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The meaning of the Western Balkans concept for the EU: genuine inclusion or polite exclusion?

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ABSTRACT

This article explains the meaning of the Western Balkans concept in the European Union (EU) political discourse through the prism of the constructivist approach of International Relations (IR). This term was conceived and institutionalized to designate more precisely the countries included in the Stabilization and Association Process (SAP). This article shows that the Western Balkans concept, as a political and social construct, is used strategically by the EU and leads to exclusion rather than inclusion. The countries that are or that become EU member states are no longer qualified as Balkan but as European, while those left outside the gates are categorized as Western Balkans, which are often associated with the pejorative concept of balkanization.

Introduction

In 1998, the European Union (EU) introduced the notion of Western Balkans for the first time (Vienna European Council 1998). The Western Balkans are a group of states which European authorities have distinguished from other Balkan or South-Eastern European countries such as Romania, Bulgaria and Slovenia, namely the countries which had made more rapid progress towards accession to the EU, and Greece, which is an EU member since 1981. Croatia was initially considered a Western Balkan country until it joined the EU in 2013. The Western Balkans concept currently covers the following six states: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia. Through the negative images historically conveyed by the words 'Balkans' and 'balkanization,' the neologism 'Western Balkans' symbolically excludes these countries from the fold of the EU, which gives off a positive image.

This article aims to analyse the Western Balkans concept according to the constructivist approach of International Relations (IR) in an attempt to answer the question, what does the Western Balkans concept mean in the EU political discourse? The main claim here is that the term 'Western Balkans' does not encompass a geographical and historical dimension but rather a political, geopolitical and technical one. This article focuses on

the social construction, international representations and political use of the term. Numerous studies have already applied constructivism and the role of ideas, narratives and discourses in the Western Balkans' debate about Europeanization and state-building as everyday practices (Musliu 2021a), the relationship between identity and Europeanization (Subotic 2011), the scope and limitations of the EU's transformative power (Elbasani 2013), the limits of the EU's normative power (Noutcheva 2009) and representations of the region in political and media discourses (Petrovic 2009). It is argued that European perceptions, identity, standards and values have been important in promoting the EU's enlargement policy towards the Western Balkans (Demetropoulou 2002). Therefore, the application of social constructivism to the study case is relevant because it provides an analysis of ideas and social constructs that may have political significance (Risse 2009). Thus, this theoretical approach generates the main argument that the ideas, thoughts, perceptions, discourses and international representations (Abazi and Doja 2016) expose the relations between the EU and the Western Balkan states and could explain the meaning of the Western Balkans concept as well. The purpose is to show whether or to what extent the international representations and negative stereotypes persisted in the EU discourse once the term was adopted. Even though the Western Balkans concept is widely used nowadays, few academic studies have paid attention to its origin and meaning, and it is not always clearly defined. Thus, the contribution of this article is to shed light on the meaning of this concept in the European political discourse and deconstruct the EU discourses regarding the Western Balkans notion. This article does not necessarily aim to present a genealogy of the Western Balkans as a term but rather to expose the functions that the concept has for the EU.

This article utilizes primary sources, such as EU official documents (declarations, statements), while being informed by a comprehensive survey of the relevant literature. This article is based on a discourse analysis of the key declarations and relevant statements of the European Commission, European Council and the Council of the EU on the Western Balkans, as well as those published during the Berlin Process summits, covering the period between 1998 and 2022 to forward an empirical analysis of the Western Balkans concept, as a political and social construct and the domestic impact it had so far on the political elites or people's perceptions of Europeanness/Balkanness (Kolstø 2016). The first section of the article focuses on the contextualization of the Balkans concept. The second section then analyzes how the Western Balkans as a concept was created by the EU, while the third section deals with the Western Balkans concept as a tool for exclusion. Finally, the fourth section delves into whether the Western Balkans notion is an ephemeral concept or one that could prove resilient.

Contextualization of the Balkans concept: origin and birth of a socially constructed name

The name of the region, the Balkans, has been affected by the half-millennium-long period of Ottoman rule. It has been widely accepted that 'Balkan' is a word and a name that entered the peninsula with the occupation by the Ottoman Turks in the 14th century (Todorova 2009, 27). According to various sources, the word derives from Turkish and refers to 'mountain' (Weibel 2002, 11; Castellan 1994, 9). For several centuries, the notion of the Balkans did not cover the entire peninsula. At the start of the 19th century, the

exact geography of this part of the European continent was still poorly understood in the West, dominated by a widespread belief in the existence of an enormous mountain range that would have crossed the Balkan Peninsula in all its width (Weibel 2002, 11). Although several travellers and geographers from Western Europe visited the region between the 15th and 18th centuries, they did not come up with a single name or a precise geographical definition of the peninsula. It was only in 1808 that the German geographer Johann August Zeune first used the term 'Balkan Peninsula' to refer to the South-Eastern part of Europe (Todorova 2009, 26; Carter 1977, 7). The name simply indicated a geographic region/location.

The notion of 'Balkans' as a concept designating the entire peninsula entered literature at the beginning of the 19th century. However, for decades, the word 'Balkans' failed to prevail in a dominant or exclusive way. Indeed, it was only from the middle of the 19th century that the Balkans notion began to be used by most authors to designate the entire peninsula, even if it failed to automatically gain priority on the other parallel names that evoked its ancient or medieval past, such as the Illyrian, Dardanian, Thracian, Roman, or Byzantine Peninsula (Todorova 2009, 26). For example, since the Illyrians, namely the ancestors of the Albanians, historically populated a large part of the Balkans, some Albanian authors continue to refer, even today, to the Balkan Peninsula as the Illyrian Peninsula (Buxhovi 2015, 11). Some Western authors in their publications have used other names, such as 'Eurasia Minor,' which includes the Balkans and the Near East (Kaser 2015) and 'Europa Balcanica' (Sundhaussen 1999). Until the Berlin Congress of 1878, the most frequent qualifications, especially in Western Europe, were those which originated from the Ottoman Empire's rule in the region, such as 'European Turkey,' 'Turkey of Europe' (Boué 1840), 'Turkey in Europe,' 'the European Ottoman Empire,' and 'the Eastern Peninsula' (Todorova 2009, 26). Among the Balkan peoples, the 'Balkans' was not a widespread geographical notion at that time (Mazower 2010, 17). The Ottoman rulers, called the region 'Rumelia,' meaning literally 'the land of the Romans,' namely the Christians. Thus, unlike the Europeans, the Ottoman authorities rather favoured the idioms such as 'Imperial Rumelia' and 'Ottoman Europe' (Davutoglu 2010, 159). But since the second half of the 19th century, along with political developments in the region, qualifications have also evolved. During this period, the terms 'the Balkan Peninsula,' or simply 'the Balkans,' emerged as the dominant denominations. The notion of the Balkan region is, therefore, a relatively recent and a name that was mostly foreign to the people at the time.

Due to its geopolitical, geocultural and geostrategic importance, the Balkans became, during the 19th and 20th centuries, one of the most unstable regions in Europe. With the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918 and the Ottoman Empire in 1922, several states were born in the Balkan region but quickly grew unstable and hostile to each other, and this phenomenon started to be called 'balkanization.' According to Eric J. Hobsbawm, the word 'balkanization' connotes in a negative, contemptuous and infamous way, derived from the division of the territories formerly occupied by the Ottoman Empire into various independent entities in a system of mini-states (Hobsbawm 1992, 31).

In fact, the term was first used by Westerners (Mazower 2010, 20). The First World War (1914–1918) definitively transformed the perception of the Balkans in the rest of the continent, systematically associating it with negative connotations on the political, social,

cultural and ideological levels, and thus giving to the term 'Balkans' a pejorative dimension (Weibel 2002, 14). More precisely, this period gave birth to the concept of 'balkanization,' which refers to political and territorial fragmentation in the context of ethnic heterogeneity and territorial and border conflicts. While the name 'Balkans' originally had a rather neutral meaning, over time, it has moved away significantly from mere geographic location, taking on a geopolitical and even political dimension (Rapatout 2006, 232). Simultaneously with the increasingly widespread use of the Balkans notion, it has, since the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, also become politically charged. Thus, the region has gradually been associated with images of tearing and conflict. Semantically speaking, the word 'balkanization' is always associated with the idea of disorder, fragmentation, or chaos. This image is, moreover, strongly integrated into the vocabulary and the political and academic discourse, especially in Western countries (Michail 2016, 336). Such a connotation began with the two Balkan wars and continued during the 20th century (Glynn 1993, 24; Biondich 2011; 193–253; Abazi and Doja 2016).

According to Todorova, the Balkans form a geographically inextricable region of Europe but is culturally constructed like 'the other' by Western Europe itself; she continues her argument by posing that each erroneous perception is linked to the notions of 'Balkans' and 'balkanization' (Todorova 2009, 3). Furthermore, she mentions that not only has balkanization taken on the meaning of fragmentation of large, stable political units, but it has also become a synonym for 'return to the tribal' situation, primitive and backwardness by generalizing the whole region (Todorova 2009, 3–7). For instance, even today, the balkanization term is used to describe negative phenomena on the African continent as 'the balkanization of Africa' (Kennedy 2012).

For Sundhaussen, the Balkan region was marked by nine peculiarities that set it apart from the rest of Europe because of its (1) instability and ethnic heterogeneity; (2) loss and late perception of ancient heritage; (3) Byzantine-Orthodox heritage; (4) anti-Western dispositions and patterns of cultural distancing from western and east central Europe; (5) Ottoman-Islamic heritage; (6) socio-economic backwardness in the modern era; (7) the modalities of state and nation-building processes; (8) mentality and inclination to historical mythopoesis; (9) the Balkans as an instrument of Great Power politics (Sundhaussen quoted in Rutar 2014, 11). According to him, the regrouping of these elements over a long period has transformed the region into a historically specific entity (Sundhaussen quoted in Rutar 2014, 11). However, other authors, among which Rutar, try to go beyond the debates relating to the mind map of the Balkans as a negative alter ego of the West and those as a specific historical space by proposing new perspectives which consider the past of the Balkans as an integral part of European and world history (Rutar 2014, 22–24). Other recent studies analyse the Balkans from an inside-out perspective where far from being just a negative Western perception, the Balkans appear as a cultural construction of great complexity. They add other dimensions, such as local self-understanding and reflexive of the ideas, images and discourses of Europeanness to and from the Balkans (Mishkova 2019). To understand Europeanization processes, the focus is placed on local dynamics in the production of ideologies and self-narratives on how the peoples of the Balkans imagine, negotiate and use the idea of Europe through performative practices and cultural production (Petrovic 2014; Musliu 2021a).

The politically negative perception that the Balkans name later took on through the notion of balkanization fuelled many ideologically motivated debates in this part of the European continent, particularly around the question of which countries are or are not part of the region. According to Castellan, the name Balkans has a 'bad press' due to its complicated history, and nobody wants to be Balkan (Castellan 1994, 11). For example, many Croats have long insisted that their culture was foreign to Balkans and Western Balkans traditions and that their identity was anchored exclusively in Central Europe. The Hungarians, the Slovenes, the Moldovans or the Romanians do not wish to be grouped into the Balkans either; they rather maintain that their respective country is part of Central or South-Eastern Europe (Boia 2001, 11). The Greeks, for their part, prefer a Mediterranean affiliation. Hoxhaj underlines that, based on historical, cultural and political criteria, the broadest, most precise and most neutral notion to designate the entire region is that of South-Eastern Europe (Hoxhaj 2016, 162). In the Balkans itself, the label of South Eastern Europe 'was widely regarded as a neutral, non-political and non-ideological concept' (Kolstø 2016, 1253). However, the term South-Eastern Europe is much broader than that of the Western Balkans. There is an interminable debate on the borders of South-Eastern Europe.

The Western Balkans: a political, geopolitical and technical concept invented by the EU

In December 1998, during the European Council in Vienna, organized under the Austrian Presidency, the EU introduced the political notion of Western Balkans (Vienna European Council 1998), which has since become a formula in the speeches of EU officials. The EU has given no definition at that time to specify what this concept exactly means. Constructivist approaches invite us to ask who builds regional identity, for what purpose and, above all, for or against whom is it built? The constructivists emphasize the role of ideas, ideologies or even identity and try to go beyond materialism (Argounès 2018, 53–66). According to constructivists, international politics results from interactions between ideas, attitudes, norms and rules (Checkel 2004, 229–244). There are therefore mutualized normative frameworks (discourses, rules, cultures, international representations, dominant ideas) which determine the way in which the actors rank their interests. Constructivism analyzes how the question of identity and how thought can shape the world, as from 'thought' develops 'perception.' Constructivists consider that norms and identity define and nourish the nature of the interests of different actors (Lynch and Klotz 1999, 54). Wendt observes that 'identities are the basis of interests' (Wendt 1992, 398), which does not only concern the identity of states but also social identities and those of individuals. Identities determine what the actors are, while interests translate their desires (Wendt 1999, 231). Based on this observation, constructivists believe that the national interest is enshrined in the norms and values that shape the identity of the actor (Battistella 2015, 329–330).

The Western Balkans concept indicates the sub-regional objective of European policy in a selective approach of 'differentiated integration' (Dyson and Sepos 2010, 4–5). According to Bechev, 'all regions, whatever the geographic scale, are constructions rooted in political programs rather than quasi-natural formations' (Bechev 2011, 23). This is also true in the case of the introduction of the Western Balkans concept. Indeed, in the late

1990s, the Southeast European initiatives and programs lost their geopolitical orientation since they included a large group of diverse countries, including Moldova and the EU candidate countries, such as Bulgaria and Romania (Ilirjani 2006, 23). Thus, in 1998, a new notion was conceptualized by the EU to designate a part of the region of South-Eastern Europe or the Balkans: the Western Balkans. It is a categorization process by European institutions and leaders, where the Western Balkans became a common denominator for non-EU member states in the region (Kolstø 2016, 1249). The Western Balkans concept has further contributed to the intersection debates on Balkans/South-Eastern Europe and balkanization/Europeanization. There have been contradictory opinions regarding the appropriateness of this term, which have extensively shaped the political debate and its implications on the introduction of the Western Balkans concept (as opposed to South-Eastern Europe) and its relation to Europeanization.

The overall reaction from all parts, namely the EU member states and the countries in the region, was very negative due to the simple fact that it created another division in the already fragmented Balkans (Bokova 2002, 32). The most persuasive of these reactions was drawn up on 29 and 30 June 2000 in Brussels during the meeting of the Club of Three, an informal network of British, French and German leadership covering the spheres of politics, business, academia and media. The Club of Three asserted that the Western Balkans expression suggests that structural challenges like economic underdevelopment and nationalism are now reduced to this region on the European periphery (Club of Three 2000, 13). In their report of the meeting, the Club of Three strongly emphasized that the 'use of the term "Southeastern Europe" rather than "Western Balkans" would imply recognition of the fact that the region already is part of Europe, that its problems are European problems and that any viable solution has to be a European solution, involving both the deepening and the widening of the Union' (Club of Three 2000, 5).

The opposite concept of balkanization is Europeanization (Kolstø 2016, 1250). Europeanization is based on democratization, regional stabilization, strengthening of the rule of law and the creation of a free market economy (Anastasakis 2005, 78). This is in line with the proposition of Manners, who portrays the EU as a normative power based on a solid foundation of values, norms and an identity which guides its foreign policy (Manners 2002, 252). According to Manners, the normative framework gradually developed by the EU consists of five fundamental standards: peace, freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law (Manners 2002, 242). In its enlargement policy, the EU is therefore acting according to a Europeanization strategy that Radaelli defines as 'processes of (a) construction, (b) diffusion and (c) institutionalization of formal and informal rules, procedures, policy paradigms, styles, "ways of doing things" and shared beliefs and norms which are first defined and consolidated in the making of EU decisions and then incorporated in the logic of domestic discourse, identities, political structures and public policies' (Radaelli 2003, 30). Europeanization is regularly presented as a form of EU influence on national policies, institutions and political processes (Gstöhl 2017, 8–9). In other words, when a state of the region complies with European norms and standards and becomes an EU member, it is considered 'European,' while others remain a part of the 'Balkans.' Musliu provides a critical understanding of Europeanization, using the concept of everyday practices, namely, the Western Balkan countries use

everyday events to perform their belonging to Europe and the EU (Musliu 2021a). In doing so, Europeanization consists of transforming structures, institutions and economic models but also changing behaviours and ideas in citizens at large (Musliu 2021a). Moreover, Pål Kolstø states, 'what can redeem a people in this part of Europe from the stigma of being "Balkan" is membership in Western organizations, in particular the EU. Deep down, membership of the EU is the pivot around which the Balkanization/ Europeanization debate revolves. Ostensibly a geographical name, "Balkan" turns out to be a political categorization' (Kolstø 2016, 1246). Thus, following the accession to the EU of certain countries in the region, the concept of the Balkans, which often functions as a stigma, seems to be contracted by the EU to the Western Balkans (Kolstø 2016, 1247).

The Western Balkans concept as a tool for exclusion

In EU official declarations and documents, it is very often mentioned that the 'future of the Western Balkans is within the EU' (EU-Western Balkans Summit Thessaloniki 2003) or 'EU is not complete without Western Balkans' (European Western Balkans 2020), and this seems to be an inclusive concept. Since the end of the 1990s wars in the former Yugoslavia, the European authorities have always repeated that the future of the Western Balkan states is within the EU. In 2017, at the EU-Western Balkans summit that took place in Trieste, the declaration by the Italian chair highlighted the following:

> The future of the Western Balkans lies in the European Union, a Union open to those European countries which respect its values and are committed to promoting them. In Rome, at the celebration of 60th anniversary of the signing of the Treaties, the EU advocated for a stronger and more differentiated Europe. Now, in Trieste we pledge to work for a better inclusion of Western Balkans, with a view to consolidate and unite the continent. Integrating the Western Balkans with the EU is a strategic investment in peace, democracy, prosperity, security and stability of Europe as a whole
>
> *(EU-Western Balkans summit Trieste 2017).*

In 2018, the same sentences were reiterated in the enlargement strategy document of the European Commission: 'The European perspective of the Western Balkans is clear and unambiguous, and the conditions and criteria for EU membership are well established' (European Commission 2018, 18). Likewise, during her visit to the six countries of the Western Balkans, from 1 to 4 March 2017, Federica Mogherini, then High Representative of the EU for Foreign Policy/Vice-President of the European Commission, once again confirmed the importance of the Western Balkans for the EU:

> Leading the Western Balkans inside the European Union: this is a task for our political generation, not for the next one. The Balkans are part of Europe and have always been: no political boundary can change this geographic, historic and cultural reality. The people of the Balkans are European: they deserve the same opportunities, the same safeguards and rights as all other citizens of this continent. The European Union will not be complete as long as this region at the heart of Europe is not united, as part of our community
>
> *(Mogherini 2017).*

Nevertheless, at the same time, for the EU, the neologism of Western Balkans always implies economic underdevelopment, disputes, quarrels and nationalism are specific to this region. The logic of the European authorities towards the Western Balkans was to regard these countries as fragile, asking them to do many reforms before making

a realistic application for EU membership (Economides 2010, 116). The technical dimension of the concept refers to the need to meet EU standards. Consequently, 'viewed in this perspective, "the Balkans" is just as much a concept of exclusion as it is of inclusion. Indeed, it could be seen as more exclusive than inclusive' (Kolstø 2016, 1247).

Despite the new context in the Western Balkans, looking at the EU discourse produced, one can discern how the EU is reverting to the discursive strategy in addressing the countries of the region. For instance, the 2019 Communication on EU enlargement policy stated that the European Commission's Western Balkans strategy of 2018 'confirmed the significant progress the region has made both on reforms and towards overcoming the legacy of war and conflict. But in order for the countries to meet all membership conditions, including strengthening their democracies, more serious, comprehensive and convincing reforms are required in crucial areas, notably on the rule of law, including the fight against corruption and organized crime, on economic reforms and competitiveness, regional cooperation and reconciliation' (European Commission 2019, 1). Another illustrative example is the final declaration by the chair of the first summit of the Berlin Process (2014), which makes reference to the First World War: 'hundred years after the outbreak of the First World War, the heads of government, foreign ministers and economics ministers of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, the FYR of Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Slovenia, as well as representatives of the European Commission, the future host Austria, and France, met in Berlin on 28 August 2014 for the first Conference on the Western Balkans' (EU-Western Balkans Summit Berlin 2014). According to Musliu, 'the inability of the countries in the region to join the EU seems to further reinforce the orientalist tropes through which the EU sees and addresses the region. Being two anti-words, the Balkans (or Western Balkans) will continue to be outside of the EU as long as it continues to be the Balkans' (Musliu 2021b, 95). Therefore, the expression Western Balkans gave a common meaning to the Balkan states described by the EU as unstable or politically and economically fragile. Since the Western Balkans concept was first used, the EU has referred to the importance of peace, security and democratization in the region (Vienna European Council 1998). Nowadays, the European Commission refers to the weak infrastructure in the region: 'The road, rail and inland waterway connections in the Western Balkans are underdeveloped due to lack of sufficient investment and poor maintenance' (European Commission 2020, 5). Moreover, it highlights that, 'in order for the countries to meet all membership conditions and strengthen their democracies, comprehensive and convincing reforms are still required in crucial areas, notably on the rule of law, competitiveness, and regional cooperation and reconciliation' (European Commission 2018, 3). As Musliu puts it, 'the persistence of such tropes utilized from the EU towards the region may reflect the EU's continued vision of the Western Balkans as a region that is beyond repair, irrespective of European and international donors' help and support. Further, by reinforcing such tropes, the EU in turn self-legitimizes its presence and interference in the region as well as the creation of new instruments and programs (Musliu 2021b, 95–96). Abazi and Doja also criticize this EU policy, arguing that nothing distinguishes the Western Balkans from other countries in South-Eastern Europe (Abazi and Doja 2016, 599). According to Abazi, the countries of the entire region all share, albeit in different proportions, a common historical and cultural heritage based on the imperial ruptures of the Habsburgs, the Ottomans or the Soviets (Abazi 2008, 237).

The terminology Western Balkans is, therefore, a recent innovation of the EU; namely, it dates from the period when Bulgaria and Romania were allowed to open accession talks with the EU (Nigoul 2008, 16–17). This new name was conceived and institutionalized to designate more precisely the countries included in the Stabilization and Association Process (SAP). In other words, from 1998 onwards, the term Western Balkans appeared as a neologism of the EU, referring to the countries that once belonged to former Yugoslavia (minus Slovenia) plus Albania. Abazi and Doja indicate that "the Western Balkans are actually defined by what they are not (...). They are not EU members, and there is not an 'Eastern' counterpart but only the 'Western Balkans' and the European Union' (Abazi and Doja 2016, 599). Romania and Bulgaria could possibly have been classified under the notion of 'Eastern Balkans,' Greece as 'Southern Balkans,' Slovenia or Hungary as 'Northern Balkans,' but these labels were absent from the EU vocabulary. The case of the Western Balkans demonstrates quite clearly that the practices of disseminating standards by the EU are not only based on mental maps but are also capable of recomposing the political geography of the region (Bechev 2011, 79).

From the EU perspective, the Western Balkan countries were divided into candidates and potential candidates. In this way, the Southeast European region was split into distinct groups based on external judgements as to the nature of the state-building process and compliance with the standards established by the EU (Solioz and Stubbs 2012, 25). The common denominator of the Western Balkan countries was based on the existence of conflicts and the weakness of state institutions compared to the candidate countries (Romania, Bulgaria and Slovenia). According to Economides, the elements that bind these countries are geographical proximity, recent common and troubled history, the post-communist period, late political-economic development and, above all, the political inclinations of the EU to group them under the designation of Western Balkans (Economides 2010, 116). But this is also a reflection of the fact that they are not yet considered ripe for EU membership. Therefore, the concept of the Western Balkans as a political and social construct does not seem to have changed positively over time. Furthermore, it had, so far, a domestic impact on political elites and people's perceptions of Europeanness/Balkanness. Indeed, in recent years, there has been a gradual erosion of the EU's enlargement policy (Lika 2021, 13), as well as a decline and stagnation of democracy in the Western Balkans (Bieber 2020). The bilateral political disputes, economic problems, the patterns of competitive authoritarianism in some Western Balkans countries (Bieber 2018) and state capture (Richter and Wunsch 2019), combined with the 'enlargement fatigue' and multiple crises inside the EU (economic, political, migratory) have impacted the process of European membership (Lika 2021, 13). Although the EU membership process itself is not in doubt, the conditions of membership are not seen as legitimate by citizens and political elites (Noutcheva 2009) and 'publics are sceptical about their governments' commitment to European integration' (BiEPAG 2020, 1).

From a territorial point of view, therefore, the EU defines the Western Balkans partly on the basis of their geographical position and proximity but particularly on the basis of a recent troubled past. Thus, in the Summit of Vienna (2014), reference was made to the dissolution of former Yugoslavia: 'The Western Balkans region has come a long way since the violent breakup of former Yugoslavia, notably in the areas of political and economic stability, as well as in regional cooperation' (EU-Western Balkans Summit Vienna 2015).

The same was repeated at the summit of Paris (2016): 'Regional cooperation is a key condition for the European perspective of a region that was affected by tragic conflicts less than 25 years ago. Since then, much progress has been achieved by the Western Balkans. Today, in Paris, we welcomed the path covered and called upon each country's continued efforts towards good neighbourly relations' (EU-Western Balkans Summit Paris 2016). Moreover, Josep Borrell declared in 2021 that 'it (...) takes little knowledge of European history to understand why the region remains fragile and its integration process into the EU complex. It was in the Balkans that the First World War started in 1914, and it was also in the Balkans that war and its trail of death and destruction returned to European soil in the 1990s, after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the break-up of former Yugoslavia' (Borrell 2021). The troubled past has indeed become predominant in the EU discourse (Musliu 2021b, 94). This has political significance and keeps the Western Balkan countries out of the EU. Moreover, all Western Balkan countries, without exception, are put in the same bag by the European authorities. The EU has put, for example, Albania, a country not involved in the wars during the 1990s, in the same bag as Serbia which has precipitated and caused wars in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo and Slovenia. Therefore, the EU has been criticized for addressing the Western Balkan states through the balkanization tones (Musliu 2021b) and the equalization of blame between the aggressor and the victims (Kushi 2021).

For some authors, 'this new geopolitical term at least has the virtue of associating the Balkans with the adjective "Western" for the first time since the concept of the "Balkans" was invented' (Hayden 2013, xi). However, from the EU's point of view, the adjective 'Western' does not refer to the Western countries; it encompasses the six countries geographically located on the western part of the Balkan Peninsula. The EU strategy towards the Western Balkans aimed to curb the influence of nationalist politics in a post-war period in the region and, at the same time, to promote reconciliation and, mainly, to prepare the gradual integration of these countries into the common European project. From then on, the EU had the symbolic power to reshape the political geography of the region. Thus, at the end of the 1990s, the EU, through its initiatives and institutional practices of 'controlled inclusion,' shaped the collective politico-geographic identities of the states of South-Eastern Europe (Bechev 2006, 22). The projection of a specific set of standards and a new geopolitical label Western Balkans to this group of geographically contiguous countries has strengthened the position of the EU in the region. The Western Balkans leaders have declared that they want to pursue region-building strategies per the standards projected by Brussels, thus accepting the legitimacy of the EU as a producer of these. Concretely, by signing the Sofia declaration (2018), the Western Balkan leaders 'recommitted to the European perspective as their firm strategic choice, to reinforcing their efforts and mutual support' (EU-Western Balkans Summit Sofia 2018). Albania and Kosovo are the most pro-EU states in the Western Balkans, followed by North Macedonia, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina (Lika 2021, 18). However, the situation is different in Serbia, which officially declares itself favourably to the EU but is also developing its relations with Russia and China (Sainovic 2021; 75–76; Marciacq 2020).

The Western Balkans: an ephemeral concept or destined to last?

In 2013, 15 years after the appearance of the term and its entry into EU terminology, Croatian membership changed the border between the Western Balkans and the EU. Croatia no longer appears in the European Commission's annual enlargement package assessing the steps towards reform in the Western Balkan countries or the Council conclusions on EU enlargement. Although it is unusual to narrow a region, the fact seems intrinsic to the definition, political and not geographic or historical. In other words, the development of relations between the states concerned and the EU will determine whether or not they will always be part of the Western Balkans (Bieber 2020, 2–3). This is precisely what Töglhofer discusses in her analysis:

> With Croatia's accession, the problem inherent in the terminology becomes particularly clear. If we follow the logic of the definition, the regatta principle will lead the Western Balkans to shrink bit by bit with each successful accession candidate – first Croatia, and in a few years possibly the most promising candidate, Montenegro. Thus the Western Balkans will be reduced to the stragglers in the association process that do not fulfil the requirements for EU membership, and therefore cannot yet join the ranks of member states
>
> *(Töglhofer 2013, 6).*

Since Croatia joined the EU, the question arises as follows: what will happen when, finally, all the remaining countries join the EU? (Abazi and Doja 2016, 599). It seems that the Western Balkans notion will be brought to disappear definitively as memberships proceed. Based on the case of Croatia, by the time when all Western Balkan states will be EU members, the notion will probably no longer have a reason for it to exist further. Indeed, as stated by Kolstø, this is a political decision by the EU: 'If all applicants in the Western Balkans are eventually accepted into the EU, then, according to this logic, "the Balkans" as such will be eliminated' (Kolstø 2016, 1262).

However, since 1998, the term Western Balkans has found an increasingly important use within European institutions and in various countries of the world. With the exception of significant criticism in academic debates, the term is already incorporated into daily discourse and communications. Through interaction, this terminology was borrowed by international, regional and national organizations, as well as by journalists, media, diplomats, academics and even ordinary citizens.

Conclusion

The Western Balkans are a heterogeneous region composed of various nations, states, languages and cultures. In 1998, the notion of Western Balkans first appeared in the vocabulary and political discourse of the EU to suit its needs and to designate a group of states located geographically in the western part of the Balkans or South-Eastern Europe. The purpose of this article was to provide a critical analysis of the use of the Western Balkans concept in the EU political discourse, highlighting its political use. The contribution of this study lies in the claim about the EU's strategic use of the Western Balkans concept. This article particularly stressed the arbitrary nature of the Western Balkans concept as used by the EU and exposed both the political purpose of this image construction and its side effects in the Western Balkan countries themselves. The emergence of the Western Balkans concept is inseparable from the contemporary

conjuncture and the EU's foreign policy development towards the region. The Western Balkans concept is not a neutral name.

This concept remains in daily use in the EU political discourse and also is introduced, adopted and used by politicians, journalists, institutions, academics and citizens. It became widespread and gave a common meaning to the Western Balkan states described by the EU as unstable or politically and economically fragile, distinguishing them from other countries in this part of the European continent which were already members or in the process of joining, such as Greece, Bulgaria, Romania and Slovenia. Therefore, the Western Balkans notion, as a social and political construct, covers the states of the region which are not yet members of the EU. The South-Eastern Europe concept seems to be a more appropriate and neutral alternative, but this notion includes much more states.

The EU has categorized the countries in the region: the EU members and the others. Concretely, there are no 'Eastern Balkans,' 'Southern Balkans,' or 'Northern Balkans' but only 'Western Balkans' and the EU. Those countries considered closer to compliance with the norms and standards disseminated by the EU normative power have been spared the words 'Balkans' and 'Western Balkans,' which are often associated with the concept of balkanization, namely a pejorative connotation. Indeed, Europeanization is the opposite concept of balkanization. In the EU political discourse, until the Western Balkan countries are Europeanized, they cannot become members of it. The Western Balkans concept is thus used by the EU in a strategic and geopolitical manner and leads to exclusion rather than inclusion. The documents analysed in this article show that, especially since the Thessaloniki summit in 2003, the same message has been repeated by the EU: 'the Western Balkan states will be part of the EU.' But, even though these countries have been involved in the process for 20 years, they have not yet succeeded in becoming members of the common European project. With the exception of regularly repeated statements, in practice, the EU does not yet seem ready to enlarge rapidly towards the Western Balkans.

Since it is not a geographical and historical concept but rather a political, geopolitical and technical one, the Western Balkans designation is supposed to disappear with the accession of all the countries concerned within the EU. The case of Croatia's accession to the EU has demonstrated it since this state is no longer included anywhere as a country of the Western Balkans but is counted only as an EU member state. While the Western Balkans concept may lose its meaning of non-EU with future accession rounds, the stigma that goes with backwardness may last unless there are thorough reforms in the countries. A deeper genealogy of the Western Balkans concept may be interesting as a track for further research.

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