

The Balkan Dilemma

The contradiction between two aspects: the economic interests with China and the accession to the European Union



AALBORG UNIVERSITY
DENMARK

Viktoria Musilová

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Development and International Relations

Faculty of Social Science

University of Aalborg

Supervisor: Professor Xing Li

Department of Politics and Society

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ABSTRACT

The former countries of Yugoslavia and Albania are currently in the ongoing process of the European Union enlargement. Since 2003, the Western Balkans are facing several challenges while awaiting their entrance to the European Union. However, the long-lasting progress is affected by the slow actions of both parties. The individual Western Balkan countries are still in need of democratic reforms and establishing stability in the region and the EU has still to open several negotiations and discussions toward the accession process. The slow improvement has invited a third-party actor such as China that has increased its presence in the region. The Chinese government does not have a foreign policy framework for the Western Balkans as a region. Rather, China deals with Western Balkans countries mainly at the bilateral level (Zweers, 2020). China has embraced the situation in the region by providing funds and loans to the countries as well as pursuing infrastructure projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative and the 17+1 project. Due to the slow development of the EU enlargement, China has increased its presence in the region. Western Balkans are facing a dilemma where on one side they seek to join the European Union and on the other side they want to take advantage of the Chinese economic power. Several factors influence the accession such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which has slowed down the development of the accession talks as well as the reforms. During the pandemic, the EU has initially prioritized the health care of its member states and the Western Balkans have proceeded with China to receive aid in the form of medical equipment and later on vaccines. The EU has received a large extent of criticism for not supporting its future member states which led to deepening the cooperation with China and the Western Balkan countries. The Chinese influence in the country is present also in several infrastructure projects that are constructed by Chinese companies and funded by Chinese banks. China has offered favorable loans and investments in the region that can cause an additional increase in Chinese influence over the region since the allocation of the finances requires less time and measures than with the EU. The EU, however, remains the largest partner for the Western Balkan countries. The EU has supported the Western Balkans in investment plans that are allocating and donating money to the region to support economic development and bring the countries closer to the EU standards. The countries are facing the 'Balkan dilemma' between cooperation with China or accession to the EU.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 WESTERN BALKANS AND THE EU

The end of the Balkan conflict in the 1990s ended after the intervention of the United Nations (UN) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), an additional promise of the eventual accession to the European Union (EU). After the collapse of Yugoslavia, the region suffered from an ethnic conflict that resulted in the war leading to declaring the independence of countries which nowadays are known as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo, and North Macedonia. Additionally, Albania is considered to be part of the Balkan region and adds to the group that aspires to enter the EU, and altogether have been waiting to enter the EU for more than 20 years. The Western Balkan individual countries were identified as potential candidates for the EU after the EU-Western Balkans Summit in Thessaloniki in 2003 which marks the initial point of the accession process. The EU member states have shown their support for the Western Balkans regarding the European perspective and their future within the EU. All the Western Balkan countries have the perspective of becoming the EU member states as they lay at the heart of Europe and are entirely surrounded by EU member states, of course under a different speed with many obstacles to encounter (McAllister, 2021).

The long-lasting process of the EU accession is based on reforms in line with the EU values and norms. The so-called Copenhagen criteria represent the requirements for aspiring EU member states based on democratization and stability.

There are three key aspects of Copenhagen criteria:

- *‘the stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and respect for protection of minorities’*
- *‘functioning market economy and the capacity to cope with competition and market forces’*
- *‘administrative and institutional capacity to effectively implement the Acquis Communautaire and ability to take on the obligations of membership’*

(Source: European Commission, 2022)

Each country's process depends on its individual efforts to comply with the criteria, reform for improving the rule of law, and fighting corruption and organized crime. The five countries are in different stages in which Serbia and Montenegro have commenced accession negotiations with the EU and are currently holding accession talks. Serbia was granted a candidate status in 2012 and formally started the accession negotiations in 2014. Currently, the 20 negotiation chapters are 2 closed and the remaining 18 are still in the process. Furthermore, Montenegro applied for EU membership in 2008, which led to identifying the 10 key priorities to be addressed for opening the negotiations. The negotiations were open in 2012 and currently, 33 negotiation chapters are 3 provisionally closed.

When it comes to Albania and North Macedonia, they are anticipating the accession negotiations to be opened and currently are in candidate status, despite fulfilling all the requirements. Albania applied for EU membership in 2009. Albania has had the candidate status since 2012, with the condition of reforms in judicial and public administration and revision of parliamentary procedures. In 2020 a draft of the negotiation framework was presented to the EU member states and awaiting further action. Bosnia and Herzegovina still holds the status of a potential candidate to the EU and the further development depends on the implementation of the 14 key priorities formulated by the EU with the main point to reform the domestic constitution according to the European convention of human rights. The EU Commission has set the deadlines for admission to the EU for Montenegro and Serbia possibly speeding the negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania in terms of transition and domestic reforms. However, momentarily, there are no signs that the negotiations will be open.

The accession is based on the economic recovery and reforms of the democratic norms that were slowed down due to the financial crisis in 2007-2009 and 2010-2013 (Dabrowski & Myachenkova, 2018). The economy of Balkan countries¹ is closely integrated with the EU. The EU is the largest partner for the Western Balkans when it comes to trading as the main source of inward foreign direct investments and outward labor migration (Dabrowski & Myachenkova, 2018). The past conflicts in Western Balkans have influenced the economic growth of the region as the countries face problems with organized crime and corruption as well as drug trafficking and money laundering. Since the membership is dependent on the improvement of democratic standards and socio-economic norms the 'door to the EU' is currently closed. The decreasing interest of the EU

¹ Throughout the paper the Balkan countries stand for Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Albania and Bosna and Herzegovina. Kosovo is not included in the research since it is not officially recognized by all the member states of the EU, nor China.

in the region has encouraged other players to get involved allowing them to create deeper engagement with China.

In 2020, the EU Commission has adopted the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans that aims to pursue a long-term recovery economic and investment plan for the region, to help improve its competitiveness and accelerate the green and digital transitions in line with the EU agenda. The plan identifies 10 flagships and allocates a financial package of 9 billion EUR in EU grants which will mobilize an additional 20 billion EUR of investments (European Commission Press Release, 2022). The investment will be allocated mostly towards sustainability and green development projects. In February 2022, the 3.2 billion investment package is established to support 21 transport, digital, climate and energy connectivity projects in the Western Balkans (European Commission Press Release, 2022). Additionally, the EU seeks to close the development gap between the EU and the Western Balkans and support the post-pandemic economic recovery. Previous investments by the EU have resulted in 3 billion EUR by the year 2014 and in 2015 another extra billion EUR was confirmed to support the Connectivity Agenda. Between 2007 and 2017, the EU invested 8.9 billion EUR divided into individual Balkan countries in the forms of pre-accession funds, loans, and investments in different sectors.

The EU is a key economic partner for the Western Balkans (European Commission Press Release, 2022). When it comes to the exports to the EU, in 2017, 80% of North Macedonia's total exports of goods went to the EU (€4.0 bn or 81%), followed by Albania (€1.6 bn or 77%), Bosnia and Herzegovina (€4.0 bn or 71%), Serbia (€9.7 bn or 68%), Montenegro (€0.1 bn or 35%) and Kosovo (€94 ml or 25%) (Eurostat, 2018). The EU is providing investments to the region; however, some tendencies are slowing down the accession process, mostly because the accession of the Western Balkans is not a priority for the EU agenda since it faces a range of different aspects. The EU is losing its authority in the Western Balkans, especially due to the lack of action and no initiative toward the accession.

The slow deliberation in the EU is not the only issue. The Balkan countries need to present a strong position that they are determined to deliver the norms and values the EU demands. The Western Balkans are facing an internal challenge as well in order to meet all the democratic requirements. The Western Balkans need to produce an agenda to remove a type of negative perception and fear to let these countries enter the EU (Abazi, 2021). The Western Balkans need to present to the EU that joining the organization means an opportunity for the EU, rather than being perceived as a burden. To a substantial extent, the EU is helping the countries in the region, however, few restrictions block the enlargement process from the EU side. The EU does not

prioritize the enlargement in the agenda due to different geopolitical issues, the most current being the Ukraine invasion that pushes the importance of the Western Balkans.

1.2 WESTERN BALKANS AND CHINA

China and the Western Balkans do not have a long history of bilateral relations and economic cooperation. During the 1980s China kept diplomatic ties with Yugoslavia and opposed the NATO bombing of Serbia and Montenegro in the 1990s, however, the economic relations began around 2013 with the Belt and Road Initiative. Additionally, the Albania-China diplomatic ties were fairly strong in the 1960s, the Cold War and the collapse of Yugoslavia have brought Serbia to the primary diplomatic partner. To this day Serbia is the only country in Western Balkans visited by president Xi Jinping, in 2016. Nevertheless, during the 1990s Kosovo war, China openly supported Serbia, however, was opposing the bombing of the military intervention of NATO. The military intervention has brought Serbia and China closer together as one of the targets of the attack was the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade. Moreover, China has not recognized Kosovo as an independent state and has used its influence to prevent Kosovo's participation in international organizations such as UNESCO or Interpol.

Since the region is currently in the EU's waiting room, it is using every opportunity to strengthen its economic and political ties with Beijing with Belt and Road Initiative as the main project (Mikovic, 2021). China has changed its position in the world from being a rule-follower to the current status of a rule-maker, where the Belt and Road Initiative presents the first major international project in China (Xing, 2019). Before the BRI's launch, Beijing also established the China-Central Eastern European Cooperation forum also known as the 17+1 initiative expanding its influence. The 17+1 framework is presented as Chinese-led concrete deals and the implementation of development projects realized between China and individual countries on a bilateral level (Mardel J., 2020). The basic motive of the Chinese activities in the region was to increase the connection and mobility that is straightly connected to the BRI, therefore most of the projects in the region funded by China concern transport, infrastructure, ports, and most importantly the rails network (Caspian Report, 2020). The state-guaranteed loans for transport and energy projects characterize China's economic footprint in the Western Balkans (Mardel, 2020).

China has funded many infrastructures project in the Western Balkan region such as the Bar-Boljare highway in Montenegro which is yet to be finished. Often the projects are invisible, ambitious, and expensive, and with the political system in the country with no rule of law and high

corruption, the project is rarely finished and challenging for the economy. However, the only institutions that are able to fund these types of projects are Chinese institutions since China proceeds it as a business opportunity and has no political ties. There are several examples of China's loans to the region as proof of the economic ties. Firstly, as of 2019, Montenegro's sovereign debt to China is EUR 671 million, which is 22 percent of its total foreign debt of EUR 3.1 billion, which makes China the second-biggest lender to Montenegro, and it is the single biggest bilateral lender (Zweers, 2020). Secondly, another construction loan was borrowed by North Macedonia in 2013 in the amount of EUR 714 million from China's Exim Bank for the construction of two highways: Miladinovtsi–Stip and Kicevo–Ohrid. This represents approximately 14 percent of the 2020 level of government debt, which stands at EUR 5.2 billion (Zweers, 2020). Thirdly, Bosnia and Herzegovina have received loans from China for the Stanari coal plant and the Tuzla lignite power plant, which accumulated a total debt of EUR 1.1 billion, which equals 13 percent of Bosnia's total external debt (Zweers, 2020). Furthermore, Serbia excepted EUR 195 million loans from the Exim Bank for the Pupin bridge and another EUR 1.08 billion for the two sections of the Belgrade–Budapest railway. EUR 538 million was borrowed for the construction of the Kostolac B3 coal power plant, which equals 7.91 percent of Serbia's EUR 24.5 billion government debt (Zweers, 2020). Lastly, Albania's debt to China has decreased in the last decade, owing to Beijing's EUR 13.7 million in 2010 and EUR 1.6 million in 2019 (Zweers, 2020). The debts of the Western Balkan countries bring leverage over the national governments, however, there are no signs that the Chinese government would use this leverage for political purposes (Zweers, 2020).

According to the American Enterprise Institute, the investment in Western Balkans has summed up to a total of 14.6 billion dollars between 2005 and 2019 (Mikovic, 2021). Most infrastructure projects are financed by Chinese loans, and the total value of such deals adds up to significant amounts compared to the GDP of the relevant economies. The level of loans offered by China may reach 18% of the GDP in Montenegro, 12% in Serbia, 10% in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and 7% in North Macedonia (Matura, 2021). The amount of infrastructure projects changes the perspective of the Chinese presence in the region as it mostly focuses on construction rather than on investment projects. China's investments and contracts in BiH, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia amounted to \$14.6 billion from 2005-to 2019 (Foreign Affairs Committee, 2021).

In general, Western Balkan countries have the status quo of based on the overall development in the countries, the geopolitical uncertainty of the region, incomplete access to the EU market, insufficient investment, and bad government that gives opportunities to countries like China to

enter the critical sectors (Xing, 2019). China's BRI framework is shaping the Western Balkans and it aims to increase international trade and the role of Chinese companies. China has become the second or third most important import partner, although the EU is still in the first place. The engagement between the Western Balkans and China has translated into rising influence over the domestic and foreign policies that growingly result in the erosion of the EU-centered regional order (Pavlicevic, 2019). China has shown its ability to provide the finances in the region without any additional bureaucratic process.

1.3 RESEARCH QUESTION

Overall, the European Union and China are providing financial support to the Western Balkan region and have strong ties to the region. However, can be observed that cooperation with the EU has its limitations and furthermore the EU gives mixed signals when it comes to accession. Where on the contrary, the Chinese strategy for trading and investments can be seen as a threat that gives its opportunity for rivalry and competitiveness. The Western Balkan countries have strong ties with both actors, which creates a contradiction between the two aspects. Firstly, the Western Balkans are seeking to enter the EU, and individually are making reforms and slowly meeting the requirements for accession. Each Balkan state has its own pace in order to meet all the criteria as well as a range of reforms. Secondly, the slow process toward the EU accession creates a lack of investments and capital in the region, therefore the countries are willing to cooperate with actors such as China and its international trade or infrastructure investment. The presence of China in the region has an effect on domestic policies as well. China can be represented as an economic partner that can provide several benefits while the Western Balkans are awaiting the decision from the EU. The cooperation of Western Balkan countries with the EU and China has both its benefits as well as issues and it needs to be determined which cooperation will profit the region the most. In the context of the China-EU-Western Balkans triangle, the Western Balkans are understood as a middle ground where a geo-economic competition is played out between China and the EU (Pavlicevic, 2019).

Ana Krstinovska (2022) has argued that the existing dilemma of China's presence in the Western Balkan region and the financial assistance allows the countries to maximize their national interest and meet the necessary requirements for the EU accession, particularly when it comes to good governance and the democratic values aligned with the EU policy. Hence, this paper is focused

on the Balkan dilemma aiming to observe both relations by looking into the recent development in the Western Balkan region.

Thus, the following paper fills the gap by focusing on the balance between China and the EU cooperation with the Western Balkan countries, analyzing the following research question:

How are the Western Balkans countries going to cope with the 'Balkan Dilemma' (the economic relations with China and the EU accession)?

2 METHODOLOGY

In order to successfully carry out the analysis, the following chapter is discussing the methodology elaborated during the research. In the first section, the objective of the thesis will be discussed as well as the understanding of the problem. Secondly, the chapter is introducing the model of the research design with a graphic interpretation of the paper. Furthermore, the choice of theories will be discussed, namely norm diffusion as a part of constructivism and rational choice as a part of realism. The last section of this chapter is dedicated to the choice of data together with the means of data gathering. In order to success

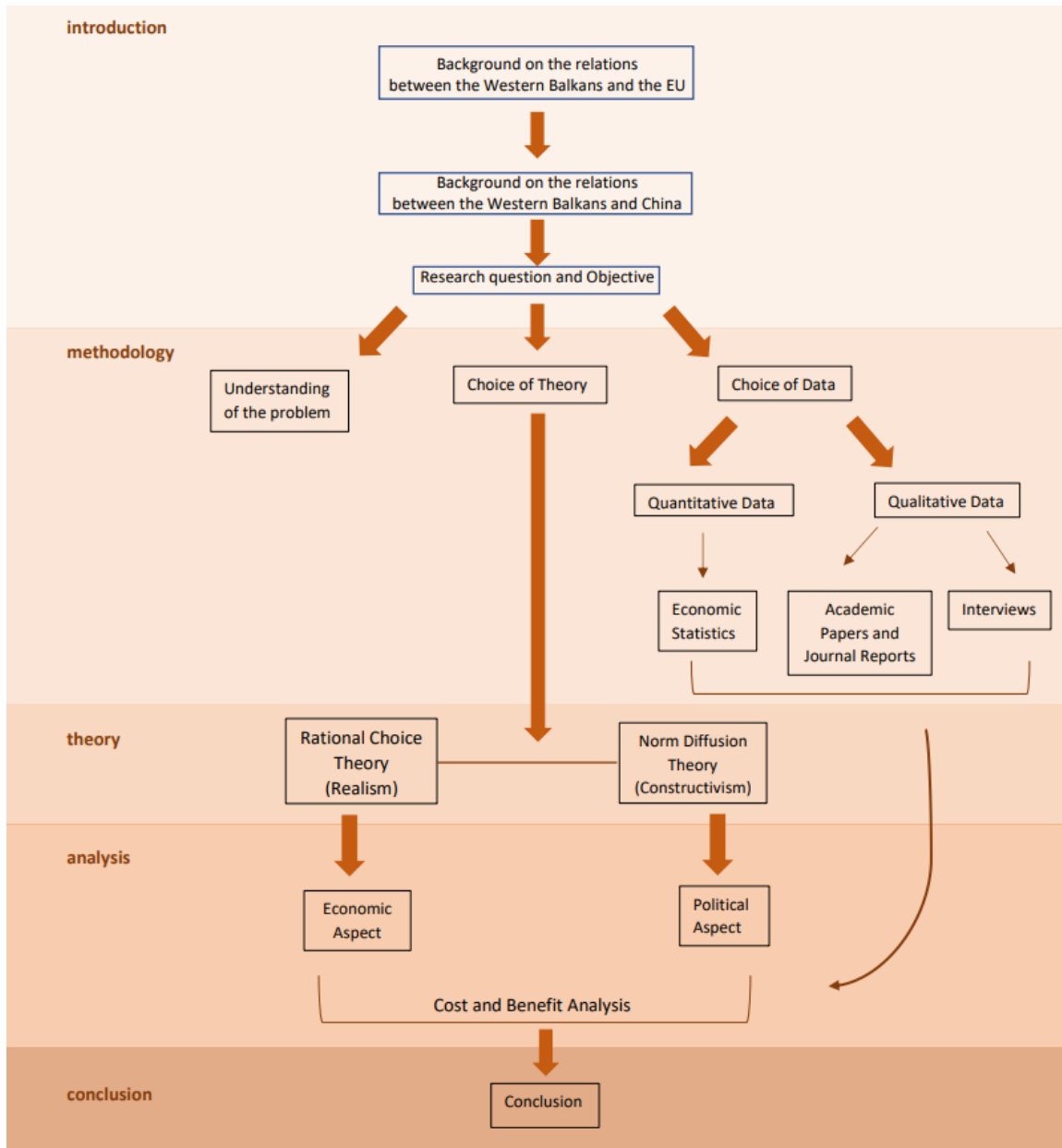
2.1 OBJECTIVE

There has already been a lot of attention put towards the slow process of the EU accession and the lack of support towards the Western Balkan development by conducting several discussions between scholars, EU representatives, and the representatives of the EU member states. On contrary, there are also many discussions regarding the Chinese presence in the Western Balkan region having a large impact on financial, political stability, and security. Chinese presence in the region can proceed as a battle of principles between China and the EU, where China is undermining the EU reformist agenda (Makocki & Nechev, 2017) This paper aims to acknowledge the dilemma between cooperation with China and cooperation with the EU as a future perspective for the Western Balkan countries. For the purposes of this study, the comparative analysis will be conducted based on three key aspects focusing on the political theory of social constructivism.

2.1.1 Understanding of the problem

The situation of the Balkan countries poses a dilemma between the EU and China. 'The Balkan dilemma' is a mix of a variety of perspectives including geopolitical aspects, economics and trade, norms, and values of the different actors. The Balkan Dilemma can be seen as a multidimensional problem that includes both economic and normative aspects. The economic interests of both China and the EU bring out the question of what is more beneficial for the Balkan countries. They can profit from both, investments and trade from China as well as enter the EU and enjoy the open EU market and the status of an EU member state in international trade. When it comes to the normative aspect, the EU accession process cannot be speeded up or changed, therefore each candidate country is obliged to meet the norms that the EU requires to enter the organization. However, the Chinese investments are the economic ties that can leave a normative effect on Balkan countries as well since Chinese presence in the region brings out different opportunities that can benefit the Balkan countries. The economic and normative aspects are closely influenced: if the Western Balkan countries decide to be entirely focused on the EU accession and proceed with the EU norms, they can risk reducing their economic significance to China while increasing their chances to enter the EU. Nowadays, the EU's agenda has different priorities that are slowing down the enlargement process of the Western Balkans. On contrary, there is China that for geo-economic reasons would like to cooperate with Balkan countries. However, China for the most part treats all the bilateral relations as business, which has its benefits and issues. In the middle of the dilemma, there is the Western Balkan region which has its internal problems with rule of law, corruption, and drug trafficking. The countries of the Western Balkans seek to become the EU members, however until all the necessary changes and reforms will occur, they seek economic and geopolitical support from China since the EU has not set any deadlines or shown any signs that the enlargement will occur at any time soon.

2.2 RESEARCH DESIGN



The following paper is based on qualitative research using both qualitative and quantitative data. To address the research question adequately, the analysis will be focused on the comparative approach between two groups of actors. The problem formulation will be addressed from two different points of view: the EU-Western Balkans relations and the China-Western Balkans relations. The two cases will be presented based on three key aspects such as investment and trade; political stability; and security. The comparative analysis will determine the incentives of how the Western Balkans can balance two hegemons over the region. The analysis will debate the EU's perspectives on the Chinese presence in the region.

2.3 CHOICE OF THEORY

The following section will discuss the theoretical framework chosen in order to successfully carry out the analysis. The two theories will be introduced, mainly the norm diffusion theory and rational choice theory, discussing the main frameworks and aspects that will be furthermore used in the analysis chapter.

The theories of economic realism and constructivist norm diffusion are applied in the chapter on analysis. The realist approach can be used to argue that the Western Balkan countries are roughly equally positioned in the world system and interact with China using almost the same methods of cooperation. However, realism cannot help explaining countries' perception of Chinese economic relations, therefore a constructivist approach, such as the norm theory, help to understand the aspect. From the realist perspective, the relations with Western Balkan countries and China bring a lot of economic benefits to the region. When it comes to the 'Balkan dilemma', there are two aspects: firstly, the material economic interests between China and the Western Balkans; and secondly, the shift in norms in form of accession criteria to enter the EU. Collaboration with China, a strong economic partner, in terms of investments and trade represents a rational choice for the Western Balkans as it brings investments and infrastructure projects. Especially during the pandemic, Western Balkan countries have turned to China for help rather than the EU which can provide more opportunities. However, the strong ties with China can generate a risk of norm diffusion as well effecting in the policy behavior of the Balkan countries. Thus, there is a contradiction in norm diffusion to the EU's accession requirements. The two aspects affect each other as on one hand there is a norm diffusion in form of reforms, democratic stabilization of the region, and meeting the Copenhagen criteria and on the other, there is an economic relation with China that can cause a risk of norm diffusion as well, creating a contradiction between the two.

2.3.1 Norm Diffusion Theory

When it comes to the choice of norm diffusion theory, the Western Balkan countries are facing two types of relationships important for their national development and economic growth both based on rules and norms. The diffusion of the EU norms in the region is one of the crucial steps for entering the organization. The EU is rule-driven and all the states, candidate states, or member states are obliged to act according to the EU treaties. Thus, the EU can be seen as a 'one-way action' organization as all the member states act collectively adopting the same norms. The accession to the EU is one of the two key aspects of the analysis and since the Copenhagen criteria are a set of norms and rules necessary for the aspiring member states the norm diffusion

is a clear choice for the analysis. Furthermore, the norm diffusion can be applied to the second aspect of the analysis, the Chinese economic relations with the Western Balkan countries. The collaboration with China creates a risk of generating norm diffusion as China has a specific approach toward international trade and bilateral relations. Chinese state of capitalism can have an effect on the policy behavior of the Balkan countries; hence the economic ties can create a norm diffusion as well. The theory was selected since norm diffusion can be applied to both aspects and both, the EU and China can have a norm effect on the Western Balkan countries.

2.3.2 Economic Realism and Rational Choice Theory

Realism is often regarded as the mainstream conventional IR theory to analyze interstate relations through the framework of material factors such as the economy. Rational choice as a realist sub-theory is applied since it takes a contradictory methodological approach between the EU and China in the region of Western Balkans. The rational choice theory refers to the decision-making of a certain state and explains why a state decided to make a certain foreign policy. In the case of the Balkan dilemma, the choice between two different actors can be analyzed by the rational choice theory. It can be viewed as rational for the Western Balkans to cooperate with China while awaiting the accession to the EU as well as it can be viewed rationally to enter the EU and gain the status of a member state with all the benefits that the organization offers. Rational choice is based on the main assumption of 'rational economic actor' that can be also used in analysis within political science. The motivation of Western Balkan countries is purely driven by pursuing the maximization of self-interest in the global society. The contradiction between the two actors gives a floor for further analysis of which decision would be more rational for the Western Balkan countries.

2.3.3 Summary

When it comes to the correlation between the two theories it can be summarized that these aspects are intertwined. The economic material interest of the Western Balkans can be obtained by both the EU and China, however, in order to pursue with the EU, there are set of rules that are necessary in order to enter the EU. On the other hand, there is a strong economic partner China that is also influencing the domestic policies of the Western Balkans by investing and creating a space for trade and economic projects. China creates a risk of normative influence over the region that is currently in the transition period to the EU accession. There is a contradiction between two

norm diffusions. Additionally, the rational choice aspect can be applied to the Balkan dilemma, as it is up to the Western Balkan countries what they perceive as more beneficial for their individual national interest. Currently, all Western Balkan countries are seeking EU membership, slowly adopting necessary norms, as well as they have economic ties with China. The theories of norm diffusion and rational choice have been selected to explain the contradiction between the two relations and furthermore verify the balance between the two different relationships, as both theories complete each other.

2.4 CHOICE OF DATA

Throughout the paper, qualitative and quantitative data were used in order to analyze the comparison between the China-Western Balkans and EU-Western Balkans cooperation. Most of the data gathered for the research are quantitative in the form of academic articles and previous research about the EU-China relations, the Chinese presence in the Western Balkan region, and the aspect of the accession to the EU. In order to fully establish an overview of the topic, there were several interviews conducted. Vladimir Bilčík, a Member of the EU Parliament has shared his opinions on the EU accession and the perception of China from the EU perspective. Additionally, the dialogues between the Western Balkans representatives and the political scholars will be analyzed gathered from several conferences such as the Post EU Summit on Enlargement to the Balkan Countries panel at the Festival Della Diplomazia Conference in Rome, the Western Balkans panel discussion at the GLOBSEC Forum, as well as online discussions from different forums. Furthermore, the academic papers used as a background for the analysis are focusing mostly on the multilateral relations between the countries.

3 THEORY

3.1 NORM DIFFUSION

To fully comprehend the norm diffusion theory, one must first establish a definition of a norm. A norm can be understood by Krasner (1983) as a standard of behavior of states which define the rights and obligation of states. A norm represents a collection of expectations regarding the behavior of states and other actors in a given context and identity (Björkdahl, 2002) Generally, norms are implemented and shared among different states and actors. Norms can define a moral perspective of the behavior of a state. The moral aspect of a norm can be interpreted in the work of a transnational network that helps to problematize a given issue and furthermore integrate the

norm into a political agenda (Tskhay, 2020). Thus, countries adopting the transparency of norms within external industries are committing to the disclosure of information ranging from the revenues received and how such revenues are spent (Tskhay, 2020). The general picture of transparency is based on the perception that the disclosure of information contributes to the economic growth and benefit of the domestic governments. Transparency of norms is closely related to sharing democratic values and good governance. The function of norms can be understood as a tool to connect the national interests of two actors that will essentially benefit both. Moreover, the international norms explain how states with different interests establish similar policies and how the national interest of a state emerges based on materialist accounts (Park, 2006).

International norms are perceived as legitimate for domestic implementation and in order to be diffused, they should be associated with local norms, beliefs, and practices (Acharya, 2004). The previous literature on international relations has focused on how international organizations shape the behavior of different states. International organizations are therefore recognized as diffusers of international norms (Finnemore, 1996). An international norm is defined as a "set of standards for the appropriate behavior of states" (Finnemore/Sikkink 1998). The international or national authorities make the norms, and these norms are promoted at the international level and adopted by different countries, so it does not compromise the domestic policies.

Nations and states are culturally structured by their national interest based on their norms and values. The states follow and adopt particular norms in order to be associated and internationally recognized by a certain international ranking such as a 'modern' or 'developed' country. Shaping norms according to a different transnational body brings recognition of a state in the international system as well as it brings benefits to the domestic governance. The state is willing to adopt the norms of an international organization as a tool to establish its position in the international system. The shift of the norms is based on the rules set by the international organization as a requirement necessary to implement. According to Finnemore and Sikkink the development of these norms can be explained by a three-stage process known as the norm life-cycle, however, since this approach does not discuss the reason why a state decides to implement different forms, the approach will not be used in the analysis.

Since norms are instrumental in the relations between the states and organizations, they can be used to understand state behavior, the decision-making process, and interstate relations (Tskhay, 2020). According to Gilardi (2013), four categories are discussing how policy choices and norms are affected by international influence: coercion, competition, learning, and emulation. For the

purposes of this paper, the category of coercion and emulation will be used since the remaining two categories are related to tax competition, and the estimation of policy change is not related. Coercion signifies that a powerful country or an international organization can influence states to implement or adopt certain policies. A typical feature is a conditionality, thus in order to enter an international organization, there is a certain set of requirements that needs to be met in order to become a member. A perfect example of such an organization is the European Union accession criteria in form of legislation and a wide range of reforms as a tool for reconstructing the domestic political institutions and practices (Simmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004).

Emulation can be understood as norm diffusion which Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) describe as a three-stage process: norm emergence, cascade, and internalization. In the first stage, the new norms and rules are introduced by norm entrepreneurs with the support of organizational platforms. With sufficient support from different states, it reaches the second stage in which the norms are promoted in a socialization process that rewards conformity and punishes noncompliance (Gilardi, 2013). A norm can eventually be supported by most of the international system, hence the internalization stage. Instead, the approach of norm diffusion will be used with the international organization as a norm diffuser and the Western Balkans as a region willing to implement different norms to ensure the state legitimacy, economic growth of the individual countries, and international recognition. The diffusion occurs within the boundaries of the country, and it can be executed by non-state actors, nation-states, and international corporations. Domestic actors push for compliance while international actors incentive domestic actors to comply. Norm commitment is closely linked to norm compliance (Hathaway, 2007) as the state considers the costs and benefits of compliance and only then decides on the next possible actions. Hathaway argues that norm commitment and compliance depend on the benefits that the norm would bring. A state will rationally choose to adopt the norms only if it can benefit from them. Domestic norm implementation is based on reforms of domestic governance, democratization values, and political stability. Diffusion is an approach that can be applied to a range of social and political aspects from policies to specific instruments such as tax rates or general policy frameworks (Gilardi, 2013).

3.2 RATIONAL CHOICE

According to the realist theory, states rely on themselves in any situation and are responsible for their actions. Hence, their goals and decisions depend on them as well. Therefore, the basic feature of international behavior can be applied to economic activities. Economic realism argues that there is no economic authority, and a state has full liberty of decisions and looks after its

economic well-being. States are rational actors, goal-oriented and consistent, therefore the achievement of their goals depends on the order of preferences which can change according to constraints and opportunities (Barth, 2000) Rationality is strongly connected to the economic sphere. It is necessary to point out that the economy intersects with a foreign policy that needs a national strategy that will enhance the national welfare. It is rational for states to act according to their national interests and collaborate with states or institutions that can provide benefits. In international relations, rationality is the main concept in the major traditional theoretical approaches such as realism. The basic assumption of rationality is that an actor, whether a state or non-state actor, is rational meaning they seek to advance their preferences in order to maximize their interests (Keohane, 1988; Katzenstein et al, 1998). Explicitly, rationality means that an actor orders one's interests or preferences and makes the choice that ranks highest in the order within a certain situation (Choi, 2015).

Rational choice is a normative theory that explains how individuals chose among alternatives to achieve their goals and objectives (Chong & Mullinix, 2022). In Wendt's view, rational choice is a second-order theory that is based on the nature of human agency and its relationship to social structures (Pollack, 2007) Thus, it can be assumed that governments will choose, within the limits of their knowledge, the best available means to achieve their goals (Chong, 1996). The focus of the theory is based on the individual, however not so much on his unique traits, but more on the assumption that one makes decisions based on self-interest and rationality. If something is proclaimed good for a state, it tries to maximize the utility and expected result, and build a structure of preferences (Green & Shapiro, 1996). In the political world, it usually means that people are assumed to vote for a party that is closest to their position. The crucial aspect of the rational theory is the interest of the individuals, as the interest are shaping the decision-making and rationality of its decisions.

Rational choice presumes that the interests of an actor are fixed in any analysis and focuses on explaining the changes in constraints for the reason that preferences cannot be observed directly, but one can observe the constraints that an actor is facing. Consequently, fixed preferences lead to a more concrete analysis, whereas the assumption of changing preferences brings about unclear arguments that cannot be tested. Rational choice is often criticized as insufficiently attuned to empirical matters. The issue is based on the difficulty of observing main variables such as the beliefs and preferences of an actor. However, the complaint should not be seen as an indication of a fault theory as such, but rather be cautious when it comes to the application (Snidal, 2013). Therefore, rational choice cannot be tested as a whole, as it operates on a general level

and covers a vast range of models. By considering other assumptions and examples alongside the theory the application of a theory becomes a more concrete topic. In other words, a rational choice cannot be explained with statistical data, or as such, one needs to apply the theory to a concrete case. It can be observed that actors deviate from the strict assumptions of rational choice so that conclusions need to be tempered by consideration of whether the simplification is adequate for the problem (Snidal, 2013). Some rational choice models leave out the aspect of preference change which can restrict the ability to view other international issues.

The change in preference, or rather the possibility of choosing between different aspects is the best way to apply rational choice as one can explain the motivations of the actor with tangible arguments by analyzing their domestic components. The preference change can occur when a different actor (different state or an organization) with different goals enters the issue and can result in an aggregation of rules. Rational choice examines the behavior of an individual actor based on the 'what is the best choice' approach, however, it also contains a normative element. Ultimately, one can address the impact on normative conceptions by the means of their influence on actors' behavior. By incorporating rational choice with the normative aspect, it can be explained the normative understanding interacts through domestic reforms of rules and norms.

3.3 THEORETICAL APPLICATION

3.3.1 Norm diffusion

Norm diffusion can be analyzed from different perspectives as it is a multistage process that is infused by the efforts of norm entrepreneurs. They represent a key role in the process by setting the transparency of the norms. The role of the norm diffuser or the norm entrepreneur is crucial within the norm diffusion process. The norm entrepreneurs would be those adopting and promoting the norm. With the state supporting the EU norms, the member states helped established the norms institutionally by implementing and shaping the EU policies. The EU norm diffusion is based on the rules and norms already implemented and agreed upon by all 27 member states. The EU norms are implemented by a unanimous vote that collectively shapes the legally binding rules. Hence the EU takes the norm diffuser characteristics led by rules that the countries of the Western Balkan region need to fulfill. At the same time, since the EU has required all the member states to follow the implemented measures, the member states have become the norm entrepreneurs as well. In other words, they become equally responsible for promoting the norms as well as ensuring their implementation by other candidate states. The actions by other member

states shape the EU and the EU shapes the domestic policies of the member state such as name, interpretation, or elaborating of different norms. Norm emergence depends on the support it receives (Tskhay, 2020).

Conditionality of norm adaptation has also been a prominent feature of the interaction with the EU. The key logic that characterizes the EU conditionality is a 'bargaining strategy of reinforcement by reward, under which the EU provides external incentives for a target government to comply with its conditions' (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004). The EU demands embracing the *acquis communautaire*, and broader political and institutional goals, namely the respect for democratic principles. Mattli and Plümpert (2004) point out that the expectation of joining the EU explains about 40% of the variance in regulations among aspiring member countries, which react to the credibility of EU commitments. Whether the expectation of joining the EU is sufficiently powerful to alter state behavior depends also on other factors, such as the clarity and formality of EU demands, the size and speed of rewards, and the size of adoption costs (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004). The norm implementation worked well until the enlargement in 2004, however it has lost its effectiveness since. Mainly because the domestic political costs of compliance, especially concerning minority rights, have been too high in countries ridden with ethnic conflicts, such as Serbia (Schimmelfennig, 2008).

After becoming aware of norms that a state needs to implement in terms of norm diffusion, the policies are then implemented on the domestic level, towards the norm internalization stage. In the stage of adopting norms, the norm entrepreneurs no longer play a substantial role, but the compliance and verification mechanism. The EU and its member states have already set the rules and requirements for the accession, at this moment it is the Western Balkan countries that need to fulfill the criteria as it is established. The EU norms are implemented in the same way across all member states, hence the candidate states have agreed to match the expectations. The norm internalization stage looks at how the norm is implemented in the domestic sphere with respect to domestic practices and policies (Tskhay, 2020).

The Western Balkan countries have committed to the EU accession and slowly implementing the reforms necessary for the accession meaning the states have chosen to change their state behavior towards the norm implementation. The fact that the states are willing to reform their domestic policies seeks the reason why implementing measures that contradict the political behavior of the states. By looking into cost and benefits, a state makes a decision whether it is beneficial to proceed with such changes in order to pursue national interests. During the process of the EU, accession can arise new costs and benefits in form of the speed in which the process

is ongoing, or various geopolitical factors that can shift the decision making, such as the Chinese influence, the lack of interest by the EU, or the slow development in the democratic reforms.

The less-developed governments of the Western Balkan countries, where certain legislation is lacking, are currently not facing any pressure to speed up the norm internalization. Currently, the domestic reforms are slowing down in countries such as North Macedonia and Serbia as they are not motivated by the lack of action by the EU. The norm diffusion is not regulated by no time limit and neither by any external actor. At this moment it depends only on the Western Balkan countries how long the democratization of the region will take. The EU will not bend any rules and certainly will not allow countries with a high rate of corruption, drug trafficking, and money laundering into the organization since democratic values are the number one component. At the same time, from the side of the Western Balkan countries, the reforms have slowed down based on the lack of reciprocity from the EU. The EU demands the norm implementation from the Balkan countries; however, the Balkan countries do not see any sign that even when they complete the given EU norm requirements there will be no guarantee the EU will go forward with the accession in the next course of years.

The lack of progress and inactivity of the EU towards their aspiring member states, especially Serbia, Albania, and North Macedonia has brought different actors into the picture that can offer the financial support meanwhile the EU accession will take place; China. To address the issue, one needs to understand that Chinese national identity is shaped by the 'Century of Humiliation'. The national identity and the interaction with different nations are influenced by their past as it is related to the nations' image and perception in the international system which is crucial for China. China's national pride was damaged by its past which has only triggered the development to become the global hegemon, as it desires to overcome the humiliation and recover its prestige. China's position in the international sphere cannot be doubted, although there is a certain criticism of Chinese presence and involvement in several projects.

China has developed a specific way of cooperating with other states treating each partnership as a business. China is known for maintaining large financial sources and investing them in other regions as well. Chinese presence in other regions, such as the Western Balkans can affect the norm diffusion for the domestic policies. When it comes to the norms, China does not require any criteria or reforms necessary for the partnership, however, the investments and trade are strongly linked to the governmental structures. These investments can be perceived as soft power approaches or soft power sources that are generating norm diffusion. The soft power approach can have different characteristics, such as: firstly, the non-conditionality of foreign aid. Contrary

to the EU, China has no requirements for receiving any financial capital for the Western Balkans or any other states. Secondly, China does not directly intervene with the domestic policies. Finally, China forms international ties based on the economic interdependence that can benefit the model of China's economic model. The normative aspects of China's soft power are not specifically defined; however, they include the normative principles of policy-making challenging mainstream global politics (Xing, 2020). It can be observed that the Chinese normative influence is distributed within the Western Balkan countries with a project such as Belt and Road Initiative, the 16+1 framework, and the infrastructure projects in Montenegro or Serbia. The region is facing two types of norm diffusion: the adoption of the EU regulations in order to enter the EU as well as the Chinese normative soft power influence in form of economic projects aimed to promote the Chinese positive picture.

3.3.2 Rational Choice

Snidal (2013) argues that the rational choice application can be described as soft, meaning there are no concrete arguments or formal models to follow. Significant attention is devoted to rational choice-based theories using qualitative and quantitative methods. The rational choice arguments are however based on the benefit-cost aspect of the actor that illustrates the empirical application significantly guided by the rational choice. The method uses a rational choice framework to guide the description of a certain case study or an example in terms of actors, preferences, and environmental constraints. Furthermore, by invoking different sets of arguments within the relationship with Western Balkan countries it can be determined the logical decision. In doing so, the analytic narratives engage the formal logic and parsimony of the rational choice framework (Snidal, 2013). Rational choice can be addressed to membership within international organizations as a solution to an institutional design problem (Snidal, 2013). The memberships in international institutions, such as the EU, are fixed and impose the democracy requirements on prospective members. When looking into the membership of the international organization, the normative elements are linked with rational choice as one has to consider the requirements of the accession.

According to Abelson (1996), an actor has transitive preferences that can be challenging to explain and damaging to the findings, although, taking costs and benefits into consideration does not create requirements, however, it analyzes possible choices. When it comes to the rational choice of the Western Balkan countries, there are several aspects to take into consideration when looking into the two different relations. Each of the partnerships provides a set of advantages as

well as losses to the region. Rational choice can have a positive impact on normative conceptions based on how they influence the actor. It can be observed that the accession requirements to the EU will benefit the reform in terms of domestic reforms and regional development by international standards. Promoting new democratic values and increasing the rule of law quality in these states can benefit their position in the international system and increase the legitimacy of the countries. When it comes to the benefits of the EU membership, there are key components to deliberate, such as the close cooperation within the member states, open borders within the Schengen area, and open market and trade benefits when pursuing the economic relations. Furthermore, the most important element of the EU membership is the support of Brussels and all the other states. The organization is closely cooperating on different projects funded by the EU funds providing finances for education, health facilities, infrastructure, and general growth of its member states. In contrast, the accession to the EU also has its obligations. Firstly, once recognized as an official EU member, a state must obey the constitutional basis of the EU, namely the Treaty of the European Union (TEU) and the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU). These are the core rules and principles of the organization. A member state has agreed to comply with the EU Law and agreed that the EU law is primary to the domestic governance. In other words, the member states agree to oblige to the EU regulations. Hence, the actions of the Western Balkan countries as of any other EU member states become transparent and evaluated by the organization.

Nevertheless, another opportunity within the rational choice is China. China has ties with the Western Balkans countries mostly through infrastructure projects and investments in the region. When looking into the partnership with China, it is a strategic economic partner that requires no specific obligation. China's straightforward and undemanding way of partnership is associated with more accessible financial resources. China's presence in the region is also beneficial for its foreign policy, especially, for the 17+1 and BRI projects where the Balkan region represents the gate to Europe. Hence the cooperation between the two brings benefits to both parties. China generates the financial attributes to the region, which are the main characteristics as well as benefits when referring to the partnership. Western Balkan countries have strengthened their relations with China, especially during the COVID pandemic as it provided health supplies to the region. However, in the international sphere, China gained the impression of being a risky partner when it comes to the security aspect. The disadvantage of having China as a partner is the lack of reciprocity and transparency in the Chinese market which creates many uncertainties.

The Western Balkan dilemma is based on the decision between the collaboration with China or the accession to the EU. The choice between the two partnerships affects the foreign and domestic policy of the Western Balkans countries as with stronger relations with China, the countries will lack the development towards the EU accession criteria and with focusing on the accession criteria there is a risk of decreasing the strategic economic ties with China. The rational choice between the two can be determined by the cost and benefits comparison that will be further elaborated in the analysis chapter to provide more examples and empirical data.

4 ANALYSIS

The following chapter is dedicated to verifying theoretical application with gathered data. The chapter is divided into several sections based on the arguments and cost and benefit analysis within the norm diffusion a rational choice theory. Each section elaborates a different argument in order to successfully answer the research question. The main arguments are referring to the relations between the EU and the Western Balkans and China and Western Balkans. Since the theoretical application chapter has discussed norm diffusion and rational choice theories, the analysis will illustrate several arguments to take into account when looking at the cost and benefits framework. The arguments discussed in the following chapter will be the current development of the EU accession discussing the perspective for the Western Balkan; the support of the region during the COVID-19 pandemic; and the Chinese infrastructure projects.

4.1 CURRENT DEVELOPMENT OF THE EU ACCESSION

The former Juncker Commission did not consider the enlargement a priority as declared in the 2014 political guidelines. The different challenges have erased the enlargement procedure from the agenda, causing a decrease in the efficiency of the Western Balkans reforms. In 2018, at the end of its mandate, the Juncker Commission introduced an enlargement strategy with a clear direction for the Western Balkans indicating 2025 as a possible enlargement date (European Parliament Briefing, 2018) The document, for the first time, acknowledged a possible date for accession of Serbia and Montenegro which are currently the most advanced in the accession talks to join the EU. However, the negotiations are representing a process of development as a

target, not a promise. Nevertheless, it is Serbia and Montenegro that are obliged to close all their negotiating chapters and meet the EU standards in order to carry out the 2025 accession.

'It was unfortunate that the Juncker Commission made a clear statement that his Commission would not be an enlargement Commission and that throughout his mandate enlargement would not take place and of course, it would slow down the processes.'

(MEP Vladimir Bilcik, see Appendix 1)

With the 2019 election and the commencement of the Von der Leyen Commission, the Western Balkan enlargement was placed higher on the agenda. During the Von der Leyen mandate, the EU perception of enlargement is seen as a mix of issues and challenges for both parties.

'The Western Balkan is part of the same Europe as the EU. We share the same history, we share the same interests, the same values; and I am deeply convinced of the same destiny. And the EU is not complete without the Western Balkans.'

(Ursula Von der Leyen, 2021)

The Commission is strongly encouraging and supporting the Western Balkans' development and mostly the entry into the EU. It can be argued that the president's statement can be misleading due to the fact that the timeline is not established, and it does not take into account challenges faced by both the EU and the Western Balkans (Cerimagic, 2021). But regardless of the speed of the enlargement or the support of the EU member states it can be observed that the EU Commission clearly encouraged the Western Balkans for further development.

The commitment has been very clear in this institutional mandate since 2019. It has been a strong priority of the von der Leyen Commission as well as it is a strong priority of the EU Parliament. And of course, we had a big division on the topic in the EU Council.'

(MEP Vladimir Bilcik, see Appendix 1)

The Council is currently the most significant aspect preventing the countries to gain the status of candidate states and move over to accession negotiations alongside Serbia and Montenegro. The bilateral relations between EU member states and Albania and North Macedonia certainly cause the stagnation of their accession, namely, since the EU's decision is based on a unanimous vote. There are several normative changes when it comes to the recent development of Albania and North Macedonia:

Firstly, Albania has made significant progress in the judicial reforms aimed at increasing independence and especially the efficiency of its judicial institutions. The system was suffering from a long-lasting problem of corruption and structural inefficiency, not to mention, the public distrust of law enforcement, therefore the judicial system reforms present a challenge to the rule of law (Dobrushki, 2016). The EU membership-driven judiciary reform was confronted by both the government and the opposition since it has a large impact on the domestic political elites. By establishing good governance, it is essential to shift the focus on functioning and the newly established structure.

Secondly, regardless of its historical disputes, North Macedonia has opened bilateral agreements with Greece and Bulgaria. In order to demonstrate the determination and progress, North Macedonia has decided to leave the disputes in the past and show the willingness to compromise and promote friendly bilateral relations. The Prespa agreement with Greece and Treaty on Friendship, Good Neighbourhoodliness, and Cooperation with Bulgaria were signed to send the EU a positive message with regards to peaceful co-existence within the institution, once entered. In other words, North Macedonia prioritizes the enlargement of the EU ahead of its disputes with other countries. Despite the promise by the EU, that the solution between Greece and the Prespa deal would earn the ticket to the EU membership negotiation, the EU did not agree on opening the accession talks. However, regardless of the efforts, the two countries have put into the reformation process, the failure to agree on opening accession talks was blocked by France, Denmark, and the Netherlands. The determination to advance on the EU reform agenda and the delivery of concrete results has not unanimously convinced the EU member states in order to proceed with the accession process. The resolution of 2019 has a detrimental effect on the EU's credibility as well as it might lead to an increase in the instability of the Western Balkan region.

There are many critiques of the slow development of the enlargement, in favor of the Western Balkan countries.

'We need to have a successful story in Western Balkans and more EU engagement on the ground in the region, which was difficult in the COVID times. But to show clear political signals that we are ready to do this. And to motivate all those that work on it in the region.'

(MEP Vladimir Bilcik, see Appendix 1)

The Thessaloniki Treaty about the enlargement has been signed almost 20 years ago and yet there is not a clear decision regarding the EU membership (Fassino, 2021). The Western Balkan countries have a long path ahead to be able to present a strong position. The countries have paid

a large price to achieve their current democratic system especially given the past 50 years of mono-political direction (Abazi, 2021). Therefore the countries are familiar with difficult transitions within the government. The democratic stability in the region is a key step to presenting the Western Balkans as a large opportunity that the EU ought to bring to the organization, rather than being perceived as a burden. The Balkan region has a status quo of being a conflict zone which brings more challenges to change its prestige. Initially, the bilateral conflict has a large effect on the accession due to the eventual risk of feuds within the EU, once becoming member states.

Adnan Cerimagic (2021) argues that meantime there is a need for an interim step towards the enlargement as a positive sign for the region. When looking at the 1990s and the case of Sweden and Austria, when they were both first offered membership in the single market prior to the EU membership, is something that the EU should consider as a middle step for the Balkan countries as well. The step will be a sign for the Balkan countries as a trigger point toward the reforms necessary for meeting the accession criteria. Hence, the Balkans will become more attractive for the EU members as well (Cerimagic, 2021) However, the case of the Western Balkans cannot be compared with the 1990s case of Sweden and Austria since the economic development differs, especially due to the economic asymmetry of the Western Balkans. (MEP Vladimir Bilcik, see Appendix 1).

'There can be other areas for instance foreign security policy. I think we should be inviting the foreign ministers and defense ministers to the EU Council meetings informal ones such as Gymnich.'

(MEP Vladimir Bilcik, see Appendix 1)

The EU can let the Western Balkan countries into different matters in order to comply and align the agenda of both parties in a trustful way that can be considered a potential for the upcoming entry. Especially, nowadays, the areas of migration can be promoted as well as allowing the Western Balkans to join the conference on the Future of Europe. Additionally, since the EU is allocating funds in the region, it can include financial resources to be part of the Next Generation EU to promote a positive perspective of the EU (Fassino, 2021). There are concerns about the Western Balkans meeting the accession criteria especially due to high corruption, adherence to the rule of law, and financial insolvency. Therefore, the EU is lacking a strategy on how to deal with these issues resulting in the decision not to proceed with the Balkan enlargement at the moment. However, there are instruments that the EU can take into action and look closely at how

the investments are distributed such as the measures that could be used, for instance, the office of the public prosecutor.

Nowadays, it seems that the EU no longer has a strategy for the enlargement of the region. Since the EU has not shown its interest in the Western Balkan region, it is also risking stability in the already unstable region (Roundtable, 2021). The impact of the EU in the region is slowly disappearing since in the Balkans there are no conversations of transformation towards the Copenhagen criteria and towards becoming members of the EU. The lack of policy and strategy toward the region is visible in regard to the third actors such as Russia and China. Considering the latest geopolitical development between Russia and Ukraine, it can be assumed that China will have more opportunities to cooperate with the Western Balkans as the partnerships with Russia have significantly dropped, which only opens more chances for China to step in. The international sanctions against Russia and Russian companies will lead to an increase in the Russian influence in the region, which will create more space for China to fill. The EU's lack of development causes the Western Balkans to be more involved with Chinese projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative and the 17+1 framework. Joining the two projects require no government reformation and promises economic growth in the region. The 4.1 section is implying that the EU has not shown enough interest in the Western Balkans with explanations of these critical assumptions. The EU is widely criticized for not being clear about the Western Balkans' accession, not presenting a clear plan for the accession, and losing its credibility.

4.2 MASK AND VACCINE DIPLOMACY DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the number of policies, economic models of individual countries, and most global politics, in particular the role of China in the international sphere. The origin of the pandemic has clearly worsened the public opinion of China. As the first nation that has been exposed to the deadly virus, China has perceived responsibility for the spread of the global pandemic which has led the global actors to take a position toward China actively seeking accountability and responsibility. In order to help the Chinese image in the international sphere, China decided to endorse a different approach. Being the world's number one producer of medical equipment and respiratory masks, China has established a 'mask diplomacy' by distributing the equipment to different countries, mostly the less developed. The situation has reached another level once the vaccines have been developed and the 'vaccine diplomacy' taken place simultaneously by offering cheaper vaccines around the world, which has ultimately become another topic for skeptics.

At the beginning of 2020, once COVID started to spread in Europe, China attempted to facilitate all the assistance in order to lower the impact of the pandemic and help countries to cope with it (Vangeli, 2021). Western Balkans was one of the key regions where China offered its help under the 17+1 framework. At the beginning of the pandemic, a major part of the vaccines for the Western Balkans arrived from Russia and China. China has quickly become the larger provider of protective and medical equipment in form of testing kits, respiratory masks, and protective gear alongside pharmaceuticals (Vangeli, 2021). The Chinese assistance in the Western Balkan countries was assessed to be both an opportunity and a threat. Chinese aid was seen as a way for China to take advantage of the region as well as create leverage for future cooperation. Western Balkans decided to proceed with Chinese aid due to its shortage of medical supplies and equipment and mostly because, at the time, there were no other alternatives since the Western countries as well as the EU has introduced a ban on medical supplies export and had not provided any assistance to the region, as a future EU member state. Nevertheless, Western Balkans have expressed their gratitude for the Chinese contribution. In March 2020, the EU imposed a ban on the export of any medical protective equipment in order to keep all the supplies in the Union, if necessary for the health care system. As a result, the Serbian president, Alexandr Vucic, declared: 'European solidarity does not exist. It is a fairy tale on a paper' (Vuksanovic, 2020). There was a large scale of criticism by the representatives of the Western Balkans toward the EU's lack of solidarity in the initial times of the pandemic.

'The resolution was made by people that lectured us here [Western Balkans] that we are not supposed to purchase goods from China.' (Serbian President, March 16, 2020)

The critiques have included the argument of a double standard when it comes to trade with China as well as the cooperation with the Western Balkan countries in the challenging time that they have been facing. The EU has decided not to proceed with the international aid to its future member states and therefore the Western Balkan countries had no other choice than an appeal for help from other states such as Russia and China. The position of the EU has presented a negative image which has influenced the public opinion in the region and the speed of the reforms. Although all the Western Balkan countries have expressed their negative opinion of the EU ban and were willing to accept medical equipment from China, Serbia was the only country that glorified China on such a large scale. According to Serbian health officials, the use of Sinopharm's vaccine against coronavirus was widely accepted. To ensure that the country's citizens have access to the best possible vaccine, the government decided to establish a joint venture with

China to produce it. The first batch of the vaccine is expected to be produced in 2022, and the doses will then be delivered to the whole region.

The pandemic has changed, either slowed down or speeded up many aspects, one of which was the development of the vaccines against COVID-19. The vaccines have been one of the milestones in the fight against the pandemic. However, despite the development and the research achievement, the distribution of the vaccines remained challenging. When it comes to the Western Balkans, the vaccination process as well as the vaccine distribution has not been a success at the beginning. In Serbia, which purchased Sinopharm vaccines from China and in January received the first million doses., vaccines became fairly popular, due to its campaign (Vangeli, 2021). Despite the Chinese vaccines, the Balkan region has experienced several issues with securing and obtaining vaccine supplies. After the WHO has initiated the Covid 19 Vaccine Global Access, or COVAX, the Western Balkan countries have relied on the mechanism as well as on the EU assistance that has been promised, however, both of the options have failed based on the access to vaccines and terms of financing (EC, 2020). By February 2020 most of the Balkan countries have rejected purchasing the vaccines from China, due to the skepticism of the vaccine development and research as well as the vision of obtaining the vaccines from the West. However, due to the lack of opportunities, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia have all placed their orders for the Chinese vaccine. China's health care program became crucial in the region particularly the vaccine diplomacy for the 17+1.

Serbia received the first shipment of the Chinese vaccines early in the January of 2021, which was faster than in other African and Latin American countries, that which China promised their medical aid. Additionally, Serbia is the first country that has received the Chinese vaccine and has therefore started its vaccination campaign by mid-March 2 million Serbians out of 7 million population have received their first dose (Petrov, 2021) In general, Western Balkan countries have a low percentage of fully vaccinated population. Currently, the number of fully vaccinated people in Albania is 43.3%, Montenegro 45.5%, Bosnia and Herzegovina 25.6%, Serbia 47.2%, and North Macedonia 40.2% (Ritchie H., et al, 2021)

Although many have expressed their concern about the EU not being present in terms of COVID aid, it would be misleading to claim that the EU has been absent from the Western Balkans. In December 2020, the Commission adopted a €70 million package of grants to help access Western Balkans partners to COVID-19 vaccines. 4.7 million doses of vaccines have been donated or financed by the EU Member States, which by summer 2021 had covered the delivery of 650,000 doses of BioNTech/ Pfizer COVID-19 vaccines to all the Western Balkans.

Furthermore, COVAX has provided almost 2.8 million doses, making a total of almost 8 million doses of vaccines received via Team Europe and via COVAX. The Commission together with the WHO launched a project of over €7 million which supported vaccination and resilient health systems in the Western Balkans. Additionally, the EU has provided more than 1.2 million medical equipment from the RescEU project to North Macedonia and Montenegro (Ioannides, 2021).

Moreover, the delay of the EU has caused Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and North Macedonia to follow Serbia and proceed with Sinovac and Sputnik vaccines. It was only in January 2021 that the EU committed to making the EU's surplus of vaccines available to the Western Balkans. The EU was facing the unprecedented challenge of the pandemic as any other country in the world, and it is clear that the EU wanted to reassure the safety, and stability and prioritized the health care within its member states before any other non-EU state.

The pandemic has had a negative impact on the EU's efforts to promote democracy in the Western Balkans. Moreover, since the union has struggled to contain the crisis within its member states and has failed to extend its solidarity to the neighboring countries it has further undermined the EU's credibility, which was already low prior to the pandemic (Juncos, 2021). Where the EU lacked its presence, authoritarian powers, such as China and Russia have filled the void and strengthened their influence in the region in the form of healthcare aid. The pandemic has impacted the democratic values in the world due to the restrictions and pandemic measures that have been often in contradiction with the fundamental state of democracy. Additionally, it can be argued that the authoritarian regimes used vaccination donations in the Western Balkans to undermine the democracies to a larger extent (Juncos, 2021). The Western Balkans are known for being problematic with the democratic stability and the COVID pandemic has affected the democratization and worsened the situation.

4.3 INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECTS IN WESTERN BALKANS

The economic partnership with China is mostly implemented in to obtain the equipment through grants and construction works through concessional loans (Krstinovska, 2022). These projects, especially the infrastructure projects are affecting the influence in the region. The rise of Chinese power in the region over the last years can be seen as one of the most significant geopolitical developments in Europe (Shopov, 2022). When looking at the range of projects and the challenges that come with them combined with the lack of transparency of the Chinese policy in the Western Balkans cause a risk of increasing the corruption rate and the non-transparent

governance. The infrastructure project is triggered by the national authorities that are often not aligned with the EU standards that aspiring EU members should respect. In other words, China's model does not consider the vulnerabilities of Western Balkan countries, including the rule of law issues, corruption, public procurement issues, or disregard for environmental protection (Krstinovska, 2022).

In 2012, China introduced the framework of 16+1 to promote cooperation with 16 countries of Central Europe and Western Balkans, which was recently joined by Greece and renamed 17+1. The framework identifies three main incentives for cooperation such as infrastructure, advanced technologies, and green technologies in form of investments and loans (Hillman & McCalpin, 2019). Although the framework might seem to be based on multilateralism, China is mainly focusing on bilateral agreements with the involved countries. Before the 17+1 and BRI, China has not played a significant role in the region. In fact, the project has unified the region by a mutual need for investment that China offers. The presence of China in the region brings out skepticism from the West, which leads to the elevation of doubts about the investments and rising concerns about Chinese intentions (Ivanic & Savovic, 2020). The BRI frameworks and 17+1 projects are significant for the region, especially due to the infrastructure investments, as the level of development of roads and other means of infrastructure is below the EU average. The Western Balkan countries do not receive the funds from the EU, which are available for the member states. The lack of infrastructure in the region is regarded as a significant impediment that would speed up the growth in terms of economic development and match the EU standards. Hence, substantial infrastructure investments are necessary for political and economic integration into the EU (Ivanic & Savovic, 2020). The 17+1 has become an integral part of the BRI framework and the Western Balkans, together with the Central and Eastern countries were targeted for the projects due to their strategic geographical position. The 17 countries individually negotiate for a range of construction projects such as roads, railways, or ports typically funded by the Chinese Exim Bank covering about 85% of the project capital and the remaining part by the recipient's country (Ivanic & Savovic, 2020). In contradiction to Western partners or the EU, Chinese loans are offered on more favorable conditions and terms with a long maturity period, typically 20 years, and low-interest rates (Tonchev, 2017). When it comes to the Chinese interest in the region, there is the aspect of easier access to Europe, through the infrastructure they have built and therefore shorten the route and the delivery time of goods transported through the Mediterranean to European ports. Since the infrastructure is poorly developed, it is also in the Chinese interest to provide funds for the reconstructions, such as it the railway between Athens-Skopje-Belgrade-Budapest.

Geographically, the Western Balkans alongside Greece represent the final part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which is also a sphere of EU interest, causing a conflict. The EU does not only fear the geopolitical power over Eastern Europe but is mostly concerned about the Chinese diffusion of power. The Chinese investments in the region could eventually lead to a further spillover effect toward other countries involved in the BRI project (Xing, 2019). Several critiques are pointing out that the deeper involvement of Beijing in the region could essentially lead to alternative forms of governance using the economic resources as leverage for strategic purposes. The views on China in Western Balkans differ. On one side there are arguments expressing that China represents a problem that will eventually undermine the policy of the EU as well as influence the region. There are concerns regarding security and political stability in the individual countries, based on the lack of transparency of the contracts and the access to strategic sectors and sensitive information that can be used against the individual countries.

'China is trying to undermine the European perspective for this region, it has been doing it in a more subtle way than Russia., I do believe that any formats that try to split the candidate states from the EU or split some member states from the EU or other forms of dialogues with China are not good.'

(MEP Vladimir Bilcik, see Appendix 1)

On the other side, there are arguments that the BRI should not be viewed as an attempt to lead and dominate the region pointing out that the BRI is a product of globalization and cooperation not a tool of geopolitics (Ivanic & Savovic, 2020). China has more ambitious plans in Asia or Africa that would benefit them more than influencing Western Balkans. It is eventually a win-win situation where the two individual actors improve the logistics in the region and both benefit from it.

Discussion on Chinese influence over the region and its implications has emerged after the initiative has been announced. BRI projects have two branches for the infrastructure. Maritime Silk Road reaches Greece and the Balkan Peninsula by sea, and the Silk Road Economic Belt in form of various economic corridors, oil and gas pipelines, and railroad connections connecting China and Antral and Eastern Europe (Grcic, 2019). Despite the regional strategies and projects such as the BRI, China is involved in infrastructure projects in the region. Firstly, the highway in Montenegro, which is not part of the BRI scheme, however, it does not mean that it cannot be connected to it in the plans as it can be considered an additional route for Chinese goods. Developed infrastructure is often a key to economic growth and creating opportunities for domestic institutions and international trade.

The motorway in Montenegro was initially planned to connect the northern border and the southern sea with the capital city. There are several controversies when it comes to the construction and the organization of the Montenegro highways. Road construction has caused several environmental damages and deepened the national debt of the country. Initially, the construction was planned to be a 165km motorway connecting the capital city, Podgorica and with the Serbian border in the north and the Port Bar in the south. However, in 2014, the Montenegro government prioritized a shorter section of the road and signed a contract for construction of only 42km with the China Road and Bridge Corporation (CRBC) (Paccalin, 2021). The same construction company was completing a bridge in Belgrade, financed by the EXIM bank, as the prime contractor (Grcic, 2019). In addition to the construction contract, Montenegro signed another agreement with a state-owned Chinese Exim Bank based on a loan of 800 million EUR for the remaining part of the highway. Part of the document, namely, Article 8.1 states that Montenegro "waives any immunity on the grounds of sovereign or otherwise for itself or its property" if it fails to repay the loan. In other words, Montenegro gave up part of its territory in case of not meet the criteria of the agreement in terms of repayment. It is necessary to point out that currently, Exim bank holds 20% of Montenegro's national debt which rises its influence over the country. With the leverage over the country's territory, there is a high risk of gaining control over the territorial assets, namely the Port of Bar, which can eventually benefit the Maritime Silk Road project.

Montenegro's first highway and the additional loan were supposed to benefit the economic development of the country. However, the indicators have suggested that the Bar-Boljare highway was excessively ambitious and not economically viable. These findings have been carried out by a British consultancy, currently named URS UK Limited in 2009 and 2012. Moreover, the EU, European Investment Bank, and European Bank for Reconstruction and Development considered the highway an adventurous project with no economic or financial feasibility (Grcic, 2019) Before the Chinese loan, Montenegro has made its attempts with its Western partners for the construction, however, due to the high price and doubtful economic viability and the unwillingness of Western financial institution to finance such a project, Montenegro has proceeded with the Chinese partnership.

Mladen Grcic (2019) argues that the highway was presented as the only possible road project, disregarding the fact that the funds for the 42km project would cover an entire network of infrastructure connecting the entire state. Since 2014, and the signing of the two agreements Montenegro had a change of the government where the newly elected mandate has inherited the

issue of repaying its debt to China to avoid the condition of Article 8.1. The first installment of the loan was paid in July 2021, and the current government does all necessary to reduce its debt to China. The exemption of tax is often a case in the region and a subject of criticism by the government. Montenegro has the highest corruption rate among the Western Balkan countries which has also been one of the main accusations for the highway not being finished. The 2014 agreement with CRBC has established a 48-month building period where 30% of the construction will be divided among the local subcontractors. The building period has been extended several times and the road construction has been delayed due to unresolved issues and disputes. These types of projects would be impossible to arrange in the EU since the host country has allowed China to avoid important regulations and has established exclusive policies. The internal political dynamics of Montenegro have substituted the Western financial institutions with China due to its easier financial and foreign trade policy. Serbia and Montenegro are getting infrastructure funded and constructed by the Chinese on favorable loans with the lack of transparency as to the contractual terms, liabilities, or obligations that can be tempting for the other countries as well. Especially, the construction and the funding cannot be confirmed with the traditional EU practices of public procurement (Bancroft, 2021). Although over the last years the focus was on infrastructure projects and the economy, the Chinese influence is spilling over beyond the economic matters. There is much greater involvement in the areas of public diplomacy, media, or research.

CRBC has a similar project in other Balkan countries, namely, Serbia, constructing 26 treatment plants, Serbia Zijin Bor Copper smelter, and other infrastructure projects tying the Sino-Serbian friendship. Serbia has its infrastructure funded by the Chinese on favorable loans with the lack of transparency as to the terms and policies in the contracts, liabilities, and obligations, which however would not be possible according to the standard procurement practices of the EU. However, when it comes to the infrastructure projects, Bosnia and Herzegovina do not present the priority for Chinese roads interests, therefore it cannot be expected that China will propose projects proposals. Cooperation between Bosnia and Herzegovina and China in terms of infrastructure projects remains limited. It can be observed that the involvement of China in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as the whole region, has risen in the last few years. Less than ten years ago, the relations between China and Bosnia and Herzegovina were almost non-existent, however with the introduction of the BRI framework and the 17+1 project China has become one of the state's key partners. Bosnia seems to consider the impact of accepting the Chinese loans since it is oriented towards the EU as there is still large project such as the power plant Tuzla or

the Banja Luka-Novigrad highway both funded by Chinese banks. Although China is present in the country, the cooperation with the EU is still more significant.

Many Balkan countries after the collapse of Yugoslavia lacked a developed road or a sign of a modern highway. The entirely underdeveloped region has the biggest aspiration for all the international actors to engage in the construction in the region. For the Bosnian government, the main infrastructure project at the moment is the Corridor Vc, although it requires significant financial resources. The Corridor Vc represents a road network that connects the Adriatic Sea with Central and Northern Europe, with the key section of 325 km passing through Bosnia and Herzegovina's territory. In contrast to other motorway projects funded by China, the Corridor Vc is supported by the EU grants, and loans by the European Investment Bank (EIB) and European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD). The road is part of the Western Balkan Investment Framework which was allocated 200 million EUR, so far for developing faster economic and social integration. Together with the EIB and EBRD funding, 1.1 billion EUR have been allocated to the project (EU Grant of 202.7mil EUR, 837mil EUR from EIB and EBRD loans, and 88.5mil EUR from beneficiary contribution) (WBIF, 2020). Similarly to the highway in Montenegro, the construction is meant to improve the accessibility between large cities as well as establish easier trading opportunities between the regions, as well the relations with the EU. Parts of the road subsections are already under construction with the investment plan to complete 75% by 2024 (ESAP, 2020). The key investor of Bosnia and Herzegovina remains and will remain the EU since it funds projects, lends capital to local banks and firms, and works as a financial and diplomatic guardian (GlobalMarkets, 2019)

The Western Balkan Investment Framework (WBIF), to which the EU has committed, includes several different infrastructure projects not only in Bosnia and Herzegovina but within the whole region. The WBIF plant combined loans, grants, or technical assistance cooperating mainly with EIB, EBRD, and Council of Europe Development Bank (CEB) focusing on infrastructure projects in the energy, transport, and environment sectors (Holzner & Schwarzappel, 2018). Most recently, the European Commission has launched the investment package for 21 transport projects that besides investment projects by Bosnia and Herzegovina, the plant includes more on the territory of Serbia for road and rail connection along with Corridor Vc (WBIF, 2022). The WBIF investments are planned to spur the economic development of the region, especially due to the effects of COVID-19, and make a progress in the connection in the region. The railways, corridors, bridges, and motorways seek to connect the coastal regions, north with south and east with west, significantly improving the network which is the strategic interest of the region, and the EU. The

EU projects include the Rhine-Danube Corridor in Serbia; the East-Med Corridor between North Macedonia and Bulgaria; the East Med Corridor railway network connecting Nis, Dimitrovgrad, and Belgrade in Serbia; the Mediterranean corridor in Bosnia and Herzegovina; four motorway sections of the VC corridor; as well as motorway and railway projects in Albania. These projects will create new jobs for the local constructors, significantly decrease the travel time, and improve the flow of goods and people in the region.

China and the EU have different approaches to investment projects and ways of financing. The EU funding and investments take a longer time to process as the organization is based on the unanimous votes and rule-driven administration procedures and adoption of the project's plan which can take a longer time to approve. The EU projects, however, comply with the EU standard policies that bring democratic practices related to government procurement, transparency of the documents, and improving relevant regulations to boost the prospects of the EU membership. Once the EU funding is approved, there is a guarantee that the projects and construction will be finished. On the other hand, China's investments are based on a fast allocation of the finances that do not require long-lasting bureaucratic approvals. There are no requirements for the loans, there are no strict agenda or democratic values that are followed. The involvement of China has an effect on the domestic policies, especially corruption and public procurement which is one of the key issues for the EU accession. The presence of China in the Western Balkans is widely criticized mostly due to the fact that it resulted or significantly impacted the transformation towards the EU standards. The Western Balkans are no longer dependent only on the EU, but there is China as an alternative for a partner that can lead towards a more developed region. However, China represents a solution for more developed countries and thus meets the EU standards. The EU frameworks are prioritized, and the Western Balkan countries integrated the EU-centered transportation and energy networks (Pavlicevic, 2019). The strategic goal of the Western Balkan governments is to synchronize their policies with those of the EU.

5 CONCLUSION

Although, since the Yugoslavia war 30 years have passed, the Western Balkans are still considered to be a zone of instability and potential crisis. This paper seeks to compare the individual approach of both the EU and China in the region of Western Balkan. Each of the approaches and partnerships has unique benefits. The EU is focusing on the democratizing of the Balkans and establishing good governance and security aligned with the EU policies that furthermore will result in the EU accession of the countries. Whereas China focuses mainly on investing in infrastructure projects based on the geographical strategy for further development of its projects of the Belt and Road Initiative or the 17+1 framework.



When it comes to the 'Balkan dilemma' there are two scenarios that can be understood from the analysis. First, the EU by making a firm political decision about further enlargement and establishing a deadline, the Western Balkan countries will speed up the reform process aligned with the EU criteria. Second, the EU will maintain its position of enlargement which will slow down the reform process even more and result in a decline in the EU membership enthusiasm, EU authority in the region, and an increase in economic and strategic cooperation with China.

However, focusing only on the normative reforms is not enough since there is a problem where the EU is lacking strategic thinking on how to face the issues of the Western Balkans such as the rise of populism, the democratic instability, and the difficulty of establishing the rule of law. Therefore, the response from the EU is to not proceed with the EU enlargement at the moment especially because of the difficulties that it can cause once the Western Balkans join the EU. The EU is not ready for another six member-states at the moment due to its need for the institutional reforms that have been pointed out by several actors, which is also the reason for blocking the accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia. The EU remains an attractive ambition for

many of the Western Balkan countries. There are many aspects that China will never be able to substitute, such as cultural values and language. The EU has a large English-speaking opportunity when it comes to job and education opportunities, once opening its borders. In other words, the EU remains an attractive solution for the region, and it always will be closer to the Western Balkan countries in terms of culture, language, and normative values.

The lack of policy and strategy toward the region is visible concerning the third actors such as Russia and China. Considering the latest geopolitical development between Russia and Ukraine, we can also assume that China will have more opportunities to cooperate with the Western Balkans as the partnerships with Russia have significantly dropped, which only opens more chances for China to step in. China is taking advantage of the lack of strategy and policy in the Western Balkans region by the EU. The EU has certainly made a mistake in allowing external actors such as China to get involved with the Balkan countries, by deciding to push the Balkan enlargement for the foreseeable future. Due to the high corruption problem, it is often the case that the citizens of the Balkan countries will not see the EU funding used. Which can create the effect that loans from China will be more celebrated than those from the EU. The EU also lacks communication about its contribution to the region (Bancroft, 2021). What will happen to the funding if the EU invests in the region and how the financial resources will be used are the most important questions when it comes to the financial aspect of the dilemma. The EU remains critical of projects such as the 17+1 since the framework can undermine the EU unity on policies toward China (Hillman & McCalpin, 2019). By accepting the Western Balkan countries into the EU, it will be easier to coordinate any bilateral relations with China as they would occur in line with the EU policies. China will not replace the EU and the benefits it can offer. The EU accounts for more than 70% of overall direct investment in the Balkan region.

The final decision between the two actors and the solution to the Balkan dilemma can be done only by the Western Balkan countries. It comes down to what can be more beneficial and have better long-term results concerning the economic and social growth of the Balkan region. In other words, what is more, rational based on the domestic interest of the countries and the requirements for such cooperation. When it comes to the cost and benefit outcome of both China and the EU individual relations, we can sum up the following:

Accession to the EU comes with many challenges that the Western Balkans need to face. There are many reforms and democratic changes that each country need to take into consideration. The Western Balkan countries need to adopt all the necessary reforms and democratic values, the rule of law, and follow the standard of the EU countries. The main challenge for the Balkan

countries is the high level of corruption and political instability which is the number one issue that the countries need to face. The EU is a rule-driven organization and neither the accession to the EU can be speeded up by no means. There are also two sides to the story that can be observed. The EU has its challenges, especially lately with the COVID pandemic, it prioritizes its member states which causes frustration in the Balkans. The accession process, however, has slowed down due to the lack of interest from the EU representatives. The European Council has blocked the accession of Montenegro and Serbia several times which has caused frustration in the two countries. Although the EU is in favor of the EU accession, the vote needs to be unanimous which means that the actions of the Western Balkan countries need to persuade all the EU members. Currently, it does not seem that either of the Balkan countries will enter the EU soon since none of the countries are meeting the Copenhagen criteria. And the reform process in the Western Balkan countries has slowed down and no longer seems to be the priority.

The Western Balkans clearly must resume the norm reforms and show the EU member states that it is a priority on their agenda to enter the EU. The democratic political system, rule of law, and good governance give the Western Balkan countries a higher chance to be recognized as valuable members and potential partners. Although the accession is promised to the Western Balkan countries after they fulfill the requirements there is still the element of the unanimous vote that can abolish the effort and time in terms of the reforms. In other words, the Western Balkans have no guarantee that even by meeting all the criteria there will not be a member state opposing the final accession vote. The benefits of the EU are self-evident, however, there are also plenty of costs in the matter. The Western Balkan countries will need to change the core and basis of government structures, as well as will need to obey the EU policies that can be in contradiction with the domestic beliefs, domestic policies, or international partners. Since the EU is skeptical when it comes to trade with China, Western Balkans will no longer be able to promote deep bilateral relations. Moreover, there are still EU members that have strong ties with China and are part of the 17+1 framework as well as the BRI, meaning they will not need to withdraw their partnership and involvement in these projects.

On the contrary, the economic relations and Chinese involvement in the region have provided financial resources that the Western Balkan countries could not obtain from their Western partners. The Chinese way of bilateral relations is beneficial to the region especially because it does not follow any specific policy, rules, or supranational law. China has offered Western Balkans fast and favorable funds that the EU opposed. Although the EU has provided the Western Balkans with funding and loans, it is clear that the requirement that China offers is more

advantageous. Chinese foreign policy in the region supports infrastructure projects that benefit both parties as the 17+1 and BRI projects represent the largest international project for China. Many are skeptical of the infrastructure projects funded by the Chinese banks and construction firms, especially due to the lack of transparency in the agreements. The skepticism toward China is not a new aspect in Europe due to the security and stability of the region. China has affected the countries based on its economic involvement. Especially, due to the unfortunate development in the region, the Western Balkans welcome the Chinese partner to support their economic growth in form of infrastructure. The costs of the Chinese economic partnerships are first, the perception of Chinese strategic loans. The Chinese effect on the Western Balkans has shown the damages during the construction of the highway in Montenegro that has caused a deepening of the national debt, although it is necessary to point out that the main cause of the debt is the corruption in the country. However, Chinese construction causes several environmental damages alongside the construction. The cultural differences between Europe and China are a clear obstacle when it comes to the partnership. The two different perspectives and principles are the key aspect and costs of the relations. China obtained a more positive picture especially due to the COVID aid provided at the initial stages of the pandemic. It was the case the Western Balkans could not have relied on the EU and China to provide the necessary equipment and health care. The case of Chinese help during the pandemic brings out another benefit of Chinese economic partnership. The Western Balkans has been left out from the EU COVID framework which can be elaborated in two ways: the EU supports and has prioritized its member states which can be seen as a motivation for the Western Balkans to enter the EU; on the other side it can be seen that the EU has not supported its soon-to-be members.

To sum up, the Western Balkan countries need to consider the relations with both the EU and China in a long-term political effect for the national interest. On one side, choosing the EU would bring all the Europe together, and the EU is not complete without the Western Balkan countries is send a clear message that the accession will occur eventually. However, the slow development creates more possibilities for actors like China to contribute to the policies of the Western Balkans. On the other side, China brings the aspect of fast funding with no concrete requirement that the Western Balkans can enjoy its benefit. However, Chinese funding does not guarantee stability in the region, democratic values in form of rule of law, and the 'safety umbrella' of the EU.

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Appendix 1: Vladimir Bilcik Interview transcript:

1. The ongoing accession to the EU is often criticized for not being the priority on the EU agenda. We saw that the EU wants the enlargement to occur, especially after Ursula von der Leyen has said that 'the EU is not complete without the WB'. However, many scholars, such as Piero Fassino, have criticized the EU for leaving the WB in the waiting room with no deadlines. I personally believe that if the EU gives some positive signs to WB, it will trigger the reforms and democratization necessary for accession. What are your views on the process from the EU perspective?

Clearly, the enlargement agenda is there. The EU has been committed to it. I must say, the commitment has been very clear in this institutional mandate since 2019. It has been a strong priority of the von der Leyen Commission as well as it is a strong priority of the EU Parliament. And of course, we had a big division on the topic in the EU Council. So, when we talk about the EU probably not doing enough, we need to look into the larger picture of what this means. I think the EU parliament has been in the full front of these efforts, the Commission in its current mandate as well. It was very unfortunate for instance that the Juncker Commission made a very clear statement early on when Juncker took on his office that his Commission would not be an enlargement Commission, and that throughout his mandate enlargement would not take place and of course, it would slow down the processes. So, unfortunately, this resulted in far deeper political consequences than just saying it would have happened within five years, and that was unfortunate. I think the picture within the EU is mixed and the biggest problem is the Council. We have a number of member states which have deep problems with enlargement, and this is the struggle that we are facing. Having said all this, I think Russia's aggression against Ukraine is a game-changer in the EU's international relations and in my view is a potential game-changer that we need to use also when it comes to the enlargement in the Western Balkans. It is an opportunity to work in a focused way on anchoring as quickly as possible all those genuine pro-European forces in the region, we need to have a good story coming out of the WB region – we have not had any positive story coming from WB for a long time- and when I say the member states are being difficult, referring to the attempt to unlock the accession negotiations with Skopje and Tirana, this should have happened years ago and it should happen now under clear and

acceptable conditions to all the MS and I hope we can do that. Because that would add a huge dynamic to the whole process. Now we are negotiating only with 2 member states and at the same time, it is clear that issues having to do with the foreign security policy, geopolitics, and alignment with the EU, are going to be much more prominent and play a bigger political role. For me, that sort of put the whole full front. Montenegro is a country that I think in the foreseeable future could make a real advance once it has established a government with a clear mandate (there is no real government in the country now). I think we need to have a success story in Western Balkans to show the local elites that are in base of enlargement. We need to have a lot more EU engagement on the ground in the region, which was difficult in the COVID times. But to show clear political signals that we are ready to do this. And to motivate all those that work on it in the region. But let me say very clearly, there are no shortcuts when it comes to enlargement. For Slovakia it took 15 years to get into the EU, I know it has been a long process for the WB, but at the same time it has not been a process that has gone on for decades and there is a light at the end of the tunnel if the EU end the states in the region. Many of the states have not gone through some of the fundamental reforms which are so necessary to gain the trust of the political elite and especially the population of some of the skeptical member states. It is a two-way process and yes there are more things that the EU should be doing but this is not the only factor that has slowed down the enlargement.

Do you think it is possible to establish an interim step and open the single market for the WB before entering the EU as we saw in the 1990s with Sweden and Austria?

I think we need to look into ways to be more creative. This case of Austria is unique because we are talking about countries that were well economically and could be easily integrated into the single market quickly. Which is not quite the case with the WB because of the economic asymmetry. But there can be other areas for instance foreign security policy. I think we should be inviting the foreign ministers and defense ministers to the EU Council meetings informal ones such as Gymnich (Informal meeting of foreign affairs ministers – Gymnich) to discuss the strategic outlook and foreign security policy of the EU with our partners in the WB as long as these align and work together with us in a trustful way and comply fully with what we do. For instance, Montenegro could be on board here since they are a NATO member state which can mean we can integrate such countries into foreign policymaking in a way that has not been happening. So, all of these areas could be considered so I do see some potential, but not in the single market matter

2. Clearly, the slow process of the EU accession is inviting different actors to the region, especially China. What do you think about the Chinese projects such as the BRI or the 17+1 and do you think they can implicate the EU accession?

China is a problem. China is trying to undermine the European perspective for this region, it has been doing it in a more subtle way than Russia. But, I do believe that any formats that try to split the candidate states from the EU or split some member states from the EU, or other forms of dialogues with China are not good. We can only be strong vis a vis with China if we work together in a united way across the EU27 together with our partners in the Western Balkans and we have a long way to go, we need to align with them as soon as possible and we need to give them as few incentives and a few reasons to work with China at the expense of the EU. Oftentimes, we saw that the WB countries tried to use all the opportunities that the EU has offered putting financial and economic opportunities but at the same time extracting the same from the outside powers such as China or Russia. I think the Russian aggression against Ukraine is showing it is very difficult to sit on two stools at the same time geopolitically and in terms of broad economic sense. I see China as a problem, we have to work with China and this does not mean there will be any Chinese investment or no Chinese presence in the economic and financial work in Europe, including the WB. But this has to be done under the EU rules, not by bypassing the EU rules. And that is why we would encourage the EU partners in the WB to work also with the third powers together with us and under our common umbrella and within our common rules. To make sure that there are no geopolitically dangerous investments such as the ones in Montenegro when the country may have the problem repaying the debt and of course, China could have extracted the benefits which go beyond doing direct business. So these are important questions and I see China in the region as a direct competence to the EU perspective for the region and we have to be acutely aware of this. We not only continue to win the hearts and minds of the people in the WB but also have a much bigger commitment from the political elite which has been seeking the EU benefit but is often much less cooperative on deep structural reforms which are so necessary to transform the region on its European path.

3. China has strong bilateral relations with several EU members, and yet the WB gets criticized for engaging with China, which can be seen as a double standard. What are your views on this matter?

I do not think there is any double standard as we keep fighting against them. I think we have to be very serious about what threat China poses to us and we have to learn from the way we were doing business with Russia in the past 20 years, collectively or individually across the EU. Russia has taken its opportunity to exploit the benefits of that business to finance the war against Ukraine and directly threaten the security order and the existence of the European project. And China is also having the largest strategy, and if it is going to be able to take a part in the individual member state within the EU it is going to exploit this and that is why I say we need to be united. There is a lot we need to do on discussing and also political engagement with China within the EU but let's use the current content of the international relation in Europe to do so.