

International Organizations and Democratic Backsliding: The Case of the Western Balkans¹

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Abstract

Democracy promotion has been a staple of international organizations (IOs) since the fall of the Iron Curtain. Today, the number of IOs is at an all-time high, yet cases of democratic backsliding are growing around the world. This article explores the role of the EU in the (de)democratization process within the non-EU Western Balkan countries (WB6). Using the Liberal Democracy Index from V-Dem's dataset to illustrate the degree of democratic backsliding in this region, followed by a qualitative case study of the most severe case, a link between the EU enlargement conditionality policy and democratic backsliding can be established. Namely, the EU's democracy promotion apparatus – although widely successful – has led to unintended developments in the process of democratization in the WB6 region by placing greater emphasis on the executive branch or disregarding the possibility of complex election manipulation. An important implication of the analysis lies in understanding how different factors, both internal and external, influence the process of democratization and how democracy promoters can improve their approach.

Introduction

The rapid democratization of states at the end of the twentieth century marked the beginning of a new era in governance around the world. Starting with the Carnation Revolution in Portugal in 1974 and spreading across other south European countries such as Greece and Spain, the third wave of democratization continued well into the 1980s and 1990s to include countries on every continent (Huntington, 1991). Around this period, democracy promotion – a distinctive foreign policy phenomenon attributed to democracies, begun to take hold among developed nations. This foreign policy instrument quickly became the staple of numerous international organizations (IOs) as well (Pevehouse, 2005). At the same time, the number of IOs increased dramatically, but more importantly, the percentage of IOs that actively seek to promote democracy abroad rose threefold from 1980 to 2010 (Marshall and Cole, 2011; von Borzyskowski and Vabulas, 2018).

¹ This article draws on the author's master's thesis *International Actors and Democratic Backsliding: The Case of the Western Balkans*, defended in June 2021.

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While scholars do link IOs with democratization, recent years have witnessed a surge in cases of democratic backsliding both in consolidated and new democracies (Poast and Urpelainen, 2015; Hyde, 2020). **So, what explains these counterintuitive episodes of democratic backsliding during an era of widespread democracy promotion?** Existing literature has extensively covered domestic (internal) sources of democratic backsliding in numerous countries and/or regions that show signs of democratic erosion³, however few have examined the role of international actors in regard to this phenomenon. Given this, I argue that IOs and their democracy-promoting policies have inadvertently enhanced backsliding in some new democracies. In essence, IOs can be considered as one of the *external* factors that can potentially provoke democratic backsliding. To illustrate and test this, the article will focus on the Western Balkan countries and how the European Union (EU) and its enlargement conditionality policies have contributed towards democratic backsliding in the region. The intended purpose of this article is twofold: to broaden the debate on democratic erosion and its underlying causes and to contribute towards improving the EU democracy promotion apparatus.

Research Design

This article follows a bipartite research design directed at **(1)** illustrating the extent of democratic backsliding in the non-EU Western Balkan countries and **(2)** exploring how the EU (and its enlargement conditionality policies) influence the process of democratic backsliding in the region. This empirical approach allows the article to study the phenomenon of democratic backsliding as well as the key external explanations that are often overlooked in existing literature through establishing a link between democracy-promoting international organizations and backsliding.

1. The extent of democratic backsliding in the non-EU Western Balkan countries

The research will include six out of the seven countries of the Western Balkan region, later referred to as WB6: Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo⁴. All of these countries are currently not EU members (they are either EU Candidates or Potential EU Candidates) (European Commission, 2020). Croatia, commonly considered a Western Balkan country, will be excluded from the scope of the research because of its EU membership. In order to evaluate the extent of democratic backsliding in the WB6 region, the article will isolate the WB country with the most severe form of backsliding and draw parallels with the two hypotheses below. To achieve this, the Liberal Democracy Index (LDI) from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) dataset will be used.⁵

³ See Hanley, Seán, and Sikk, Allan. (2014) Economy, Corruption or Floating Voters? Explaining the Breakthroughs of Anti-Establishment Reform Parties in Eastern Europe. *Party Politics*, Volume 22(4); Krastev, Ivan. (2016) The Unraveling of the Post-1989 Order. *Journal of Democracy* Volume 27(4). or Rupnik, Jacques. (2016) Surging Illiberalism in the East.” *Journal of Democracy*, Volume 27(4).

⁴ This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

⁵ Clarification on the V-Dem dataset and the LDI is included in the *Democratic Backsliding in the WB6 region* section of this article.

2. How does the EU and its democracy promoting policies influence democratic backsliding within the WB6

The results of the first part of the empirical study are going to dictate the case selection for the second part — a qualitative case study. Namely, the case selection will be done by singling out the country that exhibited the most severe case of democratic backsliding captured by V-Dem's LDI. Once this country is identified, the following two hypotheses will be tested through qualitative analysis:

H1: EU enlargement conditionality increases the likelihood of democratic backsliding by placing greater emphasis on the executive relative to other democratic institutions, leading to executive aggrandizement.

H2: EU enlargement conditionality increases the likelihood of democratic backsliding by focusing on the minimal requirements for free and fair elections, disregarding the possibility of a more complex election manipulation.

Democratic Backsliding in the WB6 region

Democratic backsliding is a phenomenon, often seen as a type of a de-democratization episode that occurs when democratically elected officials deliberately take actions to (1) deteriorate institutional checks on executive power, (2) diminish the strength of opposition parties or the opposition in the legislature and often (3) target other characteristics associated with liberal democracy such as the independent judiciary, civil society and human and minority rights (Bermeo, 2016; Maeda 2010). As a legal, state-led process, backsliding retains minimalist characteristics of democracy such as free and fair elections, resulting in a diminished form of democracy rather than autocracy (Meyerrose, 2020). So, in order to measure the degree of democratic backsliding in a country, one needs to look at the variations of the quality of democracy, rather than at a dichotomous classification of democracy-autocracy.

The Liberal Democracy Index (LDI) is one of the 350 indices offered by the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) dataset – the largest social science database focused on democracy. The LDI captures slight changes in democratic characteristics such as the quality of elections, individual rights, media freedom, checks and balances of the executive, respect for civil liberties and the rule of law and independent legislature and judiciary (Coppedge et al., 2020). As such, this index has the ability to show subtle shifts in the quality of democracy in a given country and thus, it is a suitable tool to illustrate democratic backsliding when compared to other more conventional indices such as Freedom House or Polity for example. The LDI is based on expert surveys and a mix of additive and multiplicative aggregation rules (Kapidžić, 2020) and uses a 0-1 scale, with higher scores indicating a greater degree of (liberal) democracy.

Figure 1 shows the applied LDI on the WB6 region from 2002 until 2020. As already mentioned, the scope is limited to non-EU WB countries, so it excludes Croatia (commonly considered a part of the Western Balkans). This choice is driven by the independent variable – the EU enlargement conditionality policies, which does not apply to states that are already in the EU. The timeframe is strategically set to cover the years from 2002 until 2020 (the most recent available data). This chosen interval allows sufficient time for domestic development of minimalist democratic institutions such as free and fair elections following the dissolution of Yugoslavia, while also considering key events in EU-WB6 relations – all of which occurred after the turn of the century.

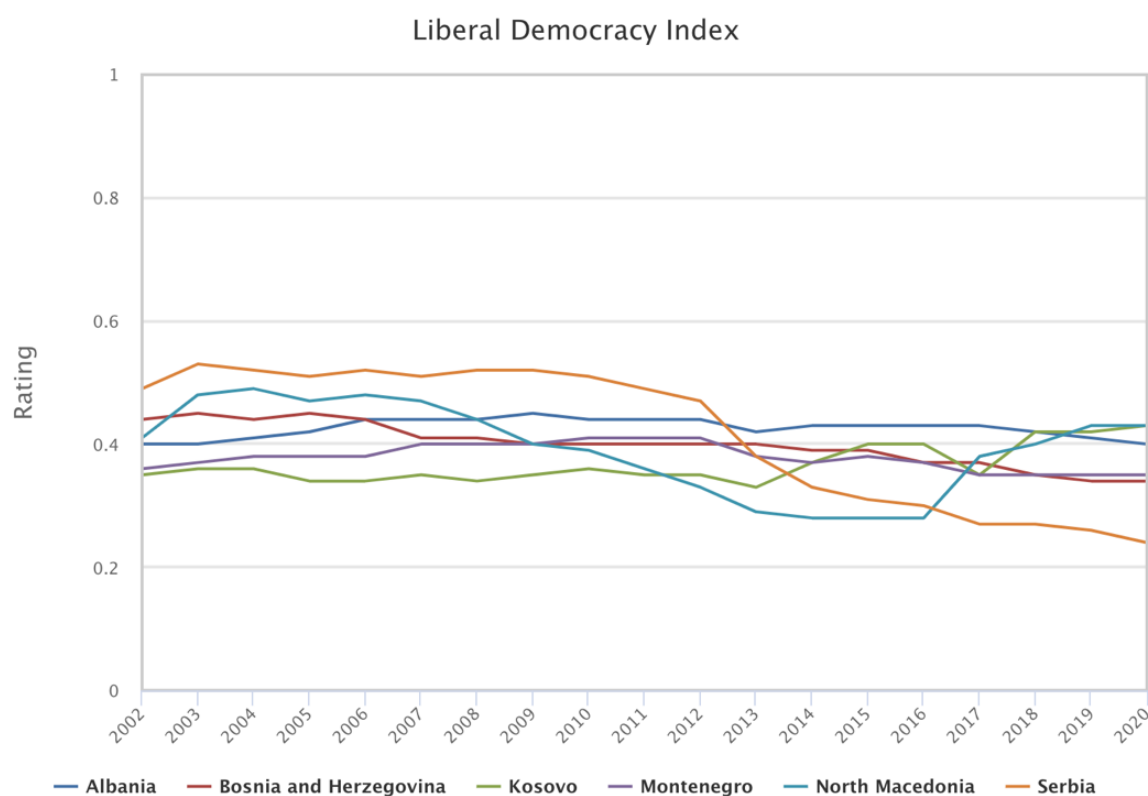


Figure 1. V-Dem LDI applied on the WB6 countries (2002-2020)

Based on the LDI, the WB6 countries did not show an improvement in the quality of their democracy in the chosen time interval of 18 years, from 2002 until 2020. After a stagnant period with minor fluctuations over the course of several years, all WB6 countries displayed a drop in the quality of democracy after 2012. The emergence of democratic backsliding did not occur simultaneously in each country – North Macedonia had been experiencing a steady decrease in the quality of democracy since 2004, and Serbia had a sharp downturn in 2012. Despite the recent improvements in specific cases, the LDI shows clear empirical signs of democratic backsliding in the WB6 region. While this increase of illiberal tendencies can be attributed to internal matters such as the rise of populism, the economic consequences following the European crisis of 2010-2013 or the growing interethnic tensions in some states (Kapidžić, 2020), the international community also played a role. The next section tests the aforementioned hypotheses regarding the role of the EU as the external factor that inadvertently contributes towards backsliding.

Backsliding: The Inadvertent Consequence of Democracy Promotion?

Although there are several external international actors influence the process of democratization around the globe, this article focuses on the European Union and their democracy promotion apparatus – the EU’s enlargement conditionality (Barnes and Randerson, 2006). As a non-official foreign policy instrument, EU accession conditionality has evolved to be an effective tool to drive certain countries or even regions towards democratic consolidation (as seen with the Eastern enlargement in 2004, 2007 and 2013). The Western Balkan region has been on the EU’s enlargement agenda for more than two decades now and the benefits thus far are clear: Croatia joined the EU in 2013 and the rest of the WB countries signed the Stabilization and Association Process (SAA), effectively making EU integration their foreign policy aim. However, as illustrated in the previous section, WB countries are experiencing democratic backsliding despite the EU’s democracy-promoting efforts. While scholars have studied the domestic reasons behind these illiberal tendencies (see Bieber, 2020; Marciacq, 2017), existing literature is scarce when it comes to external factors such as international organizations for instance.

From the LDI, we can isolate Serbia as having the most dramatic case of democratic backsliding in the last two decades. As seen in **Figure 2**, the quality of democracy had minor fluctuations between 2002 and 2012, and then continued to drastically decrease. So, to test **H1** which states that EU enlargement conditionality increases the likelihood of democratic backsliding by placing greater emphasis on the executive relative to other democratic institutions, we need to focus on the *other* democratic institutions. Firstly, as soon as the EU accession process starts, the space for parliamentary participation begins to shrink. This can be confirmed by the fact that SAA negotiations between Serbia and the EU were carried out with negligent parliamentary participation (Ministry of European Integration of the Republic of Serbia, 2019; Flessenkemper and Kmezić, 2017). On a more local level, EU institutions that engage with Serbia, “neither require nor actively encourage” parliamentary oversight (Flessenkemper and Kmezić, 2017). Instead, policies negotiated by the executive branch are absolute and final. This leads to a disbalance of the checks on the executive branch when it comes to the process of negotiating EU accession. Encouraged by this, the executive branch might continue to eliminate other checks and balances via legal and institutional changes that impede oppositional forces to challenge executive actions, a process that Bermeo (2016) calls *executive aggrandizement*. In the case of Serbia, there is overwhelming evidence that executive aggrandizement is in fact occurring under the rule of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) (Sofer, 2017)

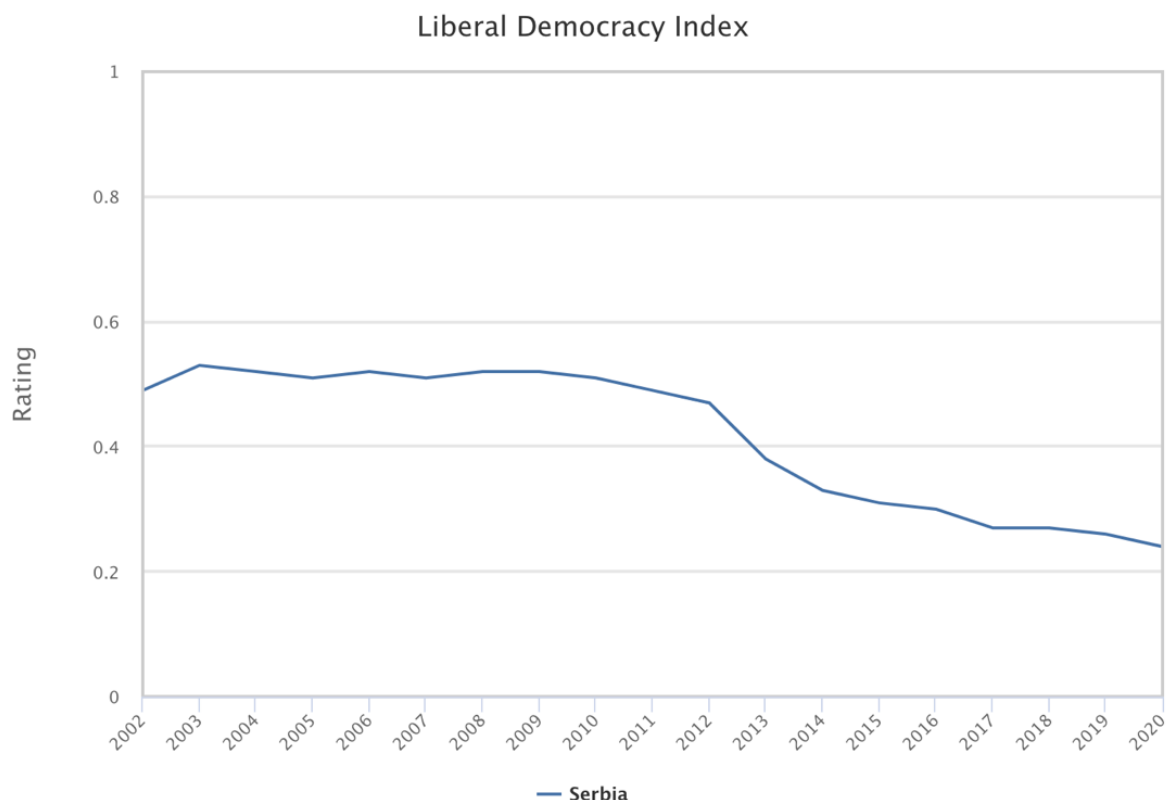


Figure 2. The course of democratic backsliding in Serbia (2002-2020) as shown through the LDI

As part of the democratic component of EU enlargement conditionality, free and fair elections are considered to be the minimal requirement that guarantee democracy (Meyerrose, 2020). Thus, the EU supports potential member states in their path towards fraud-free elections and improved electoral legislation. While the EU has been successful in improving basic election guidelines in Serbia through its conditionality framework thus far, it disregards more complex forms of election fraud (**H2**). Bermeo (2016) argues that democratic backsliding can manifest itself as strategic election manipulation which can be explained as a range of actions taken to undermine opposition movements through various mechanisms such as abusing government funds for incumbent campaigns, voter buyouts or intimidation of opponents. According to an OSCE/ODIHR report of the 2016 parliamentary elections in Serbia, such calculated election manipulation is already occurring in the country. In fact, the report states that vote-buying and general intimidation by the government during previous elections in Serbia (2012, 2014) are being replaced by covert pressure on employees in the public sector or those dependent on welfare programs (OSCE, 2016). This goes to show that Serbia is indeed experiencing strategic elections manipulation alongside executive aggrandizement, despite the EU's efforts aimed at democratic consolidation.

Conclusion

The rise of international organizations and their democracy promoting policies did manage to aid in the democratization process of numerous countries. However, the recent increase of illiberal tendencies across Europe is starting to raise questions. While a fairly obvious link would be to look

at domestic developments such as economic difficulties or populist movements, and democratic backsliding in these countries, international organizations do have a role to play. So, I argued that international organizations and their democracy promoting efforts unintentionally caused backsliding in some states. I used the example of the EU and its enlargement conditionality policy as the democracy promoter, and the Western Balkan 6 countries. The Liberal Democracy Index from V-Dem's dataset was used as a quantitative method and illustrated a drop in (liberal) democracy in the region. Then, the EU was linked to democratic backsliding through two interconnected mechanisms: the executive and elections. Motivated by the EU disregard of the legislature in the negotiation process, the executive continues to erode democratic characteristics, leading to executive aggrandizement. Relatedly, the EU's focus on elementary election policies such as elections monitoring for example omits the possibility of more complex election-fraud instances such as strategic election manipulation.

EU enlargement conditionality policy might be a success story when it comes to the preliminary and basic democratic elements. However, there are additional elements between the basic ones and complete democratic consolidation that need to be addressed. Diversifying the attention away from the executive and reallocating democracy promotion efforts towards root causes rather than palpable symptoms could not only enhance the EU's conditionality policy, but it could also help circumvent future democratic backsliding episodes.

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