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Democratization of the Western Balkans through EU's enlargement strategy: from success to failure?

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Abstract

Over time it became clear that the EU's most powerful foreign policy tool for democracy promotion in Europe is enlargement. Hence, through the top-down approach of a conditionality policy the EU decided to pursue democracy promotion in the Western Balkans. However, the democratization of the Western Balkans led by the EU produced very different results across the region. While Croatia managed to advance its democracy and join the Union; other Western Balkan countries fell behind.

Considering that the enlargement process is a top-down process, in which domestic change is to some extent guided from the outside, the effects of the political climate inside of the EU on the democratization of the candidate country need to be researched. While attempting to democratize Western Balkans the EU suffered from more internal turmoil than ever before, which either drew attention away from the enlargement or reinforced negative sentiments about it. Thus, this thesis poses the question of how did enlargement resistance impacted the democratization process in the Western Balkans?

The research looks into the problem through comparative case studies, using the most similar cases design. It focuses on Croatia – the country that managed to successfully democratize and join the Union and Montenegro – the country that in the course of its candidacy and preparations for the EU accession experienced backsliding in democracy. Based on elite interviews the analysis shows that the increasing level of politicization of enlargement inside of the EU hindered the democratization process in the Western Balkans. While the level of politicization was lower during the Croatian accession, the prospects of joining were high and thus domestic costs were low. Meanwhile, in Montenegro due to progressing level of politicization of enlargement the course of action was vaguer, prospects of joining became less probable, and with that commitment to democratization was hindered.

Introduction

On 21 June 2003, the highest officials of the European Union and the Member States met with six leaders of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Northern Macedonia, Serbia, and Montenegro in Thessaloniki and laid out the most important principles for future cooperation of the EU and the Western Balkan region. The Union provided a much-needed perspective for the region that only a little over 25 years ago went through a sequence of violent conflicts that resulted in the dissolution of Yugoslavia. The report of the European Commission echoed a commitment of the Union to ensuring unequivocal support to the region, embodied in the words “The future of the Balkans is within the European Union” (European Commission, 2003).

Thus, through the enlargement, the EU attempted to ensure peace and security in its neighborhood, whilst democratizing the Western Balkan countries¹ and aligning them with European norms, values, and practices. However, the success of democratization through the EU’s enlargement differs across the region. While Croatia managed to adjust its democratic standards with the EU’s and in the process become a Member State, other countries in the region recorded backsliding in democracy during the accession process.

During the democratization of the Western Balkans, the EU faced more internal turmoil than ever before, which first drew away the focus of the enlargement, and later produced negative sentiments about it. Over the years, especially after Bulgaria and Romania joined in 2007, a significant drop in the support for the enlargement has been recorded inside the Member States, and the phenomenon once known as enlargement fatigue transformed into enlargement resistance. Considering that this process is closely tied to the democratization of the candidate

¹ The term Western Balkans included Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Northern Macedonia, Serbia, and Montenegro by European Commission standards. After Croatia joined the EU it stopped being referred to as a part of the Western Balkans. Thus, current Western Balkan six are: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Kosovo* and Serbia.

countries this thesis aims to explore **how did the enlargement resistance affect the democratization process in the Western Balkans?**

The work of several authors (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2019, Vachudova 2014, Pridham 2008, Dzankic et. al 2018) agrees that the EU was very effective in promoting democratization in Central and Eastern Europe but is much less so in the Western Balkans. Yet this leaves open the puzzle: why are there differences among the Western Balkan countries? This analysis aims to unearth the exact mechanisms through which EU integration fosters democratization or alternatively, fails to do so.

The thesis will dive deeper into the issue through a comparative case study analysis of Croatia and Montenegro. The research follows the logic of most similar case study design as both countries were a part of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia, experienced a troublesome transition to the liberal market economy, faced similar problems of corruption during the transition, and had a strong consensus amongst the elites about the EU path. Yet, the democratization process gave different results in these two countries.

Croatia is often referred to as a success story and a model case of Europeanization and democratization for the Western Balkans. It managed to achieve the necessary level of democratization within six years of negotiating process, and join the EU. Similarly, Montenegro was for a significant amount of time considered to be the new regional frontrunner for membership in the EU. Several European high officials praised Montenegro as a new success story in the region. For example, the EU Ambassador to Montenegro, Leopold Maurer, and the European Parliament Rapporteur on Montenegro, Charles Tannock, called Montenegro the “regional EU integration leader” and “good news story” (Maurer 2018; Tannock 2017). Yet, the

democratization of Montenegro through the enlargement process did not give the desired result a decade after the beginning of negotiations. Not only did the country stagnate on its path to the EU, but serious democratic backsliding inside of the country has been recorded over the years. Nonetheless, the negotiation process and rapprochement between the EU and Montenegro continued.

After the last enlargement to Croatia in 2013, internal disputes and higher politicization of the enlargement in the EU resulted in no consensus on the future of the Western Balkan region. For instance, the lack of a consistent approach to the Western Balkans hindered the EU's demands for domestic reforms and subsequently democratization (Džankić & Keil, 2018). Yet, the paradox is that the negotiations continued despite these problems. Thus, this thesis hypothesizes that *the increasing level of politicization of the enlargement hindered the democratization process in the Western Balkans*. This hypothesis will be investigated by conducting elite interviews with experts on European integration, Western Balkans, and democratization. The interviewees from Croatia, Montenegro, as well as the EU, were either directly involved in the democratization process of Croatia and Montenegro, or they monitored the process over the years.

The thesis is structured as follows. The next section will lay out the overview of the current knowledge on the topic and the gaps in that knowledge based on which the research question and hypothesis are formulated. After that, the justification of case selection, as well as methods will be explained. Furthermore, the results of the research will be presented, whilst the thesis will end by summarizing the results drawn from this paper and potential lessons for improving further democratization process in the Western Balkans.

Democratization through enlargement

Even though enlargement and foreign policy used to be two separate policy programs, over time they started overlapping, as enlargement resulted to be the most efficient foreign policy tool for the promotion of democracy in Europe. Based on this premise the European Commission declared enlargement to be a tool that can contribute to promoting peace in Europe, as well as influence the advancement of democracy and stability in the regions outside its borders (European Commission, 2009). Similarly, Hillion (2010) defines enlargement as a process based on accession conditions that transform candidate countries into democratized nations that share the same values and principles as the EU member states. Other authors also concluded that the enlargement process should reduce discrepancies between the old and new members of the EU, and transition the new ones into democracies. (Schimmelfennig 2007; Noutcheva 2016).

Moreover, once countries go through the negotiation process they do not just become more democratized, but Europeanized as well. According to Radelli (2003) during the Europeanization process, the candidate countries should align their norms, principles, and practices to both formal and informal rules embedded in the decision-making and functioning of the European Union.

Besides, exporting democracy and stability into the region, enlargement can be economically beneficial. Thus, the Commission (2009) claims that the enlargement has shown positive economic outcome across the EU, making the further widening of the Union a good investment in both security and financial prosperity. Therefore, as the enlargement is mutually beneficial for the EU member states and the candidate countries, they decide to engage in a years-long negotiation process.

The External Incentives Model introduced by Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2004, 2005) presents a leading theoretical framework that explains why the EU conditionality process brings a positive change inside the candidate countries, and subsequent membership in the EU. According to the model the Union gives rewards for compliance with conditions in the form of financial and political assistance, and membership as the final reward. If the country does not comply with the requirements the EU withholds the award.

Furthermore, four aspects determine the effectiveness and success of EIM. Firstly, determinacy and consistency mean that the EU should express clearly what needs to be done, when, and how binding the rule is, while being consistent in applying the same requirements to all candidates. The second factor is the credibility of accession. Thus, in case the conditions are not met by the candidate, the EU should express a credible threat of withholding the membership, as well as enough incentives and awards for countries that do comply with the conditions. The membership in the EU presents the ultimate reward in the process. Thirdly, EIM depends on the capacity of the candidate to meet the conditions, and finally the cost of meeting them. The costs usually have a political nature. This means that domestic change requires support from political elites and other powerful domestic actors. The costs are usually high if the reform threatens to usurp the power and stability of the elites.

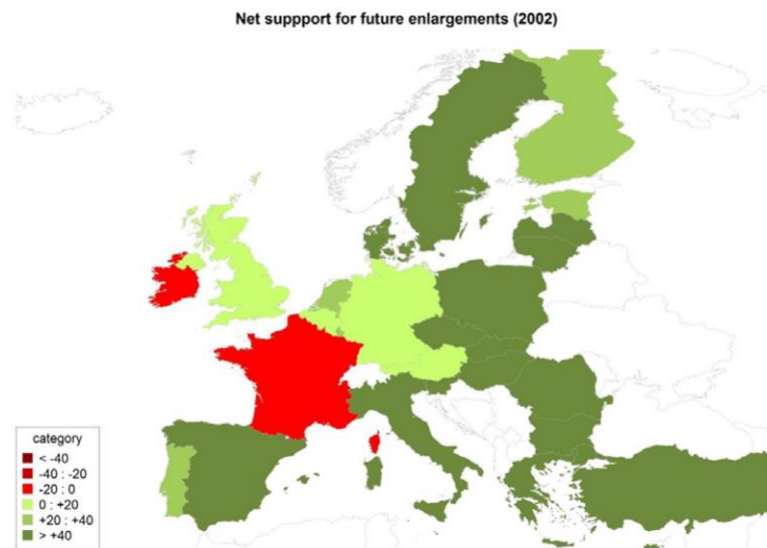
Therefore, already after the fall of the iron curtain, several new potential candidates that wanted to engage in this process emerged. In order to successfully transition those states into democracy, but also into the institutional and economic system of the EU, the Copenhagen criteria were formed by the Council. The Copenhagen Criteria aimed to help the candidate states to achieve stability, and democracy, and to help the EU in monitoring the process before the new members

join. Additionally, the harmonization before the accession was desirable to prevent democratic backsliding in the Union.

Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2019) explained why the External Incentive Model was mostly followed during the negotiations with CEE countries. One of the most important factors that determined the success of the EU's strategy in this enlargement was that the credibility of accession was high, as there was a strong consensus inside of the Union that CEE countries should become a part of the EU.

Figure 1

Public support towards further enlargement in 2002:



Note. Adapted from *The 'Old' and the 'New' Europeans: Analyses of Public Opinion on EU Enlargement in Review* by Toshkov et al., 2014, p.12

One of the reasons for strong support for further enlargement was the feeling of historical obligation toward CEE. Additionally, the Commission had a clear strategic vision for the region.

Thus Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2019) claim that during the 2004 enlargement Commission played a crucial role in the successful democratization of the Central and Eastern Europe. It set clear requirements and standards for the assessment of the candidate countries, while cooperating with the Member States that were providing guidance and best practices for the newcomers. The system of threats and promises embedded in the enlargement strategy proved to be effective because it was credible and consistent. Overall, the 2004 enlargement was seen as a success, and further expansion of the Union was pursued.

However, the same success did not follow with Bulgarian and Romanian accession. Pridham (2008) says that there were serious reservations about their performance even in 1999 when the membership negotiations were granted to these countries. Also, the Commission had strong reservations before the closure of negotiations. Hence a “safeguard clause” was added, stating that Romania and Bulgaria might have to postpone their accession if they significantly breach the requirements set by the EU. After the 2007 enlargement Commission made additional changes in its enlargement policy, especially because Bulgaria and Romania were not seen in the same light of success as the CEE.

Long road to European Western Balkans

By the time the Western Balkan countries came into the focus of the EU’s expansion to the region, the set of conditionality policies and methods has been developing for more than a decade. Among academia and political elites, there is a consensus that the process of democratization and Europeanization of the Western Balkans became much more challenging and demanding than before. The Union introduced a complex conditionality strategy drawing

lessons from the problems that arose after the 2007 enlargement, but also due to the internal turbulences inside the Western Balkan region.

Western Balkan countries face numerous serious internal obstacles that their predecessors did not, especially in Central and Eastern Europe. The region has less experience with democracy, almost all of the countries gained independence through the war, they are one of the economically least developed in Europe, and many of them suffer from issues related to sovereignty and national identity, corruption, and clientelism. For example, Dzankic and Keil (2018) define Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, and Montenegro as contested states. They consider them contested internally because of the elites and citizens who do not support their independence from inside of the country. Meanwhile, Montenegro and BiH are also contested externally, as official Serbia is still interested in their internal affairs.

Hence, the Union had to develop an updated strategy for the Western Balkans. In addition to Copenhagen Criteria, the Stabilization and Accession Agreement was added. Due to the wars in Yugoslavia, the countries were required to cooperate with the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), whilst complying with the signed peace agreements, and committing to resolve neighboring issues. Moreover, one of the most important changes was that the negotiations started by opening Chapters 23 (Judiciary and fundamental rights) and 24 (Justice, freedom, and security). Currently, those chapters must stay open until the negotiations are over in order to prevent a relapse, ensure consistency, and provide maximum time for the candidate country to adjust all the necessary legislation.

Yet, despite the complex strategy for the Western Balkans, only Croatia managed to converge into European *acquis*, while many scholars concluded that democracy in other Western Balkan

countries is in decline (Solioz 2020; Bieber 2019). Based on BiEPAG's analysis (2017) in the last ten years while the process of democratization was formally undergoing, all of the countries in the Western Balkans recorded democratic backsliding, and are currently marked as hybrid regimes or flawed democracies.

Thus, it presents a puzzle why another Western Balkan country, Montenegro, in many aspects similar to Croatia, did not manage to achieve a sufficient level of democratization and join the EU. Besides the internal structural problem that Montenegro and other WB countries face, the reason for the stagnation in the reform process and democratization is two-folded.

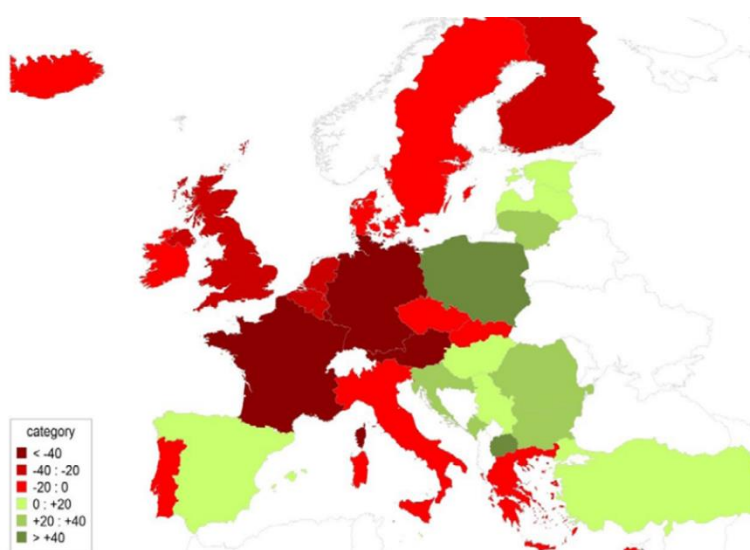
Firstly, during the last decade, the European Union had to face many challenges – financial crisis, the migration crisis, Brexit, democratic backsliding inside of some Member States, and lastly COVID-19 pandemic. Facing that many shocks, the Union has been preoccupied with internal issues and the enlargement became a secondary topic. Therefore, inside the EU the focus was either shifted from the enlargement, or negative sentiments about it were reinforced. The euro crisis had an especially negative effect and strengthened the position of those in favor of deepening, rather than widening the EU. Hence, the enlargement became more politicized and contested than ever before (Pridham 2008; Toshkov et al. 2014).

Secondly, Pridham (2008) argues that a clear consensus among the Member States regarding the prospects and future of the Western Balkans did not exist. The admittance of Romania and Bulgaria, despite some Member States' doubts only reinforced this problem. And the public support for the enlargement has significantly eroded as a result. As of 2012, just after Montenegro started negotiations, the majority of citizens in the EU's Member States have expressed opposition forwards future enlargement. However, the last five years of Croatia's

negotiations were marked by the financial crisis, as well as eroding public support for the admittance of the new member states and the declining importance of the enlargement, yet the country retained its level of democracy and successfully joined. That is why this research asks the question of how the enlargement resistance affected the democratization process in the Western Balkans?

Figure 2

Public support towards further enlargement in 2012:

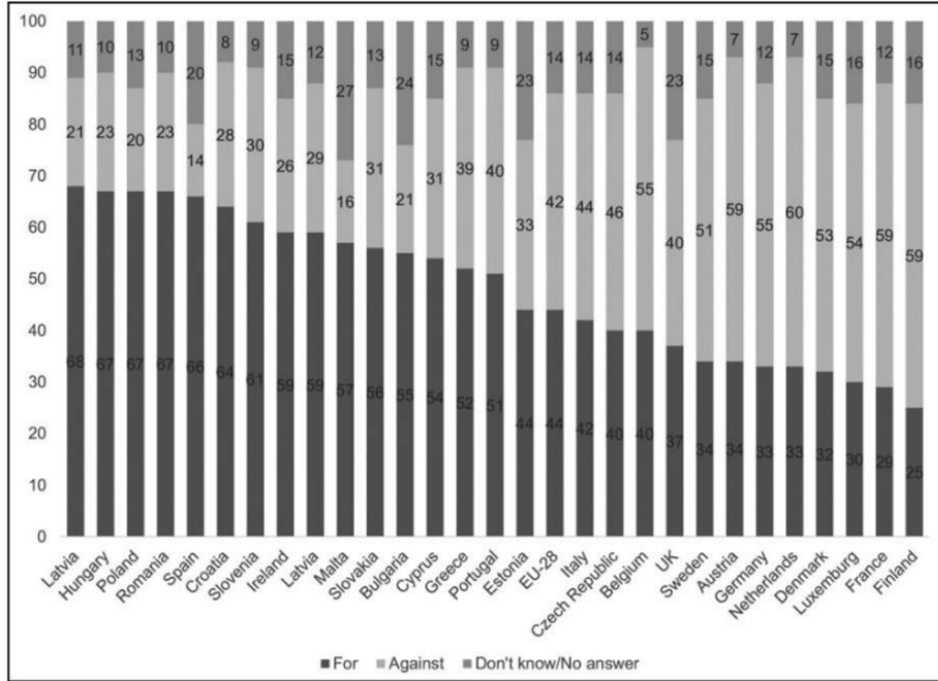


Note. Adapted from *The ‘Old’ and the ‘New’ Europeans: Analyses of Public Opinion on EU Enlargement in Review* by Toshkov et al., 2014, p.11

The trend of resistance continued as the support for the enlargement went even further down after Croatia joined. Together with eroding support for the further enlargement came the backsliding of democracy in many candidate states. Yet, the Union continued the negotiations in the Western Balkans which made many suspects that the Balkans is stuck in never-ending negotiations, or on what O’Brennan (2014) called “slow train to nowhere”.

Figure 3

Public support towards further enlargement in 2020:



Note. Adapted from *Deconsolidation and de-democratisation: Current western Balkans experience of the transition* by Solioz, 2020, p.5

Based on previous statistics, Hooghe (2008) has concluded that in the recent decades the “permissive consensus” regarding European integration shifted to a “constraining consensus”. This means that the public opinion on enlargement, directly and indirectly, impacts national governments, and their actions towards the candidate countries. Subsequently, experts from BiEPAG (2021) claim that “the enlargement started to lend itself more easily towards politicization in the national arena of many member states, making it easier for populist Eurosceptic parties to utilize citizens' uneasiness about the potential consequences of further EU widening” (p.2).

Bélanger and Schimmelfenni (2021) found that enlargement became more contested than ever before in the discourse in both national parliaments, as well as the European Parliament. Thus, even though the enlargement is primarily based on negotiations with supranational executives, the rising level of politicization has consequences for candidates as accession treaties require consent from the EP and national parliaments. Bélanger and Schimmelfenni call this a “rebordering” trend, where the EU needs to be protected from further enlargement. Furthermore, Corina Stratulat (2013) also concluded that the process of enlargement became far more unpredictable because the Commission is no longer the driver of the enlargement policy, but the Council. The BiPAG analysis (2014) showed that compared to the CEE enlargement the number of instances in which the Council blocks decisions on enlargement has increased substantially. For example, France and Cyprus demanded the opening of negotiations with Turkey to be frozen since 2006, while Greece, lately joined by Bulgaria, blocked the opening of accession talks with North Macedonia. Moreover, most of the Member States agreed not to grant visa liberalization to Kosovo, even though Kosovo fulfilled the set criteria.

Based on this input, Economides (2020) argued that once felt "enlargement fatigue" transformed into "enlargement resistance". Enlargement fatigue was a phenomenon that manifested itself after the "Big Bang" enlargement in 2004. He states that the problem of fatigue is in "absorption capacity" in terms of governance and administration. What we are currently seeing is resistance, where the lack of political will and legitimacy is the key issue, rather than the practical aspect.

The enlargement resistance is reflected in the EU's strategy and approach toward the Western Balkan region. Dzankić et al. (2018) claim that due to a lack of consensus inside of the Union, the External Incentive Model that has been fruitful in the case of CEE does not work anymore. Furthermore, we still don't know much about the exact mechanisms through which the presence

or absence of politicization within the Union and the associated (lack of) credible perspective translates into specific political outcomes in the candidate countries. This thesis will thus explore the role of the EU in the democratization of the Western Balkans by engaging in a comparative case study of Croatia and Montenegro, and analyzing why Croatia experienced more successful democratization through the enlargement process than Montenegro, resulting in membership into the EU.

This thesis shows that the EIM was still somewhat followed in the case of Croatia and that the level of politicization of the enlargement was less constraining. Therefore, it is demonstrated that the credibility of accession was higher, making domestic costs less burdensome. The Union used "stick and carrot" at targeted moments, proving that the strategy was more consistent than after 2013. When Croatia faced a stalemate or risked sliding back on its progress the Union leveraged rewards for good behavior (Badanjak, 2020). Hence, conditionality in the case of Croatia was used as a last push to adopt or implement EU policy, offering tangible and direct rewards in return, making the gains for complying with the EU's demands in the case of Croatia worth the effort.

On the other hand, the EU's slackening commitment to further enlargement increased doubts among Western Balkan countries about their prospects and effectively pulled the brake on the EU's enlargement policy. As previously mentioned during the negotiation process with the EU many Western Balkan countries recorded democratic backsliding. Thus, Western Balkan societies are not democratizing or improving in socio-economic terms, as they should after years of the so-called Europeanization process.

In an attempt to justify this trend, some of the political leaders in the Western Balkans misused the unfavorable position towards further enlargement inside of the Member States. Instead of committing to reforms and accelerating the democratization process, they contribute the problem of slow Europeanization solely to forces that resist the enlargement inside of the Member States.

However, the problem of unconsolidated democracy inside the Western Balkans can indeed partly be connected to the EU. Noutcheva (2012) claims that the EU has allowed “rent-seeking elites” to slide through the cracks as it was inconsistent in communication and enforcement of the requirements for the candidate countries in the pre-accession period. The EU partly prioritized stability in the region that the pro-Western leaders were providing on expense of democracy promotion. Subsequently, this reflected on EIM as the process lacked consistency in the application of the conditionality.

The analysis published by BiEPAG (2017) says that “the result has been the rise of a regional stabilitocracy, weak democracies with autocratically minded leaders, who govern through informal, patronage networks and claim to provide pro-Western stability in the region” (p.7). Whilst in reality the Western Balkan countries lack stable institutions and free media able to combat the most pressing domestic problems related to corruption and organized crime.

The politicization of the enlargement has led not just to dubious prioritization of the issues in the Western Balkans, but also to the lack of consensus among the Member States regarding the future of the region. Hillion (2010) makes the case for a “creeping nationalization” of enlargement policy which means that the Member States become more assertive in directing change and influencing the work of the Commission in the region. The evidence can be found in: (1) the introduction of benchmarks in the accession negotiations; (2) changes in the application

procedure; (3) a greater emphasis on integration capacity as an “emergency brake” on enlargement; and (4) stricter national rules on enlargement. The first and third have already been noted. The second relates to the willingness of Member States to block a Council decision requesting the Commission to prepare an opinion on an application (Içener & Phinnemore, 2014, p. 46). Finally, the result is weakened institutional commitment of the Commission, as well as low credibility of accession to the EU.

Furthermore, Member States have developed domestic mechanisms to tackle the enlargement. The most prominent example is the amendment to Article 88 of the French Constitution such that henceforth ‘[a]ny Government Bill authorizing the ratification of a treaty pertaining to the accession of a state to the European Union shall be submitted to referendum by the President of the Republic’. So, unless there is ‘a motion adopted in identical terms in each [chamber of the French Parliament] by a three-fifths majority’, the ratification of all future treaties governing accessions to the EU will be put to a vote of the French people. Less dramatic have been suggestions that supermajorities might be needed in, for example, the Netherlands for the ratification of future accession treaties. In other Member States, for example Germany, the emphasis so far has been on establishing more regular consultation of the national parliament in decisions on enlargement (ibid p. 47) Moreover, Austria was also considering to introduce a referendum on enlargement after Turkey started negotiating (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2019).

Thus, “greater emphasis is currently placed on negative conditionality, and how negotiations with a country can be stopped instead of focusing on rewards; i.e. how the countries that perform sufficiently well would be awarded and have their integration in the EU accelerated. This, fundamentally, raises doubts in accession countries about its true nature” (BiEPAG, 2021, p.3).

Additionally, despite the Commission's appeals that the bilateral issues should not hold up the integration process, several Member States blocked individual applicants' progress toward the EU. For example, Greece, lately joined by Bulgaria, blocked Northern Macedonia for years over the historical and cultural issues. All of this makes the costs of the reforms much higher because prospects of joining are unclear, and thus the genuine commitment to the democratization process is much smaller.

Therefore, I would hypothesize that **progressing level of politicization of enlargement hinders the democratization process in the Western Balkans.**

Research design

Comparative case study

This thesis starts from the premise that Croatia and Montenegro present two similar cases that differ in political outcomes when it comes to the success of democratization through the negotiation process with the EU. Therefore, the research will follow the qualitative comparative most similar system design. The research aims to investigate if the progressing politicization of the enlargement inside of the EU's Member States hindered the democratization of the Western Balkan countries during the negotiation period. Hence, both cross-country and cross-time research is included.

The Croatian case is extremely relevant for comparison not only because of its geographical proximity to the current candidate states but also due to its history. Šabić Šelo (2019) says that Croatia just like the rest of the Western Balkans had the burden of post-war (excluding Albania which was not a part of Yugoslavia) and post-communist legacy, as well as many cultural and

political similarities to its neighbors. Yet, Croatia is the only country in the Western Balkans that managed to fulfill the accession criteria and join the EU, meanwhile in that process becoming a full democracy, unlike other Western Balkan countries which are considered to be partial democracies.

However, on its path to the EU, Croatia also encountered several external obstacles that should be recognized. Firstly, Croatia managed to join despite the enlargement fatigue that started with the 2004 Big Bang enlargement in Central and Eastern Europe and continued with the challenging admission of Bulgaria and Romania. And secondly, Croatia joined in the aftermath of the financial crisis that shook the Union internally. Hence, Croatia presents a success story in the Western Balkans not just because it overcame the problems caused by war and its communist legacy, but also because it had more difficult circumstances during the democratization process than its predecessors. Thus, it presents a triumph that the EU was trying to repeat and that should be analyzed in comparison to the country that was considered as “next in line” – Montenegro.

When it comes to the Western Balkan region, current literature usually provides less analysis of Montenegro than its neighbors. Serbia’s accession process is often researched in the light of the frozen conflict with Kosovo, or close foreign policy ties with non-Western allies such as Russia and China. North Macedonia, lately seen as a candidate with good prospects for joining, was blocked by Greece for years due to the name and cultural disputes. Whilst, in 2021, after finally resolving the problem with Greece, Bulgaria blocked North Macedonia over cultural issues. Albania faces a similar problem since it also has a dispute with Greece. However, as the smallest country in the Balkans, Montenegrin path to accession is often neglected in the literature, especially in English literature on the topic.

This research does not include a comparison of other Western Balkan countries because they differ in several important variables. As previously mentioned, Serbia is suffering from a frozen conflict with Kosovo, but also does not have a clearly determined foreign policy course, as it is jiggling between the EU, Russia, and China. Bosnia and Herzegovina is still strongly contested from the inside (Džankić et al., 2018), far more than Montenegro, to the point that in 2022 the leader of Bosnian Serbs, Milorad Dodik, openly stated how he wishes for his party to abandon the country's institutions and for Republika Srpska to become independent (Latal, 2022). Finally, Albania and North Macedonia still cannot begin the negotiation process.

Unlike it's the rest of the region, Montenegro has no open disputes with neighboring countries and is facing less visible constraints on the path to the EU. After gaining independence, the country positioned itself as a new frontrunner among the Western Balkans within the process of European integration. Džankić (2014) argues that "the political competition has been Brusselized, that is, all political players in Montenegro have embraced a pro-European agenda" (p.97). Thus, Vučković (2018) says that Montenegro has sought to play a constructive role in improving regional cooperation and maintaining good neighborly relations in the region through its active participation in various regional initiatives (Berlin Process, Western Balkans Six, Central European Initiative, Central European Free Trade Agreement, Migration, Asylum, Adriatic and Ionian Initiative, Centre for Security Cooperation, South-East European Cooperation Process, Regional Cooperation Council, US Adriatic Charter, RECOM, Igman Initiative, etc.) by contributing to stability, reconciliation, and a climate conducive to addressing open bilateral issues and legacies of the past (p.16).

Similarly, with the beginning of 21 century, Croatia's foreign policy moved towards the EU and NATO. Šabić Šelo (2019) says how Croatia expressed univocal support to the EU by never

having an EU-sceptic or anti-EU party in the Parliament, thus, “state leadership and institutions had a full commitment to the EU membership” (p.174).

Moreover, the country contributed to the stability and cooperation in the region by signing numerous bilateral and multilateral agreements. Croatia signed the Stabilization and Association Agreement with the EU in late 2001 and became active in the Stability Pact for Southeast Europe. It joined the CEFTA and ended the period of observation by the Council of Europe, originally put in place to monitor the state of Croatian democracy. In 2003, the then-prime minister, Iвица Račan, formally submitted Croatia’s application to the EU (Badanjak, 2014, p.66).

As Croatia and Montenegro were both involved in the Yugoslav wars, and they had weaker economies, as well as less experience with democracy than their predecessors, they had to go through a far more complicated enlargement procedure than any country before. Moreover, both countries faced similar problems in the pre-accession period, namely corruption and the rise of stabilitocracy. Badanjak (2014) claims that the Croatian transition to a market economy took place in a chaotic state, allowing corruption, nepotism, and crime to get embedded in the society. Džankić (2017) says that Montenegro also experienced a troublesome transition to a liberal market economy, and was a fertile ground for corruption to get embedded in the system. Thus, for both countries, improvement in the area of rule of law presented the most important task on the path to acquiring a full functioning democracy.

Due to this, the Commission stressed the importance of tackling problems related to judiciary and fundamental rights as soon as possible in the accession process, whilst the progress in all other areas is closely related to advancement in the field of anticorruption and the fight against

organized crime. However, the Freedom House Index showed that during the negotiation period with the EU, there has been serious democratic backsliding in Montenegro, especially in 2017. Over the years Montenegro went from being free to a partly free country based on Freedom House Reports and is currently characterized as a transitional or hybrid regime.

Table 1

Trends in democracy in Croatia and Montenegro over the years

	Croatia	Montenegro
2000	Partly Free (3)	Partly Free (part of Yugoslavia – 4)
2003	Free (2.5)	Free (Serbia and Montenegro – 2.5)
2005	Free (2)	Free (Serbia and Montenegro – 2.5)
2006	Free (2)	Free (2.5)
2012	Free (1.5)	Free (2.5)
2013	Free (1.5)	Free (2.5)
2017	Free (87/100)	Partly Free (69/100)
2019	Free (85/100)	Partly Free (65/100)
2021	Free (85/100)	Partly Free (67/100)

Note. The table is made by the author based on data published by the *Freedom House report* on freedom in the world. Until 2017 scale ranged from 1 – 7, with one being the best. After that scale is 1– 100, with 100 being the best.

The years above are chosen to reflect all the important dates such as the period before countries applied for the membership and were linked with the EU only through Stabilization and Association Agreements when they applied (Croatia in 2003, Montenegro in 2005), furthermore when they started negotiations (Croatia in 2005, Montenegro in 2006 after gaining independence), and in case of Croatia joined the EU (in 2013). Additionally, in 2017 Montenegro recorded backsliding into a partly free country, and after that democracy trends can be observed in two years' time span. While Croatia experienced democratization and retained the status of democracy, Montenegro marked democratic backsliding in the course of its negotiations with the EU.

Therefore, based on the fact that historically Montenegro had the most similarities to Croatia regarding the pro-European course of political elites, but also faced similar problems with corruption and the legacy of communism, this thesis will try to uncover why the success of democratization through the negotiation process with the EU was not the same. The findings of a comparative case study will be presented in an alternating method of comparison. This means that units of comparison will be analyzed side by side, according to one specific aspect that caused the differing outcome.

Additionally, there are plenty of domestic variables that influenced the democratization process of these two countries. However, this paper will focus on external variables that were the key to the different outcomes in these cases. Thus, the analysis will scan external variables that impacted the democratization and subsequently the Europeanization process in Croatia and Montenegro, but focus on the key explanatory variables. This approach will help with avoiding “the trap into which the decision-making approach to the study of international politics fell, of

specifying and calling for the analysis of an exhaustive list of all variables that have any possible influence on the decision-making process” (Lijphart, 1971, p.690).

Finally, even though a comparative case study analysis offers less in-depth analysis than case studies, it is of crucial importance to understand the similarities and differences between Croatia and Montenegro to possibly see how the enlargement can be unblocked, and for further democratic backsliding to be prevented. Therefore, this thesis would aim to gain a deeper understanding of the processes that were occurring in two Western Balkan states, which have similar post-communist and post-war histories; they both faced challenges while transitioning to a market-based economy. However, they have different outcomes when it comes to democratization and integration.

Data collection

The data for this thesis is gathered through qualitative in-depth elite interviews. Dexter (1970) claims qualitative elite interviews provide a cost-effective balance to the people who aim to acquire more in-depth knowledge on complex political developments. People interviewed in the expert interviews according to Beamer (2002) “have special insight into the politics, and interviewing them allows for in-depth exploration of specific policies and political issues” (p.87). Moreover, Beamer (2002) claims that elite interviews offer a richer description of political processes, as well as valid and reliable data.

Therefore, people interviewed with the purpose of hypothesis testing are selected purposefully. Interviewees were either directly involved in the Europeanization and democratization process in the Western Balkan countries, or they were responsible for monitoring the process by providing an unbiased assessment of it. Experts or as Lindlof and Taylor (2019) call them “informants” are

selected because they characterize “participants who are veterans, experienced insiders, key connectors within the scene” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019, p. 227).

Therefore, three groups of experts were interviewed. The first group of interviewees presented government officials from Croatia and Montenegro who were directly assigned to leading the integration process from inside of the countries. Hence, the former Minister of European Integration of Montenegro and former Minister of European and Foreign Affairs of Croatia were interviewed. The second group consisted of two experts on the Western Balkans from the European Commission (DG European Neighborhood and Enlargement Negotiations) and European Parliament. And lastly, representatives of the civil society organizations that monitored the democratization process as part of the negotiations with the EU inside Montenegro and Croatia offered their assessment of the problem. In total six people were interviewed.

The interviews were semi-structured, which allowed gaining deeper insight into the topic based on the interviewee’s role in the democratization process. This design was chosen because as Tracy (2020) puts it “semi-structured interviews allow for more emic, emergent understandings to blossom, and for the interviewees’ complex viewpoints to be heard without the constraints of scripted questions” (p.158). Furthermore, compared to structured interviews, semi-structured interviews can make better use of the knowledge-producing potentials of dialogues by allowing much more leeway for following up on whatever angles are deemed important by the interviewee (Brinkmann, 2013, p.21). The less structured interview guide allows for a more natural discussion, by stimulating it rather than dictating it. Moreover, it allowed the interview to be adjusted based on the expertise of the interviewee, and to pose follow-up questions that were deemed as necessary for gathering more insight into the research area.

The interviews were supplemented with document analysis of primary and secondary sources. Thus, the research objective is to excavate the facts and gather relevant information on the key processes that were happening inside of the EU, which affected the democratization of the Western Balkans.

Moreover, the questions were open-ended, and interviews started from general to more specific questions. The strategy was to ask more general questions at the beginning of the interview, allowing the interviewee to speak freely about the topic. Moreover, this approach allowed asking more specific follow-up questions during the interview to gain comprehensive insight into the interviewee's experience. This allows the interview to stay structured and focused but also gives the interviewer some flexibility (Beamer, 2002 p.92). The length of interviews ranged from 30-45 minutes, and interviews were recorded. Subsequently, the interviews were transcribed and coded aiming to identify the key themes and patterns in the text. Each theme was analyzed to gain a deeper understanding of the processes that were occurring during the democratization processes in the negotiation stages in Croatia and Montenegro.

Analysis of the results

The analysis of the six interviews conducted with the government officials (former Minister of the European Integration of Montenegro and the former Minister of European and Foreign Affairs of Croatia), two civil society officials from Croatian and Montenegro who monitored Europeanization, democratization, and integration process over the years, European Parliament advisor on the Western Balkans, as well as the official working in DG NEAR - European Commission, showed that the enlargement resistance was translated into progressing politicization of the further expansion of the Union. Subsequently, the credibility of the

accession after the last enlargement in Croatia substantially declined, hindering the democratization process in the candidate country of Montenegro.

As previously mentioned, it is important to understand that the democratization process in the Western Balkan countries is an integral part of the Europeanization process and of becoming an EU Member State. At the beginning of the 21st century, Western Balkan countries declared their willingness to engage in the process of reforms and to transform themselves into full-function democracies hoping that they will eventually get the benefits that the old Member States have. They had almost none or no experience with democracy coming out of the communist regime, while also being monarchies before that. This means that democratization was and still is being led from the outside by the EU's mechanisms of conditionality. To great extent efforts inside of the candidate, countries are driven by the prospects of joining the Union. Therefore, it is of profound importance that the EU provides a credible possibility of accession for the conditions to be fulfilled.

However, this research uncovered that the credibility substantially declined over the years. The reason for the loss of credibility can be contributed to the progressing politicization of the EU's enlargement. Furthermore, this can be noticed through several aspects that impacted the commitment to reforms and the democratization process.

Off to a good start

The democratization of Croatia through the enlargement process gave fruitful results partly due to a good starting point that Croatia faced domestically and internationally. As stated above, Croatia had a broad consensus inside of its parliament on the idea that European integration is the path to follow for the country to democratize and with it achieve several other benefits

including security and economic stability. Croatia's party system experienced a dramatic change after 2000, not just with the ousting of the Franjo Tudjman's regime, but also with the transformation of the agenda of his right-wing Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) party. The HDZ embraced democratic reforms and preparations for EU membership. After the HDZ recaptured power at the end of 2003, Prime Minister Ivo Sanader led a government that put preparations for EU membership at the heart of its governing program (Vachudova, 2019, p.73). With that shift Croatian Democratic Union transformed itself from a de facto anti-European to a pro-European party.

Thus, no party, at least not any major party in the political sphere of Croatian society, opposed European values and the Croatian European future. The reason for this commitment to the EU by Croatian politicians is partly connected to the fact that the public overwhelmingly supported the idea of Croatia becoming a Member State. At the beginning of the second millennium, 70-80% of the Croatian public supported the EU membership (EUROPP, 2013).

Moreover, when Croatia started the democratization process by signing the Stabilization and Accession Agreement in 2003, a broad enthusiasm for the further expansion of the EU existed in its Member States. Also, with the beginning of negotiations in 2005, the positive outlook on enlargement was still present. Therefore, strong support from the EU and Croatia facilitated the process of reforms. Interviewees from the EU and Croatia noticed that the process inside the country was particularly dynamic.

At that time the appealing side of the EU was enough to generate changes within the country. The former Minister of European and Foreign Affairs of Croatia described it as the process in which all the eyes of the public were directed towards the reforms and the commitment to

democratization. It was notable that the public felt that the prospects of joining were high and that the membership was beneficial for the advancement of democracy. Therefore, the elites also felt that they need to deliver noticeable results if they do not want to be punished during the next elections. The focus from all the actors included was extremely high, making the process additionally dynamic. **H**aving a clear image of what the voters inside of the country and inside of the EU want, the course of action was clear as well. This facilitated a consistent approach from the EU to the country's democratization process. Hence, the interviews, as well as additional document analysis have proven that the Commission used "stick and carrot" at precise moments to push Croatia to align with its democratic standards.

For example, Butiković and Samardžija (2014) say how the opening of the accession negotiations with Croatia was delayed six months due to unsatisfactory cooperation with the ICTY. The pressure from the EU and Carla Del Ponte, ICTY's Chief Prosecutor, helped in making Croatia complacent with the Stabilization and Accession Agreement, which clearly showed the effectiveness of the EU's SAP conditionality.

Also, the carrot was used by the Commission when it helped Croatia resolve a bilateral dispute with Slovenia over the maritime border in the Gulf of Piran. Previously, Slovenia was blocking Croatia from December 2008 to September 2009. However, "in that period the Commission worked intensively with both sides on finding a way for a political agreement" (Butiković & Samardžija, 2014, p.99). This move by the Commission has proven that the institution can help in mediating the conflicts that a Member State could have with the candidate state, and thus not allow for one country to stall the entire process of enlargement due to its political reasons. **M**oreover, Badanjak (2014) claims that the EU's conditions and expectations expressed

in negotiations and the EU's normative power had a significant contribution to the anti-corruption and democratization discourse in Croatia.

When it comes to the country that was “the next in line” for the EU membership – Montenegro, the beginning of cooperation with the Union promised success and fairly smooth democratization. With the declaration of independence, the political consensus within the elites about the European path was clear just like in Croatia. According to the data published by the Center for Monitoring and Research (CEMI), more than 70% of the Montenegrin population supported the accession to the EU. However, the political climate in the EU concerning further expansion was not as favorable as before. All of the interviewees agreed that when Montenegro started negotiations in 2012, the EU was already noticing the enlargement fatigue and its attention was directed toward the internal issues caused by the economic crisis that started in 2009. Therefore, it was to be expected that the enlargement following Croatian was going to be delayed. However, it was not anticipated that it would take this long to consolidate candidate states' democracies and prepare them for membership.

The interviewees from Montenegro noticed that the country had a quite dynamic process during the first few years of negotiations and that the democratic indicators were improving. For example, according to the Commission's progress reports, Montenegro improved from 2013 until 2015 in several areas concerning the chapters that are the best indicators of democratic standards - chapters 23 (Judiciary and Fundamental Rights) and 24 (Justice, freedom, and security). During that time the European Union was sending encouraging messages to Montenegrin officials and the public, saying how it is a “leader in the region” and “a good example”.

However, a few years into the negotiations, the civil society started warning that many improvements in Montenegro are “just cosmetic” and that there are deep issues inside the country related to freedom of elections, media freedoms, and other fundamental rights. Yet, interviewees from Montenegro agreed that during that time the EU prioritized stability in the region, over the actual democratization of Montenegro, thus contributing to the rise of stabilitocracy, confirming Nutcheva’s (2012) claims stated before. One of the most important problems for Montenegro was corruption and organized crime, which required an independent judiciary if it was to be resolved. Yet, despite the incapability of the former governing party – the Democratic Party of Socialists to combat these issues, the EU’s criticism was limited, as the party held a strong pro-European course unlike the leaders of the biggest opposition parties. The EU aimed to solve the issues of corruption and organized crime with overly technical safeguards and unclear specifications of rule of law. Muk (2022) says that the Commission had to send an open criticism and measurable benchmarks instead of just annual reports and non-papers.

The stability that the former governing structures provided with a formal commitment to the EU values was wrongly perceived by the European Union because it did not help the society to build stable and democratic internal mechanisms. The formal support for democracy that was voiced by the executive organs was not translated into practice, which became visible as the negotiations continued. One of the interviewees claim that the EU should have returned Montenegro on the right track, but failed to use its “stick” - balance clause², at several moments when democratic backsliding was noticed in Montenegro. Yet, by not using it the Commission encouraged the decision-makers to continue with the situation as it is.

² Balance clause exists for the EU to formally stop the process with the candidate country that is not fulfilling the requirements for a notable amount of time.

This later backfired in 2018 when the Commission characterized Montenegro as a captured state and increased its conditionality. Interestingly, this backsliding in democracy was noticeable in the EU's other linguistic constructions as well. Once called yearly progress reports were renamed into country reports. Therefore, unfortunately, the EU did not dedicate enough of its capacities to the consistent democratization of Montenegro by allowing politicians who had connections with organized crime and breached democracy to operate free.

On a long and bumpy road

As already stated by the time Montenegro started its democratization process, as a part of the Europeanization process, the enthusiasm inside of the EU was significantly diminished. Already in 2009, a devastating economic crisis was shaking the EU, and debates between “rich and poor” contributed to the tensions inside the Union.

Therefore, Croatia also faced an unfavorable situation inside of Europe in the last stages of its democratization process. Yet, the country was deep into the democratization and Europeanization process with visible results, thus the slowdown in the dynamic was not beneficial for either side. Moreover, even though the public support inside of the EU for further enlargement declined after Rumania and Bulgaria joined, Croatia was still portrayed as a fairly easy country to integrate. Despite the negative sentiments, the prospects of joining were still high, thus reforms seemed less “risky”. Vachudova (2013) claims that Croatia was presented with enough incentives from the EU to pursue adapting model. Finally, negative sentiments about Croatia did not exist to the extent in which they exist now when it comes to the other Western Balkan countries. Interestingly, the interviewees noticed that Croatia was portrayed as “more Western than the Balkan”, hence easier to democratize and bring closer to the EU

standards. Additionally, once Croatia became a Member State it stopped being referred to as a part of the Western Balkans.

Following the euro crisis, the situation inside of the EU was exacerbated by the war in Crimea, migration crisis, Brexit, and finally, the COVID-19 pandemic, which added to a feeling of needing to close inside its borders. The first alarm that raised fear in the Western Balkans came in 2016 when the former European Commission president did not mention the future of the region in his annual speech (Cheresheva, 2018). According to two interviews, the Commission now seemed to pay more attention to the public opinion surveys and the Eurobarometer, which showed that the majority of Member States' citizens do not support enlargement, and decided to focus more on its internal issues.

Additionally, the EU recorded democratic backsliding inside of its Member States and hence increased conditionality further than ever before aiming to prevent adding any additional members that may have a troublesome relationship with democracy. For example, France unveiled a new methodology for the Western Balkans that gives the right to the certain Member States to reverse negotiations. While once closed negotiating chapters could not be reopened, now that is possible. The European Parliament's expert on the Western Balkans described this as a "possible never-ending process that is susceptible to domestic politics inside of the Member States". The interviewees also noticed that the Member States are far more in charge of the process than before. Another interviewee noticed that this is subsequently reflected in the administrative power and capabilities invested by the EU and the lack of acceleration of democratization in the candidate states. This aspect is especially reflected on Montenegro since as of 2018 the number of Brussels officials who work with Montenegrin structures was in a constant decline. For example, Montenegro is mostly maintaining communication with the DG

NEAR in the Commission. However, the DG has 16 countries in its portfolio, not only the Western Balkan countries. The interviewee also noticed that enlargement is in the second part of the DG's name, while the neighborhood is in the first part. This has some symbolism as it means that the EU is adjusting its priorities accordingly to the most pressing issues.

Furthermore, the situation with North Macedonia being blocked by the EU's Member States regardless of fulfilling the conditions reflected to some extent on the whole Western Balkans region. One interviewee said "The EU no longer has the attractive power it once had, in part, of course, because the European Union has de facto shown to be unwilling to engage in the Western Balkans and act based on criteria it has set itself. So the resistance to enlargement within the European Union itself is clear and is jeopardizing the democratization process". This means that the credibility of accession was diminished as fulfilling criteria does not guarantee a "carrot". Moreover, the interviewee said, "there are no longer enough incentives for substantial changes to be made with the aim of joining the EU".

As the enlargement resistance became clear and the process was starting to drag along, the enthusiasm inside of Montenegro declined as well. One interviewee also claims that over the years the EU became less appealing to Montenegrin citizens. Therefore "we could not count on the citizens to simply put pressure on their political elites to pursue democratization conditions given by the EU" was said in one of the interviews. This statement was reflected by the public opinion inside of Montenegro when in 2019 a drastic drop in support was recorded with 55% of the population supporting the EU accession (CEDEM, 2019). Furthermore, Balkan Barometer recorded that as of 2018 the number of people who held the attitude that Montenegro will never join the EU increased by the year. All of this did not drive the elites to accelerate the democratization process in Montenegro, but to additionally slow it down as they felt less

pressured by the voters who started believing that the EU was not committed to the region and that the membership is far less probable than ever before.

Vučković (2018) also claims that the compliance with externally given conditions declined, as the benefits of the EU's rewards did not exceed domestic adaptation costs. This could be particularly visible in the areas of judiciary reform and combating corruption. Therefore, one may conclude that the EU-driven rule of law reform has produced deficient effects in the reform of the judiciary and combating corruption, having consequently affected the strengthening of the domestic political elites and their positions by helping to introduce an ineffective legal and institutional framework (Vučković, 2018, p.288).

Moreover, the interviews uncovered that recently the EU additionally reduced its dedication to the democratization process in Montenegro. The main reason is insufficient support from the Member States to commit to further enlargement or give clear prospects for the country. For example, the Conference on the Future of Europe gave voice to the EU citizens to share their ideas, and its conclusions are presented in a final report. That report only superficially mentions Western Balkans, showing reduced commitment to the integration of the region.

Furthermore, the separate Unit for Montenegro within the European Commission was transformed into the Unit for Montenegro and Serbia in 2021, while the EU did not want to comment on it beyond it being a matter of organizational issues related to the workload and efficiency. The research uncovered how problematic this grouping can be in the democratization process. The interviewees marked that Croatia had the advantage to go through the democratization and integration process alone. Thus, any grouping, especially of two countries that are not at the same stage of democratization, might contribute to less clarity in the process,

commitment invested from the EU, and also from the candidate state. All of the interviewees said that Montenegro and Serbia are in very different stages of the democratization process, and thus should be considered separately. Any possibility of a “Balkan caravan” and reduction of institutional, as well as political commitment increases the risk of further democratic backsliding in Montenegro. Also, such grouping increases the perception that the future of Montenegro is tied to Serbia’s pace, reducing incentives for political change inside the country.

Finally, one of the interviewees drew attention to the importance of the speech given in 2021 by Oliver Varhelyi, Commissioner for the Neighborhood and Enlargement. When the Commissioner was asked how he sees the Western Balkan region by the end of his mandate, he gave a reflection on all the countries in the region besides Montenegro. This left both the public and the officials inside of Montenegro wondering about the country’s prospects of joining the EU, as well as the next steps that come in the democratization process.

Summary of the results

The democratization process that started in the Western Balkans at the beginning of the 21st century as a part of the region’s Europeanization gave very different results in two Balkan countries – Croatia and Montenegro. And while there were some peculiarities in the domestic political contexts of these countries, they shared many things in common. They were both a part of the former Yugoslavia, had the same communist legacy, and faced similar problems with corruption, organized crime, and transition to a liberal economy after the dissolution of the country.

Moreover, once they gained independence they decided to commit themselves to the advancement of the democracy, and adjustment to the EU’s standards. Thus, it is notable that the

democratization was an outside-led process by the European Union to enable Croatia, as well as Montenegro to join the EU family one day. However, the eagerness inside of the EU Member States to expand the European family drastically declined over time, with internal issues taking away the focus from its closest neighborhood. Therefore, this thesis intended to fill in the gap in the literature by addressing the effects of the enlargement resistance on the democratization process in the Western Balkans.

The literature analysis suggested that through the progressing politicization of the enlargement democratization process was hindered. Thus, to test a hypothesis this research engaged in a qualitative comparative case study analysis of Croatia and Montenegro. Six elite interviews were conducted with the former Minister of European and Foreign affairs of Croatia, the former Minister of European Integration of Montenegro, the director of the NGO overseeing the democratization and Europeanization process in Montenegro, an assistant at the NGO monitoring international economic and political relations in Croatia, European Parliament's Advisor on the Western Balkans, as well as the official from the DG NEAR within the European Commission.

The research has shown that increasing politicization of enlargement inside of the EU produced a less clear strategy for the Western Balkans, and subsequently, the model of external incentives was not consistently pursued. This reflects on a lack of credibility of accession and commitment from Montenegro to engage in democratization. On the other note, Croatia enjoyed a far more stable situation inside of the EU, which also gave more stability to the process inside of the country. The course was clear, "stick and carrot" were used strategically, the EU was an attractive force able to generate things from inside and all of that facilitated the democratization process.

The political situation inside the EU played an important role in the development of the enlargement process. As the EU expanded the satisfaction of the old members was declining. Those sentiments were reinforced by the serious issues the Union had to face confronted with the euro crisis, and later with the migration crisis, Brexit, the war in Crimea, as well as COVID-19 pandemic. Unfavorable circumstances inside the EU, coupled with the stagnation in the reform process inside the candidate states, drew attention away from the enlargement, and even exacerbate negative sentiments about it. Permissive consensus transformed into constraining consensus, as the polarization of the enlargement grew stronger and the Member States gained an increasing role in the process. Subsequently, the Commission also adapted to the situation inside of its borders. The enlargement process was never formally stopped, but the administrative capacities of the EU officials that could foster domestic change were reduced and demands lacked clarity.

With the Western Balkans losing momentum inside the EU, public belief about the prospects of membership inside of Montenegro was reduced. Thus, pressure from below for the domestic reforms to be conducted and for the process to be accelerated was not strong enough. Moreover, unfortunately, elites inside Montenegro did not react to the situation in the EU by committing further to democratization to change the opinion inside of the Member States. All of these negative political aspects in the end resulted in democratic backslidings in Montenegro two decades after the Thessaloniki summit.

Table 2

	Croatia	Montenegro
Support inside of the EU	+	-

Consistency	+	-
Credibility	+	-
Pressure from below	+	-

Note. The table above, created by the author, shows factors susceptible to politicization occurring during the democratization processes in Croatia and Montenegro during the accession period, reflecting the main differences between these cases. Plus (+) presents the factors that were present in the democratization process and minus (-) that were not.

Therefore, the results of the research show that level of politicization of the enlargement during Croatia's democratization process was substantially lower, while it progressed in the final stages of Croatian accession. Therefore, Croatia enjoyed a relatively stable political situation inside of the EU, as well as a stable political course regarding its future. That contributed to the constant approach from the Union towards the country, with the Commission having a greater influence on the democratization process than the Council. Furthermore, the process was dynamic, the credibility was high, and thus the attractiveness of the EU was sufficient to generate changes inside the country, making the benefit of reforms outweigh the costs.

As opposed to that, Montenegro engaged in the democratization process during the progressively unstable EU's internal climate. All of that contributed to the debate on the deepening vs widening of the EU and reinforced the negative sentiments of the majority of its members regarding further expansion. The result was an unclear plan for the future of the Western Balkans, inconsistency in the EU's approach to the region, and a far greater role of the Council than ever before. It was proven that the Member States had a less facilitating role in the democratization of Montenegro, reacting to their public opinion related to the enlargement.

Subsequently, the Commission also reacted to the Council's demands and Eurobarometer statistics by reducing administrative and institutional capacities engaged in the democracy promotion in Montenegro. All of this helped that democracy in Montenegro either backslides over the time or stagnates.

Conclusion

The results of this thesis speak about a broader debate on the efficiency of the EU's democracy promotion through the External Incentives Model (EIM). Meanwhile, authors like Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, Vachudova, Pridham, Dzankic et. al, proved that the model showed good results during the previous enlargements, especially in the enlargement in Central and Eastern Europe in 2004, today it is not producing desired results.

The increasing politicization of the enlargement inside of the Member States was caused by problems that the widening of the Union brought to the old members, as well as many other external and internal issues that the Union had to face over time. Thus, negative sentiments about further expansion reflected on the EU's strategy on the Western Balkans, resulting in the weaker ability of the institutions to support democracy-building in its neighborhood. While Croatia went through the democratization and integration process in rather favorable circumstances, Montenegro was trying to democratize in an increasingly politicized climate that produced less clarity in the process, reduced commitment from the EU, and finally hindered the credibility of the rewards. Enlargement resistance caused by increased politicization of the enlargement within the EU leads to less democratization in the candidate countries and allows democratic backsliding to happen.

Furthermore, the identified mechanisms translate politicization into weaker effectiveness of the External Incentives Model and consequent de-democratization. While previous literature theorized about possible negative effects of such politicization and enlargement resistance in the EU, this analysis shows that politicization indeed makes a difference in the democratization and Europeanization in the Western Balkans.

So far, the conditionality as a part of the enlargement strategy was the EU's strongest tool in democracy promotion. Hence, the EU needs to regain its efforts in the Western Balkans by consistently and strategically helping the advancement of democracy inside the region. Moreover, it is in the interest of both Montenegro and the EU for the democratization process to become more stable, for the course to be clearer, and for the efforts, as well as focus, both inside and outside of the country to be reestablished. In the case this does not happen, the Union would risk having hybrid regimes led by semi-autocratic leaders on its borders. That would leave space for other international relations powers to influence the region, and in the process destabilize the European Union.

Finally, besides engaging in the mentioned theory and filling the gap in the literature, hopefully, this research can present a small contribution by giving saliency to the major importance that Montenegro, as well as the other Western Balkan countries, become full functioning democracies, ready to join the EU family. Even though Montenegro is still showing slightly better democratic standards than its neighbors, unfortunately, the reality is that it is not difficult to be a democratic leader in the Western Balkans. Therefore, a few things are certain. If Montenegro does not accelerate reforms and the process of democratization in the upcoming few years, it risks being stuck in the "Balkan caravan" on its democratization path. This could destabilize the country not only from within because full democracy has not been achieved but

also from the outside making it susceptible to malign foreign influences. Previous years have shown that NATO membership is not enough for Montenegro to maintain a fixed pro-European course by fostering western values; hence achieving democracy in the context of European integration is of extreme importance.

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