

ASSESSMENT OF THE EU AS A PROMOTOR OF DEMOCRATIC VALUES IN THE WESTERN BALKAN COUNTRIES

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Abstract

The European Union has been instrumental in promoting reforms in areas such as the rule of law, anti-corruption measures, and human rights protections. Furthermore, its conditionality policy has provided a powerful incentive for the governments of the Western Balkan (WB) countries to make progress in these areas, and the EU's financial and technical assistance has helped to support these efforts. Although there have been some concrete achievements because of these efforts, there have also been significant challenges and setbacks in these countries' democratisation process. The objective of this paper is to assess if, and to what extent, the EU has been successful in promoting democratic values in the countries of the Western Balkans? For this purpose, a qualitative analysis is conducted with secondary data from many sources, here including reports from international organisations, policy events as well as the rhetoric review of the progress reports delivered to the WB countries. Taking into consideration the results of the analysis, I argue that there are three main factors affecting the EU's capability of being a successful promotor of democratic values in the Balkans, namely: internal political instability; external pressures from a broader geopolitical context; and a 'not-to-willing' EU.

Key words: EU, democratisation, promotor of democracy, stabilitocracy, Western Balkan countries

1. Introduction

While the European Union (EU) plays an important role in promoting reforms leading to the consolidation of democracies in the Western Balkan countries, it is now challenged by the phenomenon of democratic backsliding, which refers to the gradual erosion of democratic institutions, norms, and practices.¹ The magnitude of this new phenomenon has enormous implications as it questions not only the EU's

¹ Bermeo, N. (2016), *On Democratic Backsliding*, Journal of Democracy 27, no. 1, p. 5.

capability and role as a „transformative power“², but furthermore, also its capacity as „regime maker“³ and „member state builder“⁴ when taking into consideration its efforts to democratise potential member states. This is especially the case in the Western Balkan region, where the EU is criticised for „failing to deliver democracy to those countries engaged in the process of joining the EU“⁵.

While democracy promotion was, and remains still, a key part of the EU’s foreign policy, scholars criticise the EU’s limited transformative potential, especially when „encountering defective democracies with little chance of becoming EU members.⁶ In fact, the EU has a long history of promoting democratic governance and human rights but has not always had the appropriate tools to promote its core values.⁷ With the Copenhagen Summit in 1993 and the resulting criteria, the EU not only paved the way to develop a range of policies and instruments to support the promotion of democracy but furthermore, established monitoring mechanisms to assess the democratic performance of countries wishing to join the EU. Since then, the EU introduced a list of non-exhaustive tools, varying and depending on the specific context and country in question, demonstrating the diverse range of policies to promote democratic values in – and outside the borders of the European Union.

One of the EU’s most used approaches to promote democratic reforms is based on conditionality policies, whereby the provision of financial and other forms of assistance to the recipient is strongly interlinked to the country’s compliance with certain conditions. In this case, conditionality acts as a mechanism to encourage democratic reforms and to set conditions in areas such as the rule of law, human rights, good governance, etc. On the other hand, enlargement policies and processes are a cornerstone of the EU’s comprehensive strategy for promoting and ensuring the democratic character of potential Member States. Nevertheless, despite its proactive role in advocating democratic values and concepts, it is lacking a clear assessment methodology when it comes to the measurement of democracy performance of various political systems.

Although, among scholars, the EU is considered a „school for democracy“⁸, it is also true that the EU is short of a clear definition and conceptualisation of democracy,

² Grabbe, H. (2006), *The EU’s transformative power: Europeanisation through Conditionality in Central and Eastern Europe*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan.

³ O’Brennan, J., Gassie, E. (2009), *From stabilisation to consolidation: Albanian state capacity and adaptation to European Union rules*, Journal of Balkans and Near East Studies, Volume 11, (Number 1), March, p. 64.

⁴ Keil, S., Arkan, Z. (2016), *The limits of normative power*, in Keil S., Arkan Z. (eds.), *The EU and Member State Building. European Foreign Policy in the Western Balkans*, New York: Routledge, p. 17.

⁵ BiEPAG (2017), *The Crisis of Democracy in the Western Balkans. An Anatomy of Stabilitocracy and the Limits of EU Democracy Promotion*, p.5.

⁶ Dimitrova, A., Pridham, G., (2004), *International actors and democracy promotion in central and eastern Europe: the integration model and its limits*, Democratization, 11:5, p. 91-112, DOI: 10.1080/13510340412331304606

⁷ Pinto, H., (2016), *The role of European Union accession in democratisation processes*, Democratic Progress Institute, London, p. 11.

⁸ Ibid.

as it is often criticised that it pursues a „vague and fuzzy“⁹ form of „liberal democracy“¹⁰, which is then reflected in the difficulties that countries have in fulfilling the EU requirements, and in the assessment methodology of the EU as democracy remains „an aspiration that is not yet defined“¹¹.

The scope of this work is to assess the EU’s capacity in transforming and democratising the Western Balkan countries. For this purpose, a quantitative cross-country analysis will rely on the assessment of scores reached by Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosova, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia (following WB6) related to key political developments as assessed by internationally approved methodologies of international reports such as Freedom House, Nations in Transit and BTI. Through this analysis, the research questions to be answered are as follows:

- Are the Western Balkan countries showing progress in democratising since being engaged with the EU?
- What are the reasons for the EU’s difficulties in promoting and consolidating democracy in the Western Balkan countries?

2. Democratic performance of Western Balkan countries

EU’s engagement with the Western Balkans began in the 1990s following several conflicts that occurred both due to a prolonged transition process as well as during the breakup of former Yugoslavia. Finally, in 1999, during the Kosova War, the European Commission (EC) declared the possibility of starting a process of stabilisation and association (SAP) with the countries of the Western Balkans, marking as such a policy of engagement and integration. Since then, a series of key instruments were used, and substantial financial assistance and technical support were provided in order to give a powerful impetus for reform and to promote democracy in the WB6.

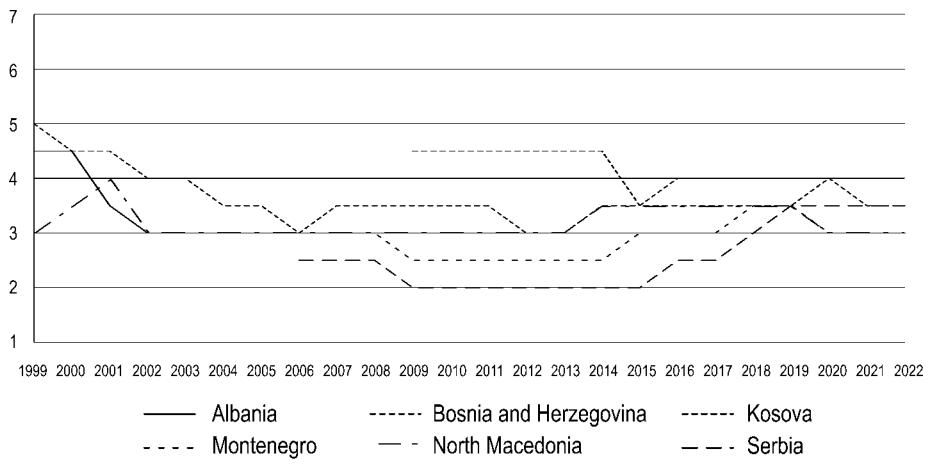
Nevertheless, the process of promoting democracy and democratic reforms in this region has been challenging, since, as it is shown, the countries cannot fulfil the EU’s democracy aspirations, and furthermore, their democratic performance seems not to be particularly improved.

⁹ Kurki, M. (2010), *Democracy and Conceptual Contestability: Reconsidering Conceptions of Democracy in Democracy Promotion*, *International Studies Review*, Volume 12, Issue 3, p. 362–386, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2486.2010.00943.x>

¹⁰ Pridham, G. (2005), *Designing democracy: EU enlargement and regime change in post-communist Europe*, Palgrave Macmillan, London.

¹¹ Timmer, A., Majtenyi, B., Haisler, K. & Salat, O. (2014), *EU Human Rights, democracy and rule of law: from concepts to practice*, Frame working paper, 3(2), p. 43.

**Graph 1: Freedom score
of WB6 according to Freedom House Data¹² (1999 - 2022)**



Source: Author's presentation based on the Data from Freedom House

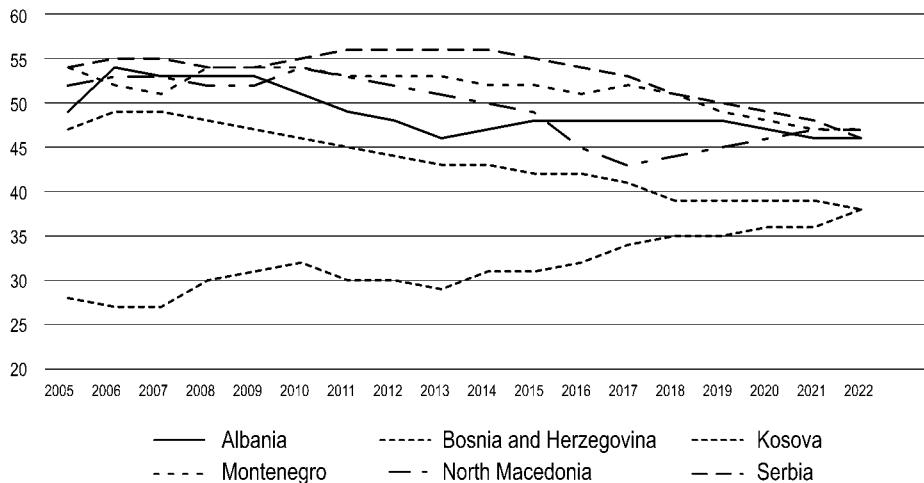
Graph 1 represents an analysis of the Freedom House scores for political and civil rights for the Western Balkan countries from 1999-2022. Based on this analysis, evidence shows that the Western Balkan countries have faced significant challenges in terms of democratic consolidation and strengthening political and civil rights. While all six countries are considered *partly free* according to the latest Freedom House reports, there have been some fluctuations and regressions in democratic progress over time. It is evident that Albania has been categorised as *partly free* throughout the whole period with no significant improvement or decline in its democratic performance since 2002. While Albania has not shown any evidence of democratic backsliding, its democratic performance has stagnated, indicating a lack of progress toward greater political and civil rights. The categorisation as *partly free* also applies to Bosnia and Herzegovina, which has had recourse in terms of democratic backsliding since 2008, resulting in a decline in political and civil rights and as such being classified as one of the worst-performing countries in the Western Balkans. Considerable progress was achieved by only two countries of the WB region, namely Montenegro and Serbia. Montenegro was categorised as *free* between 2009 and 2014, indicating improvement in its democratic performance during that period. On the other side, evidence shows that Serbia was once considered the best performer in the region, as it presented the best values compared to its neighbors in the region. Serbia is the only country, among the WB6, considered *free*, for a period of over ten years. However, since 2017, there has been an evolving regress and democratic backsliding, which resulted in being categorized as *partly free*. Although all Western Balkan

¹² Measurements of political and civil rights are made through a distribution of values, which include the interval from 1 to 7. The value 1 is defined as a democracy with full rights and full freedom (best rating), while the value 7 indicates a complete lack of rights and freedoms (worst rating). Meanwhile, the Freedom House Index rates countries with a numerical value within the range of 1.0 to 2.5 as *free*, 3.0 to 5.0 as *partly free*, and 5.5 to 7.0 as *not free*.

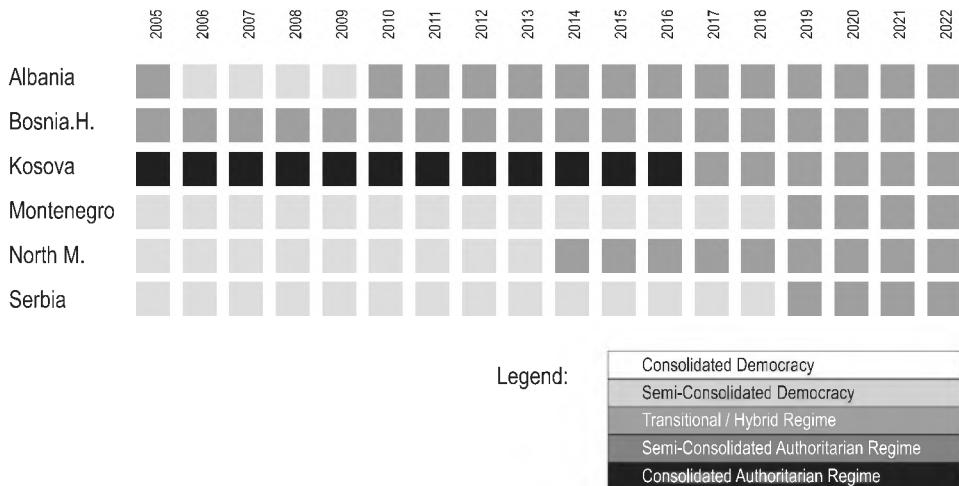
countries fall under the same categorisation, it must be emphasized that regress in terms of democratic backsliding is most evident in Bosnia&Herzegovina, Kosova, and Serbia. Despite these country-based insights, the Freedom House Index indicates smaller differences between the WB6 related to political and civil rights than some years ago.

Graph 2 is based on the data provided by Nations in Transit for the Western Balkan countries from 2005-2022. The analysis of the democracy percentages and the related regime classifications indicates the following: The most common regime classification for the Western Balkan countries is that of a *transitional* or *hybrid regime*, meaning that those countries are still in the process of transitioning towards greater democratic consolidation. Kosova shows the lowest level of democracy percentage compared to other Western Balkan countries. However, it is the only country in the region that has shown signs of constant progress, upgrading from a semi-authoritarian regime to a transitional one. On the contrary, the democracy percentage of Albania, Serbia, and Montenegro declined leading to a downgrade of regime classification. While Albania was considered a semi-consolidated democracy between 2006 and 2011, indicating a relatively high level of democratic performance during that period, Serbia and Montenegro were the best performers in the region, being categorised as semi-consolidated democracies in the timespan from 2005 until 2018. However, data emphasises that most of the WB6 faced significant challenges resulting in democratic backsliding and back-shifting to transitional and hybrid regimes.

Graph 2: Democracy percentage and regime classification of WB6 according to Nations in Transit¹³ (2005 - 2022)



¹³ The Democracy Score provides numerical ratings for each country on seven indicators: (1) National democratic governance, (2) Electoral process, (3) Civil society, (4) Independent media, (5) Local democratic governance, (6) Judicial framework and independence, and (7) Corruption. The ratings are based on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 representing the lowest and 7 the highest level of democracy. The Democracy Score is a straight average of the seven indicators and is also expressed as a percentage, where 0 represents the lowest and 100 the highest level of democracy. This methodology uses 5 categories of regime types.



Source: Author's presentation based on the Data from Nations in Transit

As shown in Table 1, according to the Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI), all six Western Balkan countries are and were, mainly throughout the whole period taken into consideration, defective democracies.

Evidence indicates two particular moments for Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. While Serbia made some efforts to better perform democratic standards and improving slightly their democracy status, being categorised as a moderate democracy or democracy in consolidation in the years 2010 and 2012, Bosnia and Herzegovina shows the highest decline in terms of democracy status compared to other countries of the region, being the only WB country considered a highly defective democracy.

**Table 1: Democracy status of WB6,
according to Bertelsmann Transformation Index (2008 - 2022)**

Country	Year	Democracy status	Country	Year	Democracy status
Albania	2008	<i>Defective Democracy</i>	Bosnia and Herzegovina	2008	<i>Defective Democracy</i>
	2010			2010	
	2012			2012	
	2014			2014	
	2016			2016	
	2018			2018	
	2020			2020	<i>Highly defective democracy</i>
	2022			2022	

Country	Year	Democracy status	Country	Year	Democracy status
North Macedonia	2008	<i>Defective Democracy</i>	Montenegro	2008	<i>Defective Democracy</i>
	2010			2010	
	2012			2012	
	2014			2014	
	2016			2016	
	2018			2018	
	2020			2020	
	2022			2022	
Kosovo	2008	<i>Defective Democracy</i>	Serbia	2008	<i>Defective Democracy</i>
	2010			2010	<i>Democracy in consolidation</i>
	2012			2012	
	2014			2014	<i>Defective Democracy</i>
	2016			2016	
	2018			2018	
	2020			2020	
	2022			2022	

Source: Author's presentation based on the Data from BTI

Overall, this quantitative analysis of the democracy status of the Western Balkan countries, with data from Freedom House, Nations in Transit, and BTI suggests that most of the countries in the region are still in the process of transitioning towards greater democratic consolidation. While some countries have shown minor improvements in their democracy status, others have experienced a decline, resulting in a downgrade in their regime classification, diminishing the EU's impact as a promotor of greater democratic consolidation in the region.

In addition, also the progress reports of the European Commission related to the Western Balkan countries generally reflect the evidence derived from the quantitative comparative assessment, although there are some differences in the level of detail and emphasis placed on certain issues. It should be highlighted that progress reports provide a detailed assessment of each country's progress toward meeting the political criteria for EU membership. Though those reports lay out an overview of each country's progress, the progress reports are generally diplomatic and timely consistent in terms of assessing the current stage in fulfilling political criteria and performing democracy. They highlight both progress and challenges in each country. Nevertheless, it is evident that those reports do not always bring

forth a clear categorisation of the terms used to describe the level of progress or the challenges faced by each country.¹⁴

3. Reasons for the EU's hampered role as a democracy promotor in the WB6

Although the EU has been engaged in the Western Balkans for nearly two decades now, aiming at promoting stability, democracy and economic development in the region, its engagement, considering the data provided in section 2, cannot be considered transformative, in terms of an enhanced and sustainable democracy, resulting in consolidated democratic systems. It is shown that while the EU's engagement has contributed to some progress on democratic reforms in some areas, its capability to democratise the Western Balkan countries remains limited. Furthermore, some scholars argue that even though the „expected democratic transformation of the region has not become reality“¹⁵ the „growing evidence for democratic regression, leads to the idea that we have to move away from the linear and normative transitional assumption towards a closer scrutiny of de-democratisation processes and regressive tendencies“.¹⁶ In addition to the non-linear path to democracy, scholars criticise „that the EU integration context has not been able to effectively counter non-democratic tendencies including outright democratic rollbacks“.¹⁷ Furthermore, as the Clingendael Report amplifies, the EU's „transformative power is not only less effective than expected in the WB6, but on top of that, is also believed to unintentionally contribute to the consolidation of stabilitocracies“.¹⁸ The discussion about the so-called shift from democracy promotion to stability promotion¹⁹, emphasises once again the moderate effect of the EU in the WB6. As the creation of simply stable systems cannot be in the EU's long-term perspective, especially considering a region that hopes to join the European family as soon as possible, it is important to elaborate on the main reasons impacting, firstly on the non-complete democratisation of the WB6, and secondly, the determination of the EU to influence, beyond mere stabilisation, the radical democratic transformation of the region. Considering this we must admit that the reasons hampering the consolidation of democracy are to be categorised by a two-fold approach: 1) Western Balkan countries – driven and, 2) EU – driven. Three reasons, limiting the EU's transformative power, deriving from this two-fold-approach are as follows:

1. Internal political instability
2. external pressures from a broader geopolitical context
3. a 'not-to-willing' EU

¹⁴ Polo, E., Malaj, D. (2021), *Reviewing the evaluation approaches of WB candidate countries' performance in meeting the economic and political criteria*, European Academic Research, Vol. 9, Issue 2, p. 1371.

¹⁵ Zweers, W., et. al (2022), *The EU as promotor of democracy or „stabilitocracy“ in the Western Balkans*, Clingendael Institute and the Think Tank for Europe Network (TEN), p. 11.

¹⁶ BiEPAG (2017), p. 12.

¹⁷ BiEPAG (2017), p.13.

¹⁸ Zweers, W., et. al (2022), p.12.

¹⁹ BiEPAG (2017), p. 95.

3.1. Internal political instability

One of the main challenges facing the EU in its efforts to promote transformation in the Western Balkans has been the lack of genuine political will among the region's leaders to implement reforms. Despite the EU's support for democratic institutions and the rule of law, corruption and political patronage remain significant obstacles to reform in many countries in the region. In some cases, EU assistance has been perceived as encouraging only superficial changes in governance practices rather than genuinely transformative reforms. In most of the WB6 countries, this lack of political will combined with internal instability is the result of partocratic regimes, defined by a strong elite dominance²⁰, which is most noticeable in times of crisis or extraordinary circumstances as it was highlighted further during the Covid-19 pandemic, contributing to a further deterioration of democracy in the region.²¹

3.2. External pressures from a broader geopolitical context

However, the EU's ability to transform the region has been limited also by the broader geopolitical context. The region has been the subject of competition between external actors, including the USA, Russia, China and Turkey. Besides Russia, which has had always a more proactive role in some parts of the Western Balkans, in recent years a more active engagement of China in the WB6 has been noticed. Nevertheless, Russia's influence in the region is particularly evident, and now more than ever, crucial in determining the WB6's political direction. From a historical point of view, the Western Balkans represent an area where Russia tries to be a long-time actor. It seems obvious that the Kremlin has relatively strong historical ties with the Balkan countries and holds a relatively soft power attraction for them, especially for Serbia. Historical ties go back to the 19th-century Pan-Slavic movement and Russia's support for Serbia's independence from the Ottoman Empire²². However, apart from this, religious connections are also particularly important for Slavic countries in the region. More specifically, Moscow plays the shared cultural and religious ties card among the region's Orthodox Christian population, which constitutes significant percentages in Bosnia in addition to majorities in Serbia, Montenegro and North Macedonia. Thus, Serbia has been perceived as Russia's kin state in the region.²³ This is especially important when considering that religious connections are usually considered gate-openers for more consequential deals including in strategic sectors such as energy and real estate, and hence gradually lead to political and economic dependence²⁴. This has complicated the EU's efforts to promote stability and democracy in the region, particularly given the region's strategic location and natural resources. In

²⁰ BiEPAG (2017), p. 13.

²¹ Dafa, A., et. al (2020), *The Western Balkans and the Covid -19: Effects on good governance, rule of law and civil society*, Think for Europe Network Policy Brief, July.

²² Stanicek, B., Russell, M. (2022), *Russia's influence in the Western Balkans*, European Parliamentary Research Service, <https://epthinktank.eu/2022/06/09/russias-influence-in-the-western-balkans>

²³ Karčić, H. (2022), *Russia's Influence in the Balkans: The Interplay of Religion, Politics, and History*, <https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/posts/russia-s-influence-in-the-balkans-the-interplay-of-religion-politics-and-history>

²⁴ Ibid.

general, the political influence from abroad has complicated the EU's efforts to promote stability and democracy in the region, particularly given the region's strategic location and natural resources.

3.3. 'Not-to-willing' EU

Moreover, the EU's ability to justify and further enhance its role as a promotor of democracy in the WB6 has been limited also and mainly due to its lack of willingness. First, I argue that the slow pace of progress in the accession process is one of the main reasons for stagnating or regressing the EU's transformative power. Although the EU offered the prospect of membership to the countries in the region nearly two decades ago, the accession process has been slow and uncertain, which has not only limited the incentive for reform but opened the gate for other external actors. Uncertainty, in terms of clear timelines, was often criticised as it „leaves the EU unable to exert time pressure on the governments of the region to carry out necessary democratic reforms“.²⁵

Despite the long and tortuous path toward EU membership, the current internal debates within the EU about the enlargement process and the criteria for accession have created additional uncertainty for the region, resulting in non-consistency when achieving benchmarks. In fact, the lack of clarity as highlighted before in section two, led to difficulties in translating political criteria benchmarks²⁶, which, in the end, must be held accountable for the greater difficulties in assessing the countries' democratic performance by the monitoring reports from the European Commission.

In addition, the lost credibility in the EU's method of sticks and carrots contributes to a hampering effect of democratic transformation in the WB6. This is on the one hand due to a lack of determination when it comes to acting upon failed progress in democratic reforms²⁷, and on the other side caused by the EU's failure when it comes to reward progress. Scholars argue that the lack of rewarding progress is mainly attributed to institutional issues and the so-called institutional paradox in enlargement policies.²⁸ As a result, the lack of common understanding between existing Member States drags the whole enlargement process for the region.²⁹

It seems that the protracted process of enlargement has limited the momentum for deeper democratic reforms in the West Balkans. This is endorsed also by the fact that countries that have been granted candidate status have typically made greater progress in implementing democratic reforms than those that have not. One can argue that they have benefited from greater access to financial and technical assistance from the EU,

²⁵ Renner, S., Trauner, F. (2009), *Creeping EU Membership in South-east Europe: The dynamics of EU Rule Transfer to the Western Balkans*, Journal of European Integration 31, no. 4, p. 457.

²⁶ Dimitrova, A., (2016), *The EU's Evolving Enlargement Strategies. Does Tougher Conditionality Open the Door for Further Enlargement?* Freie Universitaet Berlin, MaxCap - Working Paper Series 30, p. 9.

²⁷ Kmezic, M., (2019) *EU Rule of law Conditionality: Democracy or „Stabilitocracy“ Promotion in the Western Balkans?* in: Dzankic, J., Keil, S., Kmezic, M. (eds.), *The Europeanisation of the Western Balkans*, p. 99.

²⁸ Vogel, T. (2018), *Beyond Enlargement. Why the EUs Western Balkans Policy Needs a Reset*, FES, p. 16.

²⁹ Ibid.

which has enabled them to make further progress in areas related to their democratic performance but on the other side, it is also important to note that the Western Balkan countries with a granted candidacy status still face significant challenges.

Moreover, some countries that have not yet been granted candidate status, such as Kosova, have made significant strides toward democratic reforms in recent years, suggesting that this status is not necessarily a prerequisite for progress. Considering this, the EU's approach in offering assistance is often criticised as too technical and superficial³⁰. The EU has provided significant financial and technical assistance to the Western Balkans, but the resources have not always been sufficient to address the complex challenges facing the region. Also, it is important to note that those efforts transpose the EU *acquis de jure*, without tackling deep political transformations, and without altering the political realities of WB6.³¹

4. Concluding remarks

In conclusion, it is shown that despite all challenges mentioned, the EU has played a significant role in promoting stability and democracy in the Western Balkans. Nevertheless, when trying to answer the questions of this paper:

1. Are the WB countries showing progress in democratizing since being engaged with the EU?
2. What are the reasons for the EU's difficulties in promoting and consolidating democracy in the Western Balkan countries?

The analysis shows that there is no continuity in democratic progress in the Western Balkan countries since the EU's ability to act as a transformative power has been limited by a wide range of factors that are mainly EU-driven. It is known that international organisations can be key actors in terms of democracy promotion by providing necessary tools and legitimate concrete action plans³². However, this would mean that the democratic assessment of the WB6 is driven by a top-down approach, and every failure would be the EU's failure, too. It is important to underline the fact that internal political instability, including the (lack of) commitment of governments to reform, contributes significantly to the democratic testimony of the Western Balkan countries. This said, when criticising the EU for its lack of transformative power, one should be aware of the difficulties and challenges this region poses as the powder keg of Europe, with all its wars, historical and cultural ties with external actors, and furthermore with a distinctively different political culture. Nevertheless, it is important that the EU, especially in those uncertain times of crisis, rethink and revitalise its democracy-promoting mechanisms, to rebuild itself as the promotor of democratic values.

³⁰ Zweers, W., et. al (2022), p.13.

³¹ Lemstra, M. (2020) *The destructive effects of state capture* in the Western Balkans, Policy Brief, Clingendael Institute, p.4.

³² Burnell, P. (2000), *Democracy Assistance: The State of Discourse*, in: Burnell, P. (eds.) *Democracy Assistance: International Co-operation for Democratization*, London and Portland, Frank Cass Publishers, p. 3-33.

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