# REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE WESTERN BALKANS MAY NOT BE ESSENTIAL IN THE EU ACCESSION PROCESS

**Tomasz GRODZICKI**
*Nicolaus Copernicus University*
*Jurija Gagarina 13a, 87-100 Toruń, Poland*
*tomgro10@wp.pl, tg@doktorant.umk.pl*

***Abstract.*** *Regional development is a widely debated topic, not only in the EU but also in the Western Balkan countries: Albania, Bosnia and Hercegovina, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro, and Serbia. Majority of these countries have still felt the effects of the Yugoslav Wars so that their growth path is limited. Nowadays, the Western Balkan countries are aiming to be a member of the European Union. However, the accession path is considered to be a long and tough process with a number of criteria to be met. Many researchers suggest that regional development should be considered as one of the first issues to be addressed in the EU Accession Process. However, this paper takes the position that while regional development is indeed of great importance, it need not be a requirement to join the EU. The paper suggests that these countries should focus on meeting different EU accession criteria in the first place. Then once they become an EU member, they will have time and all necessary funds and financial aids to comply with regional development. The paper is based on a critical and synthetic literature review on the problem of regional development of the Western Balkans and in the perspective of the potential EU enlargement. It clearly addresses the issue of whether the Western Balkans should focus on the regional development and once it is achieved, the EU accession will come naturally. Many researchers think in that way, however, it seems that such a process might be time-consuming, so instead of focusing on regional development, the WBs countries need to focus on their economic, institutional, legal and political environment to speed up the EU integration process.*

***Keywords:*** *regional development; Western Balkans (WBs); regional integration; EU accession, Yugoslavia.*

## Introduction

The term Western Balkans (WBs) is designed for a group of countries in Southeastern Europe which are not yet EU member states. This group consists of the following countries: Albania, Bosnia, and Hercegovina (BiH), the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), Kosovo, Montenegro, and Serbia. Except for Kosovo and BiH which are the potential EU candidates, they are all the EU candidate countries.

Regional development is crucial for the EU member states, which are supported by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) to help underdeveloped regions grow. However, the WBs are not the EU members so the ERDF does not apply to them. Considering economic integration, Bartlett (2008) rightly observes that the WBs are diverging not only in economic growth but also in living standards. As a reason for that, he blames trade liberalization that imposed deeper deindustrialization. There are a number of research papers and reports that clearly indicate that the WBs should develop regional integration further, as they are a new candidate or potential candidates countries. This paper argues that there is no need to do so in the first place as they all still face their internal problems like high unemployment rate, high level of corruption, issues with the rule of law, etc. They are all placed in the specific EU chapters that have to be closed before a country accesses the EU. The time for regional development will come when the country becomes an EU member, as then it will receive EU funds and financial aids to address this issue. This paper takes the position that regional development in the WBs is not necessarily required for EU accession. Nevertheless, it is indeed a tremendous asset to have when applying for the EU membership. However, due to its complex nature involving money and proper functioning institutions, the WBs may face serious difficulties in achieving it without the substantial financial help from the EU. Instead, the paper argues that there should be the following order: at first, a country should join the EU and then (with help of the ERDF) develop its regions. Alternatively, this paper suggests the WBs to work on their institutions which are not efficient (Efendic & Pugh, 2015). Better functioning institutions have their positive impact on regional development (Rodríguez-Pose, 2013).

Firstly, this paper considers the necessary information on the economic overview of the WBs' economy. Then, it describes the role of regional development and institutions. Furthermore, it focuses on the regional perspective of the EU accession by the WBs. Then, this paper points out why regional development is not a necessary step in the EU accession. In the last section, it concludes.

## Research methodology

This paper clearly addresses the issue of European Integration for the WBs from the perspective of regional development. The paper starts with the economic overview of the WBs' economy so it contains data on the past, current at the future economic situation. Further on, this paper mainly focuses on the problem of regional development and the question whether it should be a first step towards the EU integration of the WBs or not. In order to proceed with such an analysis, it should be mentioned that such a complex issue that is related to economic and political perspectives, seems to be unsolvable from the quantitative analysis because it would be difficult to build a model that contains all factors. It could be even more difficult to comment on the result and draw a reasonable conclusion. Therefore, this paper takes the descriptive approach and formulates the problem based on the literature on this topic. A critical review of the literature and its synthesis makes this paper clear and comprehensive.

## The economic overview of the Western Balkans' economy

Almost all of the Western Balkans countries, except for Albania, used to form in the past a country of Yugoslavia. Uvalic and Cvijanović (2017) indicate that in the case of the former Yugoslavia, three phases of economic development can be distinguished, starting from 1989. The first period is the 1990s that can be described by the high political and economic instability, intensified conflicts, sanctions and, consequently, the breakup of Yugoslavia. Not without reason, this period is often referred to as "lost decade", integration with the EU (Hayoz, Jesien & van Meurs, 2005). The second period started from 2001 and lasted until 2008 that was the beginning of the integration with the EU characterized by the acceleration of economic reforms, a period of rapid economic growth based mainly on growing dependence on foreign capital (foreign direct investment), a credit boom, accumulation of structural problems. However, this phase was interrupted by the global financial and economic crisis. Last period started in 2009, with the recession and a much lower rate of economic growth and even a negative result of economic growth.

A comprehensive analysis of the economic growth of the countries of former Yugoslavia is difficult because some of the currently existing countries have changed over the years. An extreme example is then Serbia, which has changed five times to the present. In the years 1945-1991 it was the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, then in the years 1992-2003 the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Then, today's Serbia in 2003 - 2006 functioned as the Union of Serbia and Montenegro, in 2006. declare independence, and finally in 2008. Kosovo separated from it, despite the fact that Serbia still does not recognize this fact until today. Therefore, it is legitimate to ask which countries or groups of countries should be analyzed and where to get the data that could be compared.

Another problem is the availability of data. Data from the World Bank are not collected for countries that no longer exist, in this case for Yugoslavia. Eurostat for these countries only leads the latest statistics, but not for each country. Until recently, there was only one database, which had statistics for the countries of former Yugoslavia, unfortunately only available until 2010 (Uvalic, 2018). However, it has recently been updated until 2016 inclusive. Thus, the figure below shows the real GDP per capita in Yugoslavia and the countries that emerged after its collapse.

Yugoslavia was a rapidly growing economy at the time, and the records of increases up to the 1980s were impressive (Kukić, 2017). It should also be added that Yugoslavia was also a well-placed country in the international arena. This is evidenced by the Yugoslavian passport, which at that time was one of the "best" in the world because it enabled traveling both to the East and the West (Dijk, 2008, p.898). Unfortunately, in the 1990s, due to conflicts and political disputes that led to the breakup of Yugoslavia, the economies of the former Yugoslavia countries recorded a relatively high drop in GDP per capita.

One of the most common goals of each country in the world is to enter the path of long-term economic growth. It also applies to the countries of former Yugoslavia. In order to be able to refer to their current economic situation, one should look at the path of economic growth of these countries.

Figure 1 shows GDP per capita in the Western Balkans. It is worth noting that all the countries of the former Yugoslavia and each state separately characterize a similar trend of changes in GDP per capita over the years. At the beginning of the analyzed period, the republic with the highest GDP per capita was Montenegro, followed by Croatia, Serbia, Yugoslavia, Macedonia, Albania, and BiH respectively. The economic growth of all republics and total Yugoslavia to the early 1980s was impressive. Then, as a result of intensifying conflicts, stagnation took place. At the beginning of the breakup of Yugoslavia, in 1991, at the top of ranking this time Montenegro followed by Croatia, and then respectively: Serbia, Macedonia, Yugoslavia, BiH, and Albania. In addition to political tensions, there were also disproportions in economic growth in these republics. After a sharp drop in GDP per capita in all the republics at the beginning of the 1990s, these countries slowly began to rebuild their economies. This was not without temporary fluctuations (declines in GDP per capita) such as the second half of the 1990s or 2008 when the global financial crisis took place. At the end of the analyzed period, disproportions among the leading countries in the GDP per capita ratio have widened. The country that is leading is Croatia and then: Montenegro, Yugoslavia (if it still existed), Serbia, Macedonia, Albania, and BiH.

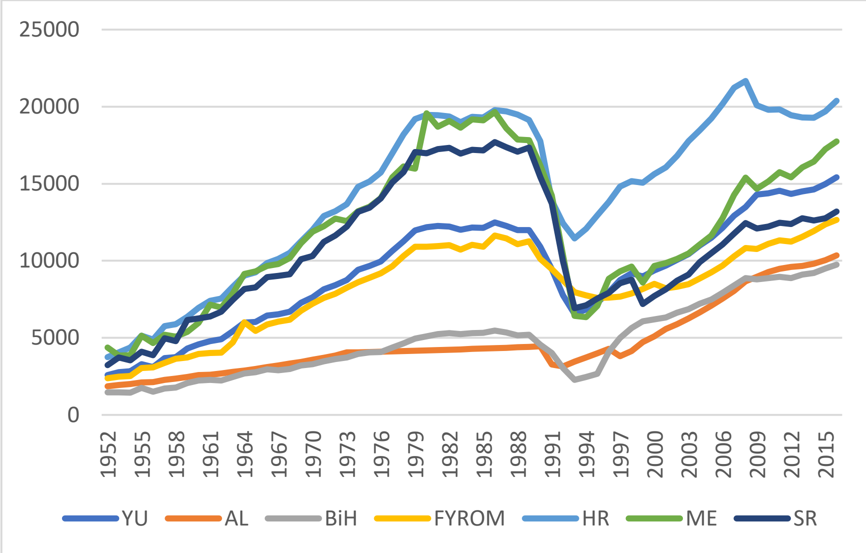


***Figure 1. Real GDP per capita in 2011US $ in the Western Balkans countries for the period 1952 - 2016, benchmark 2011***
***(Own elaboration based on Maddison database, Bolt et al., 2018)***

***Table 1. Real GDP growth in the WBs, in a percentage scale for the period 2016-2019 (own elaboration based on the World Bank, 2018, p.9)***

| | 2016 | 2017* | 2018* | 2019* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Albania** | 3,4 | 3,8 | 3,6 | 3,5 |
| **BiH** | 3,1 | 3 | 3,2 | 3,4 |
| **Kosovo** | 4,1 | 4,4 | 4,8 | 4,8 |
| **FYROM** | 2,9 | 0 | 2,3 | 2,7 |
| **Monenegro** | 2,9 | 4,3 | 2,8 | 2,5 |
| **Serbia** | 2,8 | 1,9 | 3 | 3,5 |
| **WB** | 3,1 | 2,4 | 3,2 | 3,5 |

Note: * estimated and forecasted data

As it is indicated in table 1, GDP growth in the Western Balkans decelerated from 3.1 percent in 2016 to an estimated 2.4 percent in 2017. Regional growth slowed in Serbia due to the severe winter and stopped in FYROM, where the political crisis discouraged both public and private investments. BiH noticed a similar growth as in the last two years. The dynamics of the smaller economic actors of WBs: Albania, Kosovo and Montenegro contributed to the regional increase in 2017, with the support of the higher growth of trade partners, increased prices of goods and the implementation of large investment projects (World Bank, 2018).
Although the increase in the number of jobs was slower than in 2016, it is noticeable that around 190,000 new jobs were created in the first nine months of 2017 in the

region. Professional activity was at a higher level in most countries because more people successfully entered the labor market. In addition, over 80 percent of new jobs concerned services, mainly retail and wholesale, supported by increased consumption. Although the level of unemployment declined in most countries, it still varies from 13.5 percent in Serbia to 30.4 percent in Kosovo. The level of poverty continued to decrease, in spite of rising food and energy prices. Albeit revenues increased in general, not all of the WB countries benefited from the possibility of reducing budget deficits. Only two countries managed to achieve surpluses in 2017, which are: Serbia and BiH; while all the others recorded deficits caused by a high level of recurrent expenditure, often due to poorly targeted social benefits and subsidies. Three WB countries: Albania, Montenegro, and Kosovo are currently working on reviving capital investments to boost economic growth. As it is advised, careful financial, public and budgetary management will help minimize fiscal risks associated with investments, which should ease the pressure on medium-term debt service capacity. Regional GDP growth is forecasted to increase from 2.4 percent in 2017 to 3.2 percent in 2018 and 3.5 percent in 2019. The WB countries are estimated to grow faster, supported by expected growth in Europe with the exception of Albania and Montenegro. There are the following threats for the WBs to be considered: trade protectionism, interest rate normalization on a global scale, low growth and uncertainty as to internal policy (World Bank, 2018).

## The role of institutions in regional development

The reason the term regional development exists is that there are economic disparities between regions. The ERDF was created in order to address this issue and to make the chances of all regions equal by reducing economic disparities among regions. Brülhart and Koenig (2006), empirically proved that border regions and capital regions are on higher development levels than the others. This is due to the following reasons: better access to the market, favorable initial conditions, and better economic environment to attract FDI. In order to foster regional development, the EU has its Cohesion Policy and Structural Funds.

The natural question then is if there are other options to improve regional development. Those can potentially be found in the New Institutional Economics (NIE) which may be helpful to address regional development for the WBs countries that do not receive such financial aids as EU member states. The approach towards the role of institutions in economic development had changed with the implementation of the NIE which considers institutions to be a crucial factor for economic development. The NIE was introduced by Coase, North and Williamson who originated the way of thinking about institutions as a key concept in expounding differences in performance among industries, nations, and regions (Brousseau & Glachant, 2008). Rodríguez-Pose (2013), however, goes one step further and asks whether institutions matter for regional development. He admits that policymakers would not have thought of this question until the 1990s because the institutions were not perceived as causing problems. His research clearly indicates that institutions play a significant role in regional development. When functioning properly, they cannot be overestimated in contributing to the economic growth in regions. However, the extent to which they impact the regional development still remains unknown. Albeit that he states that institutions are vital for economic development in regions, he does not provide ready-to-implement solutions on how institutional reforms should be undertaken. Instead, he underlines that there is no 'one-size fits all' policy and the key point is to properly define institutions and the way to measure them. That, however, is not an easy task.

### Western Balkans on their way towards the EU integration: regional perspective

Regional cooperation was of great importance for the Western Balkans since it created a ground for peace and democracy as well as taken away potential conflicts (Erler, 2004, p.11). There were numerous regional initiatives in the Western Balkans undertaken in the period of 2001-2008 such as: Energy Community, European Common Aviation Area Agreement, South East Europe Transport Observatory, CEFTA and Bilateral Free Trade Agreements, Stability Pact for SEE, European Charter for Small Enterprises, Investment Compact, Electronic Southeast Europe Initiative, and Stability Pact for South East Europe that contributed to the removal of Non-Tariff Barriers initiative (Qorraj, 2018).

According to Bieber and Kmezić (2016, p.2), there is "optimism" for the WBs since the EU integration is considered to be the main driving force for change in the level of democracy and potential reforms.

There have been a number of programmes and funds directed to the Western Balkans. They aimed to improve the economic and financial situation to foster regional competitiveness. These programmes: CARDS 2000-2006, IPA 2007-2013 RSEDP2, IPA II 2014-2020, were designed to fully make use socio-economic, cultural and historical potentials for the WBs (Tošović-Stevanović & Ristanović, 2016).

In order to become an EU member state, a country needs to meet certain criteria which are officially called acquis communautaire (EU acquis) and are divided into specific chapters. In the 5th EU Enlargement, there were 31 chapters, and during the current 6th one, there are 35 chapters which have to be first opened and then closed. This means that a candidate country needs to work on 35 different matters, such as customs union, free movement of goods, energy, environment, taxation, etc. They need to comply with the requirements of each chapter and it is essential that they will close the chapter, which means they will manage to fulfill all necessary points from the checklist. The most advanced country from the WBs in this process is Montenegro with 28 chapters opened and 3 closed, then Serbia with 10 and 2, respectively (European Commission, 2017). Both Albania and FYROM have no chapters being opened, and remaining BiH and Kosovo are potential candidate countries so they have not even started the process yet.

Chapter 22 of the EU acquis entitled: "Regional policy and coordination of structural instruments" clearly states what needs to be done in terms of regional policy:

> *The acquis under this chapter consists mostly of the framework and implementing regulations, which do not require transposition into national legislation. . . .*
> *The Member States must have an institutional framework in place and adequate administrative capacity to ensure programming, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation in a sound and cost-effective manner from the point of view of management and financial control*. (European Commission, n.d.)

However, neither regional economic integration nor regional development was mentioned. There is only an emphasis put on institutions that should be able to transfer funds, (e.g. from the EU Cohesion Policy) to regions. Every candidate state does receive pre-accession funds, however, not as much as the funds for the EU member states, which access the ERDF.

**Regional development as a (un)important element of the EU accession process**

As Seroka (2008) rightly notices, one of the most prominent reasons why the EU wants the WBs to be integrated is to ensure security, political stability, and economic prosperity. He also admits that the EU accession conditions are set at a higher level for the WBs compared to the 2004 EU Enlargement. The underlying idea of promoting regional integration is to ensure that the WBs will focus on cooperation instead of going into potentially long-term conflicts or political disputes, which could eventually lead to the war. Therefore, in order to avoid the latter issues, it is very convenient for the EU to ask the WBs to deal with the problem of regional integration before joining the EU. In this way, the EU is not obliged to financially support this process, which normally would have to be supported if a country is an EU member state.

According to Sklias and Tsampra (2013), regional integration in the WBs is still not developed, so it negatively affects the socio-economic situation in these countries. This is indeed true, but we argue that not being a part of the EU is negatively affecting the WBs to a much higher extent. There is an extensive economic literature on regional integration and EU accession process (Börzel & Risse, 2009; Brusis, 2001). However, every accession process is different and so is the WBs one. Scalera (2017) indicates that a threshold for the EU membership is set at a higher level than ever before, which corresponds to the following logic of EU officials: the farther from Central Europe, the more difficult it is to become an EU member. As mentioned earlier, the EU demands more from the WBs in the field of regional integration. As Kathuria (2008) observes:

> *The eventual goal [for the WBs], of course, is full EU membership, which would allow the region to take advantage of a framework that in practice constitutes the deepest integration between countries. This report makes the case that regional integration is a stepping stone to the eventual goal of the EU membership.* (p.69)

In this respect, we can draw an analogy between EU 2004 Enlargement and their approach to regional integration. It was the largest EU enlargement in its history and all these countries were quite diverse at that time. Nevertheless, there has been one official regional integration within four of these countries, namely the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia, which form the Visegrád Group. However, six other countries (Cyprus, Estonia Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, and Slovenia) that joined the EU in 2004 did not establish such a group and could still manage to become an EU member state. Cyprus and Malta were outliers in terms of geographic location which are small island countries. Analyzing the current perspective of the EU accession by the WBs countries, one may express the connection between them and Croatia at the stage before the EU accession. Croatia joined the EU in 2013 but before that, it was considered to be (unlike Slovenia) a part of the WBs. Contrary to Kathuria (2008), we do not support the idea that a country needs to make all the effort to address regional integration as a priority on the EU accession path. We do not consider Croatia as a country that put more emphasis and efforts on regional integration in the pre-accession period. Owing to meeting all EU acquis, Croatia joined the EU and it seems that Croatia was not extremely active in regional integration in comparison to the other WBs countries. Seroka (2008) states that regional integration was perceived as a key element for the EU accession process of the WBs. Following this concept, at first, the WBs should be integrated, and then all of them should join the EU. However, this did not happen because Croatia joined the EU in 2013. Croatia was the most advanced country in the EU enlargement process and at some point, EU officials realized that they can no longer postpone Croatia's accession. If we assume that the idea of fully integrated WBs failed when Croatia joined the EU in 2013, then we can simply treat regional integration as a voluntary activity, not as a requirement, in the EU accession path.

**Conclusion**

Fostering a regional growth in the WBs is still a significant challenge due to political disputes and events from the past, where the majority of WBs formed a single country called Yugoslavia. This paper clearly takes the position that regional development in the WBs should not be addressed in the very first place (before the EU accession), as they face many different economic problems which correctly resolved may truly contribute to the EU accession. Regional development only appears in the EU acquis in the institutional dimension. It requires a candidate country to be ready to transfer money, mainly from the ERDF, to regions. Instead of focusing on regional development *per se*, a country should consider a strategy that would positively impact institutions. Well-functioning institutions which are economically efficient have a positive impact on regional development. Most existing research papers directly relate the EU accession of the WBs with regional development. More specifically, they argue that weak regional development in the WBs excludes them from joining the EU and, in that sense, they recommend that this ‘burning issue’ needs to be treated with the priority. Out of all EU new member states, no country was perfectly regionally integrated, however, all of them managed to meet all the criteria (EU acquis) and owing to that become a member of the EU. It is much easier for them to work on regional development as an EU member, through the Cohesion Policy and Structural Funds, than doing so with their own resources, which would in many cases be, the so-called mission impossible.

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