

---

# Western Balkans: nationalism and the EU accession process

## Description

**The Western Balkans' EU accession process, which aims to lead them towards a shared future, is running up against nationalism. And yet, despite the difficulties of bringing reforms to fruition, European integration remains a historic opportunity for the countries of the peninsula, indeed the only way to end their nationalist conflicts and guarantee stability in the region.**

---

Despite past tragedies, nationalism is still a reality in the region. Tragedies, particularly in the 19th century, turned the Balkans into an area of instability and tension. The collapse of communism gave way to a resurgence of aggressive nationalism, leading to wars and the disintegration of Yugoslavia.

### Balkan nationalism as an obstacle to the accession process

The European perspective is offered to these countries as part of an integration process. *"For the first time in their history, the countries of the Balkans aspire to come, of their own free will, under a guardianship of their choosing. For the first time, they have the opportunity to be part of a peace project, a democratic project which, for over fifty years, has made Europe what it is today: the European Union"*<sup>(1)</sup>, wrote Ivan Vejvoda in 2010.

Just as the idea of building Europe was born after the Second World War to curb nationalism, the idea of integrating the Balkans was taken to curb nationalism in the region. To define the nature of this nationalism, it is essential to understand it in the context of each country's history.

Yugoslav nationalism invites us to take a closer look at its specific features. After Tito's death, the 1980s saw a rise in nationalism among Serbs: *"They felt neglected by the Federation and threatened in regions where they were in the minority, particularly in Kosovo, where 80% of the population is Albanian, and where unrest broke out in 1981. From 1987 onwards, the new Serbian Communist leader Slobodan Milosevic encouraged and exalted these sentiments; in 1989, he abolished the autonomy of the two provinces of Kosovo and Vojvodina, thereby upsetting the balance of the Federation. He advocated a 'modern' federation, i.e., one recentralized around the power of Belgrade. The other republics cannot accept such a development. This threat reinforces their nationalism"*<sup>(2)</sup>. On the one hand, post-communist Serbia is playing the nationalist card, and *"refusing to break with a mythical nationalism, the authorities are pursuing two contradictory objectives: to maintain the fiction of Kosovo as a Serbian province and to join the European Union"*<sup>(3)</sup>. On the other hand, Albania, a country hitherto little concerned by the question of former territories, is adopting an attitude in line with EU policies. For the Albanians, the national problem is seen as a legitimate right to live on an equal footing with the other peoples of the former Yugoslavia. Even after the end of the war in Kosovo or the proclamation of independence, Albania expressed no ambition to create a "Greater Albania." Clearly, *"it has always supported its co-nationals in Kosovo, but without direct intervention. It has carefully avoided any interference in Macedonia and has re-established good relations with Greece."*<sup>(4)</sup> The unification of its former territories is a vision that belongs to the 19th century.



---

Now resolved, the Greek-Macedonian dispute over the name « Macedonia » also bears witness to Balkan nationalism. As a result of the Greek stalemate, Skopje's Euro-Atlantic accession process was jeopardized, with Athens reserving the name Macedonia for one of its provinces. Paul Garde underlines the unprecedented nature of such a claim in international relations: *"Never before has a state arrogated to itself rights over the name of another state. [Such a claim] is dangerous for the stability of a country that is still fragile and for the entire region"*(5).

Indeed, the historical past cannot be an argument for nationalist claims. While the Western Balkans' strong desire to become part of the European family was essential to the EU's involvement in the region, Brussels also legitimized the proliferation of states. For Jacques Rupnik, *"it is paradoxical that the EU, which has contributed so much to the erosion of the nation-state in the west of the continent, should now be involved in establishing and legitimizing new states whose viability is sometimes problematic"*(6).

The Thessaloniki European Council in June 2003, followed by the Sarajevo European Council in June 2012, and the Berlin Process launched in August 2014 have reaffirmed the European perspective of the Western Balkans countries. This perspective should enable them to move away from rancorous nationalism.

### **Brussels mediates rapprochement between Kosovo and Serbia.**

Under the aegis of the EU, a dialogue between the two countries aims to stabilize their mutual relations. Since 2011, Pristina and Belgrade have signed dozens of agreements, the implementation of which has often been paralyzed despite their stated desire to normalize relations. It is up to their political leaders to ensure a credible dialogue process that involves other actors, such as civil society and the different communities in Kosovo and Serbia, to consolidate peace and establish good neighborly relations. This is still a long way off.

Mitrovica, a town in northern Kosovo, remains a political and administrative divide and often a source of tension between Serbs and Albanians. The divisions between the two communities deepened in April 2023 when the Serbian community contested the municipal elections.

There is every reason to believe that a gradual rapprochement between Kosovo and Serbia is feasible and that the support of the EU and the USA could contribute to this. But the political leaders of these countries must also want this to happen.

### **The influence of China, Russia, and Turkey - a challenge for Europeans**

The region greatly interests emerging powers such as China, Russia, and Turkey. Although not yet members of the EU, the Western Balkans countries offer many advantages for these states.

Since 2012, China has become a strategic player in the region. Its influence can be explained by a series of factors: the procrastination of the Europeans, insufficiently involvement in the area; the obstacles faced by the Balkan states in completing the reforms required by the accession process; the need for a "stabilocracy" or « reinforced integration » that has not yet been achieved; the uncertainties of EU member states... By adopting its "New Silk Roads" strategy, as part of the Belt and Road Initiative project launched in 2012 under the "16+1" format, China aims to increase cooperation with the countries of the Western Balkans (except Kosovo, which it does not recognize) and eleven other new EU member states. Focusing on increasing its investments and leaving an economic footprint in the region, Beijing avoids making pronouncements on geopolitical issues.

The leading geopolitical player has traditionally been Russia. Although Russian foreign policy does not seem to take much interest in regional processes, Moscow's influence has real consequences for Balkan politics, particularly regarding regional security. Moscow is particularly active in security, supplying the region's countries with military technology. At the same time, these countries are obliged to follow the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy, and Montenegro, Northern Macedonia, and Albania are members of NATO. With Serbia, an economically dependent country (80% of Serbia's gas comes from Russia), Moscow is seeking, above all, to strengthen its ties, particularly to guarantee its support on sanctions. For their part, Belgrade's leaders and the Serbian nationalist leaders of Republika Srpska

---

(Bosnian Serb Republic) are using Moscow's support to strengthen their political positions.

Turkey exerts influence in Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Serbia and Northern Macedonia. Turkish interest in the Balkans continues to grow, culminating in President Erdoğan's visits to Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, and Croatia in 2022. Turkey remains a strategic partner for Albania. Turkish investments are concentrated in the energy, banking, steel, and aeronautics sectors, as well as telecommunications, education, and culture. Ankara aims to increase its political influence in Albania, perceived in the region as a kind of "neo-Ottomanism," even if Turkish leaders prefer not to use this term. Indeed, Ankara has never really hidden its ambition to maintain cultural, economic, and political influence in a peninsula dominated by the Ottoman Empire for five centuries. This ambition is becoming more critical in the Western Balkans, which are moving towards European integration. In this case, Turkey's influence can be seen as a new mechanism enabling it to exert influence in its relations with the EU.

The emergence of these powers in the region is a source of concern for Brussels, which is well aware that its enlargement policy must take account of their presence. The unification of the continent that is underway must enable the EU to present itself as a genuine power capable of influencing global governance, particularly in the face of the tremendous emerging poles of power. The countries of the Western Balkans must be fully aware of this and accept that their future lies in Europe: joining the EU should be their sole objective.

#### Notes:

- (1) Ivan Vejvoda, « Les Balkans : quels progrès ? », in *L'état de l'Union 2010*, Rapport Schuman sur l'Europe, edited by Thierry Chopin et Michel Foucher, Ed. Lignes de Repères, Paris, 2010, p. 115.
- (2) Paul Garde, *Les Balkans. Héritages et évolutions*, Ed. Flammarion, Paris, 2010, pp. 56-57.
- (3) Pierre Verluise, *20 ans après la chute du Mur. L'Europe recomposée*, Choiseul Ed., Paris, 2009, p. 191.
- (4) Paul Garde, *Les Balkans. Héritages et évolutions*, *Op. cit.*, p. 78.
- (5) Paul Garde, *Les Balkans. Héritages et évolutions*, *Op. cit.*, p. 80.
- (6) Jacques Rupnik, « Les Balkans et la *pax europea* entre protectorats et intégration », in *Les banlieues de l'Europe. Les politiques de voisinage de l'Union européenne. Nouveaux débats* (Edited by J. Rupnik), Presses de la Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques, 2007, p. 145.

**Thumbnail:** Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen at the EU-Western Balkans Summit, Tirana, December 6, 2022 (photo credit: Consilium.europa.eu).

\* Haki Shtalbi is a professor of Albanian history and geopolitics at INALCO and a former ambassador of Albania.

[Link to the French version of the article](#)

Translated from French by Assen SLIM ([Blog](#))

**To quote this article:** Haki SHTALBI (2023), « Western Balkans: nationalism and the EU accession process », *Regard sur l'Est*, December 11.



[Back to the top of the page](#)

**date créée**

11/12/2023

**Champs de Méta**

**Auteur-article :** Haki SHTALBI