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The Politics of Political Conditionality: How the
EU Is Failing the Western Balkans

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Abstract

The EU conditions third-party countries wanting to join to comprehensive political reforms beneficial to development. Six current aspirants (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Kosovo, and Serbia) are progressing slowly in their bids to join. This study examines the reason why. Using process tracing, it is demonstrated these slow accessions are best explained by European political ambiguity, which has disincentivised the Western Balkan governments to implement reforms. This has more explanatory value than geopolitical interference or autocratic-minded leaders in the region. The study reaffirms the importance of understanding the politics behind incentives-based political conditionality regimes for generating more effective outcomes.

List of Abbreviations

Acquis	Acquis communautaire - existing EU law
BiH	Bosnia and Herzegovina
EU	European Union
The Commission	European Commission - executive branch of EU
The Council	European Council - representing member states
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
IMF	International Monetary Fund
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
Parliament	European Parliament
PM	Prime Minister
PT	Process Tracing
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
US	United States of America
WB6	Six non-EU member Western Balkan states

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The Politics of Political Conditionality: How the EU Is Failing the Western Balkans

Introduction

Twenty years ago, all countries in the Western Balkan region of South-East Europe were promised “unequivocal support” for European Union (“EU”) membership (European Council, 2003). Today, however, only Croatia has successfully entered the EU (in 2013). European enlargement to the remaining Western Balkan countries is progressing slowly. Out of the six non-EU members in the region, i.e., Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina (“BiH”), Montenegro, North Macedonia, Kosovo*, and Serbia (collectively the “WB6”), only Serbia and Montenegro are currently in open negotiations with the EU. Whilst in 2018 the European Commission (“the Commission”) still had a target date for a Western Balkan enlargement in 2025 (European Commission, 2018), Slovenia’s attempts in 2021 to set another for 2030 were rejected by other member states (Fleming and Foy, 2021).

Meanwhile, there is evidence from previous enlargements to Central and Eastern Europe that, if done well (Narula and Bellak, 2009, 2011), “accession” to the EU (in EU jargon) could benefit development in the WB6 substantially. In economic terms, the World Bank has praised the EU for being a “convergence machine”, helping poorer member states catch up with richer states in areas such as productivity, income levels, and gross domestic product (“GDP”) (Gill and Raiser, 2011, pp. 71–86), often with the largest improvements for the least well-off (Goedemé and Collado, 2016).

EU membership also has non-economic benefits. For instance, Konya and Guisan (2008) find that when countries join the EU, and just before, their human development indicators increase significantly and gradually converge towards the EU average. Moreover, EU enlargements have generally generated a “democracy dividend”, helping to build and strengthen democracy in countries that were previously under autocratic rule (Sadurski, 2004), providing citizens with several freedoms and liberties (Sen, 1999). Admittedly, this does not guarantee backsliding

* Kosovo declared itself independent from Serbia in 2008 but is not universally recognised as such. Notably, five EU countries have not recognised Kosovo as an independent state: Cyprus, Greece, Slovakia, Spain, and Romania.

since the Polish and Hungarian governments have recently reversed some of the progress (Holesch and Kyriazi, 2022). Finally, a future EU accession may also contribute to more sustainable peace in the conflict-ridden Balkans region (Ağır, Arman and Akçay, 2019; Petrovic and Wilson, 2021; Smith, Markovic Khaze and Kovacevic, 2021), as well as promote stronger minority protections (Sasse, 2008).

What is more, public opinion polls show convincing support for joining the EU. In most WB6 countries, public support is estimated to be around 80% or higher (Center for Insights in Survey Research, 2020; EFB, 2020). Even in Serbia, which generally demonstrates lower support in opinion polls (around 50%), a theoretical vote on EU accession would win consistently from 2009 onwards, with an average margin of about 20 percentage points (Serbian Ministry of European Integration, 2019).

Before a country can join the EU, it must meet the Copenhagen Criteria, a list of political conditionalities agreed upon at a 1993 European Council (“the Council”) summit. First, candidate countries must harmonise their legal framework with the *acquis communautaire* (“*acquis*”), the collection of existing EU laws and policies. Second, they must meet the Union’s democratic standards (European Commission, 2017).

The WB6 are making little to no progress on either criterion. First, the adoption of the *acquis* is progressing slowly. The two Western Balkan countries currently in open negotiations, Serbia and Montenegro, have closed only 2 out of 34 and 3 out of 33 chapters, respectively (European Commission, 2021c, 2021d). Second, the WB6 have shown considerable democratic backsliding. In the whole region, media has been increasingly put under state control, corruption is widespread and structures of clientelism persist or are exacerbated (Kmezić, 2020; Centre for Media Pluralism and Freedom, 2022). Whilst Serbia and Montenegro were previously classified as “free” by Freedom House, since 2019 all the WB6 are classified as “partly free”, a form of government between autocracy and democracy (see Figure 1). Moreover, since the first WB6 country North Macedonia officially applied for EU membership in 2004, the democratic indicators of all the WB6 countries except for Kosovo have either stagnated or deteriorated (see Figure 2).

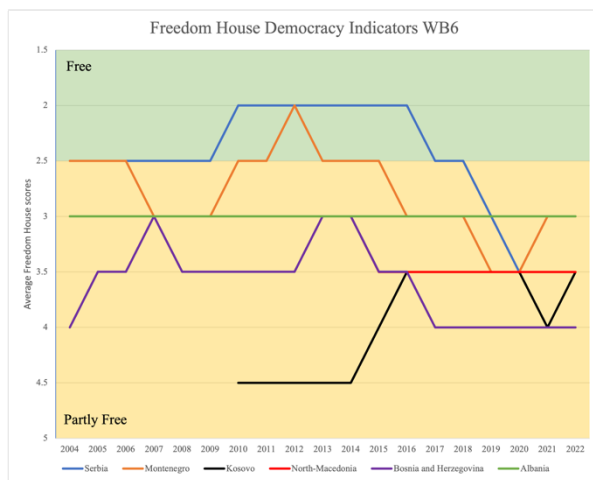


Figure 2: The average Freedom House indicators (Political Rights and Civil Liberties) for the WB6 from 2004 until 2022. Lower scores indicate a stronger democracy. Countries are classified “Free” from 2.5 and lower. Since 2019, all WB6 are classified as “Partly Free”. Note: Serbia and Montenegro were one country until 2006 and first data from Kosovo is from 2010.

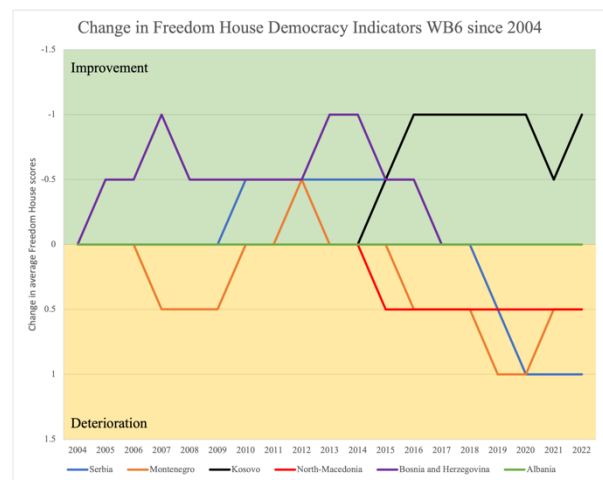


Figure 1: The change in average Freedom House indicators (Political Rights and Civil Liberties) for the WB6 from 2004 until 2022, compared to scores in 2004. A negative score indicates democratic improvement. Kosovo is the only country that improved its democracy score in the long run. Note: Serbia and Montenegro were one country until 2006 and first data from Kosovo is from 2010.

This presents a puzzle. If popular support is high and Croatia was able to start its application and meet all the criteria in 10 years, why have the WB6 made so little progress? Why have the countries become more autocratic, moving away from the *acquis*?

I propose that the solution lies in the often-overlooked politics of political conditionality. With each new stage of negotiations, and before any country can join the EU, all current member states must agree unanimously, making EU enlargements inherently political (European Commission, no date b; Grabbe, 2002).

I argue that at critical moments, politics at the EU level and the resulting ambiguous enlargement policy played a decisive role in the failure of the WB6 to implement reforms, which would bring them closer to EU accession, but be beneficial to development outcomes as well. Using the methodological tool of process tracing, I demonstrate this better explains the WB6’s slow accessions than theories emphasising geopolitical power struggles or autocratic leaders cementing their rule through ostensible stability promotion.

This question matters because within the world’s political conditionality regimes, the EU’s Copenhagen Criteria are both the most comprehensive, targeting virtually all areas of governance, as well as probably the most powerful in terms of possible development outcomes (Koch, 2015). Beyond merely a sounder theoretical framework of these conditionalities, a

better understanding of the political mechanisms behind it could have tangible implications for the WB6's development, and (possible) EU candidates, including Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, or even Turkey. Moreover, given the abundant use of conditionalities in the international development sector (see the first part of the literature review), the study can also help to assess the potential of such policy tools for actors other than the EU (Molenaers, Dellepiane and Faust, 2015).

Before proceeding, it is important to note that the paper is limited in two key ways. First, although the WB6 are comprised of different countries with distinct cultural, political and socio-economic contexts, they will be considered together. This is also how they are primarily regarded by the EU (European Commission, 2021a) and it allows for a broader argument on region-wide developments. The specificities of each of the countries are nevertheless acknowledged throughout. Second, although the possible future accessions are significant for both the WB6 and the EU, the paper limits itself to development outcomes for the former.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. First, in a literature review, political conditionality, the WB6, and their accession trajectories are discussed and contextualised. Then, an empirical study is presented where three rival theories for the slow accessions are discussed and held to evidence. The paper finishes with a conclusion.

Literature Review

The literature review starts with a broad conceptualisation of current political conditionality regimes. This is then specified to the stringent conditionality regime the EU uses for its enlargements, the Copenhagen Criteria. Third, the particularities of the WB6 as a region, as well as of the internal countries are outlined in more depth. Finally, the debate is extended to the practical mechanisms of European integration.

1. The Politics of Political Conditionality

This section of the literature review first discusses political conditionality regimes and how they are politicised. Then, it is demonstrated how European conditionality is situated amongst them.

Political conditionality is a form of governance that gained traction with the rise of the “new international order” after the Cold War, reflecting a reconsideration of multilateral relations (Baylies, 1995). Narrowly defined, it constitutes an “instrument - the withholding of development assistance, or the threat thereof - that states employ to bring other states' governments to modify their behavior” (Uvin and Biagiotti, 1996, p. 377). A broader conceptualisation of political conditionality includes “granting benefits to a country subject to the beneficiary meeting certain conditions” (Kishore, 2017, p. 105) or a mechanism to impose policy reforms on a polity that it would otherwise not have chosen (Koeberle *et al.*, 2005, p. 237; Borchert *et al.*, 2018, p. 1). The political conditions can require ad-hoc political and economic reform programmes, or more long-term rule transfers from one polity to the other (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2004). Sometimes, a country's aid policy is tied to its trade policy, so-called “aid for trade”, as Canada's development assistance has long been, for example (Hendra, 1987; Suwa-Eisenmann and Verdier, 2007). Presently, development aid from the Global North is often linked to “good governance” or respecting democracy and human rights (Uvin, 1993; Kale, 2001).

Paradoxically, political conditionality can simultaneously be perceived to undermine democracy. As political conditionality tools are applied to sovereign nations, it can be perceived as a bid from an outside state or international organisation to interfere with the internal affairs of often vulnerable countries (Babb and Carruthers, 2008). Similarly, narrowly defined conditionalities may incentivise governments to ensure compliance with those at the expense of demands from the public (Baylies, 1995). Nevertheless, there is evidence to suggest political conditionality regimes take citizens' interests into account, as well as domestic political opposition (Mayer and Mourmouras, 2004; Stone, 2008).

The literature on political conditionality policies aside from the EU mainly focusses on the domains of monetary support and development aid. The first is primarily embodied by the International Monetary Fund (“IMF”) which is known to condition desperately needed loans on austere policy changes (Kentikelenis, Stubbs and King, 2016). The second, development assistance, is provided by actors ranging from donor countries to international organisations such as the World Bank. It may be stopped, ex-post or ex-ante, if a country violates its conditionalities (Uvin and Biagiotti, 1996; Baehr, 1997; Koch, 2015).

Even though conditionality regimes are ostensibly bureaucratic and procedural, their implementation is almost always political. For instance, Dreher, Sturm and Vreeland (2015) find that United Nations (“UN”) Security Council members receive around 30% fewer conditions from the IMF. Furthermore, countries that are allied to the United States (“US”) have been found to obtain larger loans that often have less strict conditionalities attached (Oatley and Yackee, 2004; Stone, 2008; Kilby, 2009). In fact, there is copious evidence supporting that the US has habitually used both organisations to further its foreign policy goals (e.g. Woods, 2003; Andersen, Hansen and Markussen, 2006; Andersen, Harr and Tarp, 2006; Fleck and Kilby, 2006).

The EU stands out internationally because it uses political conditionality in most foreign policy, including beyond development assistance (Koch, 2015). This is especially true since the Treaty of Lisbon (2007) came into effect in 2009 and the EU obliged itself by law to include what it calls “values of the Union” such as human rights, democracy, and rule of law in its External Action (foreign affairs) policies. For instance, recent trade agreements with Singapore, Vietnam and Mexico were stalled numerous times because of human rights concerns, instigated especially by the European Parliament (“the Parliament”) (Szymanski and Smith, 2005; Sicurelli, 2015; McKenzie and Meissner, 2017). On the other hand, the EU has shown it can waive these human rights conditionalities when politically or economically opportune, as exemplified by the endorsement by the European Council in 2020 for the proposed Comprehensive Agreement on Investment with China, which was stalled only later by Parliament (Ankersmit, 2021).

2. The Copenhagen Criteria

Within the EU’s repertoire of conditionality regimes also features one of the most stringent and comprehensive in the world: the Copenhagen Criteria, required for EU accession. One part relates to the same conditions used in its relation to third-party countries, i.e., the democracy and human rights requirements. Another is perhaps more demanding and relates to the ability of a government to function within the Union (the *acquis communautaire*) and “cope with competitive pressure and market forces” through an efficient market economy (European Council, 1993, pt. A). Like other political conditionality regimes, it is explicitly political, for all member states must agree unanimously to allow a country to enter the Union. Indeed, few countries have met all the conditionalities before accession (Rezler, 2011).

As the most studied political conditionality regime, there is substantial literature on how the Copenhagen Criteria influence states to comply with its conditions. Unlike the IMF where there are few alternatives to compliance in return for financial support, most authors agree that governments wanting to join the EU make cost-benefit analyses based on incentives set by the EU (e.g., Smith, 1998; Hughes, Sasse and Gordon, 2004; Grabbe, 2005; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2008; Gateva, 2013, 2015; Zhelyazkova *et al.*, 2019). Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2004, 2020) make a helpful distinction between incentives based on rewards, determinacy, costs, and credibility. Rewards include access to the EU's internal market, influencing their neighbours' policies through EU voting rights, and larger financial assistance, to name a few. Determinacy shapes the clarity of the requirements for accession: "the more clearly the EU signals that conditions are sine qua non, the more likely target governments are to prioritize and meet them" (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2020, p. 817). Next, costs to accession are country-specific and may be influenced by state capacity and domestic politics. Finally, credibility constitutes both the time between the EU's promise and delivery of the Rewards, and the threat of withholding them if the conditions are not met. The credibility of threat becomes greater as the (political) benefits of enlargement for the EU become smaller. Credibility also increases with the EU's consistency in applying conditionality.

Finally, the EU also leverages possible EU enlargements to obtain geopolitical power in neighbouring countries. One of the *acquis* requirements for a candidate country is "to progressively align its policies towards third countries and its positions within international organisations with the policies and positions adopted by the Union and its Member States" (European Commission, no date a, chap. 30). Consequently, four of the WB6, i.e., Albania, BiH, Montenegro and North Macedonia, have currently aligned themselves with all EU sanctions against the Russian Federation, whilst Kosovo has implemented most and Serbia has implemented some (Ivković, 2022). Olli Rehn (2007), then EU Commissioner for Enlargement, in a speech made explicit the Union's use of enlargements as an instrument of soft power, arguing the Union has a "strategic bargain of accession" (p. 3). Indeed, the EU's conditionalities for accession are considered one of the Union's most effective foreign policy tools (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2004; Trauner, 2009; Wolczuk, 2009). Similarly, the recent developments to officially recognise Ukraine and Moldova as future membership candidates (as well as Georgia as a "potential candidate"), can be seen as a strategy to keep them inside the EU's sphere of influence (Kakachia and Lebanidze, 2022; Tidey, 2022).

3. European Interest in the Six Non-EU Western Balkan Countries

Before moving on to how political conditionality is operationalised in the WB6, this section goes into more depth on why the EU imposes these conditionalities on them in the first place.

First, the Western Balkans as a name for the group of countries discussed in this paper is a term mainly used by the European Union in relation to its possible future enlargement into the region and is not frequently used in the region itself (Scholl, 2018). Whilst part of the region shares a common history, not all countries do. Five of the WB6 were part of Yugoslavia from 1918 until its collapse in the 1990s. BiH, Montenegro, North Macedonia (then Macedonia) and Serbia each constituted a federalised republic within Yugoslavia (together with Slovenia and Croatia), with Kosovo being one of two autonomous regions within Serbia. Albania never formed part of the federation and instead was an independent state.

Large-scale EU involvement in the region commenced with the outbreak of the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s, which ultimately led to the complete disintegration of the federation. With Serbs and Montenegrins, Macedonians, Croats, Bosniaks, ethnic Albanians, and Slovenes fighting amongst each other, the conflict had a decisively ethnic character. It also featured the first internationally recognised genocide on European soil since the Second World War, the Srebrenica Massacre of 1995 in BiH (ICTY, 2004; ICJ, 2007). In 1997, near civil war also broke out in Albania following the collapse of numerous pyramid schemes worth half the country's GDP (Jarvis, 2000). The conflicts in former Yugoslavia and Albania came to an end mainly because of involvement by the UN and military intervention led by the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation ("NATO") (Mema, 1998; Roberts, 1999). The EU intervened through diplomacy and economic sanctions, albeit with little deterrent effect on the belligerents (Landry, 1999; Wouters and Naert, 2001).

Whilst military hostilities between the WB6 have since ceased, the EU remains concerned with the region's (in)stability. BiH, for instance, has effectively been under European tutelage since the end of the war. The European Court of Human Rights selects three of nine supreme court justices. Additionally, the country still has a special High Representative, to date always an EU citizen, who has veto rights in most political decisions, the so-called "Bonn Powers" (Banning, 2014; Dijkstra and Raadschelders, 2022). There is also regular diplomatic conflict among the WB6, which remain divided along religious, linguistic and ethnic lines (Bugarski, 2012;

Ronelle, 2013). A common source of disputes is Kosovo, which Serbia considers part of its territory, and which BiH, due to a veto by its Serbian community (Republika Srpska), also does not recognise as a sovereign state (N1 Sarajevo, 2020). Tensions between Kosovo and Serbia recurrently peak, such as in 2021 when Kosovo required cars from Serbia to replace their licence plate with a Kosovar one, leading ethnic Serbs to block two border crossings for weeks (Isufi and Stojanovic, 2021). Despite European efforts to normalise relations (Beysoylu, 2018), an important element of Serbia's foreign policy is to limit international recognition of Kosovo as much as possible, blocking Kosovo's membership bids to the UN and the Council of Europe, amongst others (Efevwerhan, 1999; Stojanovic, 2022; Sufi, 2022).

The EU also plays a critical indirect role in the WB6, primarily because of its economic importance in the region. Each WB6 country has significantly more trade relations with the EU than with each other (European Council, 2018). Moreover, economic relations are unbalanced, with the WB6 being dependent on the EU for trade (67.7% of trade is with the EU), remittances (4-15% of GDP, mainly from Europe) and foreign direct investment (40-113% of GDP, also mainly from Europe) (Fruchter, 2018; European Commission, 2020b). Finally, four of the WB6 are directly dependent on European monetary policy, either through unilateral adoption of the euro (Kosovo and Montenegro), or through a peg to it (BiH and North-Macedonia). For these reasons, authors have argued that the WB6 form a dependent "super-periphery" structure around "core" Eurozone and non-Eurozone EU member states (Bartlett, 2009; Bartlett and Prica, 2013, 2016, 2017; Pula, 2014; Ruma, 2014; Beshku, 2021).

Regarding leverage, most authors agree the WB6 do not have many other options but to seek EU membership. Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia are already aligned with the EU's security architecture as part of NATO, and BiH and Kosovo have recently stated they want to join as well (Gadzo, 2022). Moreover, Bieber and Tzifakis (2019b) argue there is a consensus amongst the WB6 that European integration is the only way forward, with other external actors, including China and Russia, not being able to offer credible development prospects. Serbia may be an exception to the rule, as the government repeatedly rejects NATO membership (Öztürk, 2022) and public support for Russia and the EU is similar (Erör, 2022).

4. The Process of European Integration

In this part of the literature review, the practical and political mechanisms of European integration are briefly discussed, as well as the progress of each WB6 country.

The process of joining the EU consists of several stages and takes years. Typically, a prospective member state first signs an association agreement with the EU to “establish close economic and political cooperation (more than simple cooperation)” (EU External Action Service, 2011, p. 1). After a formal request of a country to join, the Commission writes an opinion on the country’s preparedness. If the Council, representing the governments of the member states, agrees (by unanimity) to grant the country candidate status, the Commission starts a screening process, assessing where and to what extent the country’s legal framework must be amended. This lays the groundwork for negotiations between the EU and the candidate country, divided into 35 chapters, which essentially consist of the candidate country convincing the EU it has made enough progress or asking for exceptions (Nicolaidis, 1998). The Commission reports the progress within these chapters annually for each country. For a summary of the latest reports, see Annex 1.

In the literature, this process of taking on the *acquis* and thus gradually joining the EU is often dubbed “Europeanisation”. This can be understood as the export of European forms of governance outside its borders, either through conditionality or through some other means of influence. Alternatively, it may refer to the increasing role the EU plays in domestic policymaking, or the EU’s ability to diffuse its norms and values across Europe and elsewhere (e.g., Ladrech, 1994; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2008; Flockhart, 2010). Due to the ambiguity around the term’s employment (Buller and Gamble, 2002), Europeanisation will not be referred to hereafter.

Next, it is to be noted that accessions for the WB6 are more demanding than previous enlargements. First, in a set of additional requirements, often called the “Copenhagen Plus Criteria”, the WB6 must agree to cooperate fully with the International Court-Tribunal on Yugoslavia and resolve bilateral disputes (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2004, p. 10; Bieber and Kmezić, 2014, pp. 7–8; European Commission, 2021e). Moreover, Serbia is currently the only candidate country that must complete the 35th chapter on “other issues”, requiring it to normalise its relations with Kosovo, which, when it starts negotiations, is also expected to

complete it. Finally, in 2020, the Commission proposed a new “accession methodology”, clustering chapters into six themes, making fundamental reforms for democracy more important, and providing “greater clarity on what the EU expects of enlargement countries at the different stages of the process”, amongst others (European Commission, 2020a, p. 1).

None of the WB6 have progressed significantly in their bids for EU membership. Currently, only Serbia and Montenegro are in open negotiations with the EU, with few chapters closed (see Annex 1). In 2020, it was announced that the EU would also start negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia, but they, until recently, have been stalled by Bulgaria over a historical dispute with North Macedonia (Marusic, 2022a). What is more, BiH applied for candidate status in 2016. However, the Commission’s subsequent opinion noted that BiH is “at an early stage regarding its level of preparedness to take on the obligations of EU membership” (p. 14), and advised against granting candidacy status, leaving open the possibility of later candidacy status (European Commission, 2019). Moreover, Kosovo has not yet submitted a membership application but is expected to do so soon, possibly by the end of 2022 (Ker-Lindsay and Economides, 2012; Taylor, 2022). See Figure 3 for a quantified representation of the Commission’s (arguably subjective) assessment of the adoption of the *acquis* over time.

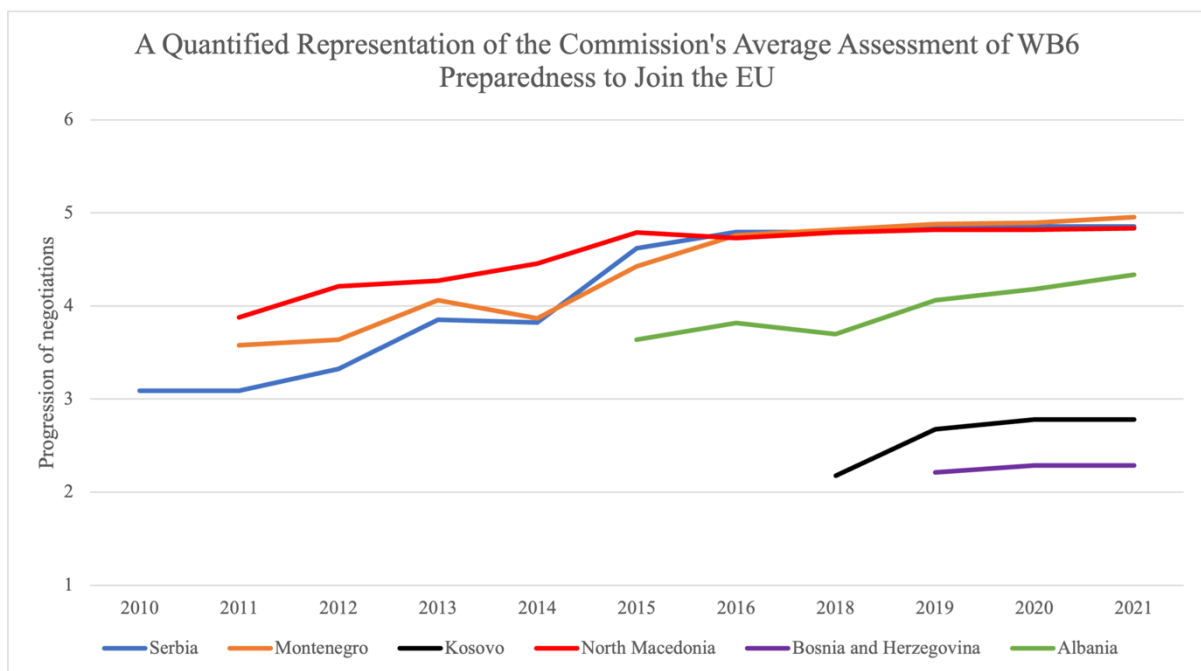


Figure 3: The quantified average for each of the Commission’s assessments on accession negotiation chapters for the WB6 from 2010 until 2021. From 0 “totally incompatible” to 7 “well prepared/advanced”. Since 2015, most countries have not made much progress in their adoption of the *acquis*. Note: In 2017, the Commission did not publish any reports. In 2011, the Commission did not report for Serbia. Data for Montenegro and North Macedonia available from 2011, Albania from 2015, Kosovo from 2018 and BiH from 2019. Source: The European Commission individual country reports. For the individual progression graphs of each of the WB6 divided into chapters and the methodology, see Annex 2.

Finally, recently Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia announced the launch of a regional cooperation protocol under the name of Open Balkan, aiming to emulate parts of the EU in creating a single common market with free circulation of people, goods, services and capital (Bami, 2022). According to the countries' leaders, it "is not a consolation prize in place of an EU membership" but "a big step towards membership" (Rama, Vučić and Zaev, 2021, translated from German by author). However, although the newly elected Montenegrin government is considering Open Balkan membership, the initiative has been criticised by the other WB6 and some EU member states, notably Germany, who fear it may distract from EU integration (Bami, 2022; Marusic, 2022b).

Empirical Research

The rest of the paper consists of an empirical study, exploring the causal mechanisms behind the weakening credibility of the EU towards the WB6, and thus the sluggish adoption of the *acquis*. Using the methodical tool of process-tracing, it is argued that amongst three dominant theories, the one emphasising internal politics within the EU has the best explanatory value.

In the succeeding sections, the study is developed first through a discussion of the methodology. Then, the three relevant theories are discussed consecutively, before presenting and discussing the evidence for each.

Methodology

The following methodology part is subdivided further into two segments. First, the methodological tool of process tracing is discussed after which the methodology of data collection is briefly addressed.

Process-Tracing

This paper uses a qualitative research technique called process-tracing ("PT"). In brief, it helps to make causal claims by finding linkages between outcomes and possible causes. Using formal tests of evidence within the proposed chain of causal mechanisms, PT has been used to provide explanations that link "social and institutional structure and context with individual agency and decision-making" (Bennett and Checkel, 2014, p. 3). It does so by linking "preexisting generalizations with specific observations from within a single case to make causal inferences

about that case” (Mahoney, 2012, p. 570). PT is increasingly argued to utilise a Bayesian logic of inference, whereby each theory’s probability is updated after every new piece of evidence (Bennett, 2009; Fairfield and Charman, 2015).

The choice for within-case casual analysis results from the fact that the last time more than two countries joined the EU was 18 years ago. Hence, this allows for a consideration of the more recent theoretical proposals, whilst similarly exploiting the differences amongst the WB6. In addition, PT has notably already been used to explain historical patterns of EU institutional integration (Moravcsik, 1998; Schimmelfennig, 2014).

As a research method that seeks to make causal claims, PT focusses on developments over time and, unlike quantitative research methods, cannot accurately describe an event at one point in time. However, it helps to highlight the steps along the way (causal inference) whilst also giving more contextual information (descriptive inference) (Collier, 2011). Practically, the technique uses the analysis of various “intermediate steps in a process to make inferences about hypotheses on how that process took place and whether and how it generated the outcome of interest” (Bennett and Checkel, 2014, p. 6).

Crucially, PT necessitates a pre-conceived hypothesis of how events are connected, as well as at least one cohesive rival theory that can explain an alternative, counterfactual causal chain of events, which must be scrutinised along each link in the chain to assess its causal validity (White and Phillips, 2012, pp. 40–42; Bennett and Checkel, 2014). These theories can be conceived for the research or already exist. This paper uses the second, deductive approach, comparing three priorly conceived theories.

Van Evera (1997, pp. 31–32) specifies four types of evidence that test for causation. They have been adapted and categorised by Bennett (2010, p. 210) and Collier (2011, p. 825) in a 2-by-2 matrix according to whether they are *sufficient* or *necessary* to establish causation, as replicated in Table 1. If X is *necessary* for Y, the former is causally linked to the latter so that Y is impossible without X. If X is *sufficient* for Y, X leads to Y, but the latter can exist without the former. Hence, in this case, different causal mechanisms may lead to Y, X being one of them. Consequently, successful *Straw-in-the-Wind* tests only slightly weaken rival theories, *Hoop* tests do so somewhat, a *Smoking Gun* substantially weakens them and a *Doubly Decisive*

eliminates them (Bennet, 2010). Double Decisive tests are rare in social science, and most process tracing is founded on *Hoop* and *Smoking Gun* tests (Mahoney, 2012).

The classifications come with some caveats. First, the distinction between the tests is not always as rigid as the table suggests. For instance, sometimes a *Straw-in-the-Wind* test may instead be treated as a lead towards a *Hoop* or *Smoking Gun* test (Collier, 2011, p. 825). Moreover, some difficult *Hoop* tests may provide more decisive evidence for a hypothesis than an easy *Smoking Gun* (Mahoney, 2012, pp. 572–573). Thus, Collier (2011) argues, “the decision to treat a given piece of evidence as the basis for one of the four tests can depend on the researcher’s prior knowledge, the assumptions that underlie the study, and the specific formulation of the hypothesis” (p. 825).

		Sufficiency	
		No	Yes
Necessity	No	<i>Straw-in-the-Wind</i>	<i>Smoking Gun</i>
		Passing: Affirms relevance of hypothesis but does not confirm it.	Passing: Confirms hypothesis.
		Failing: Hypothesis may not be relevant but is not eliminated.	Failing: Hypothesis is not eliminated but is somewhat weakened.
	Yes	<i>Hoop</i>	<i>Double Decisive</i>
		Passing: Affirms relevance of hypothesis but does not confirm it.	Passing: Confirms hypothesis and eliminates others.
		Failing: Eliminates hypothesis.	Failing: Eliminates hypothesis.

Table 1: Bennett’s (2010, p. 210) adaptation of Collier’s (2011, p. 825) table categorising four types of evidence used to inform analyses based on process tracing.

Data Collection

Process-tracing does not come with a standard methodology of data collection. In fact, most authors reject a clearly delineated dataset of independent units of analysis, due to the “noncomparability of adjacent pieces of evidence” (Gerring, 2016, p. 160) that are used in process-tracing (Beach and Pedersen, 2013, pp. 72–76; Schimmelfennig, 2014, p. 6). Bennet

and Checkel (2014) advise to “be relentless in gathering diverse and relevant evidence” (p. 21). Schimmelfennig (2014) adds to this that it should nevertheless be limited “to the evidence that is needed to discriminate between competing theories” (p. 10).

Since there are few formal limitations on what data to collect, the selection of evidence becomes more important. Evidence of the *Straw-in-the-Wind* type is naturally more abundant, so it is crucial to remain cognisant of how much the presented evidence contributes to the larger causal claim, “lest we be left building our evidentiary house with a pile of straw” (Ricks and Liu, 2018, p. 845). Similarly, one must be “equally tough on the alternative explanations”, “be open to inductive insights” (Bennett and Checkel, 2014, p. 21) and reject them when possible.

Due to the limited scope of the research, only publicly available secondary data is used. These include news articles, government communiqués, interviews with journalists, and academic reports. Moreover, all data sources will be in English. This poses a limitation to the study, since it excludes native language information that WB6 politicians may be communicating to their own populations. However, since all three studies focus on WB6 interaction with the EU (in English), it is not expected to affect the selection of relevant evidence significantly.

A “theoretical starting point” (Collier, 2011, p. 824) constitutes the annual WB6-EU summits of the Berlin and Brdo-Brijuni Processes and the press releases and political interviews around them. Other recurrent events of importance include the Commission’s annual “State of the Union” and individual country reports.

Three Rival Theories on EU Accessions

The literature broadly distinguishes three theories on why the enlargement to the WB6 is moving slowly. All start from the observation that there is considerable democratic backsliding in the region and that the *acquis* is implemented slowly (see Introduction and Figure 3).

The reasons for the diminishing effectiveness of the EU’s conditionality regime, however, are understood to come from different sources, and can be summarised as follows:

T1. Geopolitical rivals to the EU.

T2. “Stabilitocratic” leaders cementing their rule.

T3. Internal EU politics.

These three theories constitute the foundation of the empirical research, where they will be scrutinised for their causal explanatory value. In the following section, they are discussed and compared.

Before proceeding, however, it must be noted that the contrasts between the three theories, albeit distinct, are not entirely mutually exclusive. Similarly, since all three theories are backed by substantive literature, this research, rather than establishing one theory as the truth and eliminating the others, seeks to illuminate which available theory *best* explains the discussed developments (Fairfield and Charman, 2015).

T1. Geopolitics

First, in a geopolitical understanding of the WB6's slow progression in adopting the *acquis*, rivalling powers are seen to actively counteract EU conditionalities in the region. It emerged as a cohesive theory in the late 2010s as a reaction to China's and Russia's increased assertiveness, circulating predominantly in European think tanks and institutions (Pavličević, 2019; Secieru and Analyst, 2019). It understands the Western Balkans as a region of zero-sum power struggles and ideological challenges, and sees democratic backsliding and slow adoption of the *acquis* as a result of those, as stylised in Figure 4 (Pavličević, 2019, p. 465; Anđelić, 2020).

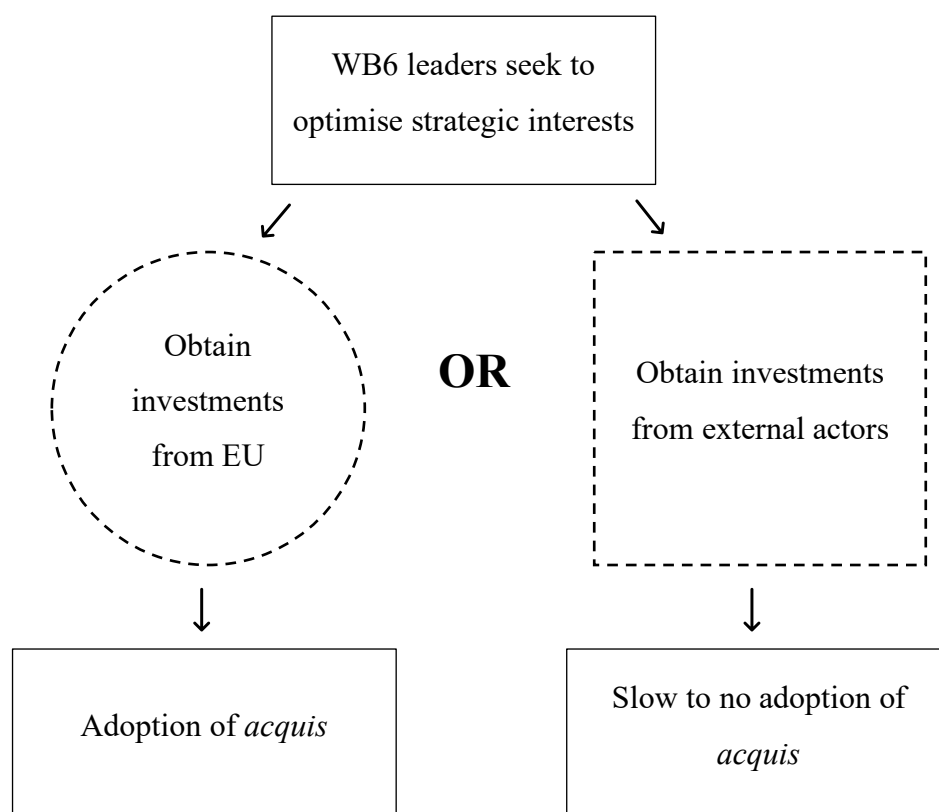


Figure 4: A highly stylised schematisation of the causal mechanisms of Theory 1. Arrows represent a hypothesised causal relationship. Made by the author.

Through this lens, EU enlargements occur when geopolitically opportune. For instance, the EU’s “Big Bang” enlargement of 2004 is understood to be part of Europe’s response to the end of the Cold War, rapidly bringing in ten countries formerly in Russia’s sphere of influence (O’Brennan, 2006). In contrast, the subsequent relatively friendly geopolitical climate meant there was less urgency to enlarge. Consequently, the EU decelerated the WB6 accessions, offering some smaller “carrots”, such as visa liberalisation schemes (Ferreiro-Turrión, 2015).

External actors, mainly China and Russia, are thought to engage with the WB6 for different reasons. Russia has direct interests in moving the WB6 away from the EU, contesting Europe on a security and strategic level by monopolising energy sectors, and exerting cultural and political influence over Serb communities in Serbia, BiH and Montenegro (Konitzer, 2011; Bieri, 2015; Tomovic, 2019; Stojkovski, 2020; Đorđević, Turcsányi and Vučković, 2021). In contrast, for China, its commercial approach to the region means WB6 EU membership would facilitate trade through the Belt and Road initiative with the rest of Europe, and provide opportunities for political gain within the Union’s decision-making through its sway over the WB6 (Makocki, 2017; Markovic Khaze and Wang, 2021).

However, although China may not deliberately seek to jeopardise WB6 accessions, its investments in the region come with their own conditionalities and political spill-overs. For instance, after an agreement with the Chinese government, the Serbian, Albanian and Bosnian counterparts relaxed their visa requirements for Chinese citizens, which has made them move away from the European *acquis* (Markovic Khaze and Wang, 2021, p. 244). Moreover, Chinese investments in the region have frequently come with charges of corruption, which go against European transparency requirements in public tenders (Makochi and Nechev, 2017; Larsen, 2020). The country is also accused of “debt-trapping” Montenegro, which owes about half of its state debt to China (Stojkovski *et al.*, 2021; Shopov, 2022). Lastly, the installation of a Chinese-aided mass surveillance system in Belgrade violates European privacy standards (Zweers *et al.*, 2020, p. 29).

Finally, both Russia and China have invested in symbolic influence in the region. For instance, high officials from both countries frequently visit the region, and both provided the WB6 with COVID-19 vaccines before the EU did, albeit in lower numbers and with less efficacious types (BIRN, no date; Bieber and Tzifakis, 2019a; Đorđević, Turcsányi and Vučković, 2021; Tzifakis, 2021). Surveys demonstrate the success of these heavily mediated investments. In Serbia, public opinion polls suggest that whilst most believe the EU to be the most significant donor (30-40%), a considerable number of people think it to be China (around 30%) or Russia (10-15%) (Institute for European Affairs, 2021; Serbian Ministry of European Integration, 2021). This is despite the EU being by far the largest donor (Hartwell and Sidlo, 2017; Delegation of the EU to Serbia, 2020). Another poll shows similar, albeit less extreme, trends in the rest of the WB6 (Center for Insights in Survey Research, 2020).

T2. Stabilitocracy

The second theory on the sluggish WB6 accessions can be summarised in the term “Stabilitocracy”. Initially coined by Srđa Pavlović (2016) in disapproval of the EU’s endorsement of Montenegrin prime minister (“PM”) Đukanović, the designation has been picked up by various authors to describe “a regime that includes considerable shortcomings in terms of democratic governance, yet enjoys external legitimacy by offering some supposed stability” (Bieber, 2017). The term can be used simultaneously to label a regime-type, as a hybrid form between democracy and autocracy (Andjelic, 2022), and as the practice of providing “external support to regimes that include considerable shortcomings in terms of democratic governance for the sake of the (false) promise of stability” (Bieber and Kmezić,

2017, p. 10). The Stabilitocracy theory thus understands the slow WB6 accessions as a result of an interplay between WB6 leaders that seek to stay in power through autocratic means, and the EU that facilitates them to do so in the short-term interest of preventing conflict in the region (Gafuri and Muftuler-Bac, 2021; Smith, Markovic Khaze and Kovacevic, 2021).

Importantly, these crises are often ungrounded in actual conflicts but are allowed or even fabricated by the WB6 leaders to regain their external legitimacy as crisis managers. According to Bieber (2018), there are three types of exploitable crises. First, threats against the government can be used to characterise the opposition as enemies, examples of which include the alleged coup attempts in Serbia (2015) and Montenegro (2016). Second, leaders may emphasise their ability to suppress ethnic conflict, as during the riots in the Macedonian parliament, which the former PM sought to instrumentalise for his nationalist agenda (Pavlović, 2017; Popovikj, 2017). The third type of crisis relates to bilateral disputes amongst the WB6. A clear example of this strategy is the “train incident”, whereby Serbia sent a train to Kosovo with “Kosovo is Serbia” written on it in multiple languages, after which President Vučić stopped the train to defuse the conflict. Therefore, ironically, WB6 stabilitocracies themselves engender instability.

The instability of stabilitocracies is also reflected by the discrepancy between domestic politics and interactions with outside actors (Primatarova and Deimel, 2012, p. 19). Bieber (2015) called it a “dance on the edge of the volcano”, since WB6 leaders must convince voters they, like most of the public, want to adopt the *acquis* and make democratic progress, whilst jeopardising both to remain in power. For instance, WB6 leaders have been accused of talking differently about Europe in domestic (native language) media and foreign publications (Tanner, 2015), and have been able to obtain support from parliamentary groupings in the EP despite their autocratic tendencies (Zweers *et al.*, 2022). For a summary of *Theory 2*, see Figure 5.

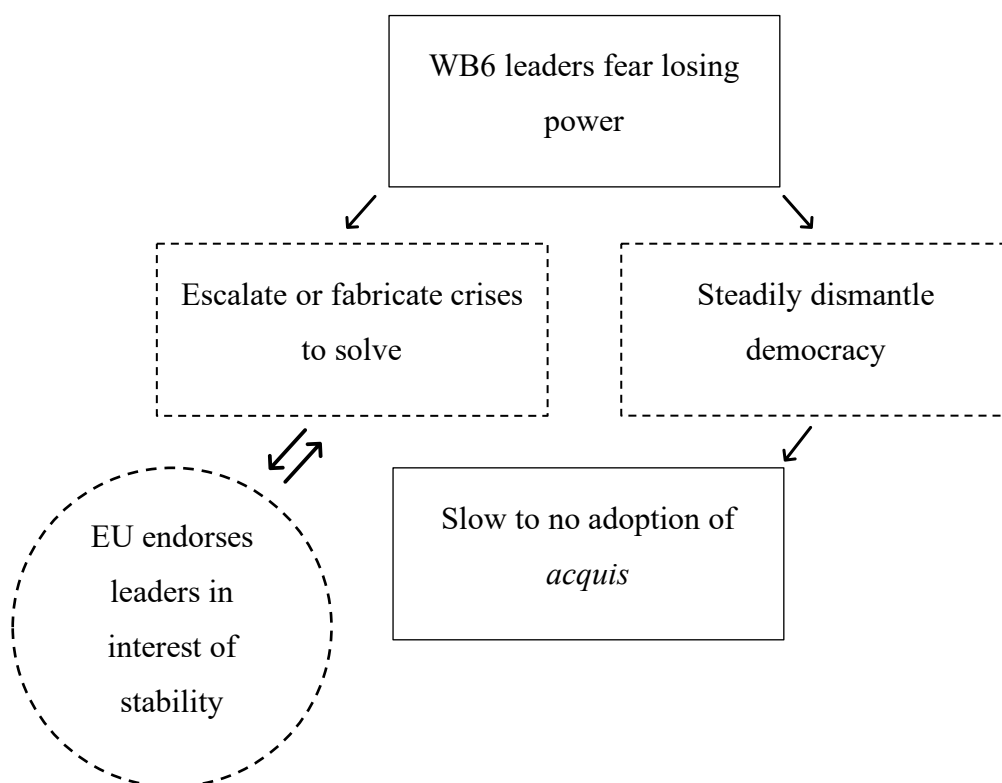


Figure 5: A highly stylised schematisation of the causal mechanisms of Theory 2. Arrows represent a hypothesised causal relationship. Made by the author.

T3. EU Politics

Whilst the last two theories acknowledge the EU's political influence on the accession conditionalities, they primarily understand the EU as a "black box" single actor that makes rational (albeit arguably short-sighted) decisions, either for their geopolitical interests, or security interests in the region. This third theory, however, focusses on EU politics *per se*, and abandons the idea that the Bloc's external policies always result in outcomes that are most beneficial to its common interests. Therefore, more than the other two theories, it incorporates into its analysis not only politics within the European institutions but also national politics within the member states (Balfour and Stratulat, 2015; Ker-Lindsay *et al.*, 2017).

Rather than seeing European integration and enlargements as separate, students of "Euroscepticism" argue both move concurrently (O'Brennan, 2014). Where the EU is seen to have had momentum around the turn of the century, including during the aforementioned "Big Bang" enlargement, as well as the Maastricht Treaty (Moravcsik, 1998; Emerson *et al.*, 2006), most authors agree the turning point was the Dutch and French rejection of a European Constitution in 2005 (Stefanova, 2006; Startin and Krouwel, 2013). From then on, the

Commission also started incorporating the Union's "integration capacity" into its vocabulary, denoting "whether the EU can take in new members at a given moment or in a given period, without jeopardizing the political and policy objectives established by the Treaties" (European Commission, 2006; Economides, 2020). Following several crises in the 2010s, including the Financial Crisis, Euro Crisis, Immigration Crisis and Brexit, Economides (2020) argues the Union's "enlargement fatigue" has transformed into "enlargement resistance".

This resistance is the result of different attitudes amongst member states. Whereas Germany, Austria, Italy and some neighbouring countries like Greece, Croatia, Slovenia and Hungary generally support WB6 accessions, others, including France, Denmark and the Netherlands have been less supportive (Ker-Lindsay *et al.*, 2017). All three recently blocked the progression of Albania and North Macedonia in accession negotiations (Tidey, Chadwick and Koutsokosta, 2019) and France has repeatedly alluded to (temporary) alternatives to full EU accession for the WB6, articulated most recently in a speech by President Macron in May 2022 (Wunsch, 2017; Economides, 2020; Fejérdy, 2020; Macron, 2022). In light of these internal disagreements, Jean-Claude Juncker promised there would be no EU enlargement during his 2014-2019 presidency of the Commission (European Commission, 2014). Moreover, the increased politicisation of enlargement has also led to more involvement by the Council (Balfour and Stratulat, 2015; Mišćević and Mrak, 2017).

Therefore, the slow adoption and democratic backsliding in the WB6 are understood as a reaction to weakening credibility of the EU (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2020). With leaders in the WB6 perceiving there to be little chance of accession due to internal issues within the EU, they are tempted to focus on gaining domestic legitimacy, rather than through affiliation with the EU, focussing on short-term political benefits which may involve opposing some reforms (Noutcheva, 2009; Belloni, 2016, p. 538). Consequently, Skara (2020) argues, the EU has gradually lost its normative or "transformative" power in the region. See the stylised mechanisms of causality in Figure 6.

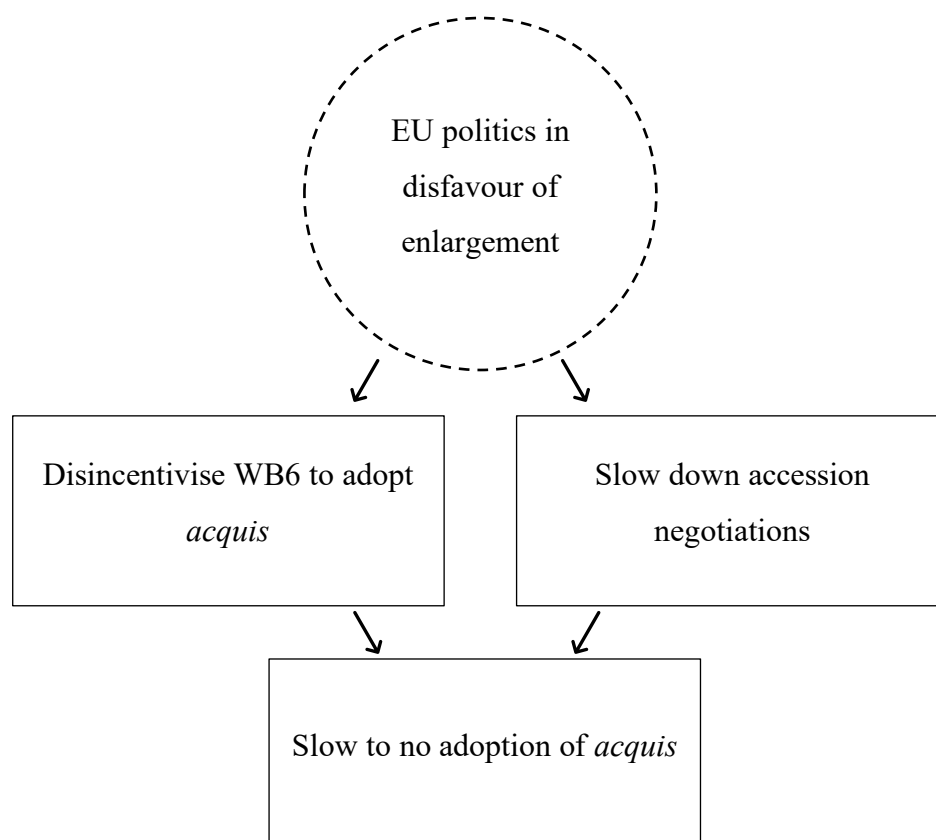


Figure 6: A highly stylised schematisation of the causal mechanisms of Theory 2. Arrows represent a hypothesised causal relationship. Made by the author.

Findings

In the following section, various pieces of evidence are presented that help to make judgements on the explanatory value of the three theories mentioned above, i.e., *Theory 1* on geopolitics, *Theory 2* on Stabilitocracy and *Theory 3* on EU internal politics. In the interest of succinctness and “efficient process tracing” (Schimmelfennig, 2014), any information is excluded that does not fall under Van Evera’s (1997, see Table 1) categorisation of evidence, is not decisively distinct from other pieces of evidence, or is already mentioned in the discussion of the theories. Moreover, most pieces of evidence represent but an instance of a broader development, in which case they are marked as such.

For the purposes of descriptive inference, the evidence is broadly organised chronologically. Since Figure 3 suggests most countries started flatlining in terms of adoption of the *acquis* around 2015, the evidence presented will accordingly be delimited to the period of 2015 to

2019, after which Montenegro makes progress in the negotiation chapters 20 and 21. All pieces are summarised in Table 2 after the presentation of the evidence.

First, at a 2015 summit in Vienna between the WB6 and some EU members, EU High Representative Mogherini praised the PMs of Serbia and Kosovo for their “leadership and courage” as they agreed to some practical arrangements (EU Delegation to Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2015). Whilst undoubtedly important for reconciliation between the two, both sides interpreted the agreement differently, with Kosovo eventually not ratifying some of its conclusions. Some authors have argued the agreements were deliberately ambiguous, lacked transparency and were managed top-down (Beha, 2015; Florian Bieber, 2015). Accordingly, Mogherini’s backing of the PMs represents an instance of a relationship of endorsement between the EU and the WB6 leaders. Collectively, this pattern is necessary for the validity of *Theory 2* but not sufficient, thus characterising a successful *Hoop* test.

Also around this time, other countries start taking an interest in the region. For instance, China started making substantial infrastructure investments in the Western Balkans, which Investigative reporting network BIRN (no date) demonstrates are gradually increasing in number and capital from 2013 until 2021. Within a year, Serbian President Nikolić and Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping met in China and Serbia (Chinese Consulate-General to Surabaya, 2015; Sekularac, 2016). Meanwhile, one year after the EU employed sanctions against Russia for its invasion of Ukraine, Serbia’s army joined Russia’s 9 May Victory Parade in Moscow (Poznatov, 2015). This is an instance of Serbia voluntarily engaging with third-party geopolitical powers, whilst the EU remains apparently inattentive to it. Overall, this constitutes a pattern, at least for Serbia, that is necessary but not sufficient for *Theory 1*, which passes a *Hoop* test.

In 2016, two summits on the WB6 were held; one in Paris through the EU-led Berlin process and one in Sarajevo, through the WB6-led Brdo-Brijuni Process. None of the WB6, except for Albania which implemented some judicial reforms (Mejdini, 2016), made any progress in the negotiation chapters, with notably BiH’s administrative communities having been in a gridlock over the implementation of a 2009 European Court of Human Rights decision on its institutional set-up, even after efforts by the United Kingdom (“UK”), Germany and the Council to promise candidanship in return (Jukic, 2014; European Council, 2016). Whilst the summit chaired by France emphasised the rule of law and “good neighbourly relations” (“Paris

Declaration’, 2016), the Bosnian-chaired summit urged the leaders of the WB6 to “unconditionally refrain from engaging in rhetoric or taking actions that give rise to tensions and risk causing political instability” (‘Sarajevo Declaration’, 2016). In a follow-up meeting, the WB6 PMs claimed to be “concerned about growing nationalist polarisation”, reaffirming their “strong commitment to resolve pending bilateral issues as soon as possible”, but to little avail (EU Delegation to Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2017). Due to the emphasis on stability from the WB6-side, consequential though sufficient nor necessary, this presents a successful *Straw-in-the-Wind* test for *Theory 2*.

2016 is also an important year for Europe because the UK in a referendum decided to leave the EU. Although French President Macron and German Chancellor Merkel assured the WB6 that Brexit would not affect their accessions (Melander and Pineau, 2016), a briefing by the European Parliamentary Research Service argued that “keeping in mind the current challenges that the aspirant countries and the EU itself are facing, future enlargement can be expected to be a lengthy process” (Lilyanova and Dietrich, 2016, p. 11). The EU stressing internal issues suggests the validity of *Theory 3*. However, since the authors are not directly responsible for EU accessions, it can be understood as passing only a *Straw-in-the-Wind* test.

In the 2017 WB6-led Brdo-Brijuni summit in Brdo, the leaders in the second paragraph of the declaration firmly assert that “the freedom to choose political and security alignments should remain a sovereign and independent choice of every country. We reiterate the need to refrain from any interferences in matters regarding those decision making [sic] processes which are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction” (‘Brdo Declaration’, 2017). This is remarkable because it seems to contradict the declaration of the Brdo-Brijuni summit a year earlier in which the countries pledged to “sincerely support and act to enable each other’s EU integration process and Euro-Atlantic integration process for NATO aspirants” (‘Sarajevo Declaration’, 2016). It is also notable since it coincides with the first summit after the alleged Montenegrin coup attempt by Russia. It is likely that the demand for the Brdo statement comes directly from Serbia, which was making multiple arms deals with Russia (Hartwell and Sidlo, 2017, pp. 40–41). With this indication of Russia influencing at least Serbia’s accession process, *Theory 1* passes another *Hoop* test.

Next, still in 2017, Kosovar President Hashim Thaçi in an op-ed (2017) criticised the European Commission’s decision not to allow further enlargements before 2019, arguing it came out of

fear of “xenophobic sentiments mixed with enlargement fatigue at home”. He continued stating that “while everyone familiar with the policy knew that an enlargement by 2019 was unlikely, the EU’s explicit policy had devastating effects on the region in terms of undermining reform efforts”, adding that the perceived “need to launch the Berlin process for the ‘Western Balkans 6’, trying to keep the EU perspective alive despite the Commission’s statements, is very telling.” A week later, Thaçi would call for Kosovar citizens to obtain Albanian passports, circumventing the EU’s strict visa liberalisation conditionalities (Gotev, 2017). Despite meeting all its 95 conditions (compared to around 50 for the other WB6) a year later (EU External Action, 2018), Kosovo to date has no visa-free access to the EU. With Thaçi clearly stating that EU politics undermine accessions, this is strong evidence for *Theory 3*. However, since he is only in the leadership of one of the WB6, and not solely responsible for adopting the *acquis*, it represents some sufficiency but no necessity. As such, it can be characterised as a successful *Smoking Gun* test for *Theory 3*.

Finally, 2017 was also a year in which the Serbia-Kosovo conflict reached a high point, including the train incident mentioned above and the arrest of former Kosovar PM Ramush Haradinaj in France following a Serbian arrest warrant through Interpol (who was quickly released thereafter). Despite diplomatic intervention by the EU (on Kosovo’s request), initiating and mediating talks between the two sides, the Bloc’s role was relatively unimportant. So much so that President Thaçi called the EU’s “silence” on the issue “alarming”, and “showing no leadership” (DW, 2017), whilst another Kosovar “senior official” accused the EU of “sitting on their hands” (Salem, 2017). The European hands-off approach contradicts *Theory 2*’s central premise that the EU endorses WB6 leaders for the sake of stability, at least when it comes to Serbia and Kosovo. Hence, *Theory 2* fails a *Hoop* test, albeit partially because only decisively so for Kosovo and Serbia.

In 2018, President Macron increasingly voiced concern over a future WB6 enlargement. Following his criticism over opening negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia (Radosavljevic and Morgan, 2018), the Commission stated that “while the EU *could* become larger than 27 members”, it would be “based on [the WB6’s] own merits and at their own speed depending on the concrete results achieved” (European Commission, 2018, emphasis added). In 2019, France would veto accession talks with both, with Dutch and Danish backing for stalling Albania’s negotiations (Emmott, Guarascio and Pennetier, 2019). In response, Council President Tusk met the Macedonian President and remarked that “over the last two years, your

country has delivered all the right political signals that the EU was expecting from the candidates”, continuing that “you have done everything that was expected of you. But I want to be honest with you: not all member states are prepared to make the decision on opening negotiations in the coming days” (European Council, 2019). This represents another successful *Smoking Gun* test for *Theory 3*.

Event/Pattern	Period	Applicable theory	Type of evidence	Pass/Fail
Serbian engagement with third-party powers.	2013-2021	T.1	<i>Hoop</i> (partial - Serbia)	Pass
Freedom to choose alliance argument.	2017	T.1	<i>Hoop</i> (partial - Serbia)	Pass
Nationalism concerns.	2016	T.2	<i>Straw-in-the-Wind</i>	Pass
EU endorsing WB6 leaders.	2015	T.2	<i>Hoop</i>	Pass
Increasing hands-off approach by EU.	2017	T.2	<i>Hoop</i> (partial – Kosovo/Serbia)	Fail
Brexit aftereffects.	2016	T.3	<i>Straw-in-the-Wind</i>	Pass
Critique Kosovar President.	2017	T.3	<i>Smoking Gun</i>	Pass
Member state vetoes.	2018-2019	T.3	<i>Smoking Gun</i>	Pass

Table 2: Summary of presented evidence for Theory 1, 2 and 3, sorted by theory.

Discussion

Overall, as expected, all three theories show some validity. *Theory 1* on geopolitics seems somewhat helpful in explaining developments in Serbia’s EU accession bid. It passes two *Hoop* tests for the country. It is clear, also confirmed in the literature, that Serbia uses its geopolitical positioning to leverage investments from the EU, and China and Russia. However, no evidence has been found to suggest a definitive turning away from EU accession. Moreover, no evidence supporting *Theory 1* has been found for the rest of the WB6.

Theory 2 on Stabilitocracy also somewhat illuminates how the WB6 and the EU relate to each other. It passes one *Straw-in-the-Wind* and one *Hoop* test, and it fails another *Hoop* test related to Kosovo and Serbia. The premise that the EU's policy towards the region is mainly aimed at avoiding and mitigating regional conflicts, is suggestively confirmed. Nevertheless, the crucial link of the EU allowing the WB6 leaders to regress in their adoption of the *acquis* is not found. Given the rise of *Theory 2* around 2016, it may have more explanatory value in the prior years, which would explain the absence of strong evidence in the researched timeframe.

Theory 3 appears to have the best explanatory value for the WB6's slow accessions. With one successful *Straw-in-the-Wind* and two *Smoking Gun* tests, there is strong evidence to suggest that internal EU politics is disincentivising WB6 governments to implement reforms. Notably, the words of Presidents Thaçi and Tusk demonstrate the understanding in both the WB6 and the EU that this is fundamental. Moreover, *Theory 3* seems to be particularly apt at explaining the accession trajectories for the entire region, rather than individual countries.

Nevertheless, there are some limitations to the study. First, due to its scope, the presented pieces of evidence are not exhaustive. Indeed, it is plausible that another author conducting longer research may find some evidential departures, but it is expected that this will not significantly deviate from the outlined patterns. Second, although justified in light of the WB6 progressions in negotiations (see Figure 3), the temporal delineation to the late 2010s somewhat narrows the breadth of the argument. Finally, due to the complex interaction of politics and state machinery involved in political reforms, no theory could be tested for a *Double Decisive*, precluding a definitive causal claim. Future research including interviews with state officials and politicians may be more revealing in that regard.

Conclusion

In summary, the Copenhagen Criteria for European Union enlargements constitute one of the world's most important political conditionality regimes in terms of scope and possible development outcomes. Where they have been critical in the positive development trajectories of many Eastern and Central European countries, they have been little successful in bringing about much-needed reforms in the six remaining non-EU member states of the Western Balkans. This paper has focussed on the politics behind the political conditionalities, examining how political decisions at the WB6 and EU levels have influenced the region's accession

trajectories. Through process tracing, it has been demonstrated that these developments can be best explained by the dynamics of internal EU politics, disincentivising WB6 governments to progress in their negotiations. Particularly, this has more explanatory value than theories emphasising geopolitical power struggles or autocratic leaders attempting to stay in power through the fabrication of crises.

This means that the EU, which frequently criticises the WB6 for not implementing reforms quickly and comprehensively enough, itself plays an important role. The EU's lack of commitment to its own accession policy has disincentivised the region's governments to invest the required political capital in implementing comprehensive and consequential reforms. Part of this seems to be the result of a negative feedback loop. Whilst the WB6 are disincentivised to make reforms due to a lack of credibility from the EU, the politicisation of their accessions within several EU member states (including Denmark and the Netherlands) is to some extent the result of the lack of reforms.

Moreover, there are few indications that within the Union the WB6 accessions are becoming less politicised. Admittedly, the recent lifting of Bulgaria's blockade to the opening of Albania and North Macedonia's negotiations shows that the country is somewhat able to engage with the region and come to a political agreement (Marusic, 2022a). However, recent remarks by President Macron (2022) about a "multi-speed Europe" and the Council's (2022) insistence on "the EU's capacity to absorb new members" suggest the politicisation of accessions persists elsewhere in the EU.

This study has thus reaffirmed the importance of understanding the politics behind political conditionality regimes. It is notable how critical these relatively arbitrary political decisions (in contrast to political decisions based on geopolitics or security) have been for the effectiveness of a policy from an international organisation that praises itself on its rules-based administration (European Commission, 2021b). Hence, it is not unlikely that similar dynamics may exist in other incentives-based political conditionality regimes from organisations that are more explicitly political, such as national governments. Nonetheless, the EU's Copenhagen Criteria are probably more important in domestic politics than conditionality regimes tied to development assistance.

At the same time, the effectiveness of political conditionality regimes *per se* is not challenged. On the contrary, the clear and coinciding response with non-compliance of all the WB6 to the faltering incentives set by the EU reaffirms the importance of these. Accordingly, if governments within the EU achieved a consistent and credible agreement on future enlargement, it is plausible the WB6 would react with implementing reforms that are conducive to their accession trajectories.

Concretely, the findings suggest that an incentives-based political conditionality regime has more likelihood of having the desired effects if its conditions are more isolated from politics. Whilst the most straightforward way would be for politicians to less politicise conditionality regimes, this may also be the hardest to realise. A more structural solution may include institutional change whereby politicians have less continuous control over the conditionalities after they have agreed on them. For the EU, this could involve a treaty change whereby the Council is not required to come to a unanimous agreement every time a candidate country progresses in the negotiations, which has allowed countries such as Bulgaria to use its veto to obtain relatively unrelated concessions. For instance, instead it could vote with some form of (super or qualified) majority at the beginning of the negotiations and once just before accession. For other organisations, it may be an argument for separating development assistance and foreign policy, for instance.

Finally, then, for countries like the WB6 that are at the receiving end of a politicised incentives-based political conditionality regime, there seems to be little they can do. Politics, however, change quickly. At the time of writing, the EU is momentarily rediverting attention to relations with its direct neighbours in the light of the war in Ukraine. With increasing political momentum for supporters of EU enlargement, it is unlikely it will take the WB6 another 20 years to join.

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Annexes

Annex 1: Indexed 2021 Commission assessment reports

Cluster	Chapter	Negotiating		Candidates		Applicants	Potential Candidates	
		Serbia	Montenegro	Albania	North Macedonia	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Kosovo	
1 The Fundamentals of the Accession Process	2 3	Judiciary and fundamental rights	Some	Moderate	Some/Moderate	Some/Moderate	Some	Early stage/Some
	2 4	Justice, freedom and security	Some	Moderate	Some/Moderate	Moderate	Some	Early stage/Some
	5	Public procurement	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Some	Some/Moderate
	1 8	Statistics	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Early stage	Some

	3	Financial control	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Early stage	Some
2 Internal Market	1	Free movement of goods	Moderate	Moderate	Some/Moderate	Moderate	Early stage	Some
	2	Freedom of movement for workers	Moderate	Some	Some	Early stage	Some	Early stage/Some
	3	Right to establishment and freedom to provide services	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Early stage	Early stage/Some
	4	Free movement of capital	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Some
	6	Company law	Good	Good	Moderate	Good	Some	Some

	7	Intellectual property law	Good	Good	Some/Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Some	
	8	Competition policy	Moderate	Moderate	Some/Moderate	Moderate	Some	Early stage/Some	
	9	Financial services	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Some/Moderate	Early stage/Some	
	28	Consumer and health protection	Moderate	Moderate	Early stage	Moderate	Early stage	Early stage	
3	Competitiveness and inclusive growth	10	Information society and media	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Early stage	Some
		16	Taxation	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Some	Some
		17	Economic and monetary policy	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Early stage	

	19	Social Policy and employment	Moderate	Some	Some	Moderate	Some	Early stage
	20	Enterprise and industrial policy	Moderate	Moderate/Good	Moderate	Moderate	Early stage	Early stage/Some
	25	Science and research	Good	Good	Some	Good	Some	Early stage
	26	Education and culture	Good	Good	Moderate	Moderate	Early stage	Early stage
	29	Customs union	Good	Moderate	Moderate	Good	Some	Early stage/Some
4 The Green Agenda and sustainable connectivity	14	Transport	Good	Moderate/Good	Some	Moderate	Some	Early stage/Some
	15	Energy	Moderate	Good	Moderate	Moderate	Early stage	Some
	21	Trans-European networks	Moderate	Moderate/Good	Some	Good	Some	Some

	2 7	Environ- ment and climate change	Some	Some	Some	Some	Early stage/Some	Early stage
5 Resources, agriculture and cohesion	1 1	Agriculture and rural develop- ment	Some	Moderate	Some	Moderate	Early stage	Some
	1 2	Food safety, veterinary and phyto- sanitary pol- icy	Moder- ate	Moderate	Some	Good	Some	Some
	1 3	Fisheries	Moder- ate	Some	Some	Moderate	Early stage	Early stage
	2 2	Regional policy and coordina- tion of	Moder- ate	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Early stage	

	structural instruments						
	3 Financial and budgetary provisions	Some	Some	Some	Early stage	Early stage	
6 External relations	3 External relations	Moderate	Good	Good	Moderate	Some	Early stage
	3 Foreign, security and defence policy	Moderate	Good	Good	Moderate	Some	
0 Currently not part of a cluster	3 Institutions	Nothing to negotiate	Nothing to negotiate	Nothing to negotiate	Nothing to negotiate	Nothing to negotiate	
	3 Other Issues/ Normalisation with Kosovo		Nothing to negotiate	Nothing to negotiate	Nothing to negotiate	Nothing to negotiate	

Annex 2: Progression for each WB6 country, subdivided into chapters

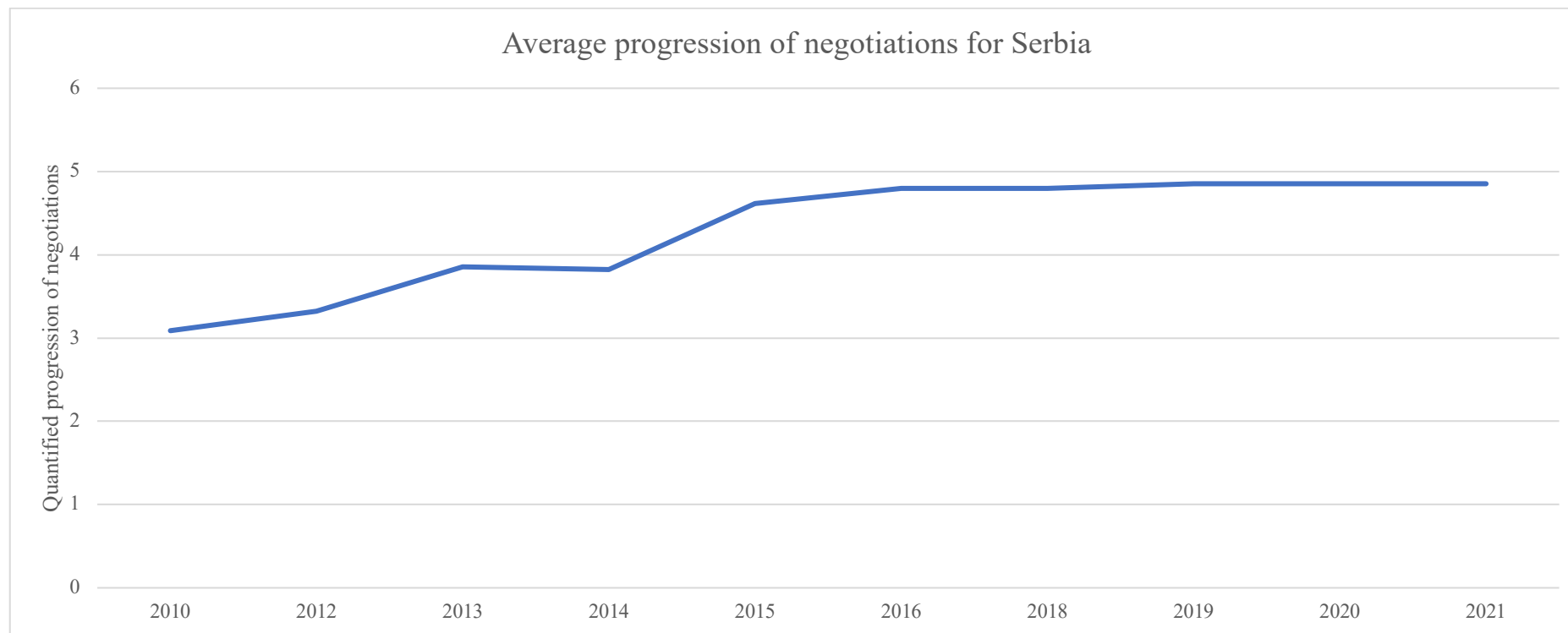
Methodology

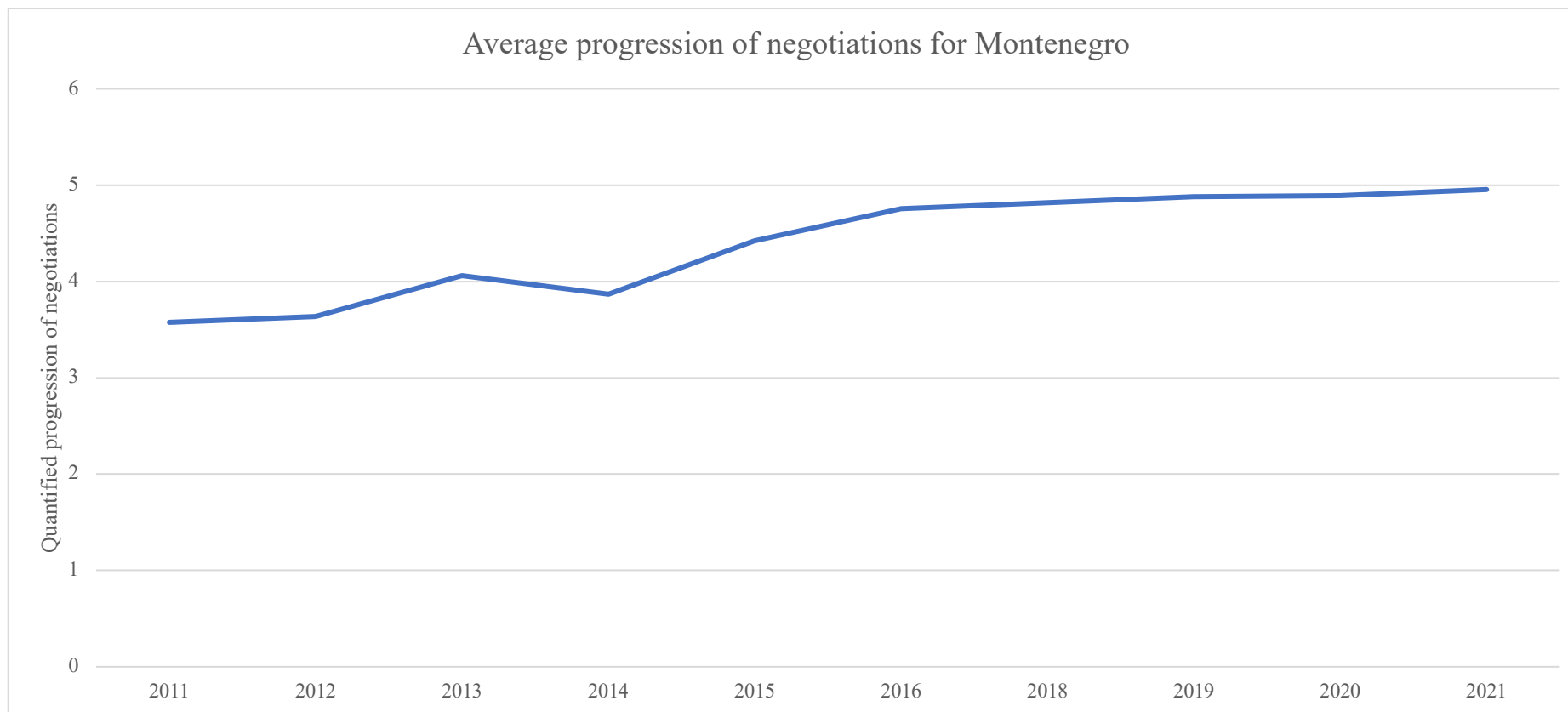
For the following figures, the numbers on the Y-axis represent the qualification as assessed by the European Commission, as demonstrated in Table 3.

Quantification	Assessment terminology used by the European Commission
0	Totally incompatible
1	Early stage
2	Considerable efforts needed
3	Some level of preparation
4	Further efforts needed
5	Moderately prepared
6	No major difficulties expected
7	Good level of preparation
8	Well prepared/Well advanced

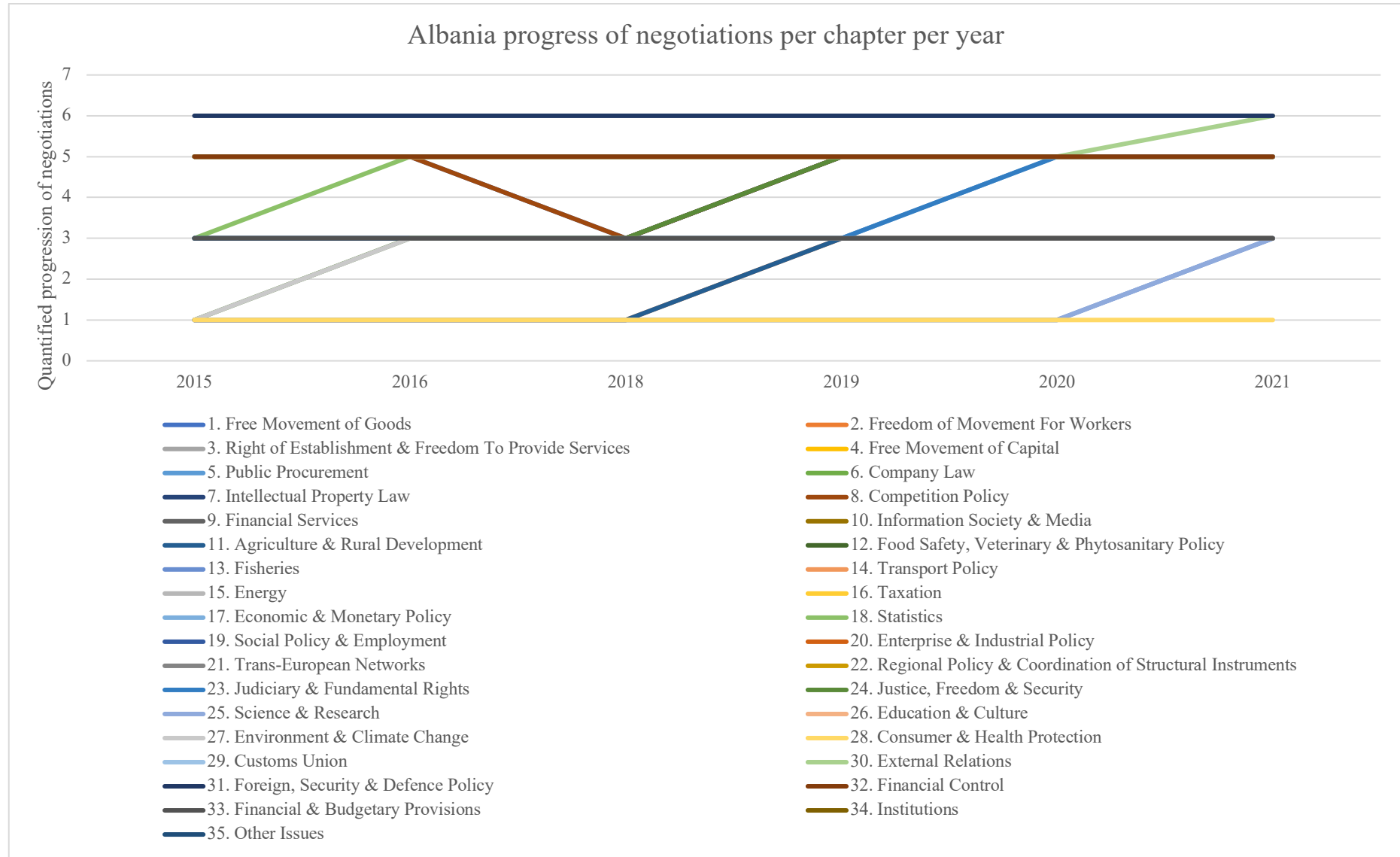
Table 3: A quantification of European Commission assessments.

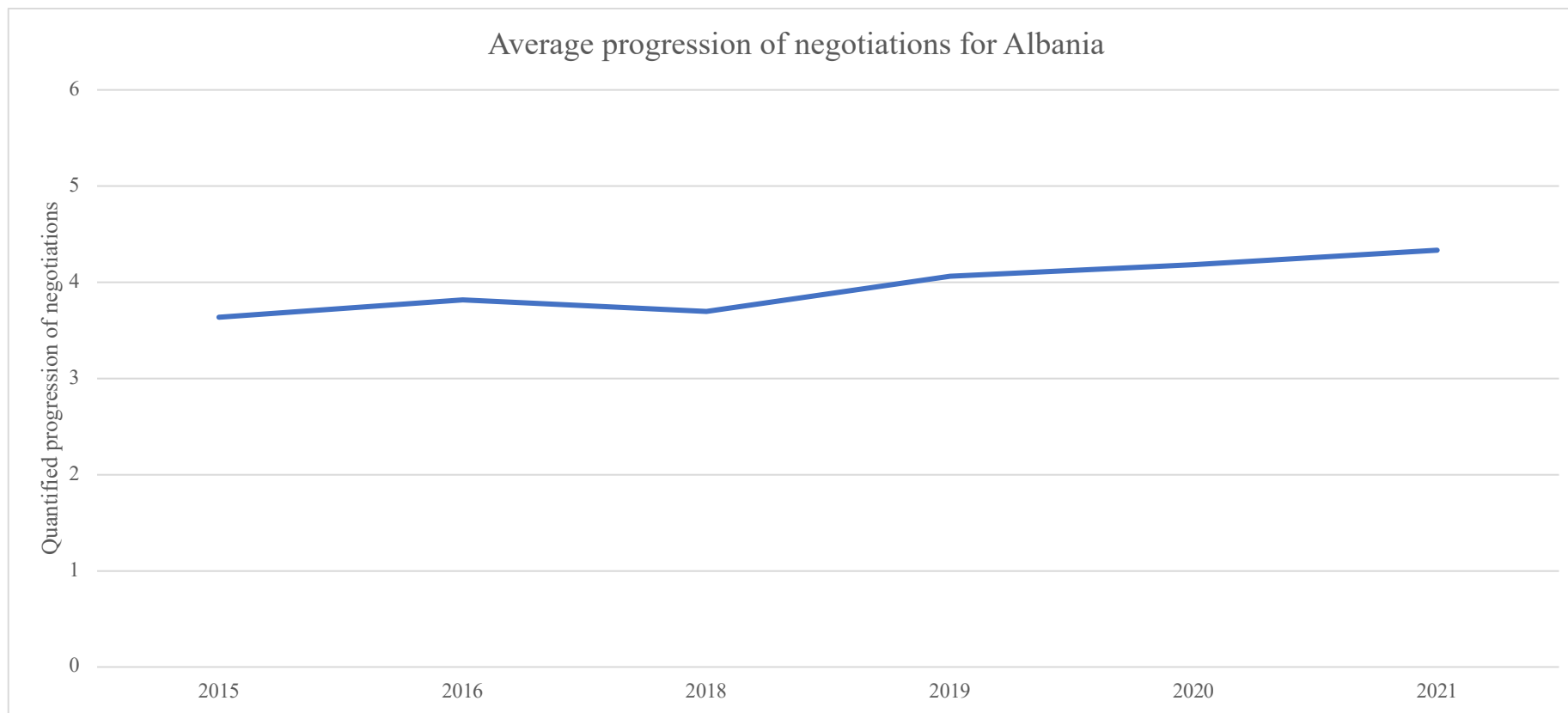
Note that for all countries data does not exist for 2017. For Serbia, data also does not exist for 2011. Data for Albania starts in 2015, for Kosovo in 2018 and for Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2019. Moreover, if a chapter is assessed between two terminologies, the score will be in between. For instance, if a chapter is assessed to be as both “early stage” and “considerable efforts needed”, it would be quantified as 1.5.

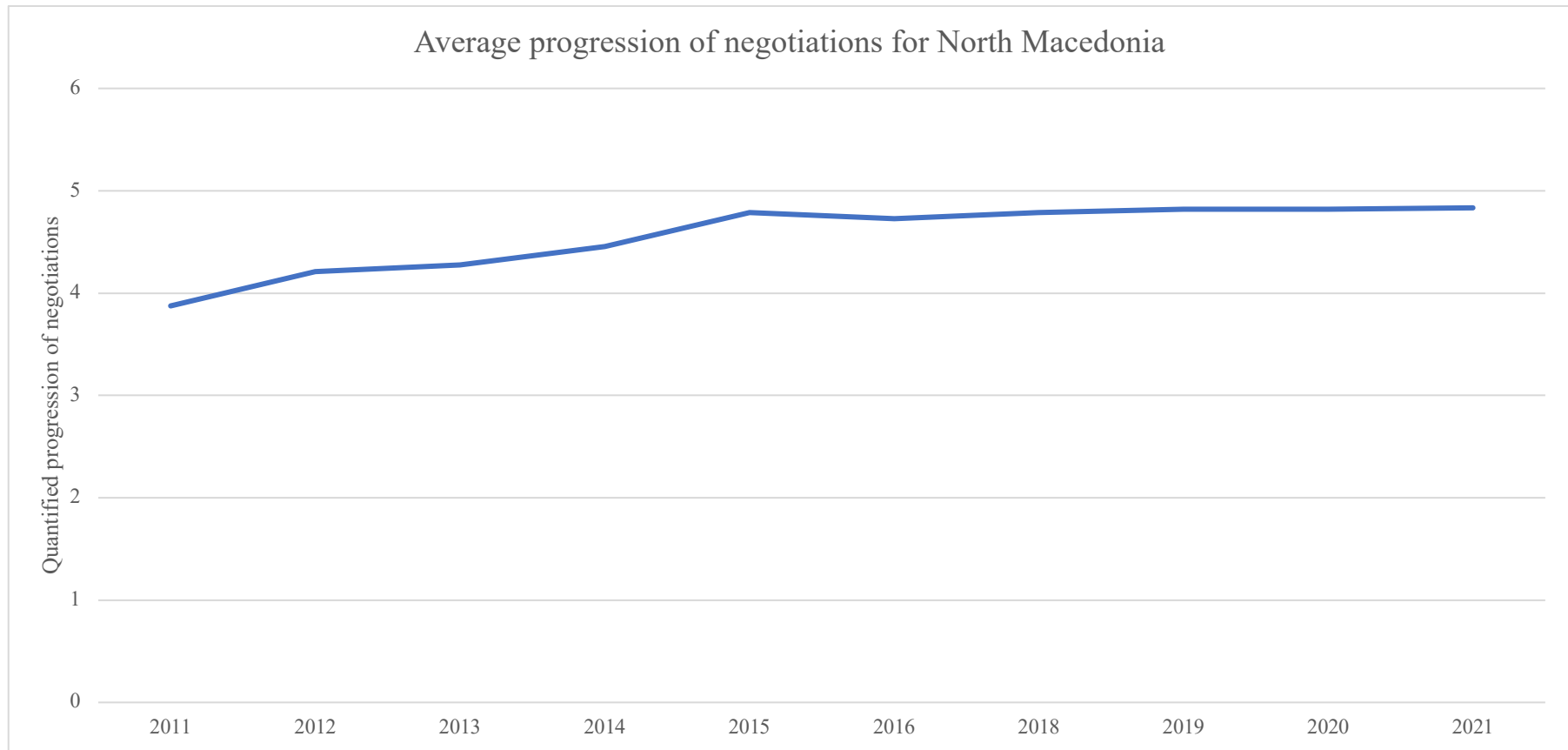




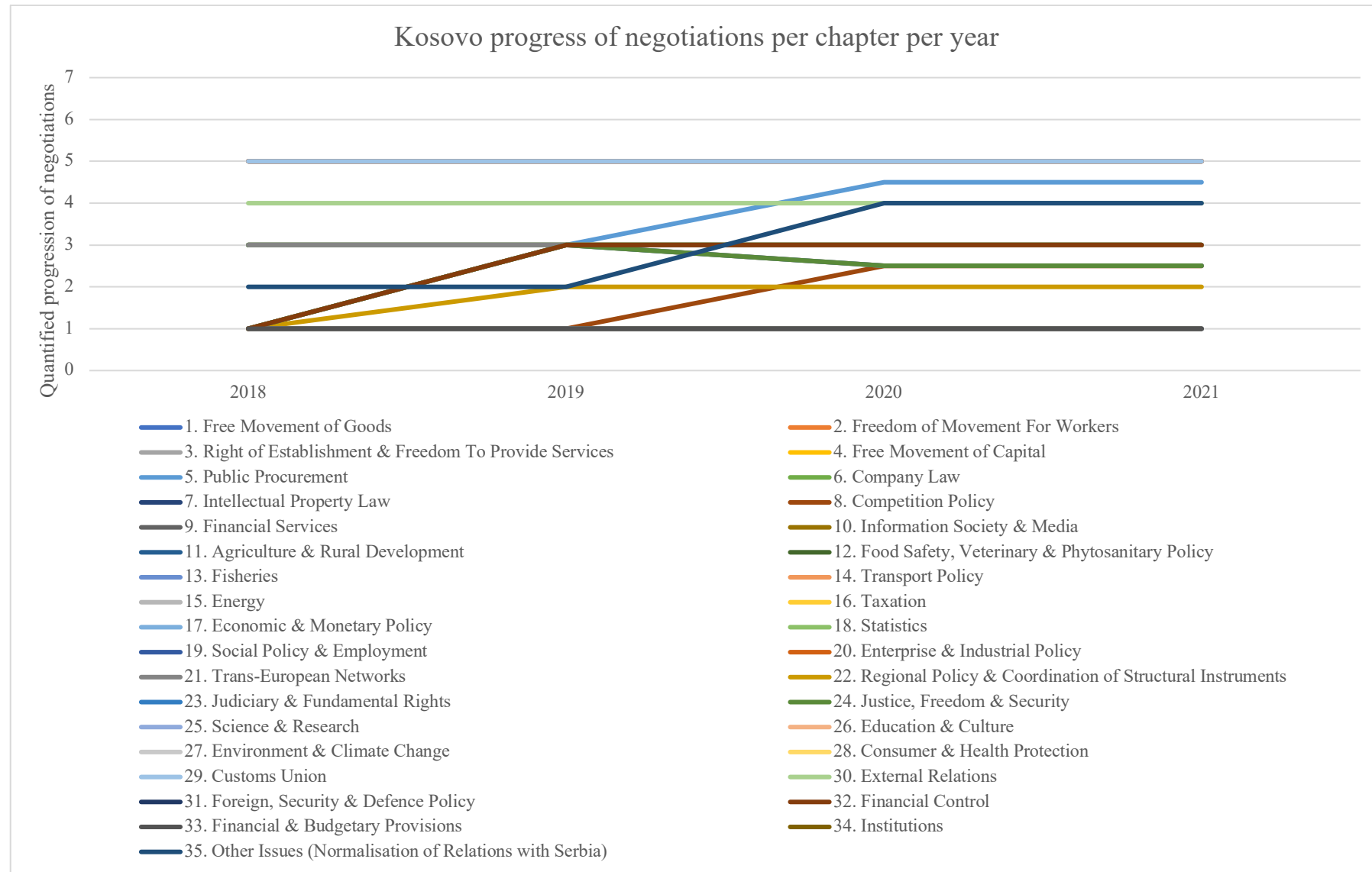
Albania

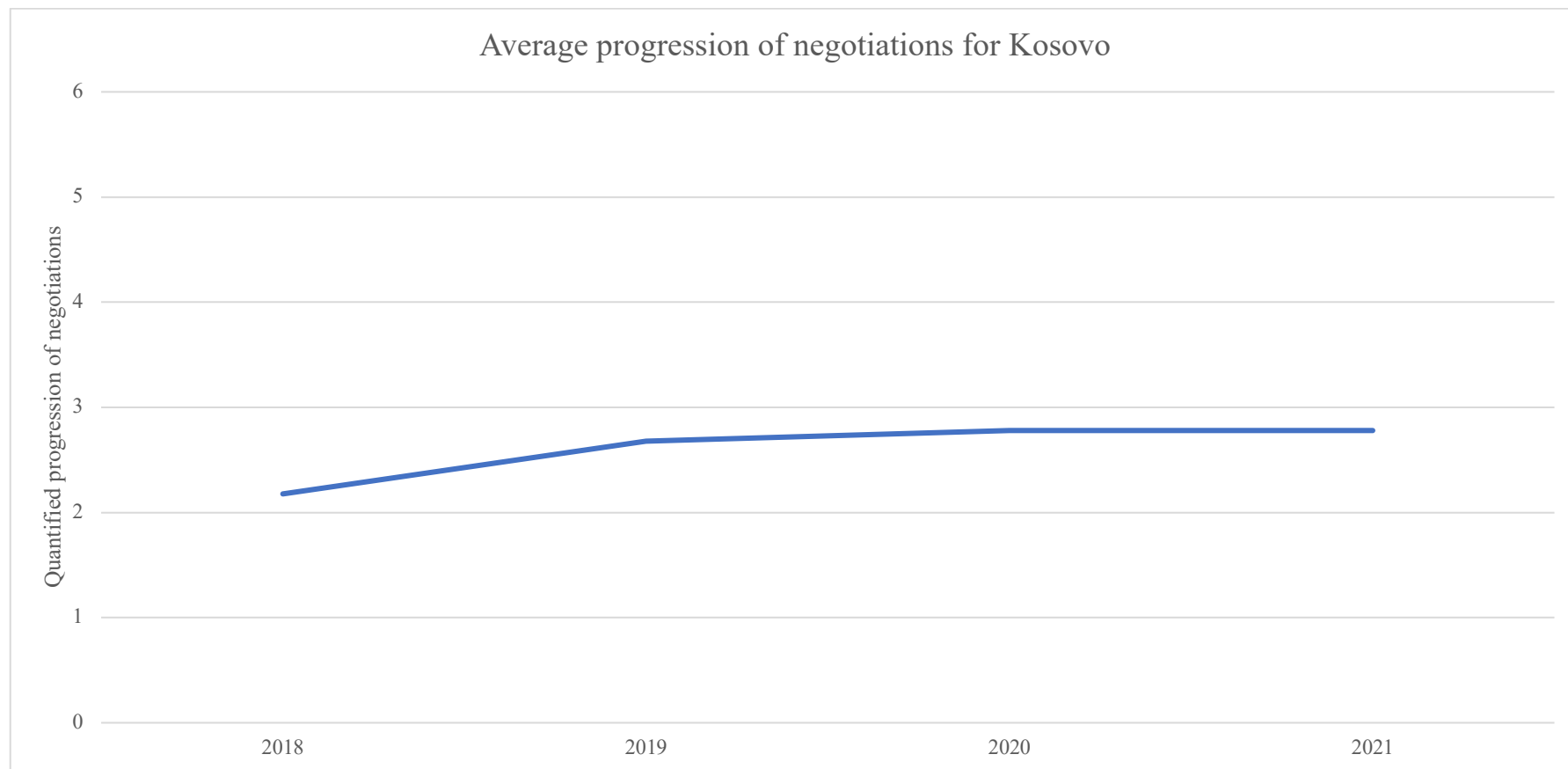






Kosovo





Bosnia and Herzegovina

