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Between democratization and stability: Assessing the European Union's (stabilitocratic) responses to membership candidate states' progress in accession negotiations

Master's Thesis

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Abstract

The European Union, when approaching its neighborhood, is faced with a foreign policy dilemma: democratization, or stability. This trade-off, which is a complex balance, is a particularly understudied field, especially in the EU enlargement scholarship. The countries waiting to join the EU often seem to be pushed in the direction of stability, at the expense of true democratization. This paper aims to apply the theory of stabilitocracy, one explaining that trend, on the official EU enlargement monitoring reports, as the theory has not yet been tested empirically that way. Focusing on the cases of Serbia and Montenegro, and utilizing qualitative content analysis, this paper finds that stability and democratization are intertwined as accession criteria, whereas the countries' progress is often put in the context of how internally stable they are, how much they contribute to regional cooperation and stability, and most importantly, how much they are geopolitically aligned with the EU.

Keywords: stabilitocracy, stability, democratization, enlargement, geopolitics

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1. Introduction

If one were to count the number of times EU officials have mentioned the word "democracy" just in the past decade, they would reach an immensely high figure, and the number might just overcome "deeply concerned", another popular catchphrase among EU figures. After all, democracy is indeed enshrined in the very foundations of the European Union (EU) that we know today. *"The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities"*, proclaims the Lisbon Treaty (Official Journal of the European Union, 2007), which strengthened the efforts of the EU to become a global driver and promoter of democracy. Kubicek (2007: 1) states that "among changes in the EU's foreign relations have been an emphasis on democratization, human rights, genuine pluralism, and the rule of law", but questions the extent to which the Union's efforts to promote democracy have been successful.

One of the key mechanisms through which the EU promotes democracy and democratization has been the enlargement process, so far the most successful and transformational tool of the EU in its mission to be a promoter of democracy (Gloannec and Rupnik, 2008). The process of joining the EU is an arduous task filled with difficult economic and political reforms, embedded in the overarching goal of living up to the values of the EU. The Copenhagen Criteria, as the basis for determining which countries are fitting for EU membership, lay forth democracy as the first key requirement (EUR-lex). Therefore, in a normative sense, a country cannot accede to the Union if it is not a full-fledged democracy.

The challenge of democratization as a basis for membership has proven to be a particular hurdle when we look at the region of the Western Balkans (WB)[1], composed of young democracies whose democratic quality is all but certain. Some even argue that the transformative quality of the enlargement has turned out to be an outright failure in the WB (Soyaltin-Colella, 2022; Džankić et. al, 2018). In constant need of external pressure, with institutional vacuums and a difficult trajectory of democratic transition, the WB states have been in the spotlight of recent debates on EU enlargement and its democratization capabilities (Elbasani and Šelo Šabić, 2017: 1319).

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[1] These countries are Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Kosovo, Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia.

Two countries from the region, Serbia and Montenegro, in a peculiar state union up until 2006, are particularly interesting examples. Montenegro has been ruled by a dominant party and its minor coalition partners since the breakup of former Yugoslavia back in 1989, up until 2020, while Serbia has been under the strong fist of its dominant party since 2012. Many describe Serbia and Montenegro (Montenegro at least until 2020) as captured states, gripped by corruption, authoritarian tendencies, and extensive political control over almost all spheres of life (Keil, 2018; Prelec, 2020; Vachudova, 2019). I argue that the similarity of the two countries lies precisely in the fact that they have both had (one *had*, the other one is still *having*), extended periods of strong rule by a dominant party, embedded in personality cults of strongman leaders – Milo Đukanović in Montenegro, and Aleksandar Vučić in Serbia, alongside a clear lack of democratic progress (see: Bieber, 2020b; Davidović, 2021; Vachudova, 2019; Vuković, 2013).

This is the context in which this paper is situated, while asking: how does the EU's role precisely look like in all of this? On the long accession path, the EU, led by the European Commission as a key actor in the process, monitors the progress of the candidate states on the path to the EU. Montenegro and Serbia have been negotiating with the EU since 2012 and 2013, respectively. Their job is to implement the EU *acquis* (the entire body of EU law) while addressing the EU's assessments; these assessments are the specific dimension that the paper is interested in. The EU monitoring reports for the states reveal the EU institutions' positions, evaluations, and overall political direction, but they also show variations over time and different political compositions of the institutions. They are also understudied as sources of data. Each year, the EU Commission issues a progress report in which it examines a country's progress on the path towards membership. Afterwards, this report is debated in the European Parliament (EP) which issues its report, comprised by a member of the EP (MEP) designated as the rapporteur for the given country.

The concept of "stabilitocracy"[2], at the core of this paper, is one potential explanation as to why the process of democratization through enlargement is seen by many as a failure in the WB. Bieber (2018: 176) defines stabilitocracies as "governments that claim to secure stability, pretend to espouse EU integration and rely on informal, clientelist structures, control of the media, and the regular production of crises to undermine democracy and the rule of law". In a world of complex geopolitical shifts, and a great interest of actors like Russia and China to fill a potential geopolitical vacuum in the WB, the EU is keen to ensure stability in the region, as

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[2] Some authors use "stabilocracy", but stabilitocracy is more frequently found, and thus utilized by this paper.

this makes it less vulnerable to external influences. Bieber (2018), building on Primatarova and Deimel (2012) underlines that the mechanism works in a way that the EU pushes for and requires stability and foreign and security policy alignment, and while receiving that from an aspirant country, it provides it with external legitimacy. This legitimacy is what allows the candidate country to essentially flip-flop between proper democratization and autocratic tendencies. That is why the enlargement process is often seen to trigger mere "surface-thin" reforms, rather than usher in actual democratization (Kmezić, 2019).

This paper aims at contributing to the academic debate in the field in a two-fold way. Firstly, it seeks to further conceptualize stabilitocracy and provide a solid theory that explains the mechanisms and causes of stabilitocracy, alongside the EU's arguments concerning the democratization-stability balance. Secondly, using a qualitative methodology embedded in content analysis, it applies the theory of stabilitocracy to a specific field – the EU's assessment of the progress of the candidate states (the progress reports of the EC and the EP). While focusing on the cases of Serbia and Montenegro, similar in their democratic "conditions", but useful for variations stemming from their different sources of (in)stability and different reasons of geopolitical relevance for the EU, in the timeframe since the opening of their respective accession negotiations, this paper asks: ***To which extent do stabilitocratic tendencies influence the EU institutions' monitoring of the progress of candidate states for EU membership?*** This paper is the first one to employ an analysis that applies the framework of stabilitocracy to the EU's mechanisms of assessment of candidate states. Thus, the primary goal of the paper is theory-testing. As many authors argue that the EU is promoting stabilitocracies and providing them with external legitimacy needed to consolidate their rule (Zweers et. al, 2022; Smith et. al, 2021; Gafuri and Muftuler-Bac, 2020, etc.), I intend to fill a gap in the literature on enlargement and test these claims using a comprehensive methodology. The findings contribute to the understanding of how different EU institutions approach the balance between democratization and stability, how they frame democratic shortcomings of the candidate states, and whether stabilitocratic tendencies are present to an extent where it can be concluded that they decisively influence the EU's positions.

The rest of the sections of the paper are as follows: state of knowledge in the field; methodology, data, and sources; results and discussion; conclusion.

2. State of knowledge

This section of the paper will examine the current state of knowledge on the subject matter. There will be an overview of the key debates on enlargement, followed by the theoretical framework, and concluded by key case-specific insights.

2.1. The enlargement of the EU: a decades-long transformation

The European Union as we know it today is a product and evolution of several rounds of enlargement and reforms over decades. As times have passed, new states have joined, and the geopolitical and institutional circumstances have been significantly altered, the nature of this process has changed, and even its formal methodology. Historically, the EU was often satisfied with enlargement due to several reasons, one of them being the fact that it would be gaining geopolitical and economic edge as it enlarged (Moravcsik and Vaduchova, 2003). As the process has transformed, so has the literature analyzing it. In their seminal piece on the theorization of enlargement, Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2002: 504) identify crucial topics that enlargement studies of the time were addressing: "(1) applicants' enlargement politics; (2) member state enlargement politics; and (3) EU enlargement politics". The focus was placed on the motivations of each actor to engage in the enlargement process, based on possible pros and cons, while these pros and cons were framed in either rationalist or constructivist terms. The rationalist approach dominated earlier studies of EU enlargement, focusing on national interest embedded in economic benefits through trade liberalization and wider transnational economic liberties (Kaiser and Elvert, 2004). The constructivist thinking is of great importance, as it highlighted an approach in theorization that essentially shaped how the enlargement process is viewed today. "With regard to the EU, applicant and member state politics are about whether an applicant state is 'European', subscribes to the integrationist project of an 'ever closer union', adheres to the liberal-democratic political value foundations of the EU, or shares the norms underlying specific EU policies" (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2002: 513). It is important to understand, however, that these earlier studies deal with the enlargement to different types of democracies compared to the ones from 2004/7 and 2013.

When it comes to the "big bang" enlargement of 2004, arguments were mostly focused on the states from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) fulfilling their "dreams" of "returning to Europe", after having engaged in mostly speedy democratic reforms and a transition to a market economy after the fall of communist regimes from 1989 onwards (Schimmelfennig and

Sedelmeier, 2002; Neumann, 1993). On the other hand, the EU's interests were both economic and geopolitical, while the ideals of truly uniting Europe also played a role, especially in the sense of an ideological victory following the fall of communism (Sedelmeier, 2005; Grabbe, 2001). This peculiar mix of EU interests, especially the ones motivated by geopolitical tendencies, is related to the current debates on stabilitocracy that the paper draws from. These are some of the early signs of a potential EU overemphasis on stability rather than democracy. The EU's enlargement to the East ushered in a new wave of studies on enlargement that introduced two novel elements: the assessment of the role of norms in the process, and the question of the influence of the EU on the countries' meaningful political transitions (Vachudova, 2006; Sjursen, 2006; Jacoby, 2004). It is precisely the lack of a meaningful political transition of the WB states, coupled with the EU's progressive shift towards a more geopolitical orientation, that motivated the debates on stabilitocracy in the first place, and thus the enlargement literature shows that there are historical roots for such debates. This is crucial for the paper at hand as it also shows the literature's leap into examinations led by novel paradigms: democratization and transformation through enlargement, which is exactly the wider debate in which my research question is situated.

The scholarly (but also political) debates on democratization intensified with the (troubled) accession of Bulgaria and Romania in 2007. The countries' EU entry was severely stalled due to a lack of progress and instability (Anastasakis and Bechev, 2003: 6). Another perspective was starting to emerge in the literature, and studies on EU conditionality and its effects were becoming more frequent, examining just how much EU's frameworks work in practice; this was highly relevant as conditionality was an understudied field at the time (Anastasakis and Bechev, 2003). The application of conditionality already had a legal foundation in the treaties and a history of its own but was not as salient considering that most of the accession processes before 2004 were smooth in terms of fulfillment of key criteria (Papakostas, 2012). The famous "carrot and stick approach" of conditionality became a strong research focus and it "involves the withdrawal of the benefits of accession and halting or slowing down the process, if candidate states' governments fail to progress with reforms" (Steunenberg and Dimitrova, 2007: 3). The varying mechanisms of conditionality and the differing circumstances that might explain its success or a lack thereof were examined in an abundance of studies, some of them identifying geopolitical factors, some internal political contestations, and some (in)stability, as indicators of success or failure of conditionality (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2004; Haughton, 2007; Sasse, 2008). The concept of conditionality is closely related to the "external incentives model",

a paradigm that Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2004) introduced in their seminal piece on EU enlargement, one of the most cited ever in the field. They introduced a model that was a rationalist-bargaining one, which related EU conditionality to the costs and benefits for both sides in the enlargement. This kind of approach, as was noted before, was quite dominant in the enlargement studies, but started to wane over time. The debates on conditionality go hand in hand with those on the transformative power of the EU, albeit that is a slightly wider field, and they have also started to dominate the enlargement scholarship just before, and after the 2004/7 enlargement (Vachudova, 2006; Haughton, 2007).

As the Big Bang enlargement was followed by the accession of Croatia in 2013, debates on conditionality still dominated the field, precisely because several of the countries that were let into the EU did not truly embody complete socio-political transformations, with particularly Bulgaria and Romania showing significant democratic deficits even after enlargement. The EU was forced to use the instrument of extended conditionality and freeze certain membership-attached EU funds even after the countries joined the club (Gateva, 2015). However, another matter started to emerge in the scholarly literature, and that is the enlargement fatigue - the inability or unwillingness of the EU to let more countries join, and it especially reflects on the lack of EU membership perspective for the WB countries (Szolucha, 2010: 2). Although it has its historical roots in various periods, it mostly refers to the WB enlargement, stalled by a great financial crisis, the rise of Euroscepticism, unprepared institutions that are not fit for another enlargement, lack of reforms in the candidate states, and in general – a lack of political will on the level of member states to further enlarge the Union (O'Brennan, 2013, Economides, 2020). This lack of a clear EU vision for the region is seen as a viable context for stabilitocracies to emerge.

2.2. Theorizing the (im)balance: The EU between democracy and stability

The WB region has put the EU's transformative power to a great test, as the region chronically struggles with "secessionist movements, unsettled borders, ethnic tensions, deficient state capacity and/or strong clientelistic networks" (Börzel, 2011: 6). Gafuri and Muftuler-Bac (2020: 268) underline that "while the European Union was a visible actor in the Western Balkans, its intense focus on stability and development downplayed its role as a democracy promoter" and argue that this link between the EU's role, stability and democratization assistance is particularly understudied. This paper extends on this and seeks to explain what

that "intense focus on stability" means and test it empirically. Additionally, the wider phenomenon of a peculiar crisis of democracy in the Balkans and beyond in Eastern Europe can be understood well if the link between stability and democracy in the context of EU accession is examined (BiEPAG, 2017; Kapidžić, 2021). This crisis of democracy manifests itself particularly in frequent state capture tendencies across the WB states. State capture entails (in)direct state control of the media and a lack of media freedoms, the instrumentalization of state institutions for vote-buying and overall political gain, political control over the judiciary, wide-spread clientelist networks illegally funded by the state, etc. (Keil, 2018; Perry and Keil, 2018). These complex mechanisms are well-linked by the concept of *stabilitocracy*, which is at the core of this paper. The goal is to theorize on its meaning and then test it empirically on EU policy output, which is the key gap I intend to fill, as this has not been done before.

As Bieber (2018) notes, the concept, although termed "stabilocracy", was originally introduced by Primatarova and Deimel (2012), bearing the meaning of externally supported regimes that internally present an intrinsic balance between authoritarian and democratic practices. As Bieber (2018: 178) further explains, "Western Balkan stabilitocracies combine semi-authoritarian features while claiming to be reforming democracies and receiving external support, in particular from EU member states, for the sake of the (false) promise of stability". This promise of stability is of exceptional importance for the EU bearing in mind the region's troubled past and the not-so-distant ethnic violence of the 1990s. "Geopolitical loyalty" (Đuković, 2024: 218) is what the EU seeks, as the countries of the WB can provide full geopolitical alignment through adopting the EU's common positions on foreign and security policy, while receiving formal or informal backing, even as they engage in highly undemocratic practices (Đuković 2024; Bieber 2020; Soyaltin-Colella, 2022). It seems that the EU believes that it "needs" to choose between either democracy or stability (Smith et. al, 2020). The justifications it provides when making that choice are relevant to this research, and the analysis will seek to uncover them. An undesired consequence of such choices could be a lack of credibility of the EU, popular distrust, and a lack of overall public support for further EU accession talks among citizens of the candidate states (Šterić, 2022: 8).

Social polarization is another important element in understanding stabilitocracies. In his extensive study on the rise of authoritarianism in the Balkans, Bieber (2020b) argues that the Balkan stabilitocracies incite grave social tensions based on the exploitations of social divisions, but then rule on the basis of "containing" them, which serves as an argument for the EU to not exert too much pressure for democratization, as it benefits from contained social

tensions, and is given foreign policy guarantees. Stabilitocracies use a "backdoor" of corruption, clientelism, nepotism, control over media, party-based employment in the public sector, etc. (Anđelić, 2022; Bieber, 2018; Soyaltin-Colella, 2022).

Although the causes of stabilitocracy are not the sole focus of this paper, I will provide an overview of some arguments from the literature, to complete the theorization of the phenomenon. Some argue that a crucial issue is the overall limited democratic development and uncompleted state-building in the Balkans, which renders EU actions incapable of inducing a full-fledged democratic transition in the WB region (Börzel, 2011). Despite the EU's significant engagement with the region, with the proclaimed goal of democratization, and regardless of financial and other assistance, the region is still suffering from deep democratic deficits (Gafuri and Muftuler-Bac, 2020: 267-268). It is most plausible that the mechanisms of the EU, such as conditionality, have not caused the democratic issues in the Balkans, but it is rather that they were designed in a way that does not solve those issues (Richter and Wunsch, 2019: 42). Mendelski (2016: 349) calls this a "pathological turn", which is composed of three key elements, all of which are also fundamental to understanding the mechanisms of stabilitocracy: "1) valuing quantity over quality; 2) partisan empowerment of domestic change agents; and 3) biased assessment of the rule of law".

The subsection that follows will further examine the literature, but case-specific one, to better understand stabilitocracy by zooming into the cases of Serbia and Montenegro, completing the theorization of the phenomenon.

2.3. Serbia and Montenegro: Stabilitocratic nature in practice

Serbia officially opened accession negotiations with the EU in 2013. Since 2012, the country has been ruled by the dominant Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), nominally a center-right party affiliated with the European People's Party (EPP). Since then, the state of democracy in the country has severely deteriorated, as seen in both V-Dem indices, as well as in Freedom House reports over the past decade. Figures 1, 2, and 3 (see below), showcase how across these two measurements of democracy (V-Dem and FH), which encompass various indicators measuring the rule of law, political freedoms, electoral integrity, democratic governance, etc., the country has experienced a great decline over the past years, is significantly below the EU standards, and suffers from grave democratic deficits. This even brought it to be classified by FH as a hybrid regime (Freedom House: Nations in Transit, 2015-2023), scoring low across the indicators of

political freedoms, the rule of law, and overall democratic consolidation. The nature of the regime in Serbia is that of endemic corruption, clientelism, party-based employment in the public sector, control over the media, and pressure on civil liberties (Soyaltin-Colella, 2022; Bieber, 2020a; Džankić, Keil, & Kmezić, 2018; Vachudova, 2019). What particularly undermines the country's democratic institutions is the "extractive institutional design", meaning that state institutions play a clientelist-patronage role and are mobilized for the sake of the ruling party's victory through employment and provision of financial benefits (Pavlović, 2021: 15). Finally, there is a strong concentration of power in the hands of a single populist ruler, the current president Aleksandar Vučić, who rules with an "iron fist" and is the cohesive element of the ruling party's orchestrated democratic decline (Gafuri and Muftuler-Bac, 2020).
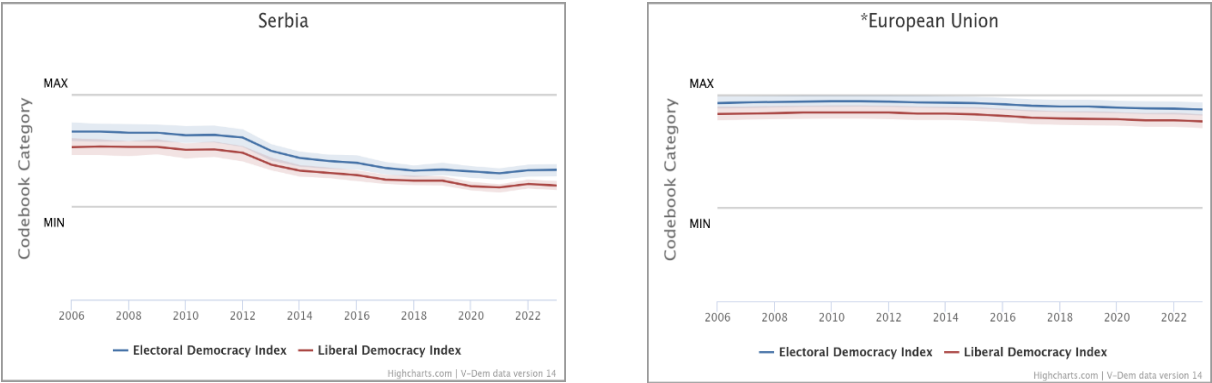
Figures 1 and 2: Graphs taken from V-Dem: Electoral Democracy and Liberal Democracy index (scale 0-1) over the years, Serbia vs. weighted average of EU member states[3]
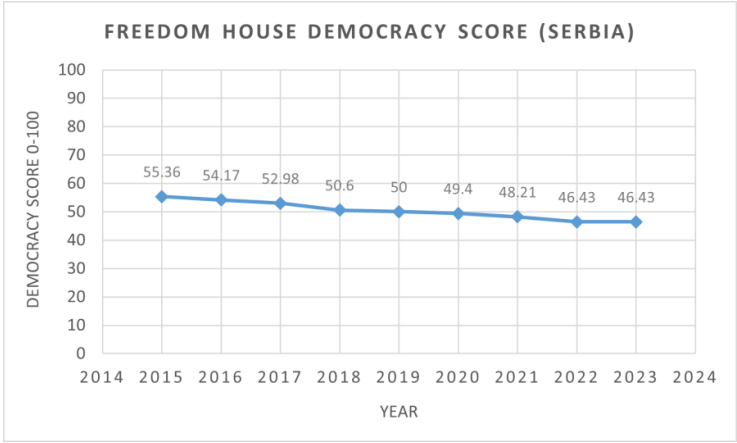

*Figure 3: Author's graph, based on Freedom House Nations in Transit data (2015-2023). From 2020, Serbia was no longer a **semi-consolidated democracy**, but a **transitional or hybrid regime.***

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[3] Detailed breakdown of all the indicators for V-Dem can be found in Appendix I.

Regardless of that, in 2018 the EU named Serbia and Montenegro as the accession frontrunners who could even join the club by 2025, as the EU Commissioner for Regional Policy Johannes Hahn noted back in the day (POLITICO, 2018). The potential EU accession of Serbia is seen as a "strategic" one, as Serbia has always been a "problematic child" of the WB region, and integrating it in the block, while finally having the country geopolitically aligned with the EU, would mean that the EU can achieve stability in the region, even though Serbia has not met the Copenhagen criteria – on the contrary, it went further away from fulfilling them (Stahl, 2013).

All aspects of the EU's negotiations with Serbia demonstrate that stabilization could be the key enlargement paradigm, with a focus on "high political issues", rather than on democratization (Petrović, 2019). The goal of this research is to move further than merely hypothesizing that this is the case, testing the claims empirically on EU monitoring reports, to understand the extent to which stabilization is, or is not, a key enlargement paradigm. One of the fundamental political issues in this case is certainly the normalization of relations with Kosovo. Serbia still does not recognize its independence and claims it as a part of its territory, and this hinders the reconciliation process in the region. At a certain point, the entire negotiations process with Serbia seemed to be aimed at finding a comprehensive solution for the regional situation, but the problem was a lack of a clear membership perspective as a reward for the high socio-political cost that Serbia would have to pay (Bieber, 2015). The new Enlargement Strategy unveiled in 2018 goes in this direction – the EU demands a peaceful resolution of disputes between countries in the region and will not tolerate instability (European Commission, 2018). That is why it is often noted that the Brussels Agreement from 2013, which sought to implement several policies that would normalize the relations between Serbia and Kosovo, bought some EU support for Serbia, regardless of its government's undemocratic governance (Petrović and Wilson, 2021). On the other hand, Serbia uses its ties with Russia as a leverage that "reminds" the EU that it needs Serbia as a partner (Bieber, 2018). Additionally, there is a great number of social and political actors across Serbia and beyond that are recognized as Russian proxies (Clingendael, 2022). Russia is not the only player in Serbia and the region. China and Türkiye are among the states that have growing influence and strong economic interests, and are keen to capitalize on a geostrategic vacuum created by the EU's potential withdrawal or lack of engagement (Heinrich Boell Foundation, 2019; Soyaltin-Colella, 2022).

The EU's failure to contain undemocratic tendencies in Serbia has been triggered by various factors, such as the weak structure of concrete reform incentives, enlargement fatigue, and a lack of a coherent strategy for enlargement, coupled with a shortfall of credible pro-EU

opposition parties that could provide the same geopolitical guarantees if in power (Bechev, 2012; Soyaltin-Colella, 2022; Mladenović, 2022). These factors allow for stabilitocracies to emerge.

Montenegro has been negotiating its accession into the EU since 2012 and is the country with the most advanced status amongst the candidate states, considering it has opened all negotiating chapters, and provisionally closed three. It had been ruled for more than thirty years by the dominant center-left Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS), which lost power in 2020 to three heterogeneous opposition coalitions, which have been, in different formations, running the country ever since. Speaking of the quality of its democracy, Montenegro has not been substantially different than Serbia. For years it has scored poorly on various measurements of democracy, such as V-Dem and Freedom House. Figures 4, 5, and 6 (see below), explain how across the two measurements of democracy, V-Dem and FH, (to note again, they encompass various indicators measuring the rule of law, political freedoms, electoral integrity, democratic governance, etc.), the country has seen a sharp decline over the past years, and is well below the EU standards, just like Serbia. Another similarity with Serbia, is that this brought it to be classified by FH as a hybrid regime as well (Freedom House: Nations in Transit, 2015-2023), scoring low across the indicators of political freedoms, the rule of law, and overall democratic consolidation.

The country has issues with endemic corruption, widespread clientelist networks, and intense social cleavages that were exploited by the once-ruling DPS (Bieber, 2018; 2020a). Similar to Serbia, the entire institutional system of the country was put in the function of bankrolling the ruling party's election victories, with massive party-based employment (Elbasani and Šabić, 2017). Under the DPS and its strong-fist ruler Milo Đukanović, Montenegro was a paradigmatic example of a semi-authoritarian captured state (Soyaltin-Colella, 2022).

Although for the longest part of the post-Yugoslav period, Montenegrin politics have been a "one-party show" with one of the world's most typical dominant party systems (Vuković, 2013), the government change in 2020 essentially transformed the political reality, but also relations with the EU.
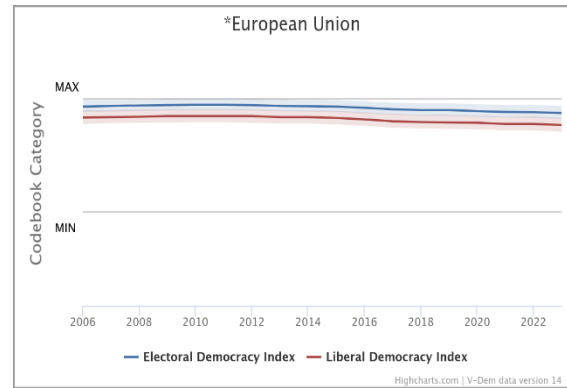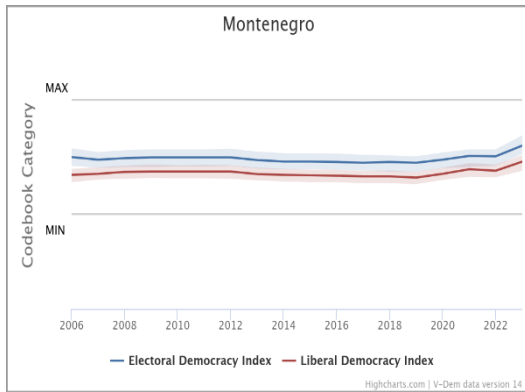
Figures 4 and 5: Graphs taken from V-Dem: Electoral Democracy and Liberal Democracy index (scale 0-1) over the years, Montenegro vs. a weighted average of EU member states.
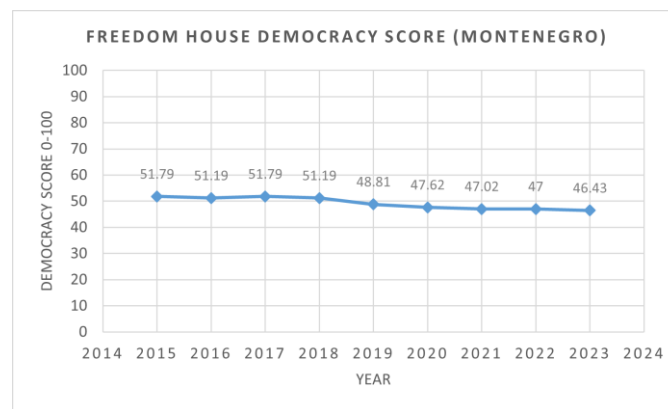

*Figure 6: Author's graph, based on Freedom House Nations in Transit data (2015-2023). From 2020, Montenegro was no longer a **semi-consolidated democracy**, but a **transitional or hybrid regime.***

Like Serbia, Montenegro also has its fair share of geopolitical significance. Being a rare example of a European country in which the dominant national group does not constitute the absolute majority of the population, it has been going through decades of an identity struggle and a deep cleavage on the Montenegrin-Serbian national identification axis. As Džankić (2013: 16) sums it up, "cleavages related to ethnic identity become salient in political competition" in "transitional polities" such as Montenegro, and they deeply shape the political scene, bring forward conflicted interpretations of history and cause dangerous social divides. The battle of "interpretation" of historical events and identity (Džankić, 2014) has turned Montenegro into fertile soil for instability, something that the EU was keen on avoiding. Beyond national identity, the social cleavages have also affected the way people in Montenegro perceive different geopolitical actors. Based on that, the competition between pro-NATO, pro-Western actors, and anti-NATO, anti-Western actors structured the political landscape, whereas national identification is genuinely a strong predictor of opinions – while Montenegrins (politically dominantly gathered around the former ruling DPS) gravitate towards pro-Western, pro-EU and

NATO positions, the Serbs (politically dominantly gathered around several radical right-wing pro-Serbia parties) are more likely to be pro-Russian and anti-Western (Bešić and Spasojević, 2018). Considering the parties around the latter have always been close to reaching power, and did so in 2020, the EU saw the DPS as its crucial political partner, although the party was involved in major scandals and corruption.

In 2016, Montenegro was shaken by an alleged coup attempt that was supposed to overthrow the government and the president, and this coup was suspected to be linked to Russia and certain figures from the leadership of the Democratic Front (DF), a coalition of several pro-Serbia, radical right-wing parties (and the biggest opposition at the time). This further alerted the EU, as it was believed that Montenegro is under constant geopolitical threats, targeted by Russian campaigns, to prevent the country's NATO accession and give Russia leverage over the West (Bechev, 2018 and 2019; Panagiotou, 2020). As Russia's potential link to the wider Mediterranean region, the country eventually became a part of NATO, in a US and EU-led bid to stabilize the region and protect the country from foreign interference (Cingel, 2018). Additionally, with a large debt owed to China for the construction of a controversial motorway, Montenegro is on yet another "watch alert" for the EU (Kemp, 2021:6) This leads us again to the concept of stabilitocracy – a flawed regime managing to get strong external support as it serves as a geopolitical guarantee.

Finally, Montenegro saw a democratic transition of power in 2020, for the first time. What followed was precisely what the EU wanted to avoid – years of turmoil, political instability, and radical parties in power. However, the country's foreign policy course has remained largely intact due to powerful external pressures, but also because pro-Western positions are now at least nominally adopted by most political parties. Currently, the strongest political party is the Europe Now Movement (PES), a new nominally liberal centrist party with a technocratic and economic orientation.

2.4. Relevance and research gap: a summary

Based on everything outlined in this section, **I hypothesize that the EU's monitoring tools, the progress reports for candidate states, are heavily influenced by tendencies of stabilitocracy**. This manifests itself in an emphasis on stability, foreign and security policy alignment, and an elaboration on internal tensions and their dangers, strengthened by continuous calls for candidate states to further align themselves with the EU's strategic

positions on the highest political questions of foreign policy, security, and defense. For this paper, "the EU" refers to EU institutions, not the member states and their respective governments, as they are a separate field of analysis that might be interesting for another research. Relating this to the research question, I expect to find that the monitoring reports frame the countries' progress in a way that implies that stabilitocratic tendencies have the key emphasis over issues of democratization.

However, I expect the sources of (in)stability and geopolitical relevance to vary in the two cases. Whereas Serbia is a major potential Russian ally in the region, and its dialogue with Kosovo is crucial for the EU, I expect the EU to focus on these issues, and frame them in terms of the (de)stabilizing effect they can have for the wider region. In the case of Montenegro, I expect more focus on its internal situation, polarization, and divisions, which can create fertile soil for foreign influences and allow their political proxies to reach key centers of power.

One might pose the question of why stabilitocracy is worth studying. Besides gaining relevance as a concept, its true value is analytical. By analyzing this phenomenon, we can better understand the failed democratization of the WB region and the deeper issues explaining the countries' stagnation on the long and difficult road towards the EU. Additionally, the strength of stabilitocracies has undermined the credibility of the EU and perhaps achieved the opposite - less stability due to failed democratization, which essentially exacerbates social issues and underlining tensions. The stabilitocracy framework is one of the novel approaches in EU enlargement studies, capturing the complex relations between the accession process, democratization, and stability, which is a particularly understudied dimension. Although stabilitocracy is becoming increasingly analyzed by academia and civil society, no research has tested the framework on the official policy output of the EU. Therefore, this paper could provide empirical evidence of stabilitocratic tendencies in official EU monitoring of the accession negotiations, or a lack thereof, and thus enrich our knowledge on this subject. Since theoretical claims argue quite strongly that the EU provides legitimacy and support for stabilitocratic regimes, and essentially creates them through an overemphasis of one set of issues over the others, it is of utmost importance to empirically test those claims.

3. Methodology, data, and sources

This section of the paper will outline the case selection of the study, alongside its design, with an overview of the sources and their relevance, concluded by an elaboration on the methodology and its justification.

3.1. Design and case selection

The study presents a focused comparison between two similar cases, Serbia and Montenegro, with two key variations to be accounted for. The nature of (un)democratic governance in Serbia and Montenegro has been elaborated in the previous sections. That is the core of the similarity of the cases – these are both countries struggling with democratic deficits, electoral manipulations, and in general the lack of democratic progress. Theoretically speaking, as was seen before, they are paradigmatic cases of stabilitocracy. At the same time, they have been engaged in official accession negotiations with the EU for almost the exact period, which has implications for the selection of sources and data, as these can be exactly replicated for both countries. In other words, the same sources exist for both countries in the same period, while this period (2012/2013 to 2023, marking their EU accession negotiations), also sees a very similar quality of democratic governance, or a lack thereof. For instance, what a comparison with other WB countries would not be able to achieve is the replicability of data, and the accession process is too different to be accurately captured with the methodology proposed below (per instance, the EU accession timelines of other countries are very different). Additionally, the positions of other countries, especially North Macedonia, are different also since their EU road is marked by disputes with EU member states, which can overtly alter the positions of EU institutions, especially the EP.

Additionally, stemming from the theorization of stabilitocracy, the two countries are both (geo)politically valuable for the EU, and their stability is of utmost importance for the block. However, here we see the first variation that can produce potentially different results and enhance the relevance of the study as the cases are similar but nonetheless present noteworthy variations. Essentially, while the source of Serbia's relevance for the EU is the Serbia-Kosovo dispute, alongside the great influence of Russia and China in the country's domestic politics, for Montenegro this relevance lies in its internal divisions and polarization, which has the potential to enhance the influence of pro-Russian actors. Since the country is also a NATO member (contrary to Serbia that is completely opposed to membership), any pro-Russian malign influence in the centers of political power in Montenegro has clear implications for the

EU, and more widely speaking, for the West. The second variation in the cases refers to Montenegro's change of government in 2020. This moment brought to power a heterogenous, three-block coalition of political parties ranging from radical pro-Serbia, and pro-Russia parties, through centre-right actors, to green pro-EU and pro-NATO figures. As this is the opposite of the center-left, pro-EU, pro-NATO DPS that had ruled for more than 30 years before the power transition, it is interesting to assess the potential changes in EU positions following the power shift. In Serbia, the big change of government occurred in 2012 when the current SNS-led elite took over political power, but afterward remained continuously in government without dramatic upsets.

3.2. Sources and data

As was noted before in the paper, the theoretical framework of stabilitocracy has never been empirically tested on official EU policy output. That is the most concrete contribution of this paper and thus motivates the selection of sources. The sources of data for the paper, and its basic units of analysis are *threefold*: European Commission Country Reports (country monitoring), European Parliament Reports on the Commission Reports, Plenary Debates on the European Parliament Reports[4].

The selected sources are relevant for several reasons. Firstly, they are the official monitoring output of the accession negotiations and the EU's evaluation of the country's progress in the context of expected reforms. Therefore, they serve as the EU's assessment of the preparedness of countries to join the block as full members. Since the theoretical notions strongly suggest the EU's overt focus on matters of stabilization, it is therefore interesting to test those notions and see if the official monitoring output can corroborate them. Also, focusing on both the EC and the EP allows for different institutional perspectives to be analyzed, to see if some sort of variation will come out of them. The EC is, for example, nominally responsible for the technical, more meritocratic aspects of the enlargement, and often assesses to the smallest details the quantitative and qualitative alignment with EU standards. In theory, at least, the Commission should be supranational, independent, and politically non-aligned with any of the member states (Egeberg, 2016). On the other hand, EP reports are created by a designated MEP who is named as a rapporteur for a given country. The report serves as a sort of response to the one of the EC, and so it can reveal another layer of variation. Seeing how the evaluation and

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[4] All documents are outlined in Appendix II.

monitoring look like when dealt with by politicians, with clear political affiliations and ideological orientations (which might especially come to the fore in the analyzed debates), could reveal novel findings on stabilitocratic tendencies and in which exact institutional contexts within the EU they might be more likely to emerge.

As per the data and its timeframe, the paper will analyze, for both countries, all of the named reports for the period from 2012 (the first Montenegrin report), to 2023 (the last published reports for both countries). Considering that all the reports will be included in the paper, there is no need to adopt a sampling mechanism.

3.3. Methodology

The method that will be applied to the abovementioned data is qualitative content analysis, utilized through both inductive and deductive coding, and assisted by the MAXQDA software and its content analysis features.

Using qualitative content analysis, one can focus on "detail and depth", delve into the interpretative nature of concepts (especially novel ones), and discover the contextual framework of any given material (Forman and Damschroder, 2008). As I am focusing on text (i.e. EU policy output), but in a qualitative approach, this means that I can discover more about the research question using qualitative content analysis, compared to other potential methods, especially considering that I am dealing with a very novel theoretical framework. The coding will be both inductive and deductive. The entire detailed coding scheme is available in this paper's Appendix III. To facilitate the analysis, allow for a check of the reliability and accuracy of the coding scheme, provide visualizations, and achieve wider accuracy through covering all the texts precisely, one of the most widely accepted software, MAXQDA, will be used to assist the analysis. The dual coding scheme means that, on the one hand, I am utilizing the theoretical framework to draw coding categories from it; on the other hand, considering the novelty and under-theorization of stabilitocracy, the coding scheme is strengthened by additional coding categories that are added through the reading of the documents that are to be analyzed (Elo and Kyngäs, 2008). The coding scheme is developed as extensively as possible, to adequately account for all the crucial themes stemming from the theorization of stabilitocracy. Each coding category is given a precise definition and an example, to enhance the methodological rigor of the analytical process. Finally, to make sure that the coding scheme is as accurate as possible, and to observe the principle of inter-coder reliability, another researcher coded a sample of the

documents, which resulted in the adjustment of the coding scheme. On top of that, the MAXQDA auto-coding features were used as a final check to make sure that the coding scheme adequately matched the texts and the theoretical framework.

4. Results and discussion

At the very beginning, it is important to stress that the purpose of this paper is not to provide normative judgments on the positions of the EU that are identified. The goal is to establish the extent to which stabilitocratic tendencies play a role in shaping the EU's approach, without painting it in a positive or negative light. That could be a relevant task for an extensive policy analysis that could dive deeper into the moral and societal damage and/or benefits caused by the EU acting in certain ways.

Overall, there are several general conclusions stemming from the data. Firstly, as shown by Figure 7 (see below), the most dominant code was "regional cooperation, reconciliation, and dialogue", found in 147 segments, or 18% of all the coded material. It is followed by the codes for foreign policy alignment and Russia. Considering that a lot of matters, such as foreign influence and stability, are framed in their relation to regional cooperation and dialogue, the figure for this code is very prevalent. Additionally, as could be predicated by theory, regional stability, in general, is something highly valued by the EU, and the debates in the EP, as well as other analyzed material, showcase that there is a significant focus on the resolution of outstanding bilateral and regional issues that are the sources of instability.
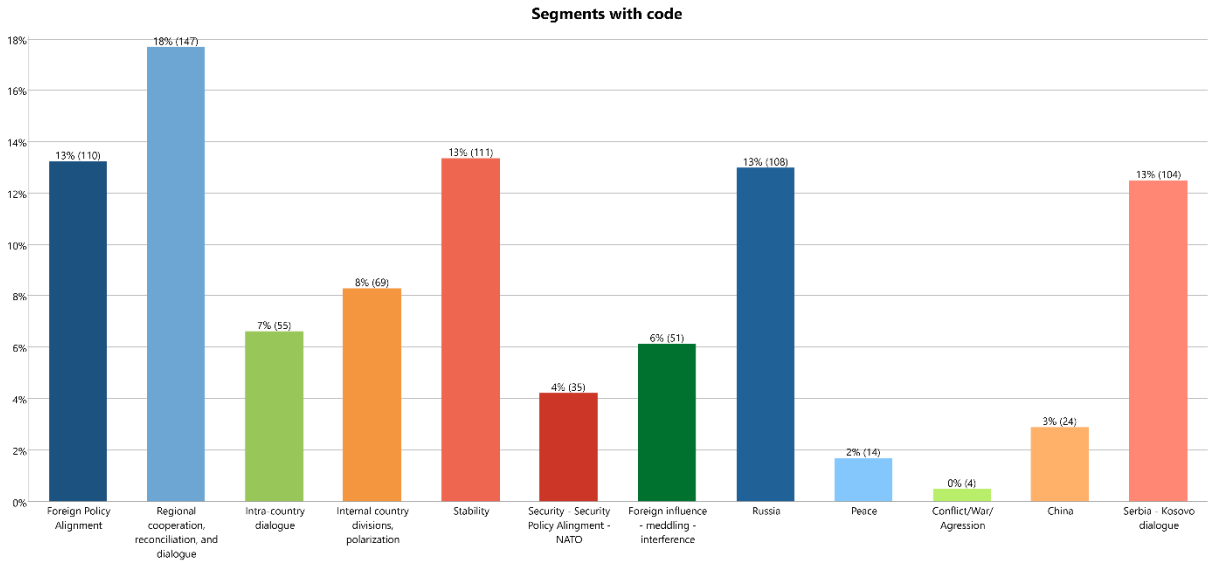

Figure 7: Graph generated by the MAXQDA Software: Segments with codes by percentages and absolute figures

The figures from above can be better understood when paired with Table 1, presented below. As the shades of red are brighter and the numbers (frequency) are higher, there are more direct links between the codes, i.e. they appear in the same coded segment. Namely, regional cooperation is the code that appears most frequently in direct links with other codes, which highlights once again that a lot of the issues are given a regional frame. It is most often connected to foreign policy and security, which suggests that the EU sees foreign policy alignment as a means to ensuring regional stability, but also cooperation of all the WB states under the geopolitical umbrella of the EU, and the West at large. Out of all the links between codes, the most frequent one indeed is regional cooperation-foreign policy alignment.

Code System	Serbia - Kosovo dialogue	China	Regional conflict	Peace	Russia	Foreign influence	Security	Foreign Policy	Stability	Internal divisions	Intra-country dialogue	Regional Cooperation
Serbia - Kosovo dialogue	0	4	1	1	7	4	1	8	4	2	2	13
China	4	0	2	2	7	8	5	8	7	5	6	8
Conflict	1	2	0	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
Peace	1	2	2	0	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
Russia	7	7	2	2	0	8	6	14	9	7	8	13
Foreign influence - meddling - interference	4	8	2	2	8	0	7	10	9	7	8	10
Security - Security Policy Alingment - NATO	1	5	2	2	6	7	0	11	12	9	10	13
Foreign Policy Alignment	8	8	2	2	14	10	11	0	14	10	11	19
Stability	4	7	2	2	9	9	12	14	0	9	12	16
Internal divisions	2	5	2	2	7	7	9	10	9	0	9	14
Intra-country dialogue	2	6	2	2	8	8	10	11	12	9	0	14
Regional Cooperation	13	8	2	2	13	10	13	19	16	14	14	0

Table 1: Table generated by the MAXQDA Software: Inter-code relations by frequency

The first group of analyzed documents are the European Parliament reports for the countries. Compared to the debates in the plenary, where these documents are discussed by the MEPs, the reports are more technical, and thematically cover various fields related to the accession process, from economic development to the rule of law.

One aspect that the results seem to suggest is the variation in the sources and relevance of stability in the case of the two countries. For Montenegro, the tone of the reports, especially in the earlier years, was quite positive and commended on quite a few instances the country's complete alignment with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). The country's shortcomings, mostly linked to the rule of law and corruption, are often framed in a way that, although the country is not progressing on certain fronts, it is nonetheless a beacon of regional cooperation and stability.

"(The EP) Stresses that the good neighborhood relations which Montenegro has with the countries in the region form a basis for successful negotiations with the EU, and that the country itself represents an example of cooperation and commitment to the peace and stability of a region of the Western Balkans."

- EP Report on Montenegro, 2013

Another interesting aspect is the intertwined nature between NATO accession and EU accession that the reports seem to imply, with the two processes framed as mutually linked and of great relevance for the country's stability. NATO membership is linked to the EU accession process and is strongly encouraged; this "securitization" of enlargement is connected to the wider need for regional stability that the EU seeks. The theory suggests that this would be the case, as the alignment of the country's security policy and geopolitical orientation means that the EU can avoid Russia and other interested parties using a potential vacuum created in the region, caused by a lack of EU and Western engagement, but also caused by countries' potential non-alignment of foreign and security policies. This becomes even more obvious with Montenegro's political transition in 2020, when a shaky, three-coalition government took power after more than thirty years of dominant rule of one block, which had been staunchly pro-EU, pro-NATO, and generally pro-Western. The EP reports express continuous and deep concern about foreign influence while stressing that the country's CFSP alignment remains a matter of deep relevance and a push in the negotiations, even as the government composition is completely different.

"(The EP) recalls Russia's persistent and continuous interest in destabilising the country and the whole Western Balkan region and in diverting it from its European path through the spread of manipulative disinformation and influence on state and non-state actors."

- EP Report on Montenegro, 2021

Therefore, a potential lack of the country's geopolitical alignment, coupled with the EU's insufficient engagement, and intensified by internal tensions and polarizations, leads to a destabilizing prospect that a third country such as Russia can exploit.

Additionally, the theory put forward the explicitly internal aspect of stability as well. Montenegro, as a deeply divided and polarized society, with complex dual identities affecting the possibilities of political dialogue, is in a state of perpetual risk in terms of escalations and tensions. The reports note this, and from very early on stress the need for political dialogue. The most emphasized risks for the country's stability indeed are deep internal divisions and polarization, which led several times to an institutional blockade and opened space for external malign influence. That is essentially what the results suggest – the EU interprets internal social divisions, tensions, and political polarization as sources of instability and seeks to prevent them. The language of the reports often seems to be quite suggestive and direct, calling on the dialogue in the country and conditioning further progress on that being achieved. The connection

between the qualities of internal stability and geopolitical alignment is summed up through the EU's calls for "pro-European governments".

*"(The EP) expresses its firm belief that Montenegro needs a **stable pro-European government and an EU-oriented majority**; encourages the formation of a new, stable and pro-European government capable and willing to continue on the EU accession path as soon as possible; (...) avoid deepening political polarisation and refrain from using inflammatory rhetoric and language in political discussions."*

- EP Report on Montenegro, 2022

When we put this in the context of the CFSP alignment again, we can better understand the variation in the EU's approach that was caused by the change of government, and that could also be predicted based on the theoretical framework. The governments before 2020, dominated by one party, made up for their undemocratic shortcomings by flawless geopolitical alignment and robust parliamentary majorities (which produced more internal stability), and this was noted by the EU that kept naming Montenegro as the leader in the WB region. However, governments after 2020 did not produce the same reaction; *their lack of rule of law reforms was noted, but was severely less criticized than their instability and proneness to foreign influence.* This stems directly from the theory, which suggested that, particularly in the case of Montenegro, deep social tensions and problematic instability of political structures are what the EU seeks to avoid as the country had been the most stable geopolitical guarantee in the region. Namely, the EU was expressing direct concern over the country's lack of internal stability following 2020, which it viewed as a potential risk to the country losing its geopolitical course and for the first time failing to deliver on geopolitical alignment. The tone of the reports does not seem to get more negative as the results in democratization are less visible, but as the instability and tensions grow. Therefore, in the period after 2020, stabilitocratic tendencies seem to be more present.

In the case of Serbia, as the theory suggested, sources of (in)stability are different and the EU is primarily interested in the resolution of the Kosovo-Serbia issue, and in Serbia's CFSP alignment. The early reports on Serbia do not take an overly critical stance towards the country, while emphasizing consistently the need to sort out bilateral and regional issues, and to fully engage in the dialogue with Kosovo. On the contrary, the tone seems to be positive and suggests that the early success in the normalization of ties with Kosovo, such as the 2013 Brussels Agreement, is pushing the country towards the EU at a strong pace. However, and in line with

theoretical expectations, the lack of a full alignment with the EU CFSP and ties with Russia are problematized, although overshadowed by the Kosovo issue in the earlier years. The framing here is almost completely regional, as the issue between Kosovo and Serbia is seen as something destabilizing the region and leaving it in a dangerous geopolitical vacuum. The following quotes shed light on this.

"(...) Whereas progress in Serbia's accession negotiations needs to be made in parallel with progress in the process of normalisation of relations with Kosovo in line with the negotiating framework; whereas further efforts remain vital in order to permanently calm these relations."

"(The EP) stresses that the normalisation of relations between Serbia and Kosovo is a priority and a precondition for the EU accession of both countries, and would also be essential for securing stability and prosperity in the wider region."

- EP Reports on Serbia (2015 and 2019/20)

In recent years, the reports got more negative, with an emphasis on the CFSP and the fact that Serbia has not imposed sanctions on Russia. Also, insistence is kept on the normalization of relations with Kosovo in all the reports, regardless of who was composing them. In the final years, there is an extensive and critical overview on Chinese and Russian misinformation and other forms of malign influence and how these activities, alongside a lack of a Serbian reaction, contribute to the destabilization of the region. Compared to Montenegro, in the Serbian case we see more of a regional emphasis. The EP reports for both countries, however, suggest what the theoretical framework brought forward – the EU seems to explicitly put high value, constant emphasis, and critical discourse on issues causing either the countries or the countries alongside the wider region, to be destabilized. Democratization is critically assessed, but linked and intertwined with stability, suggesting that the EU's official monitoring position is that *only a democratized and stable country, with no major outstanding geopolitical and bilateral issues, is ready for EU membership.*

The EP plenary debates do not take radically different positions, although they shed light on variations stemming from different political groups and ideologies, as the spotlight is on MEPs. In the Montenegrin case, early in the negotiations, there is a more present focus on the rule of law and corruption. The critiques of the country seem to always be related to corruption, but at the same time were followed by the foreign policy alignment as a counterbalance and an example of how Montenegro can positively influence the region. That is what the theorists who deal with stabilitocracy write about, often critically; that the EU puts too much emphasis on

stability and geopolitical alignment, which could embolden undemocratic regimes to engage in even more authoritarian practices.

"Montenegro is a pillar of regional stability, and its relations with its neighbours deserve our admiration. Its foreign policy is fully in line with the foreign and defence policy of the European Union, and quite logically, NATO invited the country to join the alliance. Of course, the progress made comes with additional responsibilities. The government should strengthen the role of the national parliament and continue the fight against corruption."

- EP Debate on Montenegro (2016, Ilhan Korcok – ALDE/Renew group)

Montenegro has been consistently praised for good regional relations, its contribution to regional stability, and, most importantly, for its complete alignment with EU CFSP. In an increasingly polarized world order, getting its neighborhood in geopolitical "check" seems to be a priority for the EU. That is followed by the emphasis on NATO membership and security and defense policy alignment, framing it through the importance of the country's strategic position in a potential geopolitical vacuum. After the 2016 elections and the alleged coup, there is a significant domination of codes such as internal division and a lack of dialogue between political parties, alongside constant calls to investigate and prevent Russia's malign influence. Therefore, as the political fragmentation is larger, especially after the 2020 elections, and more parties hold more political power, with less stable prospects of governance and more potential for foreign influence, the reports get more critical and more dominated by stabilitocratic framing.

"Montenegro also has special problems and difficulties, namely the division within the country itself over the fundamental issues facing the country and, of course, such divided and weak countries are easy prey, fertile ground for negative external influences."

- EP Debate on Montenegro (2016, Jozo Rados – ALDE/Renew group)

Political positions from different political groups are almost fully converging, apart from the extremes; the far-left and far-right are by far the most explicitly critical of the country's internal democratic problems, with very direct language condemning the levels of corruption and underdevelopment in all spheres. On the other side, the social democrats (S&D group), Christian democrats (EPP), and liberals (ALDE/Renew Europe group) tend to fully agree, engage in similar talking points and generally emphasize stability, internal cohesion, and CFSP alignment. The Greens (Greens/EFA group) stand out in bringing forward topics that others do

not focus extensively on, such as environmental protection, minority protection, LGBTIQ+ rights, and so on.

Serbia-Kosovo dialogue is the central EP frame of Serbia's progress, especially early on, while other issues, such as the rule of law, received significantly less attention in the early periods of negotiations. There also seems to be an intense focus on regional cooperation and stability, whereas Serbia's role in protecting national minorities of neighboring nations, and its cooperation with the region, is seen as crucial in the process of regional stabilization. Foreign policy alignment was not as visible in the earlier years of negotiations, but Russian ties were more and more scrutinized as the negotiations progressed. The focus was dominantly on Kosovo and the normalization of relations. The positions of mainstream political families, such as the EPP, S&D, Liberals, and the Greens converge, but significantly less than in the case of Montenegro. EPP pushes for topics such as stability and foreign policy alignment, while in the instance of the S&D and the latter two, we find more spotlights on the issues of the rule of law and corruption, media freedoms, etc. The far-right and far-left are once again converging on positions and taking softer approaches towards Serbia, claiming that the requirements vis-à-vis Kosovo and the normalization of relations must not be linked to the accession progress. This excludes the far-right from neighboring countries, which use extremely nationalist frames and focus on bilateral issues. Besides them, the European far-right emphasizes the principle of sovereignty and claims that the EU has no right to impose foreign policy obligations on any country, and that Serbia's ties with Russia are too strong to expect it to impose sanctions or align itself fully with the EU's positions.

One thing that is completely linked to the Montenegrin case, and is deeply embedded in theory, is the peculiar packaging of stabilitocratic topics into democratization – one is consistently framed as part of the other, whereas topics such as the rule of law are constantly intertwined with issues related to Kosovo or foreign policy alignment. More direct critiques of Serbia's internal policies appear from the report on 2016, which was an election year in Serbia. The S&D group directly called out the democratization-stability balance and even explicitly used the term stabilocracy in one of the speeches.

*"(…) Stability in the Western Balkans is important, but we should not sacrifice our values for stability: both have to go hand in hand when negotiating. **In playing with the so-called stabilocracy we might lose what is the most important – Serbian citizens and their commitment towards democracy**. We have to pay attention to the way the opposition and the*

freedom of the media are respected and be certain that the civil society concerns are listened to, because the implementation of the reforms matters for its citizens."

- EP Debates on Serbia (2016, Victor Bostinaru – S&D group)

This summarizes how the MEPs handle the accession negotiations process, especially those from the EPP, and is somewhat of a direct response by an MEP to a frequent theoretical criticism of the enlargement process. I would argue that the results of this research suggest that, while the EPP focuses intensely on foreign policy and stability, and uses a very vague and soft language on Serbia, other groups are more critical and more openly talk about the low state of democratic progress. The Russian invasion of Ukraine made it more obvious to the MEPs that certain behaviors by the Serbian side ought to be placed under more scrutiny. The country received its harshest-ever criticism in 2022, including from the EPP, with most MEPs focusing on the non-imposition of sanctions against Russia and the general Russian malign influence. However, in all years, the language of the Commission in the EP debates remains extremely reserved, at times vague, and with elements of apologism, that are in sharp contrast with the very direct language used by the MEPs. The European Commission in the 2019-2024 mandate was using a particularly soft tone and appeared less critical towards Serbia.

I use two comparison charts below (see Figures 9 and 10) to summarize certain points that were presented. They highlight the differences in the number of coded segments, for each code, compared by the countries. The top one deals with the EP reports, and the bottom one with EP debates. One key difference is that the internal issues such as polarization and political dialogue are greatly more emphasized in the Montenegrin case, than in the Serbian one. This puts forward the key variation mentioned before, that the countries have differing sources of (in)stability, and their issues are therefore framed differently in the documents. Interestingly, whereas the role of Russia in the countries is presented with equal frequencies in the EP reports, the EP debates highlight that issue significantly more when discussing Serbia, which can be linked to the political, and therefore more direct nature of that kind of forum. Explicit frames of stability are also quite more prominent in the EP debates. Regional cooperation, the most dominant code altogether across all the documents, has a notably higher presence in the debates compared to the EP reports, which can once again be understood in the more direct and politically transparent forum being the plenary rather than the reports themselves, which also have technical elements to fulfill.
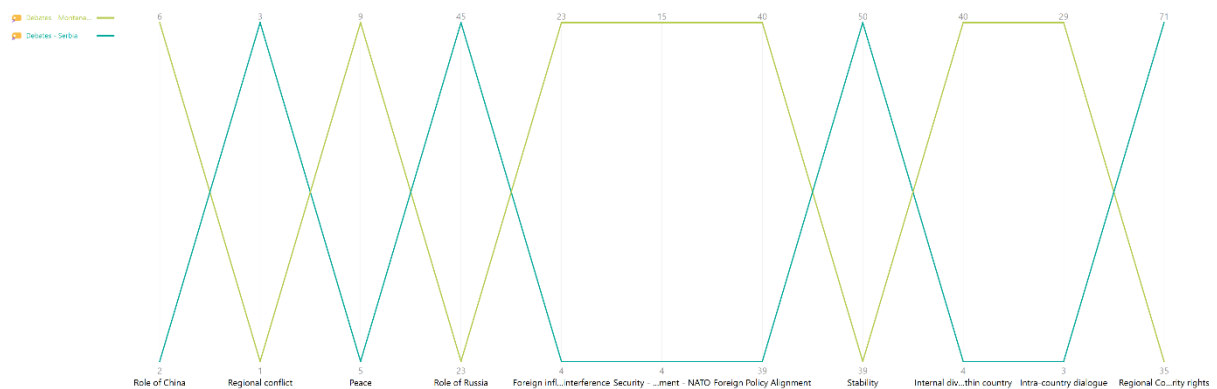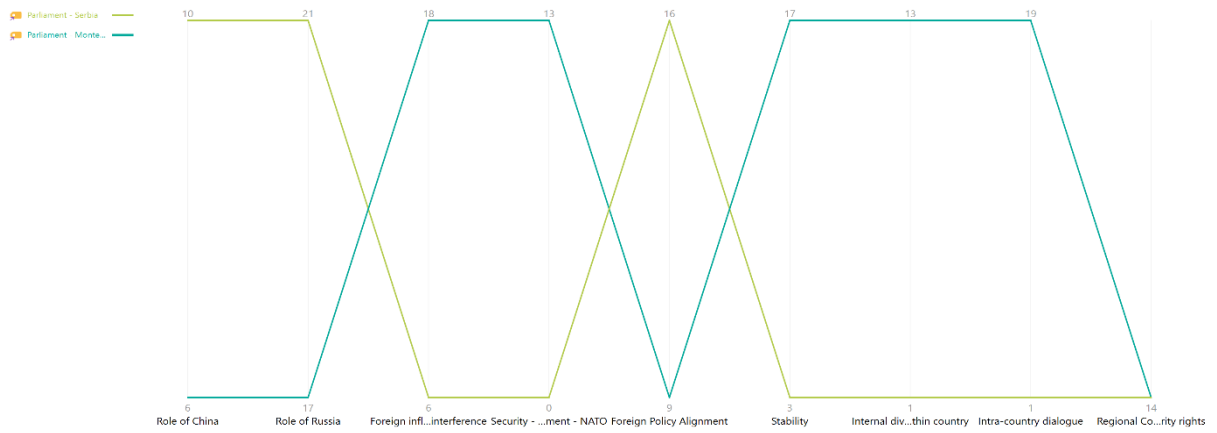
Figures 8 and 9: Comparison charts generated by the MAXQDA Software: Top (EP Reports), bottom (EP Debates), figures are absolute values of coded segment frequencies

Finally, I will provide an analysis of the Commission reports. One weakness of the paper that particularly lies in this aspect is that the EC reports are somewhat technical, as they give an overview of progress in all the negotiating fields. Therefore, they do not provide too much data nor any results that are more significant or extensive than the ones presented before. This nature of the reports makes them a completely different source compared to the EP ones, where the political direction of the language is clearer. Nonetheless, it can be inferred from the EC reports that foreign and security policy alignment, regional cooperation, and stability are highly important and linked to progress in any other chapter. In the case of Montenegro, institutional boycotts and political polarization are seen as a great and damaging source of instability, which always seems to be linked to limited progress in other fields. "Moderately prepared" is the most common description of the country's progress throughout the years, although its CFSP alignment is once again framed as a "saving grace". Membership in NATO is seen as crucial and linked to advancement in the EU accession negotiations. After the change of government in 2020, the frame remains as seen with the EP content: instability, tensions, and polarization

as a danger to the EU accession. After 2020 the Commission started emphasizing more the CFSP alignment, alongside continued warnings that institutions are too unstable because of the political polarization and social divisions. When it comes to Serbia, regional cooperation is emphasized as crucial in keeping stability. In a tone similar to the one describing Montenegro's progress, Serbia is also seen as "moderately prepared" in most fields throughout the years. As the times goes, the tone is more critical, and it is underlined that Serbia is not doing enough in the dialogue with Kosovo and that pending agreements are urgent. The dialogue with Kosovo is linked with the rule of law, and one field cannot advance without the other in the negotiations.

To sum up, the results of the analysis suggest that stabilitocratic tendencies play a significant role in influencing the positions of the official EU accession negotiations monitoring process. Especially in the case of the EP, as the Commission is often decisively vague and reserved, the progress in accession negotiations is linked to the stability of the two candidates, whereas these sources of stability vary. In the case of Montenegro, these are the deep social divisions and a high level of political instability, while in the case of Serbia, the focus is on the normalization of ties with Kosovo and the visibly low alignment with the EU's CFSP. The results of the research seem to affirm the theoretical knowledge of stabilitocracy and aim to serve as empirical evidence of stabilitocratic tendencies in official EU monitoring documents.

5. Conclusion

This paper aimed to synthesize prior work dealing with the concept of stabilitocracy, present a coherent theoretical framework, and apply it to the policy output of the European Union, in this case the official enlargement monitoring reports. The underlying goal was theory-testing, as the theory of stabilitocracy has not yet been empirically tested on EU policy documents. Using a comprehensive methodology embedded in qualitative content analysis and enhanced with several layers of reliability (deductive and inductive coding, software usage, and inter-coder reliability), the paper set out to examine the cases of Serbia and Montenegro, paradigmatic of stabilitocracy, but also different in several regards.

The EU indeed wants to see these countries as stable as possible. Their sources of (in)stability seem to be, however, fairly different. While Montenegro's internal divisions and deep political polarization, especially after the 2016 and 2020 elections drive the EU's critical stances, for Serbia that is a noted lack of CFSP alignment, alongside constant failures to finally reach a normalization of ties with Kosovo. Additionally, in the case of both countries, the research suggests that stabilitocratic tendencies (internal stability – polarization and divisions, CFSP

alignment, geopolitical issues, foreign influence, etc.) are strongly intertwined with democratization and overall progress in the negotiations. In other words, only when these countries are internally stable and geopolitically aligned with the EU, can they expect a more positive tone in the monitoring reports. While the Commission's more technical nature results in mostly uncritical and vague positions, the EP content is more direct and shows different sources of political variation. Nonetheless, most mainstream groups in the EP, the S&D, EPP, Liberals, and Greens appear to converge, except in the case of Serbia, where the EPP seemingly emphasizes stabilitocratic tendencies, while the others try to tone them down.

There are several implications of the identified results, both policy and societal ones. The EU, as some of the MEPs even admitted, has been failing to produce a real democratization effort in the two countries. It could be inferred that an overwhelming focus on stability undermines democratization, which means that the policy output of the EU could potentially need a rethinking. A more robust focus on the rule of law, corruption, media freedoms, and human rights are some of the more extensive directions that several MEPs wanted to see more highlighted in the accession negotiations. However, that sort of normative judgment is not the intention of this paper. Another implication is that regional stability could be undermined by stabilitocratic tendencies, contrary to what the EU might want to achieve. Since democratization is intertwined, and sometimes even sidelined by stability, the region is composed of several regimes of highly questionable democratic qualities, here Montenegro and Serbia, and it can be questioned to which extent can these regimes provide actual stability when the very sources of their instability could be what keeps them in power, as theory suggests. These matters combined could indicate that the EU might potentially need to reshape its enlargement policy to combat the lack of democratization. If so many years have been spent focusing on the stabilization of the WB region, how come that instability poses such a major issue even in 2024? That is just one of the questions that the EU might need to rethink, as suggested by the research results.

Finally, this paper has several shortcomings that could be addressed by further research. Firstly, the sources could be more varied, although in this case their selection was in part also dictated by the paper's limited scope. Per instance, since the EC reports did not provide much useful data, the institutions' media output and official communications on enlargement could be an interesting source, which would enrich the knowledge on the topic and add a political communication angle. Secondly, it is a limitation that the paper focuses on two cases. Further research could dedicate even more space to an extended theoretical framework that could then be applied to several new cases, with a methodology designed in a way that can account for

confounders that are common with dealing with a larger number of cases. Besides that, it would also be interesting to replicate this study on other pairs of similar countries, such as North Macedonia and Albania, or Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. The theoretical framework of stabilitocracy is highly empirically under-researched and any new study taking into consideration new cases has the potential to enrich our knowledge on the subject.

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Appendix I – Tables and figures

Figures from 1-6 are adapted based on the data from Freedom House and V-Dem. Data available through:

Freedom House. Nations in Transit Reports, Montenegro (2015-2023). Available at:
https://freedomhouse.org/country/montenegro

Freedom House. Nations in Transit Reports, Serbia (2015-2023). Available at:
https://freedomhouse.org/country/serbia

Coppedge et al. (2015). V-Dem Codebook v14, Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project

Teorell et al. (2019). V-Dem Codebook v14, Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project

The detailed breakdown of the indicators for V-Dem, as directly quoted from the sources above:

Electoral democracy index (D) (v2x_polyarchy)

Project Manager(s): Jan Teorell

Additional versions: *_codelow, *_codehigh, *_sd

Question: To what extent is the ideal of electoral democracy in its fullest sense achieved?

Clarification: The electoral principle of democracy seeks to embody the core value of making rulers responsive to citizens, achieved through electoral competition for the electorate's approval under circumstances when suffrage is extensive; political and civil society organizations can operate freely; elections are clean and not marred by fraud or systematic irregularities; and elections affect the composition of the chief executive of the country. In between elections, there is freedom of expression and an independent media capable of presenting alternative views on matters of political relevance. In the V-Dem conceptual scheme, electoral democracy is understood as an essential element of any other conception of representative democracy — liberal, participatory, deliberative, egalitarian, or some other.

Scale: Interval, from low to high (0-1).

Source(s): v2x_freexp_altinf v2x_frassoc_thick v2x_suffr v2xel_frefair v2x_elecoff

Data release: 1-11. Release 1-5 used a different, preliminary aggregation formula.

Aggregation: The index is formed by taking the average of, on the one hand, the weighted average of the indices measuring freedom of association thick (v2x_frassoc_thick), clean elections (v2xel_frefair), freedom of expression (v2x_freexp_altinf), elected

officials (v2x_elecoff), and suffrage (v2x_suffr) and, on the other, the five-way multiplicative interaction between those indices. This is half way between a straight average and strict multiplication, meaning the average of the two. It is thus a compromise between the two most well known aggregation formulas in the literature, both allowing partial "compensation" in one sub-component for lack of polyarchy in the others, but also punishing countries not strong in one sub-component according to the "weakest link" argument. The aggregation is done at the level of Dahl's subcomponents with the one exception of the non-electoral component.

Liberal democracy index (D) (v2x_libdem)

Project Manager(s): Jan Teorell

Additional versions: *_codelow, *_codehigh, *_sd

Question: To what extent is the ideal of liberal democracy achieved?

Clarification: The liberal principle of democracy emphasizes the importance of protecting individual and minority rights against the tyranny of the state and the tyranny of the majority. The liberal model takes a "negative" view of political power insofar as it judges the quality of democracy by the limits placed on government. This is achieved by constitutionally protected civil liberties, strong rule of law, an independent judiciary, and effective checks and balances that, together, limit the exercise of executive power. To make this a measure of liberal democracy, the index also takes the level of electoral democracy into account.

Scale: Interval, from low to high (0-1).

Source(s): v2x_liberal v2x_polyarchy

Data release: 1-11. Release 1, 2, and 3 used a different, preliminary aggregation formula.

Figures:
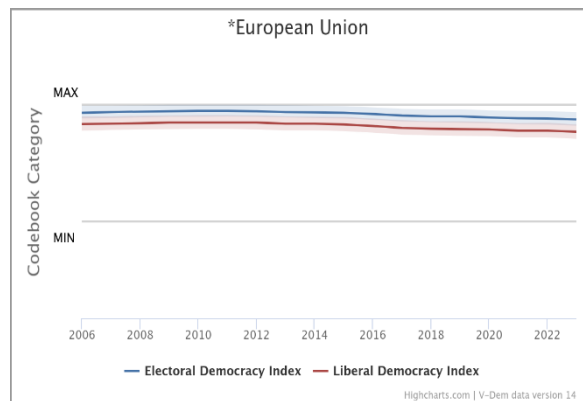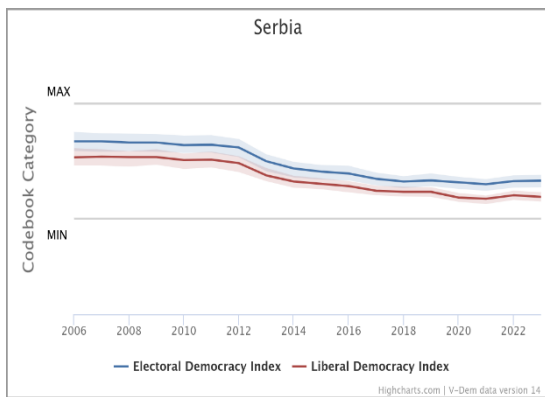
Figures 1 and 2: Graphs taken from V-Dem: Electoral Democracy and Liberal Democracy index (scale 0-1) over the years, Serbia vs. weighted average of EU member states
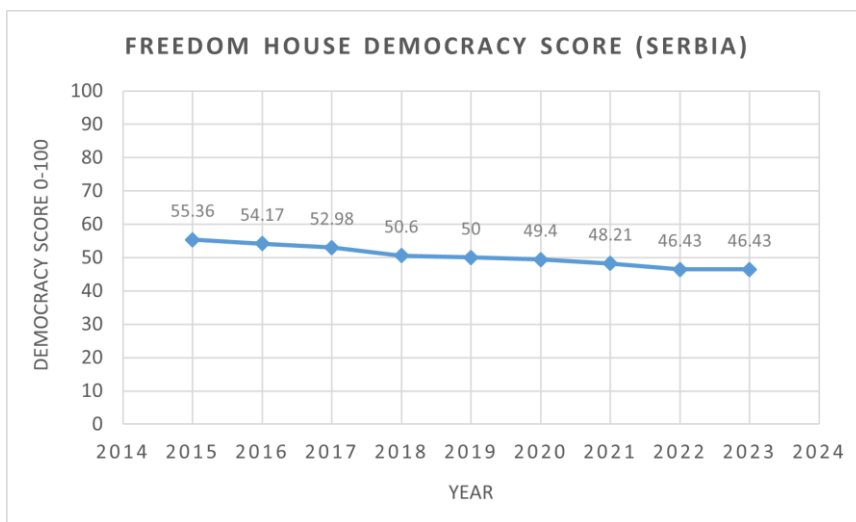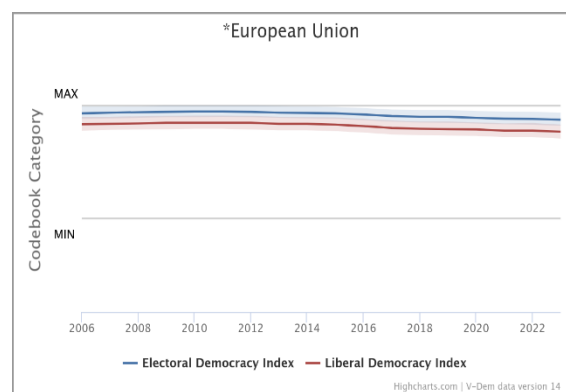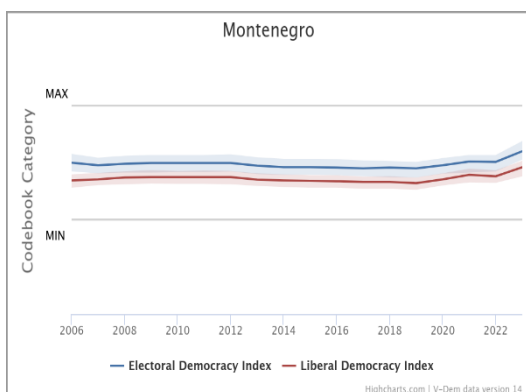

*Figure 3: Author's graph, based on Freedom House Nations in Transit data (2015-2023). From 2020, Serbia was no longer a **semi-consolidated democracy**, but a **transitional or hybrid regime.***

Figures 4 and 5: Graphs taken from V-Dem: Electoral Democracy and Liberal Democracy index (scale 0-1) over the years, Montenegro vs. weighted average of EU member states.
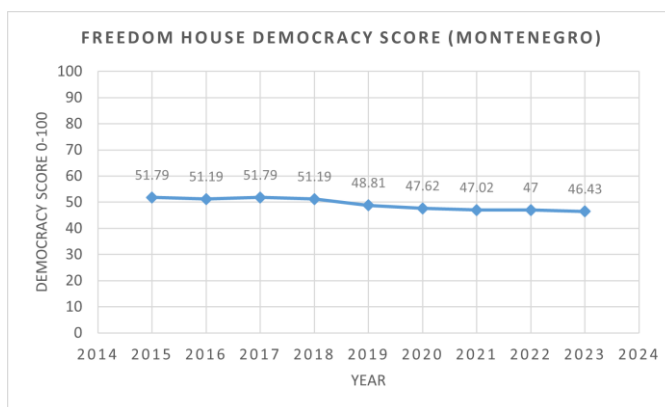
*Figure 6: Author's graph, based on Freedom House Nations in Transit data (2015-2023). From 2020, Montenegro was no longer a **semi-consolidated democracy**, but a **transitional or hybrid regime.***
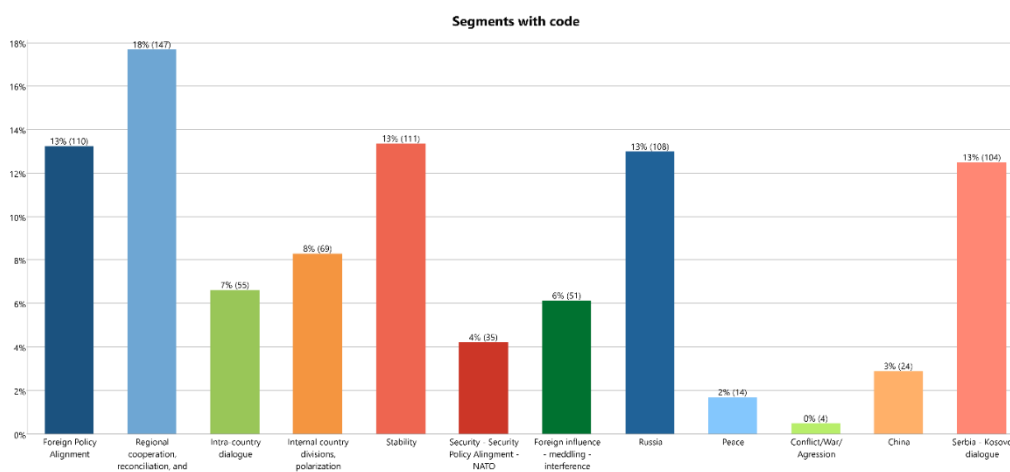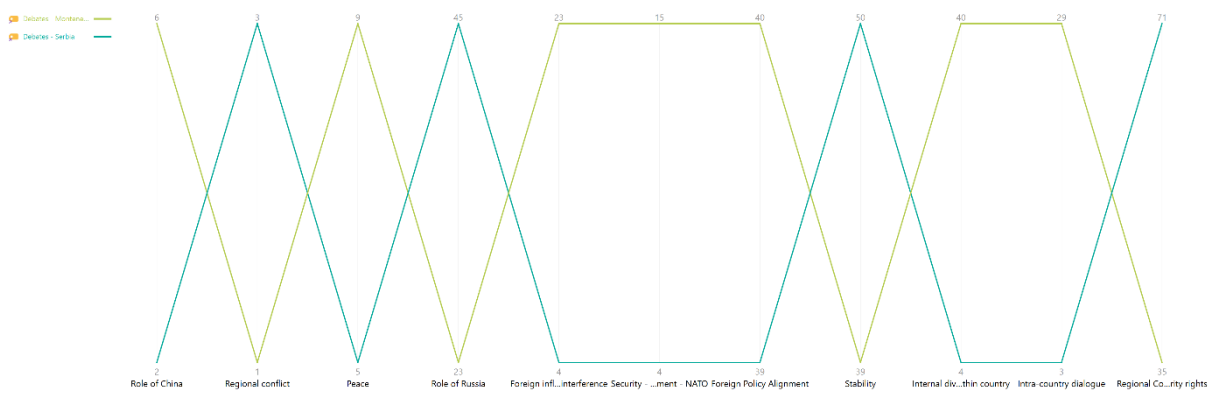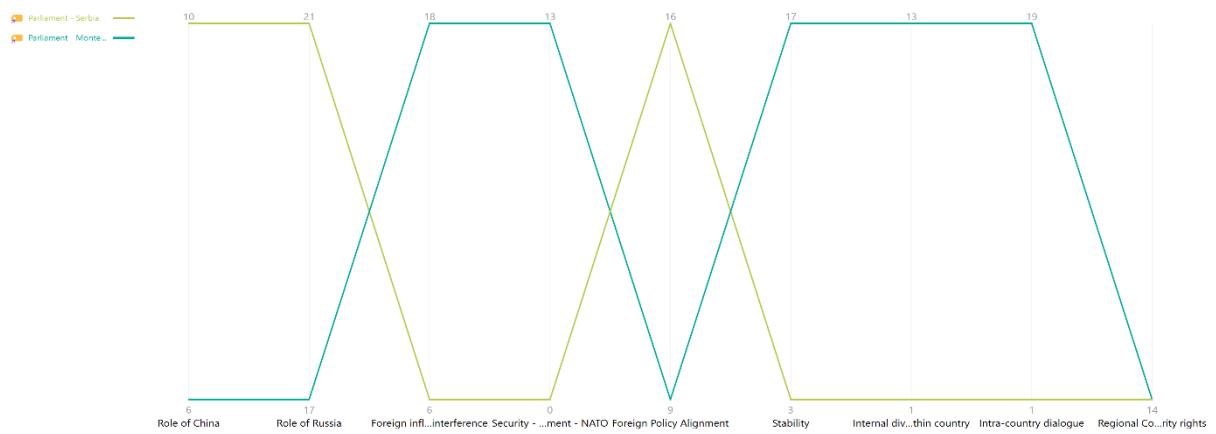

Figure 7: Graph generated by the MAXQDA Software: Segments with codes by percentages and absolute figures

Tables:

Code System	Serbia - Kosovo dialogue	China	Regional conflict	Peace	Russia	Foreign influence	Security	Foreign Policy	Stability	Internal divisions	Intra-country dialogue	Regional Cooperation
Serbia - Kosovo dialogue	0	4	1	1	7	4	1	8	4	2	2	13
China	4	0	2	2	7	8	5	8	7	5	6	8
Conflict	1	2	0	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
Peace	1	2	2	0	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
Russia	7	7	2	2	0	8	6	14	9	7	8	13
Foreign influence - meddling - interference	4	8	2	2	8	0	7	10	9	7	8	10
Security - Security Policy Alingment - NATO	1	5	2	2	6	7	0	11	12	9	10	13
Foreign Policy Alignment	8	8	2	2	14	10	11	0	14	10	11	19
Stability	4	7	2	2	9	9	12	14	0	9	12	16
Internal divisions	2	5	2	2	7	7	9	10	9	0	9	14
Intra-country dialogue	2	6	2	2	8	8	10	11	12	9	0	14
Regional Cooperation	13	8	2	2	13	10	13	19	16	14	14	0

Table 1: Table generated by the MAXQDA Software: Inter-code relations by frequency

Figures 8 and 9: Comparison charts generated by the MAXQDA Software: Top (EP Reports), bottom (EP Debates), figures are absolute values of coded segment frequencies

Appendix II – Analyzed documents

European Commission Progress Reports for Serbia:

- 2013[5]:https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/serbia-progress-report-2013_en

- 2014: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/serbia-progress-report-2014_en

- 2015: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/serbia-report-2015_en

- 2016: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/serbia-report-2016_en

- 2017/18:https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/377c86c1-1cb6-49ca-8549-e40be2308643_en?filename=20180417-serbia-report.pdf

- 2019: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/serbia-report-2019-0_en

- 2020: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/serbia-report-2020_en

- 2021: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/serbia-report-2021_en

- 2022: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/serbia-report-2022_en

- 2023: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/serbia-report-2023_en

European Commission Progress Reports for Montenegro:

- 2012:https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/montenegro-progress-report-2012_en

- 2013:https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/montenegro-progress-report-2013_en

- 2014:https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/montenegro-progress-report-2014_en

- 2015:https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/montenegro-report-2015_en?prefLang=es

- 2016: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/montenegro-report-2016-0_en

- 2017/18:https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/montenegro-report-2018-0_en

- 2019: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/montenegro-report-2019-0_en

- 2020: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/montenegro-report-2020_en

- 2021: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/montenegro-report-2021_en

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[5] It means that the report is on the progress made in that year, although it can sometimes be formally published the following year.

-   2022: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/montenegro-report-2022_en
-   2023: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/montenegro-report-2023_en

European Parliament Progress Reports for Serbia:

-   2013: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-7-2014-0039_EN.html
-   2014: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2015-0065_EN.html
-   2015: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2016-0046_EN.html
-   2016: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2017-0261_EN.html
-   2017/18: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2018-0478_EN.html
-   2019/20: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2021-0115_EN.html
-   2021: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0284_EN.html
-   2022: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2023-0172_EN.html

European Parliament Progress Reports for Montenegro:

-   2012:https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52013IP0185
-   2013: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-7-2014-0104_EN.html
-   2014: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2015-0063_EN.html
-   2015: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2016-0092_EN.html
-   2016:https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52017IP0094
-   2017/18: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2018-0482_EN.html
-   2019/20:https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52021IP0244
-   2021: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0266_EN.html
-   2022: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2023-0369_EN.html

Plenary Debates on the EP reports, for Serbia and for Montenegro:

-   All retrieved from: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/plenary/en/debates-video.html

Appendix III – Coding scheme

CODE	DEFINITION	EXAMPLE
Stability	Explicit mention, or reference to, stability, instability, stabilization or destabilization, besides in the purely economic sense.	*"Condemns, in the strongest terms, all actions that endanger stability and jeopardize the reconciliation process."*
Peace	Explicit mention, or reference to, but also indirect discussion of peace/lack of conflict, both in the country and regionally.	*"Serbia has shown its commitment to peace and stability in the region: good neighbourly relations, regional cooperation and the continuation of the dialogue with Pristina. This is encouraging for the Western Balkans connectivity agenda and the next Trieste summit in July."*
Conflict/War/Aggression	Explicit mention, or reference to, but also indirect discussion of conflict/war/aggression, both in the country and regionally.	*" (...) the situation in the Western Balkans is really worrying. I think we have a consensus about such an assessment. There are numerous tensions between the countries of the Western Balkans and within countries between different ethnic, religious and political communities. The external influences of Russia and Turkey are also strong, and the European Union is quite reserved. All this further complicates an already complex situation that can escalate into conflicts."*
Regional cooperation, reconciliation, and dialogue	Direct or indirect mention and discussion of cooperation,	*"(The EP) Underlines the importance of good neighbourly relations and welcomes Montenegro's constructive*

	reconciliation, and dialogue in the WB region, including on bilateral level.	*role in regional cooperation, especially its active participation in numerous regional initiatives in South East Europe; commends Montenegro for maintaining good bilateral relations with all neighboring countries; regrets, however, that the delimitation of borders with almost all neighboring countries remains pending; calls for efforts to resolve all remaining open issues in a good neighbourly spirit, and highlights the need to resolve bilateral issues prior to accession."*
Serbia-Kosovo dialogue	Direct or indirect mention and discussion of cooperation, reconciliation, and dialogue, but explicitly on the bilateral level between Serbia and Kosovo in the normalization of relations process.	*"Continued visible and sustainable progress in the normalization of relations with Kosovo, including the implementation of agreements reached so far, will remain essential."*
Internal country divisions and polarization	Direct or indirect mention and discussion of internal country divisions and polarization, both social and political, or however framed in the documents, including with referral to such state withing a specific institution or social group.	*"(The EP) Regrets the deep polarization, lack of dialogue, mistrust and political boycotts in the Montenegrin Parliament that have seriously hampered the legislative process."*
Internal dialogue and cooperation	Direct or indirect mention and discussion of, or a call for, dialogue and cooperation to be established between different social and political actors within a country.	*"Returning the political debate to the Parliament is the responsibility of all political actors. Active and constructive participation by all parties is required to enhance parliamentary accountability,*

		oversight of the executive, democratic scrutiny and better quality of the legislation."
Foreign policy alignment	Direct or indirect mention and discussion of, or a call for a country's foreign policy to be aligned with that of the EU (where officially named as the EU CFSP but also where mentioned as 'foreign policy').	*"On the issue of foreign policy, which some Members have mentioned, the European Union closely follows the alignment of candidate countries with European Union external policies and actions, including the EU's relationship with Russia. According to the Commission's last progress report, Serbia's alignment rate was 65%. In line with the negotiating framework, Serbia needs to progressively align its policies and positions with those of the European Union in the foreign and security policy area, which will be assessed within the screening of Chapter 31. "*
Security and defense, security policy alignment, and NATO	Direct or indirect mention and discussion of security/defense/military affairs, or a call for a country's security policy to be aligned with that of the EU (excluding discussions of the EU CFSP which are accounted for above, but including discussions of the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP); here the key is a direct appearance of security and similar areas, including segments that involve NATO and NATO accession)	*"(The EP) Expresses concern over the governmental appointments in the security and military intelligence sector and the danger that Montenegro's strategic alliance with the EU and NATO could be called into question; underlines the strategic importance of Montenegro's NATO membership and encourages the Montenegrin authorities to cooperate in the field of resilience to foreign interference and cybersecurity with both the EU and NATO."*

Foreign influence, meddling, and interference	Direct or indirect mention and discussion of, or a call for a stop to/investigation of foreign influence, meddling, and interference, but without an explicit mention of a third party by name.	*"On this occasion, I would like to express my concern regarding the influence of third non-European countries on internal political processes and foreign policy priorities in Montenegro as well as other countries in the region, which can further threaten the peace and stability of the Western Balkans."*
Russia	Combining several aspects of the previous codes, including mention and discussion of foreign policy, security, foreign influence, destabilization, etc., but in direct mention and relation to Russia and its role in the country and region.	*"(...) Serbia is the only candidate country for membership of the European Union that has not yet joined the common foreign and security policy of the European Union, especially now in relation to Russia and Russia's aggression in Ukraine. Belgrade gives very frequent signals, now also at the moment, of close cooperation with Russia, both politically, economically, energetically and militarily. The Serbian political elite must clearly choose - with the European Union or with the Kremlin, or maybe they are looking for something similar, as in Tito's time, for non-alignment. When we talk about Serbia, very often on paper the situation looks good, but in reality, unfortunately, things are not like that."*
China	Combining several aspects of the previous codes, including mention and discussion of foreign policy, security,	*"In particular, I would like to highlight the strong emphasis on countering the malign influence and*

	foreign influence, destabilization, etc., but in direct mention and relation to China and its role in the country and region.	*hybrid threats from non—democratic regimes, particularly including the Chinese Communist Party. The negative impact of Chinese influence is increasingly felt in different sectors. Chinese— made surveillance equipment undermines national security and people's freedom. Chinese corrosive capital continues to cause environmental damages, undermines good governance, and even the EU acquis passed down through the enlargement process. The growing influence of these regimes continues to negatively impact the future development of Serbia and its neighbors. It is absolutely crucial for the European Union to combine a sustainable alternative to Chinese investment with the necessary political commitment to Serbia's – and the region's – democracy and EU membership."*