THE LOGIC OF EU NORMATIVE POWER IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

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Abstract

This research focuses on comprehending the political logic behind how the EU's normative power is manifested in its engagements within the region. It's evident that numerous studies emphasize the dual role of EU conditionality in the membership criteria for Western Balkan countries, illustrating both normative unity in foreign policy and a complex interaction between interests and norm adaptation. This highlights the intricate nature of the EU's approach in the Western Balkans. The study is grounded in the semi - realist perspective, which argues that democracy norm promotion and peace building constitutes a relevant, but secondary foreign policy aim. It aligns with scholars from various viewpoints who suggest that EU democracy promotion is more strategically motivated for enhancing national security rather than strict ideational diffusion. Instead of a Kantian cosmopolitan approach, the EU's normative power is seen resembling Hobbesian normative homogenization. We argue that striving for a normatively homogenous Europe through ideational diffusion yields varied outcomes in different regions due to distinct structural conditions and institutional practices qualitative methodology, we delve into the achievements and limits of EU normative power in the Western Balkans. The study concludes that normative ideational diffusion rarely results in uniform outcomes even within the region. Thus, during times of crisis and ongoing multidimensional challenges, resilience as norm diversity rather than normative homogenization offers more effective political power implications.

Keywords: European Union, normative power, regionalism, Western Balkan

Introduction

Despite the complexities that associate the historical and ongoing process of EU Common Foreign and Security Policy, there is an apparent consensus on the distinct and most consequential power that norms play in it. A very recent official

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statement by Josep Borrel, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, reaffirms the EU's strong and original normative influence and the vital need to respect core rules and norms of the international system (Borrel, 2023) even in critical times of Russia's war against Ukraine and rising influence of China[1]. The debate over the EU's normative power is marked by contrasting perspectives. On one hand, some argue that the EU projects a cosmopolitan normative power, emphasizing diverse definitions of human freedom, lasting peace, and mutual transformation. On the other hand, there's the view that the EU's actual behavior aligns more with a Hobbesian approach to normative unity In this stance, normative disagreements are seen as jeopardizing the viability of a community built on shared values.

The diffusion theory explains how the EU diffuses its norms, institutions and practices to aspiring countries by immaterial means. According to the theory, the EU's approach to promoting regionalism happens through socialization and emulation. The first involves offering economic incentives, technical assistance and support for institutional development in order to help regions strengthen integration processes. The second type of diffusion happens when the EU often employs its own experiences of regional integration as a model for other regions to emulate. The diffusion of ideas and the normative discourse of the EU have been thoroughly explored in various contexts such as the southern neighborhood (Dandashly & Kourtelis, 2020), Africa (Storey, 2006), and even China (Kavalski, 2013). However, limited attention has been given to its impact on the Western Balkan countries, which currently hold a crucial position in the integration agenda. In this context, our study concentrates on the process of regional integration in the Western Balkans, aiming to highlight both shared and distinct dynamics that characterize the EU's normative power within the region. We particularly focus on two key aspects: The EU's ability to encourage integration and transformation through socialization and its capacity to effectively assume the role of a strategic and critical peacemaker by fostering emulation. By examining these aspects, we aim to shed light on the lesser-explored dimensions of the EU's influence in the Western Balkans' integration process.

The integration of the Western Balkans serves the EU's main objective of having peace and stability in the union. Despite the EU having initiated stages of integration on a regional basis, the progress of member states has been different. Currently, Montenegro and Serbia are ahead on accession talks and several chapters have been opened. Behind them are Albania and North Macedonia, where negotiations commenced in July 2022. Bosnia and Herzegovina lags behind on the list, currently holding the status of a candidate country. Kosovo, on the other hand, submitted its application for integration in December 2022. The first gradual rapprochement of the Western Balkan countries with the EU was launched in 1999

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[1] European Commission, retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_23_3358, on 17 May 2023.

named as the Stabilization and association process (SAP). The candidate status would be granted dependent upon merit and progress based on the Copenhagen criteria. Visa free travel to the Schengen area has been lastly granted to Kosovars, effective as of January 2024, the only country in the Western Balkans that did not enjoy it until present (Elbasani, 2013).

A recent public survey conducted in 2022, showed a consistency among all citizens in western Balkans on what EU membership meant to them. Results show that EU membership is tightly related to economic prosperity and freedom to study and/ or work in the EU and very less connected with improved democratic standards or national security guarantee. Thus, public perception connects the EU' power with its capability to produce economic efficiency (Balkan Barometer, 2022)[2]. This discrepancy between EU's conditionality for democratization and regional cooperation and Western Balkans public demand for economic prosperity is creating an impasse in the union's power to exert influence. Furthermore, progress in terms of democratic conditionality has often been subject to interests and positions of member states rather than a norm assessment. To summarize, the EU's influence on regionalism and integration has followed different logics, resulting in varied impacts across regions and even within the same region. In the case of the Western Balkans, studies highlight the dual nature of EU conditionality in the membership criteria, demonstrating both normative unity in foreign policy and a complex interaction between interests and norm adaptation. Given the current deadlock, the article will next delve into a theoretical examination of EU normative power and its methods of diffusion. Following this, it will further explore the extent of EU norm diffusion in the Western Balkans through institutional reform and its role as an effective peacemaker.

1. Normative Power Europe: conceptual and theoretical discussion

Normative Power Europe (NPE) has since the 2000s been an integral part of mainstream international relations scholarship in Europe and is cited almost universally. Normative Power in itself is defined as the ability to shape conceptions of what is normal in international relations (Manners, 2002). In the EU context, normative power is a reflection of a *Good Europe* that aims to promote values of peace, liberty, human rights, rule of law, democracy and regional integration. Furthermore, it is a self-representation of a distinct kind of actor that transcends the anarchic nature of the system and self- interested behavior of states (Hyde-Price, 2008, p. 30). The EU's treaties and legal bodies predisposes that EU acts normatively

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[2] Balkan Barometer is an annual survey of public opinion and business sentiments in six Western Balkans economies, commissioned by the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC). Retrieved from https://www.rcc.int/balkanbarometer/home on 20 June 2023.

in world politics and that it enacts a foreign policy aimed at promoting its nine core ethical norms (Aggestam, 2008, p. 1).

Two issues have arisen as a result of this interpretation. First, its normative identity, as fundamentally based on a set common values and the aspiration to act collectively through them, has been often brought to the literature as an attempt to homogenize the normative political space (Kobayashi, 2021). Normative homogenization goes contrary to the Kantian approach of cosmopolitanism and treats normative disagreement as a threat to the viability of a value- based community. In fact, it might act in favor of Hobbesian logic of transforming the society by eliminating discords and building a common wealth through norm diffusion and public education.

Kant and Hobbes offer two different political visions, but they both agree on the impact that norms have on power consolidation. For Hobbes, the key problem in politics is the existence of multiple, competing visions of moralities and normalcies (Lloyd, 1992, Malcolm, 2002). As noticed, in security strategic documents, EU members strive to emphasize the need to defend common values, agree on joint threat assessments and promote common interest and common action (A Global Strategy for the EU's Foreign and Security Policy, 2016). In practice, EU actors' rising diverse interests has made the EU peace bringer narrative less convincing (Mcmahon & Kaiser, 2022).

Second, NPE in reality has reflected itself beyond the strict definition of employing normative means toward normative ends. Often, the EU's normative instruments are more central to the EU than its normative ends (Manners, 2006). For instance, the EU as an external actor employs heavily the instruments of EU membership prospects for aspiring countries and/or trade agreements for neighboring relations. In addition, the EU has been often seen to use its normative means for geopolitical ends. Finally, tightly related to the first issue as well, the EU is criticized to be Eurocentric and promote a so-called normative empire that lacks sensitivity to local context (Bicchi, 2006). This particularly refers to the tendency of the EU to 'reproduce itself' (Bretherton & Vogler, 1999) to non-members through otherwise called "external projection of internal issues" (Lavenex, 2004).

The discussions of norms and means that surround NPE influence EU's capability to promote regionalism, which as a matter of fact is its most distinct and potentially most consequential product in international politics. The EU is the only actor that actively and regularly promotes the norm and practice of regional integration around the world and as EU Trade Commissioner Pacal Lamy (2001) states *"EU- type of regionalism is freely available for all. Use it"[3]*.

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[3] Speech/01/341, Pascal Lamy, European Trade Commissioner, Regionalism and multilateralism in Latin America, FIESP (Federation of Industries of the State of São Paulo), São Paulo, 10 July 2001.

Regionalization as a notion but also as a tool is heavily significant in all norm diffusion mechanisms EU puts into use for democracy promotion. As a notion, Bloor (2023, p.1) defines it as a shared identity and purpose. He further emphasizes on establishing institutions which uphold a certain regional identity, and then shape the activity of a region (ibid). Through this process, which aims to put states of a region under the same political or economic umbrella, international organizations are formed. States, especially because of the need of economic interdependence, strive for cooperation with one another, and often, this cooperation is supervised by integrated international institutions.

However, regionalism is not promoted only through normative power. The literature lists coercion as a diffusion mechanism that the EU uses to reach its ends by employing military imposition (Björkdahl, 2011), threats as means or channels of diffusion. Coercion acts to exploit the asymmetrical material powers and to impose self- interest on the weaker party. As an example, the EU employed threats or negative conditionality during negotiations for Economic Partnership Agreements with African countries. Economic advantage is also used as a civilian power through the promise of rewards, in other words by seducing others into desired behavior. Common market projects and trade agreements are often subject to the condition of achieving a certain level of economic integration (Mansfield et al., 2008).

Yet, even when the EU acts as a role model and pursues its regional policies through normative power, normative means such as socialization and emulation (Lenz, 2013), do not serve as reason for diffusion but simply as channels to obtain some material benefits. Pace's viewpoint (2007) underscores that challenges stemming from diverse interpretations and implementations of Normative Power Europe weaken the EU's role as a significant global actor in the political arena. More importantly, it significantly influences the EU's ability to positively leverage its potential influence for achieving constructive conflict transformation.

The theoretical exploration presented above sheds light on a critical aspect. It identifies a notable divergence within the EU's normative power, which emerges from the diverse conceptions of "normal" within its member countries, and the impact it intends to exert through the dissemination of its ideas. This impact is expected to be most pronounced in countries aspiring for EU membership. The paper posits that the manifestation of Normative Power Europe in action can be characterized by three main attributes in its exertion of influence in the region. Firstly, EU power revolves around normative tools, significantly relying on prospects for EU membership and/or trade agreements. Secondly, the EU acts pragmatically and can potentially negotiate or compromise normative objectives to accommodate geopolitical interests. Lastly, its normative objectives may display a Eurocentric perspective and may not always consider local contexts sensitively. In the subsequent section, these characteristics will be thoroughly analyzed within the context of the Western Balkans.

2. Integration through democratization as a civilian power

The EU enlargement policy serves as an example of further trying to enhance regionalism, economically, but especially politically. The EU Commission states that through the enlargement policy, the membership status will impact and inspire candidate countries to improve economically and politically, then also leading to democratization. This enlargement "contributes to mutual benefits of peace, security and prosperity in Europe" (Börzel et al., 2017), therefore, it leads to higher levels of democratization and Europeanization, which often go hand in hand. The acceptance and diffusion of European values and norms can powerfully transform the conditions of said candidate states. Three main pillars are the focus of this enlargement strategy: public administration reform, rule of law and economic governance (Sedelmeier, 2006). As this policy is mainly targeted towards Western Balkans countries, regional cooperation within the six states remains a crucial benchmark, added to the aforementioned three pillars.

Both the enlargement policy and regionalism in and out of the EU can be achieved through two main tools: institutional reforms that EU puts as conditionality for candidate states to fulfill, and effective peacekeeping, where it aims to reconcile post-conflict societies. Conditionality is strict, but fair, as it strengthens and ensures not only the aim but also the final result of the enlargement policy, where candidate states obtain membership only through deserved merit (EC, 2014).

When a candidate country starts the accession negotiations, the opening of the 35 chapters requires a fundamental process of harmonizing the legislation of the candidate country with the EU. The said state's legislation needs to be compatible with the EU legislation, rules and regulations. Surely, such harmonization is also done on the basis of the Copenhagen criteria, which imply that the state must have democratic institutions, a functioning market economy, and to oblige fully to the norms of the EU. Therefore, the opening of the chapters and not only, but also the whole process of accessing membership within the EU requires institutional reforms which further help in the Europeanization and democratization of the state politically, economically and socially. The screening process, which examines the country's institutional, political and other capabilities for ensuring the opening of the chapters paves the way for the action plans, policy project and legislation harmonization which occurs in the fields of several clusters: fundamentals, growth and internal market, regional cooperation, internal market, green agenda, resources, agriculture and cohesion. The ongoing of the reforms and action plans is continuously under the reporting of the EU and OSCE-ODIHR bodies.

Serbia's progress towards the EU has been marked in the last years by stagnation due to the non-improvement of relations with its neighbor Kosovo, rising levels of Euroscepticism and a shift towards authoritarian tendencies. As a post-transitioning country, Serbia began an accession negotiation process with the EU in positive light, nevertheless findings from the last reports show a lack of democratic

principles followed in the state. The EU has worked through institutional reforms in order to revitalize the once socialist republic, but in several fields, the Serbian government has been in front of criticism. There is an absence of institutional checks and balances, leading to a monopolization of power in the executive branch (Jovanovic, 2021). Even though there has been progress in the freedom of expression, on the contrary, the media have been fundamentally linked with the government because of lack of financial independence, serving only for government reporting (Spasojević, 2022). The judicial system has adopted several reforms in order to reduce the level of corruption and maintain the rule of law; however it still has to face many obstacles, such as the training of judges and financial independence[4]. Despite a public administration reform being carried out, clientelism survives as an important catapult for more party members and affiliates. In Freedom House, Serbia scores at 60 out of a 100, continuing to be partly free, with main issues in freedom of speech, elections, but also organized crime.[5]

Albania reached the candidate status in 2014, and in July 2022, through the first Intergovernmental Conference, officially started the accession negotiations, alongside North Macedonia. As a prior communist country, the transitioning process has been slow, accompanied with stagnation in a gray zone and a hybrid regime. The Union has consistently worked with reforms, funds and has put benchmarks for the improvement of democratic conditions in Albania several times. However, the EU still demands a high number of changes institutionally (Stojarová, 2021). Parliamentary life is characterized by polarization or monopolization at times. The EU therefore demands an improvement of both the incumbents and the opposition. Decentralization is seen as lacking in the public administration. The reform of public administration, which remains one of the main reforms regarding the norm diffusion, has gone through a slow pace in strengthening line ministries' capacity to implement regulatory impact assessments and hold public consultations (Gafuri & Muftuler-Bac, 2021). A participatory civil society is also lacking, as a result of a lack of government financial assistance. The issues of corruption, rule of law and organized crime continue to be obstacles which the EU has persistently criticized[6]. Albania's democracy has the score of 67 out of a 100 in Freedom House. The frequent changes to the electoral code, vote buying, and the lack of media freedom are listed as main reasons for the absence of democracy, which lead Albania to be a hybrid regime[7]

After seeking membership in 2010, Montenegro started accession talks in 2012. Since then, the government has worked to meet the prerequisites for EU membership, including implementing democratic reforms. Montenegro's adoption

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[4] Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations, Serbia Report 2022, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/serbia-report-2022_en
[5] Freedom House Report, https://freedomhouse.org/country/serbia/freedom-world/2022
[6] Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations, Albania Report 2022, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/albania-report-2022_en
[7] Freedom House Report, https://freedomhouse.org/country/albania/freedom-world/2022

of EU normative diffusion of democracy has been influenced by the need for democratic changes to solve practical problems. Corruption, the rule of law, and human rights are among the many issues confronting the country (Soyaltin-Colella, 2022). Significant progress is visible in Montenegro's case, through closing 33 out of the 35 chapters. Progress has been achieved in several areas, such as the enactment of new legislation and the development of anti-corruption agencies, but admits that implementation and enforcement remain difficult. There have been insufficient efforts to tackle political interference in state institutions and ensure their professionalism and impartiality. Limited progress has been made in the area of media freedom, with concerns over political influence, lack of transparency, and threats against journalists (Paleviq, 2020).

Comprehensive reforms are still needed in its judicial system; this includes enhancing the professionalism and accountability of judges and prosecutors, improving court management, and ensuring the timely resolution of cases. Lastly, there exists an inadequate implementation of anti-discrimination policies, particularly regarding the rights of vulnerable groups such as the LGBT+ community. The report specifically recommends for more measures to strengthen the judiciary's independence and impartiality, to prevent corruption and organized crime, and to ensure public officials responsibility.

According to reports made from Freedom House, Montenegro faces a number of problems in its democratic growth. Montenegro was categorized as a partly free country by Freedom House in 2022, with a score of 67 out of 100. The research identifies many threats to democracy, including political polarization, the entrenchment of interests associated with organized crime, media ownership concentration, and political interference.

North Macedonia started accession negotiations the same year as Albania, marking an important milestone in the region of Western Balkans. Yet, it has been granted candidate statues since 2005, while Albania got it in 2014. In terms of democratization, both countries are grouped as partly free regimes with not much variation in their democratic performance (Isufi, 2021). Democratic conditionality was emphasized in 2015 and 2016 as subject to the implementation of the 'Urgent Reform Priorities' and Pržino agreement, a political agreement in which the main parties in North Macedonia made a commitment to respect democratic principles and agreed to establish a transitional period that would end in free and fair elections (Kolozova, 2021). However, in practice, the name dispute with Greece, the impact of European Parliaments' elections on Germany, France's new negotiation methodology and Bulgaria's identity politics have been the forefront reasons cited for blocking membership processes.

In Bosnia, the EU has been active in peacekeeping operations, notably the deployment of the EUFOR Althea mission, which was established in 2004 to support the Dayton Peace Agreement's implementation. In addition, the EU has offered financial and technical help to promote institutional changes aimed at advancing

democracy and the rule of law. Support for security sector reform is one of the key ways in which EUFOR Althea has helped to the advancement of democracy in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Bargués & Morillas, 2021).

The mission has aided in the development of the ability of BiH's security institutions, particularly the police and armed forces, to promote the rule of law and human rights. This has included security personnel training and mentoring, as well as assistance in the building of legal frameworks and institutions for civilian oversight of the military. The mission has offered assistance in the execution of critical democratic reforms, including strengthening the judiciary and combating corruption and organized crime. Furthermore, EUFOR Althea has advocated for the implementation of election processes and the safeguarding of human rights, especially minorities' rights. Furthermore, EUFOR Althea has aided in the promotion of reconciliation and inter-ethnic dialogue in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The mission has aided in the facilitation of communication and collaboration among various ethnic populations, as well as the implementation of confidence-building measures such as joint military drills and exchanges (Poopuu, 2020).

However, like any complex peacekeeping mission, there are challenges and limitations that may impact the perception of success. The political situation in BiH is characterized by a complex power-sharing arrangement among different ethnic groups, which can lead to political tensions and difficulties in decision-making processes. These complexities can affect the implementation of reforms and the overall stability of the country. Secondly, Bosnia and Herzegovina still face challenges related to ethnic divisions and nationalist sentiments. These factors can hinder progress in achieving lasting reconciliation, trust-building, and cooperation among different ethnic groups (Keil & Stah, 2023).

Despite the efforts of EUFOR Althea and other international actors, the pace of reforms in BiH has been relatively slow in some areas. The European Commission and Freedom House assessments on Bosnia and Herzegovina both note considerable issues the country faces in terms of democratic administration, the rule of law, and socioeconomic development. The European Commission report emphasizes that progress on essential reforms, including those relating to democratic governance and the rule of law, has been slow. Political insecurity and a lack of consensus among political elites have stymied progress on constitutional reform, while corruption and organized crime continue to be major concerns.

Similarly, according to the Freedom House study, Bosnia and Herzegovina confronts issues in the areas of corruption, judicial independence, media freedom, and minority rights. The report also emphasizes the nation's unstable political climate and the country's lack of progress on crucial reforms.

Both analyses underline the importance of increased political will to make changes and solve the country's difficulties. In order to achieve sustainable growth, Bosnia and Herzegovina will need to demonstrate stronger commitment to EU integration, according to the European Commission study, while the Freedom House

assessment highlights the necessity of international support for the country's democratic development.

Whilst the debate around EU enlargement to the Western Balkans has received new impetus, the particular path of Kosovo towards EU membership remains stony. The high investments in Kosovo from the EU, motivated mostly by geopolitical reasons, and the country's leadership narrative of a future embedded in and depending on Europe, have created hopes and expectations among its people. After only 15 years of experience as an independent state, the young country has had little time to build its identity as a sovereign state. The Republic of Kosovo was the only state in the Western Balkans whose citizens cannot benefit from visa-free travel until 2023. Kosovo's EU membership perspective has been highly dependent on its capability to normalize relations with Serbia rather than a process of its own democratization (Kulinxha, 2022).

The European path of Kosovo should not remain an aim itself but the result of the efforts of the country which after a bloody past is tackling its main challenge, creating a functioning state that sustains peace for its people. Kosovo's political situation as an independent but internationally not fully recognized state and aiming to become part of the European Union pushes Kosovo in a limbo. EU relationships with Kosovo have been identified as the neither-nor situation and the attempt by the EU to design an ideal European State that it resists to make part of it (Pedersen Trenter, 2022).

3. Regionalism as a normative power: socialization vs. emulation

Economic success is the most undisputed factor when it comes to the power that the EU exerts in the Western Balkans region. The EU is the main trading partner for WB - in both exports and imports, accounting for over two-thirds (67.6%) of the region's total trade; while the region's share of overall EU trade is only 1.5%. Since 2000, the EU has been granting autonomous trade preferences to all the Western Balkan countries (Montanari, 2005).

The Union has worked continuously to enhance regional cooperation among the Western Balkans, simultaneously holding it as a precondition for entering into the EU. With the development of the Stabilization and Association Agreement, which aims for the Western Balkans to stabilize relations, movement and trade, the Berlin Process and the CEFTA Agreement, countries of Western Balkans have also initiated several cooperation mechanisms, some of which have turned to have positive results.

Europe's ideational influence on regionalism can be understood as the process by which the EU experience travels to other regions through socialization and emulation (Zwartjes et al., 2012). This impact is seen in the Western Balkans in a number of newly established institutions.

Figure 1. Imports, exports and trade balance between the EU and the Western Balkans, 2010-2020
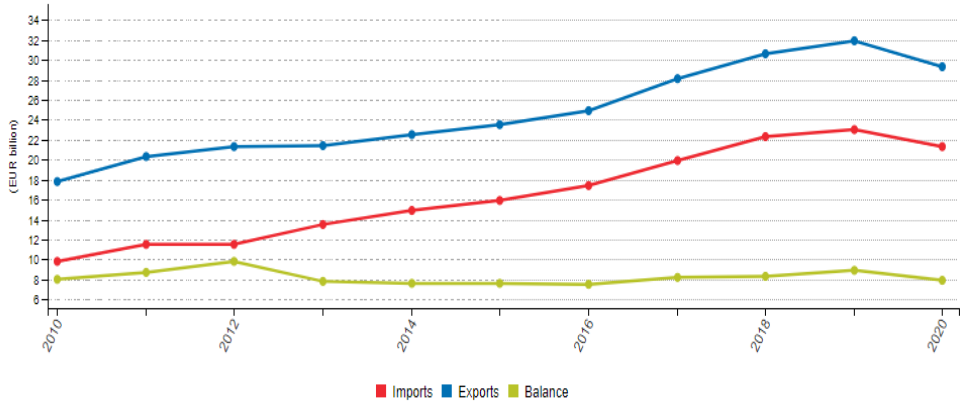
Source: authors' representation based on Eurostat data, 2021[8]

RYCO is an independent institution founded by Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. Its goal is to encourage reconciliation and cooperation among youth in the region through exchange programs. The program promotes peacebuilding and intercultural learning among schools in the Western Balkans. It aims to create long-term partnerships and strong bonds between secondary schools in the region. Schools can apply to participate in exchanges and other activities that build capacity, encourage networking, and foster cooperation.

The Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) promotes regional cooperation, European integration, and development in Southeast Europe. It engages participants from Southeast Europe, the international community, and donors to address important issues and promote European and Euro-Atlantic integration in the region. RCC works to develop and maintain a political climate of dialogue, reconciliation, tolerance and openness towards cooperation, with the view of enabling the implementation of regional programs aimed at economic and social development to the benefit of the people in the region.

The RCC aims to improve mobility, connectivity, and competitiveness, while promoting good governance, rule of law, and security. It also works to create a prosperous region through innovation, women's empowerment, and a competitive youth base. The RCC has 46 participants and is financed by the EU and SEE.

The Common Regional Market initiative was launched at the Sofia Summit on November 10, 2020, as an acknowledged need for greater economic integration

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[8] Western Balkans-EU - international trade in goods statistics, retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Western_Balkans-EU_-_international_trade_in_goods_statistics&oldid=526493 in March 2023.

within the region and with the EU. It focuses on the four freedoms (goods, services, capital, and people) as well as digital, investment, innovation, and industry policies. This is the most ambitious regional integration effort in the Western Balkans to date.

The Western Balkans Fund is an international organization based in Tirana, Albania, founded by the governments of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia. The agreement for its creation was signed by the ministers of foreign affairs of WB6 in November 2015, and it became operational on October 1, 2017. The WBF is financed equally by the six contracting parties and led by Executive Director Gjergj Murra from Albania. Its secretariat is in Tirana and aims to promote cooperation and common values through funding small and medium projects in key areas.

Open Balkans, also known as the Mini-Schengen Area, was a regional initiative aimed at improving economic and political relations between all Western Balkan countries. It was first mentioned in 2018 and dissolved as an initiative in 2023. The leaders of Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia agreed to create an economic zone in November 2019 to improve political and economic relations and strengthen cultural ties between states. The idea for Open Balkans came from the Berlin Process, with leaders of Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia referring to it as a child of the Berlin Process.

The initiative aimed to provide opportunities for trade, student exchanges, and encourage EU integration among member states. Citizens would only need an ID card to visit other Balkan states, and goods and capital would flow faster, saving over 30 million hours crossing borders each year. The initiative aimed to provide over $3.2 billion to member countries to improve and stabilize the economic spectrum in the Balkans, according to the World Bank in 2021. In July 2021, leaders of member states signed agreements on access to the labor market, movement of goods, and protection against disasters at the Forum for Regional Economic Cooperation in Skopje, North Macedonia.

Nevertheless, this initiative saw a failure on its implementation, mainly due to Kosovo's refusal to be part of it, even in the summits organized, whereas the other two countries Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro refused to join the OB initiative. Joseph (2022) gives reasons for the failure of the Open Balkans initiative. Firstly, historical conflicts made it difficult for countries to cooperate without recognizing each other. Secondly, trade deficits and lack of trust made it challenging to achieve the initiative's goals. The war in Ukraine deepened issues in the region, creating a lack of peace and increasing tensions. Joseph argues that only Serbia would benefit, with the rest being under its influence without creating strong opposition or possible cooperation. He concludes that Open Balkans would deepen the political imbalance and worsen related issues instead of creating cooperation in the region

4. The EU as a peacemaker: blurred line between interests and norms

The Common Security and Defense Policy, which was initially set in the Treaty of Maastricht and then rebuilt in the Treaty of Lisbon, brought forward a dimension of security and peace within the EU's goals and missions. This dimension would bring to the EU strategic command as well political control. Previous to the 1990s; attempts to set up a defense union did not remain successful. However, the ending of the Cold War and the change of the geopolitical setting in Europe brought to the table new differences that the EU had to address in terms of security. While this pillar falls under the category of intergovernmentalism and it's the member states who decide based on their national agenda, the supranational institutions can heavily influence their decision making process and shape their final answer into one common EU approach towards crisis management (Langenhove & Maes, 2012).

With a lack of adequate military capabilities and without a common operational structure, the Union has instrumentalized mainly diplomacy as a tool in achieving peace in conflicts and crisis. Other instruments include humanitarian aid, economic cooperation, trade policies and human rights, all shaped depending on the context, crisis and region (The Diplomatic Service of the European Union, 2021). The EU aims at delivering stabilization and peace through combining conflict prevention, mediation and peacebuilding. Therefore, its goal is to be at the disposal of peace in all stages of a conflict, from prevention to crisis management. It is of crucial importance for these instruments to be used in an adequate timely manner. Through dialogue, the EU aims to restore and reserve peace in the aftermath of conflicts. Critique for this approach mainly lies on the argument that the EU uses a "one-size-fits-all strategy" (Langenhove & Maes, 2012). The lack of flexibility in adopting adequate responses depending on the dynamics of the conflict has been pointed out.

In the case of Bosnia, the union was the primary determinant for the democratic world's policy in BiH. Christian Schmidt, the current OHR, wrote in his report that the prospects for further division and conflict in Bosnia "are very real" and said threats by Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik to withdraw Serb troops from the Bosnian Army and create a separate Serb force and other moves would "ultimately undermine the state's ability to function and carry out its constitutional responsibilities." Eu's response has been to offer reward for threats that Dodik uses to prevent elections if not satisfied with them. This particular position, which might also be linked to some member countries' different enlargement approaches, keeps the EU closer to leaders than to people (Bassuener, 2021).

The unilateral declaration of independence in Kosovo created a political impasse where Kosovo's and Serbia's respective actions aimed to produce zero-sum political outcomes. The EU used the two states' common aspiration to become EU members as an incentive to convince parties to engage in a dialogue process that would contribute to normalization of relations. Starting from 2011, the dialogue

process has often produced ambiguities in which parties relativize the objectives and outcomes of the negotiations.

The role of the EU as the key mediator has been often a subject of public debate and academic research. For the EU itself, involvement has been seen as strategically important for its foreign policy, yet the debate on its success and efficiency focuses exactly on the ambiguity in the substance of what it has achieved or in the process as a whole (Gashi et al., 2017). Furthermore, it has enabled a status of "silent" consensus among its own members on the status of Kosovo and in attempts to agree on promoting a shared narrative (Semenov, 2020) As a matter of fact, there is a substantive difference in the impact EU has in Kosovo and Serbia separately. Kosovo has still the most pro - European society in the Western Balkans, while Serbia's domestic political identity, power of veto players and competing elite strategies has often resulted in occasions where Serbian political elites used the EU to pursue strategies far from EU norms and standards (Subotić, 2010).

The normalization or appeasement of relations in cases of Kosovo and Bosnia respectively has substituted the democratization conditionality. For instance, on one hand, Serbia's accession talks have advanced despite its criticism toward authoritarianism and governments attempts to concentrate power in the executive. On the other hand, the EU appraised its military mission (EUFOR) more than OHR, by agreeing with the UNSC Resolution text that radically denuded standard references to the international Office of the High Representative (OHR) against the fear of vetoing EUFOR.

As stabilitocracy cannot be claimed as the new value of a Good *Europe*, then the EU's role of peacemaker serves prior to the union's stability interests rather to normative power Europe.

Conclusions

Europe must now assume its responsibilities in all areas in order to assert its sovereignty by increasing its defense capabilities, reducing its dependencies and designing a new model of growth and investment by 2030.[9]

The objective of this paper was to examine the process of regional integration in the Western Balkans and highlight both the shared and distinct dynamics that coincide with the EU's normative power within the region. This analysis focused on the EU's ability to foster integration and transformation through the process of socialization and its capacity to effectively play a successful role as a strategic and pivotal peacekeeper through the mechanisms of emulation. Concretely, EU normative power in the Western Balkans has been projected mainly through political

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[9] Informal Summit of Versailles, March 2022, retrieved from https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/european-council/2022/03/10-11/ on 1 May, 2023.

conditionality (Richter, 2012), by pushing institutional reforms and through its direct involvement as a so-called "effective peacemaker" (Skara, 2014). Yet, the noticed discrepancy between EU's conditionality for democratization and regional cooperation and Western Balkans public demand for economic prosperity has created an impasse in the union's power to exert influence. Furthermore, progress in terms of democratic conditionality has often been subject to interests and positions of member states rather than a norm assessment. This is clearly noticed in concrete actions such as the cases of Albania and North Macedonia when France, Denmark and Netherlands rejected in 2019, to move forward with their membership bid.

The EU's ideational influence on regionalism and enlargement via integration has naturally followed different logics and as such its impact does not vary only across regions but has rarely led to similar or comparative results even within the region. As Macron has lastly declared: "This is a dispute about vision. The enlargement rules need reform. We mustn't open accession talks with North Macedonia before Albania - there must be a majority for talks with both, together countries develop, not just make pledges." This brings about the realization that integration is not solely determined by merit but is also influenced by the interests of the Union.

Despite the often norm based rhetoric of European leaders, the belief in "normative power is held neither widely nor deeply enough to consistently shape member behavior". The diverse narrative and action in integration do not only lead to a blurred vision for aspiring countries but also, it would diminish the EU's attempts at its global reach based on normative power projections. The ongoing war in Ukraine has pushed the so-called Group of Friends including Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Slovenia and Spain to issue an appeal to overhaul voting on the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). From the Austrian Chancellor perspective, this calls for homogenization while " The diversity of European countries is not a burden[10]". The new voting system might be considered a relief for some Western Balkan countries but can also be interpreted as a shift from norms to interest, given also that norms are less present in the new vision of CFSP. Should a novel voting system be introduced, researchers will delve into its potential implications with regards to the trajectories of integration and the norms involved.

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[10] Austrian Chancellor Karl Nehammer speech in the Austrian Parliament, May 2023.

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