

Journal of **Cross-Regional** Dialogues  
Revue de Dialogues **Inter-Régionaux**

Presses Universitaires de Liège

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Courriel : [presses@uliege.be](mailto:presses@uliege.be)  
Place de La République française, 41  
Bât. O1 (7<sup>e</sup> étage)  
4000 Liège – Belgium  
Site : [www.presses.uliege.be](http://www.presses.uliege.be)

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2021



Mise en page : Thierry MOZDZIEJ  
Image de couverture : Sebastian SANTANDER

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D/2021/12.839/37  
ISBN : 978-2-87562-300-3  
ISSN : 2593-9483  
Imprimé en Belgique

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Ce numéro est sponsorisé par le FNRS  
ainsi que par le BelpD-COFUND

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La revue émane du centre de recherche :  
*Center for International Relations Studies* (CEFIR)  
[www.cefir.be](http://www.cefir.be)

Special issue  
*Western Balkans, European Union and Emerging Powers/  
Numéro spécial  
Les Balkans occidentaux,  
l'Union européenne et les puissances émergentes*

Coordinator and Guest Editor/Coordinateur et Éditeur invité  
Liridon Lika

Journal of **Cross-Regional** Dialogues  
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2/2021



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# The Western Balkans at the crossroads of European integration and the emerging powers' projection of influence

Liridon LIKA<sup>1</sup>

**Keywords:** Western Balkans, European Union, Emerging powers.

## The Western Balkans on the way to EU membership: progress and challenges

The Western Balkans is a heterogeneous region made up of multiple nations, states, languages, cultures and faiths. The neologism “Western Balkans” is a political, geopolitical, technical and social construct concept, used for the first time by the European Union (EU) in December 1998. This concept currently includes six states: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. Initially, Croatia was also part of it, until it joined the EU in 2013. During the 1990s, the EU demonstrated its strategic and operational presence in the Western Balkans, but it was the United States (US) that assumed the greatest role in the stabilization and pacification of the region. Moreover, although the European presence is intensifying in all areas, the US and the North

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Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) provided, and continue to ensure, the security of the Western Balkans. In order to carry out its actions and sustain its credibility, it was essential for the EU to secure the cooperation of the US and NATO. European soft power (attraction, positive image, values and cultural attributes) was therefore combined with attributes of hard power (military and economic aspects) and reinforced by them.

Since 2000, the US and the EU have been working closely together to stabilize the Western Balkans and prevent further conflicts in the region. The US and the EU share the goal of integrating the Western Balkan states into Euro-Atlantic structures, as reaffirmed at the 2004 NATO summit in Istanbul and the EU's summit in Thessaloniki in 2003. The values of democracy, the rule of law, respect for human and minority rights, and a free-market economy constitute the foundations of the Euro-Atlantic community. Since the US and the EU share the same goals in the Western Balkans, the transatlantic cooperation in the region becomes very important. The US and EU continue to be united in their commitment to help the region in its transition to liberal democracy and European-Atlantic integration (EU and NATO). For many years, the US strongly supported the EU's commitment that the future of the Western Balkans is within the EU (US Department of State, 2005).

Since 2000 at the Feira and Zagreb summits, and especially 2003, following the Thessaloniki European Council, the EU committed itself to enlargement on a "case-by-case basis" or in a process described by the European authorities as "meritocratic" (EU-Western Balkans Summit, 2003). This vision aimed to put an end to the long democratic transition in order to transform the Western Balkans into a region of peace, stability and economic prosperity, the ultimate goal of which would be its full membership to the EU. In this context, the EU has launched in 1999 and strengthened in 2003 the Stabilization and Association Process (SAP). Through this twofold objective, the EU wanted, first of all, to stabilize this region and, secondly, to accept these countries to adhere to the common European project. The SAP had created great hopes for change in the Western Balkans, fueled by the 2004 and 2007 enlargements towards the Central and Eastern European countries (Elbasani, 2008, p. 306).

Beyond geostrategic and economic interests, security was undoubtedly one of the main reasons that led the EU to open up to these countries. The security issue also presents the main motivation for the Western Balkan states to join the EU, which is perceived as a pole of attraction capable of neutralizing conflicts and pacifying the region (Lika, 2015, pp. 123-124). Since then, the EU has become a key player in the region (Bretherton and Vogler, 2006, p. 147). The European Commission has made consistent



efforts to strengthen its transformative power to support the implementation of reforms, particularly in the areas of rule of law and economic governance in the region (European Commission, 2014, p. 1). This enlargement policy, based on a pre-accession strategy, consisted in an Europeanization process and transfer of the *acquis communautaire* to the Western Balkan countries (Anastasakis, 2005, p. 78). In other words, in order to become full members of the EU, the latter required the Western Balkan states to fulfill the Copenhagen criteria (political, economic and *acquis communautaire*). By applying the principles of conditionality and Europeanization as in previous enlargements (Keukeleire and Delreux, 2014, p. 209) and disseminating its standards, values and norms, the EU has worked to ensure and promote security, regional cooperation and to affirm respect for human rights, the consolidation of democracy, the establishment of a market economy and the rule of law.

The EU's external action in the Western Balkans has been the subject of much debate between academics. In the European context, a large number of researches has focused on the question of the EU as an international actor (Bretherton and Vogler, 2006; Hill and Smith, 2005; Petiteville, 2002) which, to exist, requires the assembly of several elements, namely authority, autonomy, coherence (Merle, 1988) and recognition (Jupille and Caporaso, 1998). Thus, some studies focus on the Union's foreign and security policy (Smith, 2004); others interrogate the difficulty of communitarian Europe in having a common, consistent and coherent foreign policy (Yakemtchouk, 2005; Vanhoonacker, 2018). The nature of the EU action remains most often apprehended in terms of civilian power by mobilizing civil instruments such as multilateralism, socio-economic influence, enlargement and inter-regionalism (Telò, 2006). Others point out that the EU is a normative power, based on a solid foundation of values, standards and a European identity, which guides its foreign policy (Manners, 2002). Still others estimate that the concept of normative power has certain limits because it forgets material, military or security interests (Holden, 2009). The consistency of the Union's external action has been analyzed in its multiple dimensions: institutional consistency (vertical dimension between the Union and the states, as well as horizontal between the Union's institutions), substantial consistency (between the various European policies with an external dimension and between the Union's external action and its internal policies) (Dony and Serena Rossi, 2008). Moreover, an abundant literature describing the EU's foreign policy (Saurugger, 2020) and the European integration (Schimmelfenning and Winzen, 2020) stems from the liberal approach (functionalism and neo-functionalism) and analyses inspired by constructivist approaches. To date, analyses of the EU's enlargement policy towards the Western

Balkans have focused on security, normative, civil aspects, meritocracy, Europeanization and conditionality (Keukeleire and Delreux, 2014).

The EU assistance was conditional on respect for European norms and values and aimed at institutional building (Quaglia *et al.*, 2007). Dimitar Bechev demonstrated that “[b]eyond the carrot-and-stick strategies proceeding from the application of membership conditionality, the EU has wielded considerable ideational power as promoter of certain normative notions of appropriate state behavior” (Bechev, 2006, p. 28). At the beginning of the 2000s, everything indicated that the states of the Western Balkans were destined to integrate the European project as quickly as possible.

However, this EU enlargement strategy has produced mixed results. The Western Balkans are dragging on in this process. Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia have already achieved candidate country status. These four states are therefore more advanced in the accession process. However, there are differences between them: Montenegro (since 2012) and Serbia (since 2014) have opened accession negotiations, while Albania and North Macedonia hope to open as soon as possible the first chapters of negotiations. Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo both have potential candidate status, which means that they are currently further away in the accession process. Thus, the Western Balkan states have not progressed at the same pace, because they are conditioned by the so-called merit principle, which is strongly criticized by some authors in the name of a collective regional policy that promotes the block membership of these countries in order to avoid the dividing lines and the gap between the pioneers and the latecomers; in a region marked by post-conflict trauma, competition has not proved very constructive so far because values dear to the EU such as cooperation, solidarity and trust have been neglected (Marciacq, 2017, p. 17). For example, the disputes between Greece and North Macedonia over the name of the latter constituted an unsolved problem until 2019, which also had consequences for the enlargement of the NATO and the EU. Through active Western diplomacy, led by the US and supported by the EU, that name resolution was possible (Nechev and Nikolovski, 2019, pp. 127-134).

In fact, the US’s commitments in other parts of the world, such as the conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya or Syria, and the EU’s concerns about its own economic and political problems have negatively impacted the carrying out of reforms in the Western Balkan states. Believing that the democratic future of the Western Balkans was tied to the EU, the US largely entrusted the EU with responsibility for the political, institutional and economic development of the region; something it has not managed

to fully assume, leaving space for action for other emerging international actors. The European crisis had spillover effects for the Western Balkans, leading to a relative lack of interest on the part of the EU, whose objectives and commitments for enlargement to the region proved slow. Political inertia in the EU – combined with internal political concerns, Brexit, economic and refugee crises, and pressures from far-right parties – meant that the Western Balkan states could not engage reforms for EU membership.

Since 2008, some EU member states have experienced successive waves of economic and financial crises that have led to the adoption of austerity policies within the domestic economy and affected both the Eurozone and the EU member states and those of the Western Balkans (O’Brennan, 2014, p. 231). Interdependence exposed the countries of the Western Balkans to the crisis in the Eurozone, particularly in areas of foreign direct investment (FDI), private finance and remittances (Lika, 2016).

### The six Western Balkan states in the EU accession process



Source: albinfo.ch, 2020.

## The six Western Balkan states in the EU accession process (candidate and potential candidate countries)

### EU accession status of Western Balkan countries January 2020



Source: European Parliament  
ECFR · ecfre.eu

**Source: Shopov Vladimir and European Council of Foreign Relations  
(ECFR) – ecfre.eu, 2021.**

The European perspective of the Western Balkan countries has been confirmed on numerous occasions by the European institutions over the

past twenty years, but in fact, the EU has experienced a gradual erosion of its enlargement policy. Delays in EU membership and growth of the emerging powers' influence in the Western Balkans are also associated with the dynamics of the Western Balkan states (Richter and Wunsch, 2019, pp. 6-17). The bilateral political disputes and economic problems of the Western Balkans, combined with the economic setbacks of the EU and the "fatigue of enlargement" have contributed to the creation of a relative "power vacuum" in the region (Anastasakis, 2012, p. 202). In other words, the EU is confronted with a new situation within itself, and in the Western Balkans too. For many years, the EU enlargement process has slowed down for reasons both internal and external to the Western Balkan countries and to the EU itself. The EU has itself been weakened by multiple crises (economic, political, migratory). Among others, in view of this slowdown, new players qualified as emerging or re-emerging powers, such as Russia, China and Turkey, but also some other countries like Saudi Arabia, have projected themselves into the region. These states have adopted different strategies to set up themselves in this part of the European continent. The projection of their influence in the Western Balkans is to varying degrees and fields as diverse as political, economic, financial, commercial, military, cultural or religious. In this context, the emerging powers took advantage of the situation to project themselves and increase their influence in the region, thus competing with the EU.

## **The influence projection of the emerging powers in the Western Balkans**

Following the disappearance of the bipolar order and in the post-2000 international context, the EU is challenged by the rise of so-called emerging powers or re-emerging powers at the global level. Even if the emerging powers do not always have a common vision and do not form a homogeneous block, they see themselves as the future. The emerging powers promote the spread of global power and gradually calling into question the international order that has been dominated for centuries by the traditional Western powers (Santander, 2012, p. 10).

The great emerging powers first appeared under the acronym BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India and China) coined by the researcher Jim O'Neill of the international bank Goldman Sachs as a practical label to qualify these countries (Goldman Sachs, 2003, p. 2). Other waves of emerging middle powers later gathered under the acronym CIVETS, grouping together Colombia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Egypt, Turkey and South Africa, or under the abbreviation MIKTA: Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, Turkey and

Australia. Thus, whereas China and Russia are usually considered as great emerging powers, according to Ariel Gonzalez Levaggi, “Turkey is an emerging middle power that has developed a near-BRICS active foreign policy while [being] member of the G-20 and MIKTA group, even if in the last years [this] label is increasingly contested” (Gonzalez Levaggi, 2016, pp. 62-63). In other words, Turkey, which displays and projects economic, military, political, and ideological influence in its near region, is qualified by scholars as an emerging middle power (Jabbour, 2017, pp. 27-28; Parlar Dal, 2018; Donelli and Gonzalez Levaggi, 2016). In summary, since the first decade of this century, China, Russia and Turkey have had a sustained economic development and did not hesitate to deploy efforts to increase their presence on the world stage by adopting ambitious, multidirectional and multidimensional policies both regionally and internationally. The rise of the emerging powers is increasingly shaking up the balance of power in the world, including Western Balkans. As the EU procrastinated, China, Russia and Turkey were actively working to increase their influence in the Western Balkans. In other words, the emerging powers are trying to compete with the EU in this region (Lika, 2019).

Russia is promoting to the Western Balkans exactly the opposite of the EU, namely: censorship, militarization, incitement to war, disinformation campaigns, instability and non-accession to the EU and NATO (Bieber and Tzifakis, 2020; Bechev, 2017, Rustemi *et al.*, 2019). Russia continues to promote its own political, economic and traditional ties with the Slavic and Orthodox communities in the region – especially in Serbia, in the federated entity of the Serbs of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and North Macedonia – presenting itself to them as a closer ally than the EU. Serbia is a Russophile country where Vladimir Putin enjoys a solid popularity; and, at the same time, it is progressing in the agenda of accession to the European project (Marciacq, 2020). At a time when relations between Russia and the West are at the lowest, Serbia is positioning itself between the two, insisting that European integration is in its eyes a priority, while maintaining close ties with its traditional Russian ally (Marciacq, 2020). On October 25, 2019, Serbia joined the Russian-promoted Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), a project that competes with that of the EU. However, with the exception of Serbia, and partly Bosnia and Herzegovina, the other states of the Western Balkans are now members of NATO (Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia) or have clearly expressed a demand in this direction (Kosovo). For Moscow, Serbia remains its key ally in the Western Balkans, or even the Balkans as a whole, through which Russia tries to maintain or re-develop its hegemonic influence in this re-

gion (Graham *et al.*, 2018, p. 16). The projection of Russian influence in the Western Balkans poses a security threat to the EU.

Turkey also aims to establish itself as a regional leader in the Western Balkans. Since 2002, Turkey has adopted a policy that is multidirectional, multidimensional, autonomous, proactive, and competitive with the EU. Turkey's projection in the Western Balkans has two major dimensions: a neo-Ottoman one, and the other, as an emerging power one (Lika, 2020). Thus, Turkey has extended its influence in all the states of the Western Balkans to political, economic, media, education, military, culture and religion fields. It has conducted infrastructure projects, opened schools and universities, built and/or rebuilt mosques, promoted Turkish investments in the region (Öktem, 2012, p. 31). The business community, municipalities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), soap operas and individuals (Kirişci, 2012), all have become important actors in Turkey's relations with the Western Balkans. The influence is also visible at the socio-cultural level, it is a real emanation of soft power through, for example, television series or Turkish soap operas which have become very popular (Paris, 2013, p. 158). In addition, the Turkish Agency for International Cooperation and Development (TIKA) is funding numerous projects to rebuild the monuments dating from the period of the Ottoman Empire domination (mosques, bridges and schools). The Presidency of Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB) coordinates the activities of NGOs and grants scholarships for students including those from the Western Balkans. The Yunus Emre Institute, a public foundation created in 2007 to promote Turkish language, culture and art, operates through several cultural centers in all countries of the region.

But a lot of critics have emerged and the Turkish influence is not always positively received in the Western Balkans for a number of reasons: Turkish interference in the internal affairs; the Islamic agenda; the lack of transparency of its investments; the distancing of the Turkish authorities from the EU, or the Turkish regime's slide towards authoritarianism (Lika, 2020; Phillips and Peci, 2018). In this context, several obstacles to the Turkish projection in the Western Balkans have been identified. First, those specific to Turkey itself, such as the limits of its own material and immaterial power capacities in the region. Second, the EU remains the main player in the Western Balkans, both in terms of its image and its economic means. Third, Turkey faces many obstacles in the Western Balkans due to the negative perception of the period of Ottoman occupation and domination (Lika, 2020).

China is also trying to expand and strengthen its influence and strategic presence in Europe including the Balkans (Holslag, 2019). In 2012, it

announced a new global initiative (17+1 initiative) for cooperation with seventeen countries of Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe (CESEE), including Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina; the Republic of Kosovo, which is not yet officially recognized by Beijing, has not been invited to join it. The Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – formerly called One Belt, One Road (OBOR), initiated in 2013 by President Xi Jinping and also known as the New Silk Road – in addition to Asia, Africa and Latin America, also includes the European continent in general and the Western Balkan region in particular through significant economic and financial investments. The Balkan Silk Road is the name given to the transport and logistics corridor that Beijing has started to establish in the Balkans under the BRI (Bastian, 2017, p. 4). As part of this initiative, the Chinese are providing investments and loans to carry out infrastructure projects in some Western Balkan countries (Stumvoll and Flessenkemper, 2018). This economic presence has grown significantly and has become increasingly visible since 2015. China prints its economic and financial influence, particularly in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Montenegro. Trade links have been strengthened, including through bilateral agreements. Regarding the implementation of projects, Serbia stands out as the key partner of Beijing in the Western Balkans especially since, beyond the historical Sino-Serbian relations and a growing Chinese political presence in Serbia, the latter is chosen by the Chinese authorities as the main point of support of the investment strategy BRI (Marciacq, 2018, pp. 107-112). Chinese projects tended to be treated outside normal project selection processes or procurement procedures in the Western Balkan states. Thus, China tries to compete with the EU through its autocratic model, and its non-democratic principles. This poses challenges for the EU.

Yet, despite their increasing projection, the economic influence of the emerging powers remains far behind that of the EU. Indeed, there is a very strong economic interdependence between the EU and the Western Balkans. With 73 % of trade exchange, the EU is by far the largest trading partner of the six Western Balkan states, followed by China with 5 % and Russia with 4.8 % (Council of the European Union, 2018). The exchanges between the EU and the Western Balkans have doubled in 10 years – from € 21.4 billion in 2006 to € 43.6 billion in 2016 – the EU was, in fact, the main market of the Western Balkans in 2016, 67 % of imports and 83 % of exports (Council of the European Union, 2018). The enlargement process has opened up new business opportunities for EU and Western Balkan companies. Since 2000, almost all exports can enter the EU without customs duties or quantitative restrictions; thus, exports to the EU increased from € 7.337 billion (2006) to € 17.740 billion



(2016), while imports from the EU increased from € 14.08 billion (2006) to € 25.92 billion (2016) (Council of the European Union, 2018). EU firms are by far the largest investors in the Western Balkans (72.5 %), followed by Russia (4.6 %), Switzerland (3.7 %), Norway (3 %) and Turkey (2 %) (Council of the European Union, 2018). In this sense, the Western Balkans have strong economic ties with the EU. However, the Europeans are concerned about the presence of the emerging powers in the Western Balkans (Heath and Gray, 2018; Hopkins, 2019; Brzozowski and Makszimov, 2021).

The complex administrative and bureaucratic accession procedures and European hesitation have favored the penetration of the emerging powers in the Western Balkans. The EU is increasingly conditioned by the decentralization of the world power in the face of which it is readjusting its strategy to remain the main actor in the Western Balkans. Thus, the projection of emerging powers in the Western Balkans poses some challenges for the EU, since strategic competition for power maximizing and influence is developing in the region. There are tendencies towards a multipolar competitive order in the Western Balkans between the EU and the emerging powers (Russia, China and Turkey), and the emerging powers also among themselves, which have pushed the European authorities to pay more attention to the region.

### **The EU's enlargement policy towards the Western Balkan states (2014-2020)**

While the EU has been the most visible player in the Western Balkans since 2000, the recent dynamics of emerging powers are seen as a direct threat to European interests. The EU therefore wishes to maintain its leadership in the region. In the context of multiple crises in and around the EU as well as the tense geopolitical situation in the Western Balkans, the EU and some of its member states (Germany, Austria) have shown new awareness by launching four initiatives promoting enlargement and in order to remain the most important players in the region: the Berlin Process (2014), the enlargement strategy of the European Commission (2018), the Sofia Summit (2018) and the Zagreb Summit (2020) (Lika, 2021). These initiatives were launched at a time many critics emerged in the Western Balkans regarding the EU, accusing it of failing to keep its promises and neglecting the states of the region.

Otherwise, in August 2019, the US Department of State appointed Matthew Palmer as a special representative for the Western Balkans and, in October 2019, President Donald Trump has appointed Richard Grenell,

former US ambassador to Germany, as his personal envoy for the dialogue between the Republic of Kosovo and the Republic of Serbia, announcing a renewed interest of the US in the Western Balkans. Europeans answered immediately that in addition to Josep Borrell acting as the EU's mediator (from his position of EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy), a Special European Envoy should be appointed (EEAS, 2020; Lika and Reka, 2021, p. 238). On 3 April 2020, Miroslav Lajčák was appointed by the EU Council as EU's Special Representative for the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia (Council of the European Union, 2020). Thus, the US and the EU continue to cooperate in the Western Balkans. Washington and Brussels support constitutional reforms in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the normalization of bilateral relations and reciprocal official recognition between the Republic of Kosovo and the Republic of Serbia.

Furthermore, popular support for EU membership varies from state to state in the Western Balkans. For example, annual surveys of the Balkan Barometer provide figures on the perceptions and expectations of public opinion in the Western Balkans about European integration. The results of 2018 show a favorable opinion from citizens of states such as Albania (83 %), Kosovo (84 %), North Macedonia (59 %) and Montenegro (53 %) to European integration; as for Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, respectively 45 % and 29 % of citizens responded that accession to the EU is a good thing (Balkan Public Barometer, 2018). Thus, Kosovo and Albania are the two most pro-EU states in the Western Balkans, followed by North Macedonia and Montenegro.

The launch of these European initiatives was welcomed by the Western Balkan states. All countries responded favorably and their leaders have thus expressed their willingness to continue promoting European regionalism and to strengthen the dialogue and cooperation between them and with the EU. These initiatives have brought new dynamism and encouraged cooperation with a perspective to a future membership. They constitute a relaunch of the EU's enlargement policy towards the Western Balkan states and are based on three main pillars: regional political cooperation and the settlement of bilateral disputes between the Western Balkan states; improving economic cooperation via interconnectivity in the fields of transport and energy; youth-oriented interpersonal relations and cooperation with the civil society. Concretely, since 2014, the Berlin Process has focused on regional cooperation, inter-connectivity and reconciliation in the Western Balkans (Berlin Process, 2014, pp. 1-4). Four years later, the European Commission published a document entitled: "A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement

with the Western Balkans” (European Commission, 2018). In this official document, the European Commission has announced that regional cooperation and good neighborly relations remain a prerequisite for the Western Balkan states to join the European common project (European Commission, 2018, pp. 5-8). The Sofia (2018) and Zagreb (2020) summits constitute respectively the third and the fourth European initiatives.

However, as it was the case at Thessaloniki summit (2003), the recent European initiatives reaffirmed the support for the European perspective of the Western Balkans, but the EU’s foreign policy has produced a lot of declarations with little effect. The EU enlargement policy reflects the way in which the EU institutions and a number of member states, including Germany and France, formulate their policies towards the Western Balkans (Ker-Lindsay *et al.*, 2020). Thus, the EU still fails to speak with one voice and to keep its enlargement promises.

### **The Western Balkans from different perspectives: contributions to the Journal of Cross-Regional Dialogues (JCRD)**

This special issue<sup>2</sup> of the Journal of Cross-Regional Dialogues (JCRD) is the result of a reflection carried out on the occasion of an international conference organized on March 28, 2019 by the Center for International Relations Studies (CEFIR) of the Department of Political Science of the University of Liège (ULiège) on the Western Balkans and more particularly entitled: “The Western Balkans at the crossroads of European integration and emerging powers”<sup>3</sup>. As the organizer of this event and coordinator of this special issue, I made the choice to include this double scientific activity in a process of openness and interdisciplinary dialogue by involving researchers specializing in comparative politics, internal politics, International Relations, European studies, and international political economy. In other words, the research included in this special issue deals with a wide variety of subjects relating to International Relations, economics, the role of political actors in the Western Balkan states in the process of

<sup>2</sup> In this special issue, the authors write in their personal and individual capacities. The authors hold sole responsibility for the views expressed in their articles.

<sup>3</sup> This conference was organized thanks to the support of several sponsors: the CEFIR and its president, Professor Sebastian Santander, the Cité research unit of the Faculty of Law, Political Science and Criminology of ULiège, the Heritage of ULiège, the Wallonia-Brussels International (WBI) and Erasmus +. In addition, many thanks to all the participants of this conference: Sebastian Santander, Liridon Lika, Bashkim Iseini, Kamal Bayramzadeh, Jean-Christophe Defraigne, Afrim Krasniqi, Vjosa Musliu, Arlind Puka, Anton Vukpalaj, Dorina Bérdufi, Xhabir Hamiti, Ardijan Sainovic, and Antoine Delens.

European integration, strategic issues, politics of enlargement of the EU in the Western Balkans and the place of European institutions and member states in the European decision-making process, or the projection of influences from emerging powers in the region. Each of the articles featured in this publication addresses specific topics. However, they all have a common object of study, that of the Western Balkans.

This special issue<sup>4</sup> brings together articles in English and French from young and senior researchers, which aim to present a critical and original analysis on the Western Balkans. To do this, the authors articulate in their studies both theoretical and empirical approaches. They thus aim to contribute to the enrichment of academic debates and to the development of knowledge about the Western Balkans, the EU and the emerging powers. This special issue intends to answer the central question of the challenges posed by the penetration of emerging powers in the Western Balkans for the EU's deployment in this region. In other words, it seeks to analyze the new international balance of power in the context of the diffusion of global power. The research therefore raises the hypothesis that the Western Balkans today constitute a field of competition between the great powers which aspire to increase their influence in the region. Emerging powers like Russia, Turkey and China intend to compete with the EU in the Western Balkans and maximize their own interests. The research question that drives this issue is therefore the following: does the EU's enlargement strategy in the Western Balkans face competition from the deployment of emerging powers in the region? This question comes in several sub-questions: what are the interests of the EU in the Western Balkans? What are the interests of the emerging powers in the region? How do Western Balkan states position themselves towards the EU and the emerging powers? Does the assertive presence of the emerging powers in the Western Balkans present challenges for European enlargement? This special issue will try to provide answers to these various questions.

In her article, Dorina Bërdufi analyzes the role of political actors in the process of European integration of the Western Balkan states, focusing on the cases of Kosovo, North Macedonia and Albania. The author emphasizes that political actors are of paramount importance in advancing or hampering the process of integration with Western Balkan states into the EU. All the states of the Western Balkans have marked similarities but also significant differences with regard to their dynamics and prospects

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<sup>4</sup> My warm thanks go to all those who, despite their busy schedules, agreed to review the articles of the participants in this special issue. Their professionalism, their criticism and constructive remarks, as well as their sound advice have undoubtedly contributed to the high quality of this publication. My thanks also go to the JCRD editorial board: Sebastian Santander, Antonios Vlassis, Vincent Bricart and Camille Schmitz.

for development. The article uses a comparative method indicating the similarities and differences between these three states, in the context of the search for factors of progress and hindrance towards European integration. The factors of analysis highlighted in this article are: the majority-opposition and political parties, international actors, civil society, the media, public perceptions and ethnic and nationalist divisions.

Vjosa Musliu assesses the potential impact of the Berlin Process on the prospects of EU integration for the states of the Western Balkans. In the first part of the article, she examines whether the Berlin Process, a German initiative, can be read as a replacement for the current EU enlargement to the Western Balkans. In the second part, she analyzes how Orientalist/Balkanist tropes are once again part of the discourse emanating from the EU towards the Western Balkans. The author makes two central arguments. First, according to her, the idea behind the Berlin Process appears to be a replacement for EU enlargement to the Western Balkans, even temporarily. Second, she underlines that the Berlin Process is being used, once again, to re-establish Orientalist and Balkanist tropes when approaching the EU with regard to the Western Balkans. To do this, this article uses the documentary analysis and speeches by the heads of state of the twelve countries of the initiative between 2014 and 2019.

In his article, Antoine Delens studies the strategic renewal of the EU in the Western Balkans, emphasizing the asymmetry of approaches between the different European institutions. In other words, he aims to identify the divergences in approaches between the European institutions and is particularly interested in the enlargement strategy towards the Western Balkans that the European Commission presented in 2018. The author analyzes in depth the positioning of the European institutions regarding the strategic renewal of the EU and the possible impacts for the states of the region. Subsequently, he seeks to demonstrate that the asymmetry existing in the approaches of the various supranational (European Commission and European Parliament) and intergovernmental (Council of the EU and European Council) European institutions is the consequence of a renationalization of the process of enlargement. The reaffirmation of the central role of the member states in the decision-making process and the governance of the EU is illustrated in particular by the analysis of the European institutional blockage and the opening accession negotiations for Albania and North Macedonia.

Ardijan Sainovic focuses on the internal factors, systemic pressures and foreign policy of the Western Balkan states. He reminds in his article that the states of the Western Balkans are engaged in a process of accession to the EU which remains at the basis of their national policies. However, in

recent times, according to him, they have adopted different foreign policy strategies: all have increased relations with emerging powers, some have even intensified these partnerships, going so far as to occasionally oppose foreign policy directives of the EU. The author emphasizes that the attitude of the Western Balkan states is of strategic importance from a theoretical and empirical perspective. He notes that European leadership is accepted and continues to be wanted in the sense that Euro-Atlantic integration remains a priority. The author has used two theories of International Relations, namely realism and liberalism to explain these phenomena. After presenting the different theoretical postulates of realism and liberalism, the author argues that in his research the second offers a more complete framework by integrating internal and environmental factors into the analysis.

Kamal Bayramzadeh analyzes the rivalry between Turkey and Saudi Arabia in the Western Balkans and the impacts for the EU. In other words, he looks at the political, economic, military, security and religious issues linked to the competition between Turkey and Saudi Arabia in the Western Balkans in order to examine the implications for the EU. The author shows that Turkey and Saudi Arabia have increased their activities in the Western Balkans, notably in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Serbia. According to him, unlike Turkey, which had maintained a regional presence during the Ottoman Empire's long period of domination, Saudi Arabia's presence did not begin until after 1992, first in the context of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and then spread after the 2000s to other states in the Western Balkans. The author also intends to show in his article that the strategies of Turkey and Saudi Arabia are linked to a policy of soft power in two emanations of political Islam: one linked to Wahhabism and the other to Turkish political Islam close to the Sunni Islamic transnational organization of the "Muslim Brotherhood". The author confirms that the rise of the multiple activities of these two actors constitutes a security threat and a political challenge for the EU in the Western Balkans.

In his article, Jean-Christophe Defraigne assesses the impact of China's economic penetration in the Western Balkans on the region's relationship with the EU and on the region's role in the international division of labor. Using theoretical concepts from international economics and international political economy, the author presents an interpretation of relevant quantitative data and a qualitative analysis of Chinese economic flows in the Western Balkans. According to the author, the results show that China is unlikely to question the EU's economic hegemonic position in the region. The article also shows that Chinese economic flows and

development projects, notably the BRI, are not significantly transforming the role of the Western Balkans in the international division of labor. The author explains why Chinese economic flows do not substantially contribute to the integration of the economies of the Western Balkans into the international production networks set up by Chinese companies.

The last article, which is part of the “*varia*” section of the JCRD, does not deal with the Western Balkans, but with Central Asia (CA). In this article, Noemi M. Rocca argues that the “CA corridor” is experiencing an informal process of region building. She mentions that its internal drivers are represented by the BRI and a renewed Iranian stance towards the East. According to the author, although the primary goal of the BRI is to build a vast transport infrastructure to connect Chinese goods to Western markets, it also has the potential to improve connectivity and economic growth in CA. She points out that factors such as gas and oil could increase the region’s energy self-sufficiency and lead to economic interdependence. Moreover, given that all of the seven states of CA share regional stability and security as major political concerns, according to her, their mutual engagement can help to avoid interstate and intrastate conflicts in the region. The first part of the article is devoted to the theoretical debate on regionalism, in particular in the CA. The second deals with the main features of the integration process being built in the “CA corridor”.

Finally, this special issue ends with two book reviews. In the first, Sebastian Santander presents the book “*La Coopération de Shanghai. Conceptualiser la nouvelle Asie*” or, in English, “The Shanghai Cooperation. Conceptualizing the New Asia”, written by Pierre Chabal, Liège, Presses Universitaires de Liège, 2019. According to Santander, this book lies at the intersection of International Relations and studies on comparative regionalism, and deals with the construction of “New Asia” through the founding and the evolution of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). This is an original monograph which aims at understanding how International Relations evolve in a post-war context. Moreover, according to Santander, it is a significant and very welcome contribution to the discipline, which substantially enriches the existing scientific literature on the phenomenon of regional dynamics as well as on the SCO.

As for the second review, Antonios Vlassis focuses on the book “Commercial Realism and EU Trade Policy: Competing for Economic Power in Asia and the Americas”, written by Katharina L. Meissner, London, Routledge, 2018. According to Vlassis, this book seeks to understand the EU’s external trade relations, challenging the liberal-institutionalist approach, which is dominant in the EU external relations’

literature. Thus, according to him, the book explores why and how the EU systematically engages in trade relations and analyzes the motivations for different modes of European trade diplomacy such as bilateralism, interregionalism, and multilateralism. Vlassis recommends the book, highlighting that it is a key reading for academics, researchers and practitioners in various fields, such as foreign policy, regionalism, international political economy, as well as the EU external action.

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# Presentation of the Journal/ Présentation de la Revue

## **Name/Nom :**

Journal of Cross-Regional Dialogues/Revue de Dialogues Inter-Régionaux

## **Scope of the journal/Portée de la revue :**

The field on regionalism studies has long been centered and dominated by the study of European integration. The intention of this scientific journal is to go beyond the euro-centric perspective and open up to the comparative analysis of the phenomenon of regionalization and the regional organizations that structure the international scene, as well as the study of their respective interactions. The journal aims to study the regional phenomenon from the inside-out and outside-in perspective in order to better understand its internal dynamics, the external influences (globalization, multipolarization) of which it is the object and its role in international relationships. The project is open to interdisciplinarity and aims to provide multi-thematic analyzes of regional experiences in Africa, Latin America and North America, Asia, Eurasia and Oceania without neglecting study of European regionalism.

La discipline sur l'étude du régionalisme a longtemps été centrée et dominée par l'étude de la construction européenne. L'intention de cette revue scientifique consiste à dépasser la perspective euro-centrique pour s'ouvrir à l'analyse comparée du phénomène de régionalisation et des organisations régionales qui structurent la scène internationale, ainsi qu'à l'étude de leurs interactions respectives. La revue ambitionne d'étudier le phénomène régional à partir de la double perspective *inside-out* et *outside-in* afin de mieux comprendre sa dynamique interne, les influences externes (mondialisation, multipolarisation) dont il fait l'objet ainsi que son rôle dans les relations internationales. Le projet est ouvert à l'interdisciplinarité et aspire à fournir des analyses multi-thématiques sur les expériences régionales d'Afrique, d'Amérique latine et du Nord, d'Asie, d'Eurasie et d'Océanie sans pour autant négliger l'étude du régionalisme européen.

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Word Count: 6000-8000 words.

Nombre de mots : 6000-8000 mots.

### **Frequency of issue/Fréquence des numéros :**

Yearly/annuel

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