deeply entrenched political structure that arose from the Dayton Peace Agreement, which ended the Bosnian War in the 1990s.

Bosnia and Herzegovina's application for EU membership was submitted in 2016, but the progress in meeting the EU's political and economic criteria, as outlined in the Copenhagen criteria, has been gradual. The EU insists on the importance of strong democratic institutions, the rule of law, human rights and minority protection, as well as a functioning market economy.

Despite these challenges, Bosnia and Herzegovina is recommended for EU candidate status by the Council of the EU in December 2022. The country must promptly fulfill the commitments from the political agreement signed in June 2022 to progress towards European integration.

4. North Macedonia

Negotiations for North Macedonia's EU accession started 17 years after becoming an EU candidate. Since 2005 the country has taken several steps towards integration. [5]. However, the country's EU accession process has also faced challenges and delays. Key issues that have affected North Macedonia's EU accession path include political and institutional reforms, resolving disputes with neighboring countries, particularly the long-standing name dispute with Greece which was resolved with the Prespa Agreement in 2018, leading to the country's official renaming from the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia to North Macedonia.

Progress towards EU membership has also been impacted by internal political stability, the need for judiciary reforms, fighting corruption, and improving the overall functionality of democratic institutions. Furthermore, the EU enlargement process

itself has been subject to broader debates within the EU about the future of expansion and the integration capacity of the Union.

North Macedonia continues to work towards meeting the criteria for EU membership, aligning its laws and regulations with the EU acquis, and demonstrating its commitment to uphold EU values and principles. The pace of progress towards EU membership often depends on both internal developments in North Macedonia and the wider context of EU politics and decision-making processes.

5. Republic of Serbia

Serbia has been on the path toward EU membership for several years, having officially become a candidate country in 2012 after submitting its application in 2009.

The Republic of Serbia shows the highest intensity in the negotiation process. It has made significant progress over the years towards EU integration, engaging in the accession process by meeting criteria and implementing reforms.

However, Serbia also faces serious challenges. It struggles to rid itself of the burden of being a Greater Serbian South Slavic state, shaping Balkan policies and relying on Russia's support. Post-Yugoslavia breakup, various minority groups like Albanians, Hungarians and Bosniaks still reside within its borders. The normalization of its relations with Kosovo is another crucial aspect of Serbia's EU accession process that needs to be resolved. [6]. Besides the ongoing Kosovo dispute and its lack of recognition for independence, there is a firm dedication to backing Republika Srpska's identity in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This challenges the delicate Dayton Peace Agreement, risking Bosnia and Herzegovina becoming a perpetual source of conflict in the region. Serbia's foreign policy features heighten the EU's distrust, labeling it a "Trojan horse" for Russia, hindering a unified European stance upon its EU accession. Internal

political issues, like the disputed 2023 elections, further strain relations with Europe, seen as undemocratic by the West.

6. Montenegro

Montenegro is another country on the path to EU membership. The nation began its formal journey towards joining the European Union when it submitted its application for membership in 2008. It was granted the status of an official candidate country two years later, in 2010.

Since then, Montenegro has been actively engaged in the accession process, which includes negotiations in various chapters of the EU acquis communautaire, the comprehensive body of European laws and regulations that candidate countries must adopt. The process necessitates widespread reforms, particularly in the areas of judiciary, public administration, human rights, and anti-corruption efforts.

The recent change in Montenegro's political regime followed Milo Djukanovic's lengthy rule. His policies necessitate enhancing operations and establishing democratic institutions to uphold Euro-Atlantic values. This transformation aims to solidify Montenegro as a dependable NATO ally and progress towards full EU membership. In May 2023, a delegation led by Montenegro's Parliament Speaker, Mrs. Daniela Dzurovic, visited Bulgaria. They met with President Rumen Radev, who affirmed Bulgaria's backing for Montenegro's European integration. He emphasized Montenegro's pivotal role in the Western Balkans' European perspective and Bulgaria's ongoing support for its EU membership journey [7].

Joseph Borrell, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, stated that "Montenegro remains a frontrunner in European integration. To uphold this status, the country needs to advance reforms, particularly in the rule of law..." [8].

7. Kosovo

Kosovo's path towards European Union membership is distinct and complicated due to its unique international status. While it has declared independence in 2008, the UN Security Council has not officially recognized it. China and Russia, as permanent members, back Serbia and oppose Kosovo's recognition. Their veto power hinders any resolution on Kosovo's final status. Kosovo's lack of widespread recognition and United Nations membership is due to concerns about territorial integrity, with five EU countries (Spain, Greece, Cyprus, Romania, and Slovakia) also withholding recognition to prevent potential demands for self-determination from their own minority populations.

In late May 2023, following local elections where ethnic Albanian mayors assumed power, Kosovo experienced a significant rise in ethnic tensions. The EU responded by enforcing sanctions on Kosovo, halting activities related to the Stabilization and Association Agreement, and postponing the allocated funds for Kosovo in 2024. The European integration process of Kosovo is expected to span years, possibly decades. It hinges on both domestic politics and the normalization of relations with Serbia.

8. Conclusion

The process of European integration for the Western Balkan countries presents a complex and multifaceted journey, with each nation facing its own unique challenges and obstacles. For the Republic of Serbia, the path to EU membership is marked by significant progress in meeting the criteria and implementing reforms. However, the country also grapples with

issues of national identity, internal political disputes, and strained relations with neighboring countries, particularly regarding the normalization of its relations with Kosovo. These challenges not only affect Serbia's EU accession process but also impact the delicate political balance in the region.

In the case of Montenegro, the country has actively engaged in the accession process, undertaking widespread reforms in various areas to align with the EU's laws and regulations. The recent change in political regime and efforts to establish democratic institutions signal a commitment to Euro-Atlantic values and pave the way for Montenegro to solidify its position as a reliable NATO ally and progress toward full EU membership.

Kosovo's unique international status presents a distinct set of challenges in its path towards EU membership, particularly due to concerns about territorial integrity and its lack of widespread recognition. The recent rise in ethnic tensions and the EU's response in enforcing sanctions highlight the intricate domestic politics that significantly impact Kosovo's European integration process.

Overall, the Western Balkan countries' journey towards EU membership hinges on a range of internal and external factors, including political and institutional reforms, resolution of disputes with neighboring countries, and the alignment of laws and regulations with the EU acquis. These nations will need to navigate carefully through these complexities, demonstrating sustained efforts, comprehensive reforms, and diplomatic engagement to move closer to their goal of EU membership.

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