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# **Environmental democracy in the Western Balkans between dependent capitalism and integration into the European Union**

Nebojsa Vukadinovic

► **To cite this version:**

Nebojsa Vukadinovic. Environmental democracy in the Western Balkans between dependent capitalism and integration into the European Union. 2023, 13 p. <hal-04124597>

**HAL Id: hal-04124597**

**<https://sciencespo.hal.science/hal-04124597v1>**

Submitted on 10 Jun 2023

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HAL Authorization



## ÖGfE Policy Brief 12 2023



By Nebojsa Vukadinovic  
Vienna, 7 June 2023  
ISSN 2305-2635

# Environmental democracy in the Western Balkans between dependent capitalism and integration into the European Union

## Policy Recommendations

1. The active consultation and participation of civil society organisations in the preparation and monitoring of the implementation of plans and strategies regarding all sectors of energy, environment, and transport in the Western Balkan countries should be supported. In addition, the exchange of experiences between the Western Balkan countries on these tasks should be organised.
2. The role of academic and research institutions in the decision-making process for the elaboration and implementation of public policies in the environment sector in the Western Balkans should be strengthened, and academic research on regional cooperation should be promoted.
3. The synergies between the two macro-regional strategies of the European Union (EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region, EU Strategy for the Danube Region) in the area of environment should be reinforced. Regional cross-border cooperation in the environment via instruments of pre-accession programmes and projects should be strengthened, as should the role of international donors.

## Abstract

Environmental issues in the Western Balkans are at the centre of civic mobilisation against the negative effects of various types of pollution. In addition, during the post-socialist period, a dependent capitalism has emerged in the Western Balkan countries, particularly as a result of increased dependence on foreign investments and international aid. In this context, this Policy Brief analyses the economic development and consequences

of dependent capitalism on the environment. It also points out how the process of European integration impacts environmental issues as well as the role of local actors. The significant increase in civil society actors in the field of the environment has created a new situation in recent years. In this sense, this Policy Brief questions the concept of environmental democracy in the Western Balkans.



# Environmental democracy in the Western Balkans between dependent capitalism and integration into the European Union

## Introduction

The concept of “environmental and ecological democracy”<sup>1</sup> has been developed over the last three decades through extensive literature.<sup>2</sup> The environmental democracy index is based on several composite indicators with a clear distinction between three pillars: first, free access to information on environmental problems and quality; second, participation in decision-making; and third, enforcement of environmental laws. These indicators can be considered fundamental rights for citizens. They are also based on the possible impacts of citizens on decision-making processes and public policies. The contribution of civil society organisations to the Green Agenda in the Western Balkans as part of the accession process has been highlighted by the European Union (EU) and embedded in several declarations.<sup>3</sup> Is it therefore possible to speak of an “environmental democracy” in the Western Balkans? What are the consequences of dependent capitalism on the environment in the Western Balkans? How does the enlargement process affect the consideration of environmental issues in public policies?

## The energy sector and its consequences for the environment

The energy sector in the Western Balkans is still characterised by insufficient and obsolete infrastructure, high dependence on fossil fuels,<sup>4</sup> late adoption of renewables except for residential biomass and hydropower, limited energy efficiency, high rates of energy poverty despite generally high levels of subsidies, limited market mechanisms, and private sector participation. The region is therefore facing a unique double transition: first, moving from centralised state-controlled systems to open and competitive markets, and second, moving towards decarbonisation. These are at the same time the most important pillars of the Economic and Investment Plan for the

- 1 Walter F. BABERAND, Robert V. BARTLETT, *Deliberative Environmental Politics - Democracy & Ecological Rationality*, Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 2005, 276 pp.
- 2 Jonathan PICKERING, Karin BACKSTRAND, David SHLOSBERG, *Between environmental end ecological democracy: theory and practice at the democracy-environment nexus*, *Journal and Environmental Policy and Planning*, Vol. 22, 2020, Issue 1, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1523908X.2020.1703276>.
- 3 See: <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/our-work/opinions-information-reports/opinions/contribution-civil-society-green-agenda-and-sustainable-development-western-balkans-part-eu-accession-process-own/related-links-rex-528>.
- 4 See: <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/201391544823541838/pdf/Western-Balkans-Energy-Directions-Paper.pdf>.



Western Balkans (EIP)<sup>5</sup> of €9 billion announced by the European Union for the period 2021-2027 that are in line with the Green Agenda.

***The region is facing a unique double transition: first, moving from centralised state-controlled systems to open and competitive markets, and second, moving towards decarbonisation.***

Environmental problems are linked to dilapidated energy systems and the dependence on traditional energy sources (mainly coal). The high air pollution in some areas and the high water pollution are related to the energy heritage from the socialist period of the former Yugoslavia. Air pollution, particularly in urban and industrial zones, notably stemming from outdated coal-fired power plants, is also a major cross-border issue in the region. Also, drinking water supply and the discharge of wastewater are additional key concerns in the Western Balkans. At the same time, the region is rich in biodiversity, which needs to be protected, while sustainable management of water supply, wastewater, and waste disposal is crucial. In addition, poor waste management is linked to low investments in this sector and low municipal incomes.

***The number of non-governmental organisations dealing with environmental issues has increased significantly in recent years.***

In the recent period, Chinese investments in mines in Serbia and in steel have increased and impacted the environment.<sup>6</sup> Civil society organisations at local level have reacted with proposals.<sup>7</sup> In addition, the mini-hydropower plants in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina have caused significant damage. The use of lignite also aggravates the pollution situation. Added to this are the investment projects of multinational companies, such as Rio Tinto in Serbia, which have provoked disputes and environmental conflicts. The Western Balkan region is therefore facing a unique double transition: moving from centralised state-controlled systems to open and competitive markets and decarbonisation. These are, at the same time, the most important pillars of the EIP that are in line with the Green Agenda.<sup>8</sup> During the past decade, there has been an increase in awareness concerning environmental questions in the Western Balkans. The number of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) dealing with environmental issues has increased significantly in recent years. Therefore, the debates on energy, the question of increasing investment in renewable energies, and the manner in which such investments are to be made are relatively present. In this context, local governments have adopted national energy strategies that have the main goal of providing a secure energy supply and promoting compatible energy reforms in accordance with the Energy Community Treaty (ECT).<sup>9</sup> In addition, a regional approach to planning energy sector investments is expected to decrease the overall investments needed to meet regional energy demand through increased energy trade. The transition from highly polluting coal to more sustainable and green sources of energy production is a

5 See: <https://www.wbif.eu/eip>.

6 Collective study, Unapredjenje upravljanja kontaminiranim lokalitetima u Srbiji, Institut za javno zdravlje Srbije, 2020.

7 See: <https://mibor.rs/projekti/b-o-r-za-zivotnu-sredinu/>.

8 See: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_20\\_1811](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_1811).

9 See: <http://www.energycommunity.org>.



key point for the region to meet its commitments under the Paris Agreement. The war in Ukraine since 2022 has also highlighted the energy question in the Western Balkans and the question of dependence on Russia. The transition from highly polluting coal to more sustainable and green sources of energy production will be key for the region to meet its commitments under the Paris Agreement. Future-proof gas pipelines supporting the low-carbon transition and transit of decarbonised gas and hydrogen will play a key role, as will performant electricity transmission lines and smart grids for increased use of renewable energy sources in line with the region's potential.

***The transition from highly polluting coal to more sustainable and green sources of energy production will be key for the region to meet its commitments under the Paris Agreement.***

## **Economic heritage and environmental issues: towards a dependent capitalism?**

Since the Second World War and up to the present day, changes in production and consumption patterns have had an impact on the environment<sup>10</sup> in the Western Balkans and evolved according to the phases of economic development. Insofar as a "social market economy" was in place, production followed the logic of competition. The influences of agricultural production were also felt on air quality, ecosystems, and waste. Energy consumption and production also had a negative influence on air quality and gas emissions. In addition, individual and collective mobility, and the development of transport during the period from 1952 to 1990 had a negative influence on air quality and gas emissions. During this period, the self-management system in which there was a logic of competition relied on an intensive use of labour with productivity gains. This had negative effects on the environment. From the 1990s to the present day, rail transport has been reduced considerably because of wars and a lack of investment. Thus, road transport has become the main mode of transport between cities, thus contributing to air pollution.

***From the 1990s to the present day, rail transport has been reduced considerably because of wars and a lack of investment.***

The period of macro-economic stabilisation of the 1990s and the "blocked transition"<sup>11</sup> of the 2000s in the economic and political sphere have profoundly modified social stratification, with a minority of winners and a mass of losers. This period is also characterised by a loss of values and a profound change in beliefs. In this context of crisis and conflict, the informal economy and trafficking have become the norm. After a decade of wars in the 1990s and for more than two decades, economic reforms have been introduced in rapid waves and slowdowns, which is characteristic of a shock

10 Zoran OSTRIĆ, Ekološki pokreti u Jugoslaviji - građa za proučavanje razdoblja 1971-1991, Socijalna ekologija, No. 1, January-March 1992, pp.27-30.

11 The concept of "Blocked transition" is used by Mladen Lazic, Professor of Sociology at the University of Belgrade in: Mirjana MOROKVASIC, Nebojsa VUKADINOVIC (dir.), Sortir de la transition bloquée: Serbie-Monténégro, Revue d'études comparatives Est-Ouest, Vol. 35, 2004.



therapy transition followed by a “stop and go” period. The priority is placed on rapid privatisations and the closure of many unprofitable companies as well as banks. Since two decades, the focus has been on foreign direct investment (FDI), which has not arrived at the expected level. Since the beginning of 2000, a neo-liberal economic model has been put in place in all Western Balkan countries, which has become a constant in the formation of capitalism<sup>12</sup> in the region. In this context, the question of the role of state authorities and regulations is crucial. For more than two decades, the priority for most of the Western Balkan states has been focused on economic and legislative reforms. Economic reforms have also been carried out without any real reflection on the consequences of each sequence of reforms on other sequences. For example, privatisations have been carried out rapidly in some cases since 2001, sometimes without corporate restructuring and without debates on which sequence should be done first (for example, privatisation of banks or privatisation of companies or at the same time). Moreover, financial system reforms have been slower than privatisations of companies. In this context, there have been in many privatisations for the benefit of the old elites from the 1990s. Environmental issues became priorities recently in comparison with reforms in other sectors.

## Environmental issues and civil society in the Western Balkans

Since the 1990s, following pressure from environmental movements, the question of the consequences of productivity on the environment has led to economic studies that take environmental issues into account. Among these, the “Michael Porter Hypothesis” places the environment at the service of productivity and competitiveness.<sup>13</sup> Here, regulations and standards are central because they push companies to transform their production methods. Michael Porter’s hypothesis is thus based on performance and profits from changes in production methods. Even if, according to this assumption, the winners are on both sides – environment and companies – in the end, there are all the same “winners and losers”.

In most of the Western Balkan countries, during the period 1960-1991, the legal framework and public policies related to the environment followed the evolution of Yugoslav socialism. In that period, the environmental activism of the “Gorani movement”<sup>14</sup> was organised as a youth organisation similar to the organisation of the youth socialist organisation. The ideological dimension was therefore present in the law and in youth organisations. Since 1991 and until nowadays, many legislations have been adopted in all post-Yugoslav countries, with a lack of participation of NGOs and the academic sector in the preparation, definition, and implementation of the legislative framework in all Western Balkan countries.

***A dependent capitalism has emerged in the Western Balkans, particularly as a result of increased dependence on foreign investments.***

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- 12 Bruno AMABLE, Les cinq capitalismes. Diversité des systèmes économiques et sociaux dans la mondialisation, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 2005, p. 378.
  - 13 Olivier BOIRAL, Concilier environnement et compétitivité, ou la quête de l'éco-efficience, Revue française de gestion 2005 / 5 (No. 158), pp. 163-186.
  - 14 Nebojsa VUKADINOVIC, Géoculture de l'environnement en Serbie (The Geo-Culture of the Environment in Serbia), Balkanologie, Vol. 16, No. 2, 2021, <https://journals.openedition.org/balkanologie/3618>.



Chinese investment, as well as those from Gulf countries, Turkey, and the arrival of some multinational companies, have created a new situation. A dependent capitalism has emerged in the Western Balkans, particularly as a result of increased dependence on foreign investments. China invests in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina in the energy sector. While, for example, coal provides cheap energy, buildings are outdated and pollute the environment. Moreover, the lithium mining projects in Serbia by the Anglo-Australian multinational company Rio Tinto have been followed by the actions of local NGOs against these projects and have seen the emergence of environmental conflicts, which have led to changes in the positions of local governments. In this context, environmental issues in Western Balkan countries have thus become topical, particularly in recent years, with a significant increase in the number of NGOs active in this sector. Only in recent years, with the important development of the NGO sector dealing with environmental issues, has the situation started to change. In addition, environmental conflicts in recent years, as local levels have mainly focused on small hydroelectric plants, have highlighted the relationship between environmental damages and corruption. The Rio Tinto project for lithium exploration in Serbia revealed “pressures on the government”<sup>15</sup> and was the occasion of important manifestations against the project in autumn and winter 2021. Faced with mass demonstrations, the government decided to back down on this project. Following the three-pillar approach of environmental democracy, this event demonstrated that environmental activism has led to changes in governmental positions through information, participation, and enforcement. Environmental democracy is also reflected in the whole public policy cycle, namely in agenda setting, policy formulation, decision-making, implementation, and evaluation. The role of civil society organisations in the environmental sector has been taken into account in the programming, implementation, and evaluation of the EU Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA) funds and the current IPA III framework (2021-2027)<sup>16</sup> with impacts on the public policy cycle in the Western Balkan countries. Even if official strategic documents have been prepared and adopted by Western Balkan countries, environmental issues are at the centre of civic mobilisation against the negative effects of various types of pollution.

***Environmental democracy is also reflected in the whole public policy cycle, namely in agenda setting, policy formulation, decision-making, implementation, and evaluation.***

## The Western Balkans in the global economy and environment

The experience of the reintegration of Western Balkan countries in the global economy after the period of conflicts and the process of EU enlargement since the beginning of the 2000s shows that the enlargement process has a positive impact on the flow of FDI. All Eastern European countries have registered a significant increase in FDI. Nowadays, the situation is similar in the Western Balkan countries.

15 Sasa DRAGOJLO, Ivica MLADENOVIC, Serbia’s lithium is Rio Tinto’s perfect project, *Le Monde diplomatique*, November 2022, <https://mondediplo.com/2022/11/10serbia>.

16 Concerning IPA III Framework Window 3 (Green Agenda and Sustainable connectivity), pp. 36-44, [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-01/C\\_2021\\_8914\\_F1\\_ANNEX\\_EN\\_V5\\_P1\\_1462290.PDF](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-01/C_2021_8914_F1_ANNEX_EN_V5_P1_1462290.PDF).



In 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic, the Western Balkan countries saw an increase in FDI. This contrasted with the trends of declining FDI both globally and in the wider Central, Eastern Europe and South Eastern Europe (CESEE) region. Western Balkan countries have been gradually converging on the EU. However, due to different reasons, including transitional issues, macroeconomic factors, and internal and external shocks, the real convergence of the Western Balkan region to the EU average is relatively slow. Macroeconomic stabilisation programmes, in place for many years, have produced conditions for the development of the private sector and the attraction of FDI. Nominal convergence usually provides a stable macroeconomic environment as a favourable floor for real convergence. In this context, EU enlargement has provided a positive framework for macroeconomic stability. Despite improvements in relation to previous years, positive trends in FDI flows, economic stability, estimated growth rates and economic benefits of EU accession at the country level, and good macroeconomic indicators, the region continues to suffer from chronic problems, such as continued high levels of unemployment, resistance in the implementation of reforms, a lack of regional economic plans, and a lack of internal investment policies.

*EU enlargement has provided a positive framework for macroeconomic stability.*

## The enlargement of the European Union and environmental issues

In the case of Western Balkan countries, the introduction of European regulations and standards has been topical in recent years. The EU enlargement process has also made it possible to highlight environmental issues through reforms in connection with the negotiations of the chapters of the *acquis communautaire* and the announcement of the Green Deal for the Western Balkans. The EU is therefore presenting a “Green Agenda for the Western Balkans”.<sup>17</sup> This agenda is formed by five broad areas covered by the “European Green Deal”: decarbonisation, depollution of air, water, and soil, circular economy, farming and food production, and protecting biodiversity. The region is committed to achieving carbon neutrality by 2050, aligning with key elements of the European Green Deal, and implementing the Action Plan on the Western Balkans. The Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) has coordinated work on the preparation of the Declaration and Action Plan on the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans (GAWB). The European Green Deal is reinforced by policies designed to develop modern, resource-efficient, and competitive economies where growth is dissociated from greenhouse gas emissions, resource use, and waste generation and where climate resilience is pursued. The GAWB sets out relevant actions and recommendations, including alignment with EU “green” standards. The European Commission suggested a number of investment flagships,<sup>18</sup> such as flagship 4: renewable energy; flagship 5: transition from coal (closely connected with Pillar 2 of the EUSAIR<sup>19</sup>); flagship 6: renovation wave; and flagship 7: waste and waste-water management. In this context, EU actions in the Western Balkans region are expected to have a strong

17 See: [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2020-10/green\\_agenda\\_for\\_the\\_western\\_balkans\\_en.pdf](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2020-10/green_agenda_for_the_western_balkans_en.pdf).

18 See: <https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-12/EIP-WB-GG-Dec%202022%20%28V6%29.pdf>.

19 EUSAIR: European Union Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region



impact on environmental protection, citizens' health, and tourism in the region. Climate change is also receiving progressively more attention in the region due to the involvement of civil society organisations.

***The European Green Deal is reinforced by policies designed to develop modern, resource-efficient, and competitive economies where growth is dissociated from greenhouse gas emissions, resource use, and waste generation and where climate resilience is pursued.***

The severe weather and devastating floods that hit Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia in May 2014 reaffirmed the vulnerability of the region to extreme weather events and their higher frequency and intensity due to climate change. The situation has also been critical, with floods in May 2023. Concerning the vulnerability to climate change, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) identified the Western Balkans as one of the most vulnerable areas to climate change in Europe.<sup>20</sup> The Western Balkan Investment Framework (WBIF)<sup>21</sup> provides substantial support for a variety of environmental projects, accounting for nearly 15% of the total WBIF portfolio. The environment has benefited from 94 grants of €149.7 million for 59 projects with an estimated value of €2.8 billion. Priority areas are water and wastewater, flood protection, solid waste, water resource conservation, and river basin management.<sup>22</sup> The waste and wastewater management projects are compliant with the EIP, namely with flagship 7.

The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 - 2022 had massive disruptive effects on the Western Balkan countries in terms of economic convergence with the EU, facing the ongoing challenges of low competitiveness, high unemployment, and a significant brain drain. The need to intensify joint efforts by implementing structural reforms, overcoming structural weaknesses, strengthening innovation potential, and accelerating the green and digital transitions - also in view of their future in the EU - is more pressing. Therefore, in October 2020, the European Commission adopted a comprehensive EIP that aims to spur a long-term recovery backed by a green and digital transition, leading to sustained economic growth, the implementation of reforms required to move forward on the EU path, and bringing the Western Balkans closer to the EU Single Market. Alongside the EIP to support the region, the European Commission presented guidelines for the implementation of the GAWB. Indeed, it foresees activities based on the following 5 pillars: (1) climate action, including decarbonisation, energy, and mobility; (2) circular economy, addressing in particular waste, recycling, sustainable production, and efficient use of resources; (3) biodiversity, aiming to protect and restore the natural wealth of the region; (4) fighting pollution of air, water, and soil; and (5) sustainable food systems and rural areas.

Digitalisation will be the key to achieving the above five pillars, in line with the concept of the dual green and digital transition. This should help make the region more attractive for investment and tourism and unlock the significant economic potential of a green economy. The success of the GAWB depends on the commitment

20 See: <https://www.iucn.org/news/eastern-europe-and-central-asia/202008/water-our-ally-adapting-climate-change-western-balkans>.

21 See: [https://www.wbif.eu/storage/app/media/Library/11.Funding/WBIF%20Guide\\_Update\\_March2020.pdf](https://www.wbif.eu/storage/app/media/Library/11.Funding/WBIF%20Guide_Update_March2020.pdf).

22 WBIF Monitoring Report, May 2021.



of all actors: the EU, international financial institutions, bilateral donors, international organisations, and beneficiaries. Considerable efforts are needed from all partners to coordinate activities, plan and implement this agenda in a way that enhances the complementarity and synergies of all actions implemented so far by each beneficiary. The GAWB sets strategic objectives towards a clean transport system that is fit for a green and digital future, with sustainable mobility and a green infrastructure as essential elements.<sup>23</sup> In Serbia, the Ministry in charge of energy has started preparing the new Energy Development Strategy covering the period until 2050 but has also presented the preliminary goals for the National Energy and Climate Plans (NECP). In addition, a strategic environmental impact assessment procedure in EU and Western Balkans countries for the Interreg IPA Cross-border Cooperation (CBC) has been initiated in 2021 for the period 2021-2027. Environmental issues are also present in the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR),<sup>24</sup> more specifically under Pillar 3 and within the Danube Strategy (EUSDR).<sup>25</sup> These two macro-regional strategies provide a good opportunity for regional cooperation between Western Balkan countries and EU member states. Inter-pillar projects have been developed within EUSAIR to promote common projects in the environment and transport, but more synergies between the two macro-regional strategies could be developed.

***However, without a clear calendar for EU integration of the Western Balkan countries, economic dependence from non-EU international actors can continue with the reinforcement of dependent capitalism and its negative effects on the environment.***

The process of European integration also impacts environmental issues in the Western Balkans through European projects and the negotiation of the *acquis communautaire*. It is also a lever for the definition of public policies and local governments. In this sense, the process of European integration contributes to environmental democracy. In the case of Serbia, the national budget for environment and climate action was increased by 50% in 2022 compared to 2021. The European Commission Progress Report 2022 indicates: "Serbia finances new environmental programmes such as for the replacement of heating equipment, afforestation and the purchase of electric and hybrid vehicles. All income generated from environmental fees should be earmarked for environmental purposes. Although Serbia is substantially increasing investments into environmental protection, it still lacks an effective institutional set-up."<sup>26</sup> Even if this country "has a high level of alignment with the EU *acquis* but implementation and enforcement need to be further improved, in particular by strengthening administrative capacity at central and local level, including at inspectorates and judiciary. Legislation on environmental impact assessment (EIA) and strategic environmental assessment".<sup>27</sup> The question of administrative capacity and implementation of strategic documents and legislation is also an issue in Montenegro. Concerning Chapter 27, the Progress Report of the European Commission for the year 2022 indicates: "Montenegro has

23 Strategy for Sustainable and Smart Mobility in the Western Balkans, July 2021.

24 See: <https://www.aii-ps.org/eusair>.

25 See: <https://danube-region.eu/about/>.

26 Progress Report of the European Commission on Serbia 2022, 12 October 2022 p. 122, <https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-10/Serbia%20Report%202022.pdf>.

27 Ibid.



some level of preparation in this area. Limited progress was made in further aligning with the EU acquis, on water, nature protection and climate change. Significant efforts are still needed on implementation and enforcement, in particular on waste management, water quality, nature protection and climate change. Montenegro should considerably step up its ambitions towards a green transition.<sup>28</sup> The question of implementation and enforcement is highlighted for the European Commission by the two most advanced countries of the region in negotiations of the *acquis communautaire*. The strengthening of the institutional framework and capacity for enforcement of environmental and climate change legislation remains an issue. The need for strengthening institutional frameworks and capacity for enforcement is also an issue in other Western Balkan countries. In this context, the role of civil society organisations dealing with the environment sector is crucial. However, without a clear calendar for EU integration of the Western Balkan countries, economic dependence from non-EU international actors can continue with the reinforcement of dependent capitalism and its negative effects on the environment.

## The French perspective on EU enlargement and the environment in the Western Balkans

The EU integration of Western Balkan countries was not present in the French media during the last decade. The war in Ukraine has changed the situation, but the Western Balkans are still not the focus of public debate. The engagement of several French think-tanks<sup>29</sup> focusing on the Western Balkans since 2019 has highlighted the question of the future of this region. At the state level, France hosted the Berlin Process Conference in 2016. In addition, France hosted the Berlin Process Conference. In 2020, France also lifted its reservations about the opening of accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia. The new methodology for EU accession, supported by France, was another occasion to show the strategic interest in the EU integration of the Western Balkans. The new methodology was adopted by the Council in its conclusions of 25 March 2020. It proposes “grouping the negotiation chapters into six thematic groups” or “clusters”, which amounts to classifying the 35 chapters of the *acquis communautaire* in six categories for more readability: fundamentals; indoor market; competitiveness and inclusive growth; environmental programme and sustainable connectivity; resources; agriculture and cohesion; foreign relations. During the French Presidency of the European Union in 2022, this commitment was reaffirmed. The same year, the French institute for international relations (ifri)<sup>30</sup> organised a conference dedicated to the Western Balkans, followed by a publication.<sup>31</sup> A programme dedicated to higher education, ES-Balk,<sup>32</sup> has also been launched, with selected pro-

28 Progress Report of the European Commission on Montenegro 2022, 12 October 2022, p.112, <https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-10/Montenegro%20Report%202022.pdf>.

29 EuropaNova, Institut Delors, Eurocreative, Fondation Jean Jaurès.

30 ifri (institut français des relations internationales), <https://www.ifri.org/fr/mots-cles-geographique/balkans>.

31 Marciaq Florent MARCIAQ (dir.), *Balkans: un nouveau Grand Jeu? Politique étrangère*, Vol. 87, No. 4, hiver 2022.

32 See: <https://www.france-education-international.fr/document/aapes-balkvf>.



jects focusing on linkages between research and higher education. Many other cooperations are ongoing in several sectors.

***The war in Ukraine has changed the situation, but the Western Balkans are still not the focus of public debate.***

In 2018, the mandate of the AFD (French Development Agency)<sup>33</sup> was extended to the Western Balkans. Environmental issues in the Western Balkans are presented as priorities in some actions of the AFD.<sup>34</sup> As an example, the AFD and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) are supporting Serbia in improving solid waste management infrastructure.<sup>35</sup> The AFD is also present in Serbia and Albania in the water management sector. In addition, the AFD has launched a programme to support civil society organisations. In Serbia, the French initiative "Ekoopstina"<sup>36</sup> is focusing on environmental issues at the local, regional, and central levels. The initiative is targets also civil society organisations and is complementary to AFD actions in this sector.

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33 Agence Française de Développement

34 See: <https://www.afd.fr/fr/page-region-pays/balkans-occidentaux>.

35 Ibid.

36 See: <https://ekoopstina.com/>.



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## About the author

**Nebojsa Vukadinovic** is a senior lecturer at Sciences Po Paris (campus Dijon) and an associate researcher at IRM-CMRP (University of Bordeaux). He is also a lecturer at INALCO (Paris). His research focuses on the European integration of Western Balkan countries with special regards to relations between external and local actors in the region. His research also focuses on the transformation of states and the economic development of Western Balkan countries. He holds several MA-equivalent degrees: DEA in Economics from the EHESS (Paris); DEA in Political Science from Sciences Po (Paris); and DEA of Philosophy from the University of Paris 1, Panthéon-Sorbonne. He also holds a PhD from Sciences Po Paris.

Contact: [nebojsa.vukadinovic@sciencespo.fr](mailto:nebojsa.vukadinovic@sciencespo.fr)

*The Policy Brief is published in the framework of the [WB2EU](#) project. The project is co-funded by the European Commission under its Erasmus+ Jean Monnet programme. The European Commission support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents which reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.*

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### ISSN 2305-2635

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### Keywords

environmental democracy, dependent capitalism, Western Balkans, European integration, civil society organisations

### Citation

Vukadinovic, N. (2023). Environmental democracy in the Western Balkans between dependent capitalism and integration into the European Union. Vienna. ÖGfE Policy Brief, 12'2023

### Imprint

Austrian Society for European Politics (ÖGfE)  
Rotenhausgasse 6/8-9  
A-1090 Vienna  
Austria

Secretary General: Paul Schmidt

Responsible: Susan Milford-Faber, Vedran Džihčić

Tel: +43 1 533 4999

E-Mail: [policybriefs@oegfe.at](mailto:policybriefs@oegfe.at)

Website: [ÖGfE Policy Briefs](#)

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