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“EU Integration of Western Balkans: Dynamics and
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Abstracts Book

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Abstracts Book

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Welcome to ICES 2024

Western Balkan countries are experiencing dynamic and challenging EU integration processes including political, economic, judicial, social, and other types of reforms and areas of integration that are all within the scope of the 9th International Conference on European Studies (ICES'24). The conference aims to promote an interdisciplinary exchange of ideas, knowledge, research, information and recommendations between scholars, professionals and students in all major subfields of political science, international relations, economics, law, sociology, and other related topics focusing particularly on the EU integration perspectives of the Western Balkan countries.

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Building connectivity with Western Balkans – from transport, to people and cultures. Reforms, challenges and perspectives.

Dr. Alina - Carmen Brihan,
University of Oradea

Catalina Mihaela Ficut
European Parliament

Abstract

Transport connectivity is a key enabler for integration, reconciliation and economic development in the Western Balkans, a region still grappling with the legacy of conflict and fragmentation.

The expansion of the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) corridors, especially the Mediterranean Corridor and the route connecting Tirana to Bucharest, offers a strategic opportunity to link the Western Balkans more closely to the European Union (EU) and its major capitals. These corridors not only improve physical infrastructure, but also serve as a bridge to European values, fostering shared history, cultural exchange, and mutual understanding among the countries in the region. By enhancing connectivity, the Western Balkans can integrate more deeply with the European market, boosting trade, investment, and economic competitiveness. Better transport links will facilitate the movement of goods, services, and people, offering improved access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities. The resulting economic growth can help reduce unemployment, foster entrepreneurship, and attract foreign investment, all of which are vital for the region's stability and prosperity. Additionally, increased connectivity will encourage cross-border cooperation and help reduce ethnic tensions by facilitating people-to-people contact, thereby contributing to reconciliation efforts.

However, in order to fully benefit from these opportunities, the countries in the Western Balkans need to undertake significant political, economic, and institutional reforms. Reforms are needed to align national policies with EU standards, particularly in areas such as governance, rule of law, public procurement, and environmental protection. Strengthening institutions and addressing corruption are essential for ensuring that infrastructure projects are implemented efficiently and transparently. Moreover, reforms in transport and logistics sectors will be necessary to modernize and harmonize regulatory frameworks with EU requirements, ensuring the seamless integration of the region into the EU's transport system. In this context, the development of TEN-T corridors is not only an infrastructure project, but a catalyst for broader transformation. By connecting cities like Tirana, Skopje, Sofia and Bucharest, the Western Balkans can gradually integrate into the EU, not only through improved mobility, but by embracing the values of democracy, good governance, and social cohesion. The success of these transport projects depends on the region's commitment to reforms, which will ultimately pave the way for closer ties with the EU and foster a more peaceful and prosperous future for the region.

Therefore, our paper we will approach both the theoretical framework and as mentioned above, the necessary reforms in governance, infrastructure and public administration for

the Western Balkans, to fully leverage the benefits of TEN-T connectivity, as well as the challenges and perspectives for this area.

Keywords: TEN-T, infrastructure, governance, public administration, people

Albania and North Macedonia: Understanding their Diverging Paths to EU Membership

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Abstract

For over two decades, Albania and North Macedonia followed a coupled path towards EU integration. However, in September 2024, the EU decoupled Albania's accession process from North Macedonia's, underscoring not only their differing trajectories toward membership but also recognizing the distinct strategic crossroads and contingent futures these nations face. This study aims to critically assess the evolving EU integration paths of both countries. Although influenced by similar challenges, such as EU enlargement fatigue and geopolitical pressures, their paths have diverged due to varying internal and external dynamics. Albania, with its unified political support and fewer external disputes, has effectively leveraged geopolitical shifts, including the Russian invasion of Ukraine, to solidify its position as a stable EU partner. On the other hand, North Macedonia's journey is hindered by unresolved bilateral disputes, particularly with Bulgaria, which continue to delay its EU progress. The EU's strategic engagement with both nations reveals a complex balancing act between conditional support, required reforms, and geopolitical considerations. This paper offers a comparative analysis, highlighting Albania's comparative advantage in the integration process and the broader strategic implications for the Western Balkans.

Keywords: Albania, bilateral disputes, EU integration, geopolitical pressures, North Macedonia, Western Balkans

The U.S. Non-Surrender Agreements. Exploring the legal and political implications of Albania's agreement on its EU integration

Dr. Alba Gerdeci
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Abstract

Albania signed the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) in 1998 and formally ratified it in 2002. Ever since, the concepts of international crimes and international criminal justice as regulated by the Statute have gained currency in the country's political and legal discourse. This shift was influenced by the atrocities in the Yugoslav conflicts, particularly in Kosovo, as well as Albania's involvement in peacekeeping missions in post-conflict areas like Afghanistan and Iraq.

In 2003, Albania signed a bilateral immunity agreement with the United States under Article 98 of the Rome Statute, exempting U.S. citizens from ICC extradition. This decision was driven by Albania's need for U.S. support in its successful bid for NATO membership in 2009. However, the agreement conflicts with European Union (EU) policy, which opposes such exemptions as undermining the ICC's integrity.

This article explores the contrasting EU and U.S. policies on the ICC, Albania's relations with the Court, and the broader status of U.S. non-surrender agreements in Western Balkans and EU candidate countries. By doing so, it sheds light on the legal and political implications of Albania's agreement for its EU integration process, highlighting still existing tensions between its commitments to international criminal justice and aspirations for EU membership.

Keywords: Albania, ICC, U.S., EU, Immunity Agreements, Integration

International Legal Cooperation in Criminal Matters Between the Republic of Kosovo and the EU

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to present an overview of how international legal cooperation in criminal matters works in general, always bearing in mind that the Republic of Kosovo is in the final stages of its integration into the European Union. As is known, Kosovo's path to EU membership contains elements and criteria of various aspects such as political, economic, social and legal. Throughout the years since the independence of the Republic of Kosovo, our state has made efforts to meet all the criteria derived from the EU institutions, and one of these criteria also includes Kosovo's cooperation with other states, especially those of the EU in criminal matters. International legal cooperation is a necessity as criminality has already crossed internal borders and has taken on international dimensions. This is also why interdependence between states has been introduced in order to combat criminality as effectively as possible and to take immediate measures within legal frameworks for all persons committing crimes inside and outside the country. Therefore, this paper will first explain international legal cooperation in criminal matters primarily by linking the current legal and institutional framework of Kosovo including specific internal bodies dealing with this issue. Also, the most important part will focus on international bilateral agreements that Kosovo currently possesses with EU states and will also mention all forms of international legal cooperation in general.

Keywords: International cooperation, criminal cases, legal framework, bilateral agreements, EU membership.

The integration of ESG criteria in financial institutions in Albania

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Abstract

Due to the increased interest in sustainability issues brought on by climate change, there has been an increase in interest in developing sustainable investments, especially from stakeholders, regulators, and the public to learn more about the advantages of sustainability reporting on business results. Despite the increased costs accompanying sustainable investments, increasing them has a positive impact on the company's financial success.

In the framework of Sustainable Development Goals, Green finance is an emerging field that can create competi-

tive advantages and opportunities. Albanian financial institutions have started to incorporate ESG principles and develop green products to achieve SDG objectives. Their role is seen from two perspectives, as entities that directly impact the environment through different types of consumption but also indirectly via the products and services offered to their clients. Albania has benefited in this regard also from programs that have given rise to ESG understanding and its implementation such as Economy Financing Facility (GEFFN).

This paper overviews the academic literature on environmental, social, and governance (ESG) to understand the ESG pillar and how executives of financial institutions can evaluate a company's overall accountability and long-term benefits using these pillars. The research is based on a survey that mixes questions from surveys conducted by Deloitte, the International Bar Association, and Société Generale Securities. The survey was filled out by executives from eight commercial banks and seven insurance companies that operate in Albania. Findings highlight that only a minority of firms have adopted all three pillars of ESG, and however half of the firms indicate that they have an ESG practice group advising their clients on ESG matters, but only 40 percent say they also have seen an increase in demand for ESG support for clients. Around 70% of them showed that ESG is not integrally incorporated in the governance and management practices, including decision-making. However, all of them show an increase of awareness that the implementation of ESG in the long term increases financial gain, improves their reputation, life cycle, reporting practices and risk management, encourages innovation and data, and contributes to a more sustainable society.

Keywords: ESG, financial institutions, green finance, sustainability reporting

The EU Integration of Western Balkans: A Test Bench and an Opportunity for the European Single Market

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Abstract

The integration of the Western Balkans Countries in the European Union is a process that started in 2004 and experienced other two important steps in 2007 and 2013. Since then, the enlargement underwent a setback. The reasons can be traced back to a multifaceted subset of factors, especially regarding these Countries' economic performances and the compliance with the rule of law principles. Moreover, the economical, social and, we can say, identity crisis that affected the whole EU and which reached its peak in 2016 with the Brexit referendum, casted some doubts also in the opposed perspective, which means the capability of the EU and its Single Market to integrate a large number of Countries. The European Union itself is experiencing the fact that times has changed since its creation and its cumbersome structures and procedures are not able anymore to answer to the challenges the Union is called to face. The Single Market is suffering the external competition from emergent actors and, at the same time, the EU 's role is challenged in security matters, highlighting the never implemented convergence among Member States on this issue. In light of the above, the revamping of the Single Market through structural reforms and the integration of the Western Balkans Countries represent a necessary step for both these Countries and the EU. The proposed paper will analyse the current policy issues characterizing this project – especially with regard to the Four Freedoms and competition law – and it will propose the solutions deemed necessary.

Keywords: EU integration, Western Balkans, European Single Market, competition law, Four freedoms

Irregular Migrants in Albania: Trends, Challenges, and Policy Solutions

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Abstract

During the last few years, Albania has witnessed an increased influx of irregular migrants entering the country, mostly via the southern border with Greece. Although Albania is not part of the EU's asylum system, it fulfills its responsibilities and provides support to asylum seekers and refugees in line with all the principles for the protection of human rights, international protection, and security, but also in accordance with the country's resources. While existing institutional and regulatory frameworks have so far allowed Albania to cope with irregular migration flows, the country's asylum system could be overcrowded in the future by unexpected fluctuations in the number of arrivals, making it necessary to prioritise based on the needs of the most vulnerable categories. Many migrants resort to smugglers and criminal networks to avoid detention while crossing borders illegally, often due to a scarcity of other viable and safe avenues for migration. Though Albania is considered a transit path in the "Western Balkan route", the massive irregular flows of migrants raise the risk of vulnerable groups falling prey to human trafficking and sexual exploitation. The policy brief explores the current immigration trends in Albania and outlines some of the main challenges that the country faces, with a particular focus on vulnerable groups of asylum seekers and irregular migrants, such as unaccompanied and separated children, women, and minors who might potentially be victims of trafficking, exploitation, and abuse. The paper is based on 15 interviews with irregular migrants and 5 expert/ policy level interviews in migration field conducted during 2018-2023. The analysis tackled several shortcomings during the pre-screening process of vulnerable categories, which include, among others, challenges in the identification of vulnerable categories during the pre-screening procedures; limited cooperation with social protection units and border authorities; difficulties in the process of identifying victims of gender based violence. In the absence of a blueprint for institutional crisis-response, the lessons learned on how to establish sustainable mechanisms to manage unexpected flow of migrants targeting vulnerable migrants are worth internalizing.

Keywords: Migrant smuggling, Human Rights, Migration, Immigration, Immigrants, and Asylum

Causes of democracy drawbacks in the Western Balkans

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Abstract

Democratization in the Western Balkans took longer than anticipated. Actually, it is experiencing drawbacks in the democratization process and has started to undergo the process of re-authoritarianism. The six Western Balkan countries differ in the degree rather than in the substance of democracy drawbacks. The paper aims to explore the domestic, regional, and international causes of democratization drawbacks. Moreover, it will also look at the impact of current developments into the re-authoritarianisation prospects, and its impact into the regional stability and peace prospects.

Keywords: Democratization drawbacks, Western Balkans, Re-authoritarianization

The importance of online customer reviews as key influencer in purchase decision-making in the industry of tourism: Evidence from the Albanian coastline

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Enxhi Brahimaj
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Abstract

This research examines the intricate patterns of online reputation management within the hotel sector along the Albanian coastline. In the rapidly evolving landscape of modern tourism, the hospitality industry plays a crucial role in shaping the online reputation of destinations. This research identifies the key factors influencing the online identity of the hotel industry and its perception by integrating scholarly literature, digital platforms, and comprehensive analysis of internet data.

By analyzing online reviews and optimizing website performance, the research meticulously investigates each detail to assess its impact on hotel reputation and visitor booking behavior.

By encompassing a sample of 45 hotels sourced from Booking.com, all classified within the 4-star and 5-star categories, this research offers a comprehensive analysis and pragmatic recommendations for hotel managers aimed at enhancing traveler experience and improving the online reputation of the Albanian coastline in the contemporary digital landscape. By advocating for substantial investments in customer service quality and infrastructural development, the region can effectively position itself as a premier travel destination along its picturesque shoreline. These strategic improvements are essential for attracting discerning travelers and fostering sustainable tourism growth in the area.

Keywords: Tourism, Destination Management, Decision-Making, Consumer dialogue, facilitator, mediator, agreement, dispute, Kosovo, Serbia

Digitalization as a way to fight corruption and promote participatory democracy. Some evidence from Romania

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Abstract

The use of digital technologies to improve the efficiency and accessibility of public institutions and to invigorate the traditional forms of interaction between them and citizens is one of the European Union's priorities, which put on the table significant resources to support the digital transformation of its member states. The paper examines the spread of digital technologies across the European Union, and particularly in Romania, and their potential to promote transparency and accountability within the public institutions, to fight against corruption and to expand citizens' social mobilization. Even if Romania has much to do to provide quality online public services, to increase the efficiency in public administration, and to improve the communication between citizens and institutions, the examples and best practices mentioned in the chapter highlight the potential of ICT both as anti-corruption and participatory tools.

Keywords: digitalization, digital inclusion, anticorruption tools, participatory tools, institutional transparency

Arbitration in EU Competition Law and the possibilities of application in Albania

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Epoka University

Dr. Dini Sejko
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Abstract

In June 2023, the Albanian parliament adopted a new law on arbitration (Law 52/2023) modelled in line with the UNCITRAL Model Law on International Commercial Arbitration. This law was novel, as Albania did not have any specific legislation on arbitration. This paper focuses on settling EU competition issues through arbitration and discusses the possibility of application in Albania in the area of private enforcement for infringement of competition rules

and the digital sector. The article adopts a traditional legal approach by analysing and interpreting the EU and Albanian legislation, court decisions and scholarship in competition and arbitration areas. In addition to the traditional legal method, the authors will explore the topic from a comparative point of view with the EU model. The article concludes that adopting the Law on Arbitration is a significant development for arbitration in Albania. However, as the paper will show, arbitration awareness in the competition area needs to be improved.

Keywords: EU law, Arbitration, Albania, enforcement,

“Preliminary Investigations and Comparison with Italian Legislation”.

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Abstract

Preliminary investigations form the basis of criminal proceedings. They involve one of the most delicate phases of the administration of criminal justice. The legal due process and its guarantees start precisely at this stage of the criminal proceedings.

During this phase, a series of important problems are solved, such as: evidence that cannot be repeated is obtained, security measures are set, the accusation is announced, the necessary data are collected for the determination of the criminal offense and the individualization of the author of its commission.

The basic and dominant figure for the investigation phase is the prosecution body, which is represented by the Prosecutor. During this paper, special attention was paid to the figure of the prosecutor, his role and duties during preliminary investigations, the judicial police and the judge of preliminary investigations.

Then we analyzed the preliminary investigations in the field of Italian legislation. This paper elaborates the phases of the investigation, the role of the prosecution body, but with a difference from other papers, since for each legal moment a comparison is made with the Italian legislation. What prevails in this paper is not only the elaboration of the investigation phase but the comparison of the links of the provisions of our Code of Criminal Procedure with the Italian one.

Keywords: preliminary investigations, prosecutor, judicial police, judge of preliminary investigations, Italian legislation on preliminary investigations, prosecutor and judge of preliminary investigations.

“Challenges in the new geostrategic context for the EU enlargement policy in Western Balkans”

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Abstract

The effectiveness of the EU as a global actor has long been the subject of academic debate. Niche researchers of this paradigm approaching the EU as a normative power agree that its greatest transformative power (transforming by absorbing), which is realized by EU's enlargement policy, allows to transform countries that wish to become EU members through strong conditioning. Therefore, in this article we analyze the new methodology of the accession negotiations (2020) that Russian Invasion brought into the new European geopolitics. The aim of our analysis is to assess how successful is the EU's foreign policy, namely the enlargement policy, in preserving its transformative power in relation to candidate countries in the Western Balkans, with a focus in North Macedonia and Albania. It is of interest to find out how different regional approaches of the enlargement policy and its strengthening mechanisms of conditionality for the Western Balkans candidate countries is functioning. By examining the changes in the new methodology, the aim of this paper is to address the central research question: How consistent is the EU enlargement policy in presenting its actorness in the EU foreign policy towards Western Balkans?

Keywords: European Union, enlargement, normative-transformative power, Western Balkans, revised enlargement methodology

“WB candidate countries transformation in complying with the EU economic criteria: lessons learned and future challenges”

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Abstract

The WB region candidate countries are fully committed to the EU integration as the latter remains and will remain the main driver for their political and socio-economic systems development. To the moment, being involved for many years into some long, complex and complicated integration processes with all their difficulties in principle based on “conditionality”, it seems that the social and economic dimension of transformation has not been adequately addressed in the region. The EU itself remains also committed to the region, as it has (mostly recently) shown to be relatively dynamic, reflective, and proactive in its approach towards enlargement, with a revised methodology and new non/financial

instruments introduced.

Objectives of this paper are: (a) to identify and explore further the need to discuss on the real economic transformation of these economies in their efforts to integrate, beyond the fulfillment of the economic criterion, as well as on new models in the field; and (b) to identify and discuss some lessons learned from previous enlargements to improve the approach of the EU and of the WB economies along their integration and negotiation processes. For this purpose, the focus will be on the evaluation and comparison of the current stage of the WB candidate countries based on a series of indicators that explain and influence their economic openness, development and transformation, aiming at reducing the convergence gap with the EU.

Keywords: EU, WB, economic criteria, real economic transformation, convergence

Public Spending and Growth Dynamics in the Western Balkans: A Long-Term Analysis.

Dr. Erinda Imeraj
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Anida Fizi
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Abstract

This study aims to investigate the relationship between public expenditure and economic growth in Western Balkan countries, including Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Kosovo, and Serbia. Using annual panel data from 2008 to 2022, the analysis incorporates key variables such as public expenditure, Real Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). The Kao Residual Co-Integration Test, Johansen Fisher Panel Cointegration Test, and Granger Causality Test are applied to assess the strength, direction, and causality of this relationship. The findings reveal a long-term relationship between public expenditure and economic growth in Albania and North Macedonia, while no significant relationship is observed in Bosnia & Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo, or Serbia. Additionally, the absence of causality between the dependent and independent variables suggests the need for further research and refined policy measures to address the region's complex economic development challenges.

Keywords: public expenditure, economic growth, foreign direct investment, Western Balkan

The Legal Culture is the Only Justice Reform

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Abstract

After communism's fall, the reform of the justice system in Albania has gone through three stages. The first was the doctrinal one, where Albania accepted the Bolshevik dogma that property should be owned only by the state. In this way, it became a member of the "socialist family of law" which suppressed private property. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, Albania made an ideological divorce by equating the justice system with the year zero. The second stage saw the most mediocre model of law school, by graduating *luris* doctors in only six months, whereas for University curricula, not even five years would be enough. After these two reforms, the corrupted system of justice and the prelude to a legal collapse demanded a third one. And here it comes, the one that will remain for a long time in the history of Albanian political institutions as the Justice Reform. Many ad hoc institutions were created in its name. If someone were to ask whether these are the best means to establish justice in Albania, the answer would be skeptical. They constitute temporary tools that provide a model, but the work does not end here. Justice is a moral, social, legal, and political process that starts in the community and ends with the making of laws that control the lives of citizens. This study aims to highlight the fact that, if the punishment for corruption does not come as an awareness of the people themselves, there is no way to bring justice in this country. The legal culture personifies the increase in awareness that corruption, in the same way as it fills the pockets, also empties them, and above all, it empties Albania, from the distrust that the state will ever function.

Keywords: legal culture, Albania, justice reform, post-communism

The Justice Reform in Albania and the Myth of Non- Punishment: A Political Analysis

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Abstract

This paper explores Albania's Justice Reform and its role in fighting the myth of non-punishment for high-ranking political figures and public officials implicated in corruption. Approved by the Parliament in 2016, the Justice Reform aimed to rebuild Albania's judicial

system, promoting greater independence, accountability, and the rule of law. The paper focuses on the objectives of the justice reform and implementation of the principle of accountability towards the political figures through all these years of democratic transition. Focusing on former political actors and state officials whom are being investigated or convicted for corruption, the paper examines how the reform has fought the perception that those in positions of power are shielded from real consequences. The analysis highlights several key factors, including the public perception, political debate over the justice system, and challenges in implementing legal changes effectively. Through a political analysis of the reform's objectives and its outcomes, the paper identifies if there is a gap between the promises of the reform and its real-world impact. These changes reform not only state institutions, but reform as well the myth of non-punishment.

Keywords: Justice reform, Albania, EU integration, rule of law

Political and Voting Behavior in Albania: What are the Political and Voting Patterns of the Tirana Electorate?

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Abstract

Political behavior in Albania represents a crucial element in the analysis of political, economic, social, and cultural developments of the country during its long transition period towards democracy since the fall of the communist regime in the early 1990s. This article attempts to shed some light in this perspective by analyzing the political and voting behavior of the Tirana electorate in relation with the party identity in Albania, and questions whether Albanian people vote based on party identity, or other approaches of voting behavior can serve as explanatory theories of their voting choices. Further, this article provides an empirical and comparative view on the voting behavior of Tirana electorate and represents a new contribution to the literature. To answer this question, this article utilizes data from a survey conducted with citizens of Tirana where they were face to face interviewed after the parliamentary elections, held in June 2013. The findings of the survey suggested that citizens' political and voting behavior continues to be contoured, partially, by the rational choices dictated by the behavior of the main political parties. However, the study emphasizes that the role of the Albanian electorate is a fundamental component in the analysis of developments toward the consolidation of democracy in Albania. Therefore, we recommend that more studies should be conducted in this research area.

Keywords: Political behavior, voting behavior, Albanian elections, Party identity, Tirana electorate, Voting behavior theories.

Stability, economic and security challenges in the Western Balkans

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Abstract

This research paper provides an in-depth and up-to-date analysis of Albania's vocational education and training (VET) sector, which has seen significant progress in recent years across various areas. The study focuses on examining the sector's current legal reforms, ongoing development efforts, inherent challenges, key stakeholders, and emerging opportunities. Using qualitative research methods, the paper gathers primary data through focus group discussions and interviews, and secondary data from extensive literature reviews and desk research. Key findings highlight substantial skill gaps within the working age population, a misalignment between individuals' skills and labor market needs, and several challenges in Albania's VET system, including insufficient practical training and poor alignment of curricula with market demands. The research incorporates insights from surveys and focus groups, offering a comprehensive view of stakeholder perspectives. Based on the findings, the paper presents strategic recommendations for future investment and development, emphasizing the need for stronger collaboration between educational institutions and employers, the integration of new technologies, innovative teaching methods, and expanded professional development opportunities for VET staff. The study concludes that addressing these challenges through targeted reforms and investments is essential to enhancing the quality and global competitiveness of Albania's VET sector. Given the sector's role as a key pillar of the economy, the analysis confirms a positive correlation between VET improvements and economic growth, although further efforts are needed to optimize its impact across all economic sectors.

Keywords: Vocational Education and Training (VET), Skill gaps, Labor Market alignment, Legal reforms, Economic competitiveness.

Beyond Exploitation: Tackling the Deepening Crisis of Human Trafficking in Albania and the Balkan Region

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Abstract

This article delves into the complex and escalating crisis of human trafficking in Albania and the wider Balkan region. Focusing on the pressing need to address the issue beyond its surface manifestations of exploitation, the study explores the multifaceted dimensions of this heinous crime. Drawing on a comprehensive analysis of the nature and extent of trafficking, contributing factors, and the efficacy of policies and programs, the research sheds light on the intricate challenges faced in combating this deepening crisis.

Human trafficking, as a violation of human rights and a modern form of slavery, affects millions of individuals globally. Albania, serving as a source, transit, and destination country, bears the brunt of this crisis. Women, girls, and unaccompanied children are particularly vulnerable due to factors such as poverty, limited education, and social marginalization. Sexual exploitation, forced labor, and organ trafficking are prevalent forms of exploitation within the region.

The analysis highlights the multifaceted nature of human trafficking, encompassing the trafficking of women, men, and children for sexual exploitation, forced labor, organ trafficking, and the recruitment of child soldiers. Moreover, it emphasizes the transnational nature of this crime, which often involves deceptive practices, coercion, and the use of force to perpetuate the exploitation.

This article emphasizes the need to extend focus beyond immediate exploitation and to address the vulnerability of unaccompanied children in human trafficking. By providing a detailed analysis and a series of recommendations for prevention, the policy document aims to mitigate the victimization of this vulnerable group (Davis, 2011). Moreover, the study underscores the urgency of augmenting support mechanisms and protection for all individuals affected by human trafficking in Albania and the Balkan region. As the crisis deepens, policymakers, practitioners, and researchers need to work collaboratively in addressing the root causes of human trafficking and implementing comprehensive interventions. Only through sustained efforts can we move beyond mere exploitation and strive for a future free from the shackles of this pervasive crime (Buckley, 2021). Accurate quantification of trafficking victims remains challenging due to the clandestine nature of the crime. Therefore, concerted efforts at the national, regional, and international levels are imperative to combat this complex issue effectively, encompassing comprehensive preventive measures, robust victim support mechanisms, and the enforcement of stringent anti-trafficking policies.

Keywords: Modern Slavery, Transnational Crime, Western Balkans, Regional Cooperation

Economic impact and development challenges from EU infrastructure investments. Case study of Albania

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Abstract

The European Union is Albania's strongest development partner, providing in grant assistance to support the Albanian people and help Albania adopt and implement key political, institutional, social, and economic reforms to comply with EU values and progressively align with its rules. A lack of Economic convergence between countries in the Western Balkan region and the rest of Europe remains a major sticking point for allowing them EU membership. In the case of Albania, the country is investing heavily in its construction and tourism industries in a bid to boost economic growth.

All sectors of the economy have felt the impact that the EU has had in the region, and so does infrastructure. We want to emphasize the EU investment of 3 big projects; EU4Innovation, EU4Schools and EU4Culture and the impact and development challenges. The EU4Innovation is a Programme funded by the European Union, The Albanian start-up and innovation ecosystem is nascent and ranks among the lowest entrepreneurial ecosystems in Europe.

The EU4Schools is a Programme funded by the European Union in response to the recovery process following the earthquake of November 26, 2019. It aims to support Albanian citizens in eleven affected municipalities. One of the largest cultural heritage programmes funded by the European Union is the EU4Culture, restoring back the cultural heritage damaged by the earthquake, targeting 8 Municipalities. The overall objective of these programmes is to further support local and national governments in reducing social and economic losses, and to accelerate the recovery process through educational facility repairs and reconstruction, according to the EU standards; to provide increased transparency, accountability and inclusiveness to the recovery process; and to improve capacities of central and local governments in accelerating the recovery processes according to the highest international standards. This research presents an overview of the Economic impact and development challenges from EU investments, in these programs, especially focusing on the infrastructure. How do the restoration works help being a sustainable approach not only on preserving the original features of the building and restoring key components, but also hosting innovation and digitalization as part of the future. The methodology of the study is that of evidential, analytical and comparative description, focuses on and highlights its features and presents further sites from these projects. Through the study of the architectural and constructive characteristics.

Keywords: Economics, infrastructure, EU investment, Albania

Insights on the Approach and Challenges to Reconciliation Efforts of Regional Civil Society Organizations in the Western Balkans

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Abstract

In light of the ongoing challenges generated from the conflicts of the 1990s and the persistent post-conflict issues in the Western Balkans, this study explores the reconciliation efforts of regional civil society organizations/networks (RCSO/Ns) in the region. The research aims to understand how these organizations contribute to fostering peace and reconciliation across the WB by exploring the perspectives and approaches that these regional players take on reconciliation, their capacities to act, as well as their efforts on the field. Via a mixed methodology, the analysis reveals the successes and challenges faced by RCSO/Ns in advancing reconciliation and provides a comparative outlook on their experiences. The results of this study are necessary to provide a concrete mapping of regional non-state actors and their practical attempts on reconciliation.

Keywords: regional actors, civil society organizations, reconciliation, mapping, Western Balkans

Low Voltage Directive (2014/35/Eu): Transposition and Implementation Challenges in Albania

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Abstract

Transposition and full implementation of European Union legislation remains the main and decisive challenge for achieving the objective of Albania's integration into the Union. Chapter 1 of the Acquis remains the main one in terms of Free Trade between the countries of the Union, the European common market and guaranteeing the economic freedom of economic operators, but also consumers in the EU area. Low Voltage Directive 2014/35/EU, part of the harmonized legislation in Chapter 1, regulates the harmonised standards applied by manufacturers of electrical equipment within certain voltage limits, determines the obligations of economic operators that import goods for the guarantee of the implementation of legal criteria, as well as ensures that these products provide high level of protection.

Through this paper, we will provide a picture of the Legal and Institutional Gap Analysis, as well as Formal and Non-Formal Conformity control for the products that fall under Low Voltage Directive in Albania. Challenges faced by economic operators and law enforcement institutions in implementing this harmonized, which determines that the import and production of electrical products that operate at low voltage, complies to the the same standards as those in other EU countries.

Keywords: free movement of goods, conformity assessment, trade, electrical products

The role of Judicial Reforms in Strengthening the Rule of Law and Democratic Governance in Western Balkan Countries: A Comparative Analysis of EU Integration Dynamics

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of judicial reforms in enhancing the rule of law and democratic governance in four Western Balkan countries: Albania, Serbia, Montenegro, and North Macedonia. These nations, each at varying stages of European Union (EU) accession, face ongoing challenges related to judicial independence, political interference, and high-level corruption. The research adopts a comparative case study approach, drawing on EU progress reports, academic literature, and national reform strategies to evaluate how judicial reforms—driven largely by EU conditionality, particularly Chapters 23 (Judiciary and Fundamental Rights) and 24 (Justice, Freedom, and Security) of the *acquis communautaire*—have impacted governance structures.

The study assesses key indicators of judicial independence, transparency, and accountability across the four countries. While significant reforms have been implemented, all the aforementioned countries struggle with entrenched political influence and limited judicial capacity. The uneven progress in judicial reforms underscores the difficulties of balancing external EU pressure with internal political dynamics.

This research concludes that judicial reforms have contributed to strengthening democratic governance in some areas, but their effectiveness varies widely across the region. The paper recommends further measures, including empowering civil society, intensifying anti-corruption initiatives, and increasing institutional capacity-building, to ensure the long-term sustainability of these reforms. Ultimately, the study highlights the central role of judicial reforms in facilitating EU integration and consolidating democratic governance in the Western Balkans.

Keywords: Judicial reforms, Rule of law, Democratic governance, Western Balkans, EU accession, Judicial independence

The Economic Pros and Cons of Discriminatory (Preferential) Trade Liberalization: The Case of Stabilization and Association Agreement between EU and Albania

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Abstract

The last decades and especially after 1990s, there has been a huge increase in the number of preferential trade agreements in the world. This might have been caused by the delay of the Doha round and weakness of the multilateral trading system, but also, we cannot neglect the political economy of the benefits of entering in a Preferential trade agreement (PTA). Baldwin highlights some explanations with regards to the spread of PTAs and why they are contagious. The most common theoretical explanation is slow multilateralism, which means that regionalism and PTAs are spreading because the multilateral talks progress very slow. Other explanations are the set of idiosyncratic events, such as the break of USSR in 1991, or the Asian Crisis in 1997, which lead countries to enter into free trade agreements. According to Baldwin, another hypothesis is also the so-called FTA interdependence. According to this view there is a link between FTAs signed by the trade giants, i.e. US, EU and Japan, and the attitudes of other nations: "[t]he giants create "a sense elsewhere that regionalism is the order of the day and others must follow suit". He calls this the bandwagon effect. Another theory developed by Baldwin himself is the domino theory. Baldwin explains the proliferation of PTAs using a political economy model that focuses on the cost - in terms of trade diversion - of being excluded from PTAs. Other others link the contagious effect with the size and similarity between countries. There are other arguments in political science as well. Baccini mentions that political science studies suggest different reasons why countries sign PTAs: role of democratization, the distribution of power and alliances, ambitions to use international trade institutions as instruments to lock-in or credibly commit to specific policies, domestic veto players within political systems, bureaucratic interests, electoral concerns, foreign direct investments, or forum-shopping as a result of lack of progress in multilateralism." Thus, there are a lot of studies on the PTAs, delineate the cases, reasons why countries enter PTAs, and most recently studies that show their designs and effects. This paper will focus only in the economic aspect of PTAs. We will try in the first part to scrutinize the literature review and map pro and cons arguments with regards to the effects of a PTA. We will try to delineate some of the positive and negative effects a PTA has on the economy and welfare of the participating countries. In the second part of this paper we will focus on the Stabilization and Association Agreement between EU and Albania and assess some of the positive and negative aspects in the light of the literature review.

Keywords: Preferential trade agreements, EU, Albania, Stabilization and Association Agreement, challenges.

The Parallel of The Professional Qualifications Recognition: Ceta's Chapter Eleven Versus the Mras from The Berlin Process

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Abstract

The regional economic integration made possible by the Berlin process aims at providing opportunities for companies and citizens, harmonizing investment policies with EU standards and improving digital access while promoting the region to foreign investors. At the same time, the Berlin process continuously contributes to improving the cooperation between the governments of the Western Balkans, and the Common Regional Market Action Plan (2021-2024) is proof of this. Mutual recognition of professional qualifications plays a pivotal role in fostering international trade, cooperation and economic growth. The previous mention makes the crucial link in strengthening the connection between the most ambitious trade Agreement ever concluded i.e. the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) and its Chapter Eleven, named Mutual Recognition of Professional Qualifications and the Agreements on the Recognition of Professional Qualifications from the Berlin Process. This paper presents an in-depth analysis and parallel of the provisions regarding the mutual recognition of professional qualifications in the above-mentioned agreements with an applied comparative methodology to explain the intricate dynamics between them.

Keywords: Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA); Berlin Process; professional qualifications; mutual recognition; EU; Western Balkans.

Nationalist Rhetoric and its Echo: The Impact of the Language of Berisha and Vučić on Voting Behavior and Political Participation

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Instat

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Abstract

Nationalist movements have long affected the political arena of states, used as a tool by politicians to inspire and mobilize the masses. This study analyzes the influence nationalist rhetoric of political leaders has and how it affects voting behavior and political participation. The study focuses on verifying the claim that societies led by leaders that show a strong portrayal of nationalism experience a shift in voting behaviour and political participation in

nationalism. Two cases, that of Sali Berisha, former prime minister of Albania from 2005 until 2013, and Aleksandar Vučić, current prime minister of Serbia, from 2013 until nowadays, are analysed and compared. Both leaders' rhetoric, mostly during their electoral campaigns, is studied, resulting in a higher impact, higher political participation, and solidification of nationalism in Serbia, compared to Albania. A mix of qualitative and quantitative research through surveys, articles, data, and other websites is used.

Keywords: nationalism, rhetoric, electoral campaign, voting behavior.

The Socio-Political Impact of English Dominance on Europe's Multilingual Identity: Benefits and Future Challenges for the EU

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Abstract

This study examines the socio-political implications of English monolingual supremacy on Europe's linguistic diversity and multilingualism. The increasing prevalence of English as a global lingua franca while offering indisputable regional and global multidimensional benefits also poses significant challenges to the European Union's self-commitment to fostering a multilingual environment that respects and promotes all member states' languages. The prevalence of English in political discourse, education, media, and digital communication often marginalizes regional and minority languages, potentially leading to their future decline and lack of representation in the European socio-linguistics tapestry. This research investigates how the hegemony of English affects language policies, cultural identities, and social inclusiveness across Europe. Through textual content analysis of language policy frameworks, discourse analysis of the sociopolitical debates, and linguistic literature, the study reveals a sheer discrepancy between the practical benefits of English as a common language and the EU's foundational principles of linguistic diversity, national lingua-cultural identity preservation of its member states despite the size, economic and political power in the European community. While acknowledging the attributes of social inclusion, educational recognition, and political depoliticization through the utilization of English as a neutral world language, the findings uncover the urgent need for policy interventions to counterbalance the trend of English monolingual supremacy, safeguard linguistic rights, and, as such sustain Europe's rich multilingual landscape.

Keywords: English supremacy, gains, challenges, linguistic diversity, EU

Dynamics of Longer- Term Economic Growth in a Developing Non- EU Economy: Empirical Investigation of the Albanian Economy

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Abstract

This project examines the Albanian economy and its long-term economic growth characteristics. We utilized time series data spanning the years 1998 to 2019. Real GDP at constant prices is the dependent variable. Household consumption, capital creation, government final consumption spending, and net exports are the independent variables. All the information comes from World Development Indicators. The E-Views program was used to construct all the tests required for our empirical inquiry. We used ADF and PP for the unit root test. After the unit root test where some of the variables were stationary and some nonstationary, we decided to use the ARDL test. The results, in the long run, LOGHCON and LOGGCEXP are positively related to LOGGDP. This implies that when LOGHCON and LOGGCEXP rise with time, so does LOGGDP. After long-run and short-run relationships between independent and dependent variables, we checked for homoscedasticity, serial correlation, distribution of the data, structural breaks, and the Granger causality test. All the results are shown in the continuous continuation of this paper.

Keywords: GDP, household consumption, government final consumption expenditure, Granger causality test, Albania.

The practicality of EU funding to promote higher education in Western Balkan countries.

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Abstract

Examining the effects of EU research and education initiatives on the growth of higher education institutions in Western Balkan countries with a particular focus on Albania is the primary objective of this paper. The Western Balkan HEIs lack the funding necessary to create innovative study plans, research initiatives, and curricula. To close this gap, they must utilise EU research and education initiatives. The data presented in the research lends credence to the notion that HEIs in nations with poor levels of institutional capacity, political

unrest, and economic development will find it challenging to finance such initiatives without the backing of EU programs. As a result, these programs significantly influence how well these educational institutions are financed. They should therefore go into more detail about how they affect the financing of universities in this area. It should be highlighted that not much research has been done to clarify how these programs affect the funding of HEIs in the Western Balkans.

Keywords: EU programs, Higher education institutions, Western Balkans, Albania, Financing.

The Impact of the Human Development Index on Economic Growth in Western Balkans

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Abstract

The most important economic theories emphasize the significant role of human capital in economic growth, increasing the interest of researchers in this subject. This article aims to investigate the impact of the Human Development Index, which reflects a nation's overall quality of life and development progress on economic growth. By employing a panel data approach this article analyzes the factors affecting the economic growth in Western Balkans with a special focus on the impact of the Human Development Index on GDP per capita from 2000 until 2023.

Keywords: Human Development Index, economic growth, development

Strengthening Higher Education in the Western Balkans through EU Programs: Insights from Albania

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Abstract

This research delves into the role of European Union (EU) programs in strengthening institutional capacity and advancing the development of higher education in the Western Balkans, with a particular focus on Albania. The study explores how EU funding contributes to human resource development and institutional growth, addressing the challenges faced by regional educational institutions due to limited local resources. University- industry collaboration, strongly supported by EU initiatives, is shown to be a critical component in fostering research, enhancing human resource capacity, and promoting inter-regional partnerships. The findings indicate that EU programs positively influence institutional performance, although financial constraints within local institutions often impede rapid human resource development. This paper concludes that EU support plays a significant role in bridging these gaps, contributing to the broader objectives of educational and regional advancement in the Western Balkans.

Keywords: EU Programs, Human Resource Development, Higher Education, Albania, Western Balkans, Institutional Capacity

Territorial Conflicts and Regional Security in the Western Balkans

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Abstract

This paper aims to address rising security concerns all over Europe and beyond, since the war in Ukraine and its potential implications on territorial conflicts in the Western Balkans. This focus is derived from the theoretical discussion that argues that territorial conflicts create difficult barriers to the construction of balanced interstate relations and resolving them can reduce the possibility of military conflict. The paper examines how current geopolitical shifts and interests and strategies of major actors, including the United States of America, Russia, China, and Turkey, intervene in the role that territorial conflicts play on regional dynamics, affecting war or conflict resolution efforts. The paper brings a mapping of 7 territorial conflicts in the region and assesses the territorial dispute value on how critical each stand for interstate peace and regional security. The value of each territorial conflict is operationalized through three variables: power and significance, economic interdependence, and common value relations. Regional security measured through the presence and level of territorial conflicts is conceptualized as an outcome of cooperative vs conflicting relations to geopolitical actors based on the actual geopolitical configuration. Following the realist perspective, the paper shows that the larger the competition between the great powers in the region, the greater the autonomy of the small states and their ability to manipulate the powers and to extract military and economic aid in the region. In addition to this, it provides insightful findings on the role of the EU, neo-liberalism, and constructivism in addressing territorial conflicts in the Balkans. It highlights the nuanced relationship between the EU and countries like Serbia, acknowledging that while the EU's influence is significant, it does not always lead to immediate compliance. Furthermore, the results emphasize the relevance of constructivism in understanding how Balkan countries perceive territorial disputes. It acknowledges the diverse nature of these conflicts, which go beyond mere economic considerations to include cultural, symbolic, and linguistic aspects of national

Keywords: territorial conflicts, geopolitics, regional security, Western Balkans

The effect of media on public opinion formation in Albania on EU Integration

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Abstract

The media influences the formation of public opinion. Media effects theorists examine in a continuum how media contents and the audience's exposure to them shape the beliefs, behaviors or perceptions of individuals. In Albania, researches on the influence of the media in the formation of public opinion on EU Integration are important to be frequent, especially in the conditions where technology has increased the audience's access to information even more. What is public opinion? How does the media influence public opinion in Albania on EU Integration? What elements does the media use? These will be the research questions that will be answered during this study. The hypothesis of the study is focused on finding that the media decides on the issues that the public should not only be informed but also focus and think more, such as EU Integration. Matters perceived as matters of public opinion are influenced by the way how the media handles and publishes these issues. The methods used will be the monitoring of media contents and their analysis.

Keywords: Media, Public opinion, EU Integration, Media influence, Media effects, Opinion formation

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