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## **Stabilocracy and the Durability of Illiberal Practices in the Western Balkans**

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**Abstract:** The Western Balkans region has been hindered in its development due to a combination of factors, including a lack of democratic principles and increasing competition between Russia and the West. Despite attempts at engagement between the European Union and the Western Balkans dating back to the early 2000s, both the 2008 global economic crisis and the civil war in Syria in 2011 weakened the EU's focus on the region. At the same time, Russian Federation's efforts to increase its influence in the region have further encouraged anti-democratic forces and contributed to a rise in Euroscepticism. The populist policies of political leaders seeking to extend their power have further exacerbated the situation, delaying the implementation of EU conditionality principles in the region. While the EU has prioritized stability over democracy to prevent Russian expansion, this stance has been described in academic literature as "stabilocracy". However, the current research argues that these stabilocratic practices have only further distanced the region from EU standards, thereby deepening illiberal practices and requiring critical examination of their consequences.

**Keywords:** Stabilocracy, Western Balkans, European Union, Russian Federation, Conditionality.

### **Introduction**

This paper addresses to explain the effect of stabilocracy by developing some hypotheses about the politics of Western Balkans (WB) indicating how the stabilocratic regimes affects the integration process of the region to the European Union (EU). Following years of conflict and division during the 1990s, the WB embarked on a process of engagement with the EU with the ultimate objective of full membership. In the aftermath of NATO's Kosovo operation, efforts aimed at bringing an end to the hostilities were redirected towards establishment of a durable and stable peace. As the necessity for amplified efforts to convert the region's negative peace into a positive one became increasingly evident, the enlargement process was considered as uncertain. This was the result of the worldwide economic crisis of 2008 and its repercussions on Europe, as well as the escalating Syrian conflict (Demirtaş, 2018: 194). While the EU had its faults and inadequacies in this process, it was also instrumental in the resistance of the region's staunchly democratic regimes to the democratic transformation that the EU was striving for.

It is critical to acknowledge that the WB region lacks a tradition of democracy. This circumstance has hindered the establishment of a fully liberal democracy in the newly independent states of the region. Additionally, it is unsurprising that hybrid structures combining elements of democracy and autocracy are emerging in the post-truth era in this region situated between the spheres of influence of the EU and Russia. Russia has been concentrating on deepening, expanding, and consolidating its presence in a region that has historically been significant to its foreign policy goals. utilizing instruments including energy policy, cultural diplomacy, racial symbols (pan-Slavism), and ties to the past (Panagiotou, 2020: 12). Russia has made a concerted effort to re-establish itself as a major global power and to offer an alternative to the Euro-Atlantic paradigm of liberal democracy and a free market economy. In this endeavor, the WB has emerged as one of the regions in which Russia has demonstrated a high level of engagement and activity (Vladimirov & et al, 2018: 9). Despite the

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EU's avowed efforts to close the democratic deficit through its conditionality policy, these efforts have yet to produce satisfactory outcomes.

Aside from Russia's endeavors to establish a sphere of influence in the region, the high stakes involved for the EU also present opportunities for corrupt leaders to exploit. These rulers capitalize on the EU's priorities and continue to receive support from the EU in a bid to sustain their hold on power, resulting in a delay of democratization efforts in their respective countries, as the EU aid remains unabated. At present, the leaders in question have only pledged to uphold stability within the EU. This stability is limited to avoiding rapprochement with Russia and avoiding the rekindling of dormant conflicts in the region. As a result, the EU has consistently postponed its objective of democratization in the region, considering it prudent to collaborate with these leaders to preserve stability.

Despite the continuous delay of liberalization in the region, the support of the EU for leaders who do not seem eager to address this issue in the name of stability has resulted in the creation of a concept called "stabilocracy". For the purposes of this paper, the term stabilocracy will be taken to mean the semi-authoritarian regimes in the WB that receive external support, particularly from EU member states, in exchange for the illusion of stability. When the literature is examined, it can be observed that the terms stabilocracy and "stabilotocracy" are used interchangeably to express similar meanings. The terms stabilotocracy, for instance, are used by O'Brennan (2018), Khaze (2022), Bieber (2018) and Soyaltin-Colella (2022). However, Frckoski (2019), Kazarinova (2019), Halili (2019), Conley and Ruy (2021), Bieber in another publication (2017) prefer to use the term "stabilocracy". The term stabilocracy, which combines the words stability and *krátos* (Κράτος; power), would, in my opinion, be more suited for this paper. These regimes exhibit significant democratic deficiencies yet attain external legitimacy through the promise of stability. This trade-off between stability and lenience on democracy has been a recurring feature of Western support for non-democratic regimes globally (Bieber, 2017). In this study, based on the above definition, the leaders and administrations that construct and benefit from these administrations will be referred to as "stabilocrats". Of course, it would be more accurate to consider stabilocrats not as individual actors but in conjunction with their patronage networks (Soyaltin-Colella, 2022: 3).

The WB is one of the most problematic enlargement geographies in terms of European integration. Although the 2004 and 2007 enlargements were also problematic in terms of harmonization with the EU's basic norms (Arman, 2012, 44), the problems in the WB states and the global conjuncture during this enlargement were more challenging. What distinguishes the WB is the formal offer of EU accession based on equality and democracy, which departs from the earlier approach of a foreign policy driven by interests and maintaining inequality between the core countries of the EU and WB. This shift towards stabilocracy represents a setback from the initial vision of EU integration based on equality, convergence, and prioritizes geopolitical considerations over liberal democracy. The governments' claims of stability, whether it be in managing regional relationships or mitigating external challenges such as the refugee crisis, are misleading, as the lack of democracy in the region is a key source of instability. Against this background, the central question that motivates this paper is semi-authoritarian stabilocracies are willing to cause and manage instability within the region or towards opposition or minorities to sustain their rule (Bieber, 2017). Hence, we might draw the conclusion that the WB stabilocrats are taking advantage of the EU's demand for stability in order to further their own personal interests.

To Bieber, these regimes are based on a precarious balance between external demands for stability and the need to generate tensions to maintain their legitimacy. These tensions are essential to make themselves indispensable for both the EU and domestic public opinion. In the context of consolidated liberal democracies, stabilocracies would not be viable. They are inherently paradoxical, as their very existence relies on creating instability to legitimize their persistence. Thus, a region of stabilocracies exacerbates each other's instability, which, in turn, legitimizes their continued rule. In the WB, a type of governance called as stabilocracy has emerged. This form of rule is characterized by a government that prioritizes stability, pays lip service to EU integration, and retains control through informal networks, media control, and the creation of crises. While this phenomenon is not exclusive to the WB or recent times, the proximity of the region to the EU, the popular desire to join the EU, and the ongoing crisis of liberal democracy have solidified its presence in the area (Bieber, 2018). In other words, stabilocratic elements lead to a shallow Europeanization (Petrović, 2022: 310)

In conclusion, these stabilocrats are skilled at maintaining their hold on power by making alliances with Russia during pivotal moments and failing to resolve frozen issues. They can continue to get assistance from the EU in solving issues in this way. A very significant question can now be raised. Why does the EU allow this to happen and why does it not halt the integration of these states? A Neo-classical Realism argument can be used to explain the solution to this query. In other words, this issue is a keystone of a systemic West-Russia dilemma as well as a concern with EU integration.

## **Outlook of Stabilocracy in the Western Balkans**

The concept of stabilocracy has been defined in a general sense, however, it is imperative to delve into the emergence of this phenomenon in the WB. While it is challenging to make an exact categorization, utilizing the list compiled by a reputable expert organization, such as the Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael, appears to be a suitable approach. The Clingendael report identifies some following key characteristics as being representative of stabilocracy in the West Balkans. The formation of stabilocracy in the WB suggests limitations in the EU's transformative power. Internal factors and a lack of political will in the region play a significant role in this formation. However, some sources argue that the EU's policies contribute to the entrenchment of autocratic tendencies. This report aims to explore these unintended consequences and propose measures to mitigate the further entrenchment of stabilocracy in the WB. It evaluates the potential of the revised accession methodology adopted in 2020 as a remedy and examines other options available to the EU to counteract this trend. The report also identifies eight flaws in the EU's strategies, policies, and implementation that are believed to contribute to the formation of stabilocracy. The EU's technical approach to enlargement doesn't promote significant political and societal changes. The report's main findings on stabilocracy in the WB are as follows:

- . A lack of clear definitions in the rule of law hinders the proper transference of EU values.
- . Poor reporting on reform progress clouds the actual political situation in the WB.
- . The EU rarely speaks out against stagnation or regression and takes an action against them that are effectively supporting autocratic tendencies.
- . The EU is unable to reward progress due to a lack of agreement among its member states, undermining its credibility.
- . The EU's focus on leaders in the WB strengthens the power of political elites and undermines democracy.
- . Political affiliations between the EU and WB political groups lead to support for non-democratic parties.
- . The absence of interim timelines prevents the EU from monitoring reform progress and holding governments accountable for democratic reforms (Wouter et al, 2022).

Since democratic institutionalization has failed to take place in these states that emerged after the dissolution of Yugoslavia, a liberal transformation cannot take place despite all the support of Euro-Atlantic institutions. This situation delays the EU membership of these countries. From this point on, it is necessary to address the main problems in these countries.

### **Illiberal Practices in Serbia**

Serbia has been subject to numerous allegations of human rights violations and restrictions on political freedoms. One such violation is the restriction of media freedom, where the government has been accused of exerting control and limiting the diversity of opinions in the media. This has been accomplished by censorship, encouraging self-censorship, intimidating journalists, consolidating media ownership in the hands of people with ties to the government, and possibly undermining the independence of public broadcasters (Greenwood, 2022).

In addition, concerns about political influence on hiring and decision-making, a lack of accountability for judicial wrongdoing, and pressure on judges and prosecutors have raised doubts about the independence of the judiciary. Additionally, corruption, both those at the highest levels of government and pervasive petty corruption, is still a problem in Serbia. The government has come under fire for failing to adopt strong anti-corruption measures and for failing to ensure transparency in public procurement (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2011).

There is evidence of the repression of political opposition, including obstructions to media coverage, political pressure, harassment and intimidation of opposition leaders, and violations of electoral procedures. Furthermore, the exercise of freedom of assembly has also been constrained. As indicated by Freedom House Watch, the Serbian Progressive Party, which holds political power, has been instrumental in the systematic diminution of political liberties and civil rights in recent years, exerting pressure on independent media, the political opposition, and civil society organizations (Freedom House, 2022a). There have been reports of human rights violations, including instances of police brutality, substandard prison conditions, discrimination and violence against the Roma population, infringement of freedom of speech and media freedom, and restrictions on the rights of refugees and migrants.

When it comes to Serbia's stabilocracy dimensions, Vucic is a unique leader. Several people in Brussels think Vucic acts as guarantor of stability in Serbia (Bjeloš, 2017: 4). He has become a crucial leader for the EU due to his involvement in the conflict in the Republica Srpska, the Kosovo issue, and the tensions between NATO and Russia. Vucic is known as Serbia's "baron of stability" due to the sociology of the nation, which is at times prone to extremism or pro-Russianism.

### **Illiberal Practices in Montenegro**

Montenegro has been criticized for many illiberal practices, especially as a state ruled by a single leader for more than three decades. Such prolonged leadership has led to the emergence of a leader-dependent state structure. The state administration has often been blamed for a lack of judicial independence, government-dominated media, lack of transparency and accountability of institutions, and heavy repression of the opposition.

The above-mentioned reasons led to the state capture. The phrase describes how private interests infiltrate public decision-making processes and then use them to serve their own interests. This often encompasses corruption, political influence, and the abuse of power by individuals or groups with vested interests. In such a state capture scenario, the manipulation and shaping of laws, policies, regulations, decrees, and other government measures for private or group gain is a widespread issue in both the public and private sectors. While some individuals may participate in such activities for personal gain, often through corrupt practices, it is not uncommon for actors to exert control over significant portions of the institutional framework in order to promote their own interests and policy agenda (Keil, 2018). Numerous specialists assert that President Milo Djukanovic's extended rule was marked by practices associated with state capture (Heckert, 2022).

### **Illiberal Practices in Albania**

The political landscape in Albania is marked by several non-democratic policies and practices that have raised concerns about human rights and political freedom. In particular, media freedom is restricted by the government through various means including censorship, control over media outlets, harassment of journalists, concentration of media ownership in the hands of few individuals with ties to the government, political influence on public broadcasters, and economic pressures on media outlets. Access to information is also limited, resulting in a lack of transparency and accountability in public institutions. The preeminent private media outlets in Albania are dominated by a select few corporations that possess affiliations with political entities and concurrently engage in industries that are subject to stringent regulation, such as the construction industry. Despite the abundance of online media entities present within the country, a limited proportion of these media outlets have established a financially viable model, characterized by transparent funding sources (Reporters Without Borders, 2023).

The political influence on the judiciary, which jeopardizes its independence and impartiality, is another problem. This is clear from the meddling in high-profile cases, pressure on judges to rule in specific ways based on political considerations, corruption within the judiciary, and intervention in the nomination of judges and prosecutors. Independent observers generally concur that a thorough overhaul of the legal system in Albania is necessary. The system is beset by pervasive corruption, a dearth of skilled workers, and institutional inefficiencies. Even in comparison to other recently created democracies, this has led to an alarming lack of public confidence in the legal system and law enforcement. The seriousness of the situation puts the rule of law seriously in jeopardy, and the Albanian political class broadly agrees that reforming the justice system is required. However, there is no agreement on the best strategy for implementing such transformation (Dobrush, 2016).

Albania still struggles with widespread corruption that affects all branches of government, the legal system, police, and security services, as well as public procurement and theft of public monies. The absence of effective actions by the administration to reduce corruption and increase accountability and transparency has drawn criticism. The harassment and intimidation of opposition leaders and supporters, rigged elections, restrictions on the right to assemble and express oneself, political pressure, the criminalization of political activity, and limitations on media access are all examples of restrictions on political opposition. Last but not least, there are several human rights violations that are of concern in Albania. These include police brutality, prejudice against minority groups, mistreatment of refugees and migrants, poor prison conditions, violence against women, violations of the rights of those with disabilities, and abuses related to the conflict with Kosovo.

### **Illiberal Practices in Kosovo**

Many academic studies have noted that there are many problems with human rights and political freedom in Kosovo. Media freedom in particular has been the subject of much of this criticism. Government suppression of the media, imprisonment of journalists and censorship are among the evidence of restricted media freedom. Likewise, public broadcasters are subjected to political pressure and their financial autonomy is removed (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2022).

There are also frequent criticisms of political pressure on judges and prosecutors in cases involving high-profile political leaders, referred to in this study as stabilocrats (Brady, 2016). The judiciary lacks accountability and transparency and some members of the judiciary have at times been implicated in corruption allegations. It is a fact that the issue of corruption has always been on the Kosovo agenda. The lack of a fight against this issue is reflected in the reports of many civil organizations, especially the EU. Finally, the fact that the Kosovo administration responded to the Serbian municipalities' demands for autonomy with violence can also be considered as evidence of the lack of democracy (NDI, 2021a).

### **Illiberal Practices in Bosnia and Herzegovina**

The entity-level and canton-level governments that make up Bosnia and Herzegovina's (BiH) national government are said to uphold democratic values. However, in reality, ethnonational political players use the system of checks and balances to obstruct the state's ability to run effectively, perpetuating a crisis in order to maintain their political dominance (Freedom House, 2022b). BiH continues to struggle with a number of difficulties relating to democracy and human rights as a result of its transitional or hybrid system, including but not limited to.

Political pressure on judicial processes has been reported in the country's press. In particular, it is a major concern that the selection processes of judges and prosecutors are very vulnerable to political interference. As the country has an ethnic-based political model, parties supported by different ethnic groups criticize judges and prosecutors for putting their ethnicity ahead of justice. Finally, politicians have also been criticized for trying to influence judicial processes for personal gain. For all these reasons, allegations of corruption in the judiciary are also included in various international reports (U.S. Embassy in Sarajevo, 2022).

The government has also been criticized for various attempts to limit the opposition. Various attempts by the government to limit the political financing of opposition parties have also been reported. The media is largely controlled by the government, leading to unfair elections and even, according to some allegations, electoral fraud.

BiH is an ethnically based state by virtue of its creation in the Dayton Agreement and this can be seen as the root cause of many illiberal practices. The complex and ethnically divided structure of the post-Bosnian War government has come under fire for impeding progress and causing political impasse (Sahadi, 2012). The segregation of communities, the creation of political parties based on ethnicity, unequal representation in government, unequal access to resources and services, discriminatory policies, and increased tensions and conflict between various ethnic groups are examples of how these ethnically based political divisions manifest themselves (Freedom House, 2022b).

### **Illiberal Practices in North Macedonia**

North Macedonia faces a number of human rights and democracy challenges, including restrictions on media freedom, political influence on the judiciary, corruption, restrictions on political opposition, and human rights abuses.

With regard to restrictions on media freedom, the government has been criticized for limiting media diversity and freedom of expression through defamation laws, political pressure, domination of the media landscape by a few corporations, financial difficulties faced by media outlets, and limited access to information. As an example, in 2022, the Republic of North Macedonia enacted legislation pertaining to media freedom. For the first time in the country's criminal legislation, Article 193 proposes imprisonment for a period ranging from six months to five years for any individual who orders or implements censorship, or who illegally obstructs or restricts a journalist's freedom of reporting. Anyone who impedes the creation and broadcast of radio and television

programs, news organizations, or other kinds of media content, as well as the printing, selling, or distribution of magazines, newspapers, or other printed materials, may be subject to the same punishment. The punishment for interfering with or violating another person's freedom to express their own beliefs can range from three months to three years in prison (Magleshov, 2022).

Concerns regarding the independence of judges and prosecutors as well as the impartiality of the judiciary have been raised by the topic of political influence on the judiciary. These worries are fueled by a number of things, including the politicization of nominations, meddling in prominent cases, corruption, and a lack of independence. Meaningful reforms are required to overcome these persisting problems with judicial independence. The *ex officio* status of the Minister of Justice in the Judicial Council is one reform that is suggested. This is because, if the Minister holds a seat inside the Council, he or she may be able to exercise political influence, even in the absence of voting privileges. The purpose of such a reform would be to increase the judiciary's independence and guard against excessive political influence (Resimić, 2022).

In North Macedonia, corruption is still a major issue that affects many areas, including the court, public procurement, police, customs and tax administration, and political corruption. In a report by the National Democratic Institute (NDI), 64% of the respondents polled named corruption as North Macedonia's most urgent issue. The residents polled expressed a desire for reform and expected that, in order to rebuild public trust, anti-corruption measures would be implemented, including initiatives to address political impunity, solve regulatory gaps, and make necessary personnel changes (NDI, 2021b).

The administration has also been charged with stifling political opposition by means of media bias, political intimidation, limits on public assembly, rigged elections, and lack of access to public funds. North Macedonia has been condemned for police violence, discrimination, infringements on the right to free speech, torture, maltreatment, and other human rights breaches. These problems have been recognized as threats to the country's democratic processes, political rights protection, and rule of law (Amnesty International, 2021).

## **Global and Regional Imperatives for Overcoming Stabilocracy**

The 2008 global economic crisis and the onset of the Syrian conflict in 2011 had a detrimental impact on the EU's policy towards the WB. Prior to these events, the EU had established a full membership vision for the region, which was formalized through the 2003 Thessaloniki Summit. However, the crisis and the conflict led to a reduction in the EU's interest and investment in the region, resulting in a loss of the EU's anchor for the WB states. This loss of control and conditionality by the EU provided opportunities for the stabilocratic leaders in the region to engage in illiberal practices, pushing the regimes away from liberal democracy.

The Russian Federation's annexation of Crimea in 2014, in contravention of the decision reached by the USSR and the Budapest Memorandum (United Nations General Assembly Security Council, 1984) it signed, resulted in a resurgence of interest in the WB on the EU's agenda. In response, the Berlin Process was established to support these countries in their transition towards democracy, characterized by adherence to EU norms, and to prevent closer ties with Russia. In order to build enduring peace through bilateral and multilateral ties, the inaugural WB Conference, held in Berlin, Germany in 2014, sought to address the political and ethnic challenges in the region. The Berlin Process aimed to promote regional economic cooperation and medium- and long-term economic development in the WB.

Through bilateral and multilateral interactions, the Berlin Process, which was launched in 2014, aims to address the political and ethnic difficulties in the WB and advance long-lasting peace. The ultimate objective was to promote sustainable economic growth throughout the area, maintain democratic systems, and promote economic cooperation. The Berlin Process' road map for the World Bank placed a strong emphasis on the necessity of establishing strong, pluralistic power institutions, a functional civil society, and EU membership over the medium term. Since the WB are regarded as a crucial element of the European energy supply, the EU's main objective in the Berlin Process was to maintain its crucial role in the region, notably in terms of energy security. As a result, one of the main goals of the Berlin Process was to integrate the WB into the European energy system.

Geopolitics of international energy is one of the objectives of the current Berlin Process. The Russian-Ukrainian war in particular has reduced Europe's need for fossil fuels, making the WB's entry into the EU even more critical. The security of energy supply to the EU has been impacted by the obstruction of the Nord Stream-2 gas pipeline between Germany and Russia, as well as by the imposition of sanctions on plans for an alternative

pipeline to transport natural gas to Europe through Bulgaria and the WB. The political negotiations regarding the Turkish Stream are ongoing, with an agreement reached for the portion of the route that crosses the Turkish borders. In light of these developments, alternative projects such as the Trans Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP), which has been completed till the Greek border and aims to transport Azerbaijani gas to Europe through Turkey, and the Trans Adriatic Natural Gas Pipeline (TAP), which will connect to TANAP on the Greece-Albania route and convey natural gas to Europe through Italy, have acquired heightened significance as potential substitutes for Nord Stream-2 (Arman and Gürsoy, 2022: 14).

In light of all these developments, it can be expected that the EU will encourage liberal transformation in these countries more enthusiastically by accelerating the Berlin Process. The foremost issue at hand is the apprehension that the democratization of regimes may result in a loss of popularity for the stabilocratic leaders. These leaders may resist the transformation process as they may perceive a threat to their hold on power in a more democratic political system. This explains why the EU has shown a degree of leniency towards these leaders up until now, as there is a fear that leaders who are concerned about losing their positions of power may seek support from Russia.

## **Conclusion**

The phenomenon of stabilocracy has had a detrimental effect on the WB region. In Serbia, President Aleksandar Vucic has successfully navigated the balance of stability and prolonged his tenure as a leader for an extended period of time. However, the longest serving leader in the world, President Milo Djukanovic, is encountering accusations of “state capture” in Montenegro. Analogous accusations of state capture have also arisen in North Macedonia. (Ruy & Conley, 2022).

A salient illustration of this phenomenon can be observed in the Republic of Srpska. The Dayton Agreement has resulted in a fragile negative peace environment, within which President Milorad Dodik both reinforces ultra-nationalism in his country and preserves his authority through a delicate political balance between the EU and Russia. This strategy pursued by President Dodik impedes the integration of the Republic of Srpska into Bosnia and Herzegovina, hindering Bosnia and Herzegovina's advancement in Euro-Atlantic integration processes (Mujanović, 2022).

The Berlin Process was initiated with the aim of promoting stability and democracy in the WB region. However, unforeseen developments such as the Syrian Civil War, Russia's aggressive policies towards Ukraine, and the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic have hindered its success. This has not only impeded the establishment of democratic institutions and governance in the region, but has also had a sociological impact, as the masses move away from democratic values and the EU towards illiberal tendencies, making them more susceptible to disinformation in a post-truth environment. As a result, it is imperative for the Western institutions, particularly the EU, to formulate a more comprehensive strategy for the WB.

## **Scientific Ethics Declaration**

The author declares that the scientific ethical and legal responsibility of this article published in EPESS journal belongs to the author.

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