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### Small states' marginality constellations and the challenges to the Europeanisation of the Western Balkans in the last decade

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# Small states' marginality constellations and the challenges to the Europeanisation of the Western Balkans in the last decade

**Abstract:** By focusing on the Western Balkans, this paper asks two questions: first, how small states that are both EU members and candidates for membership understand their role within this normatively powered order and, second, what their roles and agency mean for the order they are socialised into via democratic norms. The notions of hierarchies and orders are conceptualised in this paper as processes of norm diffusion and understood within the socialisation of democratic norms, which, according to the literature, can be institutionalised, rejected, or modified locally. First, I argue that such measurements can help us understand how the EU's practices shape the broader understanding of its actorness in normative and strategic terms toward the Western Balkans. Second, I scrutinise national strategies related to the processes of state-building, security, economy, and society to demonstrate how Serbia and Croatia present their agency as supporting and affirming of the prevalent conception of order in norm localisation, or being more critical of it in the process of localised norm contestation. Third, the effects of EU approaches that provide more tactical and technical views of Europeanisation, rather than (a strategic) full thrust on enlargement, are discussed in the conclusion by bringing the comparative insights together and parsing them by means of the shelter theory for small states.

**Keywords:** EU enlargement, Western Balkans, small states, international order, norm diffusion, democracy, Serbia, Croatia

## 1. Introduction

The literature on small states tells us that, historically and most commonly, this class of actors in international relations pursue strategies of alliances or neutrality, bandwagoning, and balancing while

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being exposed as the weaker side in relations with powerful states<sup>1</sup>. After the end of the Cold War, the small EU member states have pursued the strategy of 'binding' the more powerful states within common norms while having 'increased freedom of manoeuvre' under the new sovereignty-constraining 'integration dilemma'<sup>2</sup>. All states find themselves in some sort of hierarchy based on their relative power and status in international relations<sup>3</sup>, but small states have a peculiar relation to the notions of order and hierarchy, based on their relative 'power deficit' that they are ready to use in international politics<sup>4</sup>. However, small states in Europe and the European Union (EU) are engaged in a specific political and institutional context that begs for a careful examination of their agency with regard to regional orders, security communities, and norm-diffusion processes. In the 2010s, with the crisis of the EU enlargement process has contributed to recasting the outlook of the overall regional constellation. This paper takes as its subject the relationship between the EU and the region of the Western Balkans, analysing it through the lens that combines small states' marginality constellations framework and the understanding of the Europeanisation process as an instance of norm diffusion<sup>5</sup>.

The role of the EU in the Western Balkans is understood as 'transform[ing] the normative context and reconstruct identity in terms of shared European identity in order to foster democracy, peace and stability'<sup>6</sup>. Despite the marked success in transforming the coun-

- 1 As Gron and Wivel note, the concept of small state is useful as a 'focusing device' for analysing asymmetric power relationships. Cf. 'However, whereas the value of small states as an analytical concept is debatable, it is useful as a "focusing device" to bring the characteristic problems and dilemmas of the weaker part of an asymmetric power relationship to our attention'. See C.H. Gron, A. Wivel, *Maximizing Influence in the European Union after the Lisbon Treaty: From Small State Policy to Smart State Strategy*, „Journal of European Integration” 2011, vol. 33, no. 5, p. 524.
- 2 Ibidem; B. Thorhallsson, A. Wivel, *Small States in the European Union: What Do We Know and What Would We Like to Know?*, „Cambridge Review of International Affairs” 2006, vol. 19, no. 4, pp. 651-652.
- 3 A. Zarakol (ed.), *Hierarchies in World Politics*, Cambridge 2017.
- 4 J.M. Rickli, *European small states' military policies after the Cold War: from territorial to niche strategies*, „Cambridge Review of International Affairs” 2008, vol. 21, no. 3.
- 5 M. Kovačević, *Understanding the marginality constellations of small states: Serbia, Croatia, and the crisis of EU–Russia relations*, „Journal of Contemporary European Studies” 2019, vol. 27, no. 4, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2019.1580564>.
- 6 A. Björkdahl, *Towards a reflexive study of norms, norm diffusion and identity (re)construction: the transformative power of the EU in the Western Balkans*, „Canterbury Law Review” 2012, vol. 18, pp. 80-81.

tries of the eastern enlargement in the 2000s, in the 2010s the EU enlargement process has slowed or halted as part of the so-called 'enlargement fatigue' or the 'crisis' discourse, following the impact of the global economic crisis of 2008<sup>7</sup>. Such developments also reflected on the Western Balkans and its domestic socio-political condition that is connected to what various authors see as the 'stabilitocracy' regime that happens between the EU and the Western Balkan countries<sup>8</sup>. Also, on the global level, an additional challenge for the EU and its policies is posed by the process of multipolarisation of international politics<sup>9</sup>. Multipolarisation is reflected in the perception of changing power distribution within the international system that is revealed in a series of challenges to the political and normative aspects of the liberal international order and its institutions and policies<sup>10</sup>. However, the European order, based on liberal norms, governance and the security community that is more Lockean and somewhat Kantian, in the sense of the logic of cooperation and amity among states in an interdependent community, is beneficial to smaller states compared to the period before 1945 in terms of security<sup>11</sup>.

Since the mid-2010s, the socio-political context in Europe has been shifting and is now different than in the time of the 1990s post-communist transition of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and the

- 7 'Economic hardship and the EU's disjointed, even chaotic response has damaged the EU's power and tarnished its image. The crisis has also made EU citizens and leaders more wary of further enlargement'. See M. Vachudova, *EU Leverage and National Interests in the Balkans: The Puzzles of Enlargement Ten Years On*, „Journal of Common Market Studies” 2014, vol. 52, p. 123.
- 8 J. Džankić, S. Keil, M. Kmezić (eds), *The Europeanisation of the Western Balkans: A Failure of the EU Conditionality?*, Cham 2019.
- 9 M. Kovačević, *Male države u svetu regiona i izazovi multipolarizacije međunarodnih odnosa na početku 21. veka*, [in:] V. Knežević-Predić (ed.), *Politički identitet Srbije u globalnom i regionalnom kontekstu*, Beograd 2015.
- 10 On the conventional view in liberal international theory, the liberal order means 'an open, rule- and institution-based international system in which states trade and cooperate to achieve mutual gains'. See M. Koivisto, T. Dunne, *Crisis, What Crisis? Liberal Order Building and World Order Conventions*, „Millennium: Journal of International Studies” 2010, vol. 38, no. 3, p. 618.
- 11 On this point: 'The very fact of so many modestly sized countries forming a united venture – however imperfect their solidarity and common will – has altered the atmosphere and strategic calculus. The EU also has more room for manoeuvre and more positive options for dealing with these larger powers than NATO, for example, precisely because it does not appear as a strategic competitor in a traditional zero-sum game'. See A.J.K. Bailes, B. Thorhallsson, *Instrumentalizing the European Union in Small State Strategies*, „Journal of European Integration” 2013, vol. 35, no. 2, p. 109; I. Neumann, S. Gstohl, *Introduction: Lilliputians in Gulliver's World*, [in:] Ch. Ingebritsen, I. Neumann, S. Gstohl, J. Beyer (eds), *Small States in International Relations*, Seattle 2006.

EU 'big bang' enlargement of 2004. What we see during this decade is greater scepticism regarding the future of the enlargement and the EU's unclear strategic-ness/normativity modicum in the face of the global and external challenges it has been facing in the past 10 years – from the economic crisis to renationalisation of politics, democratic backsliding in the CEE, migration/refugee crisis, to Brexit, to external actors' influences.

Such a changing structural environment and the political dynamics within the EU put small states, in particular, to the test. European small (member) states are in constant interaction with the forms and practices of the liberal order in which they are being socialised beyond the logic of consequences in international relations after the end of the Cold War<sup>12</sup>. In the 2010s, the populist and illiberal tendencies present part of the overall challenge to such constellation in Europe. As Trine Flockhart notes, socialisation contributes 'to the construction of new identities and membership of new social groups', and in the European context, it joins the efforts of the Democratisation Studies that deal with 'democracy promotion'<sup>13</sup>. The Europeanisation literature, as notes Sonja Grimm, sees democracy promotion as an asymmetric relationship between 'donors' and 'recipients' of democracy promotion where the 'external donor' has democratising leverage over the 'domestic recipient'<sup>14</sup>. However, the research shows such a relationship is not enforced by leverage but it is suggested to be understood as 'dynamic interaction', that is, based on negotiation in which both sides can have an impact<sup>15</sup>. The experience of the post-communist

12 'Substantively, "norms" was mobilised to illuminate three important dimensions of international politics that tended to be overlooked in rationalist analyses, namely, the workings of a "logic of appropriateness", alongside a more interest maximizing, instrumental logic; the question of how to appraise change, and the role of non-state actors in international politics'. See Ch. Epstein, *Norms: Bourdieu's nomos, or the structural power of norms*, [in:] R. Adler-Nissen (ed.), *Bourdieu in International Relations: Rethinking Key Concepts in International Relations*, Abingdon 2012, p. 166.

13 T. Flockhart (ed.), *Socializing Democratic Norms: The Role of International Organizations for the Construction of Europe*, Houndmills – Basingstoke 2005, p. 6.

14 S. Grimm, *Democracy promotion in EU enlargement negotiations: more interaction, less hierarchy, „Democratization“* 2019, vol. 26, no. 5, p. 851.

15 Cf. '...where the formulation of specific policies (reform content), the distribution of material resources (reform scope), and the process of drafting, adopting and implementing agreements and programmes (reform procedure and pace) are negotiated' ... 'The instruments external actors dispose of in the negotiations are well described in the democracy promotion and EU integration literature. They include diplomacy, democracy assistance, conditionality, and supervision.

transition and Europeanisation in the CEE suggests three models of EU impact – ‘external incentives’, ‘social learning’, and ‘lesson-drawing’ – that guide the process of norm diffusion<sup>16</sup>. By focusing on the notion of norm diffusion, this paper seeks to understand the logic of this process in the Western Balkans as the region that is subject to the variable EU enlargement policies and conditionalities. It seeks to theorise the roles of the Western Balkans’ states in the EU accession process with their regard to three possible models of EU impact by applying the framework of norm diffusion as the conduit for the EU-Western Balkans constellation of relationships.

### The argument of the paper

The notions of hierarchies and orders are conceptualised in this paper as the *processes of norm diffusion* and understood within the socialisation of democratic norms, which previous constructivist works take as a mutual constitution between the international and the domestic order<sup>17</sup>. Those norms, the literature suggests, can be institutionalised, rejected, or modified locally<sup>18</sup>. By focusing on the Western Balkans, this paper asks two questions: first, how small states, both EU members and candidates for membership, understand their role within this normatively powered order, and second, what their roles and agency mean for the order they are socialised into via democratic norms by exploring their approaches toward the socialisation process. The EU’s approach to the Western Balkans is analysed from the normative perspective and

The external instruments differ according to the general level of leverage external actors can mobilise to influence the democratic reform process, with diplomacy having the least leverage and supervision the most’ ... ‘a set of instruments that allow domestic actors either to accept or to alter, modify, change or reject reform demands. The six instruments are: diplomacy, take-over, slowdown, modification, resistance, and emancipation’. See S. Grimm, op. cit., pp. 852-855.

16 A. Zhelyazkova, I. Damjanovski, Z. Nechev, F. Schimmelfennig, *European Union Conditionality in the Western Balkans: External Incentives and Europeanisation*, [in:] J. Džankić, S. Keil, M. Kmezić (eds), op. cit., pp. 17-22.

17 As Flockhart writes ‘...key assumption of the book is that we cannot separate the “international” from the “domestic”, and that both form a mutually constitutive relationship. As a result, we must direct our attention at both the “international” and the “domestic”, thereby locating the book at the intersection between International Relations, Comparative Politics and Democratisation Studies... The specific focus of this book is ideational change at the domestic level and its consequences at the international level and vice versa. Interest is focused on the adoption of one of the key norms and shared values underpinning the Euro-Atlantic community – liberal democracy’. See T. Flockhart (ed.), op. cit., p. 1.

18 A. Björkdahl, *Towards a reflexive study of norms...*, p. 80.

its strategy is assessed relative to the normative vs. strategic concerns. Basically, with the enlargement not being on the horizon until 2025, other EU approaches to the constellation with the Western Balkans are analysed, including the regional initiatives and the more recent diplomatic initiative called the 'Berlin Process'. It is complementary to the EU enlargement process and promotes and supports practical and technical aspects of cooperation, with the notions of connectivity and regional cooperation being juxtaposed to the more traditional norm localisation approach under the mainstream Europeanisation discourse.

First, I argue that such measurements can help us understand how the EU practices shape the broader understanding of its actorness in normative and strategic terms with the Western Balkans. Second, I scrutinise the strategies related to the processes of state-building, security, economy, and society in three cases to demonstrate how Serbia and Croatia, among other post-Yugoslav countries, present their agency as supporting and affirming of the conception order in the norm localisation or being more critical of it in the process of the localised norm contestation. Those two countries are particularly interesting in the context of comparing the moments of pre- and post-accession Europeanisation. This can eventually help us in understanding the character of the current EU external power, and the degree of its transformative effect in a time when enlargement perspectives are rather secondary compared to a decade ago. Third, the effects of such EU approaches that provide a more tactical and technical view of Europeanisation rather than (a strategic) full thrust on enlargement are discussed in the conclusion by bringing the comparative insights together and parsing them by means of shelter theory for small states<sup>19</sup>. This means that it is the practice of norm-makers (EU) and norm-takers (membership candidates) that interact in the localisation of relevant normative content for both small states and the order they are socialised into. However, such a perspective is in the past several years put to test given the concerns that are more related to the EU-level than purely the regional effectiveness in norm localisation. In this manner, the paper seeks to contribute to the ongoing debates on the agency of

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19 A.J.K. Bailes, B.A. Thayer, B. Thorhallsson, *Alliance theory and alliance 'Shelter': the complexities of small state alliance behaviour*, „Third World Thematics: A TWQ Journal” 2016, vol. 1, no. 1.

small states and constructivist international relations scholarship on regional orders, norm diffusion, and Europeanisation.

In the first part of the paper, I lay out a framework for understanding the shifting democratisation dynamics in the Western Balkans in the 2010s, by linking small states' research and the study of Europeanisation. In the second part, I focus on the effects of Europeanisation at the regional level, and the shifting quality and meaning of the EU-Western Balkans constellation bounded by the discourse of Europeanisation and its domestic and external challengers. In the conclusion, I assess some contemporary perspectives for the EU policies in the Western Balkans with a view of the variety of social constructions of the regional order in Europe today.

## **2. Linking small states' research and Europeanisation via norm diffusion**

Theoretically, the paper is guided by the insights of critical constructivism, starting from the assumption that small states want to sustainably manage their identities and interests in an interdependent environment such as Europe, or the EU and its margin<sup>20</sup>. In effect, Croatia since 1992 managed this somewhat more successfully than Serbia following the breakup of the socialist Yugoslavia with regards to the effects of EU integration as the guiding process, on their respective statuses in international politics. Croatia has become a member of the EU (2013) and NATO (2009) while Serbia has been a candidate for EU membership since 2013 and leads a policy of neutrality to formal alliances since 2007, most notably due to its protracted problem of the status of Kosovo. These two countries have supported the EU and the liberal order in varying degrees, depending on their level of association with the EU and NATO's external governmentality roles and power over the past two decades<sup>21</sup>. They responded to the post-Cold War systemic change and the shift in the prevalent conception

20 M. Kovačević, *Understanding the marginality constellations of small states...*, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2019.1580564>.

21 F. Ejodus, M. Kovačević, *Penetration, Overlay, Governmentality: The Evolving Role of NATO in Western Balkan Security Dynamics*, „Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding” 2019, vol. 13, no. 5, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2019.1660032>.



of the Euroatlantic order as a security community in different ways, which tells us how they relate to the discursive process of order building and the EU's 'transformative' performance<sup>22</sup>. Their respective policies reflect the ways each of these states understands Europeanisation as a prevalent process that originates from a wider EU-liberal conception of order.

The discussions about the character of the crisis of the liberal international order past 2008 and its European branch led by the EU can be paired with the order-building discourse seen through norm diffusion and localisation under the process of Europeanisation<sup>23</sup>. Norm diffusion, as spreading of ideas, is what Amitav Acharya posited as 'norm localisation' that translates and embeds 'global norms' via 'local practices'. In that sense, the accepted forms of order are localised through normative socialisation and its effects<sup>24</sup>. Conversely, norm contestation appears as a process related to norm diffusion, being 'norm development and norm change and the process of strategic social construction', which also includes 'norm *antipreneurship*' and 'rival advocacy coalitions in contestation'<sup>25</sup>. Small states, whether they exhibit weak (e.g., Western Balkan countries) or strong socio-political cohesion (e.g., Nordic countries), usually find themselves in the role of norm-takers and, therefore, contributing to keeping their status within the international hierarchy. Whereas the international order is a sort of hierarchy in a realist sense – by allocating states' with the relative ability to act from the system-based perspective, it also represents a values-based measure of what constitutes membership of the international society. The greater the participation of states in the international normative frameworks that underpin the interdependent

- 22 Cf. J. Džankić, S. Keil, M. Kmezić, *Introduction: The Europeanisation of the Western Balkans*, [in:] J. Džankić, S. Keil, M. Kmezić (eds), op. cit., p. 8.
- 23 Koivisto and Dunne propose two approaches: on the crisis of the US-led post-war international order, and a 'legitimation crisis of the deeper institutions of contemporary international society'. See M. Koivisto, T. Dunne, op. cit., p. 620.
- 24 A. Acharya, *How Ideas Spread: Whose Norms Matter? Norm Localization and Institutional Change in Asian Regionalism*, „International Organization“ 2004, vol. 58, no. 2, pp. 239-275; A. Björkdahl, *Norm-maker and Norm-taker: Exploring the Normative Influence of the EU in Macedonia*, „European Foreign Affairs Review“ 2005, vol. 10, no. 2.
- 25 J. Lantis, *Theories of International Norm Contestation: Structure and Outcomes*, [in:] W.R. Thompson (ed.), *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Empirical International Relations Theory*, Oxford 2018, p. 1.

European order and security community, the greater their status internationally and socio-political cohesion domestically.

In the past 15 years, there have been various attempts at utilising the norm-diffusion approach in the Balkans, most notably within the agenda on Europeanisation and democratisation studies<sup>26</sup>. Björkdahl uses the concept of norm-taker and applies it to the context of the Western Balkans<sup>27</sup>. Nevertheless, the attempts at a more focused analysis and theorisation of norm diffusion have been rather scarce, and they travel rather slowly. For example, in the *Journal of International Relations and Development*, a special issue on norm diffusion in the Western Balkans appears, a decade after Acharya's seminal article on this concept application in the ASEAN region. As the editors of the special issue note, the key to understanding the drivers and effects of norm diffusion regionally is through Acharya's concept of localisation. Acharya highlights the norms as such, whereas 'localisation describes a complex process and outcome by which norm-takers build congruence between transnational norms (including norms previously institutionalised in a region) and local beliefs and practices'<sup>28</sup>. It is further assumed that 'the success of norm diffusion strategies and processes depends on the extent to which they provide opportunities for localisation'<sup>29</sup>. For Gillardi, the policies of diffusion matter, as 'diffusion is the interdependent process that is conducive to the spread of policies, not the extent of convergence that can result from it'<sup>30</sup>. The underlying norm dynamics between 'principled ideas' and 'prescriptive norms' is 'shaped by different conditions and processes, with greater scope for the agency role (voluntary initiative and selection) of norm-takers'<sup>31</sup>.

The actual content of small state agency can have conducive or hampering effects on the countries in the Western Balkans, depending on their success in the localisation of the underlying democratic

26 U. Sedelmeier, *Europeanisation in New Member and Candidate States*, „Living Reviews in European Governance“ 2011, vol. 6, no. 1, <http://europeangovernance.livingreviews.org/Articles/lreg-2011-1/download/lreg-2011-1Color.pdf> [08.06.2014]; M. Vachudova, op. cit., passim.

27 A. Björkdahl, *Norm-maker and Norm-taker...*, passim; A. Björkdahl, *Towards a reflexive study of norms...*, passim.

28 A. Acharya, op. cit., p. 241.

29 Ibidem.

30 F. Gillardi, *Transnational Diffusion: Norms, Ideas, and Policies*, [in:] W. Carlsnaes, T. Risse, B. Simmons (eds), *Handbook of International Relations*, London 2013, p. 454.

31 A. Acharya, op. cit., p. 242.

norms in the process of Europeanisation. There are several reasons for this. The literature on Europeanisation remains mostly disconnected from the literature on small states, orders or hierarchies in international relations, and this paper aims to address these lacunae. Such literature is primarily situated within European studies or seen in the light of the liberal peacebuilding, democratisation, or area studies literature on the Western Balkans<sup>32</sup>. Also, the recent wave of Eurosceptic sentiments within some of its member states in the CEE, Brexit, and the rise of populism and illiberal tendencies across the continent somehow joins the examination of the context of Central Europe and the Balkans and makes it relevant within broader European socialisation and EU enlargement contexts in the past 20 years. During that time, there have been relative ups, downs, and some stagnation when it comes to the actual reform and transition processes. All this cannot be analysed just as a series of individual events or processes but as an interrelated game between the conception of an international order that has been in flux for a greater part of this decade and its European dimension, on the one hand, and specific small states that reflect the state of such an order in their policies in the past two decades. Therefore, in the next section, we need to understand how this first-level politics (order) and second-level (state) interact through the process of normative diffusion.

### **What kind of Europeanisation in the Western Balkans: normative or geopolitical concerns?**

Regulative functions of the liberal order are more akin to those 'prescriptive norms' that European states (EU members and candidate states) take in the form of EU normative content. As a norm-maker, EU projects its normative power to the neighbourhood and other regions as a socialiser that holds the understanding of the norm, which is probably the key argument for small states' normative and decision-making agency in the EU, where they also act as co-creators of the

32 Cf. J. Džankić, S. Keil, M. Kmezić (eds), *op. cit.*, *passim*.

norms, instead of just being recipients in an asymmetric relationship on the outside margin<sup>33</sup>.

The process of Europeanisation, as Björkdahl argues, has 'created a sense of community based on a European and liberal democratic identity – a "Europeanness". This sense of community has evolved through common experiences, by common procedures, and a convergence of values'<sup>34</sup>. While this has been largely true for the period of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, following the economic crisis of 2008 and the subsequent crisis of EU enlargement, the Ukraine crisis since 2014, Brexit, and the crisis of the EU migration framework, in this together with the challenge of populist and Eurosceptic views inside the EU, this sense of principled common values has been challenged from inside the EU core (e.g., in Austria), also having its effects on the receiving end, among the norm-taking countries in the Balkans that can also be read in the geopolitical discourse<sup>35</sup>. Here, the role of external actors such as Russia, China, or Turkey in the Western Balkans as the EU margin comes to mind, posing a series of challenges or spoilers to the stalled process of EU integration<sup>36</sup>. By accepting or promoting norms, forging alliances with stronger states, imposing themselves as neutral and therefore versatile co-players, small states may also appear chameleon-like to work within the alliance or security community shelter. That way, they may seek some sort of manoeuvring space within the common normative framework<sup>37</sup>.

33 'The power asymmetry is particularly pronounced in the relationship between the EU in its various representations and the politicians and citizens of the Western Balkans'. See A. Björkdahl, *Towards a reflexive study of norms...*, p. 95.

34 A. Björkdahl, *Norm-maker and Norm-taker...*, p. 260.

35 Some scholars emphasise the geopolitical value of the eventual completion of EU enlargement to the Western Balkans, which is connected to the national interests of the EU and its member states. As Vachudova writes, 'EU Member States still see enlargement as a matter of national interest because it brings net economic and geopolitical benefits over the long term'. See M. Vachudova, *op. cit.*, p. 123. On the critical view of the geopolitical role of the Western Balkans, and the role of external powers in the region, see, for example, F. Bieber, N. Tzifakis, *The Western Balkans as a Geopolitical Chessboard? Myths, Realities and Policy Options*, „BiEPAG Policy Brief“, June 2019, <https://biepag.eu/the-western-balkans-as-a-geopolitical-chessboard-myths-realities-and-policy-options/> [25.08.2019].

36 M. Kovačević, *Understanding the marginality constellations of small states...*, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2019.1580564>.

37 On small states and alliances, see, for example the aforementioned publication by A.J.K. Bailes, B.A. Thayer and B. Thorhallsson and their work on 'shelter' theory. As they write, 'This study offers a critique of alliance theory from the perspective of small state behaviour. We argue that

The terms dealing with normative spreading are diffusion, contestation and localisation, as Tholens and Gross argue<sup>38</sup>. Given that Croatia and Serbia are part of the post-conflict and post-authoritarian contexts of the 1990s, which still affect their domestic politics/ideologies and bilateral relations, they can best take the concept of localisation of European norms to assess the degree of success of the norm-creators in the encounter with small states as norm-takers. This process of localisation means that in the region emerge 'international-local hybrids' on the level of institutions and practices, as the 'creation of tasks and instruments that alter significantly the existing institutional structure but not the normative belief system'<sup>39</sup>. It is, therefore, the difficulties in translating and the internalisation of the norms that burden the prospect of full-cycle Europeanisation in the Western Balkans. The localisation efforts include both acceptance and contestation at the level of particular national strategies. Namely, what happens is 'friction... to better be able to capture the conflictual encounters between global and local ideas, actors and practices in peacebuilding, resulting in six possible outcomes: compliance, adoption, adaptation, co-option, resistance, or rejection'<sup>40</sup>. Such a process is not typical only for the pre-accession reforms and their normative content's internalisation but it also can be said for the CEE countries that joined the EU in the 'big bang' enlargement of 2004, with post-accession dynamics that speak to some level of friction beyond the first cycle of acceptance of the ground norms. This means that internalisation of some sort of democratic political norm (e.g., on human rights or migration policy, or solidarity in the EU) can be traced in its positioning to the wider EU

the concept of alliance "shelter" better explains small state alliances than traditional theoretical approaches. Alliance shelter is the series of strategies that small states adopt to alleviate the inherent vulnerabilities of being small. It is a unique form of alliance relationship with a great power or regional or international organisation whereby the small state yields effective control of its political decision-making in specific areas. Accordingly, it provides a considerable contrast to alliance theory's conception of bandwagoning, for example' ... 'Small state behaviour may be informed by balancing and bandwagoning, but to understand and appreciate the contingency of small state alliance behaviour, additional concepts like shelter are essential if we are to understand the causes and conduct of alliances in international politics'. See A.J.K. Bailes, B.A. Thayer, B. Thorhallsson, op. cit., p. 2.

38 S. Tholens, L. Gross, *Diffusion, contestation and localisation in post-war states: 20 years of Western Balkans reconstruction*, „Journal of International Relations and Development” 2015, vol. 18, no. 3.

39 Ibidem, p. 251, 252.

40 Ibidem, p. 254.

policies and norms in one of these six modes of friction. It seems that the lack of compliance or somewhat resistant attitudes can be noted within the counter-liberal discourses.

Given that the EU and NATO are dominant norm-producers, in the analysis we will focus on setting the norms that deal with the processes of Europeanisation, state-building and peace-building. In Austria, for example, the framework of Europeanisation is relevant both for norm-making and norm-taking, whereas in the Balkans, Europeanisation has been conducted in relation to the processes of liberal state-building and peace-building. Therefore, the relation of these states to the aforesaid processes and norms associated with them in the localisation speaks about the relative constellation between role-maker (the EU) and role-taker (specific countries). This raised the question as to how the practices of the localisation of relevant norms are discursively represented in the EU enlargement discourse and whether the responses of the norm-takers serve the compliance or contestation of the EU normative policy discourse. In order to examine such responses, we proceed with the analysis based on the guiding theoretical questions on norm localisation strategies within the specific 'fields' and policies of the EU in the marginal small states of Southeast Europe.

### **3. A Sketch of the EU-Western Balkans' constellation in the 2010s**

Serbia and Croatia have had different Europeanisation paths since the 2000s. The latter has become an EU member in the summer of 2013, and the former started its membership negotiations in January 2014, two years after getting the status of candidate for membership<sup>41</sup>. The pre-accession Europeanisation of Croatia with some results has been rewarded by membership<sup>42</sup>, whereas Serbia's path has been 'fraught with difficulties' making it effectively a 'reluctant Europeaniser' in the

41 European Commission, *European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations*, [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/countries/detailed-country-information/serbia\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/countries/detailed-country-information/serbia_en) [07.06. 2019].

42 S. Grimm, *op. cit.*, *passim*.

early 2010s, and hence, a ‘difficult state’<sup>43</sup>. This complexity is also well echoed by Tanja Börzel and Sonja Grimm’s analysis, who from the viewpoint of the EU governance and democratisation concisely yet precisely diagnose the current state of play in the region: “The Western Balkans is a region that has been confronted with secessionist movements, unsettled borders, ethnic tensions, deficient state capacity, and strong clientelistic networks that provide serious challenges for internal and external attempts at democratic state-building, even in more consolidated states such as Croatia and Serbia”<sup>44</sup>. With the latter in mind, a further discussion on the interdependent external-internal aspects of Europeanisation is in order.

The post-accession Europeanisation may be a different challenge (e.g., for Croatia after 2013) in the matter of keeping up with the adopted standards but the key difference is that the pre-accession conditionality no longer applies to members, rather different mechanisms. The distortion of political reality and populist rhetoric in many respects counter the expectations of the EU member states would be expected to practice fully democratised societies post-accession. The interesting question that Jelena Subotić asks is, why does Europeanisation not yield full results in some cases (e.g., Serbia)? Europeanisation is, she argues, both a normative and political process. It cannot succeed without external rewards to the states and it cannot penetrate deeply if the political elites are reserved or there is the presence of domestic popular resentment<sup>45</sup>. Although it is clear, and it is key that Europeanisation at the level of internalisation and implementation of norms is consolidated at the level of society, the question of the liberal order as the localisation of European norms (at the level of institutions) first need to be observed at the level of the international political field.

For Serbia and Croatia, the international political field is dominantly marked in the European integration space and related constellation toward EU membership (candidacy), although their trajectories and the

43 J. Subotić, *Explaining Difficult States: The Problems of Europeanization in Serbia*, „East European Politics and Societies” 2010, vol. 24, no. 4.

44 T. Börzel, S. Grimm, *Building Good (Enough) Governance in Postconflict Societies & Areas of Limited Statehood: The European Union & the Western Balkans*, „Daedalus, the Journal of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences” 2018, vol. 147, no. 1, p. 117.

45 J. Subotić, op. cit., pp. 596-597.

level of connectedness with the EU has been divergent in the past two decades. The prevalent field deals with EU enlargement and its related approaches such as peace-building, state-building and member-state Europeanisation. Since the early 2000s, Croatia has changed its position in Europe by becoming a NATO and EU member state, effectively joining the security community in the constellation of 'near-core insider'. However, its foreign policy role is still a mix of formal institutional EU insidership and the tactics of marginality. Serbia's position can be described as foreign policy consumed by the status of Kosovo, which since 2007 has resulted in a proclaimed policy of neutrality and an associated slowdown in its EU integration as a combination of external (crisis of EU enlargement strategy)<sup>46</sup>, and domestic aspects and problems in the adoption and internalisation of the Europeanisation ethos and policies across various levels<sup>47</sup>. Although EU membership conditionality yielded partial results in the institutional and societal internalisation of norms, as the scholars of the region seem to have noted, there 'is also general agreement that most of the conditions of effective conditionality are weaker in the Western Balkans. Whereas the determinacy of EU conditions has improved, compliance with these conditions is likely to be hindered by the lesser credibility of the accession perspective, lower state and governance capacities, and higher political and financial costs. Despite these unfavourable conditions, the accession process in the past decade has progressed slowly but steadily'<sup>48</sup>. The focus of the EU's work in the Western Balkans has been joined by the so-called Berlin Process (since 2014), which is intended to contribute mostly to the 'connectivity' within the region.

46 M. Kovačević, *Understanding the marginality constellations of small states...*, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2019.1580564>.

47 As Subotić points out, apart from the external mechanisms of 'reinforcement by reward', the process of Europeanisation can be successful if it is understood within the logic of convenience. Subotić claims that, 'An alternative explanation to the incentives model is the literature on social learning, which argues that states adopt European rules because they perceive them as inherently appropriate and the process of Europeanisation is domestically considered legitimate'. See J. Subotić, *op. cit.*, p. 597. More recently, there is a view among scholars that 'the EU-induced political conditionality in the Western Balkans in most cases directly affects extremely sensitive issues of national and ethnic identity and statehood'. See A. Zhelyazkova, I. Damjanovski, Z. Nechev, F. Schimmelfennig, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

48 *Ibidem*, p. 31.



This is an umbrella framework that could yield the best results only as part of a credible EU enlargement strategy.

Here, the question of the meaning of the EU enlargement strategy comes into question. The policy and prospects for accepting new members have waned since the mid-2010s, with the Brexit crisis and the lack of internal consensus on the dynamics of further enlargement bringing a shift in approach. This has been marked by the Berlin Process as the diplomatic initiative that since 2014 has focused on boosting regional cooperation in response to the uncertain future of EU enlargement, with the guiding role of Germany's chancellor, Angela Merkel. The focus of the Berlin Process, as stated in the 2014 declaration, has been on 'resolving outstanding bilateral and internal issues, and in achieving reconciliation within and between the societies in the region' (among the countries presently dubbed as the 'Western Balkan 6'<sup>49</sup>) while fostering 'regional economic cooperation and laying the foundations for sustainable growth'<sup>50</sup>. Such efforts were also reflected in the language of the new EU global strategy of 2016. The EU's 'global strategy' from 2016 sees the Western Balkans as a region that is important for the Union in tackling important security challenges, risks, and threats, ranging from energy security to terrorism. Since 2014 and the beginning of the refugee and mass-migration crisis, the Western Balkans has returned to the security focus of the EU as a 'security provider'<sup>51</sup>. In light of the external influence in this region, the EU focuses on particular issues of soft security and seeks to provide the tools for connectivity and stability of the region in a period when enlargement policy is at least paused until 2025, if not longer.

The European Commission's 2018 strategic document titled 'A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans' outlines the following context:

49 Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Kosovo\*, Montenegro and Serbia.

50 SEESOX, *The Western Balkans and the Berlin Process*, „Southeast European Studies“ at Oxford, workshop report, July 2018, [https://www.sant.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/berlin\\_process\\_workshop\\_report\\_v2.pdf](https://www.sant.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/berlin_process_workshop_report_v2.pdf) [09.08.2019], p. 1.

51 D. Emini, D. Marku, *Rethinking security: Western Balkans as a security provider*, „SEE Think Net“, July 2018, <https://idscs.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Rethinking-security.pdf> [09.08.2019]; S. Šelo Šabić, *The Impact of the Refugee Crisis in the Balkans: A Drift Towards Security*, „Journal of Regional Security“ 2017, vol. 12, no. 1, pp. 51-75.

*The Western Balkan countries will be able to join the European Union once the criteria of Article 49 of the Treaty on European Union, including the Copenhagen criteria, are met. While none meets these criteria today, the region has come a long way since the end of the 1990s. Overall, significant progress has been made both on reforms and on overcoming the devastating legacy of war and conflict. But in order for the countries to meet all membership conditions and strengthen their democracies, comprehensive and convincing reforms are still required in crucial areas, notably on the rule of law, competitiveness, and regional cooperation and reconciliation*<sup>52</sup>.

It can be noted that the political enlargement discourse has eventually given way to that of economic cooperation via 'connectivity', with the affirmation of the requirement to meet the Copenhagen criteria before any eventual accession. Namely, the strengthening of the Western Balkans' regional cooperation is seen as a helpful tool to achieve goals related to areas of the rule of law, socio-economic development, the digital transformation, security and migration, connectivity, and good neighbourly relations that the Commission has streamlined in its 'Six Flagship Initiatives' for the Western Balkans<sup>53</sup>. These six initiatives represent a functionalist and sectoral approach aimed at 'engagement' via capacity-building of the region during a period when the political salience of enlargement is effectively paused among the key EU member states.

The EU sees the interconnectedness of efforts that are bounded and shared by 'initiatives' (e.g., the Berlin Process), 'sectoral platforms' (e.g., Energy and Transport Communities), and 'regional actors' (e.g., Regional Cooperation Council)<sup>54</sup>. Such a constellation was officially inaugurated at the EU-Western Balkan summit held in Sofia in May 2018 and reiterated at the London Summit of the Berlin Process in July

52 European Commission, *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. A credible enlargement perspective for an enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans*, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/communication-credible-enlargement-perspective-western-balkans\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/communication-credible-enlargement-perspective-western-balkans_en.pdf) [19.09.2019], p. 3.

53 European Commission, *EU-Western Balkans: Six Flagship Initiatives*, May 2018, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/six-flagship-initiatives-support-transformation-western-balkans\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/six-flagship-initiatives-support-transformation-western-balkans_en.pdf) [19.09.2019].

54 European Commission, *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament...*, p. 3.

2018 (Western Balkans Summit, London 2018). The reactions and implications of such an approach seem also to be in line with the ways that the EU has chosen to address the region's concerns, which are kept on the economic and social levels and which seeks to be coherent with the 'resilience' discourse. However, it is not viewed in the geopolitical mode, although external actors such as China, Russia, or Turkey have strengthened their influence, often treated as geopolitical in nature.

If the liberal order-building in Europe through EU enlargement and democratisation has made significant leaps in the CEE in the post-Cold War period, the Balkans remains a challenge and a key test for the EU's ability to further carry out its transformative power. This is mostly due to the prolonged and unfinished transition, the effects of which presently mix with a context that goes beyond the classical market-economy transition and societal democratisation. In the political field, the EU has achieved mixed results on the diplomatic level and has managed to promote a functioning framework initiating post-conflict stability and democratisation in the Western Balkans via its institutional and developmental support guided by the SAA framework. In such a way, it can be said that the liberal order has been spreading across the continent since the 2000s. However, some level of success of norm localisation is just one side of the coin. On the general political level and in the area of normative framework and institution building, the conception of order is accepted, but there are loopholes that still make the overall constellation not fully consolidated and internalised by the norm-taking countries.

The EU is the key political and economic partner across the Western Balkans, just taking into consideration the sheer volume of trade and commerce, and its pre-accession development aid has proven essential to support institution-building and reform processes across the region. In the period between 2008 and 2018, the EU-Western Balkans trade has continued to grow and with a relative rise in the exports of the small states of this region to the EU. Namely, EU exports have increased by EUR 10 billion, whereas Western Balkan exports increased by EUR 13 billion<sup>55</sup>. In 2018, the Union is by far the largest

55 Eurostat 2019, *Western Balkan countries-EU – international trade in goods statistics*, [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Western\\_Balkan\\_countries-EU\\_-\\_inter](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Western_Balkan_countries-EU_-_inter)

trade partner of the Western Balkan countries, with over 71.9 percent of their exports and 57.7 percent of imports. The trade among the Western Balkan countries comes second, with 15.6 percent of exports and 9.6 percent of imports. On the other hand, Western Balkan countries recorded 0.7 percent of their exports and 8.2 percent of imports to China, 3.1 percent of exports and 4.9 percent of imports with Russia, 1.7 percent of exports and 5.1 percent of imports with Turkey<sup>56</sup>.

The latter data indicate that the overall constellations of Serbia and Croatia, despite their candidate/membership status difference, has been tied to the EU on a strategic level. Therefore, EU norm localisation in these two countries demonstrates differences that also are reflected in their international status within the respective fields (political, economic, and institutional). This means membership in EU or NATO, international financial institutions such as the WTO, or the status of international aid as a donor or recipient. The formal integration of a country in these structures speaks about its level of embeddedness in some normative hierarchy, or, in other words, to what degree a state is socialised within the liberal order. For small states, it is easier to look for shelter within those structures, whereas pursuing an individual strategy outside the constellation is much more difficult and with greater costs.

## 4. Conclusion

What does this changing picture of politics in Europe imply for norm localisation among small states in the Western Balkans in a time when the long-celebrated integrationist context runs into hurdles among the EU member states? The approach to norm localisation and some degree of contestation are, I argue, the measure of a state's propensity to pursue the alliance approach as a normative shelter or try pursuing their own autonomous strategy. However, pursuing a strategy of influence is more effective for small states within the EU shelter (e.g., normative entrepreneurs) when they can take part in

national\_trade\_in\_goods\_statistics#Manufactured\_goods\_dominates\_trade\_with\_Western\_Balkan\_countries [19.09.2019].

56 Ibidem.

shaping EU policies as near-core or core insiders. On the other hand, as the constellation theory would advise us, small states as outsiders or would-be insiders find it much more difficult to contest the normative power of the EU by looking to hedge their options elsewhere. Serbia's policy of neutrality and 'balanced approach' can be seen as an attempt at such a policy with rather questionable results and prospects in the long run<sup>57</sup>. In analysing these specific policies and relationships between the EU and Serbia/Croatia, Sonja Grimm's classification of EU ('external') and national ('domestic') instruments in norm promotion is applied to the case of Croatia. According to Grimm, the EU uses 'diplomacy, democracy assistance, conditionality, and supervision' while states use 'diplomacy, take-over, slowdown, modification, resistance, and emancipation'<sup>58</sup>. Below, we will provide a brief illustration of these policy instruments in the case of EU-Serbia relations.

In the field of diplomacy, the EU and Serbia exchange various kinds of messages that are not necessarily connected to the technical aspects of EU integration, but mostly on the political level and regarding the status of Kosovo and the talks on the normalisation of relations<sup>59</sup>. The EU in its relations with the Serbian government within the SAA and membership negotiations applies the instruments of diplomacy, democracy assistance, and conditionality. Democracy assistance means support for the reform of public institutions and various projects in the area of democracy and human rights that engage civil society. Serbian institutions could acknowledge and also could filter such support for reform through their domestic policies. The question is how are those EU induced policies and instruments treated at the localisation level? One could argue that key EU-funded policy instruments and programmes in Serbia are represented as 'reforms' and usually are

57 H. Mouritzen, A. Wivel (eds), *The Geopolitics of Euro-Atlantic Integration: Europe and the Nation State*, London 2005; M. Kovačević, *Understanding the marginality constellations of small states...*, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2019.1580564>.

58 As Grimm writes, 'The external instruments differ according to the general level of leverage external actors can mobilise to influence the democratic reform process, with diplomacy having the least leverage and supervision the most', whereas states use 'a set of instruments that allow domestic actors either to accept or to alter, modify, change or reject reform demands'. See S. Grimm, *op. cit.*, p. 855.

59 M. Kovačević, *Serbia's foreign policy beyond the Kosovo conundrum*, Italian Institute for International Political Studies, 16.05.2018, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/serbias-foreign-policy-beyond-kosovo-conundrum-20509> [20.09.2019].

treated locally by applying the instruments of diplomacy, take-over, slow-down, and to a lesser extent, modification. However, there is an impression that the majority of membership negotiations and regular communication with the European Commission goes well at the technical level, without much confrontation or contestation in that process. The discourse of occasional confrontation or slowdown is mostly connected to political conditionality, which is presented as the 'normalization of relations' between Belgrade and Priština under the EU-led 'Brussels talks' since 2011 (and Chapter 35 as conditionality in membership negotiations with Serbia since 2014), frozen since the second half of 2018, especially after Kosovo imposed tariffs on Serbian goods.

The present discussion on the prospects of norm localisations in the Western Balkans still has a great deal of resonance with the argument that Jelena Subotić made about Serbia as a 'difficult state' with regards to Europeanisation almost 10 years ago: 'While material incentives perhaps moved Serbian elites into accepting some EU rules, they were not enough to start a process of deeper normative transformation'<sup>60</sup>. Instead, norm-taking and norm localisation remain sufficient to have the normative framework in place, and conform with the overall idea, but stop short on the receiving end because norm implementation or compliance requires time and a systemic commitment in order to have the sticky side of norms fully internalised. Whether the prospect of norm localisation and their internalisation in line with the logic of appropriateness will be fulfilled largely depends on the overall level of democratisation/challenges to democracy within any transition society in the Western Balkans. The external incentives in diffusing EU norms in the region have played an important role, followed by some degree of lesson-drawing and social learning as forms of norm-taking.

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<sup>60</sup> J. Subotić, *op. cit.*, p. 597.

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