

European Union Blowback?

Euroscepticism and its Consequences in the Western Balkans

Abstract

While there exists a large body of literature investigating the European Union (EU)'s intervention in the western Balkans, and in particular the influence of so-called 'enlargement fatigue', rarely is the western Balkans' own fatigue towards the EU given serious consideration. This paper examines domestic views about Europe, arguing that aspiring new EU member states have been experiencing various forms of Euroscepticism due to a number of socio-economic, cultural and political factors. The growth of Euroscepticism has helped Russia to play a more assertive and influential role in the region. However, as this paper argues, Euroscepticism is not a rejection of the European perspective and the search for alternatives, but rather a critique of the actual methods, timing and impact of the integration process.

Keywords

European Union, Western Balkans, Euroscepticism, Russia

Introduction

Over the past two decades, most citizens in western Balkan states¹ have believed that increasing integration into the European Union (EU) would bring considerable benefits. This belief has contributed to sustaining difficult post-socialist and, even, post-war transitions. In many cases, the 'European perspective' gave meaning, sense and direction to both political elites and ordinary citizens in their attempt to take control of and shape the new and challenging post-Cold War environment. Since the early 2000s, when the EU espoused an open door policy towards the western Balkans, all states in the region have developed various links with institutions in Brussels, and moved forward in the process of European integration. Croatia was the last state, after Slovenia, Bulgaria and Romania, to formally join the Union, doing so on 1 July 2013.

It is frequently noted that this enlargement process is under severe strain. The pro-enlargement European Commission has progressively lost control over the process to the member states, most of whom remain officially in favour of extending EU membership to western Balkan states, but endorse the stricter application of conditions (Balfour and Stratulat, 2015). At a time of profound economic and financial crisis, EU member states believe that they should focus their energies on solving their own internal problems before considering how (and whether) to move ahead with further enlargement. Accordingly, enlargement was not even given a ministerial portfolio in the new European Commission, which took office in late 2014. While this limited enthusiasm about accepting new member states is well known, the growth of euro-sceptical attitudes within the western Balkan region itself is less noticed and discussed. Especially since 2008, the positive perception of the EU has begun to change, leading to increasing Euroscepticism. There were deep-rooted negative perceptions of Europe (and 'the West' more generally) in the western Balkans before the

outbreak of the economic and financial crisis. But the crisis has severely undermined the main supposed advantages of EU integration – economic development and prosperity – and thus intertwined with and reinforced lingering negative attitudes towards Europe.² The difficulty in providing a solution to the problem of refugees stuck in the region throughout 2015 further reinforced a sense of frustration towards the EU.

This paper examines the causes and consequences of this largely unnoticed rise of negative views about the EU. Rather than examining the well-rehearsed reasons for the enlargement fatigue within European institutions and member states, this paper considers western Balkan citizens, whose views are frequently neglected or marginalized in the analysis of EU enlargement processes. This shift of focus is needed to gain better understanding of transitional dynamics in the Western Balkans – and more broadly in post-conflict states. The EU's involvement in such states is frequently assessed with reference to its 'transformative' (Grabbe 2014) or 'normative power' (Whitman 2011), and allusions to its positive impact abound. When local views are considered, they are generally treated as 'domestic constraints' deriving either from the presence of authoritarian political structures or the opportunity costs of adopting reforms requested by Europe. Critics of the EU's influence on democratization have argued that external involvement has at best contributed to building the procedural elements of democracy and, at worst, has legitimized weak and unresponsive institutions failing to meet citizens' needs (Chandler 2010). However, while drawing attention to the limits of intervention, even critics have been reproached for having emphasized European agency while giving scant consideration to domestic expectations, views, and attempts to (re)appropriate internationally-sponsored norms and institutions (Sabaratnam 2014). Accordingly, this paper reverses the prevailing analytical perspective, which has been largely focused on the EU's actions and strategies, and investigates how external involvement is experienced and interpreted locally.

This approach is inspired by the recent ‘local turn’ in statebuilding/peace research, and in particular its attempt to problematize the agency, expectations, needs and practices of domestic actors (Mac Ginty 2012b, Mac Ginty and Richmond 2013). A rapidly evolving literature has been addressing various aspects of this ‘local turn,’ including everyday resistance to liberal peace interventions and the hybridity resulting from the interaction between external and domestic actors and discourses (Belloni, 2012). From a policy perspective, research has focused on the need to facilitate local ownership. While acknowledging the varied and interrelated meanings of the ‘local,’ this paper focuses on the long neglected popular perceptions of European involvement in the western Balkans. In order to provide a synthetic analysis, and not to overload the text with data from 7 different states, few concrete cases are mentioned but an effort is made to include suggestive examples and relevant sources.

After a brief discussion of what is meant by Euroscepticism, the paper provides some evidence of its growth in the region. Second, it offers an account of the main reasons for this trend – reasons which include not only socio-economic factors but also symbolic and identity issues. Finally, this paper examines the consequences of the rise of Euroscepticism. While there are no short-term, realistic alternatives to further integration into the EU, other options – most importantly developing closer ties with Russia – are increasingly debated. Overall, growing levels of Euroscepticism reflect frustration with the EU’s real and perceived failures to meet citizens’ expectations, rather than a radical rejection of the institutions and principles underpinning the process of European integration.

Euroscepticism: What’s in the Name?

The term ‘Euroscepticism’ is imprecise and value-laden. In a seminal work on political parties, Taggart and Szczerbiak distinguished between a ‘soft’ and a ‘hard’ variant of the phenomenon.

'Hard' Euroscepticism involves outright rejection of the European integration process, including the existence of the EU, as well as the concepts underpinning the European project. The June 2016 UK vote in favour of leaving the EU well reflects this type of attitude. 'Soft' Euroscepticism denotes not a principled opposition to European integration or EU membership, but a position where 'concerns on one (or a number of) policy areas lead to the expression of qualified opposition to the EU, or where there is a sense that "national interest" is currently at odds with the EU trajectory' (Taggart and Szczesniak 2002, p. 7). This distinction has generated lively scholarly debate. Above all, 'hard' and 'soft' variants of Euroscepticism have been criticized for being too vague. 'Soft' Euroscepticism is a broad category encompassing a wide range of actors, world views, attitudes and policies, and is thus conceptually and empirically problematic.

Dissatisfaction with the shortcomings of the rather crude opposition between 'hard' and 'soft' Euroscepticism has induced scholars to propose more sophisticated typologies. For example, Kopecký and Mudde (2002) have advanced a four-part categorization of the views on European integration and the EU. At the two extremes of the continuum are 'euroenthusiasts' and 'eurorejectionists,' both of whom take a principled approach to European integration. Between these two extremes are 'eurosceptics,' who critique the lack of transparency and democratic credentials of the European project, and 'europragmatists,' who hope that membership will strengthen their country's economic prospects. This kind of typological reasoning has resulted in a proliferation of concepts that has produced a 'theoretical deadlock with respect to the complexity of the contention which characterizes European integration' (Crespy and Verschueren 2009, p. 381). Perhaps unsurprisingly given this lack of clarity, a number of neologisms – including 'euro-apathy', 'euro-cynicism', 'euro-realism', and the like – are often employed in studies of the phenomenon.

Besides being conceptually broad, the notion of Euroscepticism is also value-laden. Academic approaches to European integration have frequently adopted, at least implicitly, a functionalist and linear perspective, which has relegated critical and/or sceptical views to the margins of the debate. Such approaches frequently interpret the evolution of European integration from the standpoint of institutions and think-tanks in Brussels; and, with regard to new or aspiring new member states, they brim with civilizing ideas on improvement of the human condition and the transfer of values and institutions (Klinke 2015). Neo-colonial overtones are apparent in the use of notions of 'Europeanization', 'modernization' and 'liberalization' in regard to actors involved in the enlargement process. In this discourse dominated by an underlying idea of progress, opposition in any form, including mild versions of Euroscepticism, is easily seen as bordering on irrationality. This attitude reflects a 'paternalist Eurocentrism' (Hobson 2012, pp. 285-310), which gives Europe the progressive task of delivering rational institutions to states characterized by conditional or defective sovereignty. Domestic actors in aspiring and new member states frequently adopt this frame and use the 'eurosceptic' label to stigmatize political opponents. For pragmatic political reasons, they condemn 'soft' Euroscepticism as a preliminary stage towards 'hard' versions involving a principled rejection of European integration, and thus remove criticism towards Europe from the range of legitimate political views (Neumayer 2008).

While institutions and think-tanks in Brussels show forms of Eurocentrism, the literature on Europeanization and European integration has been more nuanced but similarly EU centred. A main concern of this literature has been the identification of the conditions favouring the transfer of EU rules to aspiring new EU members. The most prominent explanations for this rule transfer process have been rationalist. In a widely cited work Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2005) have argued that the EU impact on potential member states is greatest whenever it puts forward clear demands and applies credible conditionality.

Through a strategy of 'reinforcement by reward' the EU provides external incentives for a target government to comply with its conditions. In this framework, limited compliance has nothing to do with the existence of legitimate views and interests in contrast with EU demands, but is explained through reference to authoritarianism and/or domestic adoption costs. Authoritarian governments may find the costs of complying with EU conditionality too high, and thus they turn into the main obstacles to their country's EU accession.

With its focus on political leaders and governmental actors, this rationalist-bargaining model provides important insights on the Europeanization process, its impact and the conditions for its success. For examples, the April 2013 agreement between Belgrade and Pristina, through which Serbia implicitly recognized the existence of an autonomous Kosovo in return for the start of EU accession negotiations, can be explained by the cost-benefit calculations of all actors involved (Economides and Ker-Lindsay, 2015). However, at the same time this model presents at least three major limits. First, it tends to overemphasize success stories by assuming that appropriate rewards and/or pressures on political leaders will change domestic politics. Little conceptual space is left for forms of Euroscepticism and/or identity politics (Subotic, 2011). Second, this model focuses on the EU's superior bargaining power, and its capacity to monitor the target state and to sanction it in case of non-compliance, with modest consideration for internal developments in the 'target state' (Keil, 2013). Finally, popular attitudes are either neglected or paid lip service to. Rationalist approaches fail to account for the possibility of an identity mismatch between the EU and aspiring new members and the possibility that this mismatch could undermine the effectiveness of conditionality (Stahl, 2011).

In sum, the term Euroscepticism is rather vague, value-laden, and conceptually marginal in the literature on Europeanization and European integration. For the purposes of this paper, Euroscepticism is understood as a broad polymorphous stance expressing popular

opposition to the modes of European integration and its impact on aspiring new EU members, and involving latent or manifest behaviour ranging from apathy and detachment regarding the integration process to active contestation. In principle, citizens' attitudes to the broader European integration project may be distinguished from attitudes to the actual functioning of the EU, although in practice the two are closely linked. While Euroscepticism is hardly discernible from EU-scepticism, frequently it is the latter that comes to the surface in citizens' assessments. Citizens do not simply contest either the European project or the existence of the EU 'as it is'; rather, they assess evolving representations in a context – such as the one dominated by a severe economic and financial crisis – where doubts about the impact of European policies have been growing both within and outside the Old Continent. The case of the western Balkans exemplifies how this assessment is becoming increasingly critical.

The Growth of Euroscepticism in the Western Balkans

The level of Euroscepticism is commonly measured through popular attitudes towards membership of the EU. The problem with this indicator is that citizens generally have modest knowledge about Europe, and thus they rely on shortcuts or heuristics – and project their views of the national government onto the EU (Anderson 1998). Moreover, citizens' attitudes frequently follow the ups and downs of the integration process. A decline in support for European integration may reflect delays in the accession process or the EU's apparently obstinate requests - in particular for the arrest of war criminals. With these caveats in mind, a longitudinal analysis of public attitudes demonstrates that the EU's popularity in the western Balkans has been progressively declining, shifting from Euro-enthusiasm to various levels of Euroscepticism (Table 1).

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In Serbia, support for integration has reached a record low. For the first time since the democratic changes in 2000, parliamentary elections held in March 2014 produced a National Assembly composed of political parties all in favour of EU membership. At the same time, however, the percentage of citizens in favour of joining the EU dropped from 61 per cent in 2006 to 24 per cent in 2015. Even states with a strong pro-European tradition like Macedonia and Montenegro have registered significant changes. Both in Macedonia, which became an official EU candidate in 2005, and in Montenegro, which began accession talks in 2012, only about one citizen out of three supports membership of the EU. Macedonians are frustrated and disappointed by the repeated postponement of accession talks due to a dispute with Greece over the country's name. The name dispute may upset the delicate balance between ethnic Macedonians and the Albanian community, which believes that the country's chances of joining the EU are being undermined by the Macedonian majority (Milevska, 2013). As for Montenegro, this country was the first one to experience the Commission's new approach to negotiations requiring an early focus on the most difficult areas of reform and the application of strict conditionality. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these areas have proved rather problematic. The EU's criticisms of the Montenegrin government in relation to the fight against organized crime and corruption have irked the local politico-economic elites – whose interests would be threatened by genuine progress in the fight against criminality – but did not lead to any meaningful progress in improving the rule of law (Petrushinin, 2016).

In general, the states most advanced in the EU integration process – Serbia, Macedonia and Montenegro – experience the highest levels of Euroscepticism. In a progression already observed with regard to EU accession by Central and Eastern European states, as citizens learn more about the social and sovereignty-related costs of accession, they begin to wonder whether these costs outweigh the benefits, and frequently change their views. To counter this trend, governments have developed communication strategies aimed at 'better informing,

educating and communicating with citizens in order to enable wider public support about EU integration process (*sic*)' (Center for Democracy and Human Rights, 2014, p. 14). By contrast, support is highest where the prospect of accession is more distant: that is, where citizens are for the most part uninformed about the terms and procedures of accession (Belloni 2014). In such cases, aspiring new EU members are ready and willing to adopt exogenous models in a manner that has been efficaciously described as 'self-colonizing' (Kiossev 1999).

Croatia's trajectory from Euro-enthusiasm to widespread Euroscepticism exemplifies the process of disillusionment taking place in the course of the integration process. Croatia had been nurturing its European roots and traditions since the beginning of the process of dissolution of the Yugoslav Federation in the early 1990s. The invocation of Europe by Croatian politicians served both to mobilize popular support and to marginalize the few critics of the integration process, who were stigmatized as 'closed, xenophobic, anti-democratic, and provincial' (Šoštarić 2011). During the process of European accession, however, Croatia lost much of its Europeanist zeal, thus confirming that the EU is most attractive when it is distant. When Croatia applied for EU membership in 2003, support for Euro-integration was about 85 per cent. Ten years later, whereas the political elite believed that accession would expand its economic opportunities and thus remained strongly pro-Europe, the majority of Croatian citizens remained rather aloof, if not sceptical or critical. In 2012, 66.1 per cent of citizens voted in favour of accession, but only 43.5 per cent of those entitled to vote actually cast their ballot (Maldini and Pauković 2015).

While Serbia, Macedonia, Montenegro and Croatia have recorded relatively low and declining levels of Euro-enthusiasm, support for EU integration remains significant in the other western Balkan states. In Albania, which was recognized as an official candidate in June 2014, citizens' support for European integration remains stable at over 80 per cent. Similarly, in Kosovo, where the process of developing closer ties with the EU is in its initial stages,

support for Europe has reached 89 per cent. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, which applied for membership in February 2016, surveys indicate that pro-European sentiments have been consistently high for most of the post-war period, but dropped dramatically since 2010 as a result of a deepening economic, political and social crisis (Belloni *et al.* 2016).³ For Albania and Kosovo, and for Bosnia and Herzegovina for most of its post-war period, the presence of various degrees of Euro-enthusiasm has not in practice translated into concrete reforms aimed at moving closer to Europe. Rather, the broad consensus on the goal of integration has removed the need for debate on the pros and cons of the process. It has thus sidelined the integration issue on the list of policy priorities. Given that all actors in society endorse the European integration project, electoral campaigns are rarely focused on Europe, and electoral results do not depend on taking a particular stance on the EU. Overall, while Euroscepticism tends to increase the closer a state approaches the EU, the reasons for this trend are complex, and they differ for each state. However, some generalizations are possible, and they are discussed in the next section.

Why Euroscepticism?

The literature on Europeanization and European integration, briefly reviewed above, has focused on political elites and their cost-benefits calculations while paying limited attention to citizens' attitudes towards Europe. By contrast, studies on Euroscepticism in Western Europe have attempted to identify the reasons for popular discontent towards the EU. These studies have demonstrated that Euroscepticism is generated by three main factors – all of which play a role in the western Balkans. First, the utilitarian calculation of economic costs and benefits shapes attitudes towards Europe (Gabel 1998). Second, the stronger the feelings of national identity, the more citizens consider the European integration process to be a threat to their community (Hooge and Marks 2004). Third, disappointment and frustration with how

domestic institutions work negatively impact on perceptions of European-level institutions (Anderson 1998).

These factors all play a role in the western Balkan context. In addition, Euroscepticism is further motivated by some conditions characterizing in particular the current accession experience of states from the region. To begin with, as frequently discussed in the literature (i. e. Grabbe 2014), the use of a strict conditionality have contributed significantly to increase scepticism and diffidence locally, in particular among political elites who are asked to implement painful and unpopular reforms. Above all, from a popular perspective Euroscepticism is fuelled primarily by economic and identity issues, by concerns related to the difficult situation of former 'Balkan' but current EU member states, as well as by resentment at the top-down, paternalistic character of the integration process. These issues are discussed below.

Economic Concerns

The economic and financial crisis has severely damaged the economic situation of western Balkan states, which are closely integrated into the EU and thus heavily dependent on external developments. While this economic integration has favoured growth and development since the late 1990s, at the same time it has increased the region's vulnerability to external shocks, principally the repercussions of the euro's weakness and instability. The impact of the crisis has been significantly felt everywhere, but especially in those countries which have advanced most in the EU integration process (Bartlet and Prica 2012). The main effect has been the growth of unemployment. After a sharp rise in the jobless rate in 2009-10, the situation has been improving, but very slowly. In mid-2016 unemployment in Albania was at 16.9 per cent, in Kosovo at 32.9 per cent, in Bosnia-Herzegovina at 41.9 per cent, in Macedonia at 24.4 per cent, in Montenegro at 17.3 per cent, and in Serbia at 19 per cent.⁴ This

difficult situation has undermined support for the reformist policies required by the EU integration process.

Since 2011 in several states, including Albania, Serbia, Macedonia, Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, a wave of protests have put forward social, economic and political demands (Musić 2013). In some of these protests Europe has been the direct target of public scorn, and on a few occasions the EU flag has been burned. More commonly, protests have been directed against various governmental levels, which are seen locally as implementing the EU's state-building agenda. In one of the best-known analyses of these street protests, Horvat and Štiks argue that these apparently isolated instances of social discontent are characterized not simply by anti-government rhetoric but also by a radical critique of the political and economic system as such (Horvat and Štiks 2015). Whilst this is true, the protesters have generally not attacked values cherished by the EU, such as democracy and economic modernization; rather, they have demanded that these values be implemented by taking citizens' needs into account (Belloni *et al.*, 2016). Ideologically and generationally heterogeneous, protesters have for the most part either not directly addressed the EU – seen as too distant and aloof – or, when they have done so, they have demanded a EU with different political and social policies. The organization of 'plenums' in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, where citizens can debate any issue of public relevance, has furnished a platform from which to voice such demands, which have been directed primarily at local institutions but have called Europe as well into question. In the western Balkans, as in many other regions targeted by international intervention, these forms of political awakening have contributed to unmask the failings of neoliberal and state-centric political restructuring and its limits in addressing effectively citizens' needs (Mac Ginty and Richmond 2013).

Troubled Neighbours

The difficult situations of neighbouring EU member states ring loud alarm bells for aspiring new members (see, for ex., Center for Democracy and Human Rights, 2014, p. 16). Above all, the devastating effects of the economic and financial crisis on Greece have exacerbated scepticism towards the Union. Until recently, Greece was cited as a model to imitate because of its apparently irreversible achievements in moving from relative backwardness and underdevelopment to the stability and prosperity that followed the country's entry into the EU. However, since 2009, when the Greek government first admitted the existence of an unsustainably high budget deficit and public debt, and began deep structural reforms and drastic deficit reduction policies, the presumed advantages and benefits yielded by integration into European institutions have been called into question. Citizens from the western Balkans acknowledge the responsibilities of the Greek economic and political leadership for the 'Greek tragedy', but at the same time they believe that the EU's austerity policies have played a fundamental role in the worsening of the crisis.

This assessment does not signal the affirmation of 'hard' Eurosceptic views. Even in Greece, the decline in EU support has been accompanied by increased support for the euro, suggesting that Greek citizens recognize that being in the EU is the only realistic alternative despite the pain of austerity measures (Clements *et al.* 2014). Yet, at the same time, both Greek and western Balkan citizens have grown increasingly disenchanted and discontented with the way in which European institutions handle economic and social issues, and in particular with the fact that austerity measures ultimately have their most painful effects on vulnerable population groups such as the elderly and the young unemployed. While the situation in Greece is certainly the most glaring demonstration of the EU's inability to guarantee stability and growth, Croatia's economic performance as the newest EU member state is also a troubling reminder that membership cannot assure prosperity (Ilic and Radosavljević 2014).

Moreover, not only does joining Europe not guarantee economic development, but also it does not necessarily improve the quality of democratic governance (Zielonka 2007). Indeed, the democratic performance in some former 'Balkan' states which have recently entered the EU has deteriorated considerably. The political situation in Bulgaria since 2013 has been tense and difficult, with two early elections and four different governments in under two years. The country has experienced increasing economic and social difficulties which have provoked both mass demonstrations and an increasing number of suicides. In Slovenia, the first former Yugoslav state to enter the EU in 2004, the much-admired social and economic model based on gradual reforms, tripartite bargaining and modest privatizations (Crowley and Stanojević 2011) gradually unravelled, paving the way for the explosion of a number of economic, social, and political grievances. Mass demonstrations began in the winter of 2012 to protest against economic and social policies perceived as 'imposed' by European institutions with the goal of salvaging the banks while leaving ordinary citizens to fend for themselves. The former prime minister was forced to resign and was sentenced to two years in jail for corruption. Overall, the difficult situation in these neighbouring EU member states is observed and assessed with growing levels of preoccupation by aspiring new members in the western Balkans (Horvat and Štiks 2015).

Europe's Paternalism

The EU's reformist pressure on aspiring new member states reinforces a public sense of being subjected to a kind of 'democratic totalitarianism' (Volčič 2005, 164). In theory, the integration process should involve two sets of actors – EU officials and democratically elected representatives of aspiring new members – with formally equal status. In practice, the crucial decisions on where, how, and above all when enlargement will occur are taken by Brussels. The heavy emphasis on technocracy, standardisation, and assessment according to pre-

established criteria crowds out domestic perspectives and expectations (Mac Ginty 2012a). The very length of the process contributes to intensifying public frustration, and to raising suspicions about Brussels' ultimate intentions. For example, in Serbia 'a large share of the public... believes that the country will never be accepted to join in the Union, even if it fulfils all technical criteria' (Bandović and Vujačić 2014, p. 63). The criteria adopted to assess the reform process in the areas of political stability, democratic governance, and rule of law are vague and subjected to multiple and perhaps arbitrary interpretations. More generally, the EU's requests intended to ensure compliance with principles and values (including normative standards such as gay rights) under severe strain even within EU member states are perceived as moralistic, inappropriate and untimely.

Despite growing diffidence towards European requests, local political elites are careful not to antagonize their interlocutors – who provide them with both legitimacy and economic aid. In some cases, however, they do not hesitate to claim that European institutions and officials are ultimately responsible even for the difficult economic situation and for the lack of future prospects. For example, when violent protests broke out in Bosnia-Herzegovina in February 2014, Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik blamed the 'international community', including the EU, for failed privatization and the poor state of the economy (Balkan Insight, 2014). This positioning contest, whereby European policymakers try to assert their expert authority over national elites while domestic actors attempt to shift the blame for stagnating economies, has significant consequences on citizens' perceptions of Europe as not only distant, technocratic and opaque but also expressing the idea that the region should be supervised and administered by the European centre. Western Balkan societies are critical of a ready-made version of Europe which sees them as 'objects' of Europeanization and passive receivers of values and frameworks coming from the European centre. Rather than accepting Brussels' demands uncritically, the western Balkan societies want to re-appropriate, modify

and reorganize the relationship between centre and periphery on the basis of the principle that they are 'equal but unique' (Petrović 2014). They may not be necessarily against European integration, but they question a kind of Europe understood as the extension of authority and norms to their countries, rather than as a project to construct a genuinely pan-European edifice. Thus, despite the expropriation of domestic agency in the region through forms of post-liberal governance (Chandler 2010), in point of fact the values and norms on which the EU puts much emphasis – including what it means to be 'European' – are subjected to negotiation and mutual accommodation.

Identity Threats

These reasons for scepticism towards the EU and its institutions – deriving from the repercussions of the post-2008 economic crisis, the difficulties of neighbouring EU member states, and the top-down and judgmental character of the EU integration process – are intertwined with a deep-rooted diffidence towards the 'West,' and in particular towards the Christian-Catholic world. While Muslims in the western Balkans, and above all in Bosnia-Herzegovina, are frequently Europeanist (Bougarel 2005), this is not the case of Christian-Orthodox citizens (Serbs, Macedonians, Montenegrins, Greeks and Bulgarians) who are traditionally extremely suspicious of and sometimes hostile to the 'West'. From the late Byzantine period onwards, the West, and later Europe, was seen as the source of existential threats to the Orthodox world, inducing many citizens to prefer Ottoman rule to subordination to Rome (Makrides 2009, p. 213).

Needless to say, this rooted suspicion towards the 'West' does not necessarily support a Huntingtonesque view of clashing civilizations. The fact that the EU has four Eastern Orthodox states as members (Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece and Romania) testifies to the conceptual weakness of those approaches grounded on the supposed incompatibility of

cultures. Rather, the lingering persistence of conceptual dichotomies of East versus West intertwines with a negative image of Europe as promoter of values – such as human rights, pluralism and the separation between church and state – which are supposedly in contrast with Orthodox culture (Lis 2014). In particular, while Orthodox Churches officially support the existing or future EU membership of their countries, they are associated with the political camp of EU sceptics (Olteanu and de Nève 2014).

Recent European policies have reinforced a deep sense of mistrust among Orthodox nationalists. European members of NATO participated in the 1999 bombing of Serbia in order to protect the Albanian population of Kosovo. NATO airstrikes contributed to deepen a diffuse resentment towards western European states. After the war, the EU imposed a number of conditions on Serbia in order to accept the country as a potential EU candidate, including full collaboration with the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia – an institution that has tried and condemned several Serbs responsible for crimes committed during the wars in the 1990s. In addition, the EU's position on the question of Kosovo independence (which is supported by 23 member states) contrasts with the 'firm emotional resistance' of Serbian citizens, many of whom do not want to accept the 'loss of Kosovo' (Obradović-Wochnik and Wochnik 2012, p. 1167). The April 2013 Agreement between Serbia and Kosovo, which implicitly acknowledges the autonomous existence of Kosovo, reflects the pragmatic, short-term cost-benefits of the actors involved, rather than normative adaptation or identity formation (Economides and Ker-Lindsay, 2015). Unsurprisingly, for some Serbs the most severe threats to their identity continue to come from Europe, which is still considered to be the 'other' – or something that lies outside their own realm (Makrides 2009, p. 216). To the extent that Orthodox citizens approve of European integration, they do so because of a sense of resignation based on the lack of feasible alternatives, rather than because of convinced adherence to what the EU supposedly stands for.

In sum, western Balkan societies experience various degrees of Euroscepticism. It is impossible to identify a single type of Euroscepticism among the different Balkan countries, nor even within each of them. Euroscepticism is both polysemic and constantly evolving. Street protests have carried forward a radical critique of the results of post-socialist transitions and, in this context, of the role played by European actors in promoting painful reforms. A general apathy and detachment from Europe suggests the existence of a widespread sense of fatigue with Europe's requests and procedures. To these expressions of Euroscepticism one should add a frequent nostalgia for both Tito and Yugoslavia, which was a sort of 'mini-EU' supposedly functioning better than contemporary post-Yugoslav states (Palmberger 2008). Importantly, nostalgia does not express glorification of the past and a longing for a socialist world, but a rejection of the current political situation with its economic uncertainties and political arrogance (Velikonja 2008). What unites the diverse expressions of Euroscepticism is the perception of the gap between the European ideal and the actual performance of integration. Rarely does criticism of Brussels go as far as rejecting the European project altogether. Rather, western Balkan citizens are critical of particular policies or initiatives; but, for the most part, they continue to accept the European perspective. Their attitude can perhaps be described as a type of 'EU-scepticism' - a critical Europeanism which questions the methods, timing and rhetoric of the integration process but does not reject the European ideal altogether.

Is there an Alternative to Europe?

Although the growth of Eurosceptic attitudes in the region rarely involves unqualified opposition to the process of European integration, it has nonetheless developed jointly with increasing consideration of the alternatives.⁵ Some voices on the left have even called for the revival of the century-old idea of the Balkan Federation, which may lack political weight, but it

expresses the need for an alternative to the EU-inspired neo-liberal restructuring (Živković and Medenica, 2013). Besides this option, other alternatives are given consideration. Nearly half of the Macedonian population believes that its political elite should seek an alternative basis for political development outside the EU. In particular, local media frequently depict Turkey as a symbol of success without EU integration (Petkovski 2014). While Turkey, and to an extent China, exert some degree of influence in the region, it is Russia who has now become Europe's biggest competitor (Clark and Foxhall 2014; Bechev, 2015; Lasheras, 2016). Russia has been playing an increasingly assertive role in the area since the outbreak of the world economic and financial crisis in 2008. Putin's framing of the world as a 'clash of civilizations' pitting Russia and its allies against a hostile West bearing threatening values plays out in the Balkans (Shlapentokh 2013; Lasheras 2016, p. 9). Russian growing influence conflicts with norms and standards underpinning Euro-Atlantic integration (including transparency, rule of law, human rights, democratic accountability and free markets). The diffusion of Russian opaque political and business practices is supposedly leading to a 'creeping oligarchisation' of the region (Stacey and Oliver 2014).

Bosnia and Serbia have been primary concerns of Russian foreign policy since the 1990s. Bosnia is perhaps the weakest and potentially most unstable state in the region. Russia has long been a supporter of Republika Srpska and its President Milorad Dodik, who has systematically opposed social, economic, political, and above all judicial reforms demanded by the EU in order to make progress towards accession. Dodik has also threatened to hold a referendum on independence that, if held, would likely put an end to any prospect of EU integration for the Serb entity. Russian officials came out publicly in favour of a referendum. In addition, both in 2014 and 2015 Russia abstained from a Security Council vote on the extension of the EU's military mission in Bosnia (Lasheras, 2016). Although these moves had

no immediate practical consequences, they signalled Moscow's increasingly unilateral approach to the region, as well as its support for the Bosnian Serbs.

Even in Serbia, while the political class is committed to Euro-integration, some scholars and pundits have been debating the possibility of abandoning EU integration in favour of closer ties with the Russian Federation (Marić 2014). The new Serbian leadership, which came to power after the 2012 elections, has tried to minimize the discussion on alternatives to Europe by staking its political capital on a pragmatic attempt to solve economic and social problems. The 'politics of alternatives' (Radeljić 2014), however, remains a major concern for the Serbian political class, which is divided between its wish to join the EU as quickly as possible and its worry about spoiling relations with Russia, which is a major trading partner and controls strategic companies in Serbia.

Geopolitical issues also contribute to fostering the development of closer links between the two countries. In contrast to the EU, Russia has always supported Serbia's position on Kosovo, both condemning NATO's bombing in 1999 and refusing to recognize the province's self-declared independence in 2008. In late 2013 Serbia and Russia went so far as to sign a military cooperation agreement. At an event held in October 2014 in Belgrade to mark 70 years since Soviet troops helped liberate the city from Nazi occupation, President Putin re-affirmed that Russia's stance over Kosovo is 'a position of principle that is not to be subjected to any adjustments' (Radio Free Europe 2014). Putin's stance was motivated, among other reasons, by an attempt to justify Russia's annexation of Crimea on the basis of historical and cultural grounds – the same grounds that supposedly assign sovereign rights to Serbia over Kosovo. Yet, while Putin's position may be self-serving, Serbs have nonetheless assessed it positively, and raised Russia to the rank of most popular foreign power (Bechev, 2015). In this context dominated by the presence of economic and geopolitical interests on both sides, Serbia has refused to accept the European economic measures adopted against Russia as a

result of its involvement in eastern Ukraine since early/mid 2014. Meanwhile, Russia voted down a UN Security Council resolution marking the twentieth anniversary of the Srebrenica massacre, calling it 'anti-Serb.'

Thus, as in many other past instances, a situation of political-military crisis and the presence of real or perceived threats has strengthened Orthodox (and Slavic) brotherhood vis-à-vis Europe and the West. Russian, Belarus and Serbian military units even organized a joint military exercise in September 2015 name 'Slavic brotherhood' on Russian territory. Worryingly, strong military ties may lead Belgrade to believe that Moscow could support it in a future conflict (Clark and Foxhall 2014). In an apparent show of support for Moscow, both Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina abstained on the UN General Assembly Resolution 68/262, entitled 'Territorial Integrity of Ukraine.' In Macedonia, citizens are reported to be sympathetic to the Russian version of the situation in Ukraine because of their frustration in relation to the 'name issue' and the related freezing of the EU integration process (Vankovska 2014). Likewise, in Montenegro there is considerable popular opposition to the government's decision to join the EU in introducing sanctions against Russia (Tomovic 2014).

The mid- and long-term consequences of Russia's new role in the region are hard to gauge. Russia's main strength lies in its ability to exploit EU's weaknesses. United Kingdom's vote in June 2016 in favour of leaving the EU (the so-called 'Brexit') may both further weaken enlargement prospects and increase Russian influence in the region (Lasheras, 2016)..If the enlargement prospects for the western Balkans become increasingly remote, then Serbia and other states may turn gradually more to Russia, whose 'soft power' involves not only economic instruments but also a variety of other initiatives and tools designed to generate good will in the region, including energy, diplomatic, military, and cultural policies (Clark and Foxhall 2014). While American and European sanctions against Moscow over the Ukraine affaire have contributed to throw Russian economy sharply into reverse, Russian investment

and influence remain substantial (Serra 2015). Russian diplomatic advance in the region may challenge the teleological narrative of transition towards the EU, already severely tested by the growth of Euroscepticism.

Conclusion

For much of the past 20 years, diffused support for the EU has provided sense and direction during a period of often traumatic political, economic and social change. Much academic work has endeavoured to explain the conditions under which the EU can fulfil its progressive task of delivering modern and efficient rules and institutions to aspiring new EU member states. While insightful, this work has given little or no attention to the rise of sceptical views towards the EU. Indeed, particularly since the outbreak of the global economic and financial crisis, and the lack of seemingly efficient responses to it, the EU's attractiveness has lost much of its traction. The continuing crisis in Greece, as well as the outbreak in the summer of 2015 of a humanitarian crisis over refugees trying to reach Northern Europe through the Western Balkans, have fuelled further critical attitudes towards the EU, especially among the young population who sees Brussels as too distant and technocratic to solve pressing economic and social issues. In an unpredictable twist, the traditional roles between the EU and the Balkans have been reversed. Throughout 2015 the EU has turned into an exporter of instability to the region, since refugees entered it from Greece – an EU member state – and remained stuck in the western Balkans as other EU member states in the area blocked their travel towards Central and Northern Europe (Lasheras, 2016).

Advocates of integration both inside and outside the EU view Euroscepticism with concern. If citizens become disillusioned with European integration, this may also negatively affect also the hope of reforming their own malfunctioning domestic institutions under the pressure of external demands. Moreover, Russia's new foreign policy assertiveness is a

further cause of concern for those policymakers and analysts who believe that the region, now encircled by EU borders, cannot be left out in the cold. In particular, the crisis in Ukraine has stimulated EU members in the region, such as Bulgaria and Romania, to ask Brussels for an accelerated EU accession process for their neighbours (Assenova 2014).

Needless to say, EU member states do not consider further enlargement to be one of their priorities. Despite this lack of political will, or perhaps because of it, some scholars have underlined the instability of the current situation, the need to re-launch the integration perspective, and the urgency of revitalizing Europe's celebrated transformative power. The old key words of 'prosperity,' 'growth,' 'stability', and the like, are unlikely to inspire disillusioned citizens in the region. According to Konitzer (2014, p. 29), if the EU is to have a credible chance of exerting a positive influence, it must project a concrete, post-crisis vision of what the European project is about and of the real benefits – material, but also in terms of values, identity, and belonging – that membership in the Union may bring.

It is unclear whether such a strategy can produce positive results. Communication campaigns of both the EU and national institutions have long attempted to fill the gap between elites and the public but they have had little success. By privileging the EU's actorness, its objectives and expectations, these programmes risk reinforcing the perception of a paternalistic attitude towards the western Balkans. The focus on the EU, its values, its ability to communicate, and its related transformative powers marginalize domestic perspectives. In addition, not only does such a focus preserve unequal power relations vis-à-vis the western Balkan states, but it also prevents thorough consideration and debate on the growing discontent with the costs of the seemingly never-ending transition towards Europe.

Moreover, the current low salience of European issues in the domestic politics of western Balkan states makes it unlikely that another information strategy will stimulate and support the profound reformist actions expected by Brussels. Indeed, for both Euro-

enthusiast states and for sceptical ones, Europe ranks low on the list of the most pressing political priorities. For the former, Euro-enthusiasm does not translate into a set of credible reforms aimed at removing domestic obstacles to European integration. Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo testify to the difficulty of transforming widespread sentiments in favour of Europe into a workable pro-European strategy. For the latter, popular scepticism and/or passive acceptance of European-mandated rules contributes to the formation of an environment where citizens find themselves increasingly bound by EU norms and constraints, with little or no access to political representation to express their dissatisfaction.

Above all, and somewhat counter-intuitively, Euroscepticism does not necessarily imply a dismissal of Europe, erosion in the belief of democracy, or even disengagement from politics. For example, declining electoral participation does not reflect an apathetic attitude; rather, it expresses a critique of the internationally sponsored procedural aspects of the democratic process, a rejection of what is perceived as a corrupt political sphere, and a call for substantive political programmes and commitments (Greenberg 2014). Thus, Euroscepticism is hardly the pathology that some arguments adopting a normative understanding of the term imply, but an inherent feature of democratic development. In the western Balkans, as elsewhere, dissatisfied citizens can be instrumental in the construction of a viable and legitimate domestic and supranational democratic order. In a context where the economic policies of states are decisively shaped by Europe's requests and conditions (Bieber and Ristić 2012), Eurosceptic views can perform a positive function. If EU policies are no longer taken at face value, then debates on the pros and cons of European integration, including the impact of European policies on issues of social cohesion and economic justice within society, can contribute to supporting a re-politicization of questions important for citizens of the western Balkans and help manage the tension between national democracy and European demands.

Notes

¹ The western Balkans include Albania, Kosovo, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, and, before 1 July 2013, when it acceded to the EU, Croatia.

² I use 'EU' and 'Europe' interchangeably both to make the text more readable and in recognition of the fact that the EU has effectively occupied the identity space of Europe as a political community.

³ However, respondents from the Croat-Bosniak Federation remain significantly more supportive of EU accession than those from Republika Srpska (Foreign Policy Initiative 2012).

⁴ For up to date unemployment rates in the region see Trading Economics at:

www.tradingeconomics.com

⁵ Needless to say, a full analysis of alternatives would require in depth comparative research, which is beyond the scope of this paper. This section simply aims to draw attention to and briefly evaluate Russia's attempt to use a growing disillusion with the EU to forge new alliances in the region.

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Table 1. Positive answers to the question: “do you think that (OUR COUNTRY)’s membership of the EU would be a good thing?”

	2006*	2010*	2015**
Albania	84	81	84
Bosnia-Herzegovina	70	75	30
Croatia	35	25	32
Kosovo	87	87	89
Macedonia	76	60	41
Montenegro	64	73	35
Serbia	61	44	24

* *Gallup Balkan Monitor (2010)*

** *Regional Cooperation Council (2015)*

Note: The results from the two polls are comparable considering that the sampling strategies have a similar level of reliability. It should be noted that Eurobarometer surveys show generally greater support for EU integration than surveys cited in Table 1. However, Eurobarometer surveys have not consistently polled all countries of the region overtime, and thus are of limited use to assess support for the EU diachronically. Above all, Eurobarometer surveys are carried out in member and candidate states. Accordingly, they have not yet polled citizens in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo on their views about EU membership.