

The European Case for Kosovo, Serbia, and North Macedonia: A Western Balkan Focus

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Abstract

European integration of Western Balkan territories currently faces high-tension ethnic and religious antagonism between Serbia, Kosovo, and North Macedonia. The Balkans have been dealing with a cauldron of simmering ethnic internal battles that have lingered for decades. Years of Serbian and Kosovo contention severely setback the accession timeline, therefore, affecting the further integration of its neighbor North Macedonia. The European Union demands all disputes and corruption measures settled, per regulation standards set by the enlargement package from the commission. Key regional players' sphere of influence becomes an interesting variable during policy discussions leaving a path to full European integration reliant on cooperation.

A Historical Synopsis of Serbia, Kosovo, and North Macedonia

The unstable and blighted history of the Western Balkans serves as a point of contention for future European integration of these territories. The alliance of Yugoslavia at the beginning of World War I marked the start of a tumultuous period with internal conflicts and economic struggles between the Yugoslavian states. Security and protection of its borders became a primary prerogative during the interwar period which marked the installment of its constitution. Years of conflict between Serbians, Croats, and Slovenes created divisive politics and territorial disputes within the kingdom forcing Yugoslavian statesmen to engage in international relations with other Balkan territories, to extend their sphere of influence in the region. Meetings between Yugoslavia, Romania, and Czechoslovakia in 1921 gave birth to the original “Balkan Entente” to deter Hungary and prevent the revision of the Treaty of Trianon (1920). Several conferences later convened between 1930-1933 comprising the regional nations signing an agreement dictating no territorial aggression in the Balkan arena amongst Greece, Turkey, and Romania. Such a revolutionary piece of legislation fortified Yugoslavian borders and relations before the rise of major European countries in the League of Nations, or the soon-to-be United Nations. Germany and Italy slowly approached the high rankings of the League of Nations dealing with pacts of aggression simultaneously as Britain and France formulated successful appeasement policies. The succession of Germany, Britain, and France left Yugoslavia no choice but to search for other means of security. World War II depicted a neutral Yugoslavia searching for ways and means to satiate the need for security around its borders during the conflict. Eventually, the nation found allies in the Tripartite Pact of Italy, Germany, and Japan. Throughout the war Yugoslavia found itself fractured in battle with outdated equipment and doctrines to assist in battle foreshadowing its eminent departure from warfare. Impact beyond imaginable from the war fractured the kingdom severely, causing its borders to collapse upon the entry of invasions from other European states post-World War II.¹

Military invasions upon Albania were taken foot by Italian fascist forces in 1939, with a subsequent impeachment of Greece short after, but was unsuccessful and remained in Albania. Acts of force instructed by the Yugoslavian military gained headway with an attempted seizure of Nazi Germany in 1940 but were also met with great strength and vigor of the Reich. This failure disseminated the kingdom into satellite states between Italy and Germany. Key territories relative to future conflicts, such as Serbia and Kosovo, remained under the control of Italian and Wehrmacht forces until its self-enlargement in 1946. Yugoslavia assumed new borders and unified the six republics of Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia, and Macedonia. Serbian control of Kosovo was maintained until the end of the Cold War when Yugoslavia itself disbanded due to communist failures signaling heightened contention soon. Serbian and Kosovar relations soured quickly because of the campaign for independence launched by Kosovo in the early 1980s but did not make headway until 2008.²

Slobodan Milosevic forcefully manipulated numerous ethnic Serbs in Kosovo to ascend himself into leadership inside the capital city of Belgrade to eliminate Kosovar autonomy establishing a direct rule of the state. In response, Ibrahim Rugova instituted a splinter

¹ Marek Payherin, *Nordic, Central, and Southeastern Europe* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2017), 428-429.

² Jeff Bizet and Fabrice Hugot, “Can the EU still wrest the Balkans from their blighted history?” Robert Schuman Foundation, February 12, 2023, <https://www.robert-schuman.eu/en/european-issues/0656-can-the-eu-still-wrest-the-balkans-from-their-blighted-history>

government funded through a Kosovo and Albanian partnership to offer a new resistance to the Milosevic regime but ultimately failed due to lack of funding. A similar group emerged in 1997 under the moniker KLA, or Kosovo Liberation Army, which sought to secure freedom and independence for all Kosovars haunted by the tyrant Milosevic. Additional police and military campaigns were conducted under the Serbian leader against the KLA resulting in nationwide riots and crimes among ethnic Serbs and Kosovars transitioning towards a possible enforcement by NATO. Unfortunately for Milosevic, his rejection of the Rambouillet Accords triggered the threatened action of NATO and deployed a military bombing operation in Kosovo to quell the contention. Seventy-eight grueling days of bombing ensued until the Serbian opposition opted to cooperate in peace talks with its Kosovar rival. Shortly after his surrender, the United Nations activated Resolution 1244 placing Kosovo under the United Nations Interim Administration Mission (UNIMK) which approved NATO peacekeeping forces to control any further ethnic tensions.³ Inevitable spillover into North Macedonia (Macedonia at the time) of Albanian guerillas acted in the northern region of the country igniting an inter-ethnic and religious divide between Slavic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians. Liberation armies and differentiating factions claimed territory in the Presevo Valley in the early 2000s to recognize gains made by the Albanian effort after Kosovo. The Liberation Army of Presevo, Medvedja, and Bujanovac (UCPMB) sought to conduct acts of “freedom” against KLA operatives to gain traction against Macedonian officials and operate as an autonomous group residing in the Presevo Valley territories. Relative appropriate negotiations between UCPMB and NATO occurred to solidify the necessity of any peacekeeping forces needed in Macedonia to prevent another Kosovo. A rampant summarization assesses the success of Kosovo as a possible variable influencing the independence of North Macedonia. Each state remains a critical geopolitical flashpoint entering the European Union accession and application proceedings.⁴

The European Accession Process and Western Balkan Legal Basis

Accession to the European Union requires several criteria and legal charter bases to be fulfilled upon a formal request of application into the Union. Objectives of enlargement intend to uphold peace and the rule of law inside potential member states while simultaneously incorporating strategic measures to improve stability and advance economic development for potential integration.⁵ Before its activation, all candidate countries must fulfill the legal criteria for consideration. Copenhagen Criteria, outlined in Article 49 and principles 6 of the Treaty of European Union, any country wishing to participate in full EU statehood must meet each category before accession is considered. Established by the Copenhagen European Council and further strengthened by the Madrid European Council, it requires,

“Stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and respect for and protection of minorities; a functioning market economy and the ability to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the EU; the ability to take on the obligations of membership, including the capacity to effectively implement the rules, standards, and policies

³ “Kosovo - Countries - Office of the Historian,” accessed February 6, 2024, <https://history.state.gov/countries/kosovo>.

⁴ “268. Spillover Effect: Aftershocks in Kosovo, Macedonia, and Serbia | Wilson Center,” accessed February 6, 2024, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/268-spillover-effect-aftershocks-kosovo-macedonia-and-serbia>.

⁵ “The Western Balkans | Fact Sheets on the European Union | European Parliament,” October 31, 2023, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/168/the-western-balkans>.

that make up the body of EU law (the ‘*acquis*’), and adherence to the aims of political, economic and monetary union.”⁶

The accession process begins once the Copenhagen Criteria is met, and all EU member states agree on candidate states from its enlargement agenda. Negotiations outside these formal agreements take place preparing eventual countries for membership and the implementation of EU laws. After the completion of the policy dialogue, the Union formalizes a treaty of accession detailing clauses and transitional procedures for formal adoption. This treaty necessitates all consent of the European Parliament and ratification from all parties to receive acceptance as an EU member state.⁷

The official legal basis of European enlargement derives from Title V of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), Article 207 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), and Article 49 of TEU.⁸ Title V of the TEU frames external actions of the European Union surrounding the defense and security policy of future applicant states ensuring a common mechanism is in place to protect its citizens and follow EU standards. Progressive military enhancements regularly occur to initialize a formative defense force in line with EU measures to conduct operational and safety requirements essential to promote capabilities.⁹ European Parliament duties expand upon the inauguration of Article 49 increasing Council prerogatives of acquiring joint power with parliament to agree on trade legislation and formalizing sound framework for commercial policy on issues such as anti-dumping, safeguards, and the Trade Barriers Regulations (TBR).¹⁰ Western Balkan legal basis is observable through the initial Stabilization and Association Process (SAP) instrument established in 1999 as a precautionary outline for relations amongst EU member states and regional players but ultimately got replaced by the Regional Cooperation Council in 2008. An important fact to note is the 2003 European Council in Thessaloniki reasserted its sentiment that all SAP countries still contend for EU membership. European acknowledgement reappears in the 2018 Western Balkan Strategy declaring its restatement of the Council’s wish from Thessaloniki in 2003.¹¹ Significant and advancement of Western Balkan dialogue received an unsurmountable level of advocacy from Brussels in a December summit, “The future of the Western Balkans is in our Union.” This statement by key EU states broadcasts the strategic importance of integrating the Western Balkans and deterring future conflicts. Key topics facilitated fruitful discussion about several arenas such as a gradual integration into the EU, constructing a sound economic foundation, deterring the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and reinforcing stability and security assets to fortify the country’s resilience. An EU-wide identification of several Balkan struggles identifies the need for repair and rebalance, that is, if each governing body of Kosovo, Serbia, and North Macedonia limits corruption and ethnic discrepancies. Although the Copenhagen requirements

⁶ “Accession Criteria (Copenhagen Criteria) - EUR-Lex,” accessed February 7, 2024, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/EN/legal-content/glossary/accession-criteria-copenhagen-criteria.html>.

⁷ “EU Enlargement Policy,” December 18, 2023, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/enlargement/>.

⁸ “EU Enlargement Policy,” December 18, 2023, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/enlargement/>.

⁹ “Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union - TITLE V: GENERAL PROVISIONS ON THE UNION’S EXTERNAL ACTION AND SPECIFIC PROVISIONS ON THE COMMON FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY - Chapter 2: Specific Provisions on the Common Foreign and Security Policy - Section 2: Provisions on the Common Security and Defence Policy - Article 42 (Ex Article 17 TEU),” 115 OJ C § (1992), http://data.europa.eu/eli/treaty/teu_2008/art_42/oj/eng.

¹⁰ Stephen Woolcock, “EU Trade and Investment Policy After the Lisbon Treaty,” January-February 2010, *Intereconomics* 45, no. 1, 23.

¹¹ “The Western Balkans | Fact Sheets on the European Union | European Parliament.”

are met, cooperation fully succeeds when all imbalance is countered for proper accession and integration of European ideologies and initiatives, such as the Growth Plan for the Western Balkan theater.¹²

Future Concerns Before Full Accession

The guarantee of EU accession does not eliminate Kosovo and Serbia's dominant ethnic and regional conflicts despite being accepted as candidate countries. Although fulfilling all categories of the Copenhagen Requirement, differences inside each country must be settled before the EU initiates the commission protocol. Pristina and Belgrade relations relative to the early 2010s involved several normalization agreements to restore relationships between Serbia and North Kosovo to support its eventual EU candidacy. Over the decade, agreement talks soured quickly and diminished once Albin Kurti took power in 2021. Involvement in northern Kosovo granted numerous KFOR and special police forces to guard its borders. Extreme hostility was met by Serbian paramilitary groups and assistance from ethnic Serbians residing in Kosovo. A quick response from Pristina granted a multitude of despotic sanctions on Serbian medical goods, and land for police operations, and halted the assembly of Serbian housing inside the country. Apprehension of vehicles and driver's licenses by the Kosovo government recommended that any trace of Serbian nationalism be replaced with Kosovo flags and identification information, once again removing the ethnic Serbian identity. Essential services in the northern province restrict several amenities like health care and schooling rectifying it illegal to even acquire by Kosovar standards and categorizing the use of any service as "illegal." While jobs are unrestricted, the difficulty lies in challenging the government payroll and tax delegation compared to either Serbia or Kosovo. Ethnic Serbians remain on the payroll of Serbia but do not pay Kosovo taxes. This issue upsets Kosovo politicians citing one's official residence in Kosovo must subject this individual to regional taxes and payroll requirements notwithstanding cultural and ethnic identification. Constituting the conflict as an "overlooked risk" must be re-structured to expose its European imperative. The future of European Integration relies on cooperation, specifically, between these two countries. Serbia's stalling from identifying Kosovo's sovereignty remains a root cause of the Kosovar government's actions, but not justified. Inhumane limitations from either Balkan nation prevent the full accession process from occurring and question its acceptance into the Union. Staunch council and commission leadership endure the strenuous relations in hopes of presenting a united region and a stronger Balkan arena to benefit the EU.¹³

North Macedonian efforts to incorporate itself by European standards have significantly increased since negotiations opened in 2009, but like its Balkan counterparts, failure to reunite a divided government and Normalization between both Greece and Bulgaria have counteracted the future ability to be fully incorporated as of 2024. The Prespa Agreement between Macedonia (at the time) and Greece marked a foundational pivot towards European involvement granting the name "Republic of North Macedonia" as the official title after several decades of quarreling. Greco-Macedonian advances created a unique appeal to the European Commission and Council

¹² "EU-Western Balkans Summit, 13 December 2023," December 13, 2023, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-summit/2023/12/13/>.

¹³ "Toward Normal Relations between Kosovo and Serbia | Crisis Group," January 30, 2024, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/balkans/kosovo-serbia/toward-normal-relations-between-kosovo-and-serbia>.

before getting blocked by Bulgaria. A key concern lies in language disputes and constitutional rights recognized in North Macedonian law which upsets ethnic Bulgarians inside of the country. Bulgaria halting the accession process disrupts partial enlargement and reflects the blemishes of not only North Macedonian constitutional statutes but overall intergovernmental corruption and judicial structure.¹⁴ The European Commission unveils staggering facts in a key report about North Macedonia emphasizing areas in need of strength to be cooperative according to EU standards. In contrast with its legal battle with Bulgaria, political criteria and the push for democracy continue to intensify despite some surrounding circumstances. The advocacy for democracy has been met with opposition through the rejection of certain OSCE policies and recommendations about comprehensive reform analysis toward election timeliness and transparency. In tandem with limited transparency, political polarity inside of parliament severely divides members, forfeiting the required consensus necessary from all political parties of North Macedonia. The EU requires before full accession that all parties be on the same page to garner a consensus in hopes of moving forward. Political disunion also resides inside its unrevised Constitution that does not delegate specific language and nationality requirements for Bulgarians creating a further divide and allowing for corruption to seep into government. The fight between parliament and corruption acts as the stalemate to enter North Macedonia into the Union. Unlawful uses of the EU flag and implications notifying the public of a closer integration period counteracted itself preventing any denotation of the EU in culture and society. An excited country at first, North Macedonia has continually lost public support because of not complying with corruption measures necessary for entrance into the EU. Each country mentioned in this analysis struggles with fulfilling capable requirements to combat internal exploitation. Much of this corruption is traced to its blighted history of non-compliance with surrounding neighbors. Special initiatives in the region have recently reduced high-trial fines, maximum corruption penalties, and dismissing high-caliber cases. All of this to say North Macedonia's bid into the Union relies heavily on political reforms and increasing surveillance or illegal activities occurring inside the walls of Parliament.¹⁵

European desires and dreams are currently holding together the Western Balkans, specifically Kosovo, Serbia, and North Macedonia. Brief policy dialogues and screening processes mirror the citizens' cravings of being in the Union. Garnering public support among all candidate members in the region remains an issue, but a gradual integration is possible according to the Foreign Minister of North Macedonia, Bujar Osmani. Osmani does not discount the highly contentious and political ethnic conflicts of the past foreshadowing the failure of multi-ethnic democracies.¹⁶ Likewise, strategic policy informants recommend two possible avenues to attack this issue via strategic partnerships with the EU's OSA (Open Strategic Autonomy) and investing in economic capital to rebuild its capacity. Although these policy options are purely hypothetical, introducing an early relationship with EU autonomy agencies is conducive to the projected date of 2030 in which leaders want to begin shifting perspective towards the Union.¹⁷ A redirection of this paper pivots from concerns of European politics to Russia and China.

¹⁴ Luigi Scazzieri, "Reviving European Policy towards the Western Balkans," 4. December 15, 2021.

¹⁵ "Key Findings of the 2023 Report on North Macedonia," Text, European Commission - European Commission, accessed February 9, 2024, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/qanda_23_5627.

¹⁶ "EU Ambitions Are 'Glue' Holding Balkans Together, North Macedonia Says," POLITICO, November 30, 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-membership-ambitions-glue-holding-balkans-together-north-macedonia-fm-bujar-osmani/>.

¹⁷ "EUI Policy Dialogue Links EU," European University Institute, accessed February 8, 2024, <https://www.eui.eu/news-hub?id=high-level-policy-dialogue-tackles-eus-open-strategic-autonomy&lang=en-GB>.

Unequivocal evidence proves the meddling of hegemonic superpowers such as Russia and China in the Western Balkan arena. Russian and Chinese economic trade thrives through gas and other natural resources across each Balkan state having a dominant influence on political outcomes crucial to European involvement. Moscow guides its priority goal to subvert non-EU members into the persuasion of exiting accession talks and rely solely on Russian participation via suspicious business transactions between Russian companies and potential candidate states to act as a deterrence mechanism to disincentivize the Western Balkans. Such significant cultivation intends to expand the cultural identity of Pan-Slavism appealing to Orthodox Christians inside each territory.¹⁸ Three Russian urgencies from a European Parliament briefing outline the “rationality” of interfering with the Western Balkans, reading, “i.) Preserve the status quo, where convenient for Russian interests, ii.) undermine the EU and NATO, slowing down full integration into Western institutions; and, to a lesser extent, iii.) protect Russia’s economic interests (and those of its elites).” The domination of Serbian media outlets, specifically Sputnik Srbija, unveils heavy corresponding patterns of Russian foreign policy interest in the region. Another projected outlet, in 2024, under the name Russia Today plans to use Serbian language as its dialogue and disguise the organization as RT Balkan. The Russian Orthodox Church acts as an influential vessel with Putin’s foreign policy agenda and influence surrounding Orthodox territories. With Serbia housing more than 80% Christian Orthodox, it seems possible for Russian power to seep in and coordinate alongside its Orthodox brother.¹⁹ Small market countries normally do not attract Russian banking and energy investment, but ignoring possible consequences is not viable. Channeling the Serbian agenda Putin carries, 9% of the reported total FDI came from Russian support; this value is estimated to be about \$40 million (35.8 euros). Gazprom and Lukoil control Serbian gas lines and act as significant players for energy consumption in the country while employing nearly 2% of the Serbian workforce. Government loans reset the recession in Serbia receiving initial payments of \$500 million (447.8 euros) and an additional \$800 million (716.4 euros) for infrastructure and railway repair services.²⁰



Map 1.0 Russian Influence as of 2021 in the Western Balkans. Attribution: GIS Reports

¹⁸ Scazzieri, “Reviving European Policy towards the Western Balkans,” 9.

¹⁹ STANICEK Branislav, “Russia’s Influence in the Western Balkans,” 5.

²⁰ Dr Valbona Zeneli, “The West, China and Russia in the Western Balkans,” 26-27.

The Chinese see a financial benefit ready for plunder in the Western Balkan region. Beijing capitalized on establishing media, political press, cultural engagement, and private sector interest. Confucius Institutes network political collaboration amongst territorial lines generating Chinese political thought in European regions detrimental to accession talks. Like Russia, China is tightly knit with Serbia after reinforcing its engagement after assisting in the 1999 NATO Operation Allied Force during an eventful period where an “accidental” missile struck the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade killing three individuals. This event marked the beginning of superior Chinese support and the formal unrecognition of Kosovo by Beijing. Lobbyists from China increasingly pressure Serbian politicians to accommodate the needs of companies operating within Serbia. Soft power instruments work as persuasive diplomacy invading educational facilities to create new studies subsidized by Chinese funds while gradually spreading influence. Other donations to non-profits supporting human rights and the rule of law have been made evident in recent reports through Western allies and the EU.²¹ China’s infamous Belt and Road Initiative provides the main framework ideology pushing Chinese economic domain toward the Western Balkans; this goal aims to increase transport, energy, and communication infrastructure. Engagement is limited from China, but it ranks as the third highest exporter and importer behind Russia at number two with its FDI at a minimum. Low FDI does not mean a loss of power for the Chinese. Exporting Chinese construction companies and mining institutions holding majority stakes in allied countries such as Serbia. Bank loans operate as a secondary large source of funding plugging numbers from North Macedonia borrowing 714 million euros from the Exim Bank and Serbia sponging 195 million euros from Exim as well. The map below offers a transformative perspective on the Belt and Road Initiative in place by China.²²

Map 1.1 Belt and Road Route into the Balkans. Attribution: Clingendael Report 2020



²¹ “China’s Strategic Interests in the Western Balkans,” 6.

²² “China’s Approach to the Western Balkans | China and the EU in the Western Balkans,” accessed February 21, 2024, <https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2020/china-and-the-eu-in-the-western-balkans/1-chinas-approach-to-the-western-balkans/#14-the-security-domain>.

Next, conducting a proper analysis of key EU member states and regional players provides overwhelming information reciprocating political views about Kosovo, Serbia, and North Macedonia; the strategic significance of the region will be observed too.

Key Regional Players of Accession and Strategic Importance of the Balkans

Regional players vital to the accession of Kosovo, Serbia, and North Macedonia include Romania, Hungary, Italy, and Greece. These four territories possess massive opinions inside the EU on whether each country should be granted full accession. Each comment made by several high-profile diplomats weighs the future of Kosovo, Serbia, and North Macedonia.

Hungarian ministers strongly believe the Western Balkans belong in the European Union during the EU presidency. Officials from both sides briefly spoke on the issues facing North Macedonia facilitating unwavering support for pure integration of each Western Balkan territory. Pál Zsigmond, a member of the Hungarian National Assembly and state secretary at the EU, met with North Macedonian foreign ministry state secretary Filip Tosevski echoing similar rhetoric comparing the interest of immigration between each country. Both Hungary and North Macedonia want to limit and restrict its illegal immigration problem through preventative EU measures leaving support on the table for North Macedonia.²³ Serbian-Hungarian relations reached its pinnacle in December of 2023 noting several improvements between the Hungarian minority in Vojvodina. Péter Szijjártó, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade, mentioned numerous milestones reached between Hungary and Serbia including a secure rail link connecting Szeged, Hungary, and Subotica, Serbia reducing illegal trafficking and immigration numbers flowing into either country which allows for the border crossing intersecting Röszke and Horgos to be operational twenty-four hours. On top of cooperation in infrastructure, investments in public capital among ethnic Hungarians increased its business development program to function at a higher level. One can attribute the common friend in Russia as a friendly boost to this bilateral relationship or simply efficient trade as the go-getter.²⁴ Kosovar and Hungarian relations work in a unique facet. Although recognizing Kosovo as an independent nation, Hungary strongly evicts its vote from continuing in the enlargement process for Kosovo. Szijjártó once again comments on the matter explaining a deal must be in place between Serbia and Kosovo to ensure a fluent normalization process before continuing with accession. This observation constructs a two-fold issue to the Hungarians. On one side, Serbia enjoys its friendly relations with the country and its economic benefits, but the other side views a Kosovar-Serbian reunion before accession which will not likely headway until the future. With facts presented by these international governments, every move becomes a critical play on the chessboard of European Enlargement.²⁵ Hungarian thought influences the region, but other close neighbors in Greece and Italy see similar support for incorporating the Balkans into the mix.

²³ About Hungary, “State Secretary: Hungary Is Convinced That the Western Balkans’ Place Is in the EU,” State Secretary: Hungary is convinced that the Western Balkans’ place is in the EU, November 15, 2023, <https://abouthungary.hu/news-in-brief/state-secretary-hungary-is-convinced-that-the-western-balkans-place-is-in-the-eu>.

²⁴ About Hungary, “FM: Relations between Serbia and Hungary Are at Their Zenith,” FM: Relations between Serbia and Hungary are at their zenith, December 15, 2023, <https://abouthungary.hu/news-in-brief/fm-relations-between-serbia-and-hungary-are-at-their-zenith>.

²⁵ “Recognized but Not Supported: Hungary’s Stance on Kosovo’s EU Bid,” *Group for Legal and Political Studies* (blog), January 16, 2023, <https://www.legalpoliticalstudies.org/recognized-but-not-supported-hungarys-stance-on-kosovos-eu-bid/>.

The Greek government observes the European perspective claimed by the Balkan States and supports its priorities to become fully integrated under the specified categories in the Copenhagen Criteria for accession. A clear perception of potential European membership is accompanied by installing strict stability protocols, improvements in human rights, and the rule of law regarding corruption. Greek officials are supportive, but staunch on the outlined specificities provided by the EU. The inclusion of Serbia, North Macedonia, and Kosovo is a strategic choice of Greece to reflect its appreciation for the Agenda of Thessaloniki adopted during the European Union Greek presidency. Numerous border and name disputes between Greece and North Macedonia simmered in 2003 allowing for a prosperous relationship to flourish and increase its accession timeline.²⁶ Cautious constructive policy approaches against Kosovo have made headway in recent reports, despite rejecting its sovereignty. Positive dialogue has carefully exited the Greek government to enforce stability and rule of law measures against the government in Pristina to display the seriousness of EU integration.²⁷ Close to Greece, Italian involvement in the Western Balkans is not only crucial to the EU, but to the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. Government statements reveal the motivation and necessity for Italy to assist the Balkans in the accession process. Itself being a significant port country, Italy recognizes the vast resources and agriculture provided in these territories which cannot succumb to Russian control. As self-proclaimed “facilitators of peace,” Italy wants to boost economic development programs toward regional stability across each state. The strategic Trieste Conference was held in Trieste, Italy as a signal to Balkan governments of the Italian imperative and its declaration towards the Western Balkans.²⁸

The self-definition and cultural identity of Romania position itself uniquely against the borders of Balkan countries. Its goal of guiding an identity of Balkan or not Balkan directly impacts policy against the integration of Kosovo, Serbia, and North Macedonia. Historical evidence of the Ottoman reign and early civilizations encapsulated the region of Romania until the start of World War I when it became entrenched with Russian allies and formally adopted into the Soviet Union by the end of World War II. Russia dominated the region for over forty years occupying it with communist rule at the helm of Nicolae Ceaușescu. Its Balkan status garners debates deciding if the nation truly is Balkan or reaps the benefits due to regional proximity. Certainly, the country is an essential player in Eastern Europe, but borders with Balkan natives and the signature boundary of the Carpathian Mountains partially straddling Serbia contests for the region to be Balkan. Geographical talk can only go so far. A Balkan narrative supports a prosperous Romania through stability reforms to persuade the West of its democratic institutions. Carrying out each promise guarantees seats and conversion at powerful European forums regarding the integration of allied countries and increases the chance of economic exchanges with Europe and the West.²⁹ The current state of Romania has improved

²⁶ “External Relations - EU Enlargement: A Successful Policy: Western Balkans: European Perspective,” accessed February 15, 2024, <https://www.mfa.gr/en/foreign-policy/greece-in-the-eu/external-relations-enlargement.html?page=5>.

²⁷ “Greece’s Bilateral Relations,” accessed February 19, 2024, <https://www.mfa.gr/en/blog/greece-bilateral-relations/pristina/>.

²⁸ “Tajani: ‘Italy’s Commitment to the Integration of the Balkans into the EU’ (Il Messaggero) – Ministero Degli Affari Esteri e Della Cooperazione Internazionale,” accessed February 15, 2024, https://www.esteri.it/en/sala_stampa/archivionotizie/interviste/2023/04/tajani-limpegno-italiano-per-lintegrazione-dei-balcani-nella-ue-il-messaggero/.

²⁹ Tom Gallagher, “To Be or Not to Be Balkan: Romania’s Quest for Self-Definition,” *Daedalus* 126, no. 3 (1997): 66-69, 74-75.

drastically through supporting most of the Balkan accession into the EU. During his term between 2015-2017, the then Prime Minister expressed his utmost interest in backing a Serbian application into the EU detailing it as an integral strategic move by both countries to presume interest. Although, the time has passed the spirit lives on. The close borders of both nations and their cooperation over the years make this decision easy for the Romanian government.³⁰ Romania remains on the fringe over Kosovo. As an initial country rejecting its declaration for sovereignty in 2008, officials have slowly been riding the fence despite its Serbian ally. To ease into the Kosovo space of diplomacy and persuasion, October 14, 2023, saw a fresh installment of 130 KFOR support troops into Kosovo for the defense against rising tensions in ethnic-Serbs; once again Romania on the fringe.³¹ The signing of a joint memorandum by Romania and North Macedonia celebrates the avenue of collaboration between the two. Regional cooperation efforts bolster the stability in North Macedonia rectifying the political system efficiently for European consideration. Ultimately, strong ethnic and cultural ties bind each nation together almost creating a sense of “national unity” to assemble like-minded individuals to ensure a productive relationship is pursued for the accession process of North Macedonia and mutually beneficial diplomacy.³² Geographical strategic benefits craft resilient debates declaring the European case of the Western Balkans.

A simple solution to solve economic prosperity issues and broaden national economies is entering into the EU single market via accession. While the most obvious method, continual nearshoring efforts and implementation of the Berlin Process and the Common Regional Marketing Plan 2021-2024 heavily emphasize the strategic importance of reformed markets. Clear benefits from entering the European Single-Market include drastic GDP growth and financial support for industrial initiatives. EU technical assistance originates from the Instrument for Pre-Accession (IPA) allocating over 12.8 billion euros between 2014 and 2020. Current statistics reflect a 1.2 billion increase of that fund elevating it to 14 billion euros and composing just under one percent of the Next Generation EU Funds for 2021-2027. Examples of the Western Balkans installs an imperative to hastily increase how it is being used. Nearshoring becomes another utility piloting the Western Balkans to critically involve themselves with investments, economic modernization, democratic progress, rule of law, and cooperation.³³ A catalyst in driving toward the European Market was the Common Regional Marketing Plan. Introduced in Sofia, Bulgaria in 2020, this initiative accentuates the four freedoms of goods, services, people, capital, and people. Benefits accrued from the EU plan include reductions in regional costs, the development of e-commerce, facilitated food trades striking mutual interest, and an emphasis on private sector representatives.³⁴ The Berlin process mirrors the Common Regional Marketing Plan but increases an incentive base for citizens to attract Western

³⁰ “PM Ciolos: It Is in Our Interest to Have a European Serbia from All Points of View | PERMANENT MISSION OF ROMANIA to the United Nations,” accessed February 20, 2024, <https://mpnewyork.mae.ro/en/romania-news/7198>.

³¹ RFE/RL, “Romania Sends Reinforcements To KFOR In Kosovo, Says NATO,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, October 14, 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/32637314.html>.

³² “Joint Press Release of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of Romania and Republic of North Macedonia – The Celebration of 20 Years since the Signing of the Bilateral Basic Political Treaty | Ministry of Foreign Affairs,” accessed February 20, 2024, <https://www.mae.ro/en/node/55575>.

³³ Jcookson, “Western Balkans ‘Nearshoring’ Can Turn the Region into a Strategic Asset for the EU,” *Atlantic Council* (blog), September 28, 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/western-balkans-nearshoring-strategic-asset-eu/>.

³⁴ “Common Regional Market - European Commission,” accessed February 20, 2024, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/policy-highlights/common-regional-market_en.

customers. For regional excellence to thrive, the economic principle of market competition must flourish to motivate the Western Balkan participation in bigger markets which results in production chains. The attraction for foreign investors accumulates from pooled resources to drive competition and direct foreign investment. As the timeline of accession draws nearer to the threshold of 2030, amplifying economic efforts to revive industrial communities and prepare states is essential for enlargement while promoting safe and viable standards.³⁵

The United States Affirmation

The Western Balkans matter greatly to United States foreign policy agenda since the increase of Russia and China's presence. Faithful to its role as the international police force, the American approach to the Western Balkans is significant to future coercion or deterrence of Russia and China in the region. Strong commitment to fostering a proficient Western Balkan arena critically aligns with United States strategic interests. US diplomats currently engage in liberal democratic peace settlements between Kosovo and Serbia displaying the full power of persuasion to the international order. In alignment with EU priorities, the United States affirms the rule of law, stability, and economic requirements necessary for accession.³⁶ Five prerogatives structure the American foreign direction inside the combustive territorial front of the Balkans: Peace, Progress, Potential, Pragmatism, and Prosperity. Peacekeeping is engraved in the American mindset after confronting both world wars and the expansion of soviet ideals in place of a stable democratic-republican reform. Inclusive economic reforms encompass the democratic-republican ideals pushed forth by American foreign policy to ensure progress is being made on the Balkan front rather than potential setbacks limiting EU accession and international trade dialogue, therefore, unlocking the untapped potential the Western Balkans obtain not yet readily available by EU standards. Engagement in states such as Kosovo, Serbia, and North Macedonia reflects the pragmatic mindset of U.S. presidents spreading mutually beneficial pacts with rival countries to secure liberty and freedom. Useless progressive policies do not reach the target audience seeking international partnerships with candidate countries. Persuasive and robust conservative measures match the Western Balkan alliance. Eliminating social reforms funded by wasted tax dollars incentivizes these countries to approach the United States with arms open ready for negotiating. Pushing an over-inclusive social agenda marked by useless policies perceives the U.S. as weak. A weak United States creates an entrance gap for the Russian and communist China regimes to intercept democracy and impose strict uninhabitable lifestyles for the citizens. The international police force, so it is called, reflects strength, liberty, and freedom in hopes of echoing similar sentiments projected at European allies.³⁷

The European Case

Stasis of European accession leaks the possible challenges of authoritarian regime control from greater Eurasia to usurp Western democratic values. The road to accession is not easy or pretty, but stabilization and implementing European ideals advance hope of a greater day. Fast-tracking countries into country status happen slowly with the cooperation necessary for the

³⁵ jcookson, "Western Balkans 'Nearshoring' Can Turn the Region into a Strategic Asset for the EU."

³⁶ "U.S. Commitment to the Western Balkans," *United States Department of State* (blog), accessed February 21, 2024, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-commitment-to-the-western-balkans/>.

³⁷ Daniel Kochis, "A Roadmap for Strengthened Transatlantic Pathways in the Western Balkans," no. 3286, March 16, 2018. 2-3.

Copenhagen Requirement. A case for Kosovo, Serbia, and North Macedonia lies in its willingness to set aside regional conflicts and corruption for a great unification into European advances and ideals. This summarization intends to provide an insightful perspective on a key region not recognized by many standards. Strategic and geographical mainstays will undoubtedly benefit the European economy with ports, agriculture, and rich biodiverse materials for the conducting of economic trade across the country. National identity always characterizes the political support of any nation. Serbs wanting ethnic rights in Kosovo reflect a strong national identity; Kosovo declared sovereignty and maintained the declaration; and North Macedonia separated itself from the Greek as an independent people group with a culturally diverse society. The blights of history may have conquered Serbia, Kosovo, and North Macedonia throughout time, but opposing historical norms of conflict and strife may easily end if the European case is considered.³⁸

³⁸ 4/24/2024 10:55:00 PM 11-13.

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