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**Iryna Dziublenko\****PhD in History, Associate Professor**Mykhailo Drahomanov Ukrainian State University**01601, 9 Pirogova Str., Kyiv, Ukraine**<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5274-3258>***Nataliia Zhabinets***PhD in Political Science, Associate Professor**Mykhailo Drahomanov Ukrainian State University**01601, 9 Pirogova Str., Kyiv, Ukraine**<https://orcid.org/0009-0002-8054-4202>*

## Experience and prospects for further European integration of South-Eastern Europe

**Abstract.** The study of European integration processes in the countries of South-Eastern Europe is of particular relevance in the context of growing geopolitical tensions and the need to strengthen stability on the European continent. The purpose of this study was to conduct a comprehensive analysis of European integration processes in South-Eastern Europe, assess the current state of reforms, and identify key factors that affect the prospects for further integration of the region. As part of this purpose, a considerable number of documents, reports, etc., were analysed. The study examined the specific features of European integration processes in the countries of the region that are already members of the European Union and found that they have demonstrated different models of economic growth: Southern European countries have developed a consumption-oriented model based on debt financing, while Central and Eastern European countries have opted for an export-oriented model that is largely dependent on foreign direct investment. An analysis of European integration measures and reforms in countries that have not yet joined the European Union showed uneven progress in meeting the Copenhagen criteria. Economic reforms aimed at creating a functioning market economy and increasing competitiveness stay a key challenge. Foreign direct investment has played a significant role in modernising economies, but its impact on convergence with the European Union has been mixed. Trade liberalisation has contributed to a significant increase in trade between the region's countries and the European Union, but economic convergence is still slow. An assessment of the prospects for further European integration revealed complex geopolitical dynamics. Growing competition between the European Union and other global players, such as Russia and China, poses additional challenges to the European integration aspirations of the countries of the region. The energy dependence of some countries on Russia and significant Chinese investment in infrastructure pose potential risks to energy security and may lead to conflicts of interest. The European Union is increasing its influence in the region through a new enlargement methodology and financial instruments. The study showed that successful integration requires structural reforms, strengthening democracy, economic development, and overcoming historical conflicts. The findings of this study can be used to develop effective strategies to support European integration processes in the region and improve EU policy towards the countries of South-Eastern Europe

**Keywords:** euroscepticism; nationalism; social justice; rule of law; electoral dynamics; political polarisation; democratic institutions

### Introduction

The European integration is one of the crucial geopolitical processes of modern time, which has a significant impact on the development of European countries, specifically, in South-Eastern Europe. This topic requires careful investigation, as the experience of European integration of the

countries of this region can become a prominent benchmark for other states seeking to join the European Union. The problematic of this study is that the European integration of the countries of South-Eastern Europe has its specific features and challenges that require a thorough analysis.

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\*Corresponding author



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Specifically, it is important to investigate the experience of those countries in the region that are already members of the EU and analyse the prospects for further integration for those states that have not yet joined the Union.

D. Bohle (2021) presented the study of European integration processes in the context of the diversity of capitalist models and crisis trajectories on the eastern periphery of Europe. The researcher emphasised the need to account for these when analysing European integration processes in the region, which offers a deeper insight into the complexity and multidimensionality of these processes. The collective monograph edited by C. Hill *et al.* (2023) offers a comprehensive analysis of the role of the European Union in the international arena. Specifically, considerable attention was paid to the EU's relations with the countries of South-Eastern Europe, which provides a better understanding of the specifics of European integration processes in this region and their impact on international relations.

J. McCormick (2020) offered a concise but informative introduction to the European Union, with examination of key aspects of the EU functioning, including its history, institutions, and policies, as well as the processes of enlargement and integration of new members. This study is valuable for understanding the overall context of European integration in South-Eastern Europe. The subject of D. Cadier's (2021) study was the geopoliticisation of the EU's Eastern Partnership. Analysing this process in the context of the EU's relations with its eastern neighbours, the researcher examined its impact on the European integration prospects of the countries of the region, which offers a better insight into the role of geopolitical factors in the integration process.

S. Giner (2022) explored the interrelationships between political economy, legitimation, and the role of the state in Southern Europe. Considering these issues through the lens of uneven development of the region, the researcher analysed their impact on the processes of European integration, which allows for a deeper understanding of the specifics of these processes in the countries of Southern Europe. X. Richet (2020) focused on the issues of foreign direct investment, transit, and dependence in Central and South-Eastern Europe. Analysing these processes within the framework of interaction between the EU and the Western Balkans, the researcher considered their impact on the European integration prospects of the region, which helps to improve understanding of the economic aspects of integration.

G. Radosavljević *et al.* (2020) analysed the dynamics of income convergence in the region and the EU using econometric models and statistical data. The findings of the study suggest that there is some income convergence between South-Eastern Europe and the EU, especially for countries that are already members of the Union. At the same time, the researchers note that the pace of income convergence is rather slow, and for some countries in the region that have not yet joined the EU, there are even divergence trends. Researchers attribute these processes to a series of factors, such as the structural characteristics of the economies of South-Eastern Europe, the lack of efficiency of institutions, and external challenges, such as the global economic crisis. The researchers emphasise the need for structural reforms and strengthening the

institutional capacity of the countries in the region to accelerate the revenue convergence with the EU.

B. Chistruga & R. Crudu (2021) analysed the impact of European integration on the competitiveness of the new EU member states, including those of South-Eastern Europe. The researchers examined various aspects of competitiveness, such as labour productivity, innovation potential, and the quality of institutions and infrastructure. B. Chistruga & R. Crudu (2021) noted that the European integration has generally had a positive impact on the competitiveness of the new EU member states. Specifically, accession to the Union has contributed to increased labour productivity, foreign investment, and improved the institutional environment in these countries. At the same time, the researchers emphasise the presence of considerable differences in the levels of competitiveness between the new and old EU members, as well as between the new members themselves.

Despite the significant contribution of the analysed studies to the understanding of European integration processes in South-Eastern Europe, some aspects of this issue require further investigation. Specifically, a comprehensive analysis of the experience of countries in the region that are already EU members, in terms of their achievements and challenges on the path towards integration, would help identify possible ways to optimise these processes for countries that are still seeking to join the Union.

The purpose of this study was to analyse the experience and prospects for further European integration of the countries of South-Eastern Europe. To fulfil this purpose, the following objectives were set: to investigate the specific features of European integration processes in the countries of South-Eastern Europe that are already members of the EU; to analyse European integration measures and reforms in those countries of the region that have not yet joined the EU; to assess the prospects for further European integration of the countries of South-Eastern Europe, considering current geopolitical challenges.

## Materials and Methods

The study of the practices and prospects of further European integration of the countries of South-Eastern Europe was based on a comprehensive analysis of a wide range of sources and the use of various methods of scientific cognition. The study was based on official documents of the European Union, namely the European Commission's reports (2023a; 2023b; 2023c; 2023d; 2023e) on the progress of the candidate countries in implementing the Copenhagen criteria. These reports provided up-to-date information on the status of reforms and implementation of EU requirements in the countries of the region. International agreements, specifically the Stabilisation and Association Agreement between the EU and the Western Balkans (Stabilisation and Association Agreement, 2003), have become a valuable source of information. The analysis of these documents helped to assess the legal framework for cooperation between the EU and the countries of the region and to identify key areas for reform. The economic aspects of European integration were analysed using statistical data and analytical reports of international organisations. Specifically, the study analysed the World Bank's data on the economic development of the Western

Balkans (Western Balkans Regular Economic Report, 2024), UNCTAD (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development) reports on foreign direct investment (Foreign direct investment..., 2023), and the International Labour Organization's data on unemployment (Unemployment Rates Around the World..., 2024). To assess the progress of countries in the fight against corruption, the study used data from the Corruption Perceptions Index published by Transparency International (Corruption perceptions index, 2023). This helped to compare the situation in the countries of the region with the EU average.

The study compared the practices of European integration of different countries in South-Eastern Europe. The economic growth models chosen by Southern European countries and Central and Eastern European countries were compared, which helped to identify their impact on the European integration. Particular attention was paid to the analysis of the export-oriented growth model of Central and Eastern European countries and the consumption-oriented model in Southern European countries. The processes of adaptation of the legislation of the countries of the region to the EU norms, reform of state institutions and implementation of European standards in various spheres were studied. The issues of judicial reform, fighting corruption, and strengthening the rule of law in the context of the Copenhagen criteria were considered in detail.

The study provided a comprehensive analysis of European integration processes as a complex system of interrelated economic, political, and social factors. The study covered the interrelationships between different aspects of European integration and their impact on the overall progress of the countries of the region. Special attention was paid to the impact of economic reforms on the social sphere and political stability. The influence of external actors, specifically Russia and China, on European integration processes in the region was assessed. The study analysed the data on the energy dependence of the countries of the region on Russia and the volume of Chinese investments in infrastructure. Potential geopolitical implications of this influence for the European integration process were considered.

The study developed an original scale for assessing the progress of South-Eastern European countries in implementing the Copenhagen criteria. A scale from 1 to 100 was used to assess progress in the political, economic, and administrative spheres. The estimates were based on the analysis of official reports of the European Commission, statistics from international organisations and expert assessments. The political criteria included an assessment of the stability of democratic institutions, respect for human rights, and the independence of the judiciary. The economic criteria included the presence of a functioning market economy, macroeconomic stability, and the level of economic convergence with the EU. The administrative criteria assessed the ability to implement the *acquis communautaire*, the effectiveness of public administration, and the administrative capacity to use EU funds. These assessments are intended to provide a general comparison of the relative progress of countries and do not claim to be absolutely accurate, but rather reflect general trends in the European integration process of the countries of the region.

## Results

**Specific features of European integration processes in the EU member states of South-Eastern Europe.** The European integration of the countries of South-Eastern Europe (SEE) was characterised by complex economic transformations aimed at adapting their economies to the standards of the European Union. This adaptation took place against the backdrop of the transition from a planned to a market economy, which created additional challenges.

The SEE countries demonstrated different patterns of economic growth in the European integration. Specifically, Southern European countries such as Spain and Portugal have been developing a consumption-oriented growth model based on debt financing. In contrast, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), including Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia, have opted for an export-led growth model that has been heavily dependent on foreign direct investment (FDI) (Vukov, 2023).

This difference in economic development strategies had profound consequences for the European integration process. Southern European countries have faced the problems of high debt levels and low competitiveness, which became particularly evident during the 2008 financial crisis. According to V. Vukov (2023), the debt-based, consumption-oriented growth model of Southern Europe before 2008, with different levels of adjustment after the crisis, created significant economic challenges for these countries during the integration.

On the other hand, CEE countries have managed to achieve more sustainable economic growth due to their export orientation and FDI attraction. M. Blikhar (2023) noted that "liberalisation of foreign trade under the conditions of European integration should increase its reliability and irreversibility". This statement underlines the significance of trade liberalisation as a key aspect of economic integration for CEE countries. Notably, the economic integration has not been homogeneous even among the countries of the same region. Slovakia, for instance, was the latest of all CEE countries to intensify its European vector, only in the late 1990s. This was caused by both economic and political factors (Blikhar, 2023).

One of the key economic aspects of integration was the alignment of the trade policies of the SEE countries with the EU's common trade policy. This included trade liberalisation, reduction of tariff barriers, and harmonisation of regulations. Attracting foreign direct investment was also an essential aspect of economic integration. CEE countries have been actively using this tool to modernise their economies. The FDI-dependent export-oriented growth model in Eastern Europe has become a key characteristic of the economic development of these countries in European integration (Vukov, 2023).

Institutional reforms and legislative adaptation have been critical aspects of the European integration processes in South-Eastern Europe (Vos, 2020). These processes required considerable effort and resources, as they involved a fundamental restructuring of the legal and institutional systems of these countries. One of the key aspects of the institutional reforms was the creation and strengthening of independent regulatory bodies. This included reforming the judiciary, establishing anti-corruption bodies, strengthening the protection of property rights, and

ensuring the rule of law. These reforms were necessary to meet the Copenhagen criteria for EU membership.

In 1993, certain requirements (the so-called “Copenhagen criteria”) were put forward for countries that expressed a desire to accede (Copenhagen European Council..., 1993; Dudley, 2020). These criteria included the stability of institutions that guarantee democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and respect for and protection of minorities; a functioning market economy and the ability to handle competitive pressures and market forces within the EU; and the ability to assume the obligations of membership, including adherence to the objectives of political, economic, and monetary union (Blikhar, 2023).

The adaptation of the legislation was a particularly complex process, as it required harmonisation of national laws with the *acquis communautaire*, the EU’s body of legal norms. This covered a wide range of areas, including competition law, consumer protection, environmental law, labour law, and many others. Notably, the legislative adaptation was not the same for all the SEE countries. For instance, Hungary gained IMF membership as early as 1982, and in 1988 it was the first CEE country to receive a stand-by loan (Blikhar, 2023). This shows that some countries started the process of institutional reforms earlier than others.

One of the key challenges in institutional reforms was the need to ensure not only the formal adoption of legislation, but also its effective implementation. The EU promoted domestic development banks, financed the creation of investment promotion agencies, and regional development agencies; and strengthened state aid institutions that were key to attracting TNCs (transnational corporations) to complex sectors such as automotive or ICT (information and communication technologies) (Albu Comănescu, 2021). This underscores the EU’s comprehensive approach to institutional reforms in the SEE countries.

The social impact of European integration on the countries of South-Eastern Europe has been significant and multifaceted. The integration process has led to profound changes in the social structure, value system, and lifestyle of the citizens of these countries. One of the key social impacts of European integration has been an increase in labour mobility. The opening of borders within the EU has allowed citizens of the SEE countries to seek employment in other member states. This has led to considerable migration flows, especially from the CEE countries to more developed countries in Western Europe. The increase in demand for Polish food abroad has been facilitated by labour migration from Poland, which has been another favourable consequence of European integration, despite some critical assessments of this phenomenon (Blikhar, 2023).

Labour migration had both positive and negative consequences. On the one hand, it has helped to reduce unemployment in countries of origin and provided an additional source of income for many families through remittances. On the other hand, this has led to the emigration of highly skilled professionals and demographic problems in some of the SEE countries. Another significant social aspect of European integration was the introduction of European standards in the field of social protection and labour relations. This included strengthening the protection of employees’ rights, introducing anti-discrimination

legislation, and improving working conditions. The EU not only demanded liberalisation and privatisation, but also helped build state development capacities, including the social sector (Albu Comănescu, 2021).

European integration has also had a considerable impact on the education system in the SEE countries. The introduction of the Bologna system, the expansion of student exchange programmes such as *Erasmus*, and the recognition of qualifications between EU member states have opened new opportunities for young people in these countries (Reilly & Sweeney, 2022). Notably, the social consequences of European integration have not been the same for all segments of the population. While some groups have benefited from integration, others have faced challenges in adapting to the new environment. For instance, M. Blikhar (2023) noted that in Poland, “heavy industry has been hit hardest, leading to a rapid rise in unemployment”. European integration has also led to changes in the system of values and identity. The convergence with European norms and standards has affected the cultural and social aspects of life in the SEE countries. This included strengthening the protection of minority rights, gender equality, and other European values. EU membership is considered by CEE countries as the culmination of their dreams of returning to Europe after its artificial division (Van Oudenaren, 2021). This indicates a profound cultural and identity-based aspect of European integration for these countries. The social consequences of European integration for the SEE countries were complex and multifaceted. They included both positive aspects, such as increased mobility, improved social standards, and expanded opportunities, and challenges related to adapting to new conditions and preserving national identity within the wider European space.

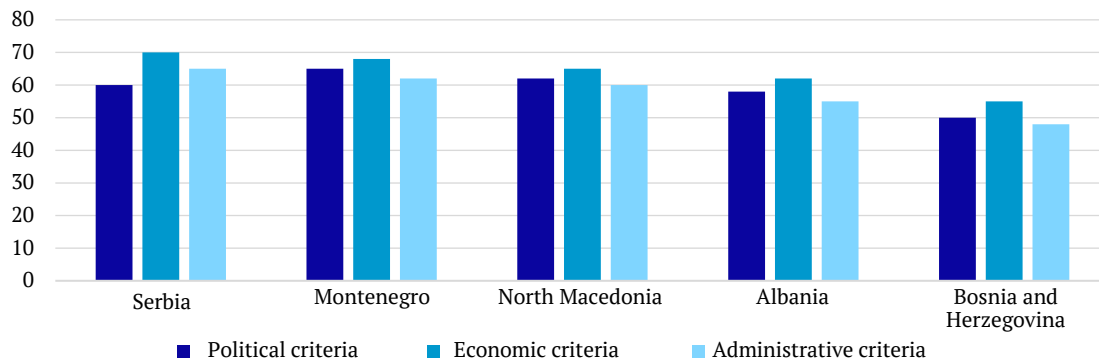
To summarise, the European integration processes in the countries of South-Eastern Europe had both common features and significant differences. These differences were conditioned by both historical and economic factors, as well as different approaches of the EU to managing integration in different periods. The key conclusion is that European integration is a complex and multifaceted process that requires careful balancing between national interests and EU requirements, as well as adaptation to new economic and social realities.

**European integration measures and reforms in the countries of South-Eastern Europe that have not yet joined the EU.** The European integration for the SEE countries that are not yet members of the European Union is a complex and multifaceted path that necessitates substantial reforms and transformations in various spheres of public life. This road to the EU is characterised by both considerable achievements and serious challenges that require constant attention and efforts on the part of the governments of these countries.

The Copenhagen criteria, established by the European Council in 1993, stays the cornerstone of the EU expansion process. They include political, economic, and administrative requirements that candidate countries must fulfil to accede the EU (Copenhagen European Council..., 1993). Meeting the Copenhagen criteria is a key condition for all countries seeking EU membership. Progress in meeting these criteria is uneven across the SEE

countries and depends on the specific circumstances of each country. Serbia, for instance, has made considerable progress in economic reforms but faces challenges in the rule of law and normalising relations with Kosovo. According to the European Commission (2023d), Serbia has made some progress in meeting the criteria for the functioning of democratic institutions and public administration reform, but further efforts are needed in the areas of judicial reform and anti-corruption. Bosnia and Herzegovina, on the other hand, faces more fundamental problems related to its complex constitutional structure. Bosnia and Herzegovina's constitutional architecture, created by

the Dayton Accords, often acts as an obstacle to the effective implementation of reforms necessary to meet the Copenhagen criteria (Kurecic & Brodanac, 2021). North Macedonia is showing progress in many areas, especially after the resolution of the dispute with Greece over the country's name. Despite significant efforts, North Macedonia still faces challenges in reforming its judiciary and fighting organised crime (Qorraj *et al.*, 2024). The Figure 1 illustrates the assessment of the progress of the SEE countries in meeting the Copenhagen criteria as of 2023. The estimates are based on expert opinions and official reports of the European Commission.



**Figure 1.** Progress of the SEE countries in meeting the Copenhagen criteria

**Notes:** the values of progress in fulfilling the political, economic, and administrative criteria (on a scale from 1 to 100) are approximate estimates of the author of this study based on the analysis of available data and expert assessments as of 2023

**Sources:** compiled by the author of this study based on European Commission reports (2023a; 2023b; 2023c; 2023d; 2023e)

Economic reforms play a key role in European integration of the SEE countries. These reforms are aimed at creating a functioning market economy and increasing the competitiveness of countries in the European market. Economic convergence with the EU is still one of the biggest challenges for the SEE countries. FDI plays a significant role in the modernisation of the economies of the SEE countries. However, the impact of FDI on convergence with the EU is ambiguous and depends on the sectoral distribution of investment and the ability of local economies to absorb technology and knowledge (Richet, 2020). For instance, in Serbia, a considerable share of FDI is directed to the manufacturing sector, which contributes to the development of export-oriented industries. According to the National Bank of Serbia, FDI in the country amounted to EUR 4.6 billion in 2022, which indicates the country's growing attractiveness to foreign investors (Foreign direct investment..., 2023).

Trade liberalisation is an essential aspect of economic reforms. The SEE countries are actively working to harmonise their trade regimes with EU standards. The implementation of the Stabilisation and Association Agreements (Stabilisation and Association..., 2003) has contributed to a noticeable increase in trade between the SEE countries and the EU. For instance, according to the European Commission, the volume of trade between the EU and North Macedonia increased by 34% between 2015 and 2022 (North Macedonia..., 2023). However, economic convergence is still slow. On average, the gross domestic product (GDP) per capita in the SEE countries is only 41% of the EU average in 2022 (Steinbach, 2024). This under-

scores the need for further structural reforms and investment in human capital and infrastructure.

The SEE countries face a series of challenges on their way towards EU accession. These challenges are diverse and include both internal and external factors. Political instability is a key challenge, especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in relations between Serbia and Kosovo. Unresolved ethnic conflicts and complex constitutional structures in some SEE countries substantially decelerate the European integration (Kurecic & Brodanac, 2021). For instance, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, a complex ethnic-based system of government often leads to political deadlocks and blockages of important reforms. Ensuring the rule of law and effectively combating corruption stay critical challenges for all SEE countries. Despite the adoption of anti-corruption legislation, its effective implementation is still problematic (Qorraj *et al.*, 2024). According to Transparency International, the Corruption Perceptions Index in the SEE countries stays significantly lower than the EU average. For example, in 2022, Albania had a score of 37 out of 100 points, while the EU average was 64 points (Corruption perceptions index, 2023).

Improving the administrative capacity of state institutions is a key challenge for the effective implementation of reforms and management of the European integration process. Limited administrative capacity often leads to delays in the implementation of the *acquis communautaire* and inefficient use of EU financial aid. For example, according to the European Commission, the target disbursement rate for IPA II by 2020 was set at 100% for

the IPA 2014, 2015, and 2016 programme years, 70% for IPA 2017 and 30% for IPA 2018 (Instrument for pre-accession..., 2020). This suggests that improving absorptive capacity and administrative capacity is a key priority for the effective use of EU pre-accession aid.

Economic challenges include the need to further modernise the economy, improve competitiveness, and create a favourable business environment. The SEE countries are facing the problem of emigration of highly skilled professionals, which adversely affects human capital and innovation potential. According to the United Nations (Youth unemployment and underemployment..., 2022), the youth unemployment rate in North Macedonia in 2022 was 35.5%, one of the highest in Europe.

The geopolitical situation also affects the European integration of the SEE countries. The growing influence of Russia and China in the region poses additional challenges to the European integration aspirations of the SEE countries. Considerable Chinese investment in Serbia's infrastructure under the One Belt, One Road initiative has raised concerns about possible conflicts of interest and the compliance of these projects with EU standards (Kurecic & Brodanac, 2021).

A. Steinbach (2024) addresses the factor of "expansion fatigue" among some EU member states, which may slow down the integration process. Scepticism about further EU expansion, especially after Brexit, creates additional obstacles for the SEE countries on their way towards membership. To overcome these challenges, the SEE countries and the EU are taking various measures. Specifically, the EU introduced a new methodology for the enlargement process in 2020, which makes provision for clearer criteria for assessing progress and the possibility of reversing

the negotiations in case of lack of progress. G. Qorraj *et al.* (2024) emphasise that "the new methodology aims to increase the credibility of the enlargement process and ensure its greater predictability". For their part, the SEE countries continue to implement reforms and strengthen regional cooperation. A vital step in this regard was the creation of the Western Balkans Regional Economic Area in 2017, which aims to deepen economic integration in the region and prepare countries for participation in the EU single market (Neskovic, 2019).

Table 1 illustrates the diversity of progress and challenges faced by the countries of South-Eastern Europe on their path towards European integration. Notably, the data in the table reflects the situation as of 2023 and may change over time. Analysing the table, several key observations can be made. Even though all countries have candidate status, there are considerable differences in the pace of their integration. Montenegro and Serbia have made the most progress in their accession negotiations, while Bosnia and Herzegovina is still waiting for the start of negotiations. There is a significant difference in the economic development of the countries in the region. Montenegro has the highest GDP per capita relative to the EU average (50%), while Albania has the lowest (32%). This underscores the need for further economic reforms and convergence with the EU. All countries in the region score low in the Corruption Perceptions Index, which indicates that efforts to fight corruption and strengthen the rule of law need to be intensified. Unemployment stays high in all countries of the region, especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina (13.3%) and Montenegro (15.3%). This suggests the necessity of further structural reforms to create jobs and increase the competitiveness of economies.

**Table 1.** Comparative table of European integration processes in the countries of South-Eastern Europe

| Criterion                                           | Serbia                                 | Montenegro                                              | North Macedonia                        | Albania                                       | Bosnia and Herzegovina                       |
|-----------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|
| Status in European integration (2023)               | Candidate, negotiations have started   | Candidate, negotiations have started                    | Candidate, negotiations have started   | Candidate, negotiations have started          | Candidate, negotiations have not started     |
| Year of application for EU membership               | 2009                                   | 2008                                                    | 2004                                   | 2009                                          | 2016                                         |
| Progress in meeting political criteria (1-100)      | 60                                     | 65                                                      | 62                                     | 58                                            | 50                                           |
| Progress in meeting economic criteria (1-100)       | 70                                     | 68                                                      | 65                                     | 62                                            | 55                                           |
| Progress in meeting administrative criteria (1-100) | 65                                     | 62                                                      | 60                                     | 55                                            | 48                                           |
| GDP per capita as a % of the EU average (2022)      | 43%                                    | 50%                                                     | 38%                                    | 32%                                           | 33%                                          |
| Corruption Perceptions Index (2022)                 | 36                                     | 45                                                      | 39                                     | 37                                            | 34                                           |
| Unemployment rate (2024)                            | 9.4%                                   | 15.3%                                                   | 14.5%                                  | 11%                                           | 13.3%                                        |
| Key challenges                                      | Relations with Kosovo, judicial reform | Fighting corruption and reforming public administration | Interethnic relations, judicial reform | Property rights, public administration reform | Constitutional reform, interethnic relations |

Table 1. Continued

| Criterion        | Serbia                                 | Montenegro                         | North Macedonia                        | Albania         | Bosnia and Herzegovina     |
|------------------|----------------------------------------|------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|-----------------|----------------------------|
| Key achievements | Economic reforms, regional cooperation | Progress in accession negotiations | Resolving the name dispute with Greece | Judicial reform | Application for membership |

**Notes:** The values of progress in fulfilling political, economic, and administrative criteria (on a scale from 1 to 100) are approximate estimates of the author of this study based on the analysis of available data and expert assessments as of 2023.

**Sources:** developed by the author of this study based on findings by A. Steinbach (2024), Corruption perceptions index (2023), International Labour Organization data on unemployment (Unemployment Rates..., 2024), European Commission (2023a; 2023b; 2023c; 2023d; 2023e)

The specific challenges faced by the countries of South-Eastern Europe on their path towards European integration may seem unique, but an analysis of the experience of some EU member states suggests that analogous problems have already been successfully addressed within the European Union. The issue of constitutional reforms is an important one, especially for Bosnia and Herzegovina. In this respect, Belgium's experience is extremely instructive. Belgium's transformation from a unitary to a federal state through a series of constitutional reforms demonstrates how complex ethnic and linguistic differences can be effectively addressed (Van Haute & Deschouwer, 2020). The Belgian model of federalism and the distribution of powers between different levels of government could serve as a basis for reforming the complex constitutional structure of Bosnia and Herzegovina. This would allow for a balance between the interests of different ethnic groups, while creating an effective system of governance at the national level.

In terms of interethnic relations, which are a key challenge for North Macedonia, it is worth paying attention to the experience of Finland. The Finnish model of ensuring the rights of the Swedish-speaking minority through official bilingualism and cultural autonomy (Lindroos, 2021) is an example of how minority rights protection can contribute to social cohesion and stability. Applying an analogous approach in North Macedonia could help improve relations between Macedonians and the Albanian minority, creating an atmosphere of mutual respect and equality.

In the area of judicial reforms, which are critical for all countries in the region, the experience of Bulgaria and Romania may be useful. The reformation of the judiciary in these countries under EU supervision through the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism, albeit challenging, has demonstrated the significance of consistency and external monitoring in reforms (Cheesman & Badó, 2023). This underscores the need for close cooperation with the EU in reforming the judiciary for the countries of South-Eastern Europe that are seeking European integration.

Finally, in the fight against corruption, which stays a fundamental problem for many countries in the region, including Albania, it is worth paying attention to the experience of Estonia. Estonia's significant success in digitalising public services has substantially reduced opportunities for corruption (Burzyński, 2022). The introduction of analogous technological solutions in South-Eastern European countries could be an effective tool in the fight against corruption, increasing transparency and efficiency of public administration.

Thus, the practices of EU member states in addressing analogous challenges demonstrates that despite the complexity of the problems faced by the countries of South-Eastern Europe, there are successful models for addressing them within the EU. However, it is important to understand that direct copying of these models may be ineffective. Instead, this experience needs to be carefully adapted to the local context, considering the specifics of each country.

Thus, employing the experience of EU member states can become a catalyst for accelerating the European integration process of South-Eastern European countries. This will not only help to overcome specific obstacles but will also contribute to a more profound understanding of European values and principles. Ultimately, such an approach could lead to a more stable, democratic, and economically developed region, ready for full integration into the European community.

The diversity of challenges and levels of progress in the SEE countries requires an individual approach from the EU that accommodates the specifics of each country, while maintaining common standards and requirements. This means that although the general entry criteria stays the same for all countries, the ways to achieve them may differ. The successful integration of the SEE countries into the EU requires not only the efforts of the candidate countries, but also the EU's readiness to adapt its institutions and policies to expansion. This includes, specifically, reforming the EU's decision-making process, reviewing budgetary policy, and adapting agricultural policy.

Regional cooperation is an essential aspect of the European integration process. Strengthening regional cooperation not only contributes to economic integration and political stability in the region, but also demonstrates the readiness of the SEE countries to integrate more closely with the EU. An example of such cooperation is the Mini-Schengen initiative (Bregu, 2024), launched by Serbia, Albania, and North Macedonia in 2019, which aims to create a free movement area for people, goods, services, and capital in the region.

However, regional cooperation should not be considered an alternative to EU membership, but rather as a complement to the European integration process. This is an important caveat, as there are fears that increased regional cooperation could be used by some EU member states as an argument to delay further enlargement. Public support is also an essential factor in the European integration process. A. Steinbach (2024) cites survey data showing that "the level of support for EU membership among the population of the SEE countries stays high, although it has declined slightly in recent years".

To summarise, the European integration of the countries of South-Eastern Europe is complex and multidimensional. It requires not only the fulfilment of formal criteria, but also in-depth structural reforms, strengthening of democratic institutions and the rule of law, development of a competitive economy, and overcoming historical conflicts. Despite the multitude of challenges, the countries of the region are making progress in many areas, albeit at different rates. The success of the European integration process depends on the joint efforts of the SEE countries, the European Union, and the international community. The integration of the SEE countries into the EU is not only a technical process of fulfilling the criteria, but also a strategic choice that can ensure stability, prosperity, and peace across the European continent.

**Prospects for further European integration of the countries of South-Eastern Europe.** The geopolitical landscape of South-Eastern Europe has undergone significant changes in recent decades, which has substantially affected the region's European integration processes. The key factor determining the geopolitical dynamics in the SEE is the growing competition between the European Union and other global players, specifically Russia and China.

The EU has traditionally considered the SEE as an area of strategic interest, seeking to ensure stability and prosperity on its south-eastern borders. The growing influence of Russia and China in the region poses additional challenges to the European integration aspirations of the SEE countries. This is manifested in increased investment by these states, especially in infrastructure projects, which may lead to increased economic and political dependence of the countries of the region on these external actors (Steinbach, 2024).

The Russian Federation, specifically, is actively using its influence in the energy sector, which is critical for many of the SEE countries. According to the European Commission (2023d), Serbia stays heavily dependent on Russian gas, accounting for about 89% of its natural gas imports (Obradovic, 2023). This dependence creates potential risks for energy security and can be used as an instrument of political pressure. China, for its part, is implementing the One Belt, One Road initiative in the region, investing heavily in infrastructure projects (Vänttinen, 2023). While these investments contribute to the economic development of the region, they also raise concerns about possible conflicts of interest and the projects' compliance with EU standards.

In response to these challenges, the EU is strengthening its presence and influence in the region. Specifically, in 2020, a new methodology for the expansion process was introduced, which provides clearer criteria for assessing the progress of candidate countries and an increased emphasis on the rule of law (Tilev, 2020). This initiative is aimed at boosting confidence in the expansion process and making it more predictable.

The resolution of bilateral disputes between countries in the region stays an essential geopolitical factor. An example of a positive development in this area is the resolution of the long-standing dispute between Greece and North Macedonia over the name of the latter, which paved the way for the start of negotiations on North Macedonia's accession to the EU (Qorraj *et al.*, 2024). At the same time,

unresolved issues, such as relations between Serbia and Kosovo, continue to pose obstacles to European integration.

In the context of global geopolitical changes, including growing tensions between the West and Russia, as well as increased global competition with China, the significance of the SEE for the EU is growing. The integration of the SEE countries into the EU is not only a technical process of fulfilling the criteria, but also a strategic choice that can ensure stability, prosperity, and peace across the entire European continent (Kurecic & Brodanac, 2021).

The economic prospects of the countries of South-Eastern Europe are intricately linked to their progress in the European integration. Although the region shows some economic potential, it still faces considerable challenges on its path to reaching the level of development of EU countries. According to the World Bank (Western Balkans Regular..., 2024), the average GDP growth rate in the Western Balkans in 2022 was 3.4%, which is a positive indicator, especially considering the global economic challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and geopolitical tensions. However, economic convergence with the EU is still one of the greatest challenges for the SEE countries. On average, the GDP per capita in the SEE countries is only 41% of the EU average in 2022, indicating a significant gap in economic development.

An important aspect of economic prospects is the development of trade relations with the EU. According to the European Commission (2023), the EU stays the principal trading partner of the Western Balkans, accounting for more than 70% of the region's total trade. The implementation of the Stabilisation and Association Agreements (SAAs) has contributed to a considerable increase in trade between the SEE countries and the EU. For instance, trade between the EU and North Macedonia grew by 34% between 2015 and 2022 (North Macedonia..., 2023).

However, the region's economic potential is still constrained by a series of structural problems. Specifically, high unemployment stays a serious challenge. According to the International Labour Organization (2023), the unemployment rate in the Western Balkans in 2022 ranged from 9.4% in Serbia to 15.3% in Montenegro. The problem of youth unemployment is particularly acute. For example, in North Macedonia, the youth unemployment rate in 2022 was 35.5%, which is one of the highest in Europe (Youth unemployment and underemployment..., 2022).

To overcome these challenges and realise the economic potential of the SEE countries, various reforms and initiatives are being implemented. Specifically, a vital step was the creation of the Western Balkans Regional Economic Area in 2017, which aims to deepen economic integration in the region and prepare countries for participation in the EU single market. According to M. Bregu (2024), "...this initiative aims to create a free movement area for people, goods, services, and capital in the region, which can contribute to economic growth and competitiveness". The EU also actively supports the economic development of the region through various financial instruments. Specifically, the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA III) for 2021-2027 makes provision for the allocation of EUR 14.2 billion to support EU candidate and potential candidate countries (Instrument for pre-accession..., 2020). These funds are used to support reforms,

develop infrastructure, increase competitiveness, and stimulate economic growth. The development of the digital economy and innovation is also an essential aspect of economic prospects. The EU supports these areas through various programmes such as Horizon Europe and Digital Europe. However, the SEE countries are still falling short of the EU average in terms of innovation and digitalisation of the economy (Chistruga & Crudu, 2021). This underscores the need for further investment in these areas to improve the competitiveness of the region's economies.

Institutional and social aspects play a key role in the European integration of the countries of South-Eastern Europe. Successful integration requires not only economic reforms, but also in-depth institutional changes and social transformations. Another essential aspect of institutional development is to improve the administrative capacity of state bodies. Limited administrative capacity often leads to delays in the implementation of the *acquis communautaire* and inefficient use of EU financial aid (Qorraj *et al.*, 2024). This points to the need to further strengthen the institutional capacity of the SEE countries. An important social aspect is ensuring social cohesion and inclusiveness. European integration processes can lead to considerable social transformations that can cause tensions in society (Giner, 2022). This is particularly relevant in countries with ethnically diverse populations, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia.

The EU supports the social development of the SEE countries through various programmes and initiatives. Specifically, the Erasmus+ programme promotes the mobility of students and teachers, which increases the educational potential of the region. According to the European Commission (2023), in 2022, over 30,000 students from the Western Balkans took part in Erasmus+ exchange programmes (Reilly & Sweeney, 2022).

A valuable tool for promoting institutional and social change is the conditionality mechanism that the EU uses in its relations with candidate countries. This mechanism stipulates that progress in accession negotiations and financial assistance are contingent on the performance of certain conditions, including the rule of law, democracy, and human rights. The conditionality mechanism is a powerful tool for stimulating reforms, but its effectiveness depends on the EU's consistency and credibility in applying it (Steinbach, 2024).

In the context of institutional changes, it is also important to note the need for the EU itself to adapt to potential enlargement. The successful integration of the SEE countries into the EU requires not only the efforts of the candidate countries, but also the EU's readiness to adapt its institutions and policies to expansion (Albu Comănescu, 2021). This includes, specifically, reforming the EU's decision-making process, reviewing budgetary policy, and adapting agricultural policy.

Social aspects of European integration also include labour migration and labour mobility. On the one hand, the freedom of movement of labour is one of the key principles of the EU and can contribute to economic development and cultural exchange. On the other hand, massive emigration of skilled workers can have negative consequences for countries of origin, leading to the emigration of highly skilled professionals and demographic problems (Vukov, 2023).

This requires the development of a balanced policy that would facilitate circular migration and return migration.

Education and science are also important aspects of social integration. The EU is actively supporting the development of higher education and research in the SEE countries through programmes such as Horizon Europe and the European Research Area. However, the SEE countries are still falling short of the EU average in terms of innovation development and scientific productivity (Chistruga & Crudu, 2021). Therefore, this highlights the need for further investment in these areas and strengthened cooperation with EU research institutions.

In summary, the institutional and social aspects of the future integration of the SEE countries into the EU are complex and multidimensional. They require not only technical changes in legislation and administrative structures, but also profound transformations in social consciousness, culture, and identity. Successful integration depends on the ability of the SEE countries to effectively implement the necessary reforms, as well as on the EU's willingness to provide the necessary support and adapt its own structures to enlargement.

## Discussion

The findings of the study of European integration processes in the countries of South-Eastern Europe revealed a complex picture of economic, political, and social transformations. The economic convergence of the SEE countries with the EU stays one of the key challenges of the European integration process. S. Economides (2020) underlined the complexity of this process, which is confirmed by the results of the analysis. However, in contrast to the pessimistic forecasts of S. Economides (2020), the data obtained indicate positive trends. Specifically, there has been an increase in trade between the SEE and the EU countries, as well as a gradual improvement in economic performance in some countries of the region. Notably, these positive trends are not uniform across the region. Some countries, such as Montenegro and Serbia, are making faster progress, while others, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina and Albania, face more difficulties. This heterogeneity points to the need for a differentiated approach to the economic integration of different SEE countries.

The findings indicate the potential for economic growth and deeper integration, provided that effective reforms are implemented, and the EU continues to support them. Structural reforms aimed at improving the competitiveness of the SEE countries' economies and attracting foreign direct investment are particularly important. Thus, the present study offers a more optimistic view of the prospects for economic convergence of the SEE countries with the EU than presented by S. Economides (2020). However, this optimism is cautious and is based on the need for further efforts on the part of both the SEE countries and the EU to ensure sustainable economic convergence.

The findings of T. Sekulić (2020) confirm the problem of high unemployment in South-Eastern Europe, especially among young people. The researcher focused on the structural economic problems of the region, which lead to persistent unemployment. The results of the analysis correlate with T. Sekulić's conclusions but offer a more nuanced view of the situation. In contrast to the pessimistic

position of T. Sekulić, the data obtained indicate that there are active measures to overcome these challenges. Specifically, the creation of the Western Balkans Regional Economic Area is considered an important initiative aimed at stimulating economic growth and creating new jobs. Notably, the effectiveness of these measures may differ from country to country in the region. For instance, while Montenegro and Serbia have made some progress in reducing unemployment, the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia stays more challenging. This points to the need for a differentiated approach to addressing unemployment in different SEE countries.

The analysis also reveals the potential positive impact of European integration processes on the labour market in the region. Deepening economic integration and preparing countries for participation in the EU single market can help create new employment and professional development opportunities, especially for young people. The geopolitical aspect of the SEE's European integration, specifically Russia's influence, confirms the observations of R. Panagiotou (2021). Serbia's energy dependence on Russian gas does pose considerable challenges to European integration, as the researcher notes. This dependence can be used as an instrument of political pressure and potentially threatens the region's energy security. However, contrary to the researcher's predominantly negative assessment, the data suggest that this situation stimulates the processes of energy diversification in the region. The SEE countries are actively seeking alternative energy sources and working to improve energy efficiency, which could reduce their dependence on Russian gas in the future.

Continuing the consideration of the geopolitical influence on the European integration of the SEE, it is worth paying attention to the study by N. Markovic Khaze & X. Wang (2021), which focused on China's role in the region. The researchers emphasise China's growing economic influence through significant investments in the infrastructure of the SEE countries, including Serbia, within the framework of the One Belt One Road Initiative. In contrast to the researchers' predominantly negative assessment of this impact, the findings of this study suggest potential positive effects of Chinese investment on the economic development of the region. Specifically, these investments contribute to the modernisation of transport and energy infrastructure, which can increase the competitiveness of the economies of the SEE countries. However, it is important to note the need to ensure that these projects meet EU standards and avoid creating excessive economic dependence on China.

Analogously, China's significant investment in Serbia's infrastructure within the framework of the One Belt One Road Initiative poses both potential risks and opportunities for economic development. These investments contribute to the modernisation of transport and energy infrastructure, which can increase the competitiveness of the Serbian economy and other countries in the region. However, it is vital to ensure that these projects meet EU standards and avoid creating excessive economic dependence on China.

As noted by L. Scazzieri (2021), the uneven progress in implementing the Copenhagen criteria among the SEE countries confirms the need to "revitalise" European policy. The scores range from 70 in Serbia for economic

criteria to 48 in Bosnia and Herzegovina for administrative criteria. This difference indicates the need for a differentiated approach of the EU to the countries of the region. However, in contrast to the researcher's focus on the political aspects, the data show concrete economic and administrative indicators of progress. Serbia, for instance, has made considerable progress in economic reforms but still faces challenges in the rule of law. Montenegro, on the other hand, shows more balanced progress with a score of 65 on the political and 68 on the economic criteria.

The analysis of regional cooperation confirms the conclusions of E. Tota (2020) on the significance of initiatives such as the Berlin Process. However, contrary to the researcher's political focus, the data demonstrate concrete economic effects, specifically through the creation of the Western Balkans Regional Economic Area. This initiative promotes deeper economic integration in the region, stimulating trade and investment. Furthermore, it helps the SEE countries to better prepare for participation in the EU single market, which is a crucial step towards full membership.

Significant amounts of EU financial support, including EUR 14.2 billion under IPA III for 2021-2027, confirm S. Lange's (2022) thesis that the Western Balkans are returning to the EU's focus. These funds are used to support reforms, develop infrastructure, increase competitiveness, and stimulate economic growth in the region. However, contrary to the researcher's optimistic forecasts, the data reveals problems with the effective use of these funds. This points to the need to further strengthen the administrative capacity of the SEE countries and improve the mechanisms for managing financial aid.

An analysis of bilateral disputes, such as the name issue between Greece and North Macedonia, confirms the findings of I. Armakolas & G. Triantafyllou (2020) on the complexity of regional relations. This issue has long been an obstacle to North Macedonia's European integration, and its resolution in 2018 was a vital step forward. However, in contrast to the researchers' focus on the role of Greece, the data shows a broader impact of these relations on European integration processes in the region. Specifically, they demonstrate the significance of resolving bilateral disputes for progress in European integration and the need for the EU to be actively involved in mediating and facilitating dialogue between the countries of the region.

The findings of the study partially confirm the thesis of L.S. Talani (2020) about the complexity and ambiguity of EU policies towards the Balkans. However, in contrast to the researcher's focus on the political aspects, the data demonstrate the concrete economic and social consequences of these policies for the SEE countries. Specifically, there has been a positive impact on trade and investment, but at the same time, there are challenges related to adaptation to EU standards and the need for complex reforms.

Overall, the findings of the study demonstrate that the European integration of the SEE countries is a complex, multidimensional process that requires a comprehensive approach. In contrast to many previous studies that focus on individual aspects, the data show that economic, political, institutional, and social factors are closely interconnected in this process. This underscores the need for

a more integrated approach to the study and management of European integration processes in the region. Such an approach should factor in not only the formal criteria for EU membership, but also the specific challenges and opportunities of each country, as well as regional dynamics in general. Only through a comprehensive understanding and addressing of all these factors can sustainable progress in the European integration of South-Eastern Europe be achieved.

### Conclusions

An analysis of the specific features of European integration processes in the countries of South-Eastern Europe that are already members of the EU revealed a complex picture of economic, political, and social transformations. The countries of the region have demonstrated different models of economic growth: Southern European countries have developed a consumption-oriented model based on debt financing, while Central and Eastern European countries have opted for an export-oriented model that is largely dependent on foreign direct investment. This difference in strategies had profound consequences for the European integration process, affecting the economic stability and competitiveness of the countries. Institutional reforms and legislative adaptation have been critical aspects of the European integration process, requiring considerable efforts and resources to fundamentally restructure legal and institutional systems. The social impacts of European integration have been significant and multifaceted, including increased labour mobility, the introduction of European standards in social protection and labour relations, and changes in the system of values and identity.

The study of European integration processes in the countries of South-Eastern Europe reveals a series of important trends and challenges that are of significant practical importance for the formation of EU policy and development strategies of the countries of the region. The analysis of economic growth models demonstrates the significance of choosing the suitable economic development strategy for successful European integration. The experience of countries that have chosen the export-oriented model indicates the potential benefits of this approach for the SEE countries. This can serve as a guideline for shaping economic policy in the region, aimed at increasing competitiveness and attracting foreign direct investment. The uneven progress in implementing the Copenhagen criteria underscores the need for a differentiated approach by the EU to the countries of the region. This may include developing individual roadmaps for each country, considering their specific challenges and opportunities. Such a strategy could improve the efficiency of the European integration process and ensure more targeted support from the EU.

The identified problems with the rule of law and corruption point to the need to strengthen mechanisms for monitoring and supporting reforms in these areas. This could include developing more effective tools for measuring progress and providing technical assistance to strengthen justice institutions and anti-corruption bodies.

The geopolitical challenges posed by the influence of external actors in the region underscore the significance of developing a comprehensive EU strategy for the SEE countries. This strategy should accommodate not only the economic aspects of integration, but also energy security and strategic investments. Specifically, it is important to develop alternative energy projects and strengthen control over foreign investment in critical infrastructure. The elevated level of unemployment, especially among young people, points to the necessity of developing targeted employment and skills development programmes. This could include expanding exchange and internship programmes for young people from the SEE countries in the EU, as well as supporting the development of innovative sectors of the economy.

Overall, the findings of the presented study underline the need for a more integrated and strategic approach to the European integration of the SEE countries. This implies not only a focus on meeting formal criteria, but also the development of a long-term vision for the region's development as part of the EU. Such an approach could include the creation of special mechanisms for coordinating EU policy towards the SEE countries, strengthening regional cooperation, and developing innovative financial and technical support instruments.

Limitations of this study include the difficulty of obtaining complete and up-to-date data on all aspects of European integration processes in the region, as well as the rapidly changing geopolitical situation that may affect the prospects for European integration. Prospects for further research include a more detailed analysis of the impact of the new methodology of the EU enlargement process on the countries of the region, an investigation of the effectiveness of regional cooperation initiatives, such as the Western Balkans Regional Economic Area, and a study of the long-term socio-economic consequences of European integration for countries that have already become EU members. Furthermore, a major area for future research is to analyse the impact of global challenges, such as climate change and digital transformation, on European integration processes in the region.

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### Conflict of Interest

None.

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