



LABOUR MIGRATION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

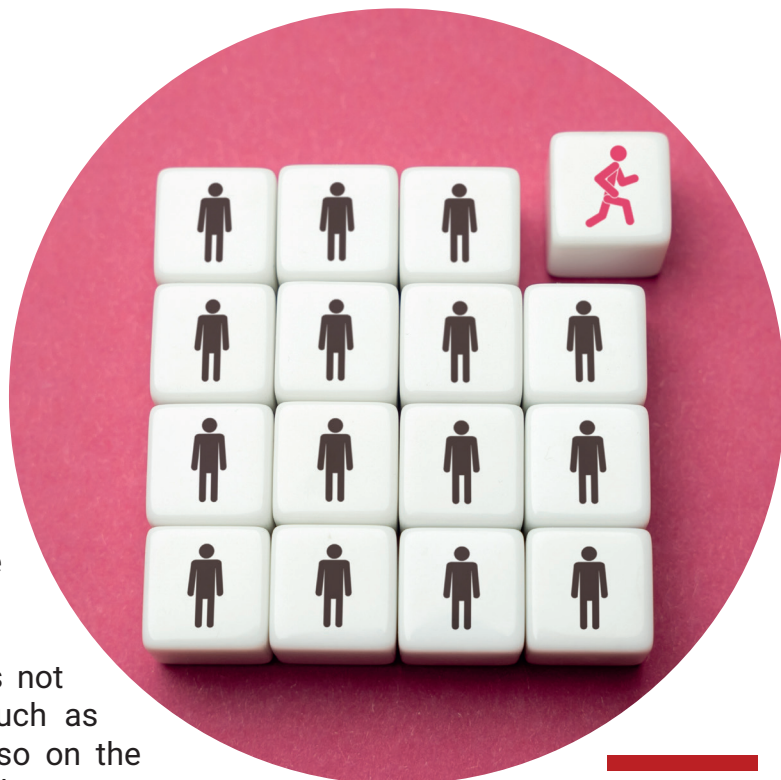
CONSEQUENCES FOR THE REGION'S DEMOCRATIC LIFE

ABSTRACT

Labour migration is a phenomenon that is rooted in the structural problems of Western Balkans societies, such as the high rate of youth unemployment, a poorly performing labour market and inadequate welfare systems.

The phenomenon has severe repercussions not only on the quality of internal services, such as healthcare and highly qualified jobs, but also on the democratic stability of the countries analysed.

This policy brief provides an overview of the causes and consequences of labour migration from the Western Balkans, concluding with recommendations for the region's national governments and for the European institutions on how to jointly address the problem.



AUTHOR

SABINA DE SILVA

Project Coordinator at the Centro Studi di Politica Internazionale (CeSPI) for the Balkan Focus project

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THE FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN PROGRESSIVE STUDIES (FEPS)

European Political Foundation - N° 4 BE 896.230.213
Avenue des Arts 46 1000 Brussels (Belgium)
www.feps-europe.eu
@FEPS_Europe

 **RennerInstitut**

KARL-RENNER-INSTITUT

Karl-Popper-Straße 8
A-1100 Vienna (Austria)
www.renner-institut.at
Twitter/Instagram: @RennerInstitut



CeSPI

Piazza Venezia, 11
00187 Roma (Italy)
www.cespi.it | Twitter: @CeSPI_Roma



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	4
Root causes of migration	5
Consequences of labour migration on democratic stability	6
Conclusions.....	7
Endnotes	10
About the author	12
About FEPS.....	13
About the Karl-Renner-Institut	13
About CeSPI	13

Introduction

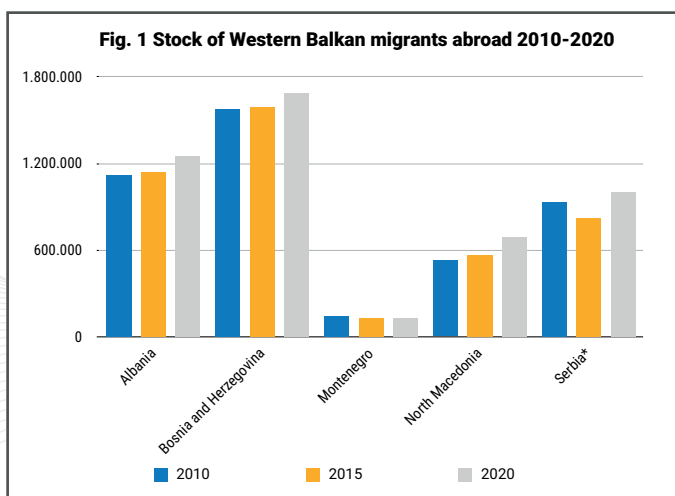
In the last three decades, the Western Balkan countries have experienced a phenomenon of massive emigration: according to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs' (UNDESA) International Migrant Stock, in 2020, the number of people from the WB6 living abroad was about 4.77 million on a population of 17.6 million, this corresponds to a total emigration rate of about 21% in 2020 – in line with a steadily growing trend since 1990. Albania and Bosnia-Herzegovina are the countries with the largest stock of migrants abroad – respectively 44% and 49% of their current population – followed by North Macedonia and Montenegro – 34% and 21% – while Serbia is the country with the smaller amount – 15% of the total population.¹

Due to geographical proximity and the EU visa liberalisation regime, Western European countries are the most desirable destinations for migrants from the region, hosting half of the WB6 diaspora.² Labour and educational opportunities are the main drivers of migration, and the numerous EU mobility programmes – such as Erasmus+, Central European Exchange Programme for University Studies and the

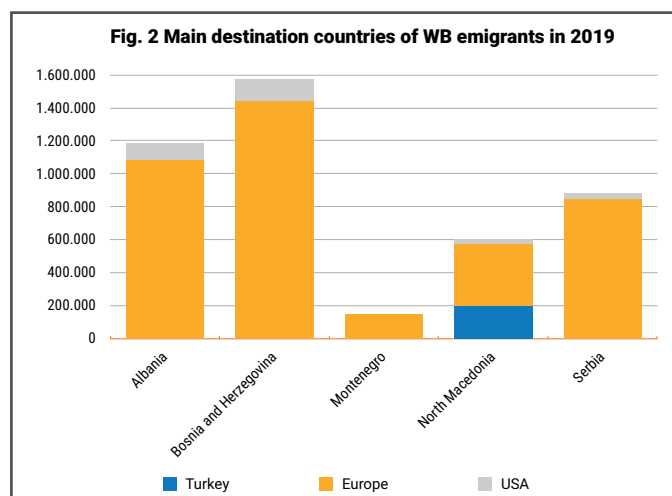
European Regional Master's Programme – foster this trend: between 2015, when the Erasmus+ was established, and 2020, over 48,000 students, researchers and university staff from the WB6 benefited from the Programme.³

The majority of Albanians show a preference for destination countries such as Italy (43%) and Greece (35%), although the beginning of the new millennium illustrates a change in the orientation in favour of the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom, due to the better economic conditions, labour prospects and education opportunities.⁴ Migrants from the ex-Yugoslav countries mainly move to Germany, Austria, France and Sweden. Croatia and Slovenia have become attractive destinations after they joined the EU – especially thanks to the agreement that allows Bosnian migrants to obtain dual citizenship in Croatia.⁵ Besides the EU countries, a place of honour is held by Turkey, thanks to the massive programme of internationalisation of education that the country is carrying out to encourage the exchange of students.⁶

The great majority of migrants are of working age and, among them, youth (15-24 years) constitute an important share. In terms of gender, female and male holds the same ratio.⁷



Source: Personal elaboration from UNDESA International Migrant Stock 2020



Source: Personal elaboration from UNDESA International Migrant Stock 2019



Emigration contributes to alleviating the pressure on the labour market. However, too high levels of emigration can lead to skill shortages, thus discouraging human capital investments and hindering productivity growth.



Bosnia-Herzegovina and Montenegro have the highest rate of highly educated migrants, while migrants from Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Serbia are more likely to have a lower level of education than the average population in the origin economies. Moreover, migrants from Serbia and Montenegro are more likely to be highly skilled (28%), followed by Bosnia-Herzegovina (23%), while the least likely to be skilled are from Albania and Kosovo (11%).⁸ In general, the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom attract mainly educated and skilled migrants, while EU countries host mostly low- and medium-skilled migrants.

Better employment perspectives in terms of salaries and working conditions, but also the desire to achieve a higher standard of living are push factors for labour migration, contributing to the depopulation trend in the WB6. This is particularly relevant for young people, suffering from unemployment, poverty and social exclusion.⁹ Since 2012, the working-age population in the region decreased by 6%,¹⁰ and it is estimated to fall by 15% by 2050.¹¹

This trend, combined with a generally low fertility rate – with an average number of children per woman, in 2021, of 1.76 in Montenegro, 1.55 in Kosovo, 1.52 in Serbia, 1.44 in North Macedonia 1.31 in Albania, and 1.40 in Bosnia-Herzegovina¹² – results in an ageing population.

Root causes of migration

Low living standards, poor prospects of career progression, and high levels of corruption and political instability are among the prominent push factors driving people to leave the region.

Although the region has made significant progress in the last decade in terms of economic development – from 2010 to 2020, GDP per capita grew by about one quarter, while the poverty headcount ratio declined by one tenth – GDP per capita continues to be well below the EU average¹³ – 7 billion euros for WB6 average compared to 37 billion euros for EU average.¹⁴ The unemployment rate continues to be high (11.7% compared to 6.2% in EU), especially among young people (29.5%) and women (12.5%) while scarce digitisation policies affect the productivity and competitiveness of SMEs.¹⁵

Emigration contributes to alleviating the pressure on the labour market. However, too high levels of emigration can lead to skill shortages, thus discouraging human capital investments and hindering productivity growth. The massive outflow of workers in certain labour sectors, for example the medical one, affects the accessibility of basic services such as public healthcare.¹⁶ This is especially true for young doctors and nurses who decide to pursue their training abroad, and for those who, after receiving education in their home country, decide to look for work elsewhere, with consequences on the tax and pensions systems.¹⁷ The weakness of the education system also represents a push factor for the emigration of young students, who prefer obtaining a degree abroad. Often the education system is affected by problems of skill mismatching: poorly updated curricula cannot provide students with skills and knowledge useful for the labour market.¹⁸

Lastly, high levels of perception of government corruption and mistrust in local institutions are important push factors for emigration. Corruption is identified by entrepreneurs as one of the major obstacles to the development of private initiatives.¹⁹

Consequences of labour migration on democratic stability

The debate on the impact of emigration on the democratic stability in the Western Balkans is still open and has only recently been stimulated by studies that present very specific characteristics in terms of geographical scope and often lack homogeneous results.

A cross-national analysis of the electoral behaviours of European citizens between 2000 and 2016 conducted by the Immigration Policy Lab shows a positive correlation between emigration and the propensity to vote for populist and radical right parties across Europe.²⁰ This correlation is explained by two different elements: emigration alters the composition of electorates and it changes the preferences of the voting population.

First, emigrants are often young and motivated people who look for better educational and economic perspectives abroad: this propension for high level of education and cosmopolitanism make emigrants less unlikely to support populist parties.²¹ As a consequence, those who remain in their native countries tend to be more sensitive to populist rhetoric, based on xenophobe and nationalist sentiments.²² Moreover, the electoral composition shifts even more toward radical position with the increase of emigration of women, generally less inclined to vote for populist and radical right parties.²³

Second, mass emigration of labour force leads to a deterioration in the quality of

basic services, such as healthcare, and to a decrease in investments in education. Populist parties channel community grievances, presenting themselves as valid alternatives to the unsatisfactory political and social environment.²⁴ Moreover, the demographic disappearance partially caused by emigration, is one of the most recurring topics of right-wing parties and populist narratives in the Western Balkans. In particular, youth emigration is a central topic during electoral campaigns, when parties promise to 'keep youth home'. During the Fourth Budapest Demographic Summit in 2021, right-wing leaders from Central and Eastern Europe blamed Western European countries for the shrinking in Eastern countries' population.²⁵ This politicisation of the problem risks undermining the support of local public opinion toward the European Union and the backing to the democratic reform process.



The demographic disappearance partially caused by emigration, is one of the most recurring topics of right-wing parties and populist narratives in the Western Balkans.



According to some studies, emigration has indirect consequences as well: emigrants who have lived abroad, especially in European countries, have been exposed to new knowledge, ideas and democratic values in the host countries. Once they return to their home country, they tend to demand higher democratic standards and spread their knowledge within the community.²⁶ For the community, in turn, the prospect of finding better job and better living conditions abroad could incentivise citizens to invest in training and education.²⁷ However, empirical results of these indirect effects are difficult to determine.

Emigration affects not only democratic standards, but it has also direct consequences on the economies of the countries of origin. Remittances has a critical role, even though their spillover effects may take different directions. In the Western Balkans region, remittances constitute an important source of income for the migrants' families in the country of origin and, more generally, for local economies. In 2020, remittances constituted 9.9% of the GDP in Albania, 10.1% in Bosnia-Herzegovina, 17.3% in Kosovo, 15% in Montenegro, 3.2% in North Macedonia and 8.6% in Serbia.²⁸ A portion of the literature supports the thesis that greater economic availability from remittances makes the receiving families rely less on public welfare. This should improve the quality and accountability of the governors, who lose the capacity to influence governance through the patronage system.²⁹ However, an empirical analysis conducted in Kosovo in 2014 – in a national context of high levels of remittances and unemployment – highlighted that remittances could negatively affect the participation in the job market of the recipients, in particular of the women: this is because the increase in the reservation wage of the recipients due to remittances often reduces their willingness to seek employment.³⁰ Access to remittances could partly explain the high rate of NEET in the region: in 2022, the rate of young people not in employment nor in education or training was 23.3% in Albania, 18.2% in Bosnia-Herzegovina, 33% in Kosovo, 20% in Montenegro, 18% in North Macedonia and 13% in Serbia.³¹ The inactivity of young people could also be the symptom of a severe lack of future perspective and trust in government policies.

Conclusions

One major question when talking about emigration from the Western Balkans is the lack of an efficient data collection system, resulting in the absence of precise and updated data on the phenomenon. A strengthened regional coordination is crucial for the local governments in order to have an overall knowledge and appropriate instruments to address properly this important issue.

The phenomenon of emigration has different dimensions as it has complex and multifaced repercussion on the democratic stability of the countries of origin, and leads to a depletion not only in terms of economic growth but also of human capital.

Western Balkan governments should address the issue in a twofold manner.

On the hand, national governments should design structural and long-term return policies, in order to favour circular migration. Emigrants who gained education and work experience, and who have been exposed to democratic values abroad represent an added value for their country of origin, but fertile ground must be prepared for their social and economic reintegration. A careful and targeted management of Foreign Direct Investment can contribute to create a solid and competitive private sector able to valorise the return of high-skilled emigrants, with fiscal incentives for entrepreneurship and investors and ad hoc development policies to boost innovation and ICT sectors. A 2022 report by the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) identified the lack of funding for research and development, the missed link between research and the industrial sectors, and the scarce regional cooperation in the field of innovation as the main obstacles to technological development.³² To date, the share of GDP reserved for investment in research

and development is extremely low – 0.15% in Albania, 0.19% in Bosnia-Herzegovina, 0.36% in Montenegro, 0.38% in North Macedonia and 0.99% in Serbia.³³

On the other hand, WB governments should invest in the improvement of the education system, in order to provide a higher quality of education and to ease the school-to-work transition. A better investment environment should be created for diaspora remittances, encouraging investment opportunities for the youth. Moreover, involving young people and workers in the political life, through public consultation of educational and professional associations, could narrow the democratic gap between government and citizens.

The role of diaspora is not to be underestimated. WB6 governments should strengthen cultural and social ties with citizens abroad, including diaspora in national political life. Better communication about the possibility of voting abroad and easier voting mechanisms are efficient ways to make the voice of the diaspora heard. For examples, Serbia allows its citizens living abroad to vote at diplomatic missions, making voting complicated for those who live in territories where Serbian embassies and consulates are absent; Kosovo provide a complex system of voting via mail, to be verified via phone calls, once the citizens have registered at the Central Election Commission (CEC).³⁴

In the 2022 parliamentary election in Serbia, about 30,000 citizens voted from abroad. Though it represents less than 1% of the Serbian diaspora, the number of voters increased more than three times compared to the 2020 election.³⁵ In the 2021 parliamentary election in Kosovo, about 56,000 citizen votes from abroad, more than 6% of the total amount of voters, and a number significantly increased compared to the 2019 elections.³⁶



The emigrants' labour supply from the Western Balkans matches perfectly with the growing demand by EU countries, affected by an aging populace and vacant jobs.



The growing electoral involvement of the diaspora is a sign of a renewed interest in the fate of the home country and it represents a political potential that cannot be wasted.

Finally, the European Union could play a crucial role in mitigating negative externalities of emigration, too. The EU is, at the same time, the main destination and beneficiary of brain gain from the WB6: according to Eurostat, in 2021, the EU had over 64.000 labour migrants coming from WB6.³⁷ The emigrants' labour supply from the Western Balkans matches perfectly with the growing demand by EU countries, affected by an aging populace and vacant jobs.³⁸ The extent of the phenomenon, accompanied by its economic benefits for the Western economies – Eastern European and Western Balkan countries contributed over €200 billion to the German economy via the emigration of students and workers between 2009 and 2017³⁹ – led some politicians to talk about a "de facto transfer of wealth" from Southeast Europe to Western Europe.⁴⁰

In the framework of EU enlargement policy, bearing in mind that a credible enlargement perspective requires a joint effort by EU institutions and WB6 governments, the EU should imprint a clear direction to its policy on migration by:

1. Creating a favourable environment for educational and labour development through financial mechanisms provided by

the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans and the Western Balkans Agenda on Innovation, Research, Education, Culture, Youth, and Sport.

2. Promoting students' international mobility from the WB countries to the EU, encouraging knowledge transfers and capacity building and facilitating recognition of university degrees and professional qualifications, through the extension of the Talent Partnerships Programme.
3. Encouraging circular migration to ensure the transfer of know-how and human capital by WB students educated and workers trained in the European countries, supporting

their reintegration in the economies of origin. To stimulate a pro-active response by WB governments, the improvement of reintegration policies could be included among the conditionalities for future membership.

4. Renewing the emphasis on the social dimension of the enlargement process, helping local governments to implement democratic reforms aimed at improving the working and living conditions in the region.

Endnotes

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About the authors



Sabina de Silva

Sabina de Silva is the Project Coordinator at Centro Studi di Politica Internazionale (CeSPI) for the Balkan Focus project. She is a researcher on the EU Enlargement process toward the Western Balkans and a consultant on Public and Cultural Diplomacy for Reconciliation for several companies and institutions. Sabina is a PhD candidate in Institutions & Policies at the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Milan. She also holds a Master's Degree in International Cooperation and a Master in Cultural Diplomacy and is author of several analyses and policy briefs on the geopolitics of Western Balkans.

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European Political Foundation - N° 4 BE 896.230.213 | Avenue des Arts 46 1000 Brussels (Belgium)

www.feps-europe.eu | Twitter/Instagram: @FEPS_Europe | Facebook: @FEPSEurope

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BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA
HOW TO BUILD A VIABLE ROAD
TO EU MEMBERSHIP



ABSTRACT

Since its beginning with the Stabilisation and Association Agreement in 2005, Bosnia-Herzegovina's EU path has been marred by the country's unwillingness to gather the necessary political consensus to adopt the reforms needed to improve its functionality, its rule of law and its democratic standard. This feature has proved itself true throughout BiH's EU journey. The limits of conditionality have been overcome by Brussels' and the member states' several decisions to lower the bar and allow Sarajevo to go further. The 2022 decision by the Commission and the Council to grant BH the candidate status stems from almost purely geopolitical considerations, rather than from the effort of Bosnian institutions to reform. The same will most likely be true when, in March 2024, the Commission might recommend the Council for the opening of accession negotiations.

AUTHORS

DARIO D'URSO
International relations analyst with focus on the political dynamics of the Western Balkans

LADA VETRINI
Senior expert in cohesion policy, with a focus on European territorial cooperation in the Adriatic-Ionian region

Balkan Focus

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POLICY BRIEF
December 2023

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**THE EUROPEAN POLITICAL
COMMUNITY:
INFORMALITY AS A
KEY TO SUCCESS**



ABSTRACT

The EPC has been established to create 'strategic primacy' among European countries, at a time when Russian aggression against Ukraine demanded a show of unity and geopolitical resolve. In lack of standing structures, institutions, budget and even final declarations should be taken as added value and not as a liability. Indeed, the EPC should not be considered as a loose replica of the EU or as a waiting room for EU aspiring members. Any comparison with the EU fails to capture the real added value of the EPC – an informal format allowing European leaders to freely discuss open issues at 'ministerial' level on the sidelines of the event, without the pressure of political consensus. While European leaders should resist the calls to institutionalise the EPC, they should also be aware of the risk of increasing fatigue, if this format fails to deliver tangible results to the long run. In order for the EPC not to become just a big photo opportunity for the whole European continent, organising host countries (which rotate on a six-month basis on the EU/non-EU country principle) should spend their political capital to keep the EPC a valid geopolitical institution with its distinctive features.

AUTHORS

LADA VETRINI
and
SABINA DE SILVA

Balkan Focus

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FES ITALIA
Institut Jean Jaurès

POLICY BRIEF
August 2023

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**IS A NEW PATH TO
ENLARGEMENT POSSIBLE?**
A LOOK AT THE PROPOSALS FOR
STAGED ACCESSION



ABSTRACT

This policy brief analyses the most relevant proposals – developed both within the European institutions and by independent research centres – on the staged accession methodology for the EU enlargement process toward the Western Balkans.

It also includes a summary of the discussion held at the network meeting of Friends of the Western Balkans in June 2023, putting together the different positions emerged, the uncertainties declared, and the new proposals developed during the discussion. Finally, the policy brief highlights the strengths and weaknesses of the proposal, indicating which aspects can be improved.

AUTHOR

SABINA DE SILVA
Project Coordinator at the Centro Studi di Politica Internazionale (CeSPI) for the Balkan Focus project

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POLICY BRIEF
August 2023

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**EMBRACING THE WESTERN BALKAN
COUNTRIES' EU ACCESSION
AT PRESENT**
A VITAL QUESTION MARK
FOR THE EU



ABSTRACT

This paper highlights the challenges and geopolitical shifts impacting the European Union (EU) enlargement process for the Western Balkan (WB6) region. Concerns over democratic institutions and reluctance of some EU member countries have significantly slowed down the enlargement process. To overcome obstacles, the EU has been pushing in the region both the reforms needed but also the idea of reaching regional integration as a way to enhance welfare, growth, and stability. However, these strategies have not yet yielded the desired results.

The outbreak of Covid-19, geopolitical tensions, and an increasingly confrontational global environment might well compel the EU to reassess its regional engagement and provide a credible enlargement path for the WB6. Yet, reforms are not only needed in the WB6, but also in the EU to make its decision-making process more efficient. Notwithstanding current obstacles, the shifting global order and the influence of external actors in the region make the WB6 inclusion within the EU of vital importance for the European security and stability at large.

AUTHOR

ELEONORA POLI
Head of Analysis at the Roma Office of the Centre for European Policy Network (cep)

Balkan Focus

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**MONTENEGRO'S POLITICAL
TRANSITION**
FROM DJUKANOVIC TO WHERE?



ABSTRACT

Since 2020, Montenegro has been marred by strong political turbulence, whose main driver has been the gradual loss of power by long-time former President Milo Djukanovic and his party, the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS), which have been in power since the country introduced multipartism in 1991. Djukanovic's hold on power guaranteed Montenegro's hold on Western values and Euro-Atlantic institutions, building on a strong Montenegrin national identity and decoupling from Serbia. At the same time, Montenegro became a classic case of statorocracy, with a strong degree of state capture, corruption and political control of media and judiciary. Years of political tensions, due mostly to the attempts by DPS to marginalise the Serb minority in the country and to the strongly felt grievances against the perceived authoritarian rule by Djukanovic, resulted in the ousting of DPS from power following the parliamentary elections in 2020, when a loose coalition of pro-Serb and civic forces – whose only common denominator was the removal of the ruling party from power – managed to form a short-lived government. Notwithstanding the ensuing instability, and the persistence of the divide between pro-Serb forces and the advocates of a strong Montenegrin identity, the presidential elections in March-April 2023 saw the final demise of Djukanovic with the election of Jakov Milatovic as president. His recently born 'Europe Now' Movement managed to combine pro-Serb feelings with calls for economic development, with a populist twist. Parliamentary elections in June of the same year resulted in Europe Now gaining the most votes, although not enough to form a government alone, with DPS managing to keep a fair share of support. As Montenegro embarks on the difficult process of forming a coalition government, its commitment to Euro-Atlantic values might be put to the test.

AUTHORS

DARIO D'URSO
International relations analyst with focus on the political dynamics of the Western Balkans

LADA VETRINI
Senior expert in cohesion policy, with a focus on European territorial cooperation in the Adriatic-Ionian region

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POLICY STUDY
March 2023

**THE CASE OF UKRAINE'S
CANDIDACY TO THE EU:**
PROGRESSIVE POLICY TOWARDS THE EASTERN
NEIGHBOURHOOD AS A CORNERSTONE OF
THE EU'S STABILITY AND SECURITY

Dr Andriy Komychuk



ABSTRACT

Ukraine's candidacy to the EU is a complex issue that involves a wide range of stakeholders, including the Ukrainian government, the EU member states, and the EU institutions. This study examines the challenges and opportunities associated with Ukraine's candidacy, and offers a progressive policy framework for the EU to address the Eastern Neighbourhood as a cornerstone of the EU's stability and security.

AUTHOR

Dr Andriy Komychuk

Balkan Focus

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**Labour migration in the Western Balkans.
Consequences for the region's democratic life**