

WESTERN BALKANS AND THE EUROPEAN UNION IDENTITY: VALUES, LIFESTYLES, AND EUROPEAN UNION CONDITIONALITY

Sarina Bakić

Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Ena Jusufbegović

Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Corresponding Email: sarina.bakic@fpn.unsa.ba

Received: October 21st, 2024 | Last Revised: December 3rd, 2024 | Accepted: December 4th, 2024

Abstract

This paper examines the interplay between the European Union (EU) identity and the identities of countries in the Western Balkans, focusing on shared values, lifestyles, and the role of EU conditionality. It explores how EU-promoted values and lifestyles affects political, social, and economic landscapes in the Western Balkans, especially among the Western Balkan Six (WB6) aspiring for EU membership. Through qualitative case studies of the WB6, the paper analyses the influence of EU conditionality on the adoption of EU values and lifestyles, highlighting the comparison and dynamics of identity transformation during the EU integration process. By drawing on media interviews with policymakers, EU officials, and local stakeholders, as well as policy documents and academic literature, the paper discusses how EU conditionality shapes national identities in the region. It also addresses the challenges and opportunities these countries face in aligning with EU values, presenting obstacles to integration and opportunities for deeper engagement with the EU framework. The findings contribute to understanding the complexities of the EU's enlargement policy, emphasising the strategic importance of the Western Balkans for the future of EU integration.

Keywords: *European Union, Western Balkans, EU Conditionality, EU Integration, Identity, EU Values, Political Landscape, Social Landscape, Western Balkan Six (WB6).*

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between the Western Balkans and the European Union (EU) has long been characterized by a complex interplay of cultural values, lifestyle differences, and EU conditionality mechanisms that lead to EU accession. As the EU grapples with its own identity and challenges, the integration of the Western Balkans presents both opportunities and challenges. This study aims to explore the dynamics of EU identity in the context of the Western Balkans, examining how shared values and lifestyles influence the accession process and how EU conditionality shapes the political landscape in the region. Considering the region's historical conflicts and varying political trajectories, this topic is of paramount importance as it addresses the potential for regional stability, peace and development.¹

¹ Western Balkans Six (WB6): Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia. All references to Kosovo in this article, whether to the territory, institutions or population shall be understood in full compliance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 and without prejudice to the status of Kosovo.

The significance of this article lies in its examination of critical research questions, including: How do the values and lifestyles of the Western Balkan countries align or contrast with EU standards? What role does EU conditionality play in promoting or inhibiting these values and lifestyles? Are there controversial perspectives regarding the effectiveness of conditionality in shaping political behaviours and societal norms? How does the integration process influence the identities of Western Balkan countries? By addressing these questions, the article also considers diverging hypotheses, such as the argument that EU integration could undermine local traditions and identities versus the belief that EU membership could reinforce democratic values and practices in the region.

The methodology employed in this study involves qualitative research of existing literature on the Western Balkans and the EU, alongside case studies of candidate countries.² This approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of the diverse cultural contexts and the impact of the EU's conditionality on national policy changes. The research incorporates analyses of media interviews with local stakeholders to capture grassroots sentiments regarding EU membership.

The main conclusions drawn from this study suggest that while there is a significant alignment of certain values, envisioned in the EU's Treaty of Lisbon (2007)—such as the desire for democracy and economic opportunity—divergences in lifestyle and cultural identity pose challenges to the standardization efforts the EU seeks to impose. Additionally, the findings indicate that EU conditionality can be a double-edged sword: while it catalyses reform, it may also engender resistance among populations wary of external influence.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The methodology employed in this study utilizes a qualitative research of existing literature to analyze the relationship between the Western Balkans and the European Union. This involves a thorough examination of existing literature that explores historical, political, and cultural dimensions of EU integration within the Western Balkans, offering a foundational understanding of the region's complexities, especially in regard to identities, values and lifestyles.

The theoretical background of this study is grounded in several key frameworks that inform our understanding of regional integration and conditionality. Primarily, the theory of Europeanization serves as a foundation, highlighting how EU policies and norms influence the political, economic, and social dynamics within candidate countries. This framework underscores the process through which local institutions adapt to align with EU standards, often catalyzing significant policy reforms. The concept of social constructivism is integral, as it emphasizes the role of identity, norms, and perceptions in shaping the aspirations of Western Balkan nations towards EU membership. By considering these theoretical lenses, the study aims to explore how historical legacies, national identities, and local governance structures interact with the EU's conditionality, ultimately affecting the trajectory of integration in the region. This theoretical backdrop not only informs the analysis but also guides the interpretation of the qualitative data collected throughout the research.

In addition to literature review, the study incorporates case studies of candidate countries. This approach facilitates an in-depth analysis of specific contexts, highlighting how WB6 states have responded to the EU's conditionality—namely, the criteria and reforms that countries must adhere to in order to pursue membership. By examining these case studies, the research can reveal patterns and variances in policy changes, revealing how each state navigates the pressures and incentives associated with EU accession.

The study enriches its findings by integrating qualitative data from existing interviews conducted with local stakeholders. This grassroots perspective is crucial as it captures the sentiments, aspirations, and

² Kosovo is the only state of WB6 which does not hold a candidate status for the EU accession.

concerns of citizens regarding EU membership, therefore the research aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of how EU conditionality is perceived at the community level, and how these perceptions influence national policy decisions, as well as personal set of identities and values. This comprehensive methodology ultimately aims to illuminate the multifaceted dynamics at play in the Western Balkans' pursuit of EU integration, revealing the interplay between external pressures and local realities.

RESULTS

Summary of Wb6 Case Studies as a Confirmation of Interplay between Identities and EU Accession Process

Integration of the Western Balkan countries has been an imperative for both national state policies and the EU enlargement policy, due to complex political and economic reasons, including strategic interests, identity politics, as well as the ideal of European unity. “The EU’s enlargement policy contributes to mutual benefits of peace, security and prosperity in Europe. It reinforces the EU’s political and economic strength and has a powerful transformative effect on the countries concerned. A well prepared accession process ensures enlargement is not at the expense of the effectiveness of the Union”.³ In addition to the enlargement policy, values of the EU are promoted in the Treaty of Lisbon (2008), which emphasizes that the European Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and human rights, including the rights of minorities. These values are universal and fundamental, forming the cornerstone of the Union's internal actions and its relationships with external partners. The *Acquis Communautaire*⁴ is fundamental to EU values related to the rule of law, with the aim of ensuring a cohesive legal system, as the backbone of the EU's legal framework, guiding both the Union and its Member States in upholding shared principles and standards.

Regardless of the common goal to join the EU, accession process has been a long, rocky road. “This significant enlargement has further emphasised the political stalemate that has been going on for years in the Western Balkans, where, more than two decades after the start of the enlargement policy, very little progress has been made and there has been an increasingly evident slowdown”.⁵ However, this is not the ultimate challenge for further EU accession. In addition to slow reform process in WB6, there is a dose of the lethargy within the EU. “European observers cite several kinds of reservations that have been preventing, or at least delaying, the EU’s readiness to admit the countries of the Western Balkans. Perhaps foremost is the so-called “Enlargement Fatigue.” According to the Eurobarometer, in 2013 upwards of 60% of Europeans opposed any further enlargement of the EU due to their concern about the Union’s ability to absorb new countries, whether politically or culturally”.⁶ The European Union often puts the responsibility for inadequate compliance with accession standards on the shoulders of local political elites that are in power in WB6. However, these local politicians have discovered that they can not only maintain their influence, but also potentially reinforce their grip on power, by blaming the EU for not acknowledging the significant strides of progress their countries have made. This dynamic creates a paradox where political leaders leverage external criticism to deflect accountability, ultimately complicating the path to EU

³ See European Commission, 2018, EU Enlargement strategy. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/ALL/?uri=celex%3A52014DC0700> (accessed 29 September 2024)

⁴ The EU *Acquis Communautaire* is term referring to the set of EU laws, rights, and obligations binding Member States. Candidate countries must adopt it into their legal systems to ensure uniformity and cohesion within the Union.

⁵ See Léo Portal, 2023, The EU enlargement in the Western Balkans: new challenges after the war. Blue Europe. <https://www.blue-europe.eu/analysis-en/full-reports/the-eu-enlargement-in-the-western-balkans-new-challenges-after-the-war/> (accessed 29 September 2024)

⁶ See Eran Fraenkel, 2016, the EU and the Western Balkans: Do They Share a Future? Barcelona Centre for International Affairs. https://www.cidob.org/en/publications/publication_series/notes_internacionals/n1_145_the_eu_and_the_western_balkans_do_they_share_a_future/the_eu_and_the_western_balkans_do_they_share_a_future (accessed 2 October 2024)

integration for their own homelands. It is necessary to understand comprehensive overview of the EU accession progress of the WB6, highlighting their journeys towards European integration, for better understanding of broader implications for regional stability and development.

Albania was granted candidate status in 2014, and ever since, has embarked on a detailed and complex reform process. One of Albania's most significant achievements in its EU accession process has been its commitment to judicial reform and the fight against corruption. When the EU granted Albania candidate status, they recognized its efforts to strengthen government institutions and combat organized crime and corruption, which are essential criteria for accession⁷. Albania has been commended for its ongoing reforms in these areas, indicating a positive trajectory toward meeting the Copenhagen criteria necessary for membership⁸. However, according to the same EU Report, while Albania has made strides, issues like political instability and incomplete reforms continue to pose significant challenges⁹. When it comes to identity, one of the most important aspects impacting Albania's EU accession is its national identity and the relationship with ethnic Albanians living in diaspora. Gëzim Alpion has explored how Albanian national identity can coexist with a European identity, highlighting the need for a balance between local traditions and European integration efforts.¹⁰ This dynamic is crucial as Albania navigates its future to the EU, seeking to modify the identity that honors its history while embracing new opportunities. The vision of Europe is deeply ingrained in the aspirations of Albania's younger generations. Young adults in Albania, who experienced the identity turmoil of the 1990s, are convinced that Albania's future lies within Europe.¹¹

North Macedonia has experienced one of the most prolonged delays in its EU accession process. Although it gained candidate status in 2005, progress was hindered for years by a persistent name dispute with Greece, which was ultimately settled by the Prespa Agreement in 2018. More recently, Bulgaria's veto, linked to historical and linguistic issues, further obstructed negotiations. In 2022, the EU lifted Bulgaria's veto, enabling accession talks to move forward¹². However, the substantial hindrance reflected in the public opinion. "The lifting of the Bulgarian veto to the opening of negotiations in the summer of 2022 caused an unexpected turn around in Macedonian public opinion. In the words of its critics, the European Union has become "unfair, arrogant and a promoter of blackmail" with regard to North Macedonia".¹³ A series of anti-EU protests have struck the state, and the North Macedonia's Prime Minister Hristijan Mickoski publicly expressed his dissatisfaction with Brussels's policy. "*Two-and-a-half decades since we started this integration process, since we signed the Association and Stabilization agreement, we are victims of bilateral problems, of bi-lateralization of the accession process. We have been humiliated on this path. I will remind you that in the name of European values we have changed our flag, banknotes, the constitution on several occasions [and] the name [of the country]. I underlined once more that we can no longer accept ultimatums*", Mickoski told reporters after the meetings he attended along with other Western Balkan

⁷ See more in: European Commission. [Albania 2023 Report](#).

⁸ See more in: European Commission. [Albania 2023 Report](#).

⁹ See more in: European Commission. [Albania 2023 Report](#).

¹⁰ See Gëzim Alpion, 2005, Western Media and the European "Other": Images of Albania in the British Press in the New Millennium, *Albania Journal of Politics*, Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 4–25, available on SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=839546>.

¹¹ Marjola Rukaj Tirana, Albania and the EU. A European dream? Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso Transeuropa. <https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Areas/Albania/Albania-and-the-EU.-A-European-dream-82105> (accessed 2 October 2024)

¹² See more in: European Commission. [European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations](#).

¹³ See Kolozova, K., 2024, Nationalist obstacles and geopolitical blind spots: the specific case of North Macedonia. *Schuman Papers* n°748. Foundation Robert Schuman. <https://www.robert-schuman.eu/en/european-issues/748-nationalist-obstacles-and-geopolitical-blind-spots-the-specific-case-of-north-macedonia> (accessed 2 October 2024)

leaders.¹⁴ The upcoming task for North Macedonia now is to shift the public opinion back on track towards EU accession, and it can only be done through promoting the common values: democracy, rule of law, human rights, and anti-corruption, but not only through reforms. It should be fostering a culture and society that embraces these principles.

Montenegro started EU accession talks in 2012 and has made the most progress among the Western Balkan countries, and it now has the best opportunity for the EU to regain momentum for enlargement in the Western Balkans.¹⁵ All 33 negotiating chapters have been opened, and progress has been noted in key areas. Montenegro could accelerate its process if it successfully closes more chapters in the near future. However, identity questions have been very important for understanding the Montenegrin politics. Currently, the contentious struggle over Montenegrin identity between those who identify as Serbs and ethnic Montenegrins has been eased. Overall, the political momentum is shifting in a way that Brussels finds favorable. However, there are still many potential pitfalls. To begin with, Montenegrin politics continues to be as contentious as ever.¹⁶ Unpredictable, as politics in the Balkans is, it can happen that Montenegro reverts to its previous state of revelling in the status of being "a frontrunner" while making minimal internal changes.¹⁷ This scenario would certainly benefit those in the Western Balkans who argue that the EU has lost its credibility, justifying closer ties with Russia, China, and others. At the moment, essential for domestic political leaders to take responsibility for maintaining political stability in Montenegro and use the momentum. According to a survey conducted in November 2023 for the EU Delegation¹⁸, the support among Montenegrin citizens for EU accession remains consistently high. Nearly 78.5% of the population is in favor of Montenegro joining the European Union.

Serbia started its accession negotiations in 2014 but has also faced slow progress. The current situation with Serbia's EU path is closely related to the complex relationship with Kosovo, as well as with Serbia's foreign policy, which openly shows signs of sitting in two chairs. *"I am not sure that it is possible to predict many years ahead but we will prepare to be closer (with negotiations) and I hope that if what Oliver Varhelyi rightly reproached us for, which is our non-compliance with their foreign policy, will not be a hindrance,"* Vučić, President of Serbia said.¹⁹ "Serbia is expected to improve, as a matter of priority, its alignment with the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy, including with EU restrictive measures, and refrain from actions that go against EU positions on foreign policy".²⁰ The EU's insistence on these reforms underscores the importance of demonstrating commitment to democratic values and regional stability. Additionally, public support for EU membership varies, and it is lowest among WB6. "Serbia is an exception since only a plurality of 40% of the population would support joining the EU and 54% of citizens and believe that the EU is not serious in its intention to offer membership in the European Union."²¹ Serbian national identity also plays a crucial role in citizen's opinion on EU accession, especially

¹⁴ See BIRN, 2024, North Macedonia PM Voices Frustration Over 'Humiliating' EU Accession Demands. <https://balkaninsight.com/2024/09/20/north-macedonia-pm-voices-frustration-over-humiliating-eu-accession-demands/> (accessed 5 October 2024)

¹⁵ See Milan Nič, et al., 2024, Montenegro's EU Push: Imminent Opportunities and Challenges. German Council on Foreign Relations. https://dgap.org/system/files/article_pdfs/DGAP-MEMO-03-2024_EN_0.pdf (accessed 3 October 2024)

¹⁶ See Dimitar Bechev, 2024. Montenegro's Window of Opportunity. Strategic Europe. Carnegie Europe. <https://carnegieendowment.org/europe/strategic-europe/2024/03/montenegros-window-of-opportunity?lang=en> (accessed 2 October 2024)

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ See more in: [EU Delegation to Montenegro](#).

¹⁹ See Euronews, 2024, 'Serbia needs to align further with the EU', Commissioner Várhelyi tells Vučić in Belgrade. <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/05/14/is-serbia-sliding-towards-authoritarianism-or-closer-to-eu-membership> (accessed 3 October 2024)

²⁰ See more in: European Commission. [Serbia 2023 Report](#).

²¹ See International Republican Institute (IRI), 2024, Western Balkans Regional Poll. February–March 2024. <https://www.iri.org/resources/western-balkans-regional-poll-february-march-2024-full/> (accessed 4 October 2024)

considering that two contrasting perspectives based on values and ideology shape Serbian national identity. The first perspective views Serbia as a Western European nation aligned with liberal values, emphasizing urban identity and prioritizing the individual citizen over national affiliation. The second perspective sees Serbia as a traditional state that, while geographically in Europe, does not fully embrace all European values. This view is associated with a collectivist mindset, a connection to Russia, and a focus on Orthodox and Slavic heritage, often placing national identity above individual responsibility and expressing scepticism toward the West and liberal ideals.²² This suggests that Serbia can only expedite its path to EU membership by resolving the internal divisions and presenting itself as a state committed to cooperation. Better, align itself with European values and facilitate progress in its accession process.

Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) remains at an earlier stage in its EU integration efforts, since it is facing complex political landscape and diverse ethnic composition. It was granted candidate status in December 2022, after significant delays due to political turmoil, corruption, and weak institutional reforms. The EU is insisting on more comprehensive reforms, especially in governance and the rule of law, but complex political situation continues to slow down the progress. Despite these political hurdles, there is a growing recognition among citizens of the importance of EU integration, as it is seen as a pathway to economic stability and democratic governance. To continue with the accession process, BiH must address these internal divisions, strengthen its institutions, and demonstrate a commitment to EU values and standards. There is a strong public support to EU accession, with 68% citizens who are in favour of BiH's membership in the EU, regardless of their ethnicity.²³ Ethnic and cultural diversity is one of the pillars of interculturalism in BiH. "People manifest a strong sense of European identity, which may come as a surprise since the majority of the population has a strong ethnic identity, but they believe that these two do not exclude each other. European identity as the idea that many BiH citizens still support, which means that the idea that Bosnia-Herzegovina has always been part of Europe and should stay there could be used more in promoting EU accession".²⁴ It is clear that Bosnia and Herzegovina should continue on the path toward EU accession. While the current economic and political crises both within BiH and the EU may slow down the state's integration efforts, it is encouraging to note that the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina are supportive of EU accession. A more realistic and open political discussion about the EU membership could enhance understanding of both the accession process and Bosnia-Herzegovina's current standing and make room for progress. The key takeaway is that improving system efficiency and addressing corruption are crucial, if these issues are tackled, EU membership will naturally follow as the next step.

Kosovo's journey toward EU accession is characterized by significant challenges, as it remains the furthest behind in the integration process, and the only WB6 state without the candidate status. Since declaring independence from Serbia in 2008, Kosovo has sought to establish itself as a credible candidate for EU membership, which has been complicated due to the ongoing disputes over its status and recognition (not even all EU members recognize Kosovo). Normalizing relations with Serbia remains a critical aspect of the process, as the EU is involved as a mediator. Additionally, domestic issues such as political instability, economic development, and the rule of law must be addressed to meet EU criteria. With the strong public support according to International Republican Institute's²⁵ survey, 92% of Kosovo citizens said that they would vote to join the EU if a referendum were held today.²⁶ In relation to the complicated political situation, the identities in Kosovo are also on the opposite ends. The quest for EU accession is viewed not only as a way to attain political and economic stability but also as a reaffirmation of Kosovo's sovereignty and

²² Irena Ristić, 2007, Serbian Identity and the Concept of Europeanness. *Panoeconomicus*. 54. 185-195. 10.2298/PAN0702185R. <https://scindeks-clanci.ceon.rs/data/pdf/0032-8979/2007/0032-89790702185R.pdf> (accessed 30 September 2024)

²³ IRI., Loc.cit

²⁴ See Lejla Turčilo, 2013, Bosnia-Herzegovina and the European Union: Strong European Identity in Spite of Scepticism. Heinrich Boll Stiftung. <https://eu.boell.org/sites/default/files/uploads/2013/12/lejla-turcilo-bosnia-herzegovina-and-the-eu.pdf> (accessed 4 October 2024)

²⁵ IRI., Loc.cit

²⁶ Ibid

identity in the global arena. Nevertheless, the presence of substantial minority groups, especially Serbs, complicates the narrative of identity and presents challenges. Despite these challenges, there is a strong commitment among Kosovo's citizens to pursue EU membership, as it represents a path toward a more prosperous future. Strengthening institutions and fostering a culture of reform will be vital for Kosovo to advance its EU accession efforts.

DISCUSSION

Impact of EU Conditionality on the Acceptance of EU Values and Lifestyles in the Western Balkans

The European Union, as a unique example of political and economic integration, has established through a decades-long process a specific form of balanced structure between national and supranational sovereignty. As a multi-layered, polycentric system of governance, law, and values, with broad capabilities in the fields of economy, human rights protection, and common internal and unified external policy, it is the most important form of European integration.²⁷ However, the increasingly vocal critics of the European project, who question the very purpose and even the survival of the EU, often forget its greatest achievement, peace and peaceful coexistence among European states and nations.

The integration of the Western Balkans into the European Union is a prerequisite for stabilizing peace, strengthening democracy, the rule of law, and economic prosperity. The implementation of European standards and values in the areas of democracy, the rule of law, public administration, economy, and the single market within the integration process also represents a unique opportunity for the transformation and modernisation of Western Balkan societies, their political systems, and the building of liberal democracy. It is important to underline that the Western Balkans countries, both geographically and culturally belong to Europe, and the integration of these states, given the existing geopolitical and economic relations, simply has no alternative. According to Sadiković,²⁸ not necessarily because the integration process and, in the long term, full EU membership will solve all the problems of these countries, but primarily because the cost of remaining outside of that value framework would have unforeseeable economic and political consequences for societies as a whole.²⁹ Additionally, authors of this article consider that the importance of Western Balkan countries entering the EU lies in several key factors. First, EU membership offers a path to political stability, helping to consolidate democratic institutions and the rule of law in the region. This integration fosters greater cooperation among nations, reducing historical tensions and conflicts.

Subsequently, joining the EU provides economic benefits, including access to a larger single market, which can stimulate trade, attract investment, and promote economic growth. This is crucial for improving living standards and creating job opportunities in the Western Balkans. Third, EU membership can enhance regional security by aligning these countries with European standards and practices, which can lead to more robust partnerships in addressing common challenges like organized crime and migration. It is important to notify that, this issue, concerning migration has tested the EU's commitment and obligations to diversity and human rights, leading to a serious debate about border control, cultural integration of migrants, labour policies and national identities. Additionally, integration into the EU helps ensure the protection of human rights and minority rights, promoting social cohesion and inclusion within diverse societies. Overall, EU accession represents a transformative opportunity for the Western Balkans, enabling them to modernize their political and economic systems while contributing to a stable and prosperous Europe.

On the other side, European identity is a complex and evolving concept shaped by shared history, values, and institutions across the continent. It encompasses a sense of belonging to a broader European

²⁷ See Elmir Sadiković, 2019, *Subnacionalni konstitucionalizam i demokratija: Bosna i Hercegovina između liberalnog i etničkog nacionalizma*. Univerzitet u Sarajevu, Fakultet političkih nauka: Sarajevo.

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ Ibid

community while respecting the diversity of individual national cultures and identities. Rooted in principles like democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, European identity also emphasizes cooperation and solidarity among its member states. Furthermore, the European Union plays a crucial role in fostering this identity, creating a political and economic framework that unites countries around common goals such as peace, prosperity, and stability. Despite challenges, such as national sovereignty concerns and cultural differences, European identity is often seen as a bridge between local and global citizenship, promoting dialogue, inclusivity, and a shared future in an interconnected world. According to Sassatelli,³⁰ views on European identity abound and propose different classifications, implicitly or explicitly estimating its future. Not all of them are primarily concerned with contemporary institutional developments as either the main agency or context of that identity (for example, the literature on identity-building by the EU or in the EU), but most are. Even those contemporary studies which are not, and that pursue more comprehensive understandings of ‘Europeanness’ – either in time, as a history of ideas of Europe going back well beyond the post-Second World War period, or in space, considering Europe in geographical terms – cannot be understood without any reference to that institutional context, which is also their own. As studies on Europe have flourished in parallel with the creation of the institutions that call themselves European, it makes sense sociologically to consider that context.³¹

In the context of the Western Balkans and the suspicious of ‘loosing of national identity versus European one’, that is an ongoing issue, that in the matter of identity politics creates certain tension among some. The tension between European identity and national identity is a significant issue in contemporary Europe. On one hand, European identity promotes unity and common values among member states, emphasizing shared principles like democracy, human rights, and economic cooperation. This overarching identity seeks to foster a sense of belonging to a collective European community, which can enhance political stability and facilitate collaboration on global issues. On the other hand, national identities are deeply rooted in the historical, cultural, and linguistic uniqueness of individual countries. Many citizens prioritize their national identity, viewing it as integral to their heritage and social cohesion. In some cases, this led to resistance against perceived encroachments on national sovereignty or cultural homogeneity by EU institutions. As a result, there is often a delicate balance to strike between embracing a European identity and preserving national distinctiveness. The challenge lies in fostering a sense of belonging to both the European community and one's nation, ensuring that both identities can coexist and enrich each other without conflict. The prospect of EU membership requires countries to concede some elements of national sovereignty in exchange for integration into the EU's institutional framework. This can create tension between the desire to join the EU and the need to preserve a strong sense of national sovereignty. Nationalists often frame EU conditionality as an external imposition that undermines the nation's autonomy, firing Euroscepticism in certain sectors of society.

From the sociological aspect, values are principles or standards that guide human behaviour and decisions, shaping how individuals and societies define what is important, desirable, or worthwhile. They influence everything from personal choices to broader cultural and societal norms and they are categorized as personal, cultural, moral, religious, spiritual and social values. Values vary across individuals and cultures, but they form the foundation for ethical behaviour, laws, social and moral norms, together with personal relationships. They provide a sense of purpose and meaning, influencing both individual actions and societal structures. More concretely in the context of this article, social values are the deeply held beliefs and principles that guide individuals and communities in their behaviour and interactions. They encompass concepts such as respect, equality, justice, and cooperation, shaping the moral framework within which societies operate. Social values influence how people perceive and relate to one another, fostering a sense of belonging and community. In diverse societies, such are all societies in the European continent social values play a crucial role in promoting inclusivity and understanding among different cultural, ethnic, and social groups. They can help establish norms regarding acceptable behaviour and expectations, thereby

³⁰ See Monica Sassatelli, 2009, *Becoming Europeans: Cultural Identity and Cultural Policies*. Palgrave Macmillan

³¹ Ibid

contributing to social cohesion. Additionally, social values often underpin the policies and laws that govern a society, reflecting collective priorities and aspirations.

As societies evolve, social values may shift in response to changing circumstances, new ideas, and global influences. This dynamic nature can lead to discussions and debates about the relevance and interpretation of these values, ultimately shaping the identity and future direction of communities, especially those in the Western Balkan countries. For example, younger generations in the Western Balkans, particularly those who have grown up with the prospect of EU membership and have participated in EU-sponsored educational and cultural exchange programs, tend to identify more strongly with European values and identity. This has contributed to a generational shift, with younger people being more open to Europeanization and less attached to the traditional ethno-nationalist narratives that dominate older generations.

It is important to underline that the European Union is founded on a set of core values that shape both its policies and the way of life for its citizens. These values are deeply intertwined with the cultural, social, and political lifestyles across member states, and they reflect the principles upon which the EU seeks to build a unified, democratic, and just society. More concretely, the EU is built on several key principles, enshrined in the Treaty of the European Union and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. These values are central to the EU's identity and help define the standards for both governance and societal life. Primarily, the EU believes that human dignity is inviolable and must be respected and protected in all aspects of life, which includes individual rights such as freedom of expression, movement, and belief, as well as economic freedoms such as free enterprise and the freedom to live and work anywhere in the EU. The EU emphasizes the importance of representative democracy, the rule of law, and fair and transparent governance, equality between all citizens, regardless of gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, or other status, is a fundamental EU principle. What is far more important for the Western Balkans countries, the EU emphasizes the importance of representative democracy, the rule of law, and fair and transparent governance, equality between all citizens, regardless of gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, or other status, respect for laws, legal equality, and the impartiality of justice systems are the cornerstones of EU's value system. These values are not just theoretical but play out in various policies that promote inclusiveness, interculturalism, and social justice across EU member states. The set of values of the European Union heavily influence how people live their lives across the union, reflecting a combination of both common European practices and national distinctions. This is basically linked to the lifestyles which in this context refer to the patterns of behaviour, consumption, values, and social interactions that individuals or groups adopt. Lifestyles are influenced by various factors, including class, culture, economics, and personal identity. They are seen as expressions of both individual choices and social structures.³² Some key aspects of EU lifestyles include the EU is home to a vast array of cultures, languages, and traditions. Freedom of movement within the EU has encouraged cross-cultural exchange, making urban centres particularly intercultural.

CONCLUSION

The integration process impacts the identities of Western Balkan countries in several significant ways. Firstly, it encourages a re-evaluation of national identities as countries align their policies and practices with European standards, prompting discussions about what it means to be both European and national. Also, the process fosters a sense of shared identity among the countries in the region, as they work together towards common goals, such as democracy and economic development, which can help bridge historical and cultural divides. What is far more significant in the context of the Western Balkans, the EU integration process often emphasizes the importance of human rights, rule of law, and interculturalism, leading to greater recognition and appreciation of diversity and interaction within national identities.

³² Deivid Chaney, 2003, *Životni stilovi*. Clio: Belgrade, Serbia.

Additionally, exposure to EU values and norms can inspire a shift towards more inclusive identities that embrace dialogue and cooperation, rather than division. Finally, while the integration process may strengthen European identity, it can also prompt a resurgence of national pride and cultural heritage as countries seek to maintain their unique traditions and histories amidst the broader European framework. The European Union's conditionality has had a profound impact on the political, economic, and societal transformations in the Western Balkans, particularly through its influence on governance, the rule of law, market reforms, and societal values. Conditionality refers to the EU's policy of offering the prospect of membership or closer integration in exchange for specific reforms that align with EU values and in that way formed the lifestyles that we have accentuated out in this article. In addition to EU's values, enshrined in the Treaty of Lisbon (2008), it expresses commitment to ensuring that cultural and linguistic diversity is not only respected but also actively promoted in the EU. By doing so, the EU aims to cultivate a diverse yet united Europe, ensuring that cultural heritage is preserved for future generations while enhancing the richness of the European cultural landscape.

Entering the EU can significantly change lifestyles in Western Balkan countries in several ways. First, access to EU funding and resources can lead to improved infrastructure, including better transportation, healthcare, and education systems, enhancing the overall quality of life. Related to this, EU membership promotes the adoption of higher standards in consumer protection, environmental sustainability, and public health, which can lead to healthier and safer living conditions, improving lifestyles for citizens in the Western Balkans in a broader scope, and for all generations of the population. Third, the integration into the EU single market opens up opportunities for greater economic participation, allowing citizens to benefit from increased job prospects, higher salaries, and enhanced career mobility across member states. On the other end, exposure to diverse cultures, ideas, and practices through EU programs can enrich local cultures and promote a more cosmopolitan lifestyle. Lastly, EU membership encourages the strengthening of civil society and democratic governance, fostering active citizenship and greater involvement in decision-making processes, which can empower individuals and communities as well. In the overall picture, integration into the EU can lead to a more dynamic, prosperous, and interconnected lifestyle in the Western Balkans. The EU conditionality process could have a transformative effect on the national identities of Western Balkan countries, pushing them towards Europeanization while challenging entrenched ethno-nationalist narratives. While the prospect of EU membership can serve as a unifying force and promote modernization, it also creates tensions between national sovereignty, cultural preservation, religious identities and European values. The process is marked by both generational and identity divides, as younger and more urban populations are more receptive to European identity. Eventually, the EU integration process encourages a redefinition of national identity, where being 'Western Balkan' and 'European' become increasingly interweaved, but the journey remains apprehensive with serious and demanding challenges.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alpion, G., 2005, *Western Media and the European "Other": Images of Albania in the British Press in the New Millennium*, *Albania Journal of Politics*, Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 4–25, available on SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=839546>.
- Bechev, D., 2024. Montenegro's Window of Opportunity. Strategic Europe. Carnegie Europe. <https://carnegieendowment.org/europe/strategic-europe/2024/03/montenegros-window-of-opportunity?lang=en> (accessed 2 October 2024)
- BIRN, 2024, North Macedonia PM Voices Frustration Over 'Humiliating' EU Accession Demands. <https://balkaninsight.com/2024/09/20/north-macedonia-pm-voices-frustration-over-humiliating-eu-accession-demands/> (accessed 5 October 2024)
- Chaney, D., 2003, *Životni stilovi*. Clio: Belgrade, Serbia.

- European Commission, 2018, EU Enlargement strategy. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/ALL/?uri=celex%3A52014DC0700> (accessed 29 September 2024)
- European Union, 2007, Treaty of Lisbon amending the Treaty on European Union and the Treaty establishing the European Community. Official Journal of the European Union, C 306, 17 December 2007, 1-271. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A12007L%2FTXT> (accessed 2 October 2024)
- Euronews, 2024, 'Serbia needs to align further with the EU', Commissioner Várhelyi tells Vučić in Belgrade. <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/05/14/is-serbia-sliding-towards-authoritarianism-or-closer-to-eu-membership> (accessed 3 October 2024)
- Fraenkel, E., 2016, The EU and the Western Balkans: Do They Share a Future? Barcelona Centre for International Affairs. https://www.cidob.org/en/publications/publication_series/notes_internacionals/n1_145_the_eu_and_the_western_balkans_do_they_share_a_future/the_eu_and_the_western_balkans_do_they_share_a_future (accessed 2 October 2024)
- International Republican Institute (IRI), 2024, Western Balkans Regional Poll. February–March 2024. <https://www.iri.org/resources/western-balkans-regional-poll-february-march-2024-full/> (accessed 4 October 2024)
- Kolozova, K., 2024, Nationalist obstacles and geopolitical blind spots: the specific case of North Macedonia. Schuman Papers n°748. Foundation Robert Schuman. <https://www.robert-schuman.eu/en/european-issues/748-nationalist-obstacles-and-geopolitical-blind-spots-the-specific-case-of-north-macedonia> (accessed 2 October 2024)
- Nič, M., Bechev, D., Maillard, S., Nechev, Z., Seebass, F., Zweers, W., and Gjoni, I., 2024, Montenegro's EU Push: Imminent Opportunities and Challenges. German Council on Foreign Relations. https://dgap.org/system/files/article_pdfs/DGAP-MEMO-03-2024_EN_0.pdf (accessed 3 October 2024)
- Portal, L., 2023, The EU enlargement in the Western Balkans: new challenges after the war. Blue Europe. <https://www.blue-europe.eu/analysis-en/full-reports/the-eu-enlargement-in-the-western-balkans-new-challenges-after-the-war/> (accessed 29 September 2024)
- Ristić, I., 2007, Serbian Identity and the Concept of Europeanness. *Panoeconomicus*. 54. 185-195. 10.2298/PAN0702185R. <https://scindeks-clanci.ceon.rs/data/pdf/0032-8979/2007/0032-89790702185R.pdf> (accessed 30 September 2024)
- Rukaj, M., 2010, Albania and the EU. A European dream? *Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso Transeuropa*. <https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Areas/Albania/Albania-and-the-EU.-A-European-dream-82105> (accessed 2 October 2024)
- Sadiković, E., 2019, Subnacionalni konstitucionalizam i demokratija: Bosna i Hercegovina između liberalnog i etničkog nacionalizma. Univerzitet u Sarajevu, Fakultet političkih nauka: Sarajevo.
- Sassatelli, M., 2009, *Becoming Europeans: Cultural Identity and Cultural Policies*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Turčilo, L., 2013, Bosnia-Herzegovina and the European Union: Strong European Identity in Spite of Scepticism. Heinrich Boll Stiftung. <https://eu.boell.org/sites/default/files/uploads/2013/12/lejla-turcilo-bosnia-herzegovina-and-the-eu.pdf> (accessed 4 October 2024)