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Extremism as a Security Factor in the Western Balkans

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ABSTRACT

Taking into account that extremist tendencies have had and continue to have a significant destabilizing potential within Western Balkan societies, this paper will examine their nature and their impact on the European perspective of the region. Experiences from the conflicts of the 1990s and the persistent presence of extremism in the new century have led many theorists to the conclusion that the Balkans remain entangled in religious and national intolerance. Rather than serving as points of convergence, multi-ethnicity and multi-confessionalism are perceived as an enduring source of conflict, which has been a dominant characteristic of its past and is likely to cast a shadow over its future. This paper will explore the various forms of extremism that afflict Western Balkan societies today, assess the feasibility of overcoming these antagonisms, and evaluate the extent to which European Union initiatives can contribute to this endeavor.

Keywords: *Extremism, Western Balkans, Reconciliation, Strategy, European Union*

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Given its multifaceted manifestations and the resulting consequences, especially regarding its potential for destructiveness and success in destabilizing political communities, extremism is to a larger extent, though not always, inexorably intertwined with politics. The emergence of extremist movements, as a pathological phenomenon and a reflection of the societal condition and decadence of contemporary human values, presents a significant problem, primarily in a global context, and certainly within the volatile region of the Balkan Peninsula. For instance, the disastrous multi-decade influence of communist ideology, and many similar ideologies to it, validates an unwritten rule in the social sciences: that one form of extremism (left-wing) often begets an antagonistic form of extremism

(right-wing, ethnic, religious, etc.), which can be simplified as follows - violence breeds violence. The abrupt and radical changes that occurred immediately after the Cold War led to the following processes: while the West experienced integration (the fall of the Berlin Wall), the East witnessed the disintegration of communist systems, with the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia serving as one of the most salient examples.

The processes of disintegration not only resulted in the creation of new states but also led to the fragmentation of established value systems. Antagonisms stemming from preexisting ideological, religious, and ethnic conflicts, alongside societal unpreparedness for a swift transition from planned to market economies, created fertile ground for the propagation of

extreme ideologies, primarily right-wing and radical religious ones. Consequently, after decades of communism's monopoly on the extreme left, the stage was now set for the emergence of the extreme right, with its array of variants. Furthermore, globalization has given rise to a cohort of dissatisfied and frustrated individuals who, driven by the desire to safeguard their identity and integrity out of fear, are drawn towards extremism. Fear, indeed, serves as the perfect foundation for the development of aggression. After all, the right, by its very essence, does not favor transition and globalization, precisely because it advocates for „tried and true solutions“, tradition and conservatism. „Extremism clearly capitalizes on the human need for protection, even when we are not under threat or don't need it“¹.

As a particularly resilient yet concealed phenomenon, extremism necessitates a specialized, multidisciplinary response, both in terms of employing various measures (aligning legal provisions with emerging extremist threats, publicly condemning extremism, promoting tolerance, respecting diversity, fostering equitable economic development, etc.) and in the viraety of those implementing them (judiciary, law enforcement, education, civil society, media). A comprehensive response, synthesizing all the aforementioned measures and their implementers, along with a clearly defined European path for Western Balkan countries, would significantly contribute to reducing the impact of the extremist factor to a level deemed „socially acceptable“. Simultaneously, it would save substantial resources, including human lives, in case of implementation of repressive measures in order to solve the problem.

The Process of Extremism in Western Balkan Societies from the 1990s to the Present

The violent phase of Yugoslavia's dissolution that concluded in the 1990s, left behind numerous casualties and widespread devastation. It was followed by the agenda of reconstruction and the establishment of last-

ing peace, with the proclaimed intention of transforming the Western Balkans into a stable European region. Given the nature of antagonisms in this region, the scars left by conflicts, and the existing potential for conflict, it is imperative to reevaluate the reasons for the visibly slow regional progress, particularly in light of the constraints hindering it.

The disintegration of the former Yugoslavia (1991–2006) was accompanied by the aspirations of new post-communist elites to establish mono-ethnic state entities (nation-states) on its territory.² This process largely culminated in the creation of four mono-ethnic states (Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, and North Macedonia), one tri-ethnic state (deeply divided Bosnia and Herzegovina), and one declaratively civic state (Montenegro) on the post-Yugoslav soil.³ The heavy legacy of armed conflicts in the post-Yugoslav region (1991–1999) left deep imprints on inter-state relations among the newly emerged states within the region, which the European Union designated as the „Western Balkans“. The term Western Balkans refers to the states that emerged on the territory of the former Yugoslavia, excluding Slovenia, such as Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Albania.⁴ Following Croatia's accession to the EU in 2013, the Western Balkans now encompasses the remaining five states in the region that have not yet become Union members.

The introduction of the term „Western Balkans“ evolved concurrently with the gradual development of the European Union's regional approach (after 1996) towards a region burdened by years of conflicts. In the dominant spheres of public discourse (political, academic, cultural, etc.), states belonging to the Western Balkans region are still characterized by two prevailing orientations regarding the further development of interstate relations in this area. On one hand, there is an orientation that emphasizes the need to transcend the grim legacy of Balkan conflicts in the 1990s by establishing truth, accountability, and, consequently, reconciliation. On the other hand, there exists a fatalistic perspective that views conflicts as inherent to the Balkan Peninsula, and they are perceived to cyclically recur. This perspective is also rooted in the amplification

of civilizational, religious, ethnic, and other differences between the South Slavic and Albanian populations in the Western Balkans.⁵ Depending on whether political, cultural, or academic elites advocating either the first or the second perspective dominate and manage to impose their orientation on the broader population, bilateral as well as multilateral relations between states in the region are shaped.⁶

Extremism, as a phenomenon that has only gained prominence in the last decade of the 20th century and throughout the years of the new millennium, has emerged as one of the most pressing and retrogressive issues in the fragile context of the Western Balkans. The region's specificities have conspicuously fueled the escalation of extremist ideologies and actions. Extremism serves as both a cause and a consequence of conflicts, exacerbating distrust within and among communities, and acting as a profoundly destabilizing factor in the region. With its potential for conflict, it represents one of the most significant challenges to the normalization of ethnic and religious relations in the countries of the Western Balkans.

In the states formed after the dissolution of the FSR Yugoslavia, there is a significant number of extremist groups that espouse ethnic extremism based on the principles of neo-Nazi organizations. When examined individually, these groups remain on the social fringes, as each of them consists of a relatively small number of members. However, these facts do not make them any less dangerous, and they should not be underestimated as such. In some larger cities in Slovenia (Maribor and Ljubljana), Croatia (Zagreb, Osijek, Split, Zadar), and Serbia (Belgrade, Novi Sad, Niš), there are neo-Nazi groups affiliated with the international movement „Blood and Honour“.⁷

Somewhat more influential and numerous are the clerical-fascist groups, which combine elements of fascist ideology with religious fundamentalism: in Croatia and Croatian parts of Bosnia, a „Catholic-Ustasha“ movement is on the rise, while in Serbia, there is a „Orthodox-fascist“ youth contingent. In Bosnia and Herzegovina (residentially), as well as in the Raska region of „Sandzak“ and Kosovo and Metohija, pronounced tendencies toward Islamist extremism exist. Right-wing extremist bases

in Croatia are comprised of war veterans, so-called „ultras“ (sports hooligans), and less chauvinistic parties. They are connected with their neo-Nazi counterparts in Hungary, Germany, and Austria. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, these structures are divided along nationality lines (Serbs, Croats, and Muslims/Bosniaks) and mainly consist of so-called right-wing „ultras“, war veterans, and paramilitary groups.⁸

As the primary causes of extremism are identified as „incomplete urbanization, specific forms of industrialization, changes in the ethnodemographic structure of society (particularly in the conditions of tumultuous and unregulated migration processes), a pronounced inclination toward tradition and history, as well as national, identity, and cultural marginalization“⁹, it becomes evident that the majority of Western Balkan countries (if not all) „find themselves in nearly exemplary conditions for the strengthening of extremist tendencies“¹⁰. Therefore, the „disruptive potential of Balkan societies, in light of the accentuation of national, ethnic, and religious differences, represents a serious threat to take precedence over the progressive one, characteristic of well-organized countries in the contemporary world“¹¹.

Furthermore, it is important to emphasize that, given its myriad manifestations and the resulting consequences, particularly its potential for destructiveness and success in destabilizing political communities, states, and regions, the question of extremism is, par excellence, a political issue. We can rightfully state that the variants of right-wing extremism are indeed of paramount importance for a contemporary understanding of this phenomenon in the context of Western Balkan societies. They exhibit, to a lesser or greater extent, characteristics specific to their particularities through ethnonationalism, extremism under the guise of religion, and so-called hybrid extremism.

The Western Balkan states, coinciding with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration of the FSR Yugoslavia, have become a place where all the aforementioned variants of extremism thrive. In this regard, one can generally conclude that the sub-type of extremism that involves the combination of the previ-

ously mentioned aspects is also the one that best represents the majority of antagonisms in the Western Balkans. A significant number of scholars who have analyzed the nature of conflicts in the Balkans, view the wars of the 1990s as religious conflicts. Others emphasize that the nature of these conflicts is rooted in ethnic and ethnonationalistic causes. Acknowledging the complex character of the so called Balkan powder keg, it can be said that both perspectives are correct, and that each of these conflicts had (and still has) specific differences that support the notion that this particularly sensitive issue must be approached while recognizing the significant role of religion in nearly all conflicts inspired by ethnonationalistic ideas and passions.

Simultaneously, ethnonationalistic and religious aspects of extremism merge in the sphere of culture and public space, where they gain legitimacy and are accepted as the new reality, further emphasizing identity differences as insurmountable obstacles. Profiling a political identity always implies demarcation in relation to the „relevant other“, who is treated either as an enemy or a different entity. Therefore, the fundamentalist emphasis on particular identities always carries renewed conflict potential because it transforms the „relevant other“ into an enemy to be eliminated. Since group identity insists on uniting the same based on distinctiveness and otherness, it easily becomes the prey of those who will assume that distinctiveness as someone else's and confront it. This is particularly pronounced when we speak of identity transfer: from the identity of an individual to the identity of a collective. „Differences that collectives insist on, such as race, religion, nationality, ethnicity, and the like, provide significant opportunities for articulating and manifesting conflict towards others that are different“¹². In this way, the doors to extremism are wide open, unfortunately, as an inseparable companion to political identity, because „what we consider absolute is still ours, often residing in the zone of extremely subjective experience“¹³.

When it comes to culture and public space as providers for extremism, we are primarily referring to mass and popular culture that through the content of light entertainment

and hedonism is perpetuating extremist behavior. What is concerning is that this pattern, in the absence of different content, is followed by a disappointingly large portion of the population. Speaking about the deficit of social ethics in our society, Ratko Božović says “There is nothing of a social ethics in a community where hatred is most prevalent as an anthropological error and a defect in sentiment. Haters identify themselves with their hatred, and without this absurd passion, they don't even exist”¹⁴. When linking our unique cultural pattern to extremism, Božović emphasizes, “Here, all forms of extremism are most prevalent, and they are incompatible with culture and tolerance”. He continues: “When intellectual culture becomes the determinant of one's entire life, not irrational politics, when one escapes material poverty and moral decline, only then the true prerequisites for civil society and civilized everyday life are created”¹⁵.

All of the above grounds us in the realization that we are trapped in a vicious circle of intolerance and extremism. Until the awareness level of the average consumer is elevated while political culture is improved and various forms of intolerance are reduced, until war crimes are condemned through national and political consensus and across all media, national chauvinism, as a residue from the 1990s that still lingers today, our quality of life and culture will remain unacceptably low, and the degree of extremism in these societies will remain unacceptably high.

EU and the Western Balkans – between genuine support for overcoming antagonisms and pragmatism in tolerating Balkan stabilocracies

Over the past two decades, there has been a gradual transition of the Western Balkans from a zone of armed conflicts to a region where all states are at least declaratively oriented toward accession to the European Union. This provides hope that, in the future, the countries in the region will be ready to embrace numerous European values such as peace, democracy,

human and minority rights, the principle of equality, and the principle of solidarity. This would significantly pacify the largely present extremist tendencies in each country individually and, consequently, in the entire region. The best response to the growing antagonisms in the region is undoubtedly the prospect of its integration into the European Union. However, there is an increasing consensus that a significant reconciliation and greater regional integration in various political and social spheres should precede the Western Balkans' accession to the EU.

The commonly recognized EU discourse for conflict resolution in the regional context primarily emphasizes economic integration through trade, industry, and cross-border projects. As a model of good practice for pre-EU accession regional integration, the Central European Free Trade Association (CEFTA) serves as an example¹⁶. CEFTA, a multilateral free trade agreement, was established in 1992 by the Visegrad Group members, consisting of Central European countries that were not EU members but in the process of becoming so¹⁷. The agreement now includes Western Balkan states and Moldova. At the fourth summit of the Berlin Process, an initiative for regional cooperation in the Western Balkans, the creation of a transport community was launched in July 2017 through the signing of an agreement in Trieste. This initiative aims to integrate transport networks within the region and link them with the EU. The question of economic integration has also been raised, including within the framework of the Chamber Investment Forum of the Western Balkans, which brings together trade chambers from the region¹⁸.

Even after the Berlin Process summit in Paris in 2016, there was considerable discussion about pragmatic solutions that would enhance the mutual integration of Western Balkan countries, as a form of pre-integration process into the EU. The ideas of economic regional integration through trade, industry, and cross-border projects were welcomed. Some argue that if the integration of the region's countries is expedited without thorough reforms, after gaining membership, the EU Council and the European Commission may lack the adequate

instruments to rectify what has not been done properly in these countries¹⁹.

However, there are significant differences in the transition and European integration processes between the Visegrad Group countries and the Western Balkans. This primarily pertains to the confrontation with past antagonisms, the growing extremism, and, notably, the unwillingness of Western Balkan societies to tackle this kind of problem. According to Nenad Dimitrijević, „the issue here is actually the problem of a shattered political society and the dominance of a collectivist political culture”²⁰. When addressing the problems of Serbian society on this issue, particularly in the context of facing the past, he emphasizes that the reformist fallacy of the post-October 5th political elite lay in neglecting the idea that the future of Serbia is not possible without overcoming the past. For him, „it is not only about war crimes committed during the 1990s in the region, but the focus on the future must be based on the political, economic, social, cultural, and moral transcendence of the past”²¹.

The failure of the region to come to terms with its past is emphasized by former spokesperson for the Hague Tribunal, Florence Hartmann. She believes that „due to the unsuccessful confrontation with the past and the return of rhetoric from the 1990s, politicians in peacetime, in the 2000s, want to continue what was not finished during the war”²². Hartmann does not see the responsibility for this outcome solely in the Balkan leaders, but explicitly points out the shortcomings of the International Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, which failed to clearly indicate the phenomenon of the connection between propaganda and ideology with the crimes committed. This has subsequently led to the rehabilitation of a policy in the region that could only be achieved through crime, while the victims are being erased to justify the goals that were supposed to be achieved through war.²³ Hartmann believes that „failure to confront the past and denial of war crimes actually legitimizes such policy, which was pursued in the first phase - through war, and points to the danger of a possible renewal of conflicts, especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina”²⁴.

Desired outcomes in the field of reconciliation and de-radicalization in the region may be elusive, not only due to a lack of confrontation with the past but also because of the mentioned regional political pragmatism, which is based on maintaining a conflict-oriented rhetoric. Such rhetoric, when paired with appropriate media campaigns, can be an excellent marketing strategy in pre-election campaigns. The situation is further complicated by the fact that the countries of the Western Balkans are in a state of near-permanent pre-election activities, which are recognized by local political elites as an ideal opportunity to establish power through populism. In theory, „populism emerges as a manipulative appeal to popular beliefs and sentiments, and is used as a means of political mobilization to elevate charismatic leaders and resist any form of elitism”²⁵. According to research conducted by the organization Freedom House - Nations in Transit in 2016, „Serbia was considered a semi-consolidated democracy, while Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Macedonia had transitional or hybrid regimes”²⁶. In this research, all post-Yugoslav states were assessed as having relatively strong civil societies with democratic elections. However, they all face significant challenges such as corruption, lack of independent judiciary, poor governance at the national level, and issues related to freedom of speech.

Reports for the year 2022 indicate that for the nineteenth consecutive year, the state of democracy has been deteriorating in 29 countries across the region, from Central Europe to Central Asia. Democracy levels have declined in 11 countries while seven countries have shown progress. Modest improvements in Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia were balanced by declines in Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina, while Serbia's position remained consistently low²⁷. The latest report points out that ten European countries that are not EU members have been classified as hybrid regimes, with fragile democratic institutions and significant challenges to protect political rights and civil liberties. Five of them have made progress, while three have experienced setbacks. However, the EU accession process in the Western Balkans, which

has been delayed, has particularly amplified disappointment in the EU. Moreover, the broader accession challenges have been further intensified by the inclusion of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Moldova, and Ukraine as formal candidates for EU membership. In 2022, Bosnia and Herzegovina was granted candidate status, and Kosovo submitted a membership application²⁸.

Nevertheless, despite these notable signs of progress, citizens in the Western Balkans feel abandoned by their domestic political elites, which resist democratic reforms that would weaken their hold on power. They also feel let down by international elites who lack the determination to advance the accession process. Unlike Ukraine, where there are high expectations of joining the EU by 2030, due to years or even decades of waiting, citizens in the Western Balkans are disappointed and skeptical about the possibility of EU membership in the near future. Even their long-term hopes are relatively modest: for many, the appeal of EU accession is more related to individual prosperity and the right to travel, work, and study abroad - in other words, the chance to leave is more appealing rather than the prospects for democratic progress in their countries. According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), „approximately one-fifth of the population born in the Western Balkans lives abroad, primarily in a few OECD member countries”²⁹.

Starting from the established principle that weak institutions create a weak state, and that the process of state weakening inevitably impacts the emergence and increase in influence of violent non-state actors, it is useful to examine how Serbia and other countries in the region are ranked based on the Fragile States Index, which is compiled based on twelve criteria established by the Fund for Peace³⁰.

In 2022, based on the assessment of these twelve criteria, Serbia was ranked 92nd out of 179 countries. As such, it belongs to the group of states with an index labeled as „Warning”. This is the worst ranking in Southeastern Europe, along with Bosnia and Herzegovina and Turkey. It is also the lowest rank concerning European Union member states, which Serbia aspires to join. A more detailed analysis of Ser-

bia's ranking reveals that it received an index higher than six in five of the twelve parameters, indicating weaknesses in those areas. The parameter ranked the lowest is „Group Grievance”, with an index of 8.1. This parameter assesses general dissatisfaction, societal discrimination, a sense of powerlessness, ethnic violence, violence in local communities, and more, essentially indicating a pronounced risk of extremism³¹.

It is evident that weak institutions and authoritarian leaders have been particularly recognized as risk factors in the region, resulting in the growth of corruption, organized crime, and the proliferation of extremism. This is attested by a report from the House of Lords Committee on External Affairs of the UK Parliament, titled „The UK and the Future of the Western Balkans”, which covers the period from 2017 to 2019. The report highlights that „the region is suffering from autocratic leadership, weak democratic institutions, and serious challenges from organized crime and corruption”³². Additionally, it notes that „this situation has been exacerbated by uncertainty surrounding EU accession, a brain drain of young and educated people, and the rise of extremism and antidemocratic nationalism”³³.

All the shortcomings in democracy mentioned are typical of the well-established concept of „stabilocracy”³⁴, which has entered media headlines and expert analyses in recent years. Stabilocracy describes the phase of erosion in transitional regimes. It vividly characterizes the situation in Western Balkan countries,³⁵ where „leaders with autocratic tendencies are at the helm, presenting themselves as pro-Western politicians and a stability factor in the region”³⁶. In these societies, „democracy weakens, protectors of democracy like independent media and strong institutions are dwindling, and patronage ties many citizens to the ruling elites through cooperation and coercion”³⁷.

In this context, ethnonationalism emerges as the ideal tool for populist mobilization for internal use, aimed at elevating political leaders while generating distrust towards other ethnic and religious communities in the Western Balkans. This should be supplemented by the so-called „populism towards the outside”³⁸,

which has a specific rhetoric that recommends those in power as factors of peace and stability in the region. This particularly benefits the consolidation of the stabilocratic system of governance. These circumstances significantly cast a shadow on the sincere and unequivocal commitment of EU officials to strengthening democratic institutions like citizens' rights and freedoms, promoting tolerance, media freedom, and more. Such efforts would greatly contribute to relaxing the constantly tense and strained relations in the region and reduce the unquestionable extremist potential in this area.

Concluding remarks

The Western Balkan states that have not yet integrated into the EU (Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Albania) find themselves in new international circumstances that are currently unfavorable for EU accession. The primary reason for this is the long-standing crisis within the Union (financial, economic, refugee, political), along with shifts in borders (Brexit). Consequently, the term „enlargement” has become unpopular, and the process has been de-prioritized, despite the fact that, through the Thessaloniki Declaration (2003), Union member states committed themselves to providing a clear European perspective for the Western Balkans. The Russian aggression against Ukraine further complicates the European integration process for Western Balkan countries. This can be attributed to the initial „unattractiveness” of the topic during the early months of the conflict and the increasingly noticeable influence of Russia and China in the region. The strained relations also extend to the Brussels-Visegrád Group countries, where the formal pretext is the refugee crisis and the rejection of asylum seekers. However, the underlying issue is the serious erosion of democracy in Central Europe and the rise of nationalist-populist regimes (Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia). In some EU member states, this has led to increased caution regarding the accession of other Eastern European countries to the Union.

The majority of the analyzed Western Balkan states have experienced armed conflicts on their territory and are generally unprepared to confront their past, resulting in the persistence of extremist rhetoric. If the rise of populism using radical nationalist discourse and the fanning of regional tensions are ignored, the Western Balkans may regress further. Euro skeptic, and even anti-European, sentiments could be further fueled by fatigue from the transition, disillusionment, a sense of unattainability, or the undesirability of Western Balkan states joining the EU. If European orientation is abandoned, ethno nationalist-oriented political elites could revert to the objectives of the 1990s.

When it comes to predicting problems in the Western Balkans, the outlook is anything but „rosy“. The contamination with extremism is unquestionable and, considering the regenerative potential of this form of political violence, it has once again taken precedence in the social milieu of Western Balkan societies. What is even more concerning is the attitude towards this phenomenon. The second decade of the new century has shown that the extremist hydra is still vital, and the overall societal discourse in Western Balkan societies is anything but one that appropriately addresses this problem. Complex relations between entity leaderships in the once-central Yugoslav republic, and now the never-more-divided post-Dayton Bosnia and Herzegovina, often result in disagreements when resolving frozen conflicts along the Sarajevo-Belgrade-Zagreb axis. Combined with the undeniable conflict potential in the southern Serbian province of Kosovo and Metohija and the former southernmost Yugoslav republic, North Macedonia, this region is rightfully considered unstable and potentially unsafe.

Hence, the EU must not neglect the Western Balkan region but instead must react more decisively to deviations from democratic norms in the countries of the region. Pragmatic integrative regional projects alone are not enough for reconciliation. The call for addressing the past and rejecting ethnonationalist policies that led to the war's destruction must not be overlooked. Although the actions of EU officials may reveal a policy of double stan-

dards, such as tolerating Balkan stabilocracies at the expense of substantive democratization in the region, the far worse scenario would be the Western Balkans remaining outside the EU. This would risk the development of undemocratic political regimes in the region and the rekindling of well-known extremist narratives from the 1990s, which inherently carry all the risks of fatal consequences that this region has already endured. The declarative commitment to multi-ethnicity, multiconfessionalism, and the celebration of the „richness of diversity“, coupled with the tacit tolerance of rampant extremism, is anything but the path to a stable democratic society. Moreover, there are „fresh memories of the former central Yugoslav republic, Bosnia and Herzegovina where the advantage of diversity ended in a tragic war“³⁹.

Endnotes

¹ Milovan Subotić, *Određenje savremenog ekstremizma*, Beograd: *Vojno delo*, jesen 2011. pp. 297-313. p. 300.

² See more in: Robert M. Hejden, *Skice za podeljenu kuću: ustavna logika jugoslovenskih sukoba*, *Samizdat B92*, Beograd, 2003, pp. 65-107.

³ According to: Dragan Đukanović, *Institucionalni modeli i demokratizacija postjugoslovenskih država*, Institut za međunarodnu politiku i privredu, Beograd, 2007, pp. 49-73.

⁴ See more in: Predrag Simić, *Do the Balkans Exist?: Vision of the Future of Southeastern Europe: Perspectives from the Region*, in: Predrag Simić, Gordana Ilić, Zlatko Isaković, Ivan Krastev and Krassen Stanchev (eds.), *The European Union, NATO and their Southeastern European Neighbors*, Institute of International Politics and Economics, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, Belgrade, 2002, pp. 13-30.

⁵ There are several theories about the origin of Albanians. Albanians collectively consider themselves the descendants of the ancient inhabitants of the Balkans - the Illyrians. This theory is supported by the majority of Albanian scholars, as well as some foreign scientists, including certain Serbian scholars like Cvijić („Balkansko poluostrvo i Južnoslovenske zemlje“). Other scientists challenge this theory, emphasizing their Indo-European origins, similar to the majority of other European nations. According to: Michele Belledi, Estella S. Poloni, Rosa Casalotti, Franco Conterio, Ilia Mikerezi, James Tagliavini and Laurent Excoffier, „Maternal and paternal lineages in Albania and the genetic structure of Indo-European populations“, *European Journal of Human Genetics*, July 2000, Volume 8, No 7, pp. 480-486.

⁶ Katarina Štrbac, Milovan Subotić, Branislav Milosavljević, *Extremist Trends in the Western Balkans and the Republic of Serbia*, *Journal on Law, Economy & Management*, Science Centre Ltd. 2012, pp. 92-97, p. 93.

⁷ Petar Atanacković, *Od nacionalizma do neonacizma*, in: *Desni ekstremizam – ultradesničarske i neonacističke grupacije na prostoru bivše SFRJ*, Alternativna kulturna organizacija i Rosa Luxemburg Southeast Europe, Novi Sad, 2012. p. 7.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Milovan Subotić, *Ekstremizam pod okriljem religije*, Medija centar Odbrana i Institut za strategijska istraživanja, Beograd 2015.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Milovan Subotić, *Ekstremističke tendencije u AP Vojvodini*, Kultura polisa, posebno izdanje, Novi Sad, 2018. pp. 171-185. p. 171.

¹² Milovan Subotić & Ivan Dimitrijević, *Identities as Abused Category in Balkan Conflicts*. In: Dašić, D. (Ed.) *Security Challenges of Modern Society: Dilemmas and Implications*. Belgrade: University „Union – Nikola Tesla“, Niš: Faculty of Law, Security and Management „Constantine the Great“, 2022. pp. 115-130. p.117.

¹³ Dragan Simeunović, *Terorizam: opšti deo*, Pravni fakultet, Beograd. 2009. str. 14.

¹⁴ Interview with prof. Ratko Božović, *Izbegli iz normalnog života*, *Etna*, br. 65. Beograd, 2007.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ CEFTA is a trade agreement between Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Moldova, Serbia, UNMIK on behalf of Kosovo and Metohija, and Montenegro. CEFTA was founded by Poland, then Czechoslovakia, and Hungary on December 21, 1992. in Krakow.

¹⁷ The Visegrad Group (Visegrad Four or “V4”) is an association of four Central European countries: Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic. It was established for the purpose of further European integration and to enhance mutual military, economic, and energy cooperation. From its inception, it was also known as the Visegrad Triangle, as it initially consisted of three countries until the dissolution of Czechoslovakia in 1993. The group emerged at a summit of the heads of state or government of Hungary, Poland, and Czechoslovakia in the Hungarian town of Visegrad on February 15, 1991. Slovakia and the Czech Republic became members after the dissolution of Czechoslovakia in 1993. All four countries became members of the European Union on May 1, 2004.

¹⁸ “Samit lidera zapadnog Balkana 2017. – bolja regionalna saradnja radi približavanja Evropskoj uniji”, European Union, External Action, <https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/29678/samit-lidera-zapadnog-balkana-2017-%E2%80%93-bolja-regionalna-saradnja-radi-pribli%C5%BEavanja-evropskoj-sr-22/09/2023>

¹⁹ „EU će prvo tražiti ekonomsku integraciju Balkana”, Capital.ba: prvi poslovni portal u Republici Srpskoj, <http://www.capital.ba/eu-ce-prvo-traziti-ekonomsku-integraciju-balkana/> 15/09/2023

²⁰ Nenad Dimitrijević, *Srbija kao nedovršena država*, *Peščanik*, <https://pescanik.net/srbija-kao-nedovrsena-drzava/> 31/1/2023

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² “Hartmann za AJB: Politicari u miru nastavljaju ono što nisu završili u ratu”, Aljazeera Balkans, <http://balkans.aljazeera.net/vijesti/hartmann-za-ajb-politicari-u-miru-nastavljaju-ono-sto-nisu-završili-u-ratu> 31/1/2021

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Boško Mijatović, Ilija Vujačić, Tanasije Marinković, *Pojmovnik liberalne demokratije*, Službeni glasnik i Centar za liberalno-demokratske studije, Beograd 2008. p. 134.

²⁶ According to: Nate Schenkkan, *Nation in Transit: The False Promise of Populism*, Freedom House, 2017.

²⁷ According to Freedom House report for 2022.

²⁸ Nataša Anđelković, Bosna i Hercegovina dobila status kandidata, šta to znači za građane, šta za Sarajevo, a šta za Brisel, *BBC News na Srpskom*, 13. decembar 2022.

²⁹ “Snažan osećaj napuštenosti od političkih elita na Zapadnom Balkanu, navodi Freedom House”, *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, 24. maj 2023.

³⁰ He criteria used by the Peace Fund to assess the weakness of a state are as follows: (1) Demographic pressures; (2) Refugees and internally displaced persons; (3) Social discontent; (4) Brain drain and emigration; (5) uneven economic development; (6) poverty and economic decline; (7) Legitimacy of state authority; (8) Public services; (9) Human rights and the rule of law; (10) Security apparatus; (11) Divisions amongst the elite (12) External interventions. According to: “Fragile States Index 2015”, *The Fund for Peace*, Washington, 2015, p. 17.

³¹ Fragile State Index, <https://fragilestatesindex.org/10/09/2023>.

³² “Zapadni Balkan u opasnosti zbog autokratskih lidera i slabih institucija”, *Istinomer*, <http://vesti.istinomer.rs/2018/01/11/zapadni-balkan-u-opasnosti-zbog-auto-kratskih-lidera-i-slabih-institucija/> 19/2/2021

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *The Economist*, “The West backs Balkan autocrats to keep the peace, again”, <https://www.economist.com/news/europe/21724414-some-call-it-stabilitocracy-others-call-it-way-things-have-always-been-west-backs-balkan> 19/2/2020

³⁵ In the context of Western Balkan countries, the term “stabilitocracy” was coined by Srđa Pavlović to primarily describe the political situation and the political regime in Montenegro. It refers to a form of governance where democracy is lacking, and it is supported by Western democratic countries. Srđa Pavlović argues that Milo Đukanović, as a key political figure, has created a “stabilitocracy” characterized by election manipulation, the marginalization of the opposition, and the misuse of state resources for political and personal gain. According to Pavlović, such Western-backed policies may ultimately lead to undermining their own interests in the region and could have unintended consequences in terms of deepening dissatisfaction with foreign actors. According to: “Montenegro’s ‘stabilitocracy’: The West’s support of Đukanović is damaging the prospects of democratic change”, The London School of Economics and Political Science, <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2016/12/23/montenegros-stabilitocracy-how-the-wests-support-of-đukanovic-is-damaging-the-prospects-of-democratic-change/#Author> 12/09/2023

³⁶ *BiEPAG*, *The Crisis of Democracy in the Western Balkans – Authoritarianism and EU Stabilitocracy*. Policy Paper: Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group. March 2017, pp. 7.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ “What local leaders do in their antidemocratic behavior does not face condemnation from the West. It is enough for them to maintain peace, and it is tolerated”. According to: Ekonomist: “Stabilokratija recept za nestabilnost”, u: <http://www.novimagazin.rs/vesti/ekonomist->

[stabilokratija-recept-za-nestabilnost-vucicu-glavni-pro-tivnik-jeremi](http://www.novimagazin.rs/vesti/ekonomist-), 11/2/2021

³⁹ Milovan Subotić, Ekstremističke tendencije u AP Vojvodini, *Kultura polisa*, posebno izdanje, Novi Sad, 2018. pp. 171-185. p. 171.