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## The EU's stability-democracy dilemma in the context of the problematic accession of the Western Balkan states

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### ABSTRACT

The accession of the remaining six Western Balkan states into the EU is shrouded in much uncertainty. Despite Croatia finally traversing the difficult path to eventual membership in 2013, not one of the remaining Western Balkan countries can claim to be on a definite pathway to membership today. An increasingly prevalent argument is that the EU's engagement with its neighbourhoods has faltered because its strategies have been undermined by an inherent stability-democracy dilemma. This article examines the EU's engagement with the Western Balkans and finds that although the EU tried to transcend this dilemma, in reality, a tension between stability and democracy was present with the former generally receiving more attention in policymaking. This led to not only a lack of tangible democratization amongst the Western Balkan states, but further uncertainty about their accession prospects. By 2018, it was clear that the EU's engagement with the Western Balkans needed a rethink, resulting in a new approach: the 'Six Flagship Initiatives'. However, given the apprehensiveness of some member states (especially France) coupled with the presence of outsiders such as Russia and China in the area, the accession prospects of the six non-EU Western Balkan states remains blurred.

### KEYWORDS

Stability; democracy; EU foreign policy; Western Balkans democratization; EU enlargement

### Introduction

With the apparent success of the 2004 and 2007 enlargements into Central Eastern Europe and the Baltics (CEEB), the EU was increasingly characterized as representing a normative power (Manners 2002); with a particular zest for promoting democracy (Pridham 2005). Over time, accession in the EU has become synonymous with successful democratic transitions. For the states of the EU's Western Balkan neighbourhood which, unlike the EU's post-enlargement Eastern European or Mediterranean neighbourhoods, were given clear, albeit demanding, membership perspectives by the EU, it was hoped that the carrot of accession into the EU would lead to successful democratic transitions. However, progress related to democracy in the Western Balkans has been slow and the accession prospects of the remaining six non-EU Western Balkan states remain highly uncertain.

Much of the literature on the shortcomings of the EU's promotion of democracy in the Western Balkans has centred on evaluating the 'ineffective' utilization of conditionality by the EU to induce democratic reform (Anastasakis 2008; Freyburg and Richter 2010; Bieber 2011; Richter and Wunsch 2020). However, an increasingly invoked argument is that the EU's biggest barrier to effective democracy promotion has been the dilemma between pursuing democracy or stability, and

contradictions found in those two distinct approaches within the EU's various neighbourhood policies (Andrés Viñas 2009; Börzel and Lebanidze 2017; Kovačević 2018). The reasoning here is that stability and democracy are incompatible goals in the short term because the process of democratization is naturally unstable. This paper argues that the EU sought to transcend this inherent tradeoff by devising a strategy of securing stability through democratization. However, in the context of its specific engagement with the Western Balkans, there has been limited progress with regards to democratization in most of the target states there and stability issues persist – due to a mix of internal and external factors (Bieber 2020). Therefore, re-evaluating whether the EU is suffering from a stability-democracy dilemma is deemed an important question to ask, especially as the EU is seemingly seeking to reinvigorate its Western Balkans engagement.

Consequently, this paper critically examines the EU's engagement with the Western Balkans since the 2003 'Thessaloniki Summit' in which the EU offered a membership perspective to the states there. The first section introduces the concept of the stability-democracy dilemma and how it pertains to the EU's neighbourhood policies. Thereafter, the concepts of stability and democracy are discussed to offer a conceptual framework for the remainder of the article. The third section traces the EU's engagement in the Western Balkans – with regards stability and democracy – from the 1990s until the beginning of 2020. Four specific periods are examined: the period leading up to the Thessaloniki Summit in 2003; the period from the Thessaloniki Summit to Croatia accession to the EU in 2013; the period from Croatia's accession to the introduction of the Six Flagship Initiatives (SFI) in 2018 and its aftermath. Although this article does not observe a clear stability-democracy dilemma in the EU's Western Balkans engagement, a tension between the two exists and has led to an increasingly ineffective strategy, particularly with regards the EU's democracy promotion efforts (despite significant investment).

## **A stability-democracy dilemma in the EU's foreign policymaking towards its neighbourhoods?**

An increasingly asserted argument as to why the EU's democracy promotion has faltered so significantly in its peripheral neighbourhoods over the past 15 years is that it has experienced something of a stability-democracy dilemma. That is, the EU has faced a difficult choice between promoting either stability or democracy in its neighbourhoods (Andrés Viñas 2009). The notion of a dilemma between the goals of stability and democracy is not something new and is not something isolated to the EU. During the Cold War period, for example, the United States had a putative policy of promoting democracy but was often willing to overlook these goals if it was deemed to conflict with its security interests (Robinson 1996). This is why the United States was able to justify its policies at certain times in places like Congo, Indonesia, Chile, Saudi Arabia and the Philippines – to name but a few – because their ultimate national interest was maximizing security, and concurrently promoting democracy was often seen as an obstacle to that goal (Fowler 2015). Of course, whether more authoritarian countries are inherently more stable than democratizing ones is debatable given that authoritarian countries also face stability problems, perhaps even more critical ones as witnessed during the Arab Spring (Gause 2011). But, regardless, a perception entrenched from the days of the Cold War – which is backed up by the data from that period (Wright 2008) – has become widespread that authoritarian states tend to be more stable partners than democratizing ones (Tansey 2016).

While the EU is often characterized as a softer, more civilized power (Orbie 2006) – as opposed the hard power and security maximizing traits of bona fide states like the United States – it too has seemingly confronted this stability-democracy dilemma in areas which are deemed to be of great importance with regards to the EU's external security (Börzel and Lebanidze 2017). Unsurprisingly, because security threats tend to be at their strongest in the peripheries of states, the EU's various neighbourhood policies have long referenced the overarching goal of achieving stability (Higashino 2004). For instance, the main rationale for enlargement, in the European Council's own words, was to 'lend a positive contribution to security and stability on the European continent' (European Council 1999).

However, unlike the United States which has generally acknowledged in its actions that a kind of tradeoff between stability and democracy is needed in certain sensitive areas (with the former usually prevailing), the EU, evident in its policies, has not viewed pursuing the goals of democracy and stability as being mutually exclusive (Stivachtis 2016). As a result of the seemingly successful inducement of democratic transformations in the CEEB through its 'mega enlargement', all of which occurred without significant instability (save for Bulgaria's and Romania's delayed accession), the EU has come to see democracy as a vital component of ensuring a stable external setting. Indeed, such a notion evokes the logic of the democratic peace theory (Stivachtis 2016) and the EU, in practice, has seemingly designed its neighbourhood policies from a belief that creating a ring of like-minded democracies is a key aspect of ensuring security on its periphery (Nilsson and Silander 2016).

There is a significant body of literature which argues that the concept of achieving stability through democratization is inherently contradictory, however (Grimm and Leininger 2012; Börzel and van Hüllen 2014). One of the key arguments here is that democratization is generally a process which creates significant instability, so using as a conduit for achieving stability is somewhat paradoxical, in the short-term at least. Additionally, the likelihood of a target state achieving a successful democratic transition is far from guaranteed (the potential for backsliding or democratic reversal is also a factor) which in turn may create further instability down the line (Mechkova, Lührmann, and Lindberg 2017). Thus, pursuing democratic promotion as a means from which to create stability only makes sense if the actor doing the promoting has a long-term timeline for wanting to achieve stability and is also willing to accept failure along the way. Unsurprisingly, when democratic transitions do not go to plan in target states, especially those that reside in testy security settings for the promoter, it is clear why some external democracy promoters, including the EU, are confronted with a democracy or stability dilemma.

There is evidence to suggest that the EU has a clear preference for stability over democracy in its foreign relations and trade, especially in highly volatile regions that are geographically close to it. Perhaps the most glaring example of this preference for stability has been in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), where the EU had long conducted business with an array of varying authoritarian regimes, whether Egypt, Jordan, Algeria, or Morocco, to name but a few (Pace 2009). Furthermore, in the wake of the Arab Spring protests (which, despite eventual failure, was a potential wave of democratization at the time) the EU, according to Börzel and Lebanidze (2017), only consciously choose democracy over stability in Tunisia while refusing to do the same in Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Jordan, and Syria. Also, similar trends of a preference for stability over democracy have been observed in Eastern Europe (Nilsson and Silander 2016) and the Western Balkans (Richter 2012) too.

### ***Conceptual framework: stability and democracy in EU neighbourhood policies***

This paper explores the questions of 'to what extent are the faltering democratization trajectories of the six non-EU Western Balkans states (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia) a by-product of a stability-democracy dilemma that is afflicting the EU's policy-making? and 'is this undermining the accession prospects of these countries?'. Therefore, this paper touches on two important concepts which are often prioritized in the EU's foreign policy-making: stability and democratization (and democracy).

Regarding stability, this paper agrees with Deutsch and Singer (1964, 390–91) assertion that stability, from the perspective of an individual entity – whether a state or a state-like actor like the EU – is ensuring the 'probability of their continued political independence and territorial integrity without any significant probability of becoming gaged in a "war for survival"'. In the context of the EU's interaction with the Western Balkans region, there is no credible chance for a 'war for survival' emerging any time soon – not only due to the asymmetry of the relationships but also its positive-sum potential between the EU and Western Balkan states – so it substantially widens the EU's manoeuvring space with pursuing the goal of ensuring stability because there are fewer mitigating threats. To this end, stability for the EU is no longer just about protecting against a 'war for survival'

but rather about producing a proactive and cooperative regional setting which, ultimately, benefits the EU (and the Western Balkans). Indeed, one strategy for ensuring stability is through regional order and institution building, and for the EU, its Western Balkan strategies since the 2003 Thessaloniki Summit should be treated, in part, as an attempt to create a framework for ensuring long-term stability in the Western Balkans.

However, to add value to the concept of stability, especially as it relates to the EU's policymaking towards the Western Balkans, this paper relies on insights from regional security complex (RSC) theory. According to Buzan and Wæver (2003, 44), an RSC is a 'set of units whose major processes of securitization, desecuritization, or both, are so interlinked that their security problems cannot reasonably be analyzed or resolved apart from one another.' Consequently, 'the members are so interrelated in terms of their security that actions by any one member, and significant security-related developments inside any member, have a major impact on others' (Lake 2009, 35). In the context of the EU, it is involved in several different RSCs, such as Eastern Europe (where Russia is also a member) and to a lesser extent in the Middle East and North Africa. But, unequivocally, the Western Balkans has, historically at least, represented the most pressing and challenging RSC for the EU's policymakers. Even despite the clear worsening of the Eastern European RSC due to the ongoing Ukraine crisis, this paper argues that the Western Balkans remains, due to geographic proximity and the plethora of issues there, the EU's number one stability concern.

Regarding democratization, this paper adheres to the belief that, first and foremost, democratization either succeeds or fails due to whether pro-democracy reform elites or anti-democracy reform elites win out. Of course, pre-conditions such as level of development and the size of the middle class are important, and the role of external actors – both positively and negatively – should not be discounted. But, as Diamond et al. (2014, 91) argues, the one precondition for successful democratization 'is a set of elites who decide for whatever reasons that democracy is in their interest.' In the post-communist setting, the role of elites has been arguably even more crucial. Hale (2005, pt., 161) argued at the time of the Colour Revolution wave 'political contestation [in the post-Communist context] is at root an elite affair where powerful groups compete to manipulate mass opinion through biased media and machine politics.' And, it is plain to see that the EU's apparent success in inducing democratic reform in the post-communist states has largely been down to offering elites in target states credible enough incentives to democratize. And when these incentives have not been credible enough, then the EU's success has been far limited.

Conceptually, democratization is closely linked to democracy, given that a functioning liberal democracy is the envisaged endpoint. Regarding democracy, this article adopts a maximalist view of democracy which holds that a truly democratic political system involves more than just elections, rule of law, and minimal civil liberties. In addition to these crucial elements, it involves a deeper system of conditions, which include a free press, basic human rights, and active political participation (through civil society) on the part of the general population. Such a system can allow a polity to exert effective control over elected political leaders (Diamond 1995). To help guide this chapter's examination of the democratization trajectories of the Western Balkans non-EU states, the democracy ratings compiled by Freedom House's 'Nations in Transit' (NIT) are utilised. NIT is arguably a more maximalist rating of democracy than Freedom House's main index, 'Freedom in the World' or The Economist Intelligence Unit's 'Democracy Index', both of which tend to favour the more formal aspects of democracy over the more substantive ones. To this end, NIT examines an array of areas related to a functioning democracy: electoral process; civil society; independent media; national democratic governance; local democratic governance; judicial framework and independence; and corruption (Freedom House n.d.).

### ***The EU's engagement with the Western Balkans: from the thessaloniki summit to an uncertain future in 2020***

This section analyzes the EU's engagement with the Western Balkans since the landmark Thessaloniki Summit in 2003 up until the beginning of 2020 in the context of the EU's dual aim of promoting stability and democracy. The first part offers a look at the EU's engagement with the Western Balkans

leading up to the Thessaloniki Summit; an agreement heavily focused on achieving both stability and democracy in the Western Balkans. The second part examines the stability challenges and the democratic trajectories in the Balkans from 2003 until Croatia's accession to the EU in 2013, identifying some progress from the EU's perspective but also a continuation of a litany of problems in most Western Balkan states. The third part examines the EU's post-Croatian accession engagement until 2018 where, despite initial optimism, not only has democratic performance backslid, but relatively newer stability concerns – namely migration – for the Western Balkans and the EU have emerged. The last part considers the EU's new Western Balkans strategy, the SFI, and the emergence of a key veto player in France (with support from the Netherlands and Denmark), amidst the backdrop of newer stability concerns: the growing influence of Russia and China.

### ***The first phase of the EU's Western Balkans engagement: from the 1990s until the Thessaloniki Summit in 2003***

In the 1990s, the EU's Western Balkans strategy was, unsurprisingly, orientated towards mediating the various violent conflicts that engulfed the region. Indeed, during this time, the EU relied heavily on the United States and NATO as their original belief that they could, somewhat independently, manage the collapse of Yugoslavia proved to be inaccurate (C. J. Smith 1996). However, by the end of the 1990s, the EU rediscovered its confidence in the Western Balkans, which was helped, in part, by the ongoing evolution of its foreign policy capabilities but also the gradual subsiding of conflict and tension in the Western Balkans (Larsen 2002). By this time, the EU had experienced some early success in aiding the democratic transformations in the CEEB countries. Largely via the mechanism of conditionality, the EU was able to induce ten former communist states into undertaking democratic reform by the offer of a golden carrot: membership in the EU (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2004). However, unlike those CEEB countries that would eventually accede into the EU in 2004 and 2007 respectively, the Western Balkans, collectively, represented a much more significant stability conundrum for the EU.

In 1999, the EU launched the Stabilization and Association Process (SAP) with the overarching aim of enabling 'the countries in the region to create lasting peace, democracy, stability and prosperity' (Council of the European Union 1999). This was both a multilateral approach – treating the Western Balkans as a specific, interconnected region – and a bilateral approach – involving individually negotiated Stabilization and Association Agreements (SAA) with the states of the Western Balkans (Council of the European Union 1999). Croatia and North Macedonia were the first two states to sign SAAs in 2001. The other states signed much later: Albania in 2006, Montenegro in 2007, Bosnia and Serbia in 2008, and Kosovo in 2015 (European Commission n.d.). The key element of these agreements – and part of the EU's broader Western Balkan strategy – was to 'offer higher incentives than before to the countries concerned [but] these stronger incentives would, of course, require compliance with more demanding conditions, both political and economic as well as increased emphasis on the need for regional cooperation' (European Commission 1999).

The EU's SAP framework proved largely ineffective in its initial years. Tzifakis (2007) argued that part of the problem was the EU's 'hesitance to elevate the SAP into a regional grand strategy' which was 'demonstrated in the initial assignment of responsibility for its pursuance to the external relations directorate (instead of the enlargement directorate).' The EU sought to reinvigorate the SAP policy in 2003 at the Thessaloniki Summit (O'Brennan 2014). Importantly, as evident in the resulting declaration, a key outcome of the Summit was that all Western Balkan states were given a clearer membership perspective (point 2) than in the initial SAP agreement, albeit still without a concrete timetable of when accession could occur (European Commission 2003). In addition, the promotion of democracy and human rights was front and centre of the declaration, with point 1 declaring:

We all share the values of democracy, the rule of law, respect for human and minority rights, solidarity and a market economy, fully aware that they constitute the very foundations of the European Union (European Commission 2003).

However, the declaration was also concerned with some issues that related more directly to stability as well. Point 5 referenced the Kosovo situation, issues in Bosnia and North Macedonia, the ongoing International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), the problem of refugees and internally displaced persons, the need for ethnic reconciliation, and the role of the United States and NATO 'within the framework of UN resolutions.' Furthermore, points 6 and 7 mentioned organized crime and corruption as additional stability concerns. The dual stability and democracy focus of the declaration was confirmed in the last point (point 10) which recognized that 'considerable progress was made towards stability, democracy and economic recovery in all countries of the Western Balkans' (European Commission 2003).

### ***Phase two: from the Thessaloniki Summit to Croatia's accession in 2013***

Despite the ostensible focus on democracy in the Thessaloniki Summit declaration, much of the EU's engagement with many of the Western Balkan states in the period after continued to focus on stability issues. Although the region had come a long way since the instability of the 1990s, the Western Balkans remained a region with significant issues. In Bosnia, which was arguably the weakest state at this time, the EU attempted to play a central role in supporting state-building there. This already began in 2002 with the creation of the EU Special Representative (EUSR) which was fused with High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina (created by the Dayton Agreement in 1995) and was tasked with helping facilitate 'a stable, viable, peaceful and multiethnic BiH, cooperating peacefully with its neighbours' (Council of the European Union 2004). Then in 2003, the EU initiated the European Union Police Mission (EUPM) to replace the UN's International Police Task Force and, at the end of 2004, Operation Althea was initiated to replace NATO's Stabilization (SFOR) and Implementation (IFOR) forces (Kirchner 2013).

North Macedonia was another country in which the EU played a proactive role with regards to pursuing stability. In March 2003, the EU initiated Operation Concordia to replace NATO's Allied Harmony operation. Operation Concordia was a peace-keeping mission tasked with providing security for the implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement, which signed in 2001 to mediate violent ethnic tensions between Albanians and Macedonians (Kirchner 2013). In late 2003, Operation Concordia formally ended, but it was replaced by an EU police mission, Proxima, (which ran until December 2005) that aimed to continue 'a broad approach with activities to address the whole range of rule of law aspects, including institution building programmes and police activities' (Council of the European Union 2004).

Although Bosnia and North Macedonia arguably represented the most pressing stability challenges for the EU post-Thessaloniki Summit, the other Western Balkan states also raised issues, with the 'State Union of Serbia and Montenegro' which was formed on 4 February 2003, a particular source. Notably, on March 12 2003, Zoran Đinđić, the democratically elected prime minister of Serbia, was assassinated. Serbia and Montenegro as an entity was fraught with tension as differences between Serbian and Montenegrin elites emerged. Especially key in driving this increasing acrimony was the then Montenegrin prime minister Milo Đukanović who successfully engineered a 'velvet divorce' between the two in 2006 (Darmanovic 2007). The EU was quick to recognize Montenegro and include the new country in its Western Balkans strategy, with an SAA signed between the two in 2007. In 2008, Kosovo issued a declaration of independence from Serbia. Unlike Montenegro's relatively stable secession, the independence of Kosovo was a much more volatile event. The EU, which supported Kosovo's independence (although Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Spain, and Slovakia refused to recognize Kosovo), initiated the European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo (EULEX) in response (Council of the European Union 2008). As Richter (2009) argues, EULEX was built on an agreement by all the key parties involved geopolitically (including Serbia and Russia) that stability was the key aim for Kosovo.

Croatia and Albania, meanwhile, experienced not as problematic periods after the Thessaloniki Summit and both were able, subsequently, to make progress with regards their EU membership aspirations. Croatia quickly emerged as the only Western Balkan state on a clear membership

pathway as it was awarded official candidate status in 2004. After being delayed for several months due to stability issues – namely non-compliance with the ICTY in The Hague – Croatia was able to start accession negotiations in October 2005 and by 2011, the Commission recommended the closing of all *acquis* chapters and set the date of 1 July 2013 as the accession target date (Petrovic 2013). Although North Macedonia also received official candidate status in 2005, its path was blocked by Greece over the issue of the name ‘Macedonia’ (Mavromatidis 2010). Albania’s progress was less dramatic than Croatia’s but its SAA entered into force in 2009. Shortly after, Albania lodged a formal application for EU membership which was supported by the European Commission in 2012 (European Commission 2012). However, Montenegro was able to make quicker progress after it seceded from Serbia and Montenegro, receiving official candidate status in 2010 and, in 2012, the screening for the *acquis* chapters started. Serbia, too, despite their problematic experiences earlier on and ongoing issues over Kosovo, was also able to achieve official candidate status in 2012 (European Commission 2012).

Thus, at the time of Croatia’s accession in 2013, three of the six remaining Western Balkan states had received official candidate status (with Albania close behind), although only one, Montenegro, had started negotiations. The key factor from this phase was that if a specific Western Balkan state could demonstrate to the EU that it had achieved ‘stability’ then their accession prospects would improve whereas those states that were deemed too ‘unstable’ by the EU were left without a clear accession pathway. While some stabilization occurred, the democratic performance of the Western Balkans states during this period, however, was a mixed bag. According to Freedom House’s NIT data (see Table 1), all the participant states at the Thessaloniki Summit experienced initial improvements in their democratic ratings. But, by the end of the decade, most of the remaining non-EU Western Balkan states – Kosovo had a significantly more authoritarian starting point than the rest – were either stagnating democratically or backsliding (especially Bosnia and North Macedonia). Only Croatia was able to secure a credible pathway towards accession, and consequently, its democratization trajectory was positively influenced – at least initially (Epstein and Sedelmeier 2008; Petrovic and Smith 2013).

Croatia’s accession advantage over the other states was two-fold. First, although it was heavily involved in the Yugoslav wars, it entered the 2000s in a relatively more stable political and economic position than the other states with, importantly, fewer internal and external security issues (Massari 2005). Second, Croatia, since its (German-led) recognition by the then EEC in 1992 (Crawford 1996), had experienced significant identity convergence with the EU. Subotic (2011, 320)

**Table 1.** Freedom House NIT Democracy Scores for the Western Balkans (2003–2020).

Year	Albania	Bosnia	Croatia	Kosovo	N Macedonia	Montenegro	Serbia	Slovenia	Hungary	Poland
2003	3.83	3.46	4.21		3.71		4.12	6.21	6.13	6.25
2004	3.87	3.71	4.17	2.5	4		4.17	6.25	6.13	6.25
2005	3.96	3.82	4.25	2.68	4.11	4.21	4.25	6.32	6.04	6
2006	4.21	3.93	4.29	2.64	4.18	4.11	4.29	6.25	6	5.86
2007	4.18	3.96	4.25	2.64	4.18	4.07	4.32	6.18	5.86	5.64
2008	4.18	3.89	4.36	2.79	4.14	4.21	4.21	6.14	5.86	5.61
2009	4.18	3.82	4.29	2.86	4.14	4.21	4.21	6.07	5.71	5.75
2010	4.07	3.75	4.29	2.93	4.21	4.21	4.29	6.07	5.61	5.68
2011	3.96	3.68	4.36	2.82	4.18	4.18	4.36	6.07	5.39	5.79
2012	3.86	3.64	4.39	2.82	4.11	4.18	4.36	6.11	5.14	5.86
2013	3.75	3.61	4.39	2.75	4.07	4.18	4.36	6.11	5.11	5.82
2014	3.82	3.57	4.32	2.86	4	4.14	4.36	6.07	5.04	5.82
2015	3.86	3.54	4.32	2.86	3.93	4.11	4.32	6.07	4.82	5.79
2016	3.86	3.5	4.32	2.93	3.71	4.07	4.25	6	4.71	5.68
2017	3.86	3.46	4.29	3.04	3.57	4.11	4.18	5.96	4.46	5.43
2018	3.89	3.36	4.25	3.07	3.64	4.07	4.04	5.93	4.29	5.11
2019	3.89	3.32	4.25	3.11	3.68	3.93	4	5.93	4.07	5.04
2020	3.82	3.32	4.25	3.18	3.75	3.86	3.96	5.93	3.96	4.93

N.B. scale is 1–7 (7 is full democracy, 1 is full authoritarianism)



argues that identity convergence between the EU and Croatia occurred because ‘Europeanness’ was ‘the constitutive part of Croatian nationalism’. Conversely, in Serbia for example, Europe was constructed as an ‘other’ to Serbian nationalism which precipitated identity divergence (Subotic 2011). In conjunction, these factors gave Croatia a significant advantage over the other states and the EU was able, like it did with its CEEB enlargement previously, to credibly incentivize Croatia to undertake the necessary reform for eventual accession into the EU (Epstein and Sedelmeier 2008; Subotic 2011).

For the remaining Western Balkan states, their democratization trajectories and their prospects for membership in the EU began to stagnate – if not start to worsen in some cases – in the late 2000s, continuing into the 2010s (see Table 1). Of course, all of the remaining six states had a less stable starting point than Croatia in 2003, although Serbia and Montenegro (before the split) was very close. Without the same internal political will that Croatia secured within the EU, these remaining Western Balkan states were further penalized in 2006 by the EU adopting stricter accession conditions (Croatia was also subjected to this, but was able to overcome the added hurdles) than in previous enlargement rounds, namely an increased number of *acquis* chapter negotiations (from 31 to 35) and the inclusion of an absorption capacity criterion (Petrovic and Smith 2013, 556). In addition, the phenomenon of ‘enlargement fatigue’ – i.e. growing anti-enlargement sentiment – developed within the EU in the wake of the conclusion of the 2007 enlargement. This coincided with the global financial crisis which sparked a decade (and continuing) of significant economic chaos for the EU, significantly quelling the EU’s appetite for future enlargements (O’Brennan 2014).

Ultimately, the decade-long ‘second phase’ of the EU’s engagement with the Western Balkans states demonstrated a preoccupation with stability over democracy. The various stability concerns that arose during this period – in all of the states, albeit to varying degrees – led to the EU focusing on ‘security-driven’ state-building over the strict promotion of democratic reforms (Bieber 2011, 1800). The logic behind such an initial focus was that only through effective state-building could the Western Balkan states be capable of overcoming the lingering stability issues and progressing towards democracy (and the additional economic and legal reforms associated with accession). However, as Bieber (2011) argues, the EU’s effectiveness as a state-builder was questionable which, in part, led to reform stasis (apart from Croatia) in most of the Western Balkan states. Unlike previous enlargements where democratically underperforming states – such as Greece, Bulgaria, and Romania (Pridham 2005) – were still admitted to the EU on the hope they would eventually improve, the emergence of enlargement fatigue at the end of the 2000s further undermined the EU’s ability to concurrently promote stability and democracy in the Western Balkans (O’Brennan 2014).

### ***Phase three: from Croatia’s accession until the unveiling of the Six flagship initiatives in 2018***

Croatia’s accession into the EU was accompanied by some optimism in the EU and Western Balkans that a pathway could be cleared for those states that were official candidates to move towards accession in the coming years. A sign of the optimism was that Serbia, the most problematic of the official candidate countries, given the ongoing issues it had with Kosovo, was able to join Montenegro by starting negotiations in early 2014. Montenegro was able to finish its screening process at the time of Croatia’s accession to the EU and quickly opened and closed two chapters. Albania’s application was officially recognized in mid-2014 and by 2016, Bosnia had applied while Kosovo’s SAA entered into force. Only North Macedonia remained particularly blurred as to its pathway at this stage. Even though the European Parliament passed a resolution in 2013 calling for North Macedonia’s accession negotiations to begin (European Parliament 2013), the name issue with Greece persisted (Chryssogelos and Stavrevska 2019).

The progress outlined above suggested that the stability concerns for the EU in the Western Balkans had begun to dissipate, resulting in seemingly improved accession prospects. Even regarding the Kosovo issue which remained arguably the most challenging problem related to stability for the region, the EU was able to facilitate some progress on that front. In April 2013, the EU brokered the Brussels Agreement: a framework for normalizing relations between Serbia and Kosovo

(European Commission 2013). Only the question of Bosnia's of long-term statehood – namely how to promote unity between the leaders of Republika Srpska (the Serbian-majority entity) and the Croat-Bosniak Federation – remained problematic for the EU (Bieber 2020).

However, despite some success of the EU in addressing some of the larger stability concerns in the region by 2015, long-term problems negative to democracy (and stability) remained. These included issues such as entrenched corruption, weak democratic governance structures, difficulty in reforming defunct state institutions, nexus between organized crime and government figures, elements of extreme nationalism, the lack of media and reporting freedoms, and issues pertinent to individual and group rights (Kovačević 2018). Indeed, such problems were indicative of the state of democracy in the Western Balkans at this time, which had failed to improve since the EU's more focused engagement in 2003 (see Table 1). Even with the accession of Croatia in 2013 and the opportunity to reinvigorate the enlargement process as a way to secure more democratization via conditionality, the EU's democracy promotion engagement with the Western Balkans continued to falter.

The EU's Western Balkans strategy continued to, rhetorically at least, maintain a desire for democratization in the remaining six non-EU states there. However, it became clear that limited progress was being made which in turn was hindering the long-term accession prospects of these states. Vogel (2018) diagnosed the EU's democracy promotion as suffering from a technocratic approach which 'takes note of the troubled state of democracy in the region but offers little beyond established technocratic activities'. Evidence of this can be seen in the EU's willingness to overlook the authoritarian traits of Đukanović in Montenegro, which, despite this, became the most advanced of the remaining Western Balkan states with regards their accession progress (Bieber 2018a). Meanwhile, the previously better performing North Macedonia continued to face a roadblock over accession, which arguably accelerated their democratic backsliding (see Table 1).

On top of the failure to induce positive democratic progress after Croatia's accession, stability concerns slowly returned to the fore in the Western Balkans and demanded the attention of the EU. The 'progress' in the Serbia-Kosovo relationship reached an apex in 2015 but started to dissipate again shortly after (a trend that has continued up until the time of writing), despite the efforts of the EU to broker a lasting arrangement (Council of the European Union 2016). Furthermore, issues of disunity (mentioned above) in Bosnia continued to remain unsolvable (Bieber 2020). However, a newer stability concern emerged in 2015 in the shape of rapidly increasing migration. The issue arose in the five Western Balkan states – Kosovo was still negotiating theirs at the time of writing – that had signed visa-free travel agreements with the EU (Petreski et al. 2018). In 2015, the European Commission reported that the number of asylum applications submitted in EU and Schengen-associated countries by nationals of the five visa-free Western Balkan countries was rising steadily – there had been 53,705 applications in 2013, but their number had risen by 40% in the first nine months of 2014 (European Commission 2015).

Importantly, the Western Balkans also acted as a transit route for migrants wanting to enter the EU from the MENA region, mainly via Greece. In 2015, the number of non-regional migrants transiting through the Western Balkans reached unprecedented levels with more than two million illegal border-crossings occurring, roughly 30 times more than in the previous year (Frontex 2016). To combat the growing migrant crisis, the EU increased the budget of the 'Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund' from 230 million euros in 2014 to 1,799 million euros in 2016 – significantly exceeding the 506 million euros spent on the Western Balkans in 2016 through the 'Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance' (European Commission 2019). Coordination between the EU and the countries along the migration route became crucial and, in part, the ensuing crisis gave prominence to Western Balkan leaders who became, ironically, something of the 'guardians of the Schengen space' (de Lasheras, Tcherneva, and Wesslau 2016, 3). One notable example of this was the President of the European Council Donald Tusk's meeting with Montenegro's then Prime Minister Đukanović – described by Freedom House as a political figure who has employed 'state capture, abuse of power, and strongman tactics' (Csaky 2020) – in which Tusk remarked:

The visit of Montenegro's Prime Minister is the best moment to underline the great burden lying on the shoulders of the Balkan states and the great work done by them to stem irregular migration. Thanks to their determination to co-implement the comprehensive European migration strategy, and to close the Western Balkans route, the migration wave has visibly decreased (European Council 2016).

The migration crisis, thus, like previous crises in the Western Balkans, further entrenched a belief in the EU that a focus on state-building was the necessary pre-requisite towards the higher aims of democracy and accession. Despite the hope that Croatia's accession would pave the way for further accessions from the Western Balkans, what became most important for the EU – in the short term at least – was for individual politicians and governments in the Western Balkans region to present themselves as the resilient anchors of stability, rather than democratic reformers (Anghel 2018). Thus, the continued reform stasis that first began during the second phases led to the creation of what the Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (2017) termed (EU-enabled) 'stabilitocracies' in the Western Balkans: 'weak democracies with autocratically minded leaders, who govern through informal, patronage networks and claim to provide pro-Western stability in the region.' However, as evidenced by the demise of the Gruevski regime in North Macedonia in 2016, these stabilitocracies were not immune to also facing significant stability issues. This, furthermore, continued the erosion (started in the latter years of the second phase) of the democratic (and accession) prospects of the remaining Western Balkan states (Bieber 2018b).

### ***2018 onwards: A failed new phase in the EU's engagement with the Western Balkans?***

In February 2018, due to the growing ineffectiveness of its enlargement strategy for the Western Balkans, the EU adopted a new strategy aimed to reinvigorate the process. Six 'flagship initiatives' were highlighted: (1) to strengthen the rule of law; (2) reinforce engagement on security and migration; (3) enhance support for socio-economic development; (4) increase transport and energy connectivity; (5) create a digital agenda for the Western Balkans; and (6) to support reconciliation and good neighbourly relations (European Commission 2018). At a further meeting in Sofia, Bulgaria in May 2018 ('Sofia Priority Agenda') the SFI was expanded upon with 57 specific commitments established (European Council 2018). Interestingly, compared to the Thessaloniki Summit which had democracy as the first priority, only one of the SFIs (1: rule of law) relates closely to democracy while two (reinforce engagement on security and migration and to support reconciliation and good neighbourly relations) relate closely to stability. To what extent this represents the shelving of the putative stability through democratization model by the EU it is too early to tell, but it represents a noticeable point of departure in the EU's policy language at least.

In addition to the announcement of the SFI, another seemingly positive step took place in 2018 as finally a resolution to the 27-year old dispute between Greece and North Macedonia regarding the name issue was agreed. Due to the signing of the Prespa Agreement with Greece on 17 June 2018, it was expected accession negotiations would begin in 2019 and that North Macedonia could finally find a clear – albeit still arduous – pathway to accession (Chryssogelos and Stavrevska 2019). Furthermore, in Montenegro and Serbia, the only two to have started the formal process of accession, there was an expectation, based on the EU's renewed interest, that the EU would adopt a far more supportive approach aimed at speeding up the process of aligning these countries with the *Acquis Communautaire* (Emmott 2018). However, by the middle of 2020, Montenegro had only closed 3 chapters (although it had opened all of its required 33 chapters) while Serbia had only closed 2 and still had to open 16 of its 34 required chapters (European Commission n.d.).

The EU's apparent change in attitude to its Western Balkans enlargement strategy could have significant changes for not only accession prospects but also democracy, especially as, up until this point, very little progress was achieved in any of the target states with regards democracy (Bieber 2020). Even in Croatia which was able to accede into the EU in 2013, it has, like in other EU member states such as Poland and Hungary, experienced some troubles with its democracy in recent years (Stanley 2019). This casts further questions as to whether the EU's democracy promotion model linked to the promise of accession can induce lasting reform. This also suggests that democratic

reforms are less important than other (political) factors with regards accession. Although Croatia, as evident in [Table 1](#), leads the remaining six non-EU Western Balkan states in terms of democracy score, this represents a minimal improvement and when compared with neighbouring Slovenia, Croatia is significantly behind. Indeed, Croatia, like all of the remaining Western Balkan states, has had to deal with damaging post-Yugoslavian ‘authoritarian legacies’ (Castaldo and Pinna 2019).

The Croatia example, rather than successfully pursuing democratization, demonstrates that specific intra-EU bargaining is a critical factor (Massari 2005). Although nowhere near as problematic as the Greece-North Macedonia spat, Croatia had significant border issues with Slovenia which had the potential to derail its accession, namely as Slovenia could use its veto (Kusku-Sönmez and Türkes-Kiliç 2018). But this was overcome because there was enough internal political will inside the EU for Croatian accession to smooth over underpinning issues. Even though progress seemed to have been made with the 2018 SFI, the role of intra-EU bargaining reared its head in late 2019 with the decision of France – who was supported by Denmark and the Netherlands – to veto the EU granting official candidate status to Albania and North Macedonia. French President, Emanuel Macron, explained that the decision to veto was a dispute about ‘vision’ and stated that ‘the enlargement rules need reform’ (BBC 2019). Macron’s concerns about the process of enlargement predominately relate to stability issues rather than a desire for there to be more effective democratic reform, citing a lack of strategic vision by the EU and concerns about illegal migration and state-capacity (especially in Bosnia) in the Western Balkans (The Economist 2019).

Although Albania and North Macedonia were subsequently greenlit by the EU in March 2020, much uncertainty remains as to the internal cohesiveness of the EU on this issue (Fleck 2020). The timing of this latest setback for the EU’s Western Balkan strategy is problematic from both a stability and democracy perspective. An increasing perception amongst the individual Western Balkan states is that the membership perspective offered to them by the EU back at the Thessaloniki Summit (and reiterated since) is less than credible (Richter and Wunsch 2020). At the time of the Thessaloniki Summit, the EU was undeniably the main player in the Western Balkans security complex, but in the years since Russia and China have increased their presence (Markovic-Khaze 2018). In the scope of democracy, this is a potentially significant development because both Russia and China, in recent years, have been accused of being autocracy promoters in their interaction with smaller partners (Schweickert, Melnykovska, and Plamper 2012). In Russia’s case, there is evidence to suggest that it has been actively engaged in the promotion of anti-EU politicians and political parties within the EU and the promotion of more authoritarian regimes in its near abroad and, perhaps, the Western Balkans also (Smith 2018). China, more recently, has won widespread applause in the Western Balkans given its support regarding the COVID-19 outbreak, something which the EU has been heavily criticized for failing to do (Smith and Fallon 2020).

While the perception that Russia and China are teaming up as an authoritarian challenge the so-called ‘liberal international order’ has gained some traction both in academia and in mass media, the impact of these two on the Western Balkans is likely more straightforward. Essentially, the increased presence of Russia and China in the Western Balkans reduces the EU’s ability to induce reform by dangling incentives as it gives the ‘gatekeeping’ elites in these states less burdensome alternatives to the demands attached to the EU’s policies (Bieber and Tzifakis 2020, pt. III). Although the idea that Russia or China have ‘no strings attached’ policies should be eschewed, their ‘strings’ importantly do not threaten the ruling elite’s grip on power like the reform demands of the EU, which gives Russia and China some advantages (over the EU) in dealing with elites in the Western Balkans. However, at the 6 May 2020 ‘EU-Western Balkans Zagreb summit’, the EU has sought to counter the influence of competing external actors by offering increased financial assistance and reiterating, again, ‘unequivocal support for the European perspective of the Western Balkans’ (European Council 2020).

## Conclusion

The argument that the EU has suffered from a stability-democracy dilemma in its engagement with its various neighbourhoods has received significant scholarly attention in recent years. To test this

claim in the context of the Western Balkans, this article offered a longitudinal (2003 to 2020) examination of the EU's Western Balkans engagement, tracing the EU's dual aim of securing stability and facilitating functioning democracies there. This examination demonstrated a clear belief, initially at least, in the EU that it could transcend the stability-democracy dilemma – through initially embracing a 'stability through democratization' model. However, as was apparent in the analysis, the EU nevertheless faced, at the very least, a recurring tension between stability and democracy in its engagement with the Western Balkans, with the former usually receiving more attention in policymaking. The reason for this is two-fold. One, stability concerns – such as ethnic tensions, statehood issues, and migration – appear to be more imminent threats than democratic backsliding and thus, from a policymaking point of view deserve more immediate attention. Two, stability concerns like those mentioned are arguably easier to design policy for as opposed to policies promoting democratic reform, particularly as the EU's democratization model has come under increasing scrutiny in recent years.

While the stability through democratization model seemingly bore fruits for the EU's interaction with the CEEB states in the 1990s and 2000s, the Western Balkans has proved a more challenging setting largely because of its status as a particularly volatile neighbourhood, one which had only recently experienced war and continues to experience a plethora of issues related to problems of weak statehood and ongoing intra-region disputes. However, with the launch of 2018 Western Balkans strategy, the EU finally seemed to bin the stability through democratization model that they had been pursuing since 2003, as it switched focus to a more pragmatic one aimed at speeding up the accession of official candidates (as well as expediting Albania and North Macedonia). This represented a choice of stability over democracy. But, recent events, such as the apprehensiveness of several EU member states, with France as the cheerleader, has potentially thrown this new strategy into disarray and, at the same time, threatens to push the Western Balkans further towards Russia and China.

Ultimately, the optimistic tone of the Thessaloniki Summit declaration in 2003 as to the democratic (and EU) futures of the Western Balkan states has failed to come to fruition in the 17 years since. The inherent tension between stability and democracy in the EU's engagement with the Western Balkans led, in part, to policy incoherence and some missed opportunities. Furthermore, the once confident EU, with regards to its role as both a democratic facilitator and a regional stability provider, is having to self-reflect and ponder ways to re-engage with the Western Balkans more credibly and more productively.

## Disclosure statement

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