

BALKAN COUNTRIES' GOALS AND CHALLENGES IN EU ENLARGEMENT

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Abstract: This study examines the membership aspirations of the Balkan countries in the context of the European Union (EU) enlargement movements and the problems they face in this process within the framework of constructivism. While constructivism focuses on the role of organizations in international relations, it also emphasizes that enlargement movements in the system are possible through the implementation of common norms, identities and values in the new member states. In this direction, a process that does not completely ignore material interests and prioritizes normative values is dominant. The EU's growth movements, which started with limited countries, increased the number of members over time and focused on enlargement movements. The organization, which became a global power in the following periods, stands out with its union-specific criteria and institutions and adopts strategies in the fields of law, politics and economy. From this point of view, the enlargement strategies realized by the EU have turned into an effort for the Western Balkan countries, Montenegro, Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Albania, which gained their independence after the dissolution of Yugoslavia, to join the membership. The Western Balkan countries, which have achieved candidate country status as a result of reforms in political, economic and social areas, have also faced difficulties in the accession process due to various factors. These challenges include internal political and economic problems, bilateral disputes between countries and external factors such as the EU's enlargement fatigue. The difficulties encountered in this direction have led to setbacks in relations with the Union. However, in the ongoing process, the Western Balkan countries' efforts to

adapt to EU norms in areas such as democratization, human rights and the rule of law have progressed positively. The Western Balkan countries wishing to join the Union put forward these norms, which must be fulfilled for accession, as a strategic goal and see them as positive gains. From this point of view, the aim of the study is to analyze the goals of the Western Balkan countries in terms of accession and the problems they face in the EU enlargement movements.

Keywords: European Union, enlargement movements, Western Balkan countries

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Introduction

Since the beginning of the 2000s, when the wars in the Balkans decreased, the European Union (EU) began to become an important actor in the region. The EU, which was not successful in the wars and conflicts that took place before the 2000s, launched various initiatives in the countries of the region in order to take an active role in the region after the Kosovo war and offered a membership perspective (Demirtaş, 2018: 179). However, while the EU has become the most influential power in the region, it is not only an economic integration project, but also a political structuring that unites around identity, norms and values.

For this reason, after the Cold War, the EU's enlargement steps turned into a normative value field that had the effect of transforming not only the institutions but also the identities and political cultures of the candidate countries. In this framework, EU membership in the Western Balkans represents European identity as well as economic development and democratization efforts.

In this article, the concept of the Western Balkans is used to represent the countries in the Balkans that are not yet EU members, and therefore includes Montenegro, Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Albania (Çağ, 2021: 2).

When we look at the EU's enlargement steps, while it has a very important place in the democratic transformation of the candidate countries, it is also important in the EU's foreign policy. For this reason, while the fifth enlargement movement included Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Malta, Malta, Greek Administration of Southern Cyprus in 2004 and Romania and Bulgaria in 2007, the Union started to follow a more cautious policy in terms of becoming a member. This was due to internal problems as well as the democratic, economic and political situation of the countries wishing to become members. With the realization of the sixth enlargement with Croatia in 2013, there are currently five candidate countries and one potential candidate country in the Balkans region. The candidate countries are Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, while Kosovo is a potential candidate country (Presidency of the EU, 2024).

In this context, this study will analyze the goals of the Western Balkan countries in the EU accession process and the main problems encountered in this process within the framework of the theory of constructivism. Constructivism does not only evaluate international relations in terms of material interests and power, but also defines identity, norms and social construction processes. Accordingly, the Western Balkan countries' desire to integrate with the EU aims not only at

material outcomes but also at identity, norms and various social construction processes.

Western Balkan countries face various structural and social obstacles on the way to these goals. Regional ethnic crises, weak democratic institutions, a sense of social insecurity, identity conflicts and unclear messages in the EU's enlargement policy slow down or hinder this process. Accordingly, the main research question of the study is "How are the Western Balkan countries' aspirations for EU membership and the problems they face shaped in the context of identity and the search for harmonization with European norms?"

In this article, the EU enlargement movements will be analyzed not only in terms of institutional harmonization but also in the context of identity construction and normative value conformity; the EU relations of the Western Balkan countries will be analyzed in depth by using the conceptual tools offered by constructivism. Accordingly, in the first part, the founding process of the EU will be discussed and in the second part, the EU Enlargement Movements and enlargement policies in the Western Balkan countries will be evaluated. Then, the EU membership goals of the Western Balkan countries and the main problems encountered on the way to the EU will be analyzed.

The Founding Process of the EU

The establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) in 1952, which served as the foundation of the EU, is considered to be the beginning of the process leading to the EU. One of the founding objectives of the ECSC was to secure the peace of the member states. Specifically, this aimed at preventing the wars between France and Germany and the danger this situation would pose to Europe. In fact, the main reason for the conflicts between France and Germany is the Iron, Steel and Mining sector. In this direction, European countries argued that conflicts would be prevented through cooperation and agreements to be made in the sector. For this reason, the ECSC was established in 1952 by six founding countries; France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg. Thanks to this cooperation established by Germany and the leading countries of Europe, the states were able to control each other. In this direction, since this process, which started with the ECSC, led to important results, the six founding countries decided to apply this cooperation to all economic areas. This decision led to the establishment of the European Economic Community (EEC) with the Treaty of Rome in 1957 (Soytürk, 2020: 313-314).

The European Atomic Energy Community (EAEC-EURATOM) was established in 1957 in parallel with the EEC, representing the second European cooperation. The community, which was included in the Treaty of Rome, was established on the same day as the EEC (Erkmen, 2019: 141). Thanks to this community, it was aimed to ensure cooperation in nuclear energy fields among the member states. At the same time, within the framework of this community, the peaceful and safe use of nuclear energy was aimed (Soytürk, 2020: 314).

With the Fusion Treaty in 1965 (Merger Treaty), the three communities, the European Coal and Steel Community, the European Economic Community and the European Atomic Energy Community, were gathered under a single roof council and named the European Communities (European Union, 2022).

While the number of member states was limited to six when the EEC was established, the United Kingdom, Denmark and Ireland applied for membership in the following years. However, this process was prolonged because France used its veto power against the UK's membership twice in 1963 and 1967. Accordingly, the "First Enlargement Movement" took place in 1973 and these three countries became members of the Community. In 1981, the number of member states increased to twelve with the accession of Greece and Spain and Portugal in 1986 (European Union, 2022).

With the unification of Germany after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the exit of Central and Eastern European countries from the Soviet sphere of influence and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the international system has undergone changes in various ways. In order to respond to these changes, a summit was held in Maastricht in 1991. One of the most important decisions taken at this summit was the establishment of the European Union (EU). This would enable the community to respond more successfully to changes in the international system. In addition, this summit, also known as the Maastricht Treaty, decided to strengthen the ties of the member states through monetary union, the establishment of European citizenship and cooperation in the areas of security, internal affairs and common foreign policy (European Union, 2022).

EU's Enlargement Movements and Enlargement Policy in the Western Balkans

The political uncertainty in Europe following the end of the Cold War has been one of the main concerns of the EU during this period. While the number of EU members increased with the enlargement movements in the past years, the independence of Eastern European countries after the collapse of the Soviet Union

led to various predictions within the EU. One of these was that the Eastern European countries would be able to join the Union after transforming their systems into a democratic structures. However, countries that wanted to become members had to meet certain standards in order to join the Union. For this reason, a summit was organized in Copenhagen in 1993, where the criteria to be met by the candidate countries were set. These criteria later came to be known as the “Copenhagen Criteria”. These criteria are based on principles such as political stability, a functioning market economy and the adoption of the EU acquis (Soytürk, 2020: 315).

As a policy that constitutes an important part of enlargement, these criteria have been a mechanism that plays a role in the political, economic and democratic transformation of countries. Candidate countries were expected to have a free market economy, the rule of law and a state structure that respected human rights. Accordingly, Austria, Finland and Sweden, which practiced a policy of neutrality during the Cold War, became EU members in 1995 due to their economic and cultural relations with the Union (European Union, 2024).

Post-2000 Expansion Movements

In 2004, Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Malta, and the Greek Administration of Southern Cyprus became members of the European Union, marking the most comprehensive enlargement of the Union in history. With the accession of these ten countries, the number of EU members increased to twenty-five. This process, dubbed the fifth enlargement, is considered to be the most politically and historically influential enlargement of the Union. The transformation that started in Europe with the end of the Cold War turned into a process of integration with this enlargement. After half a century of wars and conflicts, the European continent achieved significant results in the field of stability and cooperation with this integration process (Özgöker & Batı, 2017: 31).

In 1995, Bulgaria and Romania, two Balkan countries that applied for membership to the EU, became EU members in 2007 after negotiations and the Accession Treaty. After the 2004 enlargement, the number of members of the Union reached twenty-seven. Bulgaria and Romania, which are important due to their strategic location, were under the pressure of Soviet influence for many years, but with the weakening of this influence over time, they were able to pave the way to EU membership (Karluk, 2011:110-111).

Croatia, which applied for candidacy in 2003, became a member of the EU in 2013 with the sixth enlargement after Slovenia lifted its veto on various issues. After Croatia, the EU became a 28-member² union (European Union, 2024).

Dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia

The 1980s marked the beginning of radical changes for Central and Eastern European countries. Following the loss of power of the Soviet Union, the Eastern Bloc began to unravel and Yugoslavia was also affected by these developments. Firstly, the death of Tito and the Albanian leader Enver Hoxha was seen not only as the loss of two political leaders, but also as the loss of a unifying figure in their country. Secondly, the weakening of the Soviet system resulted in the overthrow of long-standing leaders such as Nicolae Ceaușescu in Romania and Todor Zhivkov in Bulgaria, and new reform-minded governments came to power in these countries. In this process, all Balkan countries, except Greece and Yugoslavia, turned more towards the West and liberalization and privatization policies gained prominence. During this almost decade-long transformation period, the rising wave of nationalism in the Balkans became the main threat to regional peace (Erkmen, 2019: 142).

The emergence of political crises and conflicts caused by nationalist movements played a major role in the breakup of Yugoslavia. This disintegration first started with Slovenia in December 1990, followed by Macedonia in January 1991, then Croatia in June 1991 and Bosnia-Herzegovina in March 1992 (Alkan, 2007: 22-23). In 1993, Yugoslavia was replaced by the Federation of Serbia and Montenegro, but Montenegro declared its independence in 2006. For Kosovo, which declared its independence in 2008, the process was more challenging compared to other countries and various problems occurred between Serbia and Kosovo in this process (Bulut, 2017:39).

EU Enlargement Policy in the Western Balkans and Candidate Countries

In 1997, the European Union adopted a policy of “Regional Approach”, which aims to bring the countries of the Western Balkans closer to the Union in the political and economic fields, while promoting the development of fundamental European values such as democracy, the rule of law and human rights in the region. The approach is based on a policy of conditionality, which aims to ensure regional

2 With the formal withdrawal of the United Kingdom on January 31, 2020, the EU is now a 27-member Union (European Union, 2024).

security and stability by strengthening agreements and cooperation among the countries concerned. While the EU opened the path to membership for the countries of Central and Eastern Europe after meeting the Copenhagen Criteria, it did not offer a direct membership perspective for the Western Balkan countries, instead focusing on their development through various incentives such as trade facilitation and financial support. Accordingly, it aimed to establish peace and economic development in the post-conflict region (Özgöker & Batı, 2017:32).

On December 14, 1995, the “Regional Approach Policy” adopted after the Dayton Agreement signed between Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia and Serbia is considered to be the beginning of the EU’s policies on the Western Balkans. With this policy, it was aimed to develop stability in the Western Balkan countries, to prevent the US from becoming the sole power in the region and to increase the sense of trust in the EU (Mujezinovic, 2007:175).

Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, North Macedonia and the former Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Serbia, Montenegro and Kosovo) are included in this approach. In 1999, the European Commission adopted a vision for a more effective and forward-looking strategy for the Western Balkans, in line with the principles of the rule of law, the strengthening of democratic institutions and fundamental reforms such as the transition to a free market economy. Within the framework of this vision, it was stated that the countries that realized the necessary reforms could be offered the perspective of European Union membership. This process was called the “Stabilization and Association Process (SAP)” and it was envisaged that countries could sign a “Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA)” after completing the reform process (Özgöker & Batı, 2017:32).

The EU’s concern for external security is at the center of the EU’s expansion policy in the Balkans with various approaches. For this reason, it has tried to prevent crises and stabilize the region. Some of the efforts made in this direction are listed below:

Royaumont Process: Twenty-seven countries came together in Royaumont, France on December 13, 1995 and signed the Declaration on the ‘Process of Stability and Good Neighborly Relations in South-Eastern Europe’. This declaration, which was also included in the Final Declaration of the Madrid Summit, was welcomed by the EU and thus constituted the first comprehensive approach of the EU in its Western Balkans policy. The objectives of the Royaumont Process were, firstly, the successful implementation of the Dayton Peace Treaty and, secondly, to contribute to the transformation of democracy and social society in the region (Kavalalı, 2005:152).

Joint Stability Pact: The Stability Pact, which aimed at the stability and economic development of the countries, was also considered as an attempt by the EU to make the countries of Southeast Europe adopt European values. Since the crises in the region affect the EU member states, the central importance of the Stability Pact is to ensure a peaceful environment. The objectives of the Stability Pact prioritize respect for human rights, the rule of democracy and the promotion of economic development. At the same time, the Stability Pact was seen as a step that would bring Yugoslavia closer to Europe. The political and economic elements offered to the countries of South East Europe also emphasize its importance in terms of offering different perspectives to the countries of the region for full membership to the EU in the future (Özgöker & Batı, 2017:33).

Regional Approach Policy: In the run-up to the Rome Conference on the realization of the Dayton Peace Treaty held on 15-16 February 1996, upon the invitation of the Council, the Commission prepared a detailed report on the Western Balkan countries on 14 February 1996 and proposed a new policy called 'Regional Approach' (Kavalalı, 2005:145). Within the scope of the "Regional Approach", economic aid, trade cooperation, general criteria and country-specific conditions were determined, including the Western Balkan countries that did not have an association relationship with the EU. The criteria that the Western Balkan countries are asked to comply with are; ensuring the return of refugees, readmission of citizens who are fugitives within the EU, maintaining the Dayton Peace Treaty, respect for minority and human rights. The EU has stated that it will impose some sanctions such as suspending trade relations, stopping aid and postponing the agreements put forward when it sees that situations that do not comply with these criteria continue (Altun, 2013:3).

Thessaloniki Summit: This summit, which was prepared by the EU Commission and included concessions for the Western Balkans, took place in Thessaloniki, Greece on June 21, 2003. The summit will include

- Technical assistance to the Western Balkan countries,
- Western Balkan countries to prepare and implement separate "Action Plans" and the Commission to monitor these plans through annual reports,
- Similar to the structure established in the candidate countries, the single framework decisions include the participation of the Western Balkan countries in the Community programs and agencies, as well as the Commission's proposals taking into account the use of CARDS Program resources (Kavalalı, 2005:148).

In line with these decisions, the EU aims to support the Western Balkan countries in terms of economic and technical support and aims for them to become members of the EU.

South East Europe 2020 Strategy: The strategy for the economic and social development of the South Eastern European countries envisages activities such as increasing national income per capita, foreign investment and welfare. The South East Europe 2020 Strategy aims to come together with the governments of the region to formulate national action plans and to ensure regional integration in this direction (Özgöker & Batı, 2017:34).

Candidate Countries

Following the accession of Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia to the EU, the Union turned its enlargement efforts to the Western Balkans. In this context, North Macedonia (2005), Montenegro (2010), Serbia (2012), Albania (2014) and Bosnia and Herzegovina (2022) gained candidate country status. Kosovo became a potential candidate country (2008) (European Union, 2024).

Membership Goals of the Western Balkan Countries and Obstacles

In the aftermath of the Cold War, the EU adopted various strategies for the realization of stability and democratic transformation in the region by extending its membership perspective to the Western Balkans region, which it had envisaged for Central and Eastern European countries. In line with the enlargement movements carried out in this context, becoming a member of the Union is seen as an important goal for the Western Balkan countries, covering not only economic integration but also democratization, rule of law, security and integration with the European identity. Although the processes leading to membership vary from country to country, the existence of common regional efforts is very important for the Balkan region.

The EU has become the main political actor in the Western Balkans, especially since the early 2000s. With the launch of the Stabilization Pact and the Association Process in the context of the Kosovo War in 1999, the EU has managed to go beyond economic work in the region. From providing police forces, judges and prosecutors in Kosovo to peacekeeping and peacemaking in Bosnia and Herzegovina, from supporting political reforms in North Macedonia to pushing regional governments to cooperate with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), the EU has played an active role in the region (Bieber, 2013:1).

Serbia

It has been argued that Serbia remains “one of the most reluctant Europeanizers, consistently understudied and under-theorized in the Europeanization literature” (Subotić, 2010). Upon examination, the EU and Serbia have had a difficult relationship. For many years, tensions centered in particular on Serbia’s non-cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY). More recently, however, the interaction between Europe and Serbia has been predominantly shaped by the deep differences that emerged between Serbia and the EU following Kosovo’s declaration of independence in February 2008. This led to a series of confrontations between Belgrade and the EU. However, the situation started to improve significantly from 2011 onwards. Under the auspices of the EU’s External Action Service, a dialogue process between Belgrade and Pristina started on March 8, 2011. In the first phase of the talks, the primary focus is on reaching agreements on three key objectives: “improving people’s lives, achieving better cooperation in the Balkans and bringing the region closer to the EU” (Economides & Ker-Lindsay, 2015: 2).

In essence, relations with the EU began when the first democratic coalition government, formed after Milosevic refused to accept the results of the 2000 elections, set its primary goal full membership in the EU, and Serbia became a potential candidate country following the Stabilization and Association Process (SAP). However, in the following period, it was stated that the process would be suspended due to the failure to surrender the war criminals and send them to The Hague, and the process was interrupted. However, in 2007, Serbia cooperated with the International Court to hand over the criminals responsible for the Srebrenica massacre (Armişen & Tatar, 2022: 220). In this direction, an important step was taken towards EU membership. However, in this process, Serbia was not granted candidate status due to its failure to recognize Kosovo’s independence, and this status was obtained only on March 1, 2012 (Turan, 2020: 57).

When we look at Serbia’s goals on the path to EU membership, the first thing we see is economic aid. Especially as Serbia struggled to recover from the impact of the international crisis, the EU was seen as the key to national economic growth. In this context, the current political elites have made statements that their goal is to enter the EU and in this context to upgrade the economic system. Moreover, Serbian citizens’ priorities for EU membership include a better future, welfare policies and employability (Economides & Ker-Lindsay, 2015: 19). Thus, Serbia’s EU membership is seen as a way to increase its legitimacy in the international arena and improve its relations with Western countries. In addition, the country

sees economic support as its main objective and focuses on investment and development projects.

When we look at the obstacles Serbia faces towards EU membership, the first one is the public administration reform. In this context, the recommendations of the EU Commission in previous years have not been implemented. Other important obstacles include limited progress on judiciary and fundamental rights. This is particularly the case in constitutional amendments and adoption of by-laws. Another important obstacle is Serbia's lack of progress in the area of freedom of expression. The independence of the electronic media (REM) regulator, strengthening the protection and safety of journalists, and ensuring transparent and fair co-financing for media content serving the public interest are all priorities for the EU. Serbia's lack of progress in this area means that freedom of expression remains an obstacle. Another important obstacle is the fight against organized crime. Serbia has made limited progress on this issue and has therefore been invited by the authorities to actively cooperate with CEPOL, Eurojust, Europol and INTERPOL, especially in the fight against drug trafficking and organized crime groups (European Commission, 2024).

Montenegro

One of the first EU-supported state-building projects in the Western Balkans, the experiment of the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro, saw a significant majority of Montenegrin citizens (around 55%) vote in favor of independence in a referendum in May 2006, thus ending the precarious state-like entity. Some celebrated this event as a success of the EU's soft power, mainly due to the peaceful and democratic separation of the two constituent republics of the common state. Between 2001 and 2006, EU policy towards Serbia and Montenegro clearly favored the preservation of a common state for the two republics. The EU demanded the re-establishment of the international legal sovereignty of Serbia and Montenegro as a single subject under international law and the continuation of a layer of common institutions and policies. According to the EU representatives' own statements, regional stability and the EU's interests there are most frequently cited as drivers of the EU's involvement in the constitutional impasse between Serbia and Montenegro. The reference to the EU's security concerns is important in this context. Intensely engaged politically, financially and militarily in the stabilization and consolidation of BiH and Kosovo, the EU has been careful not to disturb the fragile peace achieved in the Balkans in the late 1990s. In the fall of 2004, the EU agreed to conduct separate 'double-track' trade negotiations with the two republics within the framework of negotiations on a single Stabilization

and Association Agreement (SAA) with the State Union. Second, when Montenegro announced its intention to hold a referendum on independence, a right enshrined in the Belgrade Agreement, the EU worked with political parties in the government and the opposition to find a consensus on the conditions under which a positive vote would be considered legitimate and give the republic international recognition. Following the referendum, the EU immediately accepted the result and called on its member states to recognize the new state on the map of Europe (Noutcheva, 2009: 5).

After Montenegro's independence in 2006, Montenegro has been working on regional and environmental reforms to improve its relations with the European Union and has been close to enlargement movements. In line with these developments, the Stabilization and Association Agreement was signed with Montenegro in 2007 and Montenegro applied for membership in 2008. In 2010, the EU Commission continued to focus on the areas of justice, freedom and security for Montenegro in the accession process. Following the commission report prepared in 2010, Montenegro's status as a candidate country was approved in 2010 and the negotiation process officially started in 2012 and it was stated that the criteria in chapters 23 and 24 were pioneering in this regard. In the progress report, 7 chapters were opened for negotiations with an emphasis on reforms. The 2015 NATO membership invitation was an important step for Montenegro. When 2016 was analyzed, it was stated that progress in issues such as justice and home affairs, democracy was positive, but since there was not enough improvement in the economy, some recommendations were made in this regard (Armişen & Tatar, 2022: 221).

When analyzed in this context, within the scope of the policies implemented by the EU in Montenegro, "state building and legitimacy tool" comes first among the EU membership objectives of Montenegro. In the new state built after independence, the EU membership request is a part of gaining legitimacy in the international system. At the same time, the reforms to be carried out in the country on the way to membership are very important both in terms of securing foreign support and attracting investment. Therefore, the membership goal functions as a foreign policy strategy.

However, when we make a general evaluation, the inadequacy of the political system in terms of governance, limited progress on corruption, waiting for improvements in the fight against criminal organizations and limited progress in the field of economic criteria can be listed as the obstacles faced by Montenegro in terms of EU membership within the framework of the "2024 Montenegro Report" (European Commission, 2024).

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Sources indicate that the EU has been involved in both helping post-conflict countries to reconstruct and attempting to build future EU member states. While these two policies are, at least in name, contained in the Stabilization and Association process, the EU has not had a single policy towards the region, but rather a number of different policies carried out by various EU institutions and ad hoc bodies. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example, the EU is present in four different forms: EU presence in Bosnia and Herzegovina through the peacekeeping operation EUFOR (Operation Althea), the EU Police Mission (EUPM), the EU Special Representative (until 2011 under the Office of the High Representative) and the Commission Delegation (since 2011 the EU Delegation under the External Action Service). Thus, apart from creating a single policy out of institutions and policies, the EU's efforts in the Western Balkans are based on a fundamental assumption: that the EU can successfully bring about change through conditionality, transforming countries into stable democracies with a functioning rule of law and the ability to become EU member states. This process is understood to be largely twofold. First, transforming institutions and adopting EU-compatible legislation, and second, socializing elites through EU conditionality. These conditions range from transforming state structures in North Macedonia, Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina to addressing the effects of mass violence in post-war regions, including Croatia and Serbia, and transforming governance across the region (Bieber, 2013:2).

Bosnia and Herzegovina presents a complex state structure within the context of different ethnicities. The EU's main objective in this region, where fragility is particularly high, is to increase the functioning of state institutions and strengthen the concept of democracy, while at the same time making it possible to fulfill the criteria that will enable the country to join the Union. Bosnia and Herzegovina, which has made significant progress after its independence, has made progress in many areas such as free market economy, civil society organizations and democratization. However, the dual structure called Bosniak-Croat Federation and Republika Srpska within the scope of the Dayton Model made it difficult to ensure stability in the country and hindered the EU process. In the following periods, negotiations were initiated in 2005 within the scope of the ups and downs and the SAA was signed in 2008. However, the planned reforms were suspended due to the political crises in the country. In 2012, the High Dialogue on the accession process was initiated with Bosnia and Herzegovina, but the country could not apply for membership due to the ECtHR decision due to the lack of improvements in the legal field (Armişen & Tatar, 2022: 224).

Signed in 2008, the Stabilization and Association Agreement between Bosnia and Herzegovina and the EU entered into force on June 1, 2015. This removed an important obstacle on Bosnia and Herzegovina's path to membership and the country applied for membership to the EU on February 15, 2016. The 2019 Enlargement Strategy Paper stated that it was premature to declare the country's candidacy and presented an overarching roadmap for candidacy. This roadmap states that the start of negotiations will depend on progress on the rule of law, democracy, public administration and fundamental rights. In the following period, at the EU Summit of Heads of State and Government on 15 December 2022, it was decided to grant Bosnia and Herzegovina the status of candidate country (European Union, 2024).

With this process, one of Bosnia and Herzegovina's membership goals is to ensure the integrity of the state and maintain internal stability. In addition to economic and political goals, the goal of ensuring the integrity of the state is of great importance. In addition, EU membership opens up new areas for the rule of law, democratization and reforms within the framework of the proposed norms. In this respect, membership goals are of strategic importance for Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The poor functioning of the judicial system is one of the main obstacles to membership. Commission officials argue that the rights of citizens and the fight against corruption should be among the priorities of the judicial system. The fight against corruption is not seen as fully in line with European standards. Another obstacle is freedom of expression. The EU argues that there has been no progress in guaranteeing freedom of expression and media freedom and the protection of journalists. Another obstacle Bosnia and Herzegovina faces on the path to membership is the limited availability of a functioning market economy. Bosnia and Herzegovina is at an early stage of preparation and has made limited progress. In 2023, economic growth slowed to around 1.6%, mainly reflecting the deteriorating international environment (European Commission, 2024).

Overall, the country's ethnic divisions, the external dependence of reform processes and the lack of fully functioning institutions pose various obstacles to membership. In this context, the normative values of the EU have a limited and superficial impact and reforms are not fully implemented.

North Macedonia

Although the Republic of North Macedonia was recognized by many countries after it declared its independence in 1991, the recognition was not fully achieved

due to the name problem put forward by Greece, and it was referred to as the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM). On the other hand, in this process, crises occurred between Albanians and Macedonians, who have a large minority population in the country. Therefore, the country, which faced a difficult process, tried to stabilize the insecurity environment by cooperating with the EU and NATO (Armişen & Tatar, 2022: 222).

In 1999, within the scope of the Stabilization and Association Process initiated by the EU, the membership of the Western Balkan countries to the Union was aimed and various political and economic strategies were put forward to ensure stability in the region. In this direction, bilateral relations between Macedonia and the EU were tried to be developed. Macedonia, which joined the Stabilization and Association Process in 2000, completed the negotiations in 2001. The Stabilization and Association Agreement entered into force on April 1, 2004 (Güner, 2020:11).

At the 2003 Thessaloniki Summit, Macedonia was defined by the EU as a potential candidate country together with other Balkan countries. Within this framework, Macedonia submitted its membership application to the EU on March 22, 2004. In 2005, North Macedonia's candidate status was accepted for the first time in the Balkans. Despite obtaining candidate status, the country could not start accession negotiations with the EU for many years due to the name dispute with Greece. Greece objected to the country's name on the grounds that it "claimed rights over the Macedonia Region in the north of its own country" and therefore blocked both the country's EU and NATO membership. As a result, Greece and North Macedonia agreed on June 12, 2018 to change the name of the country to the "Republic of North Macedonia". On February 12, 2019, following the entry into force of the Prespa Agreement, North Macedonia notified the EU of the country's new name. Following the Prespa Agreement, the EU General Affairs Council decided to start accession negotiations with North Macedonia on March 25, 2020. As of 2022, North Macedonia has been benefiting from visa liberalization since 2009. The country's NATO membership was realized on March 27, 2020 (European Union, 2024).

So what are North Macedonia's goals for EU membership?

Dr. Daskalovski from Kliment Ohridski University, evaluated this question within the framework of EU conditionality and argued that "the EU membership goal acts as a catalyst for political, economic reforms in the Western Balkans and Macedonia in particular, and that the EU is a transformative external factor for Macedonia. In this context, EU membership for North Macedonia encompasses

various factors such as the rule of law, conflict resolution, the rise of liberal democracy, good governance, human rights, and structural development in norms and values (Keçeci, 2017:170).

Although it seems that there is no obstacle to join the EU with the Prespa Agreement, this intervention is an important obstacle for North Macedonia, which faced Bulgaria's intervention in 2020. Bulgaria claims that the Macedonian language and identity belong to "the Bulgarian people who lived in North Macedonia centuries ago" (Armişen & Tatar, 2022: 222). Another obstacle facing North Macedonia on the road to membership is the fight against corruption. The EU Commission Reports state that the country has made no progress in the fight against corruption. Corruption remains widespread in many areas and is a serious concern. At the same time, limited media freedom and institutional weakness are other obstacles the country faces on the path to membership (European Commission, 2024).

Albania

After the collapse of the communist regime in the 1990s, Albania tried to improve its relations with the EU in order to ensure democracy and reforms in the country, and in this context, Albania tried to improve its relations with Italy and Greece. However, this process was not easy due to the weakness of the democratic regime, the existence of illegal criminal organizations and the corruption of the justice system. In 1998, when a popular revolt broke out due to economic and political reasons, the Stabilization and Association Process was initiated for the realization of EU membership for the development and stabilization of the region, and economic and political integration was tried to be achieved through the Pre-Accession Assistance Fund (Armişen & Tatar, 2022: 223).

At the June 2003 Thessaloniki Summit, Albania was declared a potential candidate country and an important step was taken on the road to negotiations. With the entry into force of the Stabilization and Association Agreement with the EU on April 1, 2009, Albania applied for membership to the EU on April 24, 2009. Albania also became a member of NATO on April 1, 2009. However, due to democratic, political and economic conditions, it took until June 27, 2014 for the country to obtain official candidate status. In light of Albania's progress in the following years, in 2018 the EU Commission recommended that accession negotiations could start. However, at the EU General Affairs Council (GAC) on June 26, 2018, it was suggested that negotiations with Albania could start in June 2019, subject to certain conditions being met. Following various initiatives during this period, on March 25, 2020, the EU decided to open accession negotiations with

Albania. Accordingly, the Intergovernmental Conference to launch accession negotiations was held in 2022 and the screening process was initiated for Albania (European Union, 2024).

In the EU accession process, Albania adopts membership goals in various areas such as the rule of law, new reforms in institutional areas, and development in social areas. Moreover, the adoption of the EU *acquis* in the country is seen as a goal not only from a technical point of view but also in terms of ensuring political legitimacy. However, during the reporting period, Albania faced various obstacles to membership in areas such as freedom of expression, high market concentration, political reforms, lack of transparency of financing sources and pressure on the media (European Commission, 2024). Accordingly, Albania still considers EU membership as a strategic goal, even though it may jeopardize the sustainability of the country's reforms towards membership.

Kosovo

Kosovo, which declared its independence in 2008, is still experiencing problems as some countries still do not recognize it. In addition to economic and political problems, the non-recognition of Kosovo's independence by some EU countries creates difficulties in Kosovo's EU relations. Because within the scope of EU membership, Kosovo must be recognized by all member states. On the other hand, the existence of crises in the relations between Kosovo and Serbia is one of the priority areas where relations need to be improved for the EU membership process. In this context, Kosovo was included in the Stabilization and Association Process in 2016 for Kosovo's accession to the EU and for the realization of the desired reforms (Armişen & Tatar, 2022: 225).

Article 2 of the TEU states that "The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities". Article 2 of the TEU forms the basis of the Copenhagen Criteria, which translate the values and principles contained in the TEU into more concrete criteria that must be met for a state to be ready to join the EU. These conditions are known as the Copenhagen criteria and include the existence of a stable democracy, a well-functioning rule of law, a functioning market economy and the adoption of all EU legislation (Fetahu, 2023:7).

So, what are the necessary procedures for Kosovo's EU membership?

First of all, Kosovo's application for membership should be included in the EU Council agenda after its submission. However, at this point, the approval of

the representatives of all member states is required. This requires a consensus among all member states. However, the Greek Cypriot Administration of Southern Cyprus, Spain, Romania, Slovakia and Greece do not recognize Kosovo's independence (European Union, 2024). Accordingly, the obstacles Kosovo faces in the international arena and the slow implementation of structural reforms make it unlikely that Kosovo will start membership talks in the near future (Fetahu, 2023:9).

When we look at the reasons for not recognizing these five countries, there are various reasons put forward by the countries. Greece's aim to support the Albanian minority in the country and the Greek Cypriot Administration of Southern Cyprus, the idea that the Greek Cypriot Administration of Southern Cyprus will set an example for the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, Romania and Spain's defense that those who are minorities in other states may demand the same right, and Slovakia's non-recognition oppose Kosovo's membership with the idea that it may have negative repercussions on the independence of other countries (Ayhan, 2008:124).

According to the European Commission's Kosovo 2024 Report, the Commission firstly emphasized that efforts should continue to normalize relations between Kosovo and Serbia. The Commission also emphasizes the necessity of this issue in the context of the Western Balkans, Reform and Growth Facility. From 1 January 2024, Kosovo passport holders will enjoy visa-free travel to the EU, while Kosovo has actively participated in the implementation of the four pillars of the new Growth Plan for the Western Balkans: (i) gradual integration into the European Union's single market; (ii) regional economic integration; (iii) fundamental reforms; and (iv) strengthened financial support. Accordingly, on October 9, Kosovo adopted the Reform Agenda envisaged under the Reform and Growth Facility (Growth Plan for the Western Balkans). However, the Commission still expects Kosovo to make progress in areas such as good governance, public financial management, green and digital transition, fundamental rights and rule of law (European Commission, 2024).

In conclusion, while Kosovo's accession depends in particular on the continuation of positive relations with Serbia, the fact that the country is not recognized by the five member states is one of the key issues hindering the process. Kosovo believes that EU membership would provide positive support in legal, economic and political areas. In this context, Kosovo has to maintain positive relations with both Serbia and the member states.

Conclusion

In line with the enlargement movements of the European Union, especially the promotion of democracy, stability and prosperity has become an important policy in the post-Cold War period in terms of spreading it across the European continent. Within the scope of this policy, the Western Balkan countries have seen EU membership not only as a foreign policy tool but also as a goal for the realization of domestic reforms. In this context, the central objectives of the Western Balkan countries are the rule of law, the strengthening of democratic institutions, the promotion of economic development and the desire for integration with European political values. In addition, ethnic and border crises in the region are of strategic importance for ensuring a culture of peace and prosperity through EU membership.

The Western Balkan countries' aspirations for EU membership represent a multilayered process that includes political and economic interests as well as norms and values. The countries in the region are taking various steps towards harmonization with European norms, working towards domestic structural reforms on the one hand and aiming to be included in European norms and values on the other. From this point of view, EU membership should be considered as a process of reconstruction of normative values as well as an external integration process for the Western Balkan countries.

However, various structural and political problems are encountered on the way to achieving these goals. Inadequacies in the areas such as the rule of law, the slow democratization process, the fight against corruption and restrictions on freedom of expression in the countries of the region constitute obstacles to adapting to the values put forward by the EU. At the same time, the ongoing ethnic identity problems in the region leading to conflicting crises and the rise of issues such as border security make the goal of integration with the European identity difficult. These problems lead to normative integration remaining in discourse and EU values being evaluated only in technical areas. When we consider external factors, the EU's reluctance to expand in recent years comes to the fore. Especially after the expansion movement between 2004 and 2007, the "expansion fatigue" put forward is considered a serious problem in Europe (Oğuz, 2012:61). The policies of some EU member states shaped within the framework of their national interests are carrying the expansion process to a political ground. This situation harms the fact that the expansion movements are not technical and are a predictable process. In addition, progress towards membership without resolving bilateral disputes between some Western Balkan countries, such as Kosovo and Serbia, has been seen as a difficult process.

Despite these problems, the EU membership goal continues to be the most important foreign policy tool for the Western Balkan countries. Because the EU is seen as a structure that provides security, economic development and legitimacy in the global system for the countries in the region. However, the continuity and success of the membership process does not only depend on the reforms of the candidate countries, but also on the EU's more active, stable and promising framework for its expansion movements. On the other hand, the candidate countries should implement their reforms not only for the purpose of becoming members, but also as transformations that will ensure social welfare.

In conclusion, when we evaluate, the integration process of the Western Balkan countries with the EU will be achieved through the unity of norms, values and political harmony. The success of the membership process is possible with the construction of mutual European norms and values, together with technical inputs. In this context, it is of great importance that the EU's expansion strategy is shaped within an inclusive and principled framework, and that the Western Balkan countries implement stability and applicable reforms in their democratic transformation processes.

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