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Beyond Stabilitocracy. Unveiling the Rise of Autocracy in the Western Balkans.

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Introduction

Democracy is challenged throughout the world, including the Western Balkan countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia) with current violent conflicts reshaping the global political order. Many nondemocratic or authoritarian governments, including those in the Western Balkans,¹ have used the Covid-19 pandemic as a catalyst or an opportunity to enact additional limitations on civil freedoms, and to securitise citizens and civic engagement, delegitimise election processes, and implement novel mass surveillance methods. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has furthermore increased the security stakes of the region vis-à-vis its closest neighbours and helped strengthen the authoritarian tendencies of some of its political leaders.

Leaning towards autocracy entails infringement of civil liberties, primarily citizens' political participation and political opponents' activities, as well as the rights of minority groups and freedom of speech. Autocratic leaders are embedded in powerful elite networks that routinely participate in informal, corrupt economic activities, alongside local politics. The Western Balkans political regimes' fitting autocratic attitude is not just a passing malfunction or a crisis of democracy, but rather a grounded and stable type of regime that places the countries at the bottom of a political continuum from liberal democracy to outright authoritarianism.

It emerged partly due to a sluggish EU accession path with little progress, which made the Western Balkan countries (WB6) a "transitional region with no clear goal or endpoint in sight, a zone "in-between" – in between democracy and authoritarianism, market and state-controlled economy, capitalist wilderness and socialist legacy."² This condition was termed stabilocracy³ to describe regimes that oscillate between autocracy and democracy, supported by foreign actors who fail to acknowledge this condition and continue collaboration with these autocratic leaders. Along with boosting clientelism that ties people to the ruling elites through coercion and control, it results in the erosion of protections like strong institutions and independent media in the WB6 countries.⁴

For the most part EU integration is perceived as the primary mechanism for strengthening democracy and creating a legal framework for states to operate under the rule of law. The initial idea that a gradual alignment with EU laws and policies by means of membership negotiations would spur democratic consolidation among EU candidate countries has largely failed. Serbia, where accession negotiations started in 2014, is not considered a liberal democracy from the same year onward. It is also clear that accession will not happen without democratic change.

Today, we argue, the WB6 is no longer in an in-between zone, and we seek to explore how the stabilitocracy conundrum has evolved in recent years, to assess the shift towards full autocracy in the WB6. At the same time, we assert that the democracy/autocracy dichotomy is too simplistic,⁵ recognising the democratic bias that has gained prominence in this discussion. Empirically, we aim to highlight a more complex picture of countries that exist on a wide a spectrum between these two categories, and the ongoing autocratisation away from stabilitocracy.

Is There Any Democracy Left in the Western Balkans?

According to recent measures of democratic trends, at least two of the WB6 are electoral autocracies (Serbia and Albania).⁶ Three more countries are extremely weak electoral democracies (Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia), while the regime in Republika Srpska can be considered authoritarian. Their autocratic leaders have invested in network building with world powers like China, Russia, and other like-minded governments, in an effort to boost their political (and personal) fortunes at home and abroad. In turn, co-opting these small autocratic rulers is necessary for building authoritarian capitalism and for the promotion of autocratic norms that drive the process.

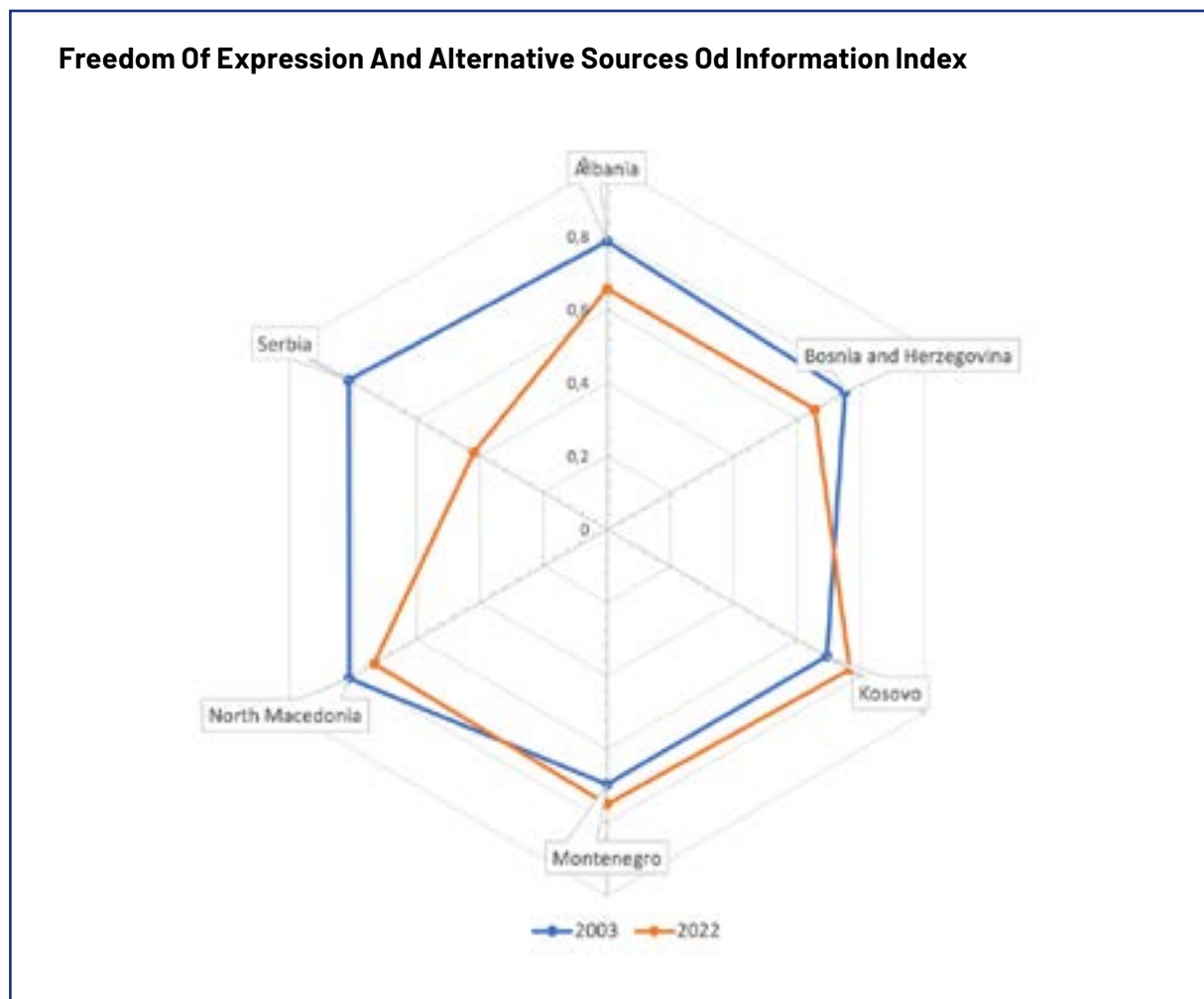
There is a vibrant debate on how to classify countries that are no longer democratic but still maintain a level of political pluralism and regularly hold elections, which comes down to the fact that only having competitive elections does not make a country democratic. If certain elements of political accountability and rule of law are not met, it is more realistic to call such countries competitive autocracies that hold elections but where the winner is known in advance.⁷ On election day, however, when the country is in the international spotlight of observers and the media, most rules are upheld. Electoral democracy thus becomes a show maintained to secure reputation abroad, not legitimacy at home. Political parties in autocratic governments have enacted policies, changed procedures, subverted independent institutions, selectively implemented rules against opponents, and installed loyal members in key, powerful positions. The intent of such illiberal politics is to perpetuate indefinite electoral advantage,⁸ enough to substantially change the game and give ruling elites an electoral advantage. Observed individually, not one of these actions is enough to warrant attention or raise alarm among the key international partners, who chose to ignore 'minor' warning signs.

The death of democracy in the Western Balkans can be described as a process of death by a thousand cuts where large parts of the WB6 societies gradually adapt to living in countries that appear democratic from within without being so.⁹ For 2022, Freedom House lists all WB6 as partially free, emphasizing issues with free media, independent judiciary, and executive overreach.¹⁰ The Bertelsmann Transformation Index delves deeper and provides a sobering view of how the key democratic components of political participation and rule of law

declined throughout the past 15 years.¹¹ Looking at political participation, in almost all countries we can witness that free and fair elections are less common, Kosovo being the exception, and that freedom of expression and association is becoming more restricted. Regarding the rule of law, we see that the separation of powers and accompanying checks and balances are being extensively weakened throughout the WB, as is the role of an independent judiciary.

Diving even deeper into the data reveals trends of subverting procedural safeguards to the extent that they no longer represent part of a democratic system, low quality of elections throughout the WB6, and a particularly strong decline in Serbia, but a minor increase in compliance with judicial decisions in Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina.¹² Stagnation and authoritarian entrenchment are also evident when it comes to executive and judicial corruption in Albania, where Kosovo is the only positive example. One key element that remains problematic throughout the region are the low and stagnant levels of freedom of expression and alternative sources of information. In the case of Serbia, we can observe a precipitous decline in media freedom over the past two decades.

Caption: Varieties of Democracy Freedom of Expression and Alternative Sources of Information Index.



Country study “snapshots” in textboxes [300-500 words]

Serbia: Stabilitocracy doesn't ensure stability anymore

Among the WB6, Serbia has experienced the sharpest decline in all measures of democracy, falling to levels not seen since the Slobodan Milošević era of the 1990s. This shift is a consequence of a continued and accumulated erosion over the past decade under the rule of the president Aleksandar Vučić and his Serbian Progressive Party (SNS). Despite minor improvements in political pluralism following the 2022 elections, including a more vocal opposition, the general trajectory of authoritarian entrenchment has not changed. Serbia can no longer be described as a democratic country, but is at best a competitive authoritarian regime.

Bosnia and Herzegovina: Internally destabilized by autocratic leaders

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, autocratisation continues at the local and subnational levels, especially in Republika Srpska under Milorad Dodik and the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD). While establishing a liberal democracy at the national level has failed, so has the authoritarian capture of the state institutions. The same consociational structures that make governance difficult have so far made the country more resilient to autocratisation, but this is likely to change due to a capture and subversion of subnational governing institutions by authoritarian leaders.

Albania: Is democracy the price for EU integration?

On the surface, Albania has made some progress in recent years, opening accession negotiations and modestly improving its judiciary and governance. However, this is not enough to offset high levels of corruption and state capture by political parties. Instead, political parties have moved to instrumentalise still not independent state institutions, including the judiciary and parliament, against political opponents. A culture of impunity before the law, as well as preference for weak governance institutions by political parties and powerful individuals, remain a key threat to democracy.

Kosovo: Who would benefit from a renewed escalation of violence?

The situation in Kosovo has become more complex as institutional reforms and governing efficacy in the country have collided with issues of recognition and the status of Serbs and Serb majority communities in the country. On the one hand, no meaningful democratic progress can be achieved without resolving longstanding governance issues in a way that strengthens Kosovo's institutions. On the other hand, a centralised approach to governance supported by Kosovar leadership has repeatedly backfired, resulting in violence and sabotaging any reform efforts. The Brussels Dialogue with Serbia that is supposed to address this has ended up being misused by autocratic leaders, especially in Serbia, to forward their own agendas.

North Macedonia: One step forward, two steps back

On EU accession, North Macedonia seems to be on a different timeline than the rest of the Western Balkans. It is simultaneously a front runner and a laggard. The successes of early EU candidate status in 2005, democratic change in 2016, NATO membership in 2020, and opening EU accession negotiations in 2022 must be considered together with years of political polarisation and intermittent autocratization under VMRO-DPMNE, entrenched weak governance powering corruption, and the persistent malign influence of neighbouring countries. The country remains politically and ethnically divided with the ruling elites not willing to give up power or increase accountability.

Montenegro: Will political polarisation tear society apart?

The country experienced profound shifts in recent years, portrayed by the gradual decline of the Democratic Party of Socialists and Milo Đukanović. The resulting political volatility and increasing polarisation has affected democratic stability, governance, and reforms on crucial issues, including judicial appointments. Tensions have led to repeated protests and clashes between opposing, politically mobilised protesters, that continuously tear societal fabric in a country where good governance and a tourism-centred economy require a stable environment to function. If left unchecked this can have more serious consequences than just the weakening of democracy.

Foreign actors playing field

The shift toward autocracy in the Western Balkans (WB6) is influenced by external actors, emboldening regional political leaders to tighten control over public institutions and undermine democratic norms. Most foreign actors attempt to utilise several axes of influence in the WB6, such as economy and energy, geopolitics, and ideology, contributing to an authoritarian turn. While the EU and the US are perceived as democratic influences, their continuous collaboration with autocratic WB6 leaders doesn't quite fit the bill.

In a non-autocratic realm, the EU has provided continuous democracy assistance but has shown lacklustre commitment to the enlargement process and has failed to show clear support for recent pro-democracy initiatives, while failing to condemn electoral fraud (e.g. 2020 Serbian elections).

The United States, traditionally influential, has seen its impact decline in the past decade despite efforts to support democratic institutions, the rule of law, and counteract the influence of malign foreign actors like Russia. It has especially done so through resilience-strengthening programmes and education initiatives for media and civil society organisations, and through assistance in protecting critical infrastructure from cyberattacks.¹³ However, due to poor foreign policy strategy, reduced budget allocations and a focus on national security, US assistance seems to have empowered local elites and their control through the mismanagement and deviation of funds,¹⁴ rather than bolstering democratic practices further.

Among autocratic foreign actors, Russia holds a strong presence in Serbia and Republika Srpska. Moscow's strategy vis-à-vis the region is geopolitical disruption, a "spoiler" that seeks to curb Western influence. Weak on trade but strong in the energy field, especially towards Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, Russia also uses energy ties to politically influence the region.¹⁵ It spreads disinformation and manipulates elections through media influence via platforms like Russia Today and Sputnik, and indirectly through the pro-Russian narratives reproduced by local, mostly pro-regime, media.¹⁶

In parallel, China's influence in the region is economic and geopolitical, primarily expressed through massive investments, including the astronomic 'Belt and Road' global investment framework.¹⁷ These investments, such as in Bosnia and Herzegovina's energy projects, raise concerns about opaque contract allocations benefiting political elites. These investments often face legal inspection from the EU and are criticised for an overall lack of transparency.¹⁸

Turkey extends its influence through political, economic, and cultural agendas. It

also funds new infrastructure projects such as the promotion of Turkish language and culture.¹⁹ However, its projects, such as financing a mosque in Prishtina, are viewed with suspicion regarding potential neo-imperialist ambitions. Turkish media Anadolu Agency and TRT Balkan, and links with political parties such as Bosnia and Herzegovina's Party of Democratic Action (SDA), have been used as vehicles to endorse and advance President Erdoğan's political agenda.

Within the EU, Hungary stands out as a significant foreign enabler in its role as an autocratising 'Trojan horse'. The government of Viktor Orbán strategically partners with Serbia, with whom it shares economic and energy interests, alongside geopolitical and ideological intentions. Orbán's ideological convergence and close friendship with Aleksandar Vučić and more recently Milorad Dodik in Republika Srpska ensures authoritarian dominance over EU democratisation efforts.

Overall, external actors like Russia, China, Turkey, and Hungary play significant roles in shaping the region's political landscape, often at the expense of democratic principles and EU efforts.

Table 1. Four axes of foreign influence in the Western Balkans, by degree of relevance

Axis	Main indicators	EU	United States	Hungary	Turkey	Russia	China
Economic	- Direct investment - Trade relations - Development aid	★★	★	★★	●	★	★★
Energy	- Oil/ gas - Energy production	★★		★		★★	★★
Geopolitical	- Strategic interest - Military/ via NATO	★★	★★	★★	●	★★	★
Ideological	- Values, governance principles, culture	★★	★★	★	●	★★	★
Global Freedom Status 2023 (index out of 100)		90*	83	66	32	16	9
		Free		Partly free	Not free		

*EU-27 mean average

Citizens are caught in an authoritarian web

Citizens are sometimes accused of being enablers of autocratic leaders, while in fact they are also a collateral casualty to the damage caused by democratic backsliding. In the WB6 civil society is arguably captured, while trying to maintain a public sphere that serves democratic processes. Importantly, authoritarianism rests on obedience, but citizens in the WB6 don't fully fit the bill as we have seen. One such example was rebelling against Covid-19 rules, by rejecting measures (wearing masks, lockdown, and vaccination) that fit a populist mass ideology. Civil disobedience has a significant utilitarian value for the shaping of civic engagement tools against authoritarian rule.

Against state capture, control of elections, and shrinking free media space there are strong examples of citizens' agency and a potent civic space across the WB6. Citizens took action against ruling parties and state capture in Serbia, organising a series of protests in 2018 to challenge the rise of political violence and the authoritarian grip of Aleksandar Vučić under the slogan One of Five Million. In 2023, frustrations following a multiple murder at a primary school in Belgrade resulted in long-term protests under the slogan Serbia Against Violence. A wave of protests also engulfed Montenegro in 2020-2022, while the 'colourful revolution' in North Macedonia (2016) led to the overthrow of the autocrat Nikola Gruevski.

Environmental activism is successful across all WB6, stopping infrastructure and energy projects with detrimental impact on the environment.²⁰ In contrast, citizens' assemblies (e.g. in Mostar, BiH) had some limited success. However, their ability to limit autocratisation at the national level is weak or disputed at best. Protest and nonviolent resistance are no longer effective tools for change when autocratic rulers are actively limiting space for dissent through illiberal politics,²¹ essentially blunting the impact of popular mobilization. Even if their effects are limited and not lasting, citizens through collective action rekindle public conversation and give rise to new structures that may eventually bring about reforms.

One challenge they face are parallel civil society structures created by autocratic regimes that don't fulfil their role and obstruct the free space while trying to rip benefits of democratic pretence. One example of this imposter syndrome is a virtual civil society that operates in digital spaces only, which are easily hijacked and intentionally targeted by an online "army" of bots. Despite their prominent role in the struggle against democratic decline, the legitimacy of civil society actors²² and their actions may come into question as a provocation tool of the regime, sometimes justified when they adopt non-democratic practices.

Conclusion

The WB6 countries have transitioned from stabilitocracy to autocracy, marked by weakened democracy and increased instability. Instances of political and individual violence in the past seven years underline this decline. Instead of balance in a triangle of democracy, autocracy, and capitalism, the countries lean more towards the autocracy-capitalism axis.

“Stabilitocratic” leaders in the Western Balkans use autocratic methods that erode democracy, accountability, media and critical voices, free elections, and civil rights. Figures like Dodik in Republika Srpska or Vučić in Serbia tend to become more authoritarian the longer they stay in power. Stabilitocracy is not a stable form of regime; it changes for the worse after a period of time and turns to autocracy, particularly if supported externally.

Foreign engagement in the region falls into two categories: good intentioned and malignant. By engaging with Western Balkans autocrats, the EU and the US cement their power while attempting to support democracy. Meanwhile, authoritarian powers like Russia and China seek either political influence or financial gain, using an opportunity to exploit any profitable venture or resource controlled by authoritarian leaders.

Stalled EU accession processes, submerged in politicisation of the decision-making process about enlargement, effectively led to the sinking of whole countries, like North Macedonia, or opportunities for meaningful democratic consolidation. The EU of course should not be blamed unilaterally, but they astonishingly still lack the right frame for engagement despite deeply embedded presence in the region. Only after a major external upheaval threatened the EU core did they become prepared to give a new, meaningful consideration to the enlargement process in 2023.

Some societal groups continuously re-elect authoritarian leaders, either because of genuine support or because they are misled and coerced by a powerful and unscrupulous autocratic machinery. Meanwhile, other citizens cast their vote against autocratic leaders and engage in collective actions driven by political motives or concerns about public welfare and the misuse of resources, achieving varying degrees of success.

The prevailing status quo vis-à-vis EU enlargement facilitates the deterioration of democratic principles rather than fostering significant structural improvements in the process of fulfilling Copenhagen criteria. It perpetuates a situation where democratic institutions struggle to evolve or strengthen, while leading to a gradual erosion of democratic values and practices instead of actively promoting positive changes and reforms in the WB6 countries.

Recommendations

Immediate steps

Emphasize democracy over stability. In public communication do not exchange short-term geopolitical containment for democracy and rule of law. The costs in the long run will be much greater.

Revised foreign policy. Avoid endorsing autocratic leaders at all costs and make clear that democracy is a not negotiable element of EU and US foreign policy.

Support free and fair elections. Engaging election observers and working closely with electoral bodies in the WB6 during and between the elections, offering capacity building and education about democratic standards. Not congratulating re-elected authoritarian rulers before the results have been verified should become a norm.

Name and shame. Point out and publicly condemn electoral manipulations, attacks against media and independent institutions that result in democratic backsliding. Call for responsibility of elected leaders to ensure a free and fair democratic process and civil liberties.

Impose sanctions against individual autocratic leaders. When faced with serious threats to democracy, impose sanctions against individuals (similar to US sanctions against officials).

Provide targeted support for media freedom. Vocally support independent journalism and investigative media. Help build links and strong engagement between WB6 countries.

Provide support for civil society organizations. Support engagement of the WB6 civil society into the European and the EU networks and institutions for support and the possibility to influence European policies.

Support the citizens directly by engaging existing and new initiatives. Explore democratic innovations and tools to give citizens direct input into decision making.

Long run

Empower democratic forces in the region. Broaden the scope of actors to engage with; avoid talking to just a narrow circle of the chosen few. Make this engagement merit based.

Governance support. Help democratic parties in the region draw up policies, even before they are elected, to identify and challenge informal practices.

Strengthen regulatory and legal frameworks. Help WB6 regulate their markets and economy in a long term, in a way that prevents malign influence of foreign actors and protects resources.

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 - 2 BiEPAG study
 - 3 <https://biepag.eu/article/what-is-a-stabilitocracy/>
 - 4 BiEPAG study p. 91-93
 - 5 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/21599165.2020.1781094>
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The Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG) is a joint initiative of the European Fund for the Balkans (EFB) and Centre for the Southeast European Studies of the University of Graz (CSEES) promoting the European integration of the Western Balkans and the consolidation of democratic, open countries in the region. BiEPAG is grounded in the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. It adheres to values that are common to a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail. It is composed of prominent policy researchers from the region and wider Europe with demonstrable comprehension of the Western Balkans and the processes shaping the region. Members are Florian Bieber (Coordinator), Bojan Baća, Dimitar Bechev, Matteo Bonomi, Srđan Cvijić, Milica Delević, Nikola Dimitrov, Marika Djolai, Vedran Džihic, Donika Emini, Richard Grieveson, Dejan Jović, Damir Kapidžić, Marko Kmezić (Assistant Coordinator), Srđan Majstorović, Jovana Marović, Zoran Nechev, Tena Prelec, Corina Stratulat, Nikolaos Tzifakis, Alida Vračić, Gjergji Vurmo, Natasha Wunsch.

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The Centre for Southeast European Studies was set up in November 2008 following the establishment of Southeast Europe as a strategic priority at the University of Graz in 2000. The Centre is an interdisciplinary and cross-faculty institution for research and education, with the goal to provide space for the rich teaching and research activities at the university on and with Southeast Europe and to promote interdisciplinary collaboration. The Centre also aims to provide information and documentation and to be a point of contact for media and public interested in Southeast Europe, in terms of political, legal, economic and cultural developments. An interdisciplinary team of lawyers, historians, and political scientists has contributed to research on Southeast Europe, through articles, monographs and other publications. The centre regularly organizes international conferences and workshops to promote cutting edge research on Southeast Europe.

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