

PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF THE EU IN ALBANIA



Albanian Media Institute
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I. Introduction

Albania's relationship with the European Union has been desired, as much as unachieved, an aspiration, as well as problematic, it has been tested, but also with its unknowns. Of course, every Albanian government, both of the left and right of the ideological spectrum, has had its main strategic objective the integration of Albania into the EU at the earliest. The fact that this process has turned out to be both unsuccessful in general terms and delayed in deadlines, has deepened the skepticism of social catalysts, such as the media, civil society groups, engaged citizens, etc.

On the contrary, for the general public there is no reliable and desirable political alternative that can rival the project of Albania's membership in the EU. There is also a unified public rhetoric around this project (at least so far), which does not necessarily go along with deepening skepticism about Albania's chances of real membership in the near future. Precisely for these reasons, even in public opinion measurements, for example in the pre-pandemic years 2018 and 2019, surveys clearly show a pro-EU trend. This is taking into consideration the relative majority, with 59% in 2018 and 54% in 2019, Albanians thought at that time that Albania was ready to open negotiations in June 2019 and March 2020 respectively.¹

¹ Albanian Public Perception of the EU. The delegation of the European Union to the Republic of Albania: https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/albanian_public_perception_of_the_eu_2019_0.pdf?fbclid=IwAR1XqXUvyhGy8jLHuzmb3CiK_avrbsly0fcHlrH3aS_Bg3eKoM7940miE5o

On the other hand, it should not be taken for granted that the political narrative and the dominance of political discourse will be so linear in the future or that the deepening of skepticism of the Albanian citizens will not happen if the EU does not advance with the negotiations. Even their formal opening does not give a hope on the horizon for their successful conclusion and full membership. This skepticism and even opposition to the integration project has occurred in all the countries that have joined from the former Eastern Europe, starting with the Baltic countries and ending with the Balkan ones. Currently, this is also reflected in the periodic surveys that are conducted to measure public perception of support for the European integration project in Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Also in Serbia, which currently has the highest percentage of Eurosceptic citizens. Albania does not have a natural and eternal immunity to the potential growth of Euro-scepticism, in case the process does not go on the right track. This study analyzes the trends of public perception about the EU in Albania, focusing on the discourse of elites as a key factor in measuring the pulse of public opinion regarding European integration.

The external and internal challenges of the EU such as the Russian aggression against Ukraine, the refugee crisis, the increase in the number of asylum seekers, etc., accompanied by the lack of reforms of the candidate countries, can change the trajectory of these countries towards EU integration. Increasing skepticism on the part of the Western Balkan citizens about the chances of integration, accompanied by increasing doses of criticism from a part of the political elite towards Brussels, may lead to a fatigue towards expansion in the opposite direction. So this “enlargement fatigue” that has always been unidirectional, now has the risk of having two directions, although the risk varies from country to

country. The degree of variation is determined by geopolitical alternatives, by the historical, social and cultural context, by the dominance of the phrase “European integration” as the only “game in town” etc.

This paper first deals with the complicated history of Albania’s EU integration efforts and how it has been perceived by the public. Then it continues with the internal and external challenges of the EU itself. It follows with the growing criticism of the political and public elite in Albania in relation to the EU to understand whether we are dealing with a systematic and structural increase or just rhetoric for internal consumption. Then, the paper discusses the involvement of third actors in the Western Balkans, focusing on Albania in particular, analyzing their role and impact in the relations of these countries with the EU. In the end, it continues with the different stage of integration of the countries of the Western Balkans and what lessons can be drawn from this comparison, offering the relevant conclusions.

II. History and perception of the Albania-EU journey

Albania established diplomatic relations with the European Economic Community in 1991, while in 1992 the Trade and Cooperation Agreement was signed and the first benefits from the PHARE Program began. This connection continued to be consolidated until 1997, when the General Affairs Council of the European Union approved the regional approach for the countries of the region, through which the EU defines the political and economic conditions for the further development of relations. But unfortunately in this same year, the *annus horribilis* of Albanian politics was happening with the collapse of institutions and social and economic chaos. The expectations of the Albanian society were naturally high for a rapid integration into the EU until 1997 when the return to the starting point occurred.

Meanwhile, in 1999 we had some significant developments that deepened Tirana-Brussels cooperation, such as the Stabilization-Association process, which targeted the former Yugoslav republics that were involved in the inter-ethnic conflict, a process that also included Albania, which was internally destabilized. Also, the previous PHARE program was replaced by the new CARDS (Community Assistance for Reconstruction, Development and Stabilization) program. In the same year, Albania was included in the Preferential

Autonomous Regime, while in 2000, products from Albania were included for the first time in duty-free entry into the EU market. In 2001, the EU-Albania Consultative Group was established.²

Meanwhile, in 2003, official negotiations were opened during the visit of the President of the European Commission, Romano Prodi, and the first round of negotiations for the Stabilization-Association Agreement began. On the other hand, the major news was the Thessaloniki Summit, which confirmed the EU accession perspective of the countries of the region, while also signing the Albania-EU Readmission Agreement.³ It was necessary to wait until 2006 for the signing of the Stabilization-Association Agreement as well as the National Plan for the implementation of the Stabilization-Association Agreement. Also in the same year, the Council adopts a regulation creating a new instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA). This single financial instrument simplifies and projects EU external assistance during the pre-accession period. Meanwhile, on April 1, 2009, the Stabilization-Association Agreement entered into force.⁴ It was necessary to wait until after 2010 to achieve the liberalization of visas for the citizens of the Republic of Albania who were provided with biometric passports. The removal of the visa regime was the most tangible sign of what the EU offers to Albanian citizens. Meanwhile, it took two full years of waiting from the moment the European Commission recommended the granting of candidate country status to

² Historiku i marrëdhënieve BE-Shqipëri. Marrë nga: [Historiku i marrëdhënieve BE-Shqipëri \(trt.net.tr\)](http://historiku_i_marrëdhënieve_BE-Shqipëri(trt.net.tr)) 24.06.2014-08.05.2022

³ *Ibid*

⁴ Integrimi i Republikës së Shqipërisë në Bashkimin Europian. MEPJ. Marrë nga: <http://integrimi-ne-be.puneteshashtme.gov.al/anetaresimi-ne-be/historiku/>

Albania. Only on June 24, 2014, the EU Council of Ministers unanimously approved the Commission's recommendation.⁵

What changed on the meantime, was also the perception of Albanians in relation to the progress of integration during this period. For example, "Albania's European Perspective: Perceptions and Realities 2014" of Albanian Institute for International Studies (AIIS) highlighted that at that time, 49.1% of Albanians had answered 'yes' to the possibility of receiving status from Albania, in the month of June, against 28.3% who had answered 'no'. At the same time, regarding the issue of not granting the status in December 2013, "37.6% of respondents hold the Albanian government responsible; 29.8% political parties and 13.7% all EU governments. The AIIS study, comparing the data with previous years, finds that the support of Albanians to become part of Europe is decreasing. According to this study, if in 2013 this support was 85%, in 2014 it is 77%".⁶

What we generate as a preliminary finding is that the perception of the public is not linear and unconditional, but is dependent on the acceleration or deceleration of the process. This process has two directions of responsibility, but in general what has been constant is Albania's inability to successfully fulfill "homework". Therefore, the majority of respondents rightly blame the government and political parties, while only a small part sees the problem in Brussels. This trend of skepticism and declining confidence has been reinforced in recent years.

⁵ Historiku i marrëdhënieve BE-Shqipëri

⁶ "Studimi i AIIS-së: 49.1% e shqiptarëve 'PO' marrjes së statusit në qershor". 2014. *InfoArkiva: Arkiva Mediatike Shqiptare*. Marrë nga: <http://www.arkivalajmeve.com/Studimi-i-AIIS-se-491-e-shqiptareve-lsqquo-marrjes-se-statusit-ne-qershor.1047597194/>

Then, we had to wait for March 25, 2020, despite the Commission's positive recommendation, for the European Council to re-condition the formal opening of negotiations.⁷ Recently, the European Council in its meeting of June 23, 2022 did not decide to open negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia. The Bulgarian veto for Skopje was formally overturned by the Bulgarian parliament only one day later, on June 24. According to President Macron, this is a step forward, but not a victory, although it was precisely the French proposal that paved the way for the removal of the veto.⁸ Meanwhile, the first Albania-EU intergovernmental conference and the official opening of negotiations took place on July 19.⁹ This became possible thanks to the Sofia-Skopje agreement that was based on the aforementioned French proposal and the passage of this agreement by the parliament of North Macedonia.

⁷ Integrimi i Republikës së Shqipërisë në Bashkimin Europian. MEPJ. Marrë nga: <http://integrimi-ne-be.punetejashtme.gov.al/anetaresimi-ne-be/historiku/>

⁸ "Bullgaria heq veton, por BE nuk jep vendim/ Macron: Hap para, por jo fitore". 2022. *Top Channel*. Marrë nga: <https://top-channel.tv/2022/06/24/bullgaria-heq-veton-por-be-nuk-jep-vendim-macron-hap-para-por-jo-fitore43/> 24 qershor.

⁹ "Historike/ Shqipëria çel negociatat! BE: Me Tiranën bëhemi më të plotë! Rama: Evropa fati ynë, vijnë sot këtu pas një pune të gjatë! Integrimi e bën Ballkanin më të mire". 2022. *Shqiptarja*. 19 korrik. <https://shqiptarja.com/lajm/sot-mbahet-konferenca-e-pare-nderqeveritare-shqiperibe-vrapi-i-fundit-drejt-anetaresimit-te-plote>

III. Internal and external challenges of the EU

On one side of the coin, the European Union has had internal and external challenges at least since 2007, which have shaken some of the pillars on which this project is based. Initially, there were the debt tsunami in Greece and the debt problems in Italy, the financial crises in Ireland and Iceland, the financial difficulties of Spain and Portugal, or the advancement of illiberal democracy in Hungary. These have also been associated with the growth of Euro-skepticism that does not accept the supremacy of European legislation in Poland, with the challenge of the opening of the European perspective for Ukraine and Moldova, with the construction of walls that coincided with the influx of asylum-seeking refugees in the EU, etc. Some other internal issues have been BREXIT, the weakening of the EU's competitiveness in global markets, or the anti-immigration discourse. Externally, the Russian pressure that culminated in the aggression against Ukraine, with the policies of energy blackmail or the conditionality of gas flows recently conditioned with the petro-ruble policy, are efforts of the Kremlin to invalidate the European sanctions. Also, the growing trade deficit with China remains a sharp problem.

On the other hand, the public and media perception in Europe and which is often conveyed in our media, is that the EU suffers from the lack of a coherent policy internally. This

is as a result of a rather burdensome regulatory framework that hinders institutional reform, economic competitiveness and creates a democratic deficit for which the EU has been criticized for a long time, especially in the period after the 90s. This multitude of laws, directives, decisions and regulations makes things difficult for the image of the EU from inside and outside. As Heather Grabbe and Stefan Lehnne argue in an article called “Emotional Intelligence for European Democracy” and published by Carnegie Europe, “ordinary citizens find Europe distant, elitist and difficult to understand”.¹⁰ This is more the perception because in reality, the EU has more transparency mechanisms than most member states available. It also has profitability in budget expenditures, where only 6 percent of its budget goes to administrative expenses. Still, the perception of Europe is such that it often distances it from ordinary European citizens. This perception is even stronger in candidate countries like Albania, due to the very fact that EU investments go mainly through Albanian governments, which suffer from a lack of accountability and transparency.

Increasing transparency, correcting the “democratic deficit”, increasing the role of citizens through more frequent referendums, increasing their access to the ECJ, as argued by Grabbe & Lehnne, would enable a more open, more democratic, more flexible Europe, more competitive and fairer for the majority of its citizens.¹¹ This applies both to the Europeans of today and those of tomorrow, including the Albanians. Today, the public perception of the European Union, even in countries that until recently had an excessive enthusiasm for it, such as the case of Albania, is that it is

¹⁰ Heather Grabbe and Stephen Lehnne. 2018. “Could an Illiberal Europe Work?” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

¹¹ *Ibid*

caught between internal and external crises. These crises are, among others, the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the problem with asylum seekers and refugees, the decline of consumer power and the aging of the population, the permanent debate between the priority of deepening versus that of expansion, etc.

Above all, the “carrot and stick” policies of the EU have proven to be the best mechanism to promote the successful completion of the transitional cycle and democratic consolidation of aspiring countries, as demonstrated by the countries of the Visegrad bloc, the Baltic countries, etc. Even in the Balkans, there have been continuous “success stories” from Greece in 1981, to Slovenia and Croatia, and recently Montenegro, which seems to be ahead of other neighbors in meeting the standards and advancing in successfully closing the negotiation chapters. Albania, despite the predispositions that it had from the beginning better than some of the neighbors of the former Yugoslavia that were caught in the net of inter-ethnic fighting, has missed the next train several times. Given that the relationship with the EU, in addition to being symbiotic, also resembles a tango where the steps go back and forth depending on the completion of “homework”, the time has come for Albania to fulfill its contractual obligations with deeds and not words. It also needs to incorporate the internal structural and institutional reforms to become part of the bloc of the member countries, maximum within a decade.

Some of the most important contractual obligations in the case of Albania are those that are repeated, not without reason, in the Commission’s periodic progress reports and that are related to the depoliticization of public administration, respect for property rights, justice reform, the fight against organized crime and the fight against corruption. All these

delay the integration train and democratic consolidation of the country. This is a perception that is indirectly measured by a multitude of media analyzes and debates. But at the same time, it is reflected directly in the perception of citizens measured through international indices such as Transparency International on corruption¹² or domestically from the Institute for Democracy and Mediation (IDM) polls on trust in governance.¹³

¹² Shqipëria ka rënë në vend të 110 nga 180 shtete në vitin 2021. Shih për më gjerë: <https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/albania>

¹³ "Sondazh i opinionit publik: Besimi në qeverisje." 2016. IDM. <https://idmalbania.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/IDM-OpinionPoll-2016-AL.pdf>

IV. Criticism of the political and public elite in relation to the EU

a. Skepticism about vaccines

The issue of not providing Pfizer, Moderna or Astra-Zeneca vaccines in the first phase of the COVID 19 emergency, for which the EU's help was expected to provide them, added to the public criticism of Brussels in Albania. For example, Prime Minister Rama himself has used language that exceeded diplomatic boundaries, with open criticism of Brussels at the height of the pandemic crisis. He said at the time, *inter alia*, that: "The EU has made an unfortunate decision. This is because it has decided that only surpluses should be sent to the countries of the Western Balkans. While there are no excesses here. There is less than what was produced."¹⁴ He went on to use even harsher language towards Brussels when he criticized it for deliberately leaving out the distribution of vaccines for Kosovo surprisingly saying that "as a human being I felt outraged and as a European I felt ashamed, while as Prime Minister of Albania, I felt more motivated than ever to not allow Albanians to feel excluded from the opportunity

¹⁴ Bledar Qalliu. 2020. "Rama Blames the EU for Albania's Lack of Covid-19 Vaccine". *Exit News*. [Rama Blames the EU for Albania's Lack of Covid-19 Vaccine - Exit - Explaining Albania](#)

to defend themselves simultaneously with other Europeans in this world war with the risk of death”.¹⁵

These statements at the time also received the attention of the world media, highlighting the new phenomenon of Euro-skepticism of the leading elites in Albania, a country that, on the other hand, has one of the most Euro-enthusiastic populations not only in the region, but also in the whole former Eastern Europe. For example, the Italian news agency ANSAMed states that “the Albanian Prime Minister criticized the European Union and its decision to leave the countries of the Western Balkans out of the vaccination plan”.¹⁶ Rama said that “it is unacceptable not only morally and politically, but also unjustifiable from a logical point of view, given that there are countries that keep extra doses because they are not able to act quickly”.¹⁷ AFP also quoted Rama as saying: “[w]hen the EU started delivering shots on December 27, it could have given access immediately also to the non-EU Western Balkan countries to have at least some doses to vaccinate their front-liners. But they didn’t do it.”¹⁸ However, Prime Minister Rama, despite these statements, refused to receive the Sputnik vaccines from Moscow, which meanwhile had supplied Belgrade with about one million of them. These

¹⁵ “Vaksina anti-Covid edhe për Kosovën”/ Rama i indinjuar me BE-në: Si europian jam ndjerë i turpëruar, vendimarrje absurde dhe e papranueshme...” 1 Janar 2021. Panorama newspaper. [“Vaksina anti-Covid edhe për Kosovën”/ Rama i indinjuar me BE-në: Si europian jam ndjerë i turpëruar, vendimarrje absurde dhe e papranueshme... \(panorama.com.al\)](#)

¹⁶ “Covid: first vaccinations in Albania, Rama criticizes EU.” ANSAMed 11 Janar 2021. Marrë nga: [Covid: first vaccinations in Albania, Rama criticizes EU - Politics - ANSAMed.it](#)

¹⁷ *Ibid*

¹⁸ “Albania starts Covid-19 vaccinations as PM blasts slow EU help”. AFP. 11.01.2021. Marrë nga: [Albania starts Covid-19 vaccinations as PM blasts slow EU help - France 24](#)

doses of increasing Rama's dissatisfaction with Brussels did not go unnoticed and received criticism in the local press as well.¹⁹

b. Skepticism about delays in the integration process

On the other hand, there have been few other cases where the prime minister, the government as a whole or the opposition have openly expressed skepticism about the EU. Rather, skeptics have rather questioned the possibilities of expansion, despite the fact that in the case of Albania, the implication has always been that there is no other alternative path. Prime Minister Rama, for example, has sometimes compared the process of integration with the experience of constantly standing on the altar. "Expansion hasn't stalled - it's stopped," he complained on one occasion. Betting on Europe is increasingly becoming a liability for jaded voters tired of hearing about unfulfilled promises.²⁰

On the other hand, Genc Pollo, former minister and deputy of the opposition, writes, among other things, that: "The experience of recent years in Albania recognizes real achievements such as European assistance for reaching the Agreement on Decriminalization (2014) or the Electoral

¹⁹ Alfons Rakaj. 2021. "Vrapimi në drejtim të gabuar: Pakënaqësia e Ramës nga BE-ja në lidhje me vaksinimin është rezultat i nervozës në rritje". *Sbunker*. 8 shkurt. Marrë nga: <https://sbunker.net/histori-nga-rajoni-3-bllogje-tematike/90818/vrapimi-ne-drejtim-te-gabuar-pakenaqesia-e-rames-nga-be-ja-ne-lidhje-me-vaksinimin-eshte-rezultat-i-nervozes-ne-rritje/>

²⁰ Benjamin Haddad and Damir Marusic. 2021. "The Balkans Don't Believe the EU Anymore." *Foreign Policy*. 25 gusht. Marrë nga: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/08/25/balkans-dont-believe-eu-anymore-albania-macedonia-rama-vucic/>

Reform (2020); failures can also be noted, such as the silence about Tahir-Kanabizmi (2016)²¹ or the declarations in favor of the abusive initiative to destroy the National Theater (2019) by certain officials of the European Commission. Without further talking about thoughtless gestures like the organization of the “Run against corruption” (2020) where European diplomats ran joyfully with problematic ministers along the lake in Tirana. A gesture that was rightly criticized by public opinion.”²² Or as Akri Cipa writing for Euractiv has pointed out: “EU enlargement to the Western Balkans has been marked by continued roadblocks and unjustified delays. The region’s window of opportunity might close soon, another delay could deal a death blow to the enlargement process altogether and that is why the EU should not ignore Albania’s progress.”²³

Another article of the last few days emphasized, *inter alia*, that: “while there are significant problems in the countries of the Western Balkans, including corruption, the malfunctioning of the judicial power, and even the direct capture of the state (things that are also present in the trio of Eastern countries aspiring to join the EU), the truth is that another reason why this region is not already in the EU is because many in the Union are not particularly enthusiastic about their integration in the first place. Less than a year ago, some EU member states questioned the placement of

²¹ Referring to the former Minister of Interior Saimir Tahiri who was accused of favoring the cannabis sativa illicit trade. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/08/25/balkans-dont-believe-eu-anymore-albania-macedonia-rama-vucic/>

²² Genc Pollo. “Procesi apo rezultati?” *Gazeta Panorama*. 12 Prill. Marrë nga: [Procesi apo rezultati? \(panorama.com.al\)](https://panorama.com.al)

²³ Akri Cipa. 2021. “The EU should resist moves to halt Balkan enlargement.” May 18. *Euraktiv*. Marrë nga: [The EU should resist moves to halt Balkan enlargement – EURACTIV.com](https://euractiv.com)

the word ‘enlargement’ in the declaration of the last Western Balkan summit”.²⁴ Also, the language used by Prime Minister Rama was not conveyed well at all by EU representatives, such as Ambassador Soreca.²⁵

c. Skepticism about the idea of the European Political Community

Prime Minister Rama was the first prime minister in the region to welcome President Macron’s idea of the European Political Community.²⁶ He has repeated this in his statements to the international media, such as when he said to the Dutch media “Volkskrant” that he is a big supporter of this idea.²⁷ But while Mr. Rama has been a supporter of this idea since the beginning, other politicians and publicists have been skeptical. For example, as Genc Pollo recently argued in an article with critical notes on the concept: “Associate Member Status is a political degradation of Full Member Status.... According to this concept, Albania can have access to certain sectors of the Market of Common European as

²⁴ “ANALIZA: E vërteta e planit “pa ndjenja” të Macronit mbi zgjerimin e BE-së”. *Gazeta Tema*. 27 Maj 2022. Marrë nga: <https://www.gazetatema.net/bota/analiza-e-verteta-e-planit-pa-ndjenja-te-macronit-mbi-zgjerimin-e-be-se-i340336>

²⁵ Soreca: I habitur nga kritikata e Ramës ndaj BE-së për vaksinën. 2021. A2. 12 janar. Marrë nga: <https://a2news.com/2021/01/12/soreca-per-zerin-e-amerikes-i-habitur-nga-kritikat-e-rames-per-vaksinën/>

²⁶ “Rama zbardh fjalimin që mbajti dje në samitin e Brukselit: Në Shqipëri, të gjithë i besojnë Europës! Mos lini që ky besim të bjerret pa kthim”. *Shqiptarja*. 24 qershor. Marrë nga: <https://shqiptarja.com/lajm/rama-zbardh-fjalimin-qe-mbajti-dje-ne-samitin-e-brukselit>

²⁷ “Rama për median holandeze: BE-ja ka humbur dy kriza pa bërë asnjë hap përpara”. 2022. *Boldnews*. 6 korrik. Marrë nga: <https://boldnews.al/2022/07/06/rama-per-median-holandeze-be-ja-ka-humbur-dy-kriza-pa-bere-asnje-hap-perpara/>

well as in some economic programs supported by cohesion funds. Until now only full members had unlimited access; while aspiring states had no access at all until they became Full Members. So we have an intermediate solution.”²⁸ In short, Albania would benefit from funds for the development of the region and the benefits of the common market, but it would not have political representation in Brussels, elected members of the European Parliament, etc.

Also, others have expressed themselves even more critically with the recent tours of the EU leadership, such as the regional visits of President Michels, calling them more of a lobbying campaign for Macron’s idea than a benefit for the rapid regional integration itself. As Leonidha Mërtiri said recently in his analysis, “The result...? Again walking and again no progress. The European perspective continues to be discussed in these walks. And yet, new delays increase their length. This procrastination, constantly flooding with inflation of promises, have only faded, even undermined their mission.”²⁹ Of course, the delays in the process and the often non-direct language that the senior officials of the EU often use, as well as the pressure of the member countries that are facing various challenges, have led to an increase in the public articulation of such positions.

Recently, the former Minister of Foreign Affairs and Europe, Ditmir Bushati, was also critical, where in an analysis for the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, he discussed the important question: “Is the European Political Community a consolation

²⁸ Genc Pollo. 2022. “Sërish për Shqipërinë në Evropë, por në rrethana të ndryshuara”. *Gazeta Panorama*. 30 Maj. Marrë nga: <http://www.panorama.com.al/1168112-2/>

²⁹ Leonidha Mërtiri. 2022. “Rezultate apo thjesht ecejake”. *Gazeta Panorama*. 11 Qershor. Marrë nga: <http://www.panorama.com.al/rezultate-apo-thjesht-ecejake/>

prize for states that will not be able to join in the EU or a step towards full membership?"³⁰ He also raises an important thesis when he underlines that the full membership of the bloc of countries in the former Yugoslavia would complete the recovery process after the wars in the former Yugoslavia in this troubled region and at the same time would serve as a guarantee for Ukraine in the future.³¹

Here the question arises as to why Albania should join a process with countries that have instigated the wars in the former Yugoslavia or were directly involved in them. Also, this is a violation of the *regatta principle* where each country should be evaluated according to individual merit. Also we have to consider the current geopolitical elements when countries that have joined NATO such as Albania, North Macedonia and Montenegro cannot have the same stage of integration with countries that have declared neutrality or are against membership in the Euro-Atlantic structure such as Serbia or they find it objectively impossible to join in a short time like Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo. While one of the premises of the article in question was that membership in NATO generally serves as a *conditio sine qua non* that precedes membership in the EU.

It seems that the government generally attributes the delays in the integration process to external factors, such as the challenges of the EU itself, the fatigue from the enlargement or recently the Bulgarian-Macedonian conflict that also affected Albania. The opposition on the other hand, regularly blames the Albanian government for non-fulfillment of the conditions, while removing responsibility

³⁰ Ditmir Bushati. 2022. "Zgjimi European". Riprodhuar nga gazeta *Panorama*. 6 qershor. Marrë nga: <http://www.panorama.com.al/zgjimi-european/>

³¹ *Ibid*

from Brussels for any delay. The political rhetoric towards Brussels is sometimes bitter, as demonstrated by the case of the Ohrid summit, where at the next meeting of the Open Balkans, Prime Minister Rama stated that: “We are no longer preparing for the wedding, as we have no intention of going to the wedding and the bride tells us, which in this particular case is EU, that we don’t take the groom from them. You understand now, we have got Bulgaria, which is a man in itself, with a thousand problems, but we have nothing to do. When I go to Brussels today and when I see them I feel very sorry for them, I try to give them courage, even though before it seemed to me that they were stars giving me courage”.³²

Sometimes the pronouncements have been for prestigious international media such as the Financial Times, where Prime Minister Rama has stated that: “Brussels is suffering from a certain amnesia about who they are, what is the purpose of their existence,”³³ though adding to soften the strong criticism somewhat that “They [the EU] are the greatest force for good humanity has ever created and I hope they recover quickly because without them the world is a much worse place.”³⁴ However, in general, we cannot say that these attitudes constitute a dominant trend of Euroscepticism or at least criticism of the enlargement process in the Western Balkans, but that they still represent a change compared to a decade before, where such writings or comments from the political and media elite were very rare, if not completely absent.

³² “Open Balkan”, Rama tallet me BE: Më vjen keq kur i shoh në Bruksel, i jap kurajo”. *Boldnews*. 8 Qershor. Marrë nga: <https://boldnews.al/2022/06/08/open-balkan-rama-tallet-me-be-me-vjen-keq-kur-i-shoh-ne-bruksel-i-jap-kurajo/>

³³ “European Union Has Forgotten the Purpose of Its Existence, Rama Tells FT”. *Exit.al*. Marrë nga: <https://exit.al/en/2021/05/13/european-union-has-forgotten-the-purpose-of-its-existence-rama-tells-ft/>

³⁴ *Ibid*

d. Criticism of the decision of the European Council of June 2022

Prime Minister Rama used harsh language towards Bulgaria saying: “It is a new day in Europe, but not in Bulgaria! What a shame for Europe this Bulgarian issue! In the middle of a very heated war in Europe’s backyard, one NATO country is holding two other NATO countries hostage under the watchful eye of the 26 EU countries standing by in a frightening display of impotence.”³⁵ Rama repeated this type of language again, in an interview for the Skopje Channel 5 television, in which he continues to express himself in critical tones towards Brussels. He says, among other things: “But at the same time I can tell you what happened in the sense that Bulgaria is a member of the EU, the EU has a way of addressing things that has turned into a kind of hostage-taking and countries for the interest of one country or another and also the spirit of expansion has been somewhat distorted”.³⁶

This type of discourse of the Albanian prime minister seems to have already become dominant in the rhetoric he uses towards the European Union. It remains to be seen if this type of discourse will be adopted by the rest of the government and politics or if it will remain sporadic, mostly

³⁵ “Edi Rama nuk përmbahet para Samitit të BE: Turp për Evropën, që është kaq impotente para Bullgarisë”. 2022. *Gazeta Tema*. 23 Qershor. Marrë nga: <https://www.gazetatema.net/politika/edi-rama-nuk-permbahet-para-samitit-te-be-turp-per-evropen-qe-eshte-kaq-i344062>

³⁶ “Mos e bëni”/ Rama i vendosur të kërkojë ndarjen nga Maqedonia e Veriut nëse nuk pranohet propozimi i Macron: Dera e BE duhet të hapet”. *Gazeta Panorama*. 4 korrik. Marrë nga: <http://www.panorama.com.al/mos-e-beni-rama-i-vendosur-te-kerkoje-ndarjen-nga-maqedonia-e-veriut-nese-nuk-pranohet-propozimi-i-macron-dera-e-be-duhet-te-hapet/>

used tactically by the prime minister. But there were also journalists and analysts who shared this perspective of the prime minister. For example, Skënder Minxhozi writes that: “For the first time in 2020, the desire of Albanians to integrate into the European Union fell below the figure of 90%. A small alarm bell for a process that has lasted for ages while Brussels has long introduced the logic of indefinite postponements. Maintaining the logic of “pairs” (altogether Northern Macedonia), means that the problems of one of the countries are simultaneously the problems of the other state, although the latter may have nothing to do with them. As is the current case of the Macedonian-Bulgarian crisis. You feel like saying that they are keeping us together, so that they leave us out...”³⁷

On the other hand, some journalists and commentators have written against the language used by Prime Minister Rama. For example, Enver Robelli took a rather strong position in an article published in the newspaper Tema against the language of Prime Minister Rama towards Bulgaria and the EU.³⁸ Others, such as the journalist Mero Baze, have highlighted the dangers that threaten Albania and the countries of the Western Balkans from the EU’s hesitation, which according to him could promote “democratic instability, pro-Russian lines and autocracies”.³⁹ While other journalists, such as Arbër Hitaj, have supported the possibility of separation

³⁷ Skënder Minxhozi. 2022. “Çifti i çuditshëm shqiptaro-maqedon/ Na duan bashkë që të na lenë jashtë?!” *Transition Promotion Program. Instituti Shqiptar i Medias*. <https://www.institutemedia.org/transition-promotion-program/>

³⁸ “Gjuha e pavend e Edi Ramës kundër Bullgarisë”. 2022. *Gazeta Tema*. 23 Qershor. Marrë nga: <https://www.gazetatema.net/blogu-tema/gjuha-e-pavend-e-edi-rames-kunder-bullgarise-i344074>

³⁹ Mero Baze. 2022. “Rreziqet nga hezitimi evropian për Ballkanin”. *Gazeta Tema*. 23 Qershor. Marrë nga: <https://www.gazetatema.net/editorial/rreziqet-nga-hezitimi-evropian-per-ballkanin-i344180>

from North Macedonia, which has been mentioned as the most possible option by Prime Minister Rama,⁴⁰ prior to the opening of negotiations with both countries. AS a matter of fact, this decoupling will continue even after the formal opening of negotiations with the conditioning of the Second Inter-Governmental Conference with the constitutional amendments that are expected from the North-Macedonian parliament.

The first intergovernmental conference was excellent news for Albania, but it still left room for reservations. As journalist Lutfi Dervishi says: “The long-awaited opening of negotiations is not the moment for champagne. Medals are not awarded when you are in the first step of the marathon, but when you reach the finish line. We have consumed the champagne of the opening of the negotiations once in 2018. It is the moment to think about how to get to the end of chapter 33”!⁴¹ This skepticism was shared by the political scientist Ilir Kalemaj, who commented on MCN Tv about the first Intergovernmental Conference, for which he said that “this is the beginning of a long journey, where we still have great work and challenges ahead. He said that none of the conditions have been finally met and that the government still has work to do in completing its homework.”⁴²

⁴⁰ “Përse Shqipëria nuk po ndahet nga Maqedonia e Veriut?” 2022. *Shqiptarja*. 26 Qershor. Marrë nga: <https://shqiptarja.com/lajm/perse-shqiperia-nuk-po-ndahet-nga-maqedonia-e-veriut>

⁴¹ Lutfi Dervishi. 2022. “Hapja e negociatave, maratona e radhës drejt BE”. *Panorama*. 19 korrik. <http://www.panorama.com.al/hapja-e-negociatave-maratona-e-radhes-drejt-be/>

⁴² “Negociatat/ Kalemaj: Jam skeptik nuk jemi gati, asnjë kusht i përmbushur plotësisht”. 2022. *MCN Tv*. 19 korrik. <http://www.mcntv.al/2022/07/19/negociatat-kalemaj-jam-skeptik-nuk-jemi-gati-asnj-kusht-i-p-rmbushur-plot-sisht?fbclid=IwAR24ODWH4G0gcgGlfhyZgn0tW4XJr-Ferdq1UfzZ7Mo9A8FaakJlz-JENNA>

There are those who are even more skeptical about the perspective of Albania's membership. An example is the researcher Blendi Kajsio, who states that the expected membership in the EU can be perceived as a danger for Albanian democracy, referring to the precedents of countries such as Hungary and Poland, which regressed after joining the EU.⁴³ Meanwhile, other publicists do not share this skepticism and demand that the lost time be recovered and that the fastest integration in the EU be the main goal.⁴⁴ But the opening of negotiations is a good omen also because it will force the Albanian politics to self-reform and remove a good part of its actual discretion.⁴⁵ As the publicist Preç Zogaj says, "better under the strict regime of European standard norms and achievements than under the so-called "sovereignty" advertised by a bunch of political strongmen who have ruled and rule by destroying free elections, the rule of law, circulation of elites, transparency and accountability".⁴⁶

The ball is already in the door of these countries themselves, starting with Montenegro and Serbia that are ahead in the process and continuing with Albania and North Macedonia. In other words, each country will continue to

⁴³ Blendi Kajsio. 2022. "Antarësimi në BE si rrezik për demokracinë shqiptare". *Transition Promotion Program. Instituti Shqiptar i Medias*. <https://www.institutemedia.org/transition-promotion-program/>

⁴⁴ Geron Kamberi. 2022. "Në kërkim të kohës së (pa)humbur të integritit në BE". *Transition Promotion Program. Instituti Shqiptar i Medias*. <https://www.institutemedia.org/transition-promotion-program/>

⁴⁵ Mero Baze. 2022. "Çelja e negociatave, ua heq Shqipërinë nga duart politikanëve shqiptarë". *Gazeta Tema*. 19 korrik. <https://www.gazetatema.net/editorial/elja-e-negociatave-ua-heq-shqiperine-nga-duart-politikaneve-shqiptare-i347711>

⁴⁶ Prec Zogaj. 2022. "Fundi i një frustrimi, fillimi i një ere të re". *Transition Promotion Program. Instituti Shqiptar i Medias*. <https://www.institutemedia.org/transition-promotion-program/>

be judged based on the performance of its “homework”, although geopolitical factors such as the Russian threat, may force Brussels to make a political decision to speed up the process of full integration of the six countries.⁴⁷

The multiple effects of delaying the integration process and not starting the negotiations until now, have affected almost every sphere of the political, economic, social and international life of Albania. This in turn has resulted in the high emigration from Albania to the countries of the European Union. After thirty years of waiting, the people have taken the integration into their own hands, demanding in the EU countries what the EU has promised to create in Albania precisely through the process of integration and alignment with the EU.⁴⁸ It remains to be seen if the opening of negotiations will significantly improve the implementation of legislation, consolidate the rule of law, curb corruption and stop the wave of emigration.

⁴⁷ Ilir Kalemaj. 2022. “Ballkani Perëndimor i disa shpejtësive”. *Transition Promotion Program. Instituti Shqiptar i Medias*. <https://www.institutemedia.org/transition-promotion-program/>

⁴⁸ Ledion Krisafi. 2022. “Efektet e shumëfishta të zvarritjes së procesit të integritimit”. *Transition Promotion Program. Instituti Shqiptar i Medias*. <https://www.institutemedia.org/transition-promotion-program/>

V. The involvement of third actors in the Western Balkans and Albania

a. Russia

Russia's attempts at hegemony in the former Soviet Republics, while culminating in attempts to invade Ukraine, are not limited to that region. Increasingly, Russia is clashing with the West for dominance in the Middle East, in North Africa, but especially in the Western Balkans. There are many examples of Russia's intervention in our region in recent years, particularly in Serbia and Bosnia.

Pro-Russian organizations in Serbia include the Radical Party, the Democratic Party of Serbia (DPS) and the "Dveri" movement. While ultra-nationalist groups such as Zavetnici, Balkan Cossacks and "Night Wolves", are often assembled by the Russian House in Belgrade, an agency of the Federal Agency of Russia. A few years ago, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov met with members of the pro-Russian organization Zavetnici, from whose ranks the participants in the Montenegrin coup were recruited. In 2012, Russia also established a humanitarian response center in Niš in southern Serbia near the borders of Macedonia, Bulgaria, Kosovo and Montenegro, where it also supported a militia called Serbian Honor. Also, Russia is involved in supporting certain organizations in the Western Balkans, such as the Democracy

Front of Montenegro or the Macedonian opposition party VMRO-DPMNE. Moscow also trains and organizes local paramilitary groups, a “tradition” dating back to the early 1990s, when Russian “volunteers”, usually supervised by the Russian services, arrived in the former Yugoslavia to fight on the Serbian side. After two decades, only the direction has changed, while it was Serbian volunteers who arrived in the Donbas of Ukraine to help the Russians.

The failed Montenegrin coup of 2016 has emerged as a flagrant example of Russian interference in the Western Balkans. Originally known as “Little Russia”, a popular destination for many Russian tourists and a favorite of Moscow-backed oligarchs, Montenegro is now at the forefront of the anti-Russian camp in the Balkans. Montenegro became a member of NATO only six months after the failed plot. This is despite the Russian view that the Russians who see Montenegro as the second most favorite country in the Western Balkans, besides the Serbs. Perceived as a Russian ally, it emerged as the best place for Moscow-backed investment. The Russian share in Montenegro’s GDP grew over the years to over 5 percent, while over 7,000 Russians have settled permanently in the country. Also, the Russians have gained control over 40 percent of the Montenegrin real estate market, especially apartments located along the coast.

Today, among the countries of the Western Balkans that are still considered to be under the direct range of action of Moscow as a sphere of influence is Serbia and the Serbs of Bosnia-Herzegovina (Republika Srpska), while the other countries are members of NATO or partner countries of the West such as Kosovo. But none of the countries of the Western Balkans are exempt from Russian influence or blackmail. Sir Stuart Peach, the high emissary of Great Britain in Bosnia-Herzegovina, said at the “Prespa Dialogue”

Forum in Ohrid that “Russia has militarized the issues of energy and economy”.⁴⁹

This applies to all the countries of the Western Balkans, especially now that the lack of supply of Russian oil and gas has become a concern that affects all the countries of the region. Meanwhile, as soon as the Russian aggression on Ukraine began, citizens in Tirana and the whole country began to demonstrate in support of Ukraine. The media covered the war extensively, even sending correspondents to Kyiv. Many debates took place on this topic, including the risk of Russian disinformation. For example, Top Channel organized a debate on the Top Story program about Russian influence in Albania. It was said there that, in general, in Albania, Russia’s economic and political influence is small, despite the efforts of the Kremlin. However, this does not exclude influence through corruption, espionage or the media.⁵⁰

The paradox is that while Russia is increasingly interfering in the Western Balkans, including Albania, it accuses the latter and Kosovo of sending mercenaries to fight alongside Ukraine. Foreign Minister Lavrov says that: “There is information that mercenaries are being recruited in Kosovo, Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina to throw Russia off balance and send them to countries including Donbass”, he said. “We are now double-checking this.”⁵¹ He also adds that: “German Chancellor Olaf Scholz insisted that “NATO intervened to

⁴⁹ “Escobar: Ballkani duhet të jetë pjesë e BE-së!” *Panorama*, 18 qershor 2022.

⁵⁰ Analiza: A rrezikohet Shqipëria nga ekspansioni rus?! 2022. *Top Channel*. 23 Mars. Marrë nga: [Analiza: A rrezikohet Shqipëria nga ekspansioni rus?! - Top Channel \(top-channel.tv\)](#)

⁵¹ “Russia checking reports about mercenaries for Donbass from Kosovo, Albania, B&H — Lavrov”. 2022. *TASS: Russian State Agency*. 22 Shkurt. Marrë nga: [Russia checking reports about mercenaries for Donbass from Kosovo, Albania, B&H — Lavrov - World - TASS](#)

prevent the genocide of Kosovo Albanians and they did it so well that the region is now progressing". But as he points out with xenophobic language, "It is far from prosperity. Kosovo and some other parts of the Western Balkans are becoming a fertile ground for crime. There are terrorists and drug dealers." This is part of Moscow's disinformation campaign against Albania. Recently, the Russian Federation published the list of foreign fighters who have been captured or eliminated by Russia in the conflict with Ukraine, where according to the Kremlin, there were 150 mercenaries from Albania and 42 of them were killed.⁵² Meanwhile, in the same report, it is specified that Kosovo has this number at 156 and 61, respectively. But the former prime minister and deputy Pandeli Majko has opposed such undiplomatic language, citing the map of the countries from which foreign fighters have come. thus referring to a chronicle of India's WION television. This map refutes the Russian claims of foreign fighters consisting to a significant extent of Albanians from Albania and Kosovo.

The implications of the war in Ukraine for the Balkans continue to be addressed in various analyses, mostly taken from the foreign press. Bota.al republished an analysis of Foreign Policy, where the author Jade McGlynn underlines that "By calling Kosovo to Ukraine, Russia is demonstrating to itself that it has returned to the status of a great power and intends to carry out the undoing of the post-war security architecture Cold, attempting another world order, rather than simply revising the current rules."⁵³

⁵² "Ambasada Ruse në Tiranë publikon statistikat e Ministrisë së Mbrojtjes: 150 mercenarë nga Shqipëria luftojnë në Ukrainë". *Panorama*. 18 Qershor 2022. Marrë nga: <http://www.panorama.com.al/lajm-i-fundit-ambasada-ruse-ne-tirane-publikon-statistikat-e-ministrise-se-mbrojtjes-150-mercenare-nga-shqiperia-luftojne-ne-ukraine/>

⁵³ Jade McGlynn. 2022. "Pse Putin vazhdon të flasë për Kosovën"? *Bota.al*. 5 mars. [Pse Putin vazhdon të flasë për Kosovën? – bota.al](https://www.bota.al/pse-putin-vazhdon-te-flase-per-kosoven/)

Meanwhile, Exit.al published an article by Sidita Kushi, which stated that “While Putin is waging a war of choice and geopolitical revisionism in Ukraine, those who continue to equate his actions with NATO’s intervention in Kosovo are only fanning the flames of a bigger conflict. They are accepting Putin’s excuses for aggression and are opening the door to further irredentism in the Balkans.”⁵⁴ This thesis is similar to Ilir Kalemaj’s argument for the analysis page of A2 CNN.⁵⁵

On the other hand, the Russian officials insist on the limits of absurdity that the right of self-determination for the Russians of Crimea and Donbas is the same as the precedent of Kosovo, although they do not recognize the latter as a republic. They have even tried to undermine the process of international recognition of Kosovo. As the German analyst of the Balkans, Bodo Weber, has recently argued, “the comparison made by the Kremlin between Kosovo and Crimea is absolutely not valid”.⁵⁶

On the contrary, many analysts see the acceleration of the integration of the Western Balkans as a prerequisite for the progress of the integration processes for Ukraine or Moldova. For example, Exit.al published a commentary on the implications of Ukraine’s EU membership for the Western Balkans, noting *inter alia* that “if the EU fails the

⁵⁴ Sidita Kushi. 2022. “Comment: Don’t Compare Russia’s War to NATO in Kosovo”. *Exit.al* 1 mars. [Comment: Don’t Compare Russia’s War to NATO in Kosovo - Exit - Explaining Albania](#)

⁵⁵ Ilir Kalemaj. 2022. “Russia’s irredentism and the existence of Ukraine as a nation-state”. *A2 CNN*. 4 mars. <https://english.a2news.com/2022/03/04/russias-irredentism-and-the-existence-of-ukraine-as-a-nation-state/>

⁵⁶ Analisti: Krahasimi rus i Kosovës me Krimenë, absolutisht i paqëndrueshëm. 2022. *Gazeta Tema*. 23 shkurt. [Analisti: Krahasimi rus i Kosovës me Krimenë, absolutisht i paqëndrueshëm - Rajoni \(gazetatema.net\)](#)

objective of membership of the Western Balkan countries, it will be very difficult to convince anyone that the EU is serious about Ukraine's membership perspective".⁵⁷ EU expert Gledis Gjipali shares this belief in an article for the Albanian Media Institute.⁵⁸

In general terms, we can say that the tensions between Moscow and Tirana have increased after the Russian aggression against Ukraine, Albania being one of the countries that is openly in solidarity with the latter. This is also a result of the responsibility as a co-holder in the Security Council with the United States of America, as stated by Prime Minister Rama.⁵⁹ The Russian threat is assumed to bring about the acceleration of the integration of the Western Balkans in general and Albania in particular, as stated by publicist and diplomat Shaban Murati, among others.⁶⁰ But this is one side of the coin that in other writings the publicist Murati has been particularly harsh with Albania's foreign policy towards Russia. He even goes so far as to accuse the latter of giving Russia the opportunity

⁵⁷ Alice Taylor. 2022. What Ukraine's EU Membership Bid Means for the Western Balkans. *Exit.al*. 19 mars. [What Ukraine's EU Membership Bid Means for the Western Balkans - Exit - Explaining Albania](#)

⁵⁸ Gledis Gjipali. 2022. "Lufta në Ukrainë dhe ndikimi në antarësimin e Ballkanit në BE". *Transition Promotion Program. Instituti Shqiptar i Medias*. <https://www.institutemedia.org/transition-promotion-program/>

⁵⁹ Juliana Prifti. 2022. "Rama: Shqipëria dhe SHBA, bashkëpenëmbajtëse të çështjes së Ukrainës në Këshillin e Sigurimit të OKB-së". 5 shkurt. *Agjencia Telegrafike Shqiptare (ATA)*. Marrë nga: <https://ata.gov.al/2022/02/05/rama-shqiperia-dhe-shba-bashkepenembajtese-te-ceshtjes-se-ukraines-ne-keshillin-e-sigurimit-te-okb-se/>

⁶⁰ "Shaban Murati: A ka mundësi që rreziku i një kërcënimi rus të përshpejtojë proceset integruese në BE të Ballkanit?" 2022. *Albspirit*. Marrë nga: <https://alb-spirit.com/2022/02/26/shaban-murati-ka-mundesi-qe-rreziku-nje-kercenimi-rus-te-pershpejtoje-proceset-integruese-ne-te-ballkanit/>

to penetrate the region, giving it in certain cases the “key” to access our Balkan neighborhood.⁶¹

In general, as various researchers have rightly observed, the Russian influence in the region has come in direct proportion to the violation of stability and fragile peace. As Andi Hoxhaj recently pointed out: “If the EU does not take Russia’s growing influence in the Western Balkans seriously enough, it risks creating enemies on its borders.” And at the height of the Ukraine-Russia war, this would be very serious indeed.”⁶²

However, despite the growing Russian intervention in the Western Balkans, Albania is relatively more protected as compared to the other Western Balkan countries from Russian influence. Even more so than Kosovo, which is sensitive in the northern part of Mitrovica where the separatist movements of the Serbs there are often financed or directly assisted by the Kremlin. Even in terms of media influence, there is no evidence of any local media in Albania being directly financed by the Kremlin, despite the speculations. Of course, there is the risk of disinformation through Russian propaganda organs such as Russia Today, Sputnik News or their regional satellites. But Albania has clearly anchored its foreign policy towards the West and as a NATO member country has had clear positions towards Moscow.

⁶¹ Shaban Murati. 2022. “Rreziku rus në portat e Ballkanit: Një çelës e ka dhënë Tirana”. *Gazeta Dita*.

⁶² Andi Hoxhaj. 2022. “Ndikimi i Rusisë në Ballkan po rritet pikërisht kur po cenohet paqja e brishtë e rajonit”. *CNA*. 19 korrik. <https://www.cna.al/opinione/ndikimi-i-rusise-ne-ballkan-po-rritet-pikerisht-kur-po-cenohet-paqja-e--i320371>

b. China

China's influence in the Western Balkans is taking the form of a "smart power" due to the combination of political influence and economic influence it uses. China is an already consolidated power with global aspirations that is seeking to correct the often unilateral approach of the United States by provoking what many geopolitical observers are calling a "new cold war" (Gladstone 2020).

Regarding China's specific interest in the countries of the Western Balkans, we can say that in recent years, infrastructure investments or in sectors such as energy, transport and oil have been multiplying, while simultaneously adapting to the different nature of the economies of each country. An example is the level of Chinese investments in North Macedonia. The contracts secured with this country has gone over 400 million dollars during the years 2005-2018, but with a further crescendo especially in recent years. For China, North Macedonia is a link between its investments with the port of Piraeus in Greece, where Chinese investments have reached around €10 billion, and Serbia, where China has so far spent roughly the same amount, €10.2 billion (Seaman et al. 2017).

Most of these small Balkan countries are quite sensitive to Chinese investments, especially after the global financial crisis that started in 2008 and continued for several years, and here we can single out the case of Greece highlighted above. Meanwhile, the subsequent crises have caused more and more eyes to turn from China to benefit especially from unconditional financing or loans or co-associated with political conditions.

In fact, some countries require investment financing for projects that are not very profitable from an economic point of view, such as Montenegro. The priority of Serbia in

China's plans for the Western Balkans also contains political influence, in addition to economic influence. Ever since the Chinese embassy was mistakenly targeted by NATO air strikes in 1999 in response to Milosevic's campaign of ethnic cleansing in Kosovo, China-Serbia relations have been strained, with China consistently supporting Serbia's position towards Kosovo, as well as not accepting any formula other than what would be agreed between the two countries in a formal agreement between them, a position that is very important for Serbia, taking into account the fact that China is a permanent member of the Security Council of the United Nations and has veto power in such matters.

China aims to advance its geo-strategic interests with the countries of the Western Balkans, including Albania, through trade agreements. The fact that it is among the main exporting countries and a key investor through semi-state and private companies, it enables China to reach far and beyond through its successful economic diplomacy. However, to summarize, we may quote the well-known expert and researcher Jens Bastian when he says that it remains unclear if and what political agenda is hidden behind Chinese investments. "China has no interest, unlike Russia, in instigating a change of governments in these countries," he says. According to his interpretation, "the current Chinese geostrategic interest is only economic in nature, as a transit point for rich Western markets. And the fact that China does not lecture anyone in these countries about human rights or media freedom is more welcomed by the governments of some countries in the Western Balkans."⁶³

⁶³ Zoran Arbutina. 2018. "Kina hyn në Ballkan - po a përbën rrezik?" 27 shtator. Marrë nga: <https://www.dw.com/sq/kina-hyn-n%C3%AB-ballkan-po-a-p%C3%ABrb%C3%ABn-rrezik/a-45647868>

China is also increasingly using forms of cultural diplomacy such as the Confucius Institute, Chinese cultural centers, cultural heritage activities, student scholarships, bilateral tourism, etc. In the case of Albania, China, through its official representatives and not only, often refers to the historical past, the close relationship that the two countries had during the 70s of the last century, Chinese investments in energy and heavy industry or cultural exports of the communist Albania like the movies. But at the same time insists on the fact that China cooperates with different political systems and does not interfere in the internal affairs of certain countries. This narrative and these ideas have been used *en bloc* to advance the thesis of deepening inter-state cooperation between Albania and China.

Gradually, China has increased its media influence in Albania. Examples of this are Radio China Internacional, which has been active in Albania for a long time. Also China supports Radio-Ejani which promotes its policies. Also, China has increased its presence on public television. According to China.org.cn, RTSH has signed an agreement with China to broadcast Chinese programs in 2019, specifically the show called “Children of Wuzhumuqin City”.⁶⁴ Meanwhile, there are also specific shows, such as the show “Albania Walks the Silk Road” on RTSH. RTSH itself describes it as follows: “a television documentary that reflects the rapid development of economic cooperation between China and the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, including Albania”. This can easily be termed as Chinese propaganda. But in general, if we look at the general schedule of RTSH, there is a lack of Chinese shows, films and programs, if we consider that as

⁶⁴ “Albania, China sign agreement on broadcasting of TV programs”. 20 Tetor. Marrë nga: Albania, China sign agreement on broadcasting of TV programs - China.org.cn

much or even more attention is given to Russia or India in the same time frame.

On the other hand, according to a report published by the European Council on Foreign Relations (Shopov, 2021) there are various agreements between China and the Western Balkan states, not to receive negative coverage in their respective media. These media often seem to avoid references to information about the controversial conditions attached to Chinese projects. The economic development imperative in countries with limited media freedom allows governments in the region to control the flow of content to China and bilateral relations with the country. An article published on reporter.al by Nancy Bogdani, mentions that a report made by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation says that in Albania there are no identified editorial media policies, neither pro-Chinese, nor Chinese-owned media. The same article also points out that China is offering a number considerable amount of free products, such as documentaries on the system of government in China “China: Time Xi”.⁶⁵

c. Arab countries

The countries of the Persian Gulf and in particular Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates have for over a decade extended their mainly economic, but also political and cultural influence in the countries of the Western Balkans, especially in Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Montenegro. It is understood that their influence is quite limited and only in countries like Bosnia-Herzegovina or in special regions

⁶⁵ Nensi Bogdani. 2021. “Kina rrit ndikimin mbi mediat publike shqiptare, vëren raporti”. Reporter: 7 janar. <https://www.reporter.al/2021/01/07/kina-rrit-ndikimin-mbi-mediat-publike-shqiptare-veren-raporti/>

like Sandzak in Serbia. While when it comes to economic investments, Serbia and Montenegro have benefited the most. For example, the United Arab Emirates has direct investments in Serbia over 3 percent of the total, ranking behind the European Union, Russia and China, and includes strategic investments such as the Belgrade Waterfront, a \$3 billion investment.⁶⁶

Also, Qatar has invested in the agricultural sector in Serbia, while the United Arab Emirates is among the Gulf countries with the most direct foreign investments in Montenegro. Meanwhile, rich citizens from Saudi Arabia have bought various properties and real estate in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Meanwhile, in Albania, investments from the United Arab Emirates have reached 40 million euros for 2020 alone.⁶⁷ A mega-investment of 2 billion dollars for the revitalization of the port of Durrës is also expected from this country. However, this has been met with skepticism by a part of the Albanian media.⁶⁸

On the other hand, the Abu-Dhabi Fund has simultaneously promised to finance the New Boulevard and Tirana River projects that have long since started work.⁶⁹ In general, there

⁶⁶ Vuk Vuksanovic. 2021. "Serbia's best friend in the Arab World: the UAE". 9 korrik. Marrë nga: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/serbias-best-friend-arab-world-uae>

⁶⁷ Arlinda Gjonaj. 2020. Investimet nga Emiratet e Bashkuara Arabe, 40 milionë euro gjatë vitit 2020. ATA (Agjencia Telegrafike Shqiptare), 3 dhjetor. Marrë nga: <http://ata.gov.al/2020/12/03/investimet-nga-emiratet-e-bashkuara-arabe-40-milione-euro-gjate-vitit-2020/>

⁶⁸ Shih për shembull, "Ja çfarë fshihet pas investimit 2 miliard euro në Portin e Durrësit". 2021. *Gazeta Telegraf*. 21 qershor. Marrë nga: <https://telegraf.al/ekonomi/ja-çfare-fshihet-pas-investimit-2-miliard-euro-ne-portin-e-durresit/>

⁶⁹ A duhet t'u druhemi investimeve arabe në Ballkan? *Gazeta Si*. 1 gusht. Marrë nga: <https://gazetasi.al/a-duhet-ti-druhemi-investimeve-arabe-ne-ballkan/>

is little transparency about investments from Arab countries in Albania, which increases skepticism and criticism regarding these funds and financing.

Although the political and cultural influence of the Arab countries still remains negligible in the region, the economic but also religious penetration through radical currents such as Wahhabism and Takfarism remains a non-negligible threat. For example, Deutsche Welle, citing expert Vedran Dzihic, has reported that around 150 and 120 jihadists have returned to Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo respectively on May 30, 2017. It is believed that up to several thousand citizens of the Western Balkans have joined the Islamic State at the height of his terrorist activity.⁷⁰ The phenomenon is, no doubt, partly the result of the fact that a strict form of Islam, Wahhabism, has infiltrated the region – in particular, under the influence of Saudi Arabia. According to the Clingendael Institute, 200 Kosovars received scholarships to study Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia.⁷¹

An article published by Balkan Insight on 29 March 2010, citing the Sunday Times, reported that hundreds of millions of pounds had been injected, mainly from Saudi Arabia, into radical Islamic groups in the Balkans.⁷² The European

⁷⁰ “Could Balkan nations become the new hotbeds of Islamist extremism?” *Deutsche Welle*. Marrë nga: <https://www.dw.com/en/could-balkan-nations-become-the-new-hotbeds-of-islamist-extremism/a-39045256>

⁷¹ Danijel Tadic. 2017. “Lack of good governance contributes to growth of radical Islam in the Western Balkans”. *Clingendael Spectator* 4, Vol. 71. Marrë nga: <https://spectator.clingendael.org/pub/2017/4/the-growth-of-radical-islam/>

⁷² Sinisa Jakov Marukic. 2010. “Report: Saudis Fund Radical Islam In Balkans”. *Balkan Insight*, 29 Mars. Marrë nga: <https://balkaninsight.com/2010/03/29/report-saudis-fund-radical-islam-in-balkans/>

Commission in particular must have a clear plan on how it plans to protect existing citizens of member states from the dangers posed by radical Islam infiltrating these countries as well as the integration of that small number of repatriated ex-jihadists and their families. theirs who have returned in the meantime. These are still unhealed wounds and limiting the influence of third countries that directly or indirectly sponsor forms of Islamic extremism that have no tradition in the region are threats that must be addressed with foresight.

VI. The different stages of the integration of the Western Balkans into the EU

The European Union has a continuous interest in accelerating the integration process for the countries of the Western Balkans, first officially promised at the Thessaloniki Summit in 2003 and reconfirmed a few years ago by the Berlin Process. At this moment, with the impact of the unprecedented crisis of Russian military aggression against Ukraine, it is thought that in addition to decision-making based on the merit of the candidate countries, geopolitical factors and considerations are not to be excluded either.

On the other hand, official Tirana has long been listening to the old refrain of “doing its own homework” before the opening of EU membership negotiations. The Regatta principle, where each country will be evaluated according to merit, is a principle repeated since the Thessaloniki Summit in 2003 that paved the way for the European perspective for these countries. This kind of tango where we Balkans pretend to do our tasks meticulously, they (Brussels) pretend to believe us and in the end the old avas of over-repeated conditions are repeated, is an ongoing saga. European countries may have specific reservations, but they are united in judicial reform and the proper functioning of the rule of law.

That said, it cannot be ruled out a priori that specific countries may have specific requirements, although they may

not go so far as to be restrictive. For example, Greece may in the future decide to make it difficult for Albania to join the EU if, according to them, the issue of protecting the properties of Greek minorities in Albania or the final solution of the delimitation of the continental shelf does not receive a final solution. The solution of the sea issue, a sharp and current problem, is not and should not be an emergency to gain the support of Greece, but a legal and professional solution that will stand the test of time and will not feed nationalism or attitudes blocking. Referral to the International Court of Justice is a step in the right direction, but if it is not accompanied by serious preparations from the Albanian side, it could be a boomerang and a high cost of integration for Albania. The case of Croatia is a good indication of what can happen with the opening of negotiations. Croatia opened negotiations in 2005 on the condition of full cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia.

From April to October, the cooperation process on the part of Croatia was observed in detail until the Council accepted the reasoning of the Commission for full and unconditional cooperation of Croatia as well as the comprehensive revision of the country's legislation that was judged to be in accordance with the *acquis communautaire*. Meanwhile, Croatia's problems with Slovenia over Piran Bay and fishing rights continue to this day with Croatia refusing international arbitration, even though both countries are part of the same EU family. On the other hand, while Croatia received candidate status in 2004 and became part of the EU in 2013, Macedonia, which received candidate status only a year later, i.e. in 2005, managed to open negotiations only recently. The situation is completely different with Montenegro, which within an extremely short time as an independent state has achieved substantial progress since obtaining candidate status in 2010,

opening negotiations in 2012 and opening 32 negotiation chapters, successfully completing three of them. Serbia, with a two-year delay as compared to each of these Montenegrin steps, follows in line, although in Serbia's case we should bring in mind the conditionality with the recognition of Kosovo, which is the last chapter of negotiations.

The latest conflict instigated by Moscow is one of the next signals that the integration process should be accelerated. Albania and the Balkans should not wait endlessly like the barbarians in ancient Rome *ante portas*. The situation in our continent should serve as a moment of national reflection on the country's priorities and challenges, in order not to miss once again the train of integration. It is the duty of the majority to extend the hand of sincere institutional cooperation with the actors and opposition factors to create the conditions for a national dialogue beyond the political rhetoric of the day regarding integration issues. The opposition, also, should see it as an opportunity of political capitalization the cooperation for a successful integration process. This process should be less conflictual and oriented towards the technical debate for the realization of those conditions and criteria, so that the opening of negotiations and their closure does not encounter blocking walls. If integration will really be sought as an opportunity to improve the lives of the Albanians, then it should not be used as a political instrument to sell it as an electoral product in favor of one or the other party.

VII. Conclusions

This study tried to shed light on the perception of Albania's efforts to join the EU, the relationship where Albania stands in relation to its neighbors, as well as the internal and external challenges that the countries of the Western Balkans face in relation to the EU. Only by having this general panorama divided into different sections throughout the paper, we can contextualize the peculiarities of the Albanian case but also critically understand the behavior of the political elite and those of the media and civil society in relation to Brussels. The monograph also brings relevant evidence for the involvement of third actors in the Western Balkans and how these actors have influenced the integration journey of each country to the EU. It also analyzes the behavior of the respective elites of Western Balkan countries in relation to Brussels.

The way the European Union is perceived, the problems related not only to the process of enlargement in the Western Balkans, but also how the EU itself is presented in the media and public forums, have to do with the freedom and integrity of the media itself. The media is not, or at least should not be, only a neutral conveyer of information, but also a builder of public opinion and a fourth power with real weight in influencing public policies. The fact that the freedom of the media in Albania has taken steps back, does not make the media more reliable for public opinion, nor influential enough vis-à-vis politics and government. Naturally, seen from this

perspective, the role of the media in influencing the public perception of the EU remains reduced. The fact that there is a lack of sufficient expertise in the Albanian media regarding developments in the EU or the enlargement process makes this fact even more problematic.

Of course, the current work has its limits and rather than an exhaustive study on the matter in question, it aims to open a debate about the aforementioned challenges and how we can contextualize the case of Albania in the current situation. It also aims to provoke such questions as: do we have an increase in Euroscepticism among the leading elites in the case of Albania? If so, is this structural and systemic, or merely reactive or provocative behavior towards the closed doors of the EU? The study also sees the public reaction to alternative plans such as that of the European Political Community recently proposed by President Macron or the idea that preceded this latest proposal such as that of “two-speed Europe”, which essentially is the idea of a permanent antechamber for the countries of the Western Balkans.

Also other questions are raised in the public and political debate, such as: in the public discourse, should Albania have a plan B or is it destined to have the full integration in the EU as the only *finalité politique*? What are the lessons that come to us from our Balkan neighbors, whether they are fully integrated, such as Romania, Bulgaria or Croatia, or those who are currently ahead of us on this journey, such as Montenegro and Serbia? And finally, are third countries, particularly Russian geopolitical influence and Chinese geo-economic penetration, threats to the ability to change the pro-EU integration course of these Western Balkan states? These questions are being asked in the media of Tirana and are being discussed and debated by politicians and statesmen, journalists, analysts and researchers, creating a

certain public discourse, while aiming to influence the views of the general public. Some of the findings presented in this study help, at least partially, in answering these questions. Additional evidence and even more exhaustive conclusions can be brought by authors who will tackle these topics in a more scholarly fashion, or offer recommendations related to policy-making.

The procrastination of the integration process and the delay in starting negotiations until now have impacted every cell of Albania's political, economic, social and international life. The Albanians have not passively waited for the opening of negotiations and even less for full membership in the EU, but through repeated migratory waves, they have tried to join the countries of the Union as soon as possible. This has also created flows of illegal immigrants and asylum requests that have become a concern for certain EU countries.

So, in a way, the Albanians have taken the integration into their own hands by demanding of member countries what the EU has promised to create in Albania through the process of integration and alignment with the EU. It remains to be seen if the opening of negotiations will significantly improve the implementation of legislation, consolidate the rule of law, curb corruption and increase the standard of well-being, thus making Albanians find Europe in Albania. This, first of all requires political will on the part of the government, as well as the Europeanization of society with mutual influence between the EU and Albania, which is achieved through dynamic interaction. This would affect domestic politics, public policies and society as a whole and is therefore important for citizens and businesses. In parallel and as an added value, it would also bring a constant positive perception of the EU in Albania and a public discourse that supports this perception.

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