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Article

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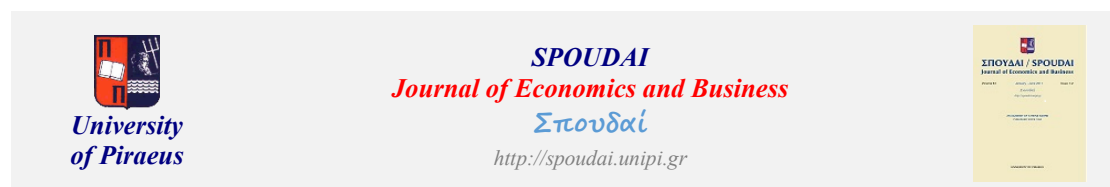
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Economic and Political Performances of EU Candidate Countries from the WB: A Quantitative Approach of the Analysis

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Abstract

EU integration is a strategic priority and a clear perspective for 4 countries of the Western Balkans region, currently holding the status of the candidate country. Fulfilment of the Copenhagen criteria has played an increased role in the discussions of the EU accession and enlargement (regularly assessed in the EC progress reports), and depth of monitoring has increased further. Objective of this paper is to assess the political and economic performance of the EU candidates from the WB based on a comparative quantitative analysis through a series of indicators. Despite of the method used, results of the analysis show that there are no significant differences between the candidate countries in improving their political and economic systems, and no major changes in time at the country level, in order to support a sustainable performance and progress. This comprehensive quantitative analysis gave us some key interesting insights about these countries individual performance and the pathway dynamics in their attempts to meet the EU criteria through relevant reforms and policy measures. Given the internal characteristics of EU integration processes (closely linked to EU dynamics, complex political and economic processes/forces, different timing), a qualitative analysis remains crucial for providing an in-depth country-oriented analysis.

JEL classification: O52, P48, Y10.

Keywords: EU integration, Western Balkans, Copenhagen criteria, quantitative analysis

1. Introduction

The EU operates with comprehensive approval procedures that ensure new members are admitted only when they can demonstrate they are able to play their part fully as members, complying with all the EU's standards and rules, having the consent of the EU institutions and EU member states and having also the consent of their citizens – as expressed through approval in their national parliament or by referendum.

The Copenhagen criteria play a central role in the discussion about accession to the Union, including that of Western Balkan countries, and have formed the structure for the Commission's reports on progress towards accession (Sigma, 2007).

As defined at the European Council in Copenhagen in 1993 and hence referred to as 'Copenhagen criteria', countries wishing to join need to have: (1) stable institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities; (2) a functioning market economy and the capacity to cope with competition and market forces in the EU; and (3) the ability to take on and implement effectively the obligations of membership, including adherence to the aims of political, economic and monetary union. Since 1997, compliance with these criteria was further reinforced. The 'own merits' principle was also established, so that each aspirant country would make progress according to its individual efforts and pace, rather than en bloc (EP, 2016).

In 2000, the European Commission discussed and afterwards recommended that negotiations should be opened with all candidate countries which meet the political criteria for membership and have proved to be ready to take the necessary measures to comply with the economic criteria (Richter et al., 2000). Acknowledging the progress achieved in individual applicant countries, the EC had to choose between two options: (1) to continue with the practice of negotiating with countries which have made sufficient progress and are in a position to satisfy the economic conditions for membership in the mid-term; and (2) to start negotiations with all countries which meet the Copenhagen political criteria, regardless the economic criteria.

In general, the Western Balkan countries present a case more complex than previous EU candidates, due to a prolonged and difficult transition to democracy, economic struggles and bilateral disputes to resolve (EP, 2016). However, the accession process in the WB is not a one-way street, it advances in a successful enlargement continuum requiring both the candidate countries' efforts and the EU member states' willingness to embrace the region (EMS, 2019). In the case of the Western Balkan countries, the depth of monitoring has increased further, leading to the general public perception that conditions have become more rigorous. Practically, this relates to the fact that the Commission has become more careful in the way it monitors performance on the accession criteria, with the new tools developed during the fifth enlargement (Sigma, 2007). The requirements imposed on aspirant countries have become more complex – more chapters, more interim benchmarks, and additional emphasis on the criteria. (EMS, 2019).

With the lessons learned from Croatia as a leading country in the region, both political and economic criteria have been supplemented by additional political criteria regarding the increase and participation in regional cooperation. In the field of EU integration studies, there is a persistent discussion on the difficulties to evaluate the relative weight of political and economic factors in boosting or impeding integration (Wallace, 2005). When it comes to fulfilling the criteria, considering the background of the country, some of them could be strengthen; some of them could be lowered. Then what is the role of criteria? They represent a frame, while still preserving their diversity.” (EFB, 2010).

The conditions are rather vague, often leaving a lot of scope for interpretation and main advantage from the EU perspective is that they can always be considered as unfulfilled in details. More specific or indeed quantitative conditions would have led to automatic opening of accession negotiations once the conditions had been fulfilled. (Sigma, 2007).

The political criteria have proved to be the most crucial part of conditionality, representing the key criteria for agreeing to negotiate accession or indeed to deepen integration, or the blocking criteria otherwise, particularly for the WB region. Economic conditionality is important but is less sensitive than political conditionality. The “market economy” is itself a very loose term. Additionally, the EU can assess the undergone economic reforms based on

their long-lasting approach ensuring for sustainability. In this sense, for the WB countries, the economic criteria may prove difficult to meet (Sigma, 2007).

According to the recent analysis, the EU should rethink its policies and differentiate the countries according to local criteria, not by an overall view or comparison between large and small countries, which should be judged upon individual merits and not comparative or global ones, while still complying with the basic political and economic criteria.” (EFB, 2010).

The objective of this work is to assess the democratic and economic performance of countries that got candidate status for European Union (EU) membership. We have selected for our quantitative and comparative analysis of democratic and economic performance four Western Balkan countries that currently enjoy candidate status in terms of EU membership. As mentioned above, democracy as well as a functional market economy are to be considered the most important credentials for the European Union. This research aims at measuring the political performance as well as the economic achievements in countries such as Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia.

Supporting the thesis that not all EU candidate countries from the Western Balkan countries are equally democratic and not all countries have a satisfactory economic performance, the research questions can be divided into two main areas and are as follows:

1. Can the political system in the EU candidate countries from the WB, be considered a democratic system?
2. What form of democracy have EU candidate countries from the WB?
3. Is the democratic performance of these countries to be considered equally among them?
4. How do EU candidate countries from the WB work with market organization and internalization?
5. Can the EU candidate countries from the WB cope with competition and market forces in the EU?
6. Do the EU candidate countries from the WB demonstrate a sustainable economic performance through adequate policy measures?

Following the qualitative analysis provided by the European Commission on the economic and political performance of candidate countries (more concretely in the fulfillment of both political and economic criteria), a series of indicators evaluated by international institutions and reports are chosen to conduct our quantitative analysis, aiming at exploring the progress of each candidate country in time, compared to the other Western Balkan countries.

For purposes of a quantitative analysis, deploying a variety of sources for relevant data and indicators supports a comprehensive analysis. By the other side, it comes with some assumptions and restrictions that should be critically addressed.

We have to acknowledge the fact that the concepts used for conducting the analysis are concepts that have been defined and developed differently by different authors. The European Union defines its criteria for joining the EU, but those definitions are quite broad, and not enough for an in depth analysis. For instance, by just stating that “Countries wishing to join need to have stable institutions guaranteeing democracy and a functioning market economy”, the EU does not give any further information or reference regarding key indicators to measure a satisfactory democratic or economic performance. Additionally, there are a lot of scholars with different definitions of democracy, and a lot of economists which employ a wide range of economic indicators to measure the country economic performance.

With these pre-assumptions, it is important to highlight that system classification, referring to the political criteria, and index composition through sub-indices, referring to both political and economic criteria, vary from method to method, and we are not going to discuss and decide which method is better compared to the others, but we will use all of them for satisfying this research requirements in terms of assessing whether democracy and economy for the targeted countries show signs of progress, stagnation or deterioration or regress, depending on the method used. Furthermore, although the use of those various methods satisfies an in depth comparative analysis through providing a more complete picture of the current situation of the candidate countries, yet the degree of subjectivity that accompanies this analytical approach outlines the need for a subsequent qualitative analysis at each country level.

It is important to highlight that given the advantages and disadvantages of each approach of the analysis, the need to explain the process itself in terms of its length and required time, as well as individual country-based characteristics both in national and supranational level, remains crucial for conducting any in-depth analysis in the field.

This paper is not merely intended to validate or invalidate the assumptions mentioned, but to enable us to discover the shortcomings of each system and thus allowing to provide some predictions. Only if deficiencies are identified in these systems, we may suggest how to avoid shortcomings in both political and economic performance and enhance thereby the political and economic quality.

2. Economic performance

Economic governance has become important in the enlargement process in recent years. The EC monitors the economic reform-program process, and the assessment of compliance with the economic criteria for accession. Each candidate country prepares an economic reform program (ERP) every year, which sets out a medium-term macro-fiscal policy framework and a structural-reform agenda aimed at ensuring competitiveness and inclusive growth. The ERPs are the basis for country-specific policy guidance jointly adopted by the EU and the WB (EC, 2019).

At the European Union level, through a series of instruments for informing, consulting, involving, cooperating with and strengthening the private sector actors, it is guaranteed overall improvement of the business climate, also for the SMEs, as well as reforms prioritization based on a public-private dialogue in policy formulation towards strategic sectors for growth and employment (EC, 2014).

According to EESC 2018, for all WB countries, the private sector remains undedeveloped compared to other small economies of the transition. These economies remain dominated by a high presence of state in the markets, high level of corruption, lack of institutional framework, lack of standards, low access in finance and in markets (Serbos, 2008). Full market liberalization still remains hampered by lack of competitiveness of local companies, although local markets are fully opened to European companies (Gordana and Nikola, 2013). In general, benefits of private sector from the scale economies resulting from the EU integration will depend on the access in finance, a skilled labor force, as well as orientation towards innovation (Simoneti et al., 1996).

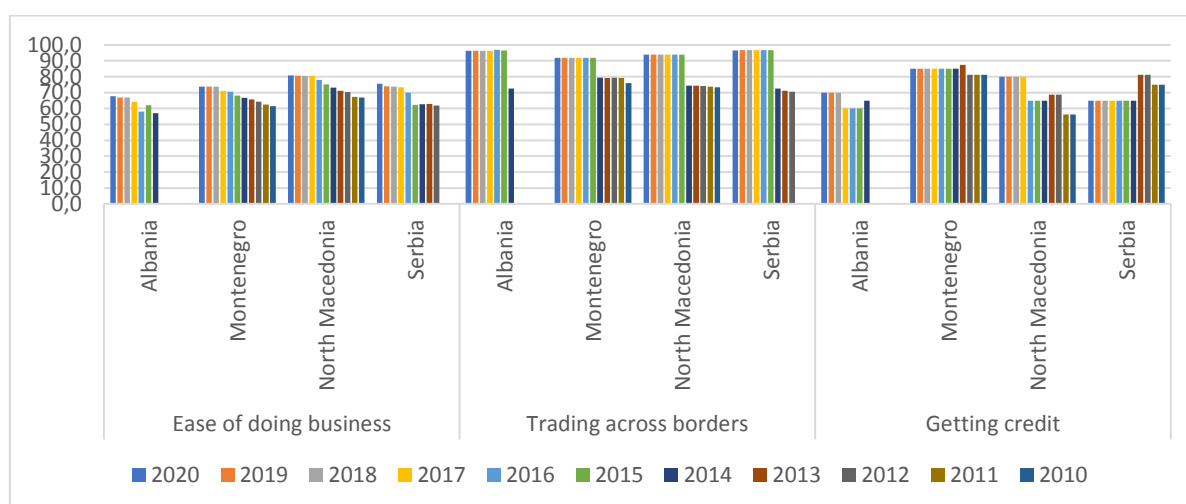
As stated in the progress reports for the candidate countries from the WB, these countries should boost national economies aiming at accelerating the required convergence with the union (EC, 2020). The integration processes for the WB relate to the countries agenda of transformation into market economies, functioning and capable economies to fully integrate,

provide employment incentives and potentials for entrepreneurship, thus improving business and investment climate, rule of law, strengthening institutional capacities and implementing European policies for fighting corruption (Budak and Rajh, 2013).

As a quantitative analysis is focused on the scores each country reaches related to the indicators and indexes measured in several international assessment reports, EU candidate countries from the WB have shown to have the following performance according to the chosen indicators, in their attempts to fulfill the economic criteria of the EU.

According to the WB, all countries have improved in terms of their “Ease of doing business”, for the whole period with a candidate status. Among these countries, North Macedonia seems to be the best performer throughout the period, and together with Serbia, have shown the highest progress. On the contrary, Albania is the weakest performer throughout the period, also showing the smallest progress. Together with Serbia, Albania has performed better in terms of “Trading across borders”, compared to the other two countries, although this indicator has shown to vary more slowly over time, and countries do not reflect considerable changes. In this report, largest differences between countries exist in terms of “Getting credit”, where both Albania and Serbia lag behind the other two countries, and Serbia has also shown a regress in terms of its access to finance. Additionally, North Macedonia seems to be a good performer, showing also the greatest progress.

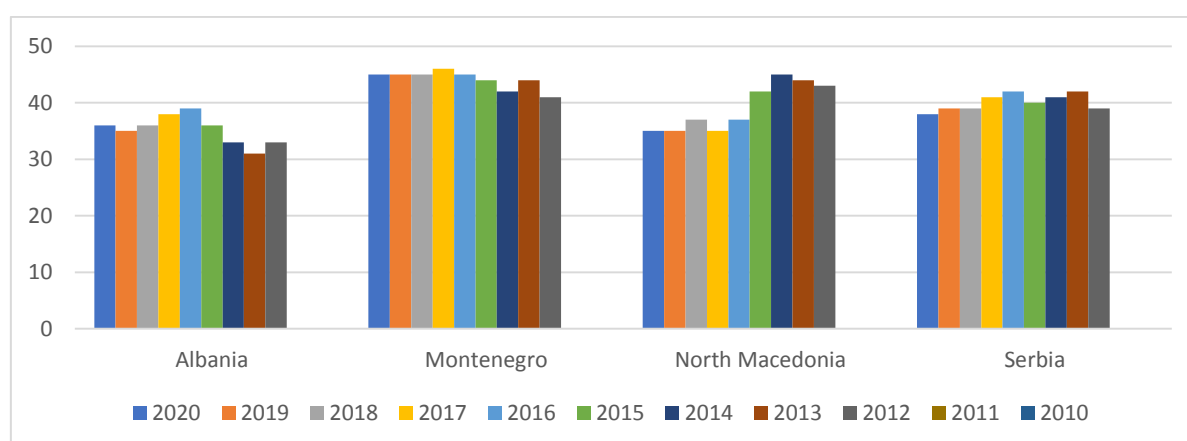
Graph 1: Key indicators of doing business



Source: Authors' presentation based on the data from the Doing Business Report of the World Bank

According to the TI, Montenegro and North Macedonia have shown to perform better over time compared to the other two countries, although North Macedonia has made a strong regress in terms of perceived corruption in the economy. Among all candidate countries of the region, Albania has reached the highest level of perceived corruption, with a peak in 2013.

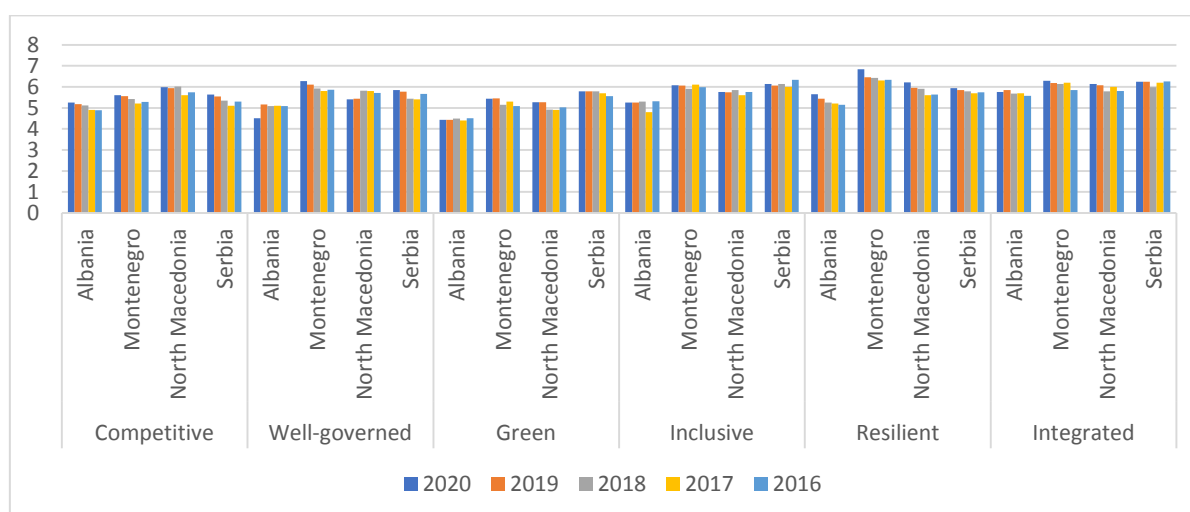
Graph 2: Corruption Perception Index



Source: Authors' presentation based on the data from the Transparency International Report

According to EBRD, the EU candidate countries from the WB, as economies in transition, show to be average performers. North Macedonia remains a more competitive economy, although the other countries have shown a better progress over time. Albania is the weakest performer in terms of the “good governance” indicator, showing also a deterioration over time, similarly to North Macedonia. Among these countries, Montenegro is better governed throughout the time. Slight changes over time are evidenced for all countries in terms of developing a green internal economy. In this context, Serbia has shown to be the best performer, whereas Albania the worst. On the contrary, these two countries have not performed well in terms of developing an inclusive economy, where Albania shows to be the weakest performer with slight deteriorations over the time, while Serbia showing the highest decline in this indicator. The other two countries have generally shown a slight progress. All countries have shown attempts to build and develop a resilient economy. Montenegro has shown major progress in this indicator, remaining the best performer compared to the other countries throughout the time. Serbia has shown the slightest progress compared to the previous years. Montenegro is also a high performer in terms of developing an integrated economy, showing a continuous progress over time, compared to the other economies. On the contrary, Albania remains the weakest performer for this indicator.

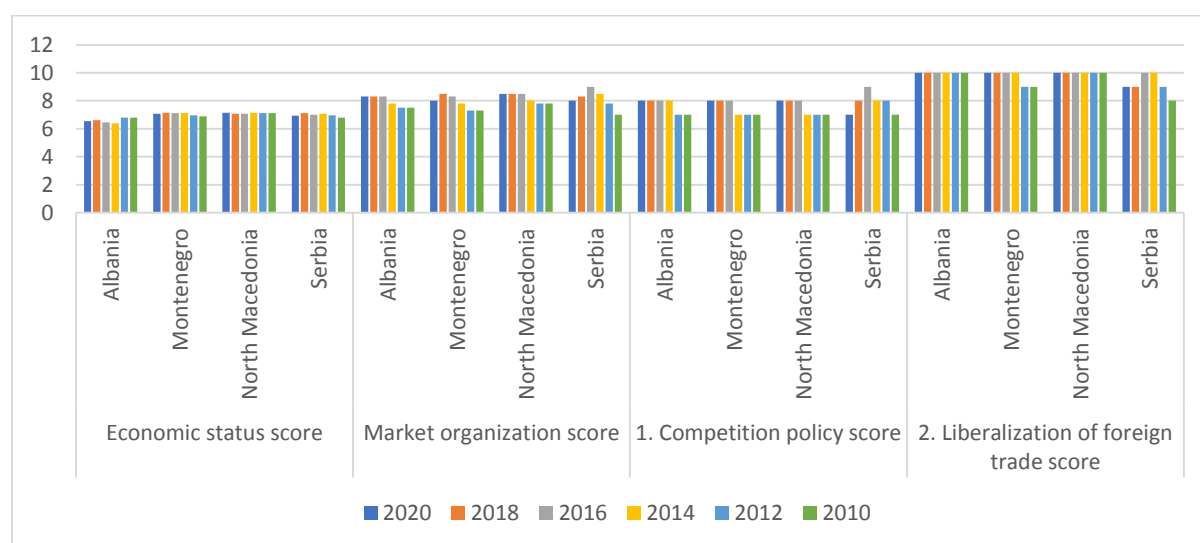
Graph 3: Key pillars of the transition scores for the economies



Source: Authors' presentation based on the data from the EBRD Transition Reports

According to BTI, countries have similarly performed in terms of their overall economic status score. Albania lags slightly behind the other countries, with frequent fluctuations but with small changes over time. North Macedonia is the best performer, also with a significant progress in the last years. Serbia and Montenegro have slightly deteriorated. All countries have shown a good performance (around 8 out of 10 = max) in terms of market organization, as they are performing maximally well in one of the two sub-indicators, specifically that of the liberalization of foreign trade (10 out of 10 = max). Both Albania and North Macedonia are maximally evaluated in their attempts to liberalize foreign trade, and Montenegro has done a significant progress, whereas Serbia has shown a negative performance in the last years, since 2016. Small differences are evidenced in the competition policies of all countries, with a general evaluation as “positive” (around 8 out of 10 = max) for Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia. Serbia remains the country with a current deterioration in terms of this indicator, with considerable fluctuations throughout the time.

Graph 4: Key pillars of the economic transformation scores



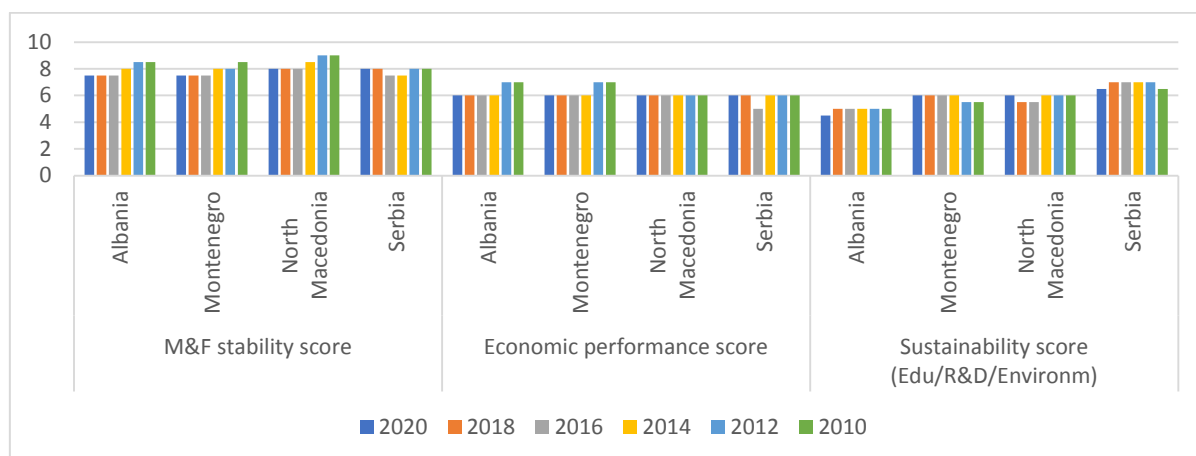
Source: Authors' presentation based on the data from the BTI Economic Transformation Scores

According to the same report, candidate countries show a good and comparable performance in terms of the M-F stability score. North Macedonia and Serbia have shown a higher stability over time, but all countries have experienced a negative performance with high fluctuations in the last years. Compared to this indicator, in the other two indicators – those of the economic performance and sustainability, countries show a relatively less good performance. There are small differences in the economic performance of the countries and each individual country shows slow progress over time. North Macedonia and Serbia show a more stable economic performance, whereas Albania and Montenegro have experienced a significant deterioration since 2014 followed by a stagnation. The sustainability score is the lowest for all countries, as it includes each country performance in terms of education, R&D and environment. Serbia has shown to be a better performer, and Albania the worst. North Macedonia and Montenegro have a comparable performance with small positive and negative fluctuations over time.

According to the WEF, generally all countries lag behind in terms of their innovation capability, compared to their overall performance in the other indicators. Serbia and Albania are respectively the best and the worst performer in terms of innovation capability throughout the period, whereas Montenegro has shown the major progress. The second less evaluated indicator for these countries of the region is that of the market size. Serbia is again the best

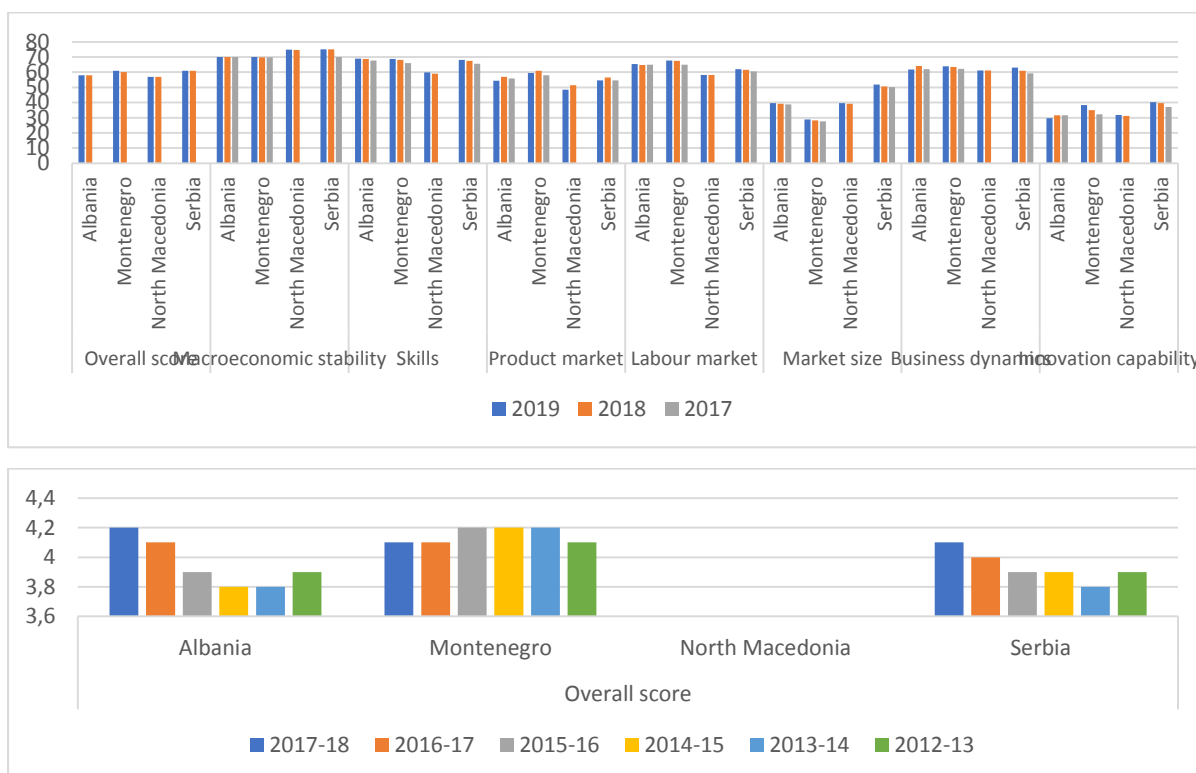
performer over time, Montenegro lags behind the other countries, whereas Albania and North Macedonia show slight positive changes in the last years. Related to the other important indicators, North Macedonia lags behind the other countries in terms of the workforce skills and the labor market as a result, but also slightly in terms of the product market. Countries in general have shown a similar performance over time in terms of their macroeconomic stability and private sector dynamics.

Graph 5: Key pillars of the economic transformation scores



Source: Authors' presentation based on the data from the BTI Economic Transformation Scores

Graph 6: Key pillars of the global competitiveness scores



Source: Authors' presentation based on the data from the Global Competitiveness Index of the WEF

In terms of the overall GCI score, all countries show very little progress in the last years. Albania have shown the highest progress during 2014 – 2018. Serbia has shown large fluctuations over time, while Montenegro has returned to growth in the last years, after a stagnation with a low performance after 2015-16.

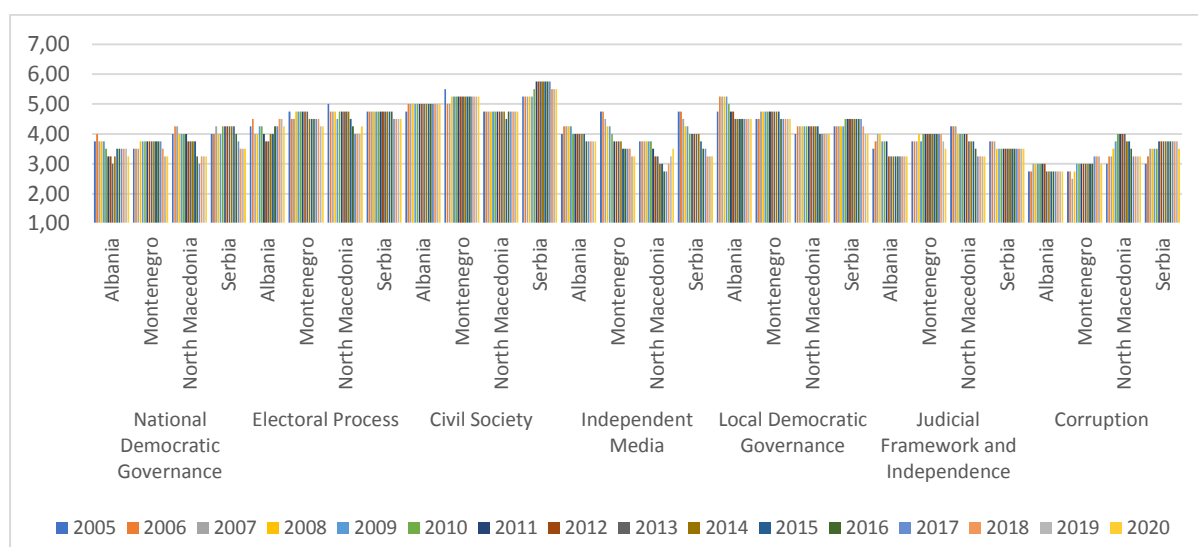
3. Political performance

As a quantitative analysis is focused on the scores each country reaches related to the indicators and indexes measured in several international assessment reports, EU candidate countries from the WB have shown to have the following performance according to the chosen indicators, in their attempts to fulfill the political criteria of the EU.

According to the Nations in Transit scores, all countries have deteriorated and show continuous regress in terms of national democratic governance for the whole period taken in consideration. Among these countries Serbia seems to be the best performer compared to the other countries, although it seems that throughout the whole period, it showed the greatest regress. No considerable changes are reflected by the WB countries in terms of the electoral process, nevertheless Serbia can be considered a better performer with a small deteriorative fluctuation recently. On the contrary, North Macedonia, once the best performer in this indicator shows the greatest regress throughout the whole analysis period. Albania and Montenegro are for the moment at the same level as North Macedonia as a result of small ups and downs throughout time. In particular, Albania had its greatest breakdown in 2012 and 2013 when it achieved the lowest scores also compared to the other WB countries. In terms of civil society it is again Serbia that shows the highest historical values, although it has registered a small regress in the last three years. Serbia is followed by Montenegro which demonstrate small progress, Albania and finally North Macedonia. Both Albania and North Macedonia neither improved nor declined over time, thus remained constant.

In terms of independent media, all countries show a breakdown and a constant regress in their scores. Nevertheless, Albania can be considered the best performer compared to the other WB countries, while both Montenegro and Serbia are the worst, with the biggest regress over time while lagging behind Albania and North Macedonia. Also, in terms of local democratic governance Serbia and North Macedonia stay behind Albania and Montenegro. Although Albania and Montenegro are leading in terms of this indicator and are at the same level since 2016, both countries showed a regress, and especially Albania registered the biggest regress.

Graph 7: Nations in Transit indicators



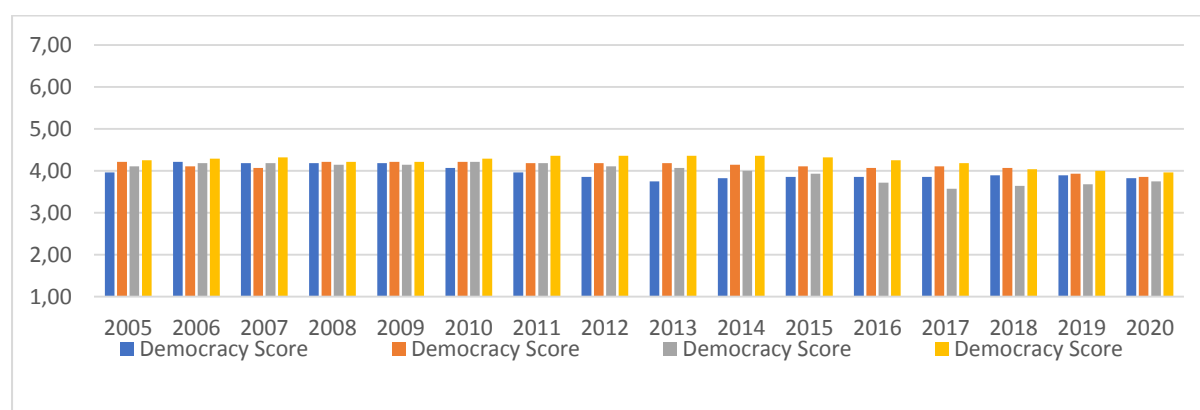
Source: Authors' presentation based on the data from the Nations in Transit Report

All WB countries reflect a backsliding in terms of the judicial framework and independence. It is important to notice that Serbia, which has shown the lowest regress, and Montenegro are slightly better performing compared to Albania and North Macedonia, the latter registering

the greatest regress throughout the whole period. According to Nations in Transit, North Macedonia reflects the highest fluctuations throughout the whole period in terms of corruption, registering phases of progress (2010-2013) as well as considerable regress. The best performer seems to be Serbia followed by North Macedonia, Montenegro and Albania. Although Montenegro reaches slightly higher scores compared to Albania, it has shown a greater progress over time. Albania can be considered the weakest performer with the weakest score, compared to all other WB countries since 2013.

All above mentioned indicators are reflected in the final score which helps identifying the democracy score and the democracy percentage of WB countries. It is important to notice that all WB countries showed regress in terms of the democracy score. In 2020 for example North Macedonia reflects the lowest value compared to other WB countries. Albania made a considerable progress during 2005-2006, but it has been under a continuous deterioration since 2010. A considerable backsliding has been detected also in Montenegro and Serbia. Although Serbia is performing better than the other countries reaching a slightly higher score, it has shown that the country was not able to hold on the progress made in the years between 2011 and 2015, with the highest scores throughout the time, both compared to itself as well as to Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia. Nevertheless, since 2016 the democracy score of Serbia is decreasing continuously, thus reaching the lowest score in 2020.

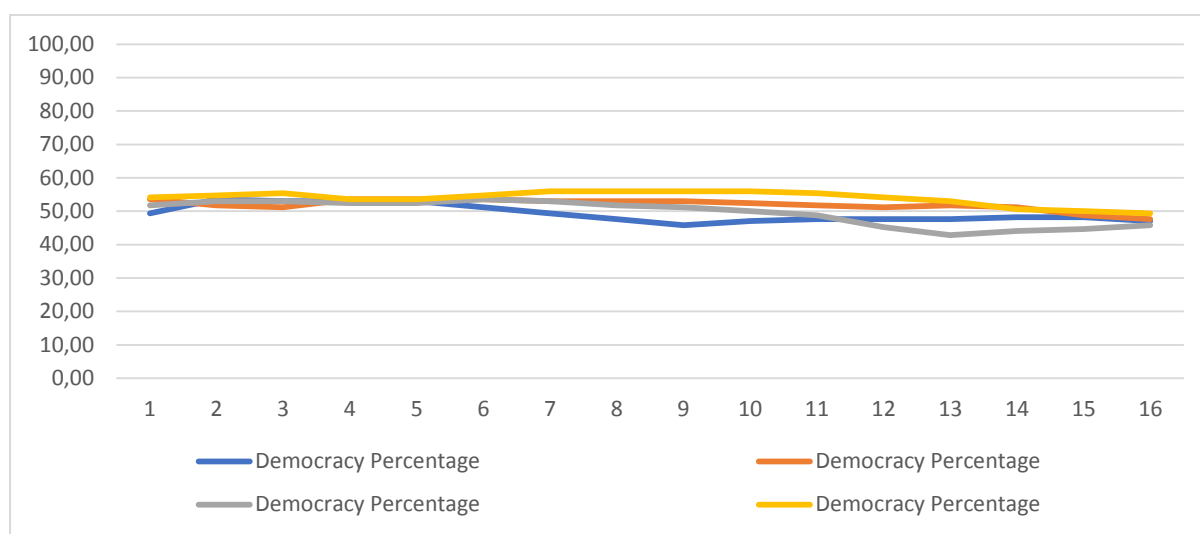
Graph 8: Democracy score of WB countries according to Nations in Transit



Source: Authors' presentation based on the data from the Nations in Transit Report

In terms of democracy percentage it is to notice that all four WB countries have had a declining trend. Montenegro and Serbia fell under the 51% score just in 2019 and 2020 and are thus now considered transitional or hybrid regimes instead of semi-consolidated democracies, whereas Albania is considered a hybrid regime since 2011 and still continues to reflect signs of regress. Because of the rapid decrease of the democracy percentage, in 2014 North Macedonia also switched from a semi-consolidated democracy to a hybrid regime and is now the weakest performer compared to the other WB countries.

Graph 9: Democracy percentage of EU candidate countries from the WB

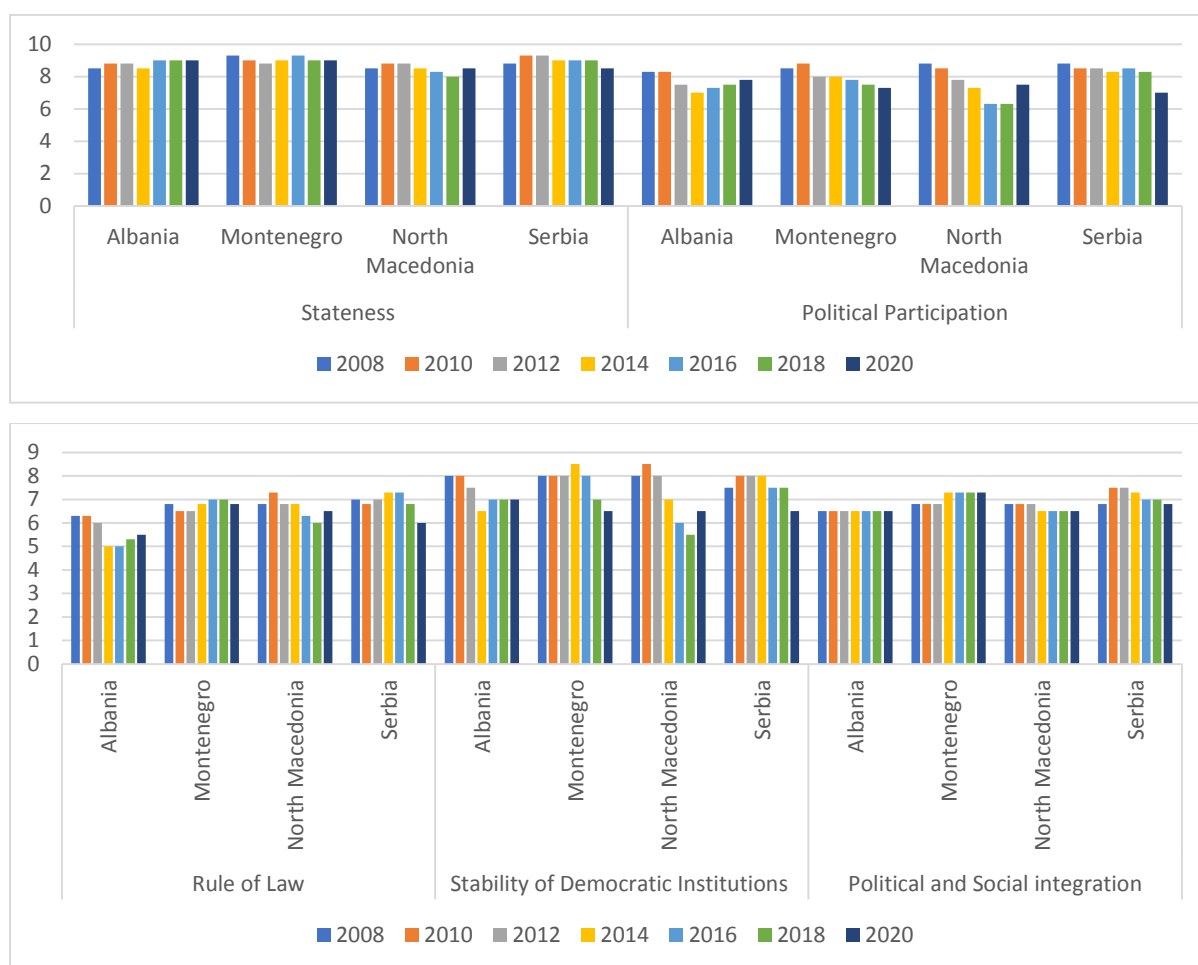


Source: Authors' presentation based on the data from the Nations in Transit Report

Considering the political transformation highlighted by the BTI, Albania and Montenegro made considerable progress reaching closely to the highest value in terms of state-ness. Compared to them, both North Macedonia and Serbia are weaker performers. North Macedonia reflects small fluctuations over time showing both progress and regress. On the contrary, the values for Serbia are declining since 2014. In terms of political participation, Serbia is not only the current weakest performer, but also the country with the greatest regress, also compared to the other countries. While Montenegro reflects a continuous declining trend, North Macedonia shows progressive tendencies compared to the values of 2016-2018. Albania showed a positive trend thus improving since 2014, when it reached the lowest value for all the period, also the lowest compared to the other WB countries. In terms of rule of law, all countries are performing badly. The country with the lowest value is Albania which has shown a continuous regress until 2018. On the other side, both Montenegro, the best performer compared to the other countries, and North Macedonia show various signs of deterioration and improvement over time. Serbia has lost a lot in terms of this indicator as it showed the biggest relapse, although performing better than Albania.

Also considering the stability of democratic institutions, there is no WB country with EU candidate status that can demonstrate any improvement. It can be considered the indicator with the most significant breakdown since 2014 throughout the region. Albania managed at least to stop the continuous decline and appears therefore to perform better compared to Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia. Only Montenegro has improved in terms of political and social integration reflecting the greatest progress compared to itself over time. Among the other countries, North Macedonia and Serbia are backsliding and Albania having a stagnation over time, currently remains with the lowest values, compared to other countries.

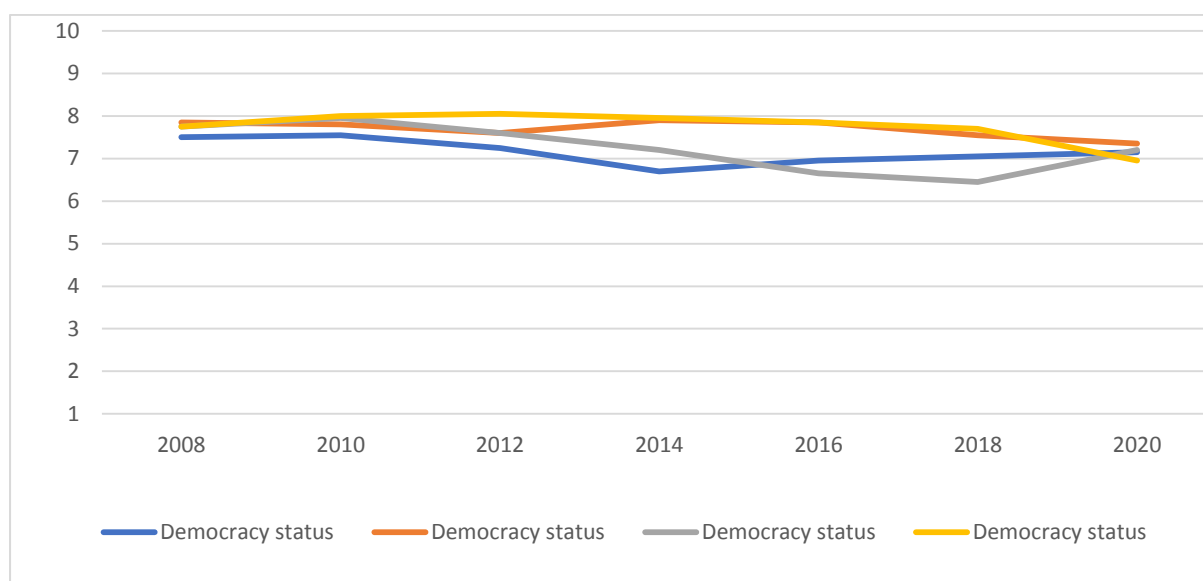
Graph 10: Key indicators of political transformation according to BTI



Source: Authors' presentation based on the data from the BTI Political Transformation Scores

No candidate country from the Western Balkans improved in terms of the democracy status. Among these countries, Albania, with some regressive fluctuations over time, reflects a slight progress yearly since 2016. While a slight improvement is showed also in the recent scores reached by North Macedonia, Montenegro's democracy score is deteriorating since 2014. Nevertheless, considering only the scores of 2020 for all WB countries, Montenegro reaches the highest score, followed by North Macedonia and Albania. Serbia, on the other hand shows the biggest breakdown, taking into account that between 2010 and 2014 Serbia was the absolute front runner among the WB countries. In 2020, Serbia is the worst performer among the WB countries when considering their overall democracy status.

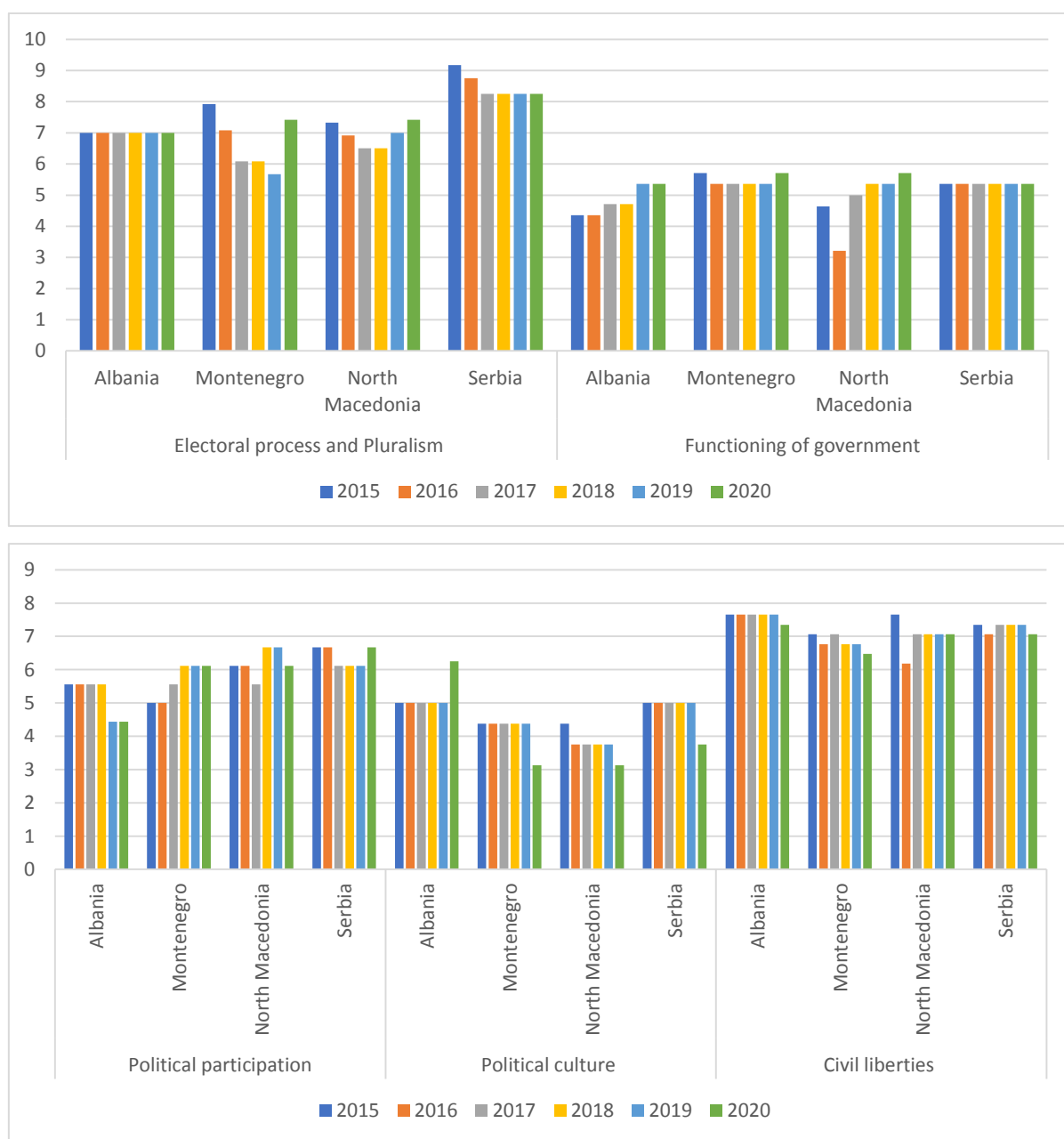
Graph 11: Democracy status of WB countries, according to BTI



Source: Authors' presentation based on the data from the BTI Political Transformation Scores

Considering the electoral process and pluralism, as the first out of five indicators to measure the democracy index according to the Economist Intelligence Unit, Serbia has shown to be constant since 2016, after a slight backsliding. Also, the values of Albania have remained constant with no changes due to any deterioration or improvement. Meanwhile, both Macedonia and Montenegro, after a significant deterioration during 2016-2019, managed to improve their values significantly for 2020, leaving Albania in the last place, as the worst performer among the WB countries. In terms of functioning of government, all WB countries except of Serbia, have improved. Although Albania reflects a continuous progress it still represents, together with Serbia, the weakest performance. The same applies in terms of the political participation indicator, in which Albania, due to its regress, reaches the lowest score among all other WB countries. On the contrary Montenegro has constantly improved, while North Macedonia and Serbia had their ups and downs over time. Nevertheless, although Serbia had some deteriorations, currently it managed to be the best performer compared to the other WB countries. In terms of the political culture, Albania reflects a huge improvement throughout the period, also compared to the other WB countries. All other countries taken into analysis are characterized by a declining trend, further deepened during 2019-2020. Albania leads the list also in terms of civil liberties, representing the best performer among the other countries, although compared to itself there are evidenced some signs of moderate regress. North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia demonstrate ups and downs throughout the whole period, whereas Montenegro, among them, is the worst performer.

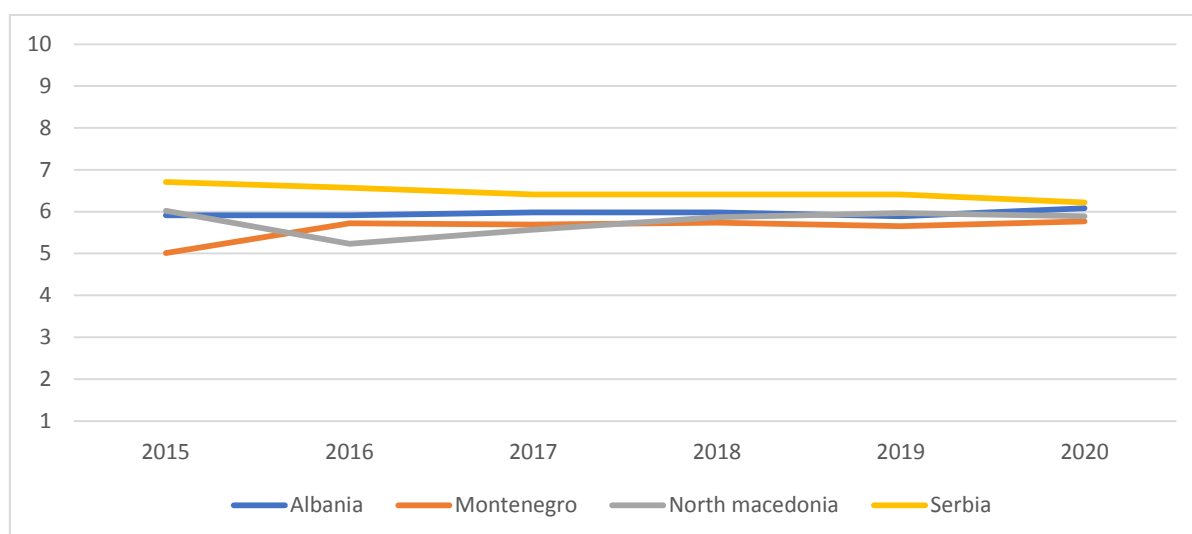
Graph 12: Key indicators for democracy index, according to EIUs



Source: Authors' presentation based on the data from the EIUs Report

Considering countries performance in all these indicators as well as the democracy score, Serbia has the highest overall score, although it made a moderate regress in the period of 2015-2020. On the contrary Albania, although remains below Serbia, improved considerably over time. Both Montenegro and North Macedonia showed moderated fluctuations of progress and regress throughout the whole period, lagging behind Albania and Serbia since 2016.

Graph 13: Democracy index for the WB countries



Source: Authors' presentation based on the data from the EIUs Report

4. Conclusions and insights for further discussion

This comprehensive quantitative analysis of the economic and political transformation and dynamics of the EU candidate countries from the WB gave us some key and interesting insights about these countries individual performance and their pathway characteristics in their attempts to meet the EU criteria through relevant reforms and policy measures.

Based on the evidence-based analysis and with a dichotomous logic, all WB countries are democratic systems, but the democratic performance is not equal among these countries of the region. Results from the EIU prove that some of the analyzed countries can be considered as flawed democracies, while others as hybrid regimes, whereas evidences from the NT confirm that WB countries are characterized as transitional or hybrid regimes, although all of them were once considered as semi-consolidated democracies. A comprehensive and comparative analysis with historical and descriptive data at the country basis remains crucial to support these statements.

In terms of the political transformation and depending on the quantitative method used, some countries reflect progress, while others reflect regress over time. According to the NT, all WB countries back-slide from semi-consolidated democracies to transitional regimes, reflecting a regress in terms of democratic performance of WB countries. On the contrary, the EIUs show that while North Macedonia and Montenegro demonstrate declining trends dropping into the hybrid-regimes sphere, Serbia remained mainly stable over time as a flawed democracy, and Albania managed to achieve a progress and get classified as a flawed democracy for the first time in 2020. Additionally, results from the BTI propose defining all EU candidate countries from the WB as defective democracies.

Based on the evidence based analysis and referring to the fulfilment of the economic criteria, all EU candidate countries from the WB show to have made some progress in developing a functioning market economy and in preparing to cope with competitive pressures and market forces in the EU (in line with key findings of the EC progress reports with data and evidences provided by formal authorities at each country basis). Despite of the quantitative method used, countries of the region have shown to generally work well with liberalization of foreign trade and trading across borders, but they are still lagging behind in terms of market size and

competition policy. Additionally, further advancement particularly regarding an inclusive and green economy, a higher macroeconomic stability, some adequate labor market policies, specific policies for skills development addressing gaps and needs, a boost to the innovation capability, will support these countries in improving their overall economic performance while developing sustainable economies, thus facilitating the EU integration process at the individual country level.

Generally referring to the economic criteria and despite the quantitative method used, no significant differences are evidenced between countries and no major changes over time at the country level. A comprehensive and comparative analysis with historical and descriptive data at the country basis remains crucial to support these statements.

Referring to the methodology, no attempts are made to compare among them the methods presented above, as it is relatively difficult due to a series of binomials as follows: (a) a broad meaning vs. a narrow understanding of both political and economic transformation through a series of indicators; (b) an objective vs. subjective methodology of assessment, and (c) a dichotomous vs. a scaling logic of systems classifications. Main critique to the methods used relates to the fact that they can be considered neither objective nor consistent.

Key advantages of the above quantitative analysis relate to: (1) data provided help in generally comparing dynamics and overall performance among candidate countries through key indicators by field of criteria; (2) data comparison provides an overall macro-overview on each country performance in fulfilling different aspects related to the two criteria, and (3) data comparison provides an overall macro-overview on each country performance in a long-term perspective, which means country's sustainable and continuous performance in working with political and economic issues of internal policy-making and upcoming challenges and potentials.

Given the internal characteristics of the EU integration processes (closely linked to an internal reforming of the country, to a country specific process, to a series of EU level dynamics, to complex political and economic processes and forces, to different timing of the processes), a qualitative analysis remains crucial for providing an in-depth country-oriented analysis, thus defining the length of the process and related characteristics step by step. A qualitative analysis becomes even more crucial considering that the WB countries present a complex case compared to the recent member countries, as economies and societies with a long-lasting transition. Nevertheless, a qualitative analysis comes with more difficulties, in terms of structure and content related to sources of information, reliability of information, indicators and variables, level of objectivity/subjectivity. As all these aspects tend to vary from country to country, further adoption is needed when a comparative qualitative analysis will be provided.

To conclude, progress in fulfilling the Copenhagen criteria absolutely varies from country to country, as well as depends on each country commitment in designing and implementing adequate policy measures in internally transforming political and economic systems, and facilitating their EU integration pathway.

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