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## Analysis of Political Atmosphere in the Western Balkans

**Mirela Metushaj<sup>1</sup>**

**Abstract:** The political atmosphere in the Western Balkans is multifaceted and dynamic, shaped by a complex interplay of historical legacies, ethnic tensions, democratic aspirations, and external influences. This abstract provides a concise analysis of key elements defining the political landscape in the region. The history of the Western Balkans is rich and complex, shaped by a tapestry of civilizations, empires, and conflicts. This abstract provides a succinct overview of key historical developments in the region. The history of the Western Balkans is characterized by a rich tapestry of cultures, empires, and conflicts. Its strategic location and diverse population have contributed to its vibrant and complex identity, while its journey towards peace, stability, and integration continues to evolve in the 21st century.

**Keywords:** history; politics; Western Balkans; ethnicity

### A Short History of the Western Balkans

The Western Balkans, situated at the crossroads of Europe and the Mediterranean, has been inhabited since ancient times by various civilizations, including Illyrians, Greeks, Romans, and Byzantines. The region's strategic location fostered trade, cultural exchange, and the development of prosperous cities. During the medieval period, the Byzantine and later Ottoman Empires exerted influence over the Western Balkans, leaving a lasting imprint on its culture, architecture, and religious diversity. Ottoman rule, in particular, lasted for several centuries and shaped the demographic composition of the region. The 19th century witnessed the rise of

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<sup>1</sup> PhD, Aleksandër Moisiu University, Albania, Address: Lagjja 1, Rruga e Currilove, Durrës, 2001, Albania, Corresponding author: mirel.metushaj@gmail.com.

nationalism and independence movements in the Western Balkans, fuelled by the decline of the Ottoman Empire. Serbia, Montenegro, and Greece gained independence, while Bosnia and Herzegovina came under Austro-Hungarian administration. The early 20th century was marked by geopolitical tensions and the outbreak of World War I, which led to the collapse of empires and significant changes to the political map of the Western Balkans. The interwar period saw the formation of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, which later became the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia under Josip Broz Tito. The breakup of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s unleashed a series of devastating conflicts, including the Bosnian War and the Kosovo War, which left deep scars on the region and reshaped its political landscape. Efforts towards reconciliation, peacebuilding, and European integration have since been ongoing, albeit with varying degrees of success.

The Western Balkans region has a rich and complex history shaped by various civilizations, empires, and conflicts. Some key historical events and influences that have shaped the region:

**Ancient Civilizations:** The Western Balkans has been inhabited since ancient times by various civilizations, including Illyrians, Thracians, Greeks, and Romans. Cities like Apollonia (modern-day Albania), Dyrrachium (modern-day Durrës), and Epidaurus (modern-day Cavtat) were important centers of trade, culture, and learning.

**Byzantine and Ottoman Rule:** In the medieval period, the Byzantine Empire exerted influence over the region, followed by the conquest of the Balkans by the Ottoman Empire in the 14th and 15th centuries. Ottoman rule lasted for several centuries and left a lasting impact on the region's culture, architecture, and religious composition, particularly in Bosnia, Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia.

**Habsburg and Venetian Influence:** Parts of the Western Balkans came under the control of the Habsburg Monarchy (Austria-Hungary) and the Republic of Venice during the early modern period. These powers competed for influence in the region and left their mark on its political and cultural landscape.

**Nationalism and Independence Movements:** The 19th century witnessed the rise of nationalism and independence movements in the Western Balkans, fuelled by the decline of the Ottoman Empire. Serbia, Montenegro, and Greece gained independence from Ottoman rule during this period, while Bosnia and Herzegovina came under Austro-Hungarian administration.

World War I and the Collapse of Empires: The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria in Sarajevo in 1914 triggered World War I. The war led to the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires, resulting in significant changes to the political map of the Western Balkans.

Yugoslavia: Following World War I, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes was established, later renamed the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. The interwar period was marked by tensions between different ethnic groups and the centralizing policies of the monarchy. After World War II, Josip Broz Tito established a socialist federal republic known as the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, which comprised six republics, including Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Slovenia.

Breakup of Yugoslavia: The collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the weakening of central authority in Yugoslavia led to the outbreak of ethnic conflicts in the early 1990s. Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and later Kosovo sought independence, leading to a series of devastating wars, including the Bosnian War (1992-1995) and the Kosovo War.

Post-War Reconstruction and European Integration: The conflicts in the Western Balkans were followed by international peacekeeping efforts, reconstruction projects, and efforts to promote reconciliation and stability. Several countries in the region aspire to join the European Union and NATO, although progress has been uneven due to political, economic, and social challenges. (1998-1999).

The Western Balkans' complex history reflects its position at the crossroads of different civilizations and empires, as well as the enduring struggles for identity, independence, and regional integration.

The Western Balkans is a region in South Eastern Europe that encompasses several countries located on the Balkan Peninsula. The core countries typically considered part of the Western Balkans are: Albania. Located on the Adriatic and Ionian Seas, Albania is known for its rugged coastline, mountainous interior, and cultural heritage. Bosnia and Herzegovina: This country is characterized by its diverse ethnic and religious composition, with Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats as the three main ethnic groups. It is often referred to simply as Bosnia. Croatia: With a long coastline along the Adriatic Sea, Croatia is known for its stunning beaches, historic cities like Dubrovnik and Split, and picturesque islands. Kosovo: Kosovo declared independence from Serbia in 2008, although its status is still disputed by Serbia. It

is recognized by over 100 countries and is home to a predominantly Albanian population. Montenegro: Known for its beautiful coastline and rugged mountains, Montenegro gained independence from Serbia in 2006. It is a candidate for European Union membership. North Macedonia: Formerly known as the Republic of Macedonia, this country resolved a long-standing dispute with Greece over its name, leading to its current designation as North Macedonia. It is known for its rich history and cultural heritage. Serbia: As one of the largest countries in the region, Serbia is known for its vibrant capital city, Belgrade, as well as its historical and cultural sites.

These countries share historical, cultural, and geographical ties and have experienced significant political changes and conflicts over the past century, particularly during the breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s. The term "Western Balkans" is often used in the context of European integration efforts, as many of these countries aspire to join the European Union and NATO. Diplomatic efforts are ongoing to promote stability, reconciliation, and economic development in the region.

### **Political System in the Region**

The political systems in the Western Balkans vary from country to country due to historical, cultural, and geopolitical factors. However, common elements include democratic governance, multi-party systems, and efforts towards European integration. Here's an overview of the political systems in some of the countries of the Western Balkans:

Albania. Albanian politics is characterized by a dynamic and often contentious landscape shaped by a complex history, diverse cultural influences, and ongoing socio-economic challenges. Albania is a parliamentary republic with a multi-party system. The President is the head of state, elected by the Assembly for a five-year term. The Prime Minister is the head of government, responsible for executing laws and implementing policies. The unicameral Assembly (Parliament) is the legislative body, comprising 140 members elected through a proportional representation system. The two main political parties in Albania are the Socialist Party of Albania (PS), led by Prime Minister Edi Rama, and the Democratic Party of Albania (PD), led by Lulzim Basha. These parties have dominated Albanian politics since the fall of communism in the early 1990s. Albania has expressed a

desire to join the European Union (EU) and has been recognized as a candidate country since 2014. Progress towards EU accession has been slow, with concerns raised by the EU regarding issues such as corruption, organized crime, and the rule of law. Albania faces significant challenges related to corruption and organized crime, which have a pervasive influence on politics and society. Efforts to combat corruption and strengthen the rule of law remain ongoing priorities for both domestic and international stakeholders. Albania maintains diplomatic relations with neighbouring countries and plays a role in regional initiatives aimed at promoting stability and cooperation in the Balkans. However, historical tensions and unresolved disputes with countries such as Serbia and Greece continue to impact regional dynamics. Civil society organizations and grassroots movements play an important role in Albanian politics, advocating for social justice, human rights, and democratic reforms. However, activists and journalists sometimes face threats and intimidation, highlighting challenges to freedom of expression and democratic governance. Overall, Albanian politics is marked by a complex interplay of domestic and international factors, with ongoing efforts to address democratic deficits, promote reforms, and advance the country's European integration aspirations.

Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) has a unique political structure resulting from its complex history and the Dayton Peace Accords, which ended the Bosnian War in 1995. Here are some key aspects of Bosnian politics: Bosnia and Herzegovina is a parliamentary democratic republic with a complicated political structure established by the Dayton Agreement. The country consists of two entities: the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, primarily inhabited by Bosniaks and Croats, and the Republika Srpska, predominantly inhabited by Bosnian Serbs. Additionally, there is the Brčko District, which is a self-governing administrative unit. Each entity has its own government and legislature, while the country as a whole has a joint presidency, parliament, and central institutions. Bosnia and Herzegovina has a complex political system established by the Dayton Peace Agreement, reflecting its multi-ethnic composition. It is a federal parliamentary republic consisting of two entities: the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska. The Presidency consists of three members: one Bosniak, one Croat, and one Serb, each elected from their respective ethnic constituencies. The Parliamentary Assembly consists of two chambers: the House of Representatives and the House of Peoples, representing the entities and ethnic groups, respectively. The political landscape in Bosnia and Herzegovina is heavily influenced by ethnic

divisions, reflecting the country's diverse population of Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats. Political parties are often organized along ethnic lines, and power-sharing arrangements are enshrined in the constitution to ensure representation for all ethnic groups. The Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina consists of three members: one Bosniak, one Croat, and one Serb, each elected from their respective ethnic constituencies. The rotating presidency ensures that no single ethnic group dominates the country's highest office. The Parliamentary Assembly consists of two chambers: the House of Representatives and the House of Peoples, representing the entities and ethnic groups, respectively. Bosnia and Herzegovina has expressed aspirations to join the European Union (EU) and has been recognized as a potential candidate country. However, progress towards EU accession has been slow due to political deadlock, ethnic divisions, and the need for reforms, particularly in areas such as the rule of law, governance, and minority rights. The international community, particularly the Office of the High Representative (OHR) established by the Dayton Agreement, has played a significant role in Bosnia and Herzegovina's post-war reconstruction and state-building efforts. International organizations such as the European Union, NATO, and the United Nations also have a presence in the country, providing assistance and support for reforms. Bosnia and Herzegovina face numerous challenges, including political fragmentation, institutional dysfunction, corruption, economic stagnation, and ethno-nationalist tensions. The country's complex political system and governance structures have often hindered effective decision-making and reforms. Overall, Bosnian politics remain deeply influenced by ethnic divisions and the legacy of the Bosnian War, with ongoing efforts to overcome challenges and build a more inclusive and functional democracy.

Croatia is a parliamentary representative democratic republic with a multi-party system. Croatia is a parliamentary republic with a semi-presidential system. The President is the head of state, elected by popular vote for a five-year term. The Prime Minister is the head of government, responsible for executing laws and policies. The unicameral Parliament (Sabor) is the legislative body, consisting of 151 members elected through a mixed electoral system. The President of Croatia is the head of state and is elected by popular vote for a five-year term, with a maximum of two consecutive terms. The president has limited executive powers, primarily focused on foreign affairs, defence, and representing Croatia internationally. Croatia has a multi-party system, with numerous political parties representing a range of ideologies and interests. The two largest political parties are

the center-right Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) and the center-left Social Democratic Party of Croatia (SDP). Other significant parties include liberal, conservative, and nationalist parties, as well as regional and minority parties. Croatia became a member of the European Union (EU) on July 1, 2013, following a decade-long accession process. EU membership has had a significant impact on Croatian politics, economy, and society, requiring alignment with EU standards and regulations and facilitating access to EU funds and programs. Croatia's political system is characterized by democratic institutions, regular elections, and a diverse political landscape. However, challenges such as corruption, economic inequality, and regional disparities remain significant issues facing Croatian politics.

Kosovo's political system is based on a parliamentary representative democratic republic. Kosovo is a parliamentary republic with a multi-party system. The President is the head of state, elected by the Assembly for a five-year term. The Prime Minister is the head of government, responsible for implementing policies and managing the executive branch. The unicameral Assembly is the legislative body, consisting of 120 members elected through a proportional representation system. Kosovo has a multi-party system with numerous political parties representing various ethnic, ideological, and regional interests. The two largest political parties are the Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK) and the Vetëvendosje Movement (Self-Determination Movement). Other significant parties include the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) and the Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (AAK). Kosovo's political landscape is influenced by ethnic divisions, particularly between the majority Albanian population and the Serb minority. The political representation of ethnic minorities, including Serbs, Bosniaks, Turks, and others, is guaranteed by the constitution. Kosovo aspires to join the European Union (EU) and has made progress towards EU integration, including the signing of a Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) with the EU in 2015. EU accession is a key priority for Kosovo's political leadership, requiring reforms in areas such as rule of law, governance, and human rights. Kosovo's political development and state-building process have been heavily influenced by international involvement, particularly by the United Nations (UN) and the European Union (EU). Kosovo declared independence from Serbia in 2008, a move recognized by over 100 countries, although not by Serbia and some other states. Kosovo faces various challenges, including socio-economic development, unemployment, corruption, organized crime, and inter-ethnic tensions. Political

stability and effective governance remain key priorities for Kosovo's leaders and international partners. Overall, Kosovo's political system continues to evolve as the country faces the complex task of state-building, reconciliation, and European integration in the aftermath of the Kosovo War and declaration of independence.

Montenegro's political system is structured as a parliamentary representative democratic republic. Montenegro is a parliamentary republic with a multi-party system. The President is the head of state, elected by popular vote for a five-year term. The Prime Minister is the head of government, responsible for implementing laws and policies. The unicameral Parliament (Skupština) is the legislative body, consisting of 81 members elected through a proportional representation system. Montenegro has a multi-party system with several political parties representing various ideological, regional, and ethnic interests. The two largest political parties are the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS), which has dominated Montenegrin politics for decades, and the Democratic Front (DF), a coalition of opposition parties. Montenegro is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society, with a significant proportion of ethnic Serbs, as well as Bosniaks, Albanians, and other minority groups. Political representation of ethnic minorities is guaranteed by the constitution, and there are specific seats reserved for minority groups in the Parliament. Montenegro aspires to join the European Union (EU) and has made progress towards EU integration, including the opening of accession negotiations in 2012. EU accession is a key priority for Montenegro's political leadership, requiring reforms in areas such as rule of law, anti-corruption efforts, and economic development. Montenegro maintains diplomatic relations with various countries and is a member of international organizations such as the United Nations (UN), NATO, and the Council of Europe. NATO membership, which Montenegro joined in 2017, is considered a significant milestone in its foreign policy. Montenegro faces various challenges, including socio-economic development, corruption, organized crime, and political polarization. Efforts to address these challenges, promote democratic governance, and advance EU integration are ongoing priorities for Montenegro's leaders and international partners. Overall, Montenegro's political system is characterized by democratic institutions, regular elections, and a diverse political landscape. However, challenges such as corruption, economic inequality, and ethnic tensions remain significant issues facing Montenegrin politics.

North Macedonia's political system is structured as a parliamentary representative democratic republic. North Macedonia is a parliamentary republic with a multi-



party system. The President is the head of state, elected by popular vote for a five-year term. The Prime Minister is the head of government, responsible for implementing laws and policies. The unicameral Assembly (Sobranie) is the legislative body, consisting of 120 members elected through a proportional representation system. North Macedonia has a multi-party system with several political parties representing various ideological, regional, and ethnic interests. The two largest political parties are the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) and the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE). Other significant parties include ethnic Albanian parties such as the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI) and the Alliance for Albanians. North Macedonia is a multi-ethnic society, with a significant proportion of ethnic Albanians, as well as other minority groups such as Turks, Roma, and Serbs. Political representation of ethnic minorities is guaranteed by the constitution, and there are specific seats reserved for minority groups in the Parliament. North Macedonia aspires to join the European Union (EU) and has made progress towards EU integration, including the opening of accession negotiations in 2020. EU accession is a key priority for North Macedonia's political leadership, requiring reforms in areas such as rule of law, anti-corruption efforts, and economic development. North Macedonia maintains diplomatic relations with various countries and is a member of international organizations such as the United Nations (UN), NATO's Partnership for Peace program, and the Council of Europe. NATO membership, which North Macedonia joined in 2020, is considered a significant milestone in its foreign policy.

These descriptions provide a general overview of the political systems in the Western Balkans, but each country may have its own unique characteristics and challenges related to governance, democracy, and institutional development. Overall, North Macedonia's political system is characterized by democratic institutions, regular elections, and a diverse political landscape. However, challenges such as corruption, economic inequality, and ethnic tensions remain significant issues facing North Macedonian politics.

## **Conclusion**

The political atmosphere in the Western Balkans is characterized by a complex interplay of domestic, regional, and international factors. Here's an analysis of key elements shaping the political atmosphere in the region:

Ethno-nationalist sentiments continue to influence politics in the Western Balkans, stemming from historical grievances and identity politics. Political parties often align along ethnic lines, with competition for power driven by appeals to ethnic identity and historical narratives. This dynamic can lead to polarization and hinder efforts towards reconciliation and integration. **Democratic Institutions and Rule of Law:** While progress has been made in establishing democratic institutions in the Western Balkans since the 1990s, challenges remain in consolidating democratic norms and the rule of law. Issues such as corruption, political patronage, and weak institutional capacity undermine trust in government and impede effective governance.

**European Integration:** European Union (EU) integration remains a central goal for many countries in the Western Balkans, offering the prospect of economic development, stability, and enhanced democratic governance. However, the pace of EU accession varies among countries, and progress is contingent on meeting stringent criteria related to democracy, rule of law, and economic reforms.

**Regional Cooperation and Reconciliation:** Efforts to promote regional cooperation and reconciliation have been ongoing, albeit with varying degrees of success. Initiatives such as the Berlin Process aim to foster dialogue, economic integration, and infrastructure development among Western Balkan countries. However, unresolved historical disputes and ethnic tensions continue to pose challenges to long-term stability and cooperation.

**Security Challenges:** The Western Balkans face security challenges ranging from organized crime and corruption to lingering inter-ethnic tensions and potential for political instability. Cooperation with international partners, including NATO and the United Nations, is crucial for addressing security threats and promoting peace and stability in the region.

**Youth Engagement and Civil Society:** Youth activism and civil society play an increasingly important role in shaping the political landscape of the Western Balkans. Young people are demanding accountability, transparency, and social justice, often through grassroots movements and online activism. Civil society organizations are instrumental in promoting democratic values, human rights, and inter-ethnic dialogue.

**External Influences:** External actors, including major powers such as Russia, the United States, and China, as well as the EU and neighbouring countries, exert

influence on the political dynamics of the Western Balkans. Geopolitical rivalries, economic interests, and historical ties shape the involvement of external actors and can impact regional stability and development.

In summary, the political atmosphere in the Western Balkans is characterized by a mix of democratic aspirations, ethnic complexities, regional cooperation efforts, and external influences. Overcoming historical legacies, addressing socio-economic challenges, and strengthening democratic institutions are critical for advancing stability, reconciliation, and integration in the region.

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