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# Caught between stability and democracy in the Western Balkans: a comparative analysis of paths of accession to the European Union

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## ABSTRACT

The Western Balkans have been on the path of European Union accession, officially since 2003. The European Union invested heavily in the region to stabilise and democratise these countries and prepare them for eventual EU accession. This paper proposes that the EU-with its democracy aid and progress on accession stages acted as an external actor that- unexpectedly legitimised the political regimes despite their apparent backsliding. To better assess whether the EU played a role in democratic backsliding, and if so to what extent, the paper takes upon two case studies – Serbia and North Macedonia. The paper aims to enhance our understanding of democracy promotion, the EU's role as an external actor both in terms of its legitimisation role and democracy assistance in furthering democratic reforms in third countries.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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Accession; European Union; democratisation; Serbia; Macedonia; conditionality

## Introduction

The Western Balkans have been on the path of European Union accession, officially since 2003. After the bloodshed of the 1990s, the European Union invested heavily in the region to stabilise and democratise these countries and prepare them for eventual EU accession. South East European countries-Western Balkans Six (WB6)- Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Montenegro, Kosovo, North Macedonia (NM), and Serbia – have the prospect of joining the European Union for nearly two decades. Yet, to date, they are still stuck in a hybrid status quo of competitive authoritarianism (Bieber 2018; Juncos 2011; Richter and Wuncsh 2019).

The ambivalence in the Western Balkan countries' relations with the European Union impacted their path to democracy with unexpected consequences of backsliding (Richter and Wunch 2019; Bieber 2018). Despite substantial EU support and democracy assistance, the WB6 experienced democratic backsliding (Nations in transit 2016), with the Economist Intelligence Unit showing a 9% decline in the average level of democracy in the region by 2017 (Burazer 2018). This is surprising, as the EU was highly engaged with these countries, from the 1990s onwards following the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the outburst of violence and wars that came with it (Phinnemore 2003; Keane 2005; Fagan and

Sincar 2011; Juncos 2011). The Western Balkans do not seem to be an exception as EU member states in Central and Eastern Europe (Hanley and Vachudova 2018), and candidates such as Turkey are also experiencing democratic backsliding (Muftuler-Bac 2019; Lührmann and et al. 2018; Cianetti, Dawson & Hanley 2018). However, as WB6 is still on accession track, it would have been expected to see these countries to move forward in a democratic trajectory. Yet, the region remains largely dominated by illiberal democratic practices, high levels of corruption, weak democratic institutions, political clientelism and patronage (Kmezić and Bieber 2017; Spoerri 2014).

It is perplexing that after three decades of EU's democracy promotion, the Western Balkans did not proceed on a democratisation track, but instead experienced significant backsliding. The paper proposes that the EU's prioritisation of stability over democracy acted as a key factor for democratic backsliding in the Western Balkans, and its democracy assistance in terms of foreign aid did not make a significant difference. This is not to deny the role of domestic level factors (Freyburg and Richter 2010) or struggles at home (Richter and Wunsch 2019) as roadblocks to democracy. Domestic level factors such as weak democratic institutions (Bieber 2018; Ostojic 2014), authoritarian political actors (Bermeo 2016), nationalist movements (Freyburg and Richter 2010) all matter as roadblocks in democratic transformation. Yet, the EU's role in the Western Balkans is not traditionally seen as one of these roadblocks. Instead, the EU's effectiveness in promoting democracy is assessed through the political will of the ruling elites and their calculations of domestic costs (Noutcheva 2009; Levitsky and Way 2015). However, this paper proposes that the EU-with its democracy aid and progress on accession stages acted as an external actor that-unexpectedly legitimised the political regimes despite their apparent backsliding.

The literature on the EU's transformative role is multifaceted with an emphasis on the EU as a foreign policy actor (Anastasakis 2008), its political conditionality (Noutcheva and Aydin-Düzgit 2012; Fagan 2013), its role as a normative power (Noutcheva 2009; Manners 2002), as well as EU's support to state-building measures (Phinnemore 2003; Bieber 2011; Juncos 2011; Grimm and Mathis 2017; Börzel and Grimm 2018; Fagan 2015; Fagan and Wunsch 2018). These studies are engaged with multiple aspects of democratic transformation motivated by the EU, but only a few scholars focus on the EU's role for democracy promotion in third-party countries leading to a possible legitimisation of the autocratic rulers (Fagan and Sincar 2011; Fagan 2015; Bohle and Greskovits 2012; Grimm and Mathis 2017; Bieber 2018; Richter and Wunsch 2019). Grimm and Mathis (2017)'s work on the impact of foreign aid in the Western Balkans concludes that EU aid to the WB6 did not lead to a consolidation of their democracies. Similarly, Richter and Wunsch (2019) argue that the EU unintentionally legitimised autocratic leaders, enabling a "state capture". There are, however, not many empirical studies on the Western Balkans where possible links between the EU accession process, its democracy assistance, and democratisation are uncovered. This paper addresses this key puzzle: "Why has there been democratic backsliding in the WB despite the EU's democracy aid and deep involvement in the region?"

While the European Union was a visible actor in the Western Balkans, its intense focus on stability and development downplayed its role as a democracy promoter. Domestic political struggles in the WB6 limited the EU's role in the region, but our paper does not focus on these struggles due to lack of space.

To better assess whether the EU played a role in democratic backsliding, and if so to what extent, the paper takes upon two case studies – Serbia and North Macedonia. The

paper aims to enhance our understanding of democracy promotion, the EU's role as an external actor both in terms of its legitimisation role and democracy assistance in furthering democratic reforms in third countries. We expect to see our results generalisable for backsliding in the acceding countries to the EU, contributing to the overall literature on democratic backsliding in Europe and the EU's transformative role in candidate countries.

### *The European Union: caught between stability and democracy in the Western Balkans*

While the European Union has been applauded for its transformative power for Central and Eastern Europe (Schimmelfennig and Scholtz 2008), its impact on the Western Balkans is less clear (Richter 2012; Noutcheva and Aydin-Duzgit 2012). Furthermore, “profound democratic reforms have proved to be very problematic in this region” (Freyburg and Richter 2010, 264). Democracy literature distinguishes between transition, consolidation, and breakdown (Waldner and Lust 2018; Collier and Adcock 1999; Przeworski et al. 2000). However, increasingly in the past decade, multiple countries in the EU's periphery such as Turkey (Muftuler-Bac 2019) and surprisingly new member states are experiencing democratic breakdown (Hanley and Vachudova 2018, V-Dem Annual Democracy Report 2020). Democratic breakdown has been analysed as “democratic backsliding” (Bermeo 2016; Waldner and Lust 2018), “regression” (Erdmann, Kneuer 2011), “erosion” (Plattner 2014), or “demise” (Schmitter 1994). Waldner and Lust (2018) define backsliding as a decline in the qualities of democracy, and for autocracies as a deterioration of governance qualities. Democratic backsliding is increasingly tied to the rise of dominant parties, control of independent media, erosion of checks and balances, rule of law and judicial independence, populist rhetoric at the executive branch. Waldner and Lust's (2018) definition of “backslide” emphasises the deterioration of governance as demonstrated in the V-Dem Electoral Democracy Index. This deterioration is reflected in Cohen and Lampe's (2011) work that the Western Balkans are unlikely to develop self-sustaining democracies (BIEPAG 2017; Nations in Transit 2016). Electoral hegemony, “stealing” elections and concentrating sources of power-media, control of the economy, access to resources emerge as key tools in democratic backsliding in the Western Balkans.

In recent years, many scholars focus on the emergence of mixed, illiberal, hybrid regimes or the so-called “grey zones,” which combine characteristics of democratic regimes and autocratic rule (Diamond 2002; Carothers 2002). Levitsky and Way (2002, 2010) have identified these regimes as “Competitive authoritarian”. Multiple scholars have labelled these competitive authoritarian regimes in the Western Balkans as “stabilitocracies” (Pavlović 2016; Beha 2017; Bieber 2018), and look into what would constitute democratic consolidation (Dawson 2018; Hanley and Vachudova 2018). For example, the mere presence of elections does not suffice, and in most cases, elections themselves are far from fair and free.

The EU enforces a “carrot and stick” approach towards its potential candidates, based on the external incentives model (Schimmelfennig and Scholtz 2008). As a result, the relationship between the EU and the Western Balkans is highly asymmetrical (Baldwin, Francois, and Portes 1997; Schimmelfennig 2001; Vachudova 2014; Fagan 2013). From a rational choice perspective, candidate countries benefit largely from the EU through their access to the common market. When the EU makes credible commitments,

compliance to EU's democratic norms is expected to be high (Levistky and Way 2005; Wolf and Wurm 2011); despite high domestic costs of compliance (Schimmelfennig and Scholtz 2008; Vachudova 2014). However, in the Western Balkans, the external incentives model does not fully explain why and how as candidates advance on their paths of accession, they do not become more democratic. Börzel and Grimm (2018) emphasise that to effectively promote democracy, one must acknowledge the conflicting goals of different objectives, leading to a prioritisation among multiple goals, in particular between stability and democracy. As a result, "lack of strong support by the EU and several of its member states facilitated the emergence of regimes that based their external legitimacy on stability rather than democracy" (Bieber 2018, 338). Accordingly, we expect to observe the Western Balkans' increased compliance to the EU's preconditions of stability as the key to understanding their backsliding and the ineffectiveness of democracy assistance. An increased tendency among the WB leaders to instrumentalise the EU's lack of a clear message and emphasis on stability to squash domestic opposition at home and to boost their legitimacy lies at the centre of backsliding.

In the Western Balkans, democratic institutions are weak, dominated by clientelist and patronage structures together with tight control of media. Furthermore, these regimes rely extensively on external legitimacy. An important feature in these regimes is the political elites' usage of pro-European rhetoric and reforms to gain popular support (i.e. Dukanovic Montenegro, Gruevski in North Macedonia in 2006, Dodik in Republic Srpska in 2006, and Vucic in Serbia). However, the European Union's impact on democracy promotion in the WB6 depends on a consistently credible commitment through yearly financial assistance, regional frameworks and bilateral agreements (Fagan and Sircar 2011; Juncos 2011; Fagan 2015). A handful of studies underscore the impact of the European Union's financial assistance (Carey 2007, Reinsberg 2015; Fagan and Sircar 2011; Fagan 2015). Finkel et. al (2007) Scoot and Steele (2005) Kalyvitis and Vlachaki (2010) argue that democracy aid has a positive effect on the democratisation process, while Altunbas and Thornton (2014) show that financial aid has a positive, but a weak impact. On the other hand, several in-depth qualitative studies shed light on the skepticism of the effectiveness of democracy aid programmes (Burnell & Schlumberger 2010; Whitehead 2004; Zeuw 2005). As a result, a consensus on the role of democracy aid in democratisation processes seems absent. Nevertheless, financial assistance is one of the tools through which the EU signals its commitment to the WB, and is part and parcel of their formal accession process.

As an illustration of the EU's commitment to offer a credible enlargement perspective, one could point out to the 2003 Thessaloniki Summit confirming the accession perspective for all Western Balkans (Phinnemore 2003). To date, every country has entered into force the Stabilisation Association Negotiation Agreement, with Kosovo the last one to do so in 2016. WB countries are in different accession process stages: Montenegro and Serbia are in the process of accession negotiations, North Macedonia and Albania are candidate countries, while BiH and Kosovo are only potential candidate countries ("EU and the Western Balkans" 2019). Croatia constituted a case on its own, as it acceded to the EU in 2013.

To reinforce the commitment to the region, a group of EU member states – Germany, Austria, France, and Italy launched "the Berlin Process", a comprehensive network for regional cooperation with the Western Balkans in 2014. In 2018, the European Commission launched a new strategy for "A credible enlargement perspective," confirming the

European future for South East Europe as a geostrategic investment in a stable, strong and united Europe based on common values. These steps are critical in demonstrating the EU's commitment and support to democratisation. The formal advancement of the EU accession process brings external legitimacy to these regimes (Bieber 2018).

Yet, the rise of “stabilitocracies” in the Western Balkans is not recent, and dates back to the 1990s when these countries began to receive democracy assistance from foreign actors in exchange for stability (Pavlovići 2016; Bieber 2017; Vangelov 2017). By 2000, with the onset of the membership prospect, the idea for democratic reform and shift away from illiberal practices slowly began to take shape (Phinnemore 2003; Bohle and Greskovits 2012). Yet, abandoning illiberal practices and internalising democratic reforms proved difficult as political elites failed to break away from corrupt and clientelist habits of the past (Fagan and Wunsch 2018), and engaged in state capture (Richter and Wunsch 2019). The downward spiral backslide after 2008 has resulted in a region dominated by corruption, assaults on civil society, electoral fraud, ethnic tensions, and undemocratic leaders (Richter and Wunsch 2019; Kmezić & Bieber 2017, Coppedge et al. 2018). Nations in Transit (2016) reports that the region's democracy average in 2016 turned out to be the same as that of 2004, even in countries most advanced in the accession process – Serbia and Montenegro, as demonstrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1 demonstrates backsliding in these countries despite progress on EU accession. This brings forth the question of the effectiveness of the EU's democracy promotion. Richter and Wunsch (2019) argue that interactions with the EU institutions and the accession process legitimise ruling elites, thereby eroding motivations for political reforms. Our puzzle is related precisely to this point: the decoupling of the formal accession process, and democratic backsliding. However, our data also incorporates an additional crucial factor, democracy assistance in the form of financial aid, to show whether the transfer of funds together with accession progress is effective. As Figure 2 demonstrates the

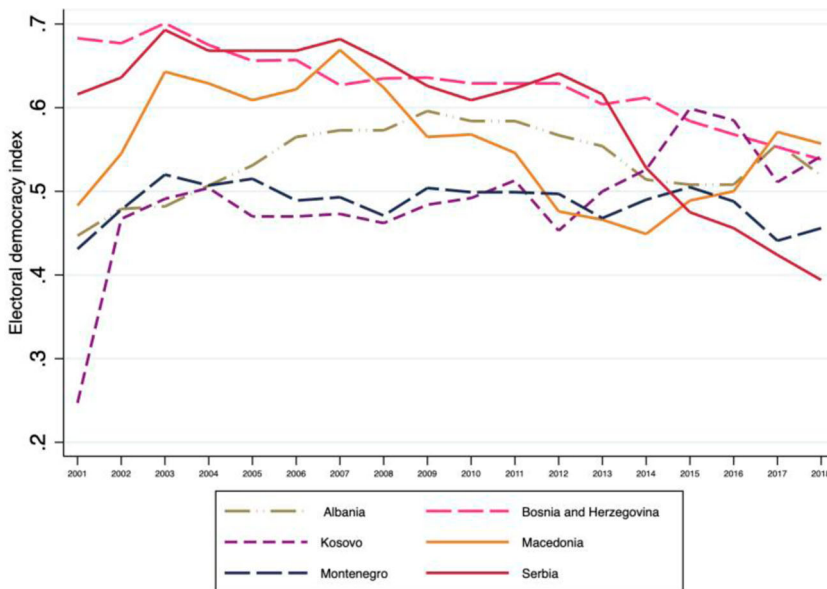
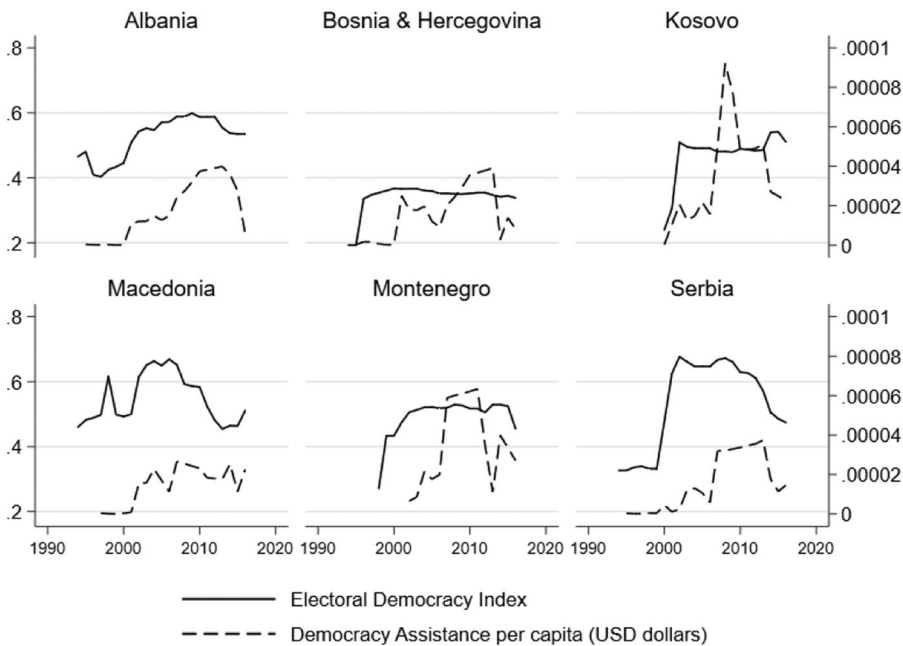


Figure 1. Electoral Democracy Index. Source: Varieties of Democracy 2019 (Coppedge et al. 2019).

Western Balkans as a whole have suffered from backsliding, despite the EU commitment and democracy aid.

The European Union helped these countries to remain stable and conflict-free, but this came at the expense of democratic consolidation. One possible reason for this backsliding might be related to these countries' history as they have never been consolidated democracies (Primatarova and Deimeli 2012; Pavlović 2016; Kmezić and Bieber 2017). A closer look reveals serious inconsistencies. For example, Milo Đukanović – Montenegro's President, known as the "eternal president" both inside the country and in the region, has remained in power for three decades (Dedovic 2018). Aleksandar Vučić, a nationalist and conservative leader who enjoys control of all branches of government, also known as "single man ruler in Serbia", is seen as "an anchor of stability in the region" – as Sebastian Kurz declared in his capacity then as Austria's foreign minister ("The Changeling" 2016). It is this reflex of valuing strongmen in power and the stability they bring over democracy that leads to questions about the EU's ability to act as a credible promoter of democracy and its democracy aid as a tool. Our proposition fits together with Bieber (2018), Bohmelt and Freyburg (2018), Richter and Wunsch (2019), demonstrating both the limits of political conditionality (Schimmelfennig and Scholtz 2008) and EU's transformative power (Borzel and Grimm 2018). However, we add a comparative perspective (Serbia and North Macedonia) to this literature along with an additional variable, democracy aid.

We test our proposition empirically by an extensive analysis of two case studies, Serbia and North Macedonia where we analyse the EU's role in promoting democracy, prioritising stability with the formal accession process as well as providing them with funds for



**Figure 2.** The Association of Democracy Assistance with the V-dem Electoral Democracy Index scores for each country.



political reforms. The following table summarises the comparison between these two cases, and demonstrates that 1/3 of all funds were allocated for democracy aid (Table 1).

These two countries are chosen primarily because they are the first in the WB6 to implement the EU reforms, with aspirations for EU accession (European Commission: Instruments for Pre-Accession 2019). Serbia, as the largest the Western Balkan country, with a key role in regional stability, is at a more advanced level at the accession stage, while North Macedonia is still a candidate. However, North Macedonia passed through bouts of democratic reform with the Commission recommending accession negotiations to be opened, only to be rejected by some member states' vetoes. This variation reveals how different actors acted as veto players throughout the accession process. While Serbia is experiencing serious democratic backsliding and is one of the top ten countries that has autocratised the most (V-Dem Annual Democracy Report 2020) despite its ongoing accession negotiations, North Macedonia seems to have broken out of this cycle in 2018.

To analyse these dynamics more closely, we use process tracing and historical comparisons to shed light on the EU's role as a democracy promoter in WB6. Figure 3 demonstrates censorship in both of these countries which reveals how the government's control over media as an indicator of backsliding changed over time.

To assess the validity of our key proposition—that the EU might have unintentionally assisted in consolidating autocracies rather than promote democratisation in the WB6 based on its prioritisation of stability, we look into the different paths of accession for Serbia and North Macedonia, and evaluate the EU's impact of democracy, with both accession process stages and democracy aid. However, an in-depth analysis of multiple causes of backsliding remains beyond the scope of our analysis.

### *Serbia's path of EU accession and its democratic backsliding*

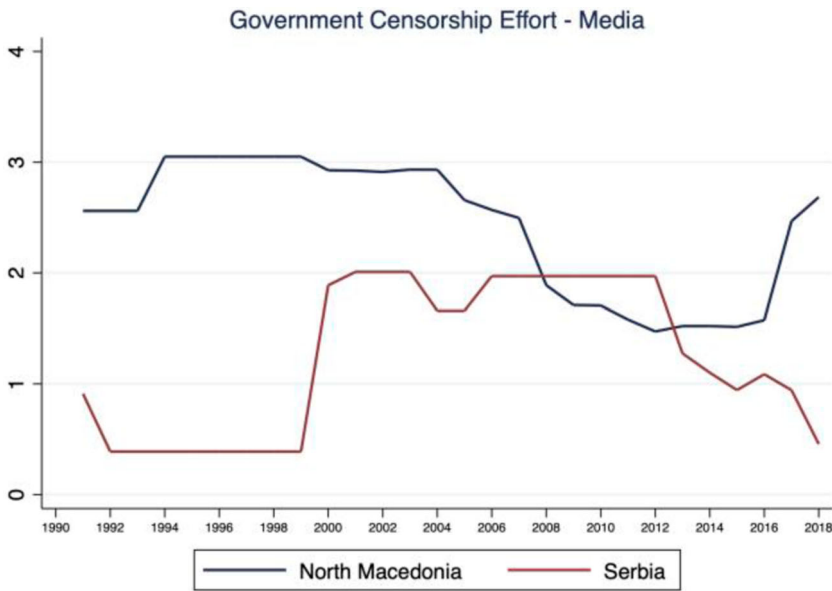
As an illustration of the EU's prioritisation of stability over democracy reforms, Serbia presents a solid test case, as, after 2008, it proceeded at a rapid pace in the EU accession process, but also while experiencing an increase in the control of media and curtailing of civil liberties, serious backslides in democracy indices (Nations in Transit 2016; V-Dem Index 2019). The EU provided credible commitments for Serbia's membership with the 2003 Thessaloniki Summit, in 2008, adopted a European partnership for Serbia. However, the EU's clear prioritisation of stability undermined the role of democracy

**Table 1.** Most Similar System Design: Serbia and North Macedonia.

Serbia	North Macedonia
Regimes of the World Index: Electoral Autocracy	Regimes of the World Index: Electoral Democracy
Part of Former Yugoslavia	Part of Former Yugoslavia
Socio-Economic Conditions (GDP per capita – 5348.29 USD) (2016)	Socio-Economic Conditions (GDP per capita – 5237.15 USD) (2016)
Stabilitocracy	Stabilitocracy
Financial Assistance (2014–2020 IPA II)	EU initiated Przino Agreement
1508.0 million total	Financial Assistance (2014–2020 IPA II)
543 million for Democracy aid	664.2 million total
77,320 Euro democracy aid per capita	205.9 million for Democracy Aid
	99,280 Euro democracy aid per capita

Note: Serbia and NM type of regime, GDP per capita and the amount of financial assistance by European Commission.





**Figure 3.** Government Censorship Effort Media (Source: V-Dem Institute 2019).

assistance programs. To understand the root causes of this, we look at the main dynamics in Serbia to understand why democratic reforms and assistance programs were ineffective.

Serbia has proceeded in the EU accession process mainly due to its cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), the signing of Brussels Agreement, while its compliance with the EU's democracy criteria and aid agenda remained largely of secondary importance (Ostojic 2014). Despite its long-term association with the EU, Serbia is still dominated by populist political elites that seem to accept the EU reforms and democracy on paper, but clearly pursue policies that subvert the establishment of liberal democracy (Pavlović 2016; Bieber 2017).

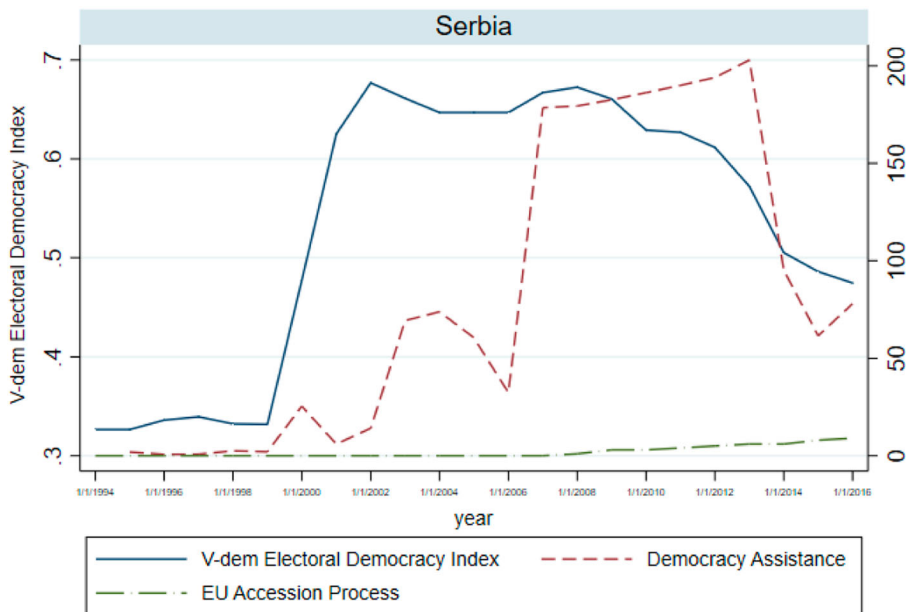
The EU has been allocating funds to Serbia for several sectors including democracy assistance through programs such as OBNOVA, PHARE, EIDHR and to date IPA I & IPA II. Yet, in response to the intensification of violent actions and war, the EU adopted long-lasting economic sanctions to Serbia under Slobodan Milošević's competitive authoritarian regime (McFaul 2005; Levitsky and Way 2002). It is only after the fall of Milošević, a transition began (Bieber 2017), sparking hope for democratic transition, economic development and eventual EU integration (Cohen and Lampe 2011; Keil 2013). When Vojislav Koštunica, a centre-right nationalist, was elected president, and Zoran Đinđić, a centre-left leader, became prime minister (Subotić 2010), hopes went up for Serbia's European vocation. It is also in this time that the EU began to act as a stabiliser rather than a promoter of democracy.

The main aspects of this stability role were the links developed between the EU accession process and the Serbian compliance with the ICTY. "Cooperation with the ICTY, FRY's international obligation, both as a UN Member State and as a signatory of the Dayton / Paris Agreements, remains insufficient" (2002, 16). The ICTY urged the Serbian government to investigate war crimes, and to bring the perpetrators to the Hague tribunal. In 2003, Đinđić – Serbia's then prime minister, a pro-European leader who supported the ICTY,

ordered Milošević's arrest in Belgrade, however, he was assassinated by the Serbian paramilitary unit "The Red Berets" with the motto "Stop The Hague." The assassination marked a focal point in Serbia's internal and external affairs, demonstrating deeper divisions between pro-Europeans and right-wing conservatives who opposed integration into the EU and cooperation with the Hague (Subotić 2010), a clear indication of further instability. The assassination acted as a turning point illustrating the potential pitfalls in Serbian democracy and allowed the EU to use accession prospects as a conflict management tool for stability in Serbia.

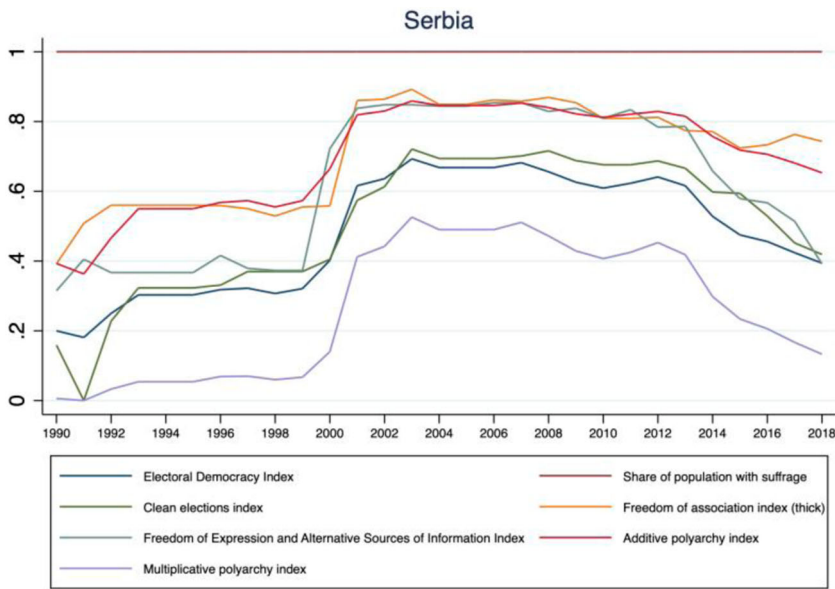
Figure 4 illustrates that Serbia progressed rapidly in fulfilling EU criteria especially after 2007, and received significant EU funds, yet did not progress on democratic indicators. Advances in accession process coupled with sustained democracy assistance per capita went together with democratic backsliding after 2012. The EU accession process is coded as a categorical ordinal score based on the milestones each country reached (see the table in the Appendix for the details). Figure 5 provides a further illustration of Serbia's backsliding with V-Dem scores. Freedom House and Polity Scores capture the democratic backsliding although to a lesser extent, mainly due to the shortcomings of these indices (for details see Coppedge et al. 2015).

Seen from a process-tracing perspective, despite the EU's official launch of democracy aid programs and accession prospect for the WB6 at Thessaloniki Summit in 2003, Serbia's prospects soon stalled due to lack of cooperation with the ICTY. The EU's Advocacy Director of Human Rights declared "The EU should not accept anything less than Serbia's full cooperation with the Hague." ("Concern over EU Approach" 2007, para.2). However, the EU did not emphasise the establishment of democratic principles and the rule of law to



Graphs by cntry

**Figure 4.** Association of Democracy Assistance with the Electoral Democracy Index and EU Accession Process.



**Figure 5.** Democratic Backsliding displayed in components of democracy scores (Source: V-Dem 2019).

the same degree. As Serbia's cooperation with the international community intensified, issues of democratic consolidation, rule of law, human rights were overlooked. Cooperation with the ICTY remained a top priority for the EU accession. As a result, progress on the accession ladder – the SAA, candidacy, opening of accession negotiations – was tied to compliance to the ICTY decisions, rather than democratic reforms.

Serbia's Stabilisation Association Agreement, signed in 2008 in Luxembourg, was an important milestone for its accession path. "The signing of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement with Serbia is a powerful signal to the people of Serbia that their future lies in Europe" ("Statement by Javier Solana" 2008, para.1). Serbian Foreign Minister, Vuk Jeremić reiterated, "This is a great historical moment. This pact sets Serbia on the irreversible path towards EU membership." (Mock 2008, para.2). Yet, SAA coincided with the announcement of a new constitution, extending Parliament's rights to restrict political rights in an emergency, and increased governmental control over the judiciary and local municipalities. It was clear that a door for authoritarianism opened (Subotić 2010). These significant changes that come with the new Constitution led to an erosion of the separation of powers, along with a death sentence for independent media. Yet, the EU praised Serbia for its co-operation with the ICTY, and did not condemn undemocratic practices. The EU's stance enabled Serbian political leaders to instrumentalise the EU's support for their gain, providing an empirical verification of our proposition. Figure 6 illustrates this time-based process for Serbia's path of accession to the EU.

Figure 6 reveals that undemocratic practices in Serbia, such as changes in the constitution consolidating power for the executive and electing leaders with authoritarian tendencies did not impede progress on accession. Instead, the EU emphasised other landmarks undermining democratic reforms and millions of euros toward democracy aid programs. Following Mladic's arrest in 2012, the European Commission recommended Serbia to be elevated to a candidacy status, and Serbia became an official candidate. The

EU's Progress Report (2012) strongly emphasised cooperation with ICTY and Mladic's arrest as critical factors in meeting the EU's accession criteria, despite a clear backsliding as shown in Figures 2 and 3.

In addition to compliance with the ICTY, Serbia's relations with Kosovo mattered for the EU's prioritisation of stability over democracy. Improving relations with neighbouring countries, normalisation of relations with and recognition of Kosovo as an independent state appeared as key requirements for Serbia's membership ("Serbia 2016 Report" 2016). Towards that purpose, in 2013, Serbian Prime Minister Ivica Dacic and Kosovo's Prime Minister Hashim Thaci signed "First Agreement of Principles Governing the normalisation of relations", Brussels Agreements. Four days later, acknowledging this as a pivotal accomplishment, the European Commission recommended opening accession negotiations with Serbia. With this milestone, Serbia's Stabilisation Association Agreement entered into force. In December 2013, the European Council adopted the Negotiations Framework, and accession negotiations officially were opened in January 2014. According to the European Commission, "Serbia has met the key priority of taking steps towards a visible and sustainable improvement of relations with Kosovo" (European Commission Press Release 2013, para.5). While both cooperation with the ICTY and normalisation with Kosovo were stressed as main obstacles to Serbian accession, reinvigorating of reforms in areas such as democratic institutions and the rule of law did not seem to have a primary importance. These quick adjustments allowed Serbia to proceed rapidly in accession path even though Serbia-Kosovo relationship has deteriorated, new tensions have arisen, and the implementation of the agreement has stagnated (Emini and Stakic 2018).

A turning point for Serbia's democratic backsliding, while on accession track and a recipient of EU funds, is the rise of Aleksander Vučić, the leader of Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), a moderate wing of Serbian Radical Party (SRP), to power, who had an extremist, nationalist, and populist agenda (Bieber 2017). Upon coming to power, Vučić tightened control over the executive and judiciary, security services, and all media outlets, curtailing civil liberties, similar to democratic backsliding in Central and Eastern Europe,

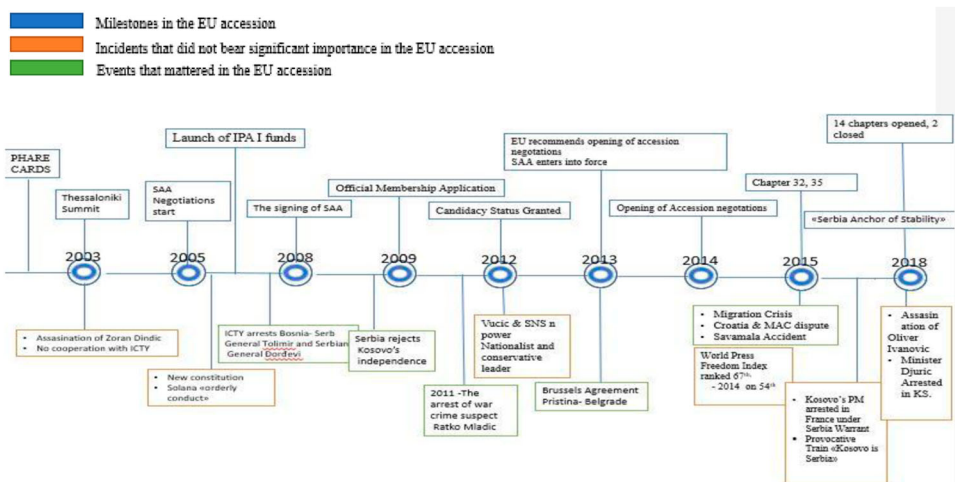


Figure 6. Serbia's Path of Accession.

he was able to use the elections to gain a stronghold and use his rule for state capture. With an intensified pressure on independent media, in 2015, Serbia fell to 67th rank in the World Press Freedom Index from 54th in 2014, a clear indication of democratic backsliding. The President of the European Federation of Journalists stated (Eror 2018, para. 4) "Serbia is the country with the worst violations of media freedoms in the Western Balkan region" (see Figure 3). However, the EU did not seem to note this backsliding as Johannes Hahn, the European Commissioner for Enlargement, claimed: "If there is proof and evidence [of press freedom violations], I will be the first to follow it up" ("Hahn Demands Proof" 2015, para.5). Similarly, German Chancellor Angela Merkel lauded Serbia's success in implementing reforms ("Serbia is a Close Partner" 2018). Vučić was "Europe's favourite autocrat" ("The Changeling" 2016; Eror 2018). In the absence of strong political institutions, the elected ruler was able to consolidate his power by further eroding the existing balances, and justify his actions through his continued support from the EU. The EU turned a deaf ear into illiberal practices, human rights violations as democratic backsliding took root in Serbia.

Serbian leaders have been instrumentalising the EU's extensive focus on regional stability to consolidate their rule. This is reflected in the 2015 migration crisis. With Hungary's blockade of the border, Serbian leaders directed the flow of refugees from Syria to use the route (which comprises the main refugee route reaching to the European Union borders) to get to the Croatian border (Radosavljevic and Robinson 2015). Serbia played an important role in handling the refugee crisis, as an EU diplomat reflected "Serbia is displaying European values that some would say some EU member states are not displaying. This does Serbia's EU aspirations no harm" (Macdowall 2015, para.13). This was a clear signal, that even with democratic backsliding, Serbian rulers could count on EU's continued support as long as they contribute to regional stability. The migration crisis further boosted Vučić's role as a stabiliser in the region. Serbia and Croatia have long-standing unresolved disputes such as the issue of missing persons during the 1990 war, border demarcation, judgement over war crime, dispute over cultural treasures ("Missing Persons Issue" 2018). Nonetheless, Vučić, remained a Europhile in the eyes of the EU, despite illiberal practices at home (Eror 2018), and democratic backsliding. Similar to its bilateral disputes with Croatia, Serbia's relations with Kosovo worsened drastically. In January 2017, Kosovo's Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj was arrested in France, summoned by the Serbian government for war crime charges (Balkan Insight 2017). The crisis deepened with the 2017 train crisis depicting Kosovo as part of Serbia. When the Kosovar government deployed police forces at the border to prevent the train from crossing, Serbia accused Kosovo of seeking war (BBC 2017). Vučić "stopped the train to show that we want peace. We sent a train, not a tank" (BBC 2017a, para.12). The migration crisis and the train incident strengthened Vučić's image (which he initiated in the first place) as a leader protecting peace and stability in the region, in the eyes of the EU at least. Although the EU highlights the rule of law as a priority for reforms, it seems that the executive and legislative powers in Serbia are abusing accession negotiations and "the fact that [the country] is currently being given 'concessions' on the reform agenda due to the much-hoped-for completion of [Belgrade's] dialogue [to normalise relations] with Pristina"(Zivanovic 2018). Despite Vučić's increased authoritarian tendencies, after his reelection in 2017, Serbia's accession process remained on solid ground.

Overall, it is evident that the EU aiming at stability overlooked evident backsliding in democratisation. Consequently, democracy aid and pursuing democratic reforms were ineffective. The political elites have diverted attention from democratic reforms, at times by fueling bilateral disputes and resolving them, only to ensure to the EU that regional stability is an essential goal. Serbia presents a case where the EU has maintained credible commitments for membership, yet not sufficient initiatives to encourage democratisation reforms, including democracy aid which was largely inefficient. This prioritisation of stability over democracy was seen in public officials' statements and progress in Serbia's path of accession, increases in democracy aid, which nonetheless ran parallel to its backsliding. *To date, Serbia is among top ten autocratising countries in the world (V-Dem Annual Democracy Report 2020). In the regimes of the world index (RoW), in 2009 Serbia was a "Liberal Democracy", but in 2019 it is classified as an "Electoral Autocracy", whilst it was one the fastest among WB6 to proceed along the path of accession. Our results, therefore, attest to the ineffectiveness of democracy aid and progress on the accession process in Serbia's backsliding.*

### **The Republic of North Macedonia's path of accession and its political transformation**

In the Republic of North Macedonia's case, the EU failed to consolidate democratic institutions for over a decade. Initially, the EU accession stalled due to NM's bilateral disputes with EU member states who vetoed the membership process from 2005 to 2018. Similar to Serbia, the EU prioritised internal and external stability over democratic consolidation overshadowing the role of democracy assistance and political reforms. However, NM became the first country in the WB6 to end its deep political crisis in 2019, ending political backlash in the country prompting our inquiry into what might be different here compared to Serbia.

In 1991, democratic transition seemingly began in North Macedonia, (Karadzoski and Adamczyk 2014) with the first Constitution defining the country as the modern state of "Macedonians" excluding other minority groups Albanians, Turks, Serbs, Roma and Muslims (Bieber 2004). Consequently, the 1991 Constitution laid the basis for internal and external conflicts after 2000. The Albanian minority constituting 25% of NM's population opposed the Constitution and asserted for greater rights, such as including Albanian as one of the official languages in higher education services, inclusiveness in public administration, and police structure. A further problem in designating "the Republic of Macedonia" as the Republic's name led to a conflict with Greece (Shtërbani 2018; Pop-Angelov 2010, 1). These internal and external disputes aggravated over time. In 2001, North Macedonia signed its Stabilisation Association Agreement (SAA) (European Commission: Press Release 2001), the first one to do so among the WB6. The SAA marked an important step toward closer relations with the EU and potential accession perspective. While the SAA emphasised regional stability and political dialogue internally, there was little emphasis on democracy consolidation, similar to the Serbian case. "SAA provides a framework for political dialogue and strengthens the regional cooperation, it promotes the expansion of markets and economic relations among the parties and establishes the grounds for technical and financial support" (SAA 2001). [Figure 7](#) summarises NM's accession path:



Shortly after the signing of SAA, the Albanian minority launched massive riots demonstrating the lack of unity among ethnic groups, signalling the potential for instability. Recalling the tragic experiences of the Bosnian war in 1995 and the Kosovo War of Independence in 1999, and the turmoil it led to in the EU, the Swedish Presidency proposed tightening relations with Macedonia. Similarly, the French Minister of Foreign Affairs, Douste Blazy declared “It is more necessary than ever to confirm that these countries’ futures lie in the EU, so it makes an essential contribution to stability” (as cited in Giandomenico 2009, 109–110; “Press Release: General Affairs and External Relations” 2005). In response, Brussels and Skopje negotiated and signed “The Ohrid Agreement”, affirming the inclusion of minorities and ensuring stability in exchange for progress in the EU accession process. The agreement was a clear success for the EU in terms of stabilising a potential conflict. By 2005, despite the failure to adopt significant political reforms and implement effectively democracy assistance programs, the Ohrid agreement was seen sufficient in granting candidacy announced as: “The European Council decides to grant candidate country status to the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, considering, in particular, the substantial progress made in completing the legislative framework related to the Ohrid Framework Agreement” (Presidency Conclusions 2006, para.23; Giandomenico 2009). The EU used its strongest incentive – the accession prospect – as a conflict resolution tool, undermining the principles of democracy as a primary criterion for EU accession.

While the EU accession process remained slow, democratic assistance remained substantial. Part of the reason as to why the accession process stalled relates to veto players among the EU member states, in particular, linked to the “name issue”. North Macedonia’s Foreign Ministry released a statement in 2006 declaring “Macedonia has filed an application with the registrar of the Court to bring Greece into compliance with

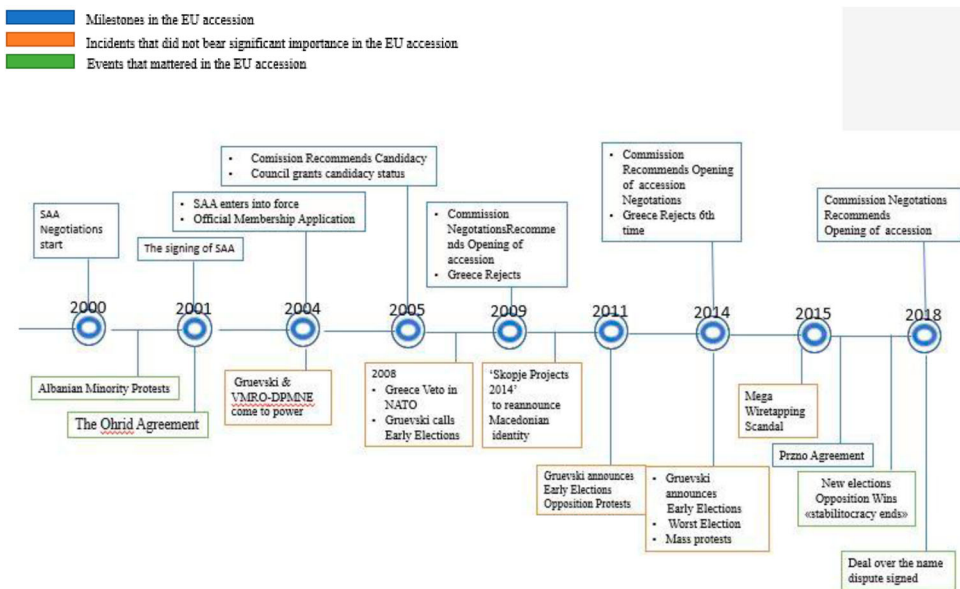


Figure 7. North Macedonia’s Path of Accession timeline.

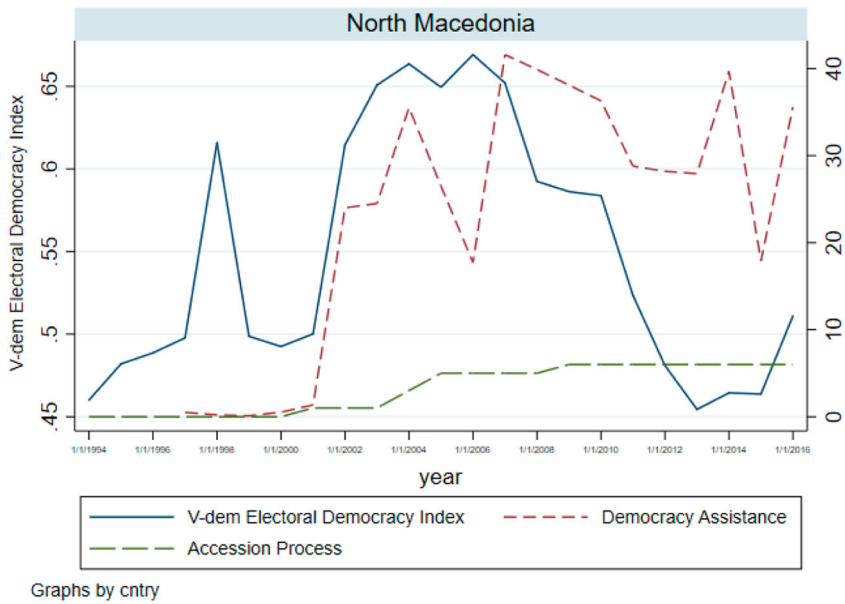


its legal obligations under the Interim Accord of September 13, 1995. Article 11 of the 1995 accord obliges Greece not to object to North Macedonia's application to join NATO" (France24 2008, para. 2). However, Greece vetoed Macedonia's application for membership to NATO (Peshkopia 2015, 199), and the Greek Prime Minister, Costas Karamanlis declared, "Skopje will be able to become a member of NATO only provided that the name dispute has been resolved" ("Macedonia sues Greece" 2008, para.11). This was a blow to North Macedonia's international and domestic politics, as joining the EU and NATO is among very few key goals that both Macedonians and Albanians agree upon (Vangelov 2017). In 2009, Greece vetoed this time the opening of accession negotiations between the EU and Macedonia, as recommended by the European Commission. According to Greece, "The name issue must be solved before we can even think of opening accession negotiations with Skopje" ("Greece Again Challenges Macedonia" 2009, para.4). North Macedonia referred the issue to the International Court of Justice in 2011, which ruled that Greece's blockade was illegal. However, the court's ruling did not change the Greek approach toward Skopje, as Greece maintained that the EU accession process will continue only if North Macedonia changes its name. Subsequently, in 2012, the European Council announced that North Macedonia's process to the EU depends on ensuring good neighbourly relations and resolving the name dispute. The Greek veto to accession membership and the EU's support to undemocratic leaders who promised internal and external stability overshadowed the consolidation of democratic institutions. From 2009 to 2018, the name dispute provided the Macedonian government with a tool to mobilise people around. An unexpected consequence was that the dispute over the name issue led to the emergence of a nationalist, populist backlash in the country. Figure 8 illustrates the correlation between the EU's role and the path towards accession in North Macedonia with a link to the ups and downs in the Electoral Democracy index.

Figure 9 demonstrates an evident democratic backslide starting in 2005 which continues for more than a decade, with an upturn towards democratisation as measured by V-Dem Index.

In terms of democratic backsliding, the conditions under which elections took place turned out to be critical. In 2006 parliamentary elections, Nikola Gruevski, the leader of the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation-Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE) in coalition with the Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA) and several minor parties formed the Macedonian government. Gruevski presented himself as a reformer, nationalist and a moderate conservative, promised to fight against corruption, to further Macedonia on the path of accession and enhance neoliberalist economic reforms claiming "economic and national rebirth" (Karajkov 2006; Vangelov 2017). Internal actors criticised the elections (Røseth 2006), which violated the norm that the Albanian party that wins most of the seats should form the government. As a result, the formation of the coalition government under Gruevski weakened the new government's legitimacy as a breach of the power-sharing agreement, hindering democratisation efforts (Karajkov 2006).

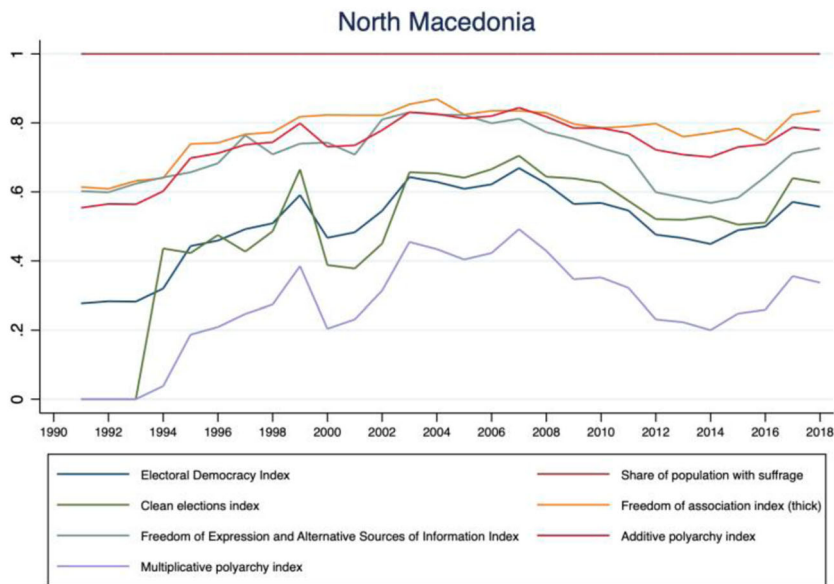
In further backsliding, in 2008, Gruevski called for early elections, stating, "We need a victory, but not just a victory, we require a triumph" ("Gruevski: Triumph is Required" 2008), and he won 50% of the seats in the parliament, but international observers evaluated the elections as one of the worst in Macedonia's history (Auer 2008; "The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" 2008; Freedom House 2009). The restrictions on



**Figure 8.** The Association of Democracy Assistance with the Electoral Democracy Index and EU Accession Process.

elections revealed Macedonia was backsliding rapidly into authoritarianism as shown in Figures 8 and 9, despite the EU accession process.

Democratic backsliding deepened in 2011 (Vangelov 2017) when Nikola Gruevski re-announced early elections, and altered the electoral laws. Additionally, the misuse of



**Figure 9.** Democracy Backsliding displayed in components of democracy scores (Source: V-Dem 2019).

state resources for political campaign and partisan purposes, indicating “state capture” demonstrated the lack of separation between state and party structure (“The Former Yugoslav Republic Of Macedonia” 2011). Moreover, Gruevski’s party was accused of destructive behaviour toward its opponents with intimidation, threats, and harassment to oppress them such as the arrest of Minister of Interior Affairs, Ljube Boškoski for illegal election campaign; or charging Miroslav Sipovic with fraud and embezzlement (Macedonia Executive Summary 2013). Yet, even under such repressive measures, VMRO – DPMNE won 56 of the seats, the opposition unexpectedly got 42 seats (World Elections: Macedonia 2011)

When a group of unidentified security personnel forcibly removed opposition groups from Parliament in 2012 (Čašule 2012), mass protests erupted. The opposition party SDSM, led by Zoran Zaev, boycotted the parliament and declared its intention to boycott the 2013 local elections (“Macedonia 2014” 2014). In the midst of the internal political crisis and the deadlock in the EU accession process in 2014, Gruevski called once again for early elections to be held together with the 2014 presidential elections-giving him 61 seats. The lack of independent media coverage (see Figure 3) was criticised (“The Former Yugoslav Republic” 2014). Furthermore, Zaev rejected the results, accusing Gruevski of “abusing the entire state system”, with “threats and blackmails and massive buying of voters” (“Macedonia Opposition Rejects” 2014, para.4). Zaev declared “Macedonia today is not a free society. There is no free expression of the will of the people. It is a dictatorship in which the voter and the citizens are being controlled” (“Macedonian opposition boycotts Parliament” 2014, para.9).

Further backsliding came in 2015 when North Macedonia faced its deepest political crisis since 2001. A mega wiretapping scandal revealed conversations between top political elites, disclosing Gruevski’s and top political leaders’ – abuse of the public office, electoral fraud, blackmail, large-scale graft, the arrest of political opponents, extortion, financial crimes, corruption. Mass protests, “Colored Revolution”, against Gruevski’s regime erupted (Hopkins 2017). Nano Ruzin, former Macedonian ambassador to the EU declared: “For the first time since the fall of Communism, the EU is facing a situation in which the Prime Minister of a candidate country must abdicate because of criminal and political wrongdoings” (Deutsche Welle 2016, para.3). To illustrate the backsliding in these 11 years, one could look at the media freedom domain. While North Macedonia ranked 36th on the Press Freedom Index, close to Japan who ranked 37th and USA 48th in 2007, it slid down to the 123rd place close to Afghanistan’s 128th (Reporters Without Borders 2014) in 2014, showing a major decline in one of the pivotal components of democracy.

For the first time, the EU reacted sharply with its 2016 Progress Report citing serious backsliding in democracy, rule of law and media freedom. Commissioner Johannes Hahn warned FYROM that if reforms are not followed, it would be the first country for whom the EU will withdraw candidacy (Blazevska and Georgievski 2016). This also marked a clear change in the EU’s stance, with its prioritisation of democracy as opposed to stability as in the Serbian case. The possibility of losing candidacy status and falling behind other Western Balkan countries was a serious threat for North Macedonia.

To solve this political deadlock, the European Commission suggested a new solution as an external actor pushing domestic political actors to reach a compromise. In July 2015, the Przino Agreement was signed by the leaders of four main political parties to end

political polarisation in the country. This was a critical juncture, and it was the external pressure from the EU, rather than internal dynamics that precipitated the agreement. Hahn declared: “the Commission is prepared to extend its recommendation to open accession negotiations [...] conditional on the continued implementation of the June/July political agreement and substantial implementation of the Urgent Reform priorities” (“Hahn on Macedonia in EP” 2016). In 2016, new elections were held under the international community’s monitoring, but again, they were far from “fair” and “credible” (Bliznakovski 2017). Gruevski’s party despite gaining 51 of the 120 seats in the Parliament failed to form a coalition government; hence SDSM as the second-largest party claimed the mandate to form the government. The transfer of power to the opposition was not without political incidents, yet remarked a victory, and ended the stabilitocratic regime after 11 years. Bieber (2018) reflected as “Out of the Western Balkan countries, the only country to break the cycle of stabilitocracy is Macedonia” (2018, para.9). Soon after, the new Prime Minister Zoran Zaev, a pro-European leader finalised an agreement with Greek Prime Minister Alex Tsipras – the Prespa Agreement under the UN auspices – ending the 27 – year old name dispute (Smith 2018) with the adoption of North Macedonia as the official name. North Macedonia’s Parliament endorsed the new name in 2019 (BBC 2019). Overall, North Macedonia’s accession process was impeded for two reasons. First, the EU was unable to put forth credible commitment for membership due to member state vetoes, preventing opening accession negotiations with North Macedonia for a decade. Second, the EU desperately prioritised securing stability with a membership perspective in 2005. For North Macedonian political elites, such as Gruevski, who held power for 11 years, the EU’s support served to deepen their power and move away from democratic principles, a clear indicator of external legitimacy. The EU’s role in democratic reforms such as the Przino Agreement, which aided domestic forces against the semi-autocratic government, demonstrated that when the EU prioritises democratic consolidation over stability, democratic reforms could take place. A critical juncture was reached in North Macedonia with the domestic opposition organising against the authoritarian rulers. This is in contrast to the EU’s position over Serbia where the EU continuously prioritises stability over democracy. Despite the North Macedonia and Albania’s fulfilling of conditions and progress in EU reforms in May 2019, at the EU summit leaders from France, Netherland and Denmark blocked the start of membership talks. This move showed the Western Balkan countries that the EU still does not provide a credible membership perspective and lack of commitment leaving the region further confused about its future (BBC 2019). Although long overdue, in March 2020, Council of the European Union decided to open accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania (“Enlargement and Stabilisation” 2020).

## Conclusion

In this paper, we demonstrated that WB6 are still mainly stabilitocratic regimes dominated by illiberal practices with undemocratic political elites. Yet, these regimes are supported by the EU’s strong focus on stability and conflict prevention which has overshadowed its efforts to promote democracy. In particular, we focused on the paths of EU accession for Serbia and North Macedonia which revealed that while on accession track, these countries maintained authoritarian regimes. The EU’s formal accession process and its democracy assistance, however, only strengthened these tendencies. Our findings

demonstrated that the EU's focus on conflict prevention and stability in the region overshadowed its role of democracy assistance and promoter of democratic reforms. This is illustrated with the interplay of progress on accession stages – SAA, candidacy, opening negotiations – and democratisation. In these two cases, progress on their path of accession were not due to democratic gains, but when bilateral disputes are solved or when they met EU's criteria on other related concerns for regional stability such as migration crisis, compliance with ICTY, resolution of conflicts with Albanian minority.

To date, Serbia's relationship with the EU enabled authoritarian leaders to remain in power. More importantly, to date, despite that Serbia is one of the top ten fastest autocratising countries in the world, it has shown progress in EU membership, largely due to its progress in cooperation with the ICTY, the Brussels Agreement, its stance in the migration crisis, and the resolve of mostly self-inflicted incidents with neighbouring countries. Improving these areas has been given primacy over the political criteria set by the EU. The EU has offered democracy assistance and accession prospect in exchange for stability. Serbia's backsliding was visible with increased executive control over other branches of government, silencing of the media and the elections manipulations.

The analysis of North Macedonia revealed similar concerns as in the Serbian case with the EU emphasising stability as its principal goal. Handling inter-ethnic conflict, compliance to the Ohrid Agreement and bilateral disputes with Greece and Bulgaria were the main instruments to measure stability and proceed in EU criteria. NM experienced a significant backsliding from 2006 to 2018 – with the intimation of opposition, misuse of public funds by the ruling party, erosion of independent media. However, unlike Serbia, NM was able to end stabilitocracy by implementing the criteria stated in the Przino Agreement and Urgent Reform Priorities initiated by EU, reforms that directly focus on the components of democracy, such as electoral competition, elections, and Parliament. The agreement ended the decade long political crisis, eradicated corrupt political leaders and brought leaders with democratic vision. While it is still too early to judge whether North Macedonia is on a track of democratic consolidation, the cycle of backsliding seems to have been broken. Our analysis of Serbia and North Macedonia provides empirical evidence that the EU has not given priority to democratisation reforms, despite its ongoing programs of financial assistance for political reforms. In unstable regimes, ensuring stability may be crucial in the short term. However, investing in the establishment of democratic institutions, rule of law and human rights may enhance the stability of a regime in the long haul.

Democratic backsliding in the Western Balkans is of concern as the EU is itself caught up in its own internal crisis with the rise of right-wing populism, the evident democratic recession taking root in the Central Eastern European countries, and the global democratic backslide trend. For example, Hungary is now officially the first non-democracy in the EU, classified as an electoral authoritarian regime (V-Dem Annual Democracy Report 2020). The findings Serbia and North Macedonia coincide with the empirical realities in other Western Balkan countries. Montenegro's Prime Minister Milo Đukanović has successfully managed to open several chapters, proceeding in the EU accession process faster than any other country in the Western Balkans, despite corruption allegations and holding the office of the prime minister since 1991. Albania, a candidate country and a recipient of EU aid programs for almost three decades, is among the most corrupt countries in Europe, dealing with massive organised crime issues. Kosovo and BiH-

where the EU intervened most heavily, both suffer from endemic corruption, political violence, political polarisation, and a failed judiciary system. These instances not only raise to question of the linkage of democratisation with democracy aid but the entire EU accession process. It is clear that the EU has been unable to bring about political change, despite the membership perspective, constituting an empirical puzzle for the conditionality literature.

Stability has taken priority over democracy and the EU's support further enabled autocratic leaders to strengthen their concentration of power by relying on this external source of legitimisation of their rule as demonstrated by our paper's findings. As more countries in the European periphery experience backsliding, further insights from the Western Balkans, Central and Eastern Europe, and Turkey are needed to assess multiple facets of democratic backsliding.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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## Appendix

### ANNEX 1: Explanation of Variables

Varieties of Democracy – The Electoral Democracy index is utilised to discern for the variation of democracy scores for the respective years. Electoral Democracy index is a macro-level index that captures the core values of electoral democracies at the highest level of abstraction and measures – the electoral competition, the level of freedom of political and civil society, the fairness of elections, the freedom of association and expression. Democracy aid per capita is collected as primary data from the European Commission’s financial assistance reports on the component of democracy and rule of law is the main independent variable. Lastly, the “accession process” is measured by milestones reached during the EU accession process as shown in the table below.

	Serbia	The Republic of North Macedonia
The Start of Negotiation of the Stabilisation Association Agreement (SAA)	2005	2000
The signing of SAA	2008	2001
The Official Membership Application	2009	2004
The European Commission Recommend Granting Candidacy Status	2011	2005
Candidacy Status Granted	2012	2005
Negotiation Open	2013	xxx
Opening of Acquis Chapters	2015,2016,2017	xxx