

Parliamentary opposition in the Western Balkans – A mixture of political, ethnic and religious components*

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1. This article is a general author's observation on the considered topic, based on his long-term experience in analysing political, security, ethnic and similar circumstances in the Western Balkans, as well as dealing with the EU policy towards this European region. For this occasion, the author confines the considerations to the ex-Yugoslavia's countries, due to their historical and also contemporary features, which provide suitable elements for comparison: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Kosovo, and Serbia. As the opposition is concerned, the contribution refers to the political parties that were elected in the recent two parliamentary elections (the parties which achieved the necessary 5 or 3 percents of the electoral votes). References to scholarly literature will provide those readers who are interested to follow more profoundly the problematic with additional information and analyses on different aspects of the considered topics. The essay provides the opportunity to get reliable information and viewpoints on the relevant situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Serbia.

2. The democratic functioning on equal basis concerning the parliamentary "opposition" in Western Balkans countries under consideration depends on the existence of the general political suppositions as are:

- i. The developed democracy in governing one country, also including the efficient functioning on equal basis of political parties and groups.
- ii. The assurance of free expression of political opinions and of political gathering, as well as freedom of organising political parties without any discrimination.
- iii. The functioning of societies based on the rule of law.
- iv. The existence of free mass media opened for different views and available to all political parties.

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v. The adequate electoral legislation giving the people the opportunity to freely select the political options and giving the opportunities on equal basis to all political parties.

The survey on the situation in this regard shows that various deficiencies concerning the mentioned elements in the considered Western Balkan countries exist. During the 1990s, these countries were dominated by competitive authoritarian regimes that combined multi-party elections with nationalist rhetoric and the privatisation of the state to affiliated business interests. After a move towards democratisation in the early 2000s across the region, authoritarian practices began re-appearing in the late 2000s and have now firmly taken root in many of these countries¹.

The analysis sponsored by the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom listed the following eight deficiencies of democracy in the Western Balkans countries: a) lack of pluralism, state capture and violations of human rights that undermines democratic development; b) civil society has been disempowered to serve as an agent of democratization in breaking the political capture of institutions; c) political influence, judicial pressure and disinformation that undermine professional and critical journalism; d) new waves of emigration are stripping away human capital needed for development and democratic reforms; e) the unsolved regional security architecture and revisionist narratives securitize the political discourse; f) Russian aggression tests the pro-Western orientation and resilience of the region; g) Chinese geoeconomic ambitions threaten economic stability and undermine transparent governance in the region; h) EU enlargement's loss of credibility opens space for democratic decline².

Practices of 'capturing' public media involve, on the one hand, appointing party members as executives (managers and editors) and employing journalists based on their party affiliation. On the other hand, they involve being awarded a part of the resources from the state budget proportional to the extent to which one bows to the demands of the ruling political elite. The 'capturing' of privately-owned media consists of making them dependent on advertising agencies for sponsorships—agencies that are, in fact, the extended arm of incumbent political parties. Likewise, the allocation of budgetary funds in 'open' calls depends on one's links to political parties from the

¹ F. Bieber, *The Rise of Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans*, Basingstoke, 2020.

² P. Čermák et al., *8 Challenges for Democracy in the Western Balkans – Analysis*, Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom, 2023 <<https://www.freiheit.org/western-balkans/analysis-8-challenges-democracy-western-balkans>> (accessed on 9.4.2024).

coalition in power³. The media noted some positive results concerning the judiciary in response to attacks against journalists, but underlined that proceedings are often ineffective and lack independence. The Report published by Reporters Without Borders, for instance, pointed out that of 180 countries covered by the index, Kosovo dropped 19 places over the last year to 75th amid direct attacks on journalists from political groups and physical attacks in the field. Bosnia and Herzegovina tumbled 17 places to 81st, mainly thanks to restrictions and political pressure in the predominantly Serb-populated Republika Srpska entity. Serbia dropped seven places to 98th, with Reporters Without Borders citing a polarised political climate in which journalists are targeted by politicians of the ruling Progressive Party in attacks amplified by national broadcasters⁴.

3. Global State of Democracy Report of 2023 underlined that the unresolved issues from the 1990s wars, populism, ethnic tensions, secessionist threats and corrupt politicians with ties to organized crime have delayed meaningful reforms and prevented the strengthening of formal institutions such as independent judiciaries, credible elections, and regulatory agencies in these countries. Their citizens continue to live with the consequences, which threaten democratic norms and the quality of life, leading to depopulation and brain drain⁵.

Similar critical evaluation of the situation in the above-mentioned areas have been also included in the reports by Freedom House, OEBS/ODIHIR and of the European Union. The recent Freedom House on Serbia report, for instance, evaluated that Serbia is a parliamentary democracy with competitive multiparty elections, but in recent years the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) has steadily eroded political rights and civil liberties, putting pressure on independent media, the political opposition, and civil society organizations⁶. Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) is a highly decentralized parliamentary republic whose complex constitutional regime is embedded in the Dayton Peace Agreement, which ended the 1992-95 Bosnian War.

³ P. Cvetičanin et al., *Captured states and/or captured societies in the Western Balkans*, in *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 2020, p. 41 ff., <<https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2023.2170202>> (accessed on 26.5.2024).

⁴ B. Xhorxhina, *Balkan states fall in press freedom rankings*, Pristina. BIRN. May 3, 2024. *Balkan States Fall in Press Freedom Rankings | Balkan Insight* (accessed on 26.5.2024).

⁵ G. Gola, *Case study: Western Balkans Global State of Democracy 2023 Report*; 2023 International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, <<https://www.idea.int/publications/catalogue/case-study-western-balkans-gsod-2023-report>> (accessed on 9.4.2024).

⁶ Freedom House, *Nations in Transit 2024, Serbia, Report*, <<https://freedomhouse.org/country/serbia/freedom-world/2024>> (accessed on 4.7.2024).

Political affairs are characterized by severe partisan gridlock among nationalist leaders from the country's Bosnian, Serb, and Croat communities. Political participation by citizens from other communities is extremely limited. Corruption remains a serious problem in the government and elsewhere in society⁷.

Kosovo holds credible and relatively well-administered elections. Many public institutions are undermined by entrenched corruption, though there are signs that a new generation of politicians are moving to confront corrupt practices through judicial and administrative reforms. Journalists continue to face intimidation, particularly on social media. The rule of law is inhibited by interference and dysfunction in the judiciary⁸. North Macedonia is a parliamentary republic, but unstable government coalitions and early elections are common; the government continues to struggle with corruption and clientelism, while media and civil society participate in vigorous public discourse, but journalists and activists still face pressure and intimidation⁹.

As per the 2024 Freedom House report on Montenegro, despite some positive hints at consensus building at the very end of the year, national democratic governance stagnated in 2023 due to the prolonged institutional and constitutional crisis, the effects of which were still active. Electoral reform has also stagnated, with deficiencies coming to the fore during the 2023 presidential election and the inability to finalize local elections in Šavnik. New high-level corruption cases continued to be opened by the Special Prosecution, but the other actors along the criminal justice chain have yet to demonstrate commitment to reforms and vigour in ensuring sustainable judicial follow-up. The government has adopted a Media Strategy, but without new and improved media legislation being adopted and implemented, progress in media independence and sustainability is still lacking¹⁰.

The reports of OEBS-ODHIR concerning various elections in the observed countries are of crucial importance. In its report on the preliminary parliamentary elections in Montenegro in 2023, the IEOM stated that “the legal framework provides a basis for the democratic conduct of elections, but it should be comprehensively

⁷ Freedom House, Nations in Transit 2024, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Report, <<https://freedomhouse.org/country/bosnia-and-herzegovina/freedom-world/2024>> (accessed on 4.7.2024).

⁸ Freedom House, Nations in Transit 2024, Kosovo, Report, <<https://freedomhouse.org/country/kosovo/freedom-world/2024>> (accessed on 4.7.2024).

⁹ Freedom House, Nations in Transit 2024, North Macedonia, Report, <<https://freedomhouse.org/country/north-macedonia/freedom-world/2024>> (accessed on 4.7.2024).

¹⁰ Freedom House, Nations in Transit 2024, Montenegro, Scores and Changes in 2024, <<https://freedomhouse.org/country/montenegro/nations-transit/2024>> (accessed on 4.7.2024).

revised to address a number of gaps and inconsistencies”¹¹. In the Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions on the parliamentary elections in Serbia in 2023, the IEOM concluded that the early parliamentary elections “though technically well-administered and offering voters a choice of political alternatives, were dominated by the decisive involvement of the President, which, together with the ruling party’s systemic advantages, created unjust conditions”¹².

As to the parliamentary elections in North Macedonia in 2024 that were held concurrently with the presidential second round, the IEOM stated that “in the run-up to these elections, most IEOM interlocutors referred to a generalized atmosphere of disaffection with the political establishment, citing a lack of will by both the government and opposition to address long standing calls for comprehensive reforms ... The legal framework for the parliamentary and presidential elections establishes the basis for holding democratic elections; however, some provisions do not comply with international standards, and persisting inconsistencies, gaps and ambiguous formulations undermine legal certainty and merit further revision. Regrettably, the Electoral Code was recently amended through expedited processes lacking transparency and public consultation, which is not in line with international standards and OSCE commitments”¹³.

The reports provided by the European Commission on the enlargement process consider more in the way of information what is the situation in the Western Balkans in the fields of the rule of law, fundamental rights, the functioning of democratic institutions, public administration reform and the economic criteria, which are known as the ‘fundamentals’ of the EU accession process. However, the reports do not

¹¹ ODIHR Election Observation Mission, Montenegro, Early Parliamentary Elections, 11 June 2023, Final Report, <<https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/montenegro/542637>> (accessed on 4.7.2024). ODIHR Election Observation Mission, Montenegro, Presidential election, 19 March and 2 April 2023, Final Report, <<https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/montenegro/537026>> (accessed on 4.7.2024).

¹² ODIHR Election Observation Mission, Republic of Serbia early parliamentary elections, 17 December 2023, Final Report, <<https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/serbia/556500>> (accessed on 4.7.2024).

ODIHR election observation mission, Republic of Serbia – Local Elections, 2 June 2024, Statement of preliminary findings and conclusions, Preliminary conclusions, <<https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections>> (accessed on 4.7.2024).

¹³ International election observation mission, Republic of North Macedonia – Presidential Election, 24 April 2024, Statement of preliminary findings and conclusions, Preliminary conclusions, <<https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections>> (accessed on 4.7.2024). International election observation mission, Republic of North Macedonia – Parliamentary Elections and, Presidential Election Second Round, 8 May 2024, Statement of preliminary findings and conclusions, Preliminary conclusions, <<https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections>> (accessed on 4.7.2024).

adequately consider the topics covered by this article, although these are of great importance for the achievement of the EU enlargement goals¹⁴.

4. This part provides some general observations concerning the situation regarding the position of parliamentary opposition parties in the region. As first, it is necessary to highlight four viewpoints of general importance for the region.

4.1. First, the consequences of wars and ethnic and religious conflicts in Western Balkans strongly influence the ways, modes, and contents of political transition in the countries of the region. In the Balkans, politics is never very far from history and history never far from the politics. In the case of the history of the WWII we could illustrate this fact in regard of treating the Serbs, Jews, Gipsy and liberal Croats determination camp Jasenovac established by the pro-Nazi Independent State of Croatia in related national politics and mass media. The same refers to the evaluation of the Yugoslav national liberation movements and of similar topics that happened in the WWII in the region. Today is even most a divide factor the treatment of the recent ethnic wars not only in politics and mass media, but also in educational programs. The ‘divide abusive nationalistic talk’ is present also in sport and similar events. This atmosphere is, of course, present also in the activities of political parties, especially those of far right and xenophobic orientations. In some cases, there are not at all differences between the parties in power and in the opposition concerning these issues.

¹⁴ See Key findings in the EU reports for 2023 for BiH, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia: Report on Bosnia and Herzegovina, Key findings of the 2023 Brussels, 8 November 2023, European Commission, <https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/qanda_23_5613> (accessed on 9.4.2024). Report on Kosovo, Key findings of the 2023, Brussels, 8 November 2023, European Commission, <https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/QANDA_23_5614> (accessed on 9.4.2024). Report on Montenegro, Key findings of the 2023, Brussels, 8 November 2023, European Commission, <https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/QANDA_23_5615> (accessed on 9.4.2024). Report on North Macedonia, Key findings of the 2023, Brussels, 8 November 2023, European Commission, <https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/QANDA_23_5627> (accessed on 9.4.2024). Report on Serbia Brussels, Key findings of the 2023, 8 November 2023, European Commission <https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/qanda_23_5628> (accessed on 9.4.2024). RFE. 2019. Montenegro passes law on religious communities amid anger, protests, Radio Free Europe, <<https://www.rferl.org/a/montenegro-religious-law-serbian-orthodox-church-protest/30346778.html>> (accessed 27 Dec 2019).

4.2. Second, the nature of political opposition in the Western Balkans countries has few similarities with the political opposition in other countries¹⁵. The divisions between the ‘position’ and ‘opposition’ parties several times consider topics that are specific for the Western Balkans region, e.g., inter-ethnic relations and the role of religion in politics.

4.2.1. *Inter-ethnic relations.* The most outstanding situation in this regard is the controversial position of Bosnians, Croat and Serbs in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The political parties of the three nations based on ethnic and religious origin of the electorate rule the politics in the two entities – Federacija Bosne i Hercegovine (Federation of Bosnia and Hercegovina) and Republika Srpska (Serb Republic). The political parties with ethnically and religious mixt members manage some local communities but have very little influence on politics of two state entities. The competent authorities have even not changed the electoral law in accordance with the decision of the ECHR of 22.12.2009 that is necessary to eliminate the situation that prohibit Rom and Jew from standing for election to the house of people of the Parliamentary Assembly and for the State Presidency what discriminate and breach their electoral rights¹⁶. The consequences of this situation have negative aspects not only for the development of the country and for the well-being of its people, but jeopardize the stability and peace of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Western Balkan region as well. The role of ethnicity in political life is present in North Macedonia as an essential element of political stability. The balance between Macedonian and Albanian political parties is of paramount importance especially after the military insurgency of the Albanian population in 2001 that ended with the signature of Ohrid agreement on 22 August of the same year¹⁷. Both political structures, the position and opposition, include in the government also the relevant Albanian political parties. Based on the amnesty declared with the Ohrid agreement, even one of the leaders of the insurgency, the president of the newly established party, the Democratic Union for

¹⁵ L. Helms, *Introduction: The nature of political opposition in contemporary electoral democracies and autocracies*, in *Eur Polit Sci*, 2021, p. 569 ff., <<https://doi.org/10.1057/s41304-021-00323-z>> (accessed on 9.4.2024).

¹⁶ The ECHR established that this situation violates art. 14 (prohibition of discrimination) of the European Convention on Human Rights, taken together with Article 3 of Protocol No. 1 (right to free elections), and Violation of Article 1 of Protocol No. 12 (general prohibition of discrimination) to the Convention.

¹⁷ The 2001 insurgency in the Republic of Macedonia was an armed conflict that began when the ethnic Albanian National Liberation Army (NLA) insurgent group, formed from veterans of the Kosovo War and Insurgency in the Preševo Valley, attacked Macedonian security forces at the end of January 2001, and ended with the Ohrid agreement on 22 August the same year.

Integration (DUI), became an outstanding member of the government¹⁸. The inter-ethnic tensions erupted again after the elections in May 2024, in which the nationalistic party VMRO-DPMNE got a large majority. The new PM Mickoski opted for the DUI's rivals in the ethnic Albanian political campus, the "Vlen" [It's worth it] coalition, which won less votes than DUI. The DUI said this was an act of "ignoring the will of the Albanians", and said it was preparing for a slew of activities, including possible street protests in Autumn 2024. Micoski declared that his political opponents were trying to mobilise people to "provoke ethnic conflict" and to "destabilise inter-ethnic harmony in Macedonia". He accused the DUI of being behind the plot. He also accused top DUI politicians, who were former senior officials in prior governments, of plotting destabilisation to protect the "huge sums of money" they accumulated over the past two decades while they were in power. Nowadays, we could not yet presume what would be the consequences of these new political confrontation between the ruling and opposition parties on ethnic basis for the stability and security of North Macedonia. The ethnic minorities parties of Montenegro usually support the government and thus sometimes created the balance of the political structure. But the main 'ethnic division' is the position of the Montenegro pro-Serbian and pro-Montenegro parties regarding not only the ethnic matters, but also the main political standpoints on crucial domestic and international issues for the development of the country. As already mentioned, the nationalistic rhetoric of most position and opposition parties in the Western Balkans countries is present in their programs and everyday political life. It is several times the main tool for obtaining the support of the electorate and for divert their responsibility from the social, economy and other grievances of the population. Their popular stand is that they are the only ones who "defend the national interests of the people".

4.2.2. *The role of religion in politics.* The role of the church as an institution is quite demanding for research, since it is traditionally closed, and comparative literature in this area is very scarce. The relations of opposition political parties, leaders or actors with representatives of the church are quite non-transparent, as opposed to the relations of the church with ruling actors¹⁹. The outstanding example of the

¹⁸ In September 2002 elections, an SDSM-led pre-election coalition won half of the 120 seats in Parliament. Branko Crvenkovski was elected Prime Minister, in coalition with the ethnic Albanian Democratic Union for Integration (DUI) party. It was formed immediately after the country's 2001 armed conflict between the National Liberation Army and Macedonian security forces. NLA founder Ali Ahmeti has been the party's president ever since.

¹⁹ D. Gavrilović, *Religion in the transitional ex-Yugoslav countries*, in Religion in Contemporary Society = (Религија и современно общество): international scientific meeting almanac: [(Thematic conference proceedings of international significance held in Srebrno jezero (Veliko Gradiste), May 19

involvement of religion in politics has been the stand towards the role of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro in relation to the adoption of the adequate legislation²⁰. The political stand of Serbia is present also in academic articles on the question of legitimacy of the Montenegro Orthodox Church²¹. Having in mind the multireligious composition, it is understandable that the impact of religion exists especially on moral issues concerning the people's life, and quite complex relations could emerge between people of different religions. In this regard, it is worthy to keep in mind that during the Balkans wars people kill each other in the name of their Gods. The direct or indirect influence of the given religion on the views and 'behaviours' of the political parties in all Western Balkan countries could be discovered by observing the practical approaches of political and religious factors especially on local communities, while is because of the reasons which we mentioned before very difficult to confirm it on the national level. Besides, we could for sure assert that religions are a factor of division and disintegration in the Balkans²².

4.3. Third, the analysis of the situation shows that the opposition parliamentary parties in the considered Western Balkan countries have well-developed (so-called) fundamental political programs, which elaborate the entire spectrum of program commitments in various fields of politics, economy, culture, society, European integration, based on the (so-called) fundamental ideological programs.

However, most parties in practical politics do not implement their program commitments at all, which remain a 'dead letter on paper', and are only declarative, but are their usual pre-election activities mostly confined to putting forward the "excesses" of the ruling political elites and similar issues, with the aim to get the support of the electorate. In addition, the analysis of the situation in recent years has put forward the

and 20 of 2017)]. Ed: Blagojević, Mirko and Matić, Zlatko. Institute of Social Sciences: Department of Education and Culture, Serbian Orthodox Diocese of Branicevo, Beograd; Pozarevac, p. 99 ff. <<http://iriss.idn.org.rs/1039/>> (accessed on 26.5.2024).

²⁰ RFE. 2019. Montenegro passes law on religious communities amid anger, protests, Radio Free Europe, <<https://www.rferl.org/a/montenegro-religious-law-serbian-orthodox-church-protest/30346778.html>> (accessed 27 Dec 2019).

²¹ S.E. Hilton, *The self-proclaimed Montenegrin Orthodox Church – A paper tiger or a resurgent church?*, in Religion in Contemporary Society = (Религија и современно общество) : international scientific meeting almanac : [(Thematic conference proceedings of international significance held in Srebrno jezero (Veliko Gradiste), May 19 and 20 of 2017)]. Ed: Blagojević, Mirko and Matić, Zlatko. Institute of Social Sciences: Department of Education and Culture, Serbian Orthodox Diocese of Branicevo, Beograd ; Pozarevac, p. 31 ff. <<http://iriss.idn.org.rs/1039/>> (accessed on 26.5.2024).

²² I. Cvitković, *Religions and Nations as Factors of Division and Desintegration in the Balkans*, in D. Todorović et al. (eds), *Contemporary Religious Changes: From Desecularization to Postsecularization*, Niš and Belgrade, p. 9 ff.

question if the opposition parties' leaders in some WB countries are at all capable to comprise the formation of coalitions of these parties to confront efficiently the ruling political elite in everyday political life, both in general and in local elections. Certainly, party leaders can develop pro-democratic political programs, but coalition partnerships or pre-election calculations and pandering to the mass of voters incline them towards populism or nationalist rhetoric.

4.4. Fourth, the stand towards the recognition of the independence of Kosovo and the Serbia-Kosovo relations is a specific Western Balkans' problem. The opposition parties in the countries that recognised Kosovo in general follow the viewpoints of the government in power regarding this question²³. The divide views concerning this issue exists in Bosnia and Herzegovina that is the only country of the former Yugoslavia (besides Serbia itself) that does not recognize Kosovo's independence. As the leaders of Serb Republic follow the policy of Belgrade regarding this question, it has been impossible that Bosnia and Herzegovina recognises Kosovo despite the positive approach of the Bosnian and Croat political structure of the country. In Serbia, of course, also the parliamentary opposition parties fully support the governmental standpoint on Kosovo. Small differences perhaps exist regarding the ways of negotiation with the Kosovo government under the sponsorship of the EU or other international factors (for instance, the previous Trump's presidency).

5. At this point of the analysis, this article should focus on what could be the conclusion and recommendations for the future. The development of values mentioned above is of course a commitment and a responsibility for the national political groups, parties, and civil societies in concerned Western Balkan countries; not neglecting in this process also the role of academia in educating the young generations in the spirit of these values.

The analysis of the present situation in the Western Balkan countries have shown that not significant efforts of political factors in this direction exist. The national governments are not interested to provide adequate legal and political circumstances for the participation of opposition parties on equal basis in the elections and in the adequate decision-making processes even on issues of primary national interest.

In the European integration process negotiations—that include also the topics addressed in this article—the influence and participation of civil society organizations has been institutionalized, but it is difficult to analyse the influence of the academic

²³Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia.

community, unless certain intellectuals are engaged as experts for individual negotiation chapters (the so-called negotiation clusters). Finally, many experts from civil society organizations or members of the academic community—professors, intellectuals—are personally engaged in the activities or membership of political parties (often under the label ‘political councils’, which do not necessarily imply membership in those parties). Based on available data, we could firmly establish that the activities of the civil societies and academia so far had no remarkable impact on the situation.

Civil society organizations in the region need to address the challenge of their delegitimization brought forth by a stalled EU accession process and illiberal governments. They need to reinvigorate their missions by expanding constituencies of people who care about democracy, reconnect to the grassroots and strengthen their leverage in contesting elements of state capture. Traditional advocacy CSOs and sporadic new grassroots issue-based movements need to develop better synergies to increase civic engagement. CSOs in the Western Balkans need to strengthen their regional cooperation and work across borders to fight on two of the major fronts in parallel. Firstly, a regional approach is essential in securing the resolution of bilateral and ethnic disputes and fighting trends of historical revisionism, as this fuels authoritarianism and holding the region back from the EU. Secondly, regional CSOs need to advocate together for common interests to convince decision-makers within the EU of the region’s readiness and interest in getting closer to the EU²⁴.

Keeping in mind the negative trends concerning the topics reviewed within this article, the necessity exists that the enlargement policies of the EU in an adequate way stimulate the development of democracy with all the pertinent elements, including the establishment of clearer political oppositions parties role on equal basis in the political system, as one of the basic elements in the development of this European region, based on democracy and the rule of law, and of their step by step integration in the EU system.

The process of political integration into the EU of the Western Balkan countries has been extremely slow. The year 2023 marks twenty years since the EU-Western Balkan Summit in Thessaloniki, when the Western Balkan countries were promised an ‘EU perspective’. Today, the announcements of the leading EU structure are very

²⁴ P. Čermák et al., *op. cit.*

vague²⁵, this is the main reason why mutual perceptions have deteriorated in recent years²⁶.

The EU should actively engage in the Western Balkans and restore the credibility of the EU accession process as it is the only external actor to provide the region with a viable geopolitical vision based on stability and democracy. However, the roadmap leading to the EU needs to be clearer, with specific merit-based milestones to accomplish, associated with certain ‘benefits’ after reaching each milestone. The EU institutions also need to make European policy towards the region more consistent and ensure that the candidate states are awarded promised progress in their accession process once they meet the criteria, while failures of regional politicians to align with the EU conditionality should be penalized.

The EU should also nurture greater unity among member states and employ its considerable leverage over the Western Balkans to facilitate the swifter resolution of bilateral and ethnic disputes, which among other things fuel authoritarianism and ethnonationalism throughout the region—especially the normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia. Thus, it will be necessary to elaborate novel EU approaches to these issues, also including the civil society institutions, organisations and academia.

The fact that members of the European Parliament, as well as the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, are more and more openly engaged in promoting pro-democratic standards in the Western Balkans, especially in electoral processes, is also positive. The experts’ reports on the situation in the Western Balkans are also useful. Reinhard Priebe, the retired director of the European Commission for Western Balkans, wrote in 2019 that the scope of state capture eludes regular EU reporting. State capture implies a condition of widespread corruption and exploitation of public resources for private gains, while neutralizing control mechanisms, whether by legal or illegal means. This situation spreads across sectors covered, in different degrees, in

²⁵ The most cited is the statement of the leaving president of the European Council, Charles Michel, that the European integration of the Western Balkans countries should be completed until 2030. However, as this issue is included in the recent political documents of the EU there are not realistic expectations that this will happen. The things are even more complicated with beginning of the integration’s negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova (Georgia is momentarily on “stand by” because of adoption of the law on “foreign agents”).

²⁶ M. Uvalić, *The Perceptions of European Union-Western Balkan Integration Prospects: Introduction and Overview*, in Id. (ed.) *Integrating the Western Balkans into the EU. New Perspectives on South-East Europe*, Cham, 2023.

separate negotiation chapters, as well as across political criteria that are more difficult to monitor and assess²⁷.

The international networks promoting democratic values can substantially assist the Western Balkan weak democracies by actively working on building positive pro-democracy narratives. With EU accession effectively on hold, there is currently a weaker institutional anchor for democratic reforms, which is why there is a need for more flexible forms of support for the new wave of grassroots pro-democracy groups and alternative media outlets which are disrupting the entrenched state of illiberalism. New pro-democracy narratives should also be based on evidence on the benefits of strengthening alliances with democratic actors in opposition to authoritarian regimes. Global watchdog organizations can also provide the regional CSOs, media and pro-reform political elites with the knowledge and expertise to fight corruption and enhance the role of independent media. While financial assistance from international funds does not guarantee progress in regional democratization, it can be a major element if appropriately routed and bound with purposeful and sustainable projects²⁸.

Abstract: The situation concerning the parliamentary opposition in the West Balkans depends on the fact if general suppositions exist for its efficient position on equal basis with the “position” parties. The analysis of the situation shows that various deficiencies concerning these elements exist. The consequences of wars, as well as ethnic and religious conflicts, strongly influence the ways, modes, and contents of political transition in the countries of the region. Starting from the assertion that the development of democratic values and the establishment of an efficient political system is a commitment and a responsibility for national politics and civil society, the contribution offers some insights on the author’s views on the role of the EU and other international organisations in these processes.

Keywords: Western Balkans – parliamentary opposition parties – civil society – European Union – international agencies promoting democracy.

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²⁷ R. Priebe, ‘The scope of state capture eludes regular EU reporting’, <<https://archive.raisee.org/priebe-report-against-state-capture-in-the-western-balkans/>> (accessed on 4.7.2024).

²⁸ P. Čermák et al., *op. cit.*