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Governance quality in Western Balkan countries: are they converging with the EU?

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ABSTRACT

The accession process of the six Western Balkan countries – Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina – has been a long-standing issue and a stalled process in the EU's enlargement agenda. Notably, countries aspiring to join the EU are expected during the pre-accession phases to adapt and implement (converge) the *acquis Communautaire* in areas that include the quality of governance and the functioning of national institutions. Using the World Bank's six 'Worldwide Governance Indicators' that allow for the multidimensionality of governance, this paper examines through a battery of unit-root tests, whether the six Western Balkans have been converging with the EU in terms of governance quality. Moreover, the paper examines whether EU's neighbourhood policy as a whole bears a responsibility for the present stalemate and whether this complies with the so-called EU conditionality principle.

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Introduction

The accession process of the six Western Balkan countries had been a long-standing issue for the EU. Notably, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia have been awarded the candidate country status at various moments in time, while Kosovo's current status is that of a potential candidate country. Enlargement per se, however, remained a second-order priority for the EU for long time. Russia's brutal war of aggression against Ukraine changed all that. EU leaders embraced again enlargement policy as a part of the union's response to Russia's aggression. The path to membership in the European Union seems, however, to be particularly tortuous and cumbersome.

The successful process of convergence and adaptation to the requisites of the accession criteria, invariably involves extensive reforms by the countries pursuing EU membership. As reflected in the Copenhagen accession criteria,¹ good governance and quality of institutions are included in the fundamental preconditions² that countries aspiring to join the EU must satisfy to be deemed eligible for membership.

In what follows, using a battery of unit root tests, this paper examines whether the six Western Balkan countries have been converging with the EU in terms of governance quality as evaluated by the World Bank. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first attempt to combine quantitative

analysis based on unit root tests and qualitative one focused on the EU conditionality in the case study of Western Balkans.

The World Bank's six '*Worldwide Governance Indicators*'³ (henceforth WGI) that allow for the multidimensionality of governance – Voice and Accountability, Political Stability and Absence of Violence, Government Effectiveness, Regulatory Quality, Rule of Law, Control of Corruption – offer a useful framework with which the progress of the Western Balkan countries can be assessed vis-à-vis the EU's *Acquis Communautaire*. This is indeed a particular concept of democracy that not always coincide with the term as it has been laid out in the vast literature over the model of democracy which, however, has been embraced by the European Union. In the respective section, we explain the methodology adopted to address the convergence hypothesis and analyse the empirical findings. The paper also engulfs an overview of the EU's enlargement policy in the case of the Western Balkans as well as a descriptive comparative presentation of the six countries' relative performance in terms of the WGIs vis-à-vis the EU. Against this background, in the second part of the paper, we finally discuss whether these criteria equally determine EU policies domestically and internationally, especially since December 2020, with the inception of the *EU global human rights sanctions regime*, when the EU has adopted a more aggressive policy against undemocratic regimes.

Literature review

The literature on democracy, even the democratic model favoured by the EU is huge and notably dates back in the first decades after the World War II and the work of Santori and Dahl and therefore, any attempt to present it in its entirety, is deficient and inadequate. On the same trajectory, it is extremely difficult to define sufficiently how the various concepts of democracy are translated into indicators or variables. Graziano and Quaranta (2024) have recently tried to outline some of the multiple existing conceptualizations and measurements of democracy and to provide a succinct overview of the main democratic trends in recent years in European countries

For the purposes of this article, however, it is important to make some theoretical observations. Scholars studying democracy in various parts of the planet, have noted that a democratic regime is installed not by trends, but by people. Democracies are formed by causers, not causes. However, it is critical to remember that democratization agents, whether inside or outside the powerful elites or mechanisms, cannot commence the process without first establishing favourable conditions for democratization (Cho 2023). The European Union seems exactly to be driven, at least declaratorily, by the intention to establish conditions that will gradually lead to the flourishing of the Westminster democracy that is identical with the European belief system.

Other scholars such as Inglehart and Welzel (2009) have argued that the reality of democracy is not primarily based on a proclaimed desire for a certain type of governance, but rather on the combination of specific social and cultural variables. They think that major modernization and economic progress, which results in popular political engagement, create the optimal social and cultural circumstances for the formation of a democracy (Inglehart and Welzel 2009).

Questions of democracy, legitimacy and shared values in Europe have existed long before the genesis of the European Community fuelling the discussions and the search for a overarching definition about what Europe is. The concept of democracy used in the context of the EU enlargement has been closely associated with the all-encompassing idea of "respect and protection of human rights" and the rule of law, though it is quite debatable whether this political identity was originally part of the Community's self-image or was instead gradually and commonly articulated and developed in course of history and through the enlargement process (De Angelis and Karamouzi 2016, 439–458).

Invariably, countries that aspire to join the EU are required to meet a set of criteria during the pre-accession period. As pointed out by Lavenex (2008) the prospect of EU membership and the concomitant accession conditionalities associated with it, such as the Copenhagen criteria, has proved to be a successful means of inducing third countries to adapt and implement the *acquis*

Communaute. That is to converge in several spheres with the EU during the pre-accession phase. This process of convergence, facilitates and smooths the process of integration once accession is completed. Meeting accession criteria such as the Copenhagen ones is monitored and evaluated by the EU.

As stressed in the relevant literature, governance is a multidimensional concept encompassing many institutional and political facets that lacks a universally accepted, standardized definition (*inter alia*: Fukuyama 2013; Gjaltema, Biesbroek, and Termeer 2020; Treib, Bahr, and Falkner 2007). Indeed, as observed by Kauffman and Kraay (2008), the many definitions of governance are also accompanied by intensely debated definitional disagreements. Nonetheless, a widely used definition in the relevant literature is the one provided by the World Bank: '*governance consists of the traditions and institutions by which authority in a country is exercised*'. Moreover, in view of the multidimensionality of the concept, the World Bank includes '... the process by which governments are selected, monitored and replaced; the capacity of the government to effectively formulate and implement sound policies; and the respect of citizens and the state for the institutions that govern economic and social interactions among them'.⁴

Dealing with the EU conditionality has turned out to be a thorny issue especially in recent years, when the EU decided to follow a strict migration policy and to cooperate with authoritarian regimes on stemming the flows of migrant and refugees trying to reach the EU territory. As it was the case with the political values, the principle of conditionality has also undergone some transformation. From a European foreign policy tool, especially one of EU external trade relations and development policy, it evolved gradually to an instrument of European governance in the European Union and a defining element of European enlargement policy. The principle also finds application on the distribution of the European funds and programmes with a view of combining political or economic adjustments among its member states, a method of soft governance (Becker 2024). As a matter of fact, various scholars have examined how the EU supranational power mechanism is endeavoured to achieve the compliance of member states with institutional mechanisms, fiscal and macroeconomic policies (Kölling 2022), European legislation, and objectives which, at least declaratorily emanate from the European basic beliefs and values implementing this form of soft governance (Saurugger and Terpan 2021).

Some other scholars have not failed to point out that some Member States have been very energetic on receiving the benefits of EU membership, specifically the financial ones, while they have omitted to show the same commitment to European values, including the rule of law (Łacny 2021). What has not been so far adequately discussed, is the external dimension of conditionality, i.e. the consistency with which the EU applies this principle in its external relations and of course in its enlargement strategy.

A bird's eye view comparative descriptive presentation

As noted in the introduction, governance is a multidimensional concept encompassing many facets of a country's polity and operation. The importance of good governance for the smooth functioning of the economy and society and the quality of democracy cannot be overstated. As stressed by Pérez-Moreno, Bárcena-Martín, and Ritzen (2020), the quality of institutions through which a state is governed, directly impacts economic performance, social cohesion, the protection of human rights, the effective administration of justice, bar undue influence on government decisions, augment the quality of public policies' formulation and their effective implementation. The WGI's used herein, comprise six broad dimensions: Voice and Accountability (VA), Political Stability and Absence of Violence (PS-AV), Government Effectiveness (GE), Regulatory Quality (RQ), Rule of Law (RL), Control of Corruption (CC) (Kauffman and Kraay 2023). These six composite indicators take values between approximately -2.5 to 2.5 with higher values corresponding to better governance. As noted by Handoyo (2023),⁵ these six indicators are a handy tool for policymakers, researchers, and

Table 1. Comparative presentation (averages 1996–2022).

	VA	PS-AV	CC	RL	RQ	GE
Albania	−0.01	−0.12	−0.70	−0.58	−0.03	−0.36
Bosnia & Herzegovina	−0.07	−0.46	−0.42	−0.39	−0.35	−0.82
Kosovo	−0.43	−0.36	−0.41	−0.49	−0.17	−0.36
Montenegro	0.05	0.26	−0.15	−0.08	0.13	0.08
North Macedonia	−0.06	−0.46	−0.40	−0.32	0.10	−0.28
Serbia	−0.11	−0.55	−0.57	−0.57	−0.30	−0.31
<i>EU average</i>	<i>1.19</i>	<i>0.87</i>	<i>1.20</i>	<i>1.24</i>	<i>1.26</i>	<i>1.26</i>

practitioners and offer a useful framework for comparative analysis. Albeit, not without objections,⁶ they have been widely used in empirical studies involving cross-country comparisons and longitudinal analyses (*inter alia*: Anagnostou, Kallioras, and Kollias 2016; Kaufmann, Kraay, and Mastruzzi 2007a, 2007b; Kollias and Messis 2022; Kurtz and Schrank 2007).

In Table 1, the average value of each of the six governance indicators for each of the Western Balkan countries examined here is presented. The time-series for which the six indicators are available spans the years 1996–2022⁷ (Kauffman and Kraay 2023). For comparison purposes, we include in Table 1 the average score for the EU members in each of the indicators. However, there are missing values for Montenegro and Kosovo, because for a period of the respective timespan covered by the timeseries they were integrated in other state entities. Per indicator the missing values are as follows: VA: Montenegro from 1998 onwards; GE: Montenegro from 2005 onwards, Kosovo from 2006 onwards; RQ: Montenegro from 2005 onwards, Kosovo from 2007 onwards; RL and CC: Montenegro from 1998 onwards, Kosovo from 2000 onwards.

From the visual observation of Table 1, is plainly evident, that in all six indicators, the Western Balkan countries significantly lag behind the average EU score in all six indices. In the VA indicator, Kosovo stands out as the worst performer of the group with an average score of −0.43 for 1996–2022 compared to an EU average of 1.19 (Table 1). Montenegro emerges as the country with the best average score in the VA indicator. In fact, out of all Western Balkan countries, Montenegro stands out as the one that exhibits the best average score in all six governance indicators. Still, despite the higher scores vis-à-vis the other countries, the deviation from the EU average remains notable (Table 1). Albania emerges as the worse performer in two out of the six indicators – control of corruption (CC) and rule of law (RL) – while Bosnia and Herzegovina has the lowest scores in terms of regulatory quality (RQ) and government effectiveness (GE). Serbia emerges as the country with the lowest score in terms of the political stability-absence of violence (PS-AV) indicator. Additionally, it has the second lowest scores in four of the governance indicators – VA, CC, RL and RQ – and thus appears to be the country with the worse overall performance. Clearly of course, the picture that emerges from the visual inspection of Table 1, is a rather static one since it is based on the average score over the entire period under examination (1996–2022) and does not allow for reliable inferences in terms of whether the Western Balkan countries are converging with the EU in terms of governance performance. As pointed out by Ferdosi (2020), convergence is a long-term a gradual process whereby differences between countries become much less discernible. In the section that follows, we turn to examine whether, in the case of the six countries in question that aspire to join the EU, such a process is empirically traceable in terms of the six WGLs.

Methodology and findings

As pointed out by Lavenex (2008), the prospect of impending EU membership has proved to be a successful means of inducing candidate as well as potential candidate countries to adapt and implement the *acquis Communautaire* in various spheres. That is to converge. As can be seen in the extant empirical literature, a convergence hypothesis can be examined empirically using a variety of empirical methodologies. These range from σ and β -convergence to unit root tests. The latter are

a tool increasingly used by many empirical studies that examine convergence hypotheses (*inter alia*: Lau et al. 2016; Ceylan and Abiyev 2016; Chapsa and Katrakilidis 2014). The unit root tests are deemed to be a more appropriate tool to use in this case since we are not examining the presence of a convergence process within a group of countries as the case would have been if the issue was investigated for the EU member states. In our case, the question addressed is whether the six Western Balkan states that aspire to join the EU are converging in terms of governance quality as quantified by the six WGIs used here. In view of this, the unit root tests are a more suitable empirical tool compared to methodologies, such as σ and β -convergence that are used in cases where within-group convergence hypotheses are tested.

Specifically, the unit root tests employed are the Dickey and Fuller (1979, 1981) ADF test, the Phillips and Perron (1988) PP test, the ADF-GLS proposed by Elliot, Rothenberg, and Stock (1996) and the NGP test by Ng and Perron (1995, 2001). To this effect, we adopt the methodological strategies of recent studies (Ceylan and Abiyev 2016; Kollias and Messis 2022; Tsanana and Katrakilidis 2014). Therein, a detailed technical description of the tests can be found. Consequently, for reasons of brevity, we refrain from engaging in a fundamentally similar detailed technical presentation of the tests here. In brief, in line with these studies, we use an average as the benchmark against which the convergence hypothesis is investigated. The benchmark is the EU average ($\bar{y}$) of each of the six WGIs. Then, we calculate the difference $y_{wb} - \bar{y}$ between the time series of the indices, with y_{wb} being the score of each Western Balkan country in each of the six governance indices. In other words, we estimate the deviation of the VA, PS-AV, GE, RQ, RL, CC governance indicator score for each Western Balkan country from the corresponding EU average ($\bar{y}$) of each year. Thus, $y_{wb} - \bar{y}$ demonstrates the difference of the natural logarithm of each series with the benchmark index. Nonetheless, an important point of methodological clarification is warranted here. During the period examined, i.e. 1996–2022, the EU has enlarged three times: in 2004 with 10 new members, in 2007 with the accession of two members and finally in 2013 when Croatia joined the EU. In order to allow for the effect the accession of new members had on the average value ($\bar{y}$) of the five indices, this is calculated as the average of the actual EU members in each specific year before the difference (i.e.: $y_{wb} - \bar{y}$) is estimated.

The results from estimating the four unit-root tests – i.e. ADF, DF-GLS, PP and Ng & Perron – are presented in Tables 2–5 for each test, respectively, and for each of the six indicators that are used to test the convergence hypothesis for the six Western Balkan countries. As one would intuitively anticipate, the results from the estimations are not totally uniform across all tests and governance indicators. Specifically, the Ng & Perron unit root test results for the six WGI presented in Table 5 are the ones least favoring the convergence hypothesis. They indicate the presence of a convergence process only in two governance indicators - *Political Stability – No Violence* (PS-AV) and *Regulatory Quality* (RQ) – only in the case of Albania whereas for all the other indices for all the Western Balkan

Table 2. ADF unit root test results for the six WGI.

	VA		PS-AV		GE		RQ		RL		CC	
	No trend	Trend	No trend	Trend	No trend	Trend	No trend	Trend	No trend	Trend	No trend	Trend
Albania	–3.106**	–1.865	–0.875	–3.113	–0.610	–2.457	–1.345	–2.788	–0.034	–2.471	–0.855	–1.998
Bosnia & Herzegovina	–1.783	–1.390	–2.225	–3.078	–1.603	–0.733	–2.582	–1.684	–0.683	–2.615	–1.852	–0.702
Serbia	–3.156**	–1.169	–0.901	–1.491	–1.687	–1.704	–0.473	–2.179	–1.513	–0.522	–2.229	–1.732
North Macedonia	–1.623	–2.337	–0.840	–3.524*	–1.217	–1.437	–0.712	–3.102	–1.078	–3.000	–1.090	–0.849
Montenegro	–3.226**	–1.933	-	-	-	-	-	-	–1.761	–6.750***	–1.061	–2.302
Kosovo	–4.884***	–5.147***	-	-	-	-	-	-	–1.585	–3.015	–2.026	–3.558*

***, **, * indicate 1%, 5% and 10% levels of significance. (– indicates not estimated due to small number of annual observations). The critical values for the ADF unit root test without trend are –3.769, –3.004 and –2.642 for the 1%, 5% and 10% significant level respectively. When trend is taken into consideration, the critical values of the test are –4.416 (1%), –3.622 (5%) and –3.248 (10%). The corresponding critical values are for the case of non-missing observations (i.e. 27 observations in total).

Table 3. DF-GLS unit root test results for the six WGI.

	IA			PS-AV			GE			RQ			RL			CC		
	No trend	Trend		No trend	Trend		No trend	Trend		No trend	Trend		No trend	Trend		No trend	Trend	
Albania	-0.501	-1.542		-0.643	-3.125*		-0.261	-2.445		-0.965	-2.683		0.176	-2.259		-0.447	-2.082	
Bosnia & Herzegovina	-1.398	-1.387		-1.886*	-3.199**		-1.124	-1.065		-0.773	-1.834		-0.662	-2.230		-1.710	-1.835	
Serbia	-1.315	-1.037		-1.885*	-2.947*		-0.571	-1.819		-0.087	-2.149		-0.975	-1.674		-1.502	-2.006	
North Macedonia	-1.106	-2.320		-0.841	-3.323**		-0.603	-1.588		-0.222	-3.212**		-0.982	-3.022*		-1.068	-1.614	
Montenegro	-1.160	-1.467		-	-		-	-		-	-		-0.381	-3.797***		-1.183	-4.077***	
Kosovo	0.485	-1.378		-	-		-	-		-	-		-1.786*	-2.708		-1.639*	-2.485	

***, **, * indicate 1%, 5% and 10% levels of significance. (- indicates not estimated due to small number of annual observations). The critical values for the DF-GLS unit root test without trend are -2.669, -1.956 and -1.608 for the 1%, 5% and 10% significant level respectively. When trend is taken into consideration, the critical values of the test are -3.77 (1%), -3.19 (5%) and -2.89 (10%). The corresponding critical values are for the case of non-missing observations (i.e. 27 observations in total).

Table 4. PP unit root test results for the six WGI.

	VA		PS- <i>AV</i>		GE		RQ		RL		CC	
	No trend	Trend	No trend	Trend	No trend	Trend	No trend	Trend	No trend	Trend	No trend	Trend
Albania	-4.783***	-2.116	-0.973	-2.379	-0.519	-2.486	-1.161	-1.632	-0.115	-2.661	-0.744	-1.998
Bosnia & Herzegovina	-1.897	-1.535	-2.101	-3.132	-1.603	-0.733	-2.176	-1.578	-0.753	-2.720	-1.309	-1.164
Serbia	-3.038**	-1.019	-1.088	-2.067	-1.595	-1.494	-0.386	-2.185	-1.300	-1.272	-1.516	-0.802
North Macedonia	-1.703	-1.766	-0.455	-3.446*	-1.059	-1.610	-0.641	-3.088	-0.732	-2.868	-1.144	-1.083
Montenegro	-2.987*	-1.920	-	-	-	-	-	-	-5.538***	-6.684***	-1.250	-4.468***
Kosovo	-6.523***	-3.783**	-	-	-	-	-	-	-1.765	-5.456***	-3.078**	-3.486*

***, **, * indicate 1%, 5% and 10% levels of significance. (–) indicates not estimated due to small number of annual observations). The critical values for the PP unit root test without trend are –3.737, –2.991 and –2.635 for the 1%, 5% and 10% significant level, respectively. When trend is taken into consideration, the critical values of the test are –4.394 (1%), –3.612 (5%) and –3.243 (10%). The corresponding critical values are for the case of non-missing observations (i.e. 27 observations in total).

Table 5. Ng & Perron unit root test results for the six WGI.

	VA		PS-AV		GE		RQ		RL		CC	
	No trend	Trend	No trend	Trend	No trend	Trend	No trend	Trend	No trend	Trend	No trend	Trend
Albania	-0.534	-1.531	-0.439	-3.193**	0.062	-1.933	-1.389	-5.591***	0.462	-1.708	-0.101	-1.792
Bosnia & Herzegovina	-1.132	-1.063	-1.493	-2.297	-0.777	-0.984	-0.257	-1.590	-0.610	-1.573	-1.533	-2.019
Serbia	-0.394	-0.509	-1.069	-2.436	0.070	-1.564	0.280	-1.756	-1.362	-1.500	-1.121	-2.164
North Macedonia	-1.135	-2.344	-0.750	-2.200	-0.253	-1.449	0.264	-2.279	-0.828	-2.207	-0.908	-1.740
Montenegro	-0.885	-0.839	-	-	-	-	-	-	-0.304	-1.683	-1.101	-1.772
Kosovo	0.376	-2.340	-	-	-	-	-	-	-1.597	-0.769	-1.575	-1.662

***, **, * indicate 1%, 5% and 10% levels of significance. (– indicates not estimated due to small number of annual observations). The critical values for the Ng and Perron (MZt) unit root test without trend are -2.58, -1.98 and -1.62 for the 1%, 5% and 10% significant level, respectively. When trend is taken into consideration, the critical values of the test are -3.42 (1%), -2.91 (5%) and -2.62 (10%).

countries the test does not yield findings that would support the assertion that the six countries are converging with the EU. On the other hand, the DF-GLS and PP unit root test results presented in [Tables 3 and 4](#) respectively, seem to be the ones where, in comparative terms, the findings seem to be more supportive for the convergence hypothesis. For example, in the case of the *Political Stability – No Violence* (PS-AV) indicator the DF-GLS unit root test results offer empirical evidence that points to a convergence process in the case of Albania and Bosnia & Herzegovina, ([Table 3](#)).⁸ The PP test results ([Table 4](#)) suggest convergence in terms of the *Voice and Accountability* (VA) index in the case of Albania, Serbia, North Macedonia and Kosovo. Except for Bosnia & Herzegovina and North Macedonia and the ADF findings also point to a convergence process in terms of the VA governance indicator ([Table 2](#)). Convergence is also supported by the PP results for Montenegro and Kosovo in terms of *Control of Corruption* (CC) and *Rule of Law* (RL).

Overall, the broad picture that emerges from observing the findings is that no strong, unequivocal inference can be drawn in favour of convergence. Although the results support the presence of convergence in certain cases, in the majority of them there is absence of ample empirical evidence that could offer robust support in favour of a convergence process. As noted previously, convergence is a process through which differences between countries – in this case between the EU average and the six Western Balkans countries – gradually become less discernable. Hence, even in cases where the test results suggest the presence of a convergence process (the shaded cells in [Tables 2–5](#)), this should only be treated as indicating an econometrically traceable process of a reduction in the existing gap in terms of the specific World Bank governance indicators. Moreover, as even a cursory look at the reported results reveals, the absence of a strong consistency in the findings across the various tests used renders the drawing of strong inferences quite precarious.

Nonetheless, as a further step in the empirical analysis, it was decided to allow for the presence of potential structural breaks in the series used. Given that during the period under scrutiny (1996–2022), there were significant changes and considerable developments in the countries examined, it is possible that these have affected the six Balkan countries' performance in terms of the six governance indicators. Hence, in the estimations, one needs to allow for the potential presence of such significant structural changes in the series.⁹ As Perron (1989) notes, such changes in the time series can influence the results and the concomitant inferences. To allow for the presence of such structural changes in the time series used herein, we opted to apply the unit root test proposed by Zivot and Andrews (1992). Unlike other tests, the ZA unit root test treats such structural breaks in the series as endogenous and in the relevant literature it is considered superior to other tests that assume the break date as known *ex ante*. In brief, the ZA test is a sequential Dickey – Fuller unit root test that utilizes a different dummy variable for each possible break date and accommodates three alternative models for possible breaks. Model A stands for a break only in the intercept, model B accounts for break only in trend while model C incorporates the possibility of a change in the intercept as well as in the trend.¹⁰

The findings from estimating the ZA unit root tests for each country and each governance indicator are presented in [Table 6](#). Evidently, allowing for the presence of structural changes in the series bears an identifiable impact on the results vis-à-vis the findings reported earlier. For instance, all three models of the ZA unit root, support the presence of convergence for Bosnia & Herzegovina in the case of the *Voice & Accountability* (VA) governance indicator, for Serbia in the case of both the *Government Effectiveness* (GE) and *Control of Corruption* (CC), for Montenegro in the case of the *Rule of Law* (RL) indicator and for Kosovo in the case of the *Control of Corruption* (CC) indicator. Nonetheless, despite these findings, the broader picture that emerges from the ZA unit root test does not allow for an unequivocal inference in favour of a convergence process. In this respect, albeit slightly different the ZA findings that allow for the presence of significant changes and their concomitant impact on the timeseries, are broadly in line with the ones reported earlier in [Tables](#)



Table 6. Results of the ZA unit root test with one structural break.

	Model A			Model B			Model C		
	t-stat	lags	Break	t-stat	lags	Break	t-stat	lags	Break
Voice and Accountability (VA)									
Albania	-1.777	2	2011	-3.162	2	2007	-3.182	2	2006
Bosnia & Herzegovina	-5.722***	6	2012	-4.683**	6	2019	-4.962*	6	2015
Serbia	-3.802	3	2006	-3.633	3	2010	-3.620	3	2006
North Macedonia	-5.771***	5	2005	-4.446**	5	2007	-4.349	3	2005
Montenegro	-2.831	5	2016	-3.021	5	2019	-3.530	5	2019
Kosovo	-6.342***	4	2007	-5.507***	5	2010	-4.714	4	2014
Political Stability and Absence of Violence (PS-AV)									
Albania	-4.155	1	2018	-5.300***	1	2018	-5.716**	1	2014
Bosnia & Herzegovina	-4.480	6	2014	-3.591	0	2004	-3.854	0	2006
Serbia	-4.923*	0	2001	-4.702**	0	2004	-3.897	0	2005
North Macedonia	-4.228	0	2007	-3.740	0	2002	-4.399	0	2006
Montenegro	-1.927	4	2015	-	-	-	-	-	-
Kosovo	-4.636*	4	2020	-	-	-	-	-	-
Government Effectiveness (GE)									
Albania	-4.231	0	2004	-3.500	0	2010	-3.819	0	2004
Bosnia & Herzegovina	-3.051	0	2004	-3.287	0	2014	-3.252	0	2012
Serbia	-9.139***	0	2004	-4.365*	0	2008	-9.474***	0	2004
North Macedonia	-5.651***	1	2004	-3.830	1	2007	-5.428**	1	2004
Montenegro	-3.825	1	2019	-8.659***	1	2016	-8.150***	1	2014
Kosovo	-1.236	4	2013	-	-	-	-3.608	0	2012
Regulatory Quality (RQ)									
Albania	-3.178	4	2019	-4.768**	4	2010	-4.268	4	2015
Bosnia & Herzegovina	-2.029	2	2004	-5.653***	2	2013	-5.236**	2	2013
Serbia	-3.525	0	2016	-3.500	0	2015	-3.859	0	2009
North Macedonia	-2.510	2	2007	-3.184	2	2016	-3.102	2	2014
Montenegro	-7.064***	2	2019	-	-	-	-13.90***	0	2010
Kosovo	-6.913***	1	2017	-	-	-	-	-	-
Rule of Law (RL)									
Albania	-4.622*	0	2004	-3.893	0	2010	-3.662	0	2012
Bosnia & Herzegovina	-5.807***	0	2004	-4.729**	0	2014	-4.662	0	2004
Serbia	-3.071	1	2004	-3.674	1	2008	-3.114	1	2006
North Macedonia	-5.706***	1	2004	-3.836	1	2011	-8.061***	1	2004
Montenegro	-6.160***	0	2003	-6.725***	1	2006	-7.378***	1	2008
Kosovo	-4.139	4	2019	-3.977	4	2017	-4.370	4	2006

(Continued)

Table 6. (Continued).

	Model A			Model B			Model C		
	t-stat	lags	Break	t-stat	lags	Break	t-stat	lags	Break
				Control of Corruption (CC)					
Albania	-5.523***	0	2004	-3.854	0	2009	-5.260**	0	2004
Bosnia & Herzegovina	-2.498	6	2008	-2.910	6	2014	-2.887	6	2013
Serbia	-5.897***	1	2003	-5.464***	2	2003	-7.891***	1	2003
North Macedonia	-4.260	1	2004	-3.274	0	2010	-3.843	0	2004
Montenegro	-3.432	2	2005	-4.264*	2	2010	-3.876	2	2011
Kosovo	-8.816***	2	2006	-7.136***	2	2009	-7.267***	2	2014

*** ** indicate 1%, 5% and 10% levels of significance, respectively. Critical values (c.v.) are as in Zivot and Andrews (1992). Model's A c.v. are -5.34, -4.80, -4.58 for the 1%, 5% and 10% significant level respectively. Model's B c.v. are -4.93, -4.42 and -4.11. Model's C c.v. are -5.57, -5.08 and -4.82.

2–5 where the results from the ADF, DF-GLS, PP and Ng & Perron unit root tests were respectively reported.

Thus, despite the presence of results that can offer empirical support in favour of a convergence process in terms of the six governance indicators examined here, the absence of a strong uniformity across the various unit tests employed here precludes us from deducing that there exists a strong governance convergence process in the case of the six Western-Balkan countries. It appears that the governance gap with the average EU standards is not only wide but that also there is no strong evidence to suggest the presence of a steady process of narrowing it and hence converging with the EU norms. One could tentatively suggest that this is attributable to the domestic political instability and the problematic functioning of the political and state institutions.

The EU-enlargement in the Western Balkans as part of the general EU neighborhood policy: an overview

The prospect of a new round of enlargement beyond the imminent accession of the 12 countries from Central and Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean in 2004 did not resonate well with the most EU member states. Thus, the inception in June 1999 by the Council of the EU of the enlargement process in the Western Balkans establishing a new policy framework, the “*Stabilization and Association Process*”, was politically undermined from the beginning. But even the political actors within the EU that supported the undertaking, appeared to be more interested in the stabilization than in the integration of the Western Balkans and not the integration that, factually, has the potential of accelerating the political and economic transformation of the region (Fakiolas and Tzifakis 2008, 377–398).

On the other hand, the Western Balkan countries enthusiastically embraced the perspective of integration into the EU, when at the Thessaloniki Summit in 2003, the EU granted them a membership perspective to the bloc viewing the enlargement as a matter of national interest, bringing long-term economic and geopolitical benefits. Nevertheless, the so-called ‘Thessaloniki promise’ has been delivered so far only one country, Croatia (considered to be part of the Western Balkans at the time), which notably became an EU member in 2013 (Vachudova 2014).

The first decade of this century was a period of optimism for the Balkans. The wars of the 1990s had ended, ethnic hostility still existed but had been temporarily eased, and the countries of the region started seriously working toward membership in the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

Freedom House’s Nations in Transit (NIT) report recorded small but steady improvements across all indicators, including media independence, the judiciary, and even corruption. Various daunting priorities from 2009 onwards such as the outbreak of the financial-economic and migration-refugee crisis, the Arab Spring, the Syrian War as well as Brexit shifted the attention of the EU and its member-states elsewhere, thereby effectively diminishing their engagement about the problems of the region. Fearing the probable harmful implications of its mega expansion in 2004–2007 and of the EU’s rejection of institutional reform in French and Dutch referenda in 2005 led to enlargement fatigue, even before Romania and Bulgaria, two poor Balkan republics. The 2008 global financial crisis and the Eurozone crisis in 2010/11 exacerbated enlargement fatigue among EU member states. The EU tightened the Copenhagen accession conditions in 2006 to better prepare candidate countries for membership and avoid mistakes from previous enlargement rounds, including the premature accession of Romania and Bulgaria. Since then, additional requirements have been introduced for Western Balkan membership candidates. The West’s relative disengagement from the Western Balkans seems to have contributed to the rolling back of democratic reforms and the emergence of an increasingly illiberal governance (Bieber and Tzifakis 2020, 1–14; Petrovic and Wilson 2021).

Until 2016, the optimistic picture had been completely reversed. According to the Freedom House, the average democracy score for the region – excluding Slovenia – has been in steady

decline since 2010, and in 2016 it returned to the same value recorded 12 years earlier, in 2004 (Freedom House 2016). Since then, the situation further deteriorated. All Western Balkan countries (the EU candidates) have today a very low score in the Freedom House democracy ranking.¹¹

Since 2004, the EU Commission has several times modified its enlargement strategy to help the Balkan countries strengthen their democratic systems and economies without very promising results. Even the 2021 year's country reports again call attention to persistent and serious problems with the rule of law, the independence of the judiciary, media freedom, and the fight against organised crime and corruption throughout the region, including in front-runners Montenegro and Serbia (Stratulat 2021).

Undoubtedly, the lack of political will in the respective countries to implement the necessary reforms has been the most crucial factor for this development. Many analysts, however, hold the EU also accountable for its policy in the region, especially because of its persistence on stability instead of integration, despite EU's expressed commitment in official texts to promote integration.¹² The so-called 'stabilitocracy', a notion coined to describe the prioritising of stability over democratic reform, has been castigated as a strategy aimed primarily protecting the EU's own short-term interests at the expense of long-term democratic transformation (Smith, Markovic Khaze, and Kovacevic 2021). The concept of 'stabilitocracy' has also been used to describe EU's support to undemocratic leaders in the region in return of their promise and engagement of controlling migration flows, resolving bilateral disputes or preventing ethnic conflict (Burazer 2020, 34–35; Kmezić and Bieber 2017; Smith, Markovic Khaze, and Kovacevic 2021).

Another peculiarity of the enlargement process in the region has to do with the political requirements asked by the EU, which are mostly alien to the internal political dynamics. Some illustrative examples are the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina where the EU demanded a change in the political system and the normalisation process between Serbia and Kosovo. Given that those changes have to be carried out in barely solidified institutions and in an environment of highly contested constitutional politics, the result is further bolstering of political parties' leaders at the expense of parliamentary participation (Kmezić and Bieber 2017; Petrovic and Wilson 2021).

Moreover, as the time run by, the EU increasingly focused on containing the negative influence in the Western Balkans of other external actors, namely, Russia, China and the Gulf countries, instead of the full implementation of liberal political and economic reforms, integration and the consolidation of stability (Koppa 2021; Markovic Khaze and Wang 2021; Panagiotou 2021). The EU's main concern was that those actors' engagement in the region exceeded economic investment and expanded onto political support for governments and parties as well as control of media (Bartlett 2021; Bieber and Tzifakis 2019).

Furthermore, given the historical ties of some Western Balkan countries with Russia, the fact that the EU allowed Ukraine into the fast lane as a candidate nation, while progress on membership for Western Balkan nations has largely stalled, has turned several Balkan nations into EU sceptics. As Moscow cannot offer a significant economic or political alternative to the EU in the region, its penetration is aimed at obstructing the further integration of the Western Balkan into the EU or NATO. Therefore, analysts define Russia's role in the Balkans as that of a spoiler power intending to destabilize the Western liberal order (Panagiotou 2021; Vojinovic, Oplotnik, and Prochniak 2010; Vulović 2023).

In the OECD report of the region in 2020 which has been confirmed by the later yearly European Commission reports, all the sectors that are regarded as fundamental areas for the EU accession process (low trust in institutions, high levels of informality and policy capture) have been assessed very negatively for all countries and more importantly with a very dismal outlook. According to the report ... *Policy capture reduces trust and promotes informality. These characteristics are often found in contexts where justice and law enforcement institutions are weak, political systems are heavily influenced by private interests, regulatory frameworks for policy making are dysfunctional, and media and citizens are unable to check the State.* The carefully picked words

and the elegant manner of expression cannot, however, dress up the underlying notion of the report that the states of the region have experienced a “state capture” by certain political groups (OECD-ilibrary 2020).

The turbulent years of pandemic seem to have reinforced this trend. Since the Western Balkans countries are considered as non-consolidated democracies, the extraordinary measures to effectively contain the spread of COVID-19 taken by the governments have rather exacerbated the authoritarian tendencies observed in the region during the last decade. This was manifest not only in the restriction they resorted to,¹³ but also in the disregard of constitutionally prescribed procedures and the ignoring of the operation of formal and informal mechanisms of checks and balances (Tzifakis 2020). As noted by Smith, Markovic Khaze, and Kovacevic (2021) the EU’s policy towards the Western Balkans has been undermined by a stability-democracy dilemma that acts as an obstacle to its engagement with aspiring members.

The Kremlin’s war in Ukraine seems to have emboldened autocratic forces in the Western Balkans and to have further shrunk the space for civil society action. According to the findings of the *Southeast Europe Leadership for Development and Integrity* (SELDI) report of 2022, even in the countries with the lowest levels of administrative corruption, about a fifth of the population report having paid a bribe of some kind. Such levels of corruption are well beyond the average in the EU, as these have been registered by the special anticorruption Eurobarometer surveys. As the authors of the report point out, this shows that administrative corruption in the region is a mass phenomenon and should be regarded as a specific risk for the operation of public institutions, while the anticorruption progress achieved in the Western Balkans between the early 2000s and mid-2010s has now been stalled (SELDI (2022), 8).

In the Brussels Declaration of December 2023 and in line with the Tirana Declaration of December 2022,¹⁴ the EU welcomed the resolve of the Western Balkans partners to respect and commit to core European values and principles, in line with international law but underlined once again the need for sustained and irreversible reform achievements on the rule of law, the functioning of democratic institutions, the economy and public administration reform, the fight against corruption and organised crime, strengthened support for good governance, human rights, gender equality and the rights of persons belonging to minorities.

Since Russia’s latest invasion of Ukraine, the EU has been more eager to bring the Western Balkans into Brussels’ fold through extra money or more vigorous diplomacy. A €1 billion package for addressing the effects of the energy crisis was unveiled by the Commission. Additionally, there are additional €9 billion available for infrastructure development across borders, economic recovery following the COVID-19 recession, and supporting the Western Balkans’ alignment with the EU-driven green transition. Membership, however, appears more like a leap of faith than a realistic outlook for all the respective countries. Even a nation like Montenegro, which has been in admission talks for several years, is miles away. Serbia is mired in Kosovo’s ongoing conflicts. While Serbia seeks support for its Kosovo policy, Republika Srpska within the Bosnia-Herzegovina is trying to get backing for its separatist tendencies. Albania has only recently begun negotiations, while the EU demands that North Macedonia amend its constitution before opening policy chapters. Bosnia and Kosovo lag behind much further (Dempsey 2022).

Following many ups and downs since the original commitment by the EU in the previous century that the Western Balkans would become an integral part of Europe, their accession process returned to a high place in the EU’s agenda (Petrovic and Tzifakis 2021). Nonetheless, in recent years, none of the six Western Balkan countries seems to be on a definite path to EU accession and membership (Smith, Markovic Khaze, and Kovacevic 2021).

From a Western Balkan point of view, achieving EU enlargement in the Western Balkans is essential for demonstrating the EU enlargement policy’s success and using it as springboard for further EU expansion, particularly further to the East. In fact, the imposed cordon sanitaire on the Balkan states may yet backfire on the EU by affecting its credibility and influence (Pandeva 2023, 154).

In November 2023, the EU Commission adopted *the so-called New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans*¹⁵ aimed at boosting economic growth and accelerating socio-economic convergence, since the EU estimates that it has the potential to double the size of the Western Balkan economies within the next 10 years. The text explicitly mentions that the lack of convergence is a major issue for the Western Balkan region as it is currently at around 35% of EU average level. This, in turn translates in limited revenue base to fund the accession process and related reforms, and it also contributes to large-scale outward migration. The plan proposes the establishment of a new €6 billion financial instrument for the period 2024–2027. Arguably, the project links the *payments on conditions and pre-conditions, such as macro-financial stability, sound public financial management, transparency and oversight of the budget*.

Also in November 2023 the European Commission presented a new Enlargement Package¹⁶ aimed at providing a new impetus to the stalled process. It mapped the progress achieved hitherto by the six countries vis-à-vis the accession criteria and the *acquis Communautaire*. The candidacy of the Western Balkan countries is assessed in terms of their progress and compliance in adopting and implementing the accession pre-conditions that would set them in a process of convergence vis-à-vis the *acquis Communautaire*. Random examples of this assessment include: ‘... *progress is in the accession negotiations will depend on reforms in the area of rule of law ...*’ in the case of Montenegro while Albania is, among others, prompted to make further efforts ‘... *in key areas of the rule of law, such as the fight against corruption ...*’. In a similar vein, North Macedonia ‘... *needs to deliver on the implementation of EU related reforms, including in the judiciary, the fight against corruption ...*’ as is also the case for Bosnia and Herzegovina that needs to adopt ‘... *important rule of law and judicial reforms ...*’ while Serbia needs to ‘... *strengthen the independence of the judiciary ... improve the regulatory environment ... implement reforms in the area of rule of law ...*’.

Although the latest EU initiatives have the potential to unlock the accession of the Western Balkan countries into the EU, it should not escape our attention that the EU itself is the rule of law crisis. While the EU requires third states to respect EU values, internally the EU has been facing major difficulties to systematically uphold let alone promote its values in all of the Member States as envisioned by Article 3(1) of the Treaty of the European Union, as it has been the case with the blatant Rule of Law backsliding, most notably in Hungary and Poland in relation to the independence of the judiciary (Govaere 2022, 13).

Moreover, as it has aptly, some member states have been happy to receive the benefits of EU membership, specifically the financial ones, while their commitment to European values, including the rule of law (Article 2 TEU), has been lacking. Furthermore, it has been proved that some member states (Poland and Hungary) with a very bad record of infringements of the rule of law, have received extensive amounts of Union funds, which, in turn turned out to be significant drivers for their social and economic growth (Łacny 2021).

EU’s inconsistencies to remain conform with the conditionality principle are not exhausted within the bloc but are conspicuously manifested in its neighborhood policy. What the EU has done in the Western Balkans is, to some extent, reminiscent of the policies it has pursued in the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, MENA before the Arab Spring and recently toward Tunisia in the context of its efforts to stem migration. A prime example is the EU Trust Fund providing funding for development projects to the regional countries. Funding for border management is often integrated into these agreements, resulting in the lines between ‘externalisation’ and ‘root causes’ development funding being blurred. Indeed, it is an open secret that a significant proportion of the Trust Fund allocation has not actually gone to development projects, but rather to migration and border management projects. Then, the EU preferred to support the authoritarian status quo that was arbitrarily connected with stability than to openly supporting independent human rights movements and independent non-governmental organizations. The EU’s focus on migration as a security threat obviously does not comply with its human rights perceptions, while the legitimising of dictators at the same time who are “bankrolled” to do the dirty work is a ridiculing of the democratic principles

On the same trajectory, now EU under the pressure of radical right-wing governments is forging ties with Tunisia that under Saïed is reverting to the kind of authoritarian system that prevailed before the Arab spring. Notably, Saïed's regime has silenced the opposition, quashed the media freedom, undermined the rule of law, and almost destroyed the independent judiciary. In 2013, in obvious contrast to the *European global human rights sanctions regime*, the EU agreed to pour €1 billion to the country, officially to help Tunisia's ailing economy. In practice, however, the package is aimed at curbing migration and most of the money will be channelled into border management (Dempsey 2023).

In 2016 already, the EU concluded a very controversial agreements with Turkey in a bid to restrict the uncontrolled flow of refugees to the EU via its territory in exchange for financial aid (over 3 billion euros), the enhancement of political co-operation (including unfreezing accession negotiations and visa liberalisation for Turkish citizens), and a program of controlled resettlement of refugees from Turkey to the EU. The deal was savaged by human rights organisations that did not consider Turkey to be a safe country, and because the deal would undermine the effective exercise of asylum seeker's rights through a fast-track procedure to examine international protection claims within 15 days, including appeal (Stergiou 2016, 93–94).

These examples actually amount to some sort of irony of history, since the conditionality principle was first introduced in the European Community in the 1980s and initially applied in the Community's external relations. The Union also linked the granting of humanitarian aid to third countries to their respect for human rights. Later on, conditionality began being used in the EU's internal relations as well. It was not before 1994 that 'Macroeconomic conditionality' was introduced to support the establishment of the European Monetary Union (Łacny 2021, 83).

Against this background, it is important to mention that the EU has applied more stringent accession criteria for the countries from the Western Balkans than the Central European states. Second, the Western Balkan countries have been confronted with 'enlargement fatigue' among member state societies. Third, the Western Balkans had to start their journey towards accession from a more difficult position, as they have less experience with democracy and frequently poorer levels of institutional capacity. Finally, unlike other countries, they are still grappling with the recent legacies of civil war and unsolved ethnic disputes. These factors seem to have accounted for the slower pace of Europeanisation (Zhelyazkova et al. 2019, 16–17)

Concluding remarks

Over the last 21 years since the 2003 Thessaloniki Summit, at which the European Perspective was granted to the Western Balkans, democratic developments in the six Western Balkan countries have been uneven and characterised by both democratic progress and democratic decline in each of the countries. These developments have been tracked by different democratisation indices that help to quantify and visualise the trends over time and along specific indicators. By using the World Bank's six Worldwide Governance Indicators that allow for the multidimensionality of governance, the paper tries to examine whether a process of convergence between the six Western Balkan countries – Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Herzegovina and Kosovo – and the EU can be empirically ascertained. Results reported herein do not offer ample and unequivocal empirical evidence indicating the presence of a convergence process. Converging with the EU at the pre-accession stages facilitates the integration of new members when eventually full membership is achieved. In line with the literature, we opted to use a battery of unit root test as method to investigate empirically the convergence hypothesis. Our findings confirm our general observations about the stand of political stability, government effectiveness, rule of law and control of corruption in the Western Balkans and hence do not point to a strong convergence process between the six countries of the region and the EU. The article also touches upon the so-called EU conditionality principle and whether it applies to the EU stance to the Western Balkan countries. Though this cannot be technically incorporated to the unit root tests due to the subjectivity permeating the

analysts' perceptions on the matter, we tried to analyse it on the basis of some striking and marked examples in the EU external relations.

All in all, the convergence process has been lagging, the enlargement process has been moving at a very slow pace and its conclusion still appears highly uncertain. The progress in democracy and rule of law in some Western Balkan countries has stagnated, while in others it has seriously deteriorated. There are many reasons accounting for this dismal result, internal, external, coincidental and structural. As it has been the case with other countries in Eastern Europe, the Western Balkans seem to have degraded to a laboratory of hybrid regimes and illiberal democracies, whose rulers exploited democracy to keep themselves leading the nation without any political accountability, while the rule of law is fragile, the press freedom limited and the dissidents persecuted.

However, we have to point out that this is not only the outcome of the countries' anemic performance or their political leadership's unwillingness to address political and social malfeasances and implement reforms that presumably would threaten their own power system. The EU also bears a considerable part of responsibility for this. It has lukewarm initiated the accession process, it got completely distracted from its commitment in the region by other preoccupations from 2009 onwards and has focused too much on stability than on integration. Furthermore, it is questionable whether the EU has consistently upheld the conditionality principle internally and externally to promote and defend human rights, democracy and the rule of law. In this respect, criticism to the EU of double standards perhaps does not look very unjustified.

Notes

1. Defined by the 1993 European Council in Copenhagen. https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/policy/glossary/terms/accesion-criteria_en
2. The criteria include both economic and political preconditions as well as the '*administrative and institutional capacity to effectively implement the acquis*'.
3. Available here: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/worldwide-governance-indicators/interactive-data-access>.
4. <http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/>.
5. Wherein a detailed presentation and discussion on data collection and compilation of the indices can be found. For reasons of brevity, we refrain from engaging in an essentially similar presentation and discussion herein. In brief, as presented in the World Bank's website (<https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/worldwide-governance-indicators/documentation#2>.) sources include Surveys of households and firms, including the Afrobarometer surveys, Gallup World Poll, and Global Competitiveness Report survey, Commercial business information providers, including the Economist Intelligence Unit, IHS Markit, Political Risk Services, Non-governmental organizations, including Global Integrity, Freedom House, Reporters Without Borders, and Public sector organizations,
6. See for instance Thomas (2010) and Williams and Siddique (2008). Delving into the various issues within this discourse is well beyond our scopes here.
7. Although the series are of an annual frequency, the indicators' values for 1997, 1999 and 2001 are not available from the original source. Thus, they were generated as follows: $t = \frac{t_{-1} + t_{+1}}{2}$
8. The DF-GLS unit root was not estimated for Montenegro and Kosovo due to the small number of annual observations available.
9. The authors wish to thank an anonymous referee for suggesting this.
10. For a detailed technical presentation of the ZA unit root test with structural breaks see among others Kollias and Messis (2020), Chapsa, Katrakilidis, and Tabakis (2015).
11. Freedom House: Countries and Territories. <https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores>.
12. For instance, in the famous text A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans, it is stated that The EU needs to integrate the Western Balkan countries in order to avoid destabilisation and strengthen the EU's own security, economy and influence. European Commission, COM (2018), 65 final, A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans, Strasbourg, 6 February 2018. In the analogous text of 2020 with the same title (https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enhancing-accesion-process-credible-eu-perspective-western-balkans_en), it is stated that at the core of the EU accession process is an 'even stronger focus on fundamental reforms, starting with the rule of law, the functioning of democratic institutions and public administration as well as the economy of the candidate countries'.

13. For example, most executive branches of government in the region took on extraordinary powers at the expense of legislatures.
14. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-summit/2023/12/13/>.
15. https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/new-growth-plan-western-balkans_en#:~:text=On%208%20November%202023%2C%20the,growth%20and%20accelerating%20socio%20Deconomic.
16. https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/commission-adopts-2023-enlargement-package-recommends-open-negotiations-ukraine-and-moldova-grant-2023-11-08_en.

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