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## **DEMOCRATIC PEACE IN RELATION TO REGIONAL PEACE AND STABILITY IN THE WESTERN BALKANS**

### **Abstract**

The Paper aims to apply the theory of democratic peace to the context of regional peace and security in the Western Balkans, using both its internal and external components. Due to the importance of regional Democratisation for regional positive peace, as the theory would suggest, the recent democratic backsliding could negatively affect it. We provide a testing and adaptation of the famous theory and its recent adaptations and emerging corollaries, and produce a comparative regional empirical analysis. After an overview of the democratic situation and an analysis of regional relations in the context of regional EU accession and the nominal role of the EU as a regional stabiliser or democratiser, we examine the implications for the region based on the theoretical insight and expectations. We found that there is a link between internal democratic practice and regional stability, as internal democratic issues led to deterioration of bilateral and multilateral cooperation, as well as to a slowing down of the EU accession process, which is meant to contribute

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to peace in the region. We proposed that regional peace depends in many ways upon the continuation of Democratisation in each regional state, which would contribute to regional pacification without direct external effort. The results indicate that democratic backsliding would hurt regional peace and security, and vice versa, putting a normative emphasis on the continuation of regional Democratisation.

**Keywords:** Democratic Peace theory, Western Balkans, Regional Stability, Peace and security, Democratisation.

## INTRODUCTION

Recent literature has noted the concern regarding democratic backsliding in the Western Balkans and the internal effects that further movement in that direction could bring. We propose another viewpoint with its own corollaries, namely that a deterioration in regional democracy could also negatively affect regional peace and stability. In doing so, we rely on developments in the well-known Democratic Peace Theory (DPT), using its external and internal predictions, concerning maintaining regional peace. Considering that, according to its core tenets, which remain unproven, a regional democratisation would lead to regional peace, we apply the theory to our own region. We use the theory to test it on a highly significant empirical example and, therefore, add nuance to it, considering the high importance of regional peace for the national interest of all five states. We examine how Democratisation is connected to regional peace and security through its effect on cooperation. We provide a case study-based comparative analysis, first giving an overview of the state of democracy in the regional states, then providing a document analysis of their regional relations. In doing so, we note the critical role that the EU has in the region, as it is a nominal regional stabiliser and democratiser, having an essential role for regional peace as all of its states endeavour to join the union and are willing to adapt their policies accordingly, both those related to internal Democratisation and to foreign policy.

Shifting the focus of the analysis to the regional states themselves, considering that they have the primary responsibility and ability to maintain regional peace, we examine regional peace through the lens of regional Democratisation, rather than the role of military alliances or

geopolitical changes. We make the point that internal Democratisation, and the level of democracy of the region in relation to it, are still key elements of peace, as DPT would suggest, and that it's in the national interest of the regional nations to continue it. We do so based on our analysis of the connection between democracy and peace, both at the state and at the regional level, examining how democracy is related to peace, and if Democratisation could then be a unilateral form of regional peacebuilding and security building that each state could follow independently, while producing a regional effect. We examine the previous five years, 2020–2025, to provide a more exhaustive examination of democratic changes in relation to changes in regional relations, being as current as possible. The Paper is composed of four sections. We begin by reviewing the state of regional relations and the state of Democratisation in the region. We discuss how the theory of Democratic peace can be applied to the area, followed by the two-part empirical section, which first provides an overview of regional democracy by relying on major reports, indices, and analyses, providing a critical comparison. The second part includes an analysis of regional relations concerning Democratisation based on a document analysis of EU reports, which we selected as objective and relevant due to the context. We follow this with a discussion of results and a conclusion.

## **THE REGIONAL CONTEXT OF DEMOCRACY AND STABILISATION**

All regional governments officially support EU integration and work towards it through the enlargement process, implicitly accepting the union's declared conditions related to accession, including regional stability and democratisation (European Commission 2018). However, there has been a decline in democratic behaviour in the entire region, with some countries faring worse than others, which has consequences for stability. Kmezić argues that this tendency leads to increased pressure from political elites towards citizens, including the exacerbation and manufacture of regional crises that are then used to justify authoritarian tendencies. Such behaviour undermines public trust in the institutions and eliminates elections' positive effect on Democratisation (Kmezić 2020). In that sense, the decrease of democracy has a directly adverse impact on stability. Bieber notes the same tendency with an even harsher critique: he frames the emerging tendency as competitive authoritarianism,

whereby authoritarian governments undermine elections and the rule of law while creating and solving minor crises to present themselves as stabilisers (Bieber 2018). Andjelic connects this to populism, arguing that charismatic leaders consolidate their power by engaging with the citizens directly and presenting authoritarianism as more effective at dealing with crises (Andjelic 2020). In this way, the governments could be disincentivised from avoiding crises entirely, as their crisis management role, which gives them added authority, would be undermined.

As for the crisis of democracy, Bieber posits that slow Democratisation has led to democratic structures that authoritarianism can exploit due to a lack of stable safeguards, allowing power to be maintained indirectly and informally (Bieber 2018). Such a system is democratic at the surface or formal level, yet is hollow on the inside and is liable to be constantly challenged, providing almost none of the benefits of democracy (Ker-Lindsay 2017). For democratic peace to function, the states in the region would need to consolidate democracies rather than democratise. Concerningly, none of them can be genuinely considered consolidated, with democratic values also in decline (Lavrič and Bieber 2021), leading Bieber to argue that these governments are in fact “stabilocracies”, whose lack of democracy is tolerated by the international community for the sake of stability. In such a system, elections are unfair, and the democratic institutions are undermined even though they provide formal competition (Bieber 2018). The move towards stabilisation by the EU could undermine Democratisation and peace in the long run. Passarelli points out that an incomplete democratisation would prevent any proper regional stabilisation, as it would not solve the identity-based tensions or increase trust in democratic institutions (Passarelli 2022), as we have previously seen in Montenegro, for example. For Democratisation to succeed, political leaders need to consider democracy to be in their own interest or be pressured into it by leverage. However, the various European crises have detracted from Democratisation in the region (Ross-Smith et al. 2020). Without internal desire and external pressure, Democratisation can stall or backslide, destabilising the region due to the unfinished process.

The problems with democracy include not only a lack of deep reform, but also a lack of normative change that would lead to deep acceptance (Radeljić and Đorđević 2020). Passarelli links the deficiencies in the regional democratic systems to how the regional ruling parties are organised, as they lack internal competition and are characterised by

strong leaders and centralisation (Passarelli 2018). These problems are longstanding, and as democratic backsliding has been going on for years, the possibility of consolidating democracy through current institutions is deteriorating (Mirel 2018). Even with unfinished Democratisation in the region, Kulkova explains that negative peace has been achieved as there is no expectation of the use of force (Kulkova 2019), even though it stands that weak democratic institutions contribute to complex neighbourly relations as political culture is not fully accustomed to compromise and peaceful resolution (Keil 2013). As the region is suffering not a stagnation of Democratisation but backsliding, a loss of political restraints and accountability is occurring (Kapidžić 2020). The resultant exclusion of ordinary citizens from decision-making has led to dissatisfaction and instability, which can also be redirected against neighbours (Trošić–Jelisavac and Arnaudov 2024), especially as the regional authoritarian behaviour has a nationalistic character where political leaders frame themselves as national protectors (Lavrič and Bieber 2021). As regional political elites consolidate power over democratic institutions and exclude citizens, the accountability necessary for democracy is undermined (Bieber and Laštro 2023). Together, this all creates a direct link between democratic deficiency and regional issues, causing internal problems to be externalised and creating a regional destabilisation of democracy and relations.

The regional legacy of the past includes a heightened level of nationalism, as well as a large amount of fragmentation and polarisation in national politics (Passarelli 2018). Making matters worse, neighbours are often used in discourse as scapegoats through nationalist rhetoric, undermining regional cooperation (Mirel 2018). The internal democratic issues that are regionally shared also lead to bilateral problems and general mistrust (Trošić–Jelisavac and Arnaudov 2024). As the states do not share the same democratic values, they cannot have the solidarity that democratic peace is meant to provide. The EU accession process is intended to promote democratic values and create exactly this effect, and as it is stalling, the effect is minimal. We should also note that the complex regional relations and instability are primarily rooted in the legacy of the identity-based conflicts of the nineties (Petrovic and Winson 2021), complicating the context for the EU and adding another set of problems. Bieber notes that the role of the EU has decreased, as it has allowed regional governments to carry out surface-level reforms while allowing democratic backsliding (Bieber 2018), creating a context

in which neither EU integration nor Democratisation is stabilising the region. Ker-Lindsay notes that this is despite the EU's direct interest in stabilising the area by the spread of its own democratic values through enlargement and economic integration (Ker-Lindsay 2017). Economic cooperation has been used to lower regional tensions and promote political cooperation (Levitin and Sanfey 2018). As Kulkova argues, the regional governments are primarily motivated by the economic benefits of integration and stabilisation (Kulkova 2019); however, financial integration cannot by itself provide stabilisation, nor does it tackle the outstanding issues within the states and within the region, especially if it undermines democratisation efforts.

According to EU norms, Democratisation has been framed as an essential element of EU enlargement ever since negotiations began (Keil 2013). Since then, its strong external influence has been undermined by other powers competing for regional influence and exploiting the process's stalling (Passarelli 2022). Vulović adds that some of them are making the process more difficult due to their promotion of their non-democratic systems (Vulović 2023), and Abazi notes that the orientation of certain regional states towards the EU is becoming shallow and that its democratic values are becoming sidelined (Abazi 2021). By making a connection between EU enlargement and Democratisation, we can see how the stalling of one process can undermine the other, which, in the context of the importance of the EU's influence on regional peace and security, would also be negatively affected. As the EU is directly interested in ensuring that the region no longer produces security threats, it can best do so by integrating the region into its security framework and supporting Democratisation (Klemenc et al. 2021). Yet, the problem emerges when security and stability are prioritised over democracy. The weakening role of the EU and the weakening of enthusiasm towards enlargement mean that the regional states are less likely to adopt its values related to Democratisation and are also losing the regional stability provided by a joint goal and shared processes.

As Democratisation is unstable, and the region has remained volatile over time, the EU prioritises stability, slowing the normative and structural changes necessary for democracy and causing deterioration (Ross-Smith et al. 2020). The result is that the EU's democratic norms are still not widely accepted. At the same time, stability and security have not been achieved (Radeljić and Đorđević 2020), creating a dangerous situation where Democratisation was sacrificed for the sake of short-term

stability, which did not even succeed (Gafuri and Muftuler–Bac 2020). This supports the argument that stabilisation can only be temporary without Democratisation, and peace is more difficult to achieve without long-term solutions. Even with goodwill, various continental crises have weakened the EU's ability to influence and support the region and its reforms, contributing to a general slowdown of the accession process (Mirel 2018), creating the space for democratic backsliding and the threat of renewed conflict. The formal support of EU accession and democratic reforms by political elites shields them from EU criticism, while democracy is weakening (Bieber 2018), preventing the positive effects that the process should bring. At the same time, Lakić argues that traditional forms of nationalism have become more popular than the civic nationalism that was promoted by the EU (Lakić 2024), causing further destabilisation and undermining the EU's influence even more, so that its goal of supporting parallel democratisation processes under its framework has not been achieved.

## DEMOCRATIC PEACE THEORY AS AN APPROACH

Democratic peace theory has long asserted that democratic states do not have violent conflict with each other. The theory is not new, yet it remains firm and has survived challenges over the years, leading us to attempt to apply its predictions to the region. Gleditsch and Russett theorised that democratic societies are unlikely to start conflicts because they value the norms of peaceful conflict resolution, and because institutional constraints and accountability prevent the consolidation of power in a small group (Gleditsch 1992; Russett 1994). Oneal further stressed the importance of the norms related to compromise (Oneal 2012), and a sound empirical basis has been accumulated for believing that liberal democracy promotes peace and security, while authoritarian states are more likely to experience intrastate and interstate conflicts (Albright 2017). Rummel argued that norms play the key role in democratic peace, as the shared democratic norms should create solidarity and orient democratic states towards cooperation with each other (Rummel 1995), while Dixon stressed the norms related to conflict regulation and the acceptance of fair competition especially, which he considers essential to the democratic process and the peaceful settlement of disputes (Dixon 1994). This would mean democracy would provide institutional and normative effects that develop peace between democracies.



The debate remains over whether democracies are more peaceful than non-democracies, or just in relation to each other, as Gleditsch and Hegre considered (Gleditsch and Hegre 1997). Yet, critics noted that while democratic states are likely to cooperate in peace, they do so in war against non-democratic states (Raknerud and Hegre 1997). Altman notes that democracy exists in various levels and forms and is a process rather than a state, and argues for the correlation that the higher the level of democracy between two states, the lower the probability of war between them (Altman 2021). As noted, even with full democracies being generally peaceful towards each other, it seems that limited democracies are highly aggressive, especially in a hostile environment and when nationalism is involved, continuing during entire periods of volatility (Baliga et al. 2009). Importantly for our case, Hegre also noted that while democracies provide peaceful outlets for problems and grievances, intermediate regimes such as states which are democratising have, are the most vulnerable to civil and interstate conflict because their institutions are neither strong enough to repress dissent, nor democratic sufficient to resolve it through peaceful means (Hegre et al. 2001). Hybrid government systems would then be the most vulnerable to insecurity (Albright 2017), meaning that while democracies are more peaceful, Democratisation is not. A danger would then be created if a region were to be comprised of states at various levels of Democratisation, especially if it is prone to crisis and has nationalist tension, as the western Balkans do, adding to our argument that only full regional Democratisation could provide the development of democratic peace.

Even with scepticism remaining, conflict is decreasing and peace is strengthening in areas where democracy has become more widespread (Gartzke and Weisiger 2013), as the propensity of democracies to cooperate has made them more peaceful than non democratic states, with no sign of abatement (Dafoe et al. 2013). Hegre notes that democracies not only have solidarity due to shared norms, but usually have joint interests with other democracies with the same constraints and conditions, stating that they also have higher internal political costs for conflict than autocracies (Hegre 2014). These political costs are related to institutional balances and restraints such as electoral accountability and participation, which limit the exercise of power both internally and externally. As democracies are open and transparent, they signal that they can signal their intentions, and policy in them is changed with more difficulty, meaning that crisis escalation costs them more than



non-democracies (Hegre et al. 2020). This means that democratic states are more peaceful, whether they desire to be so or not, because their structure undermines conflict escalation, at least in relation to other democracies. Another component of the theory that has remained current is that characteristics affect foreign policy, and that democratic states project their democratic norms onto their foreign policy (Rioux 1998), meaning that they externalise their internal norms and institutional characteristics, so that democratic states would act democratically in their foreign policy (Zeev and Bruce 1993). Their leaders would also internalise these norms and act accordingly (Dixon 1994). That would mean that in an unstable region, each state could contribute to regional consolidation through unilateral means, by accepting democratic norms and then externalising them, causing an improvement of relations in this way.

Recent revisions have not changed the basic tenets of the theory, although discussions continued over what exactly makes democratic states more peaceful. Choi has argued that democratic institutions and norms are coproductive in creating the overall pacific qualities of democratic states, rather than one being primary over the other, explaining that democratic self-control leads to internal norms of restraint being applied internationally (Choi 2011). Veri and Sass note that democratic institutions constrain violence only when seen as legitimate and inclusive, making democratic inclusion and a deliberative political culture imperative to achieve restraint and conflict (Veri and Sass 2023). This supports our initial argument that incomplete or surface-level Democratisation does not support regional peace. For internal and external conflict to be prevented through democracy, credible commitments must be made, which lead to broad democratic inclusion. At the same time, popular oversight and institutional restraints over the executive must be adequate (Fjelde et al. 2021). New studies have likewise shown that semi-democracies are the most vulnerable to civil violence and are likely to employ repression, while these are least likely in full democracies (Jones and Lupu 2018). This has internal effects rather than external ones, as stable democracies rarely suffer from civil wars, as opposed to transitional systems, which cannot accommodate political demands that result from unrest (Snyder and Mansfield 2008). As internal violence can quickly escalate regionally, especially in unstable regions like the Western Balkans, where democratisation processes are incomplete. We can then assume that a lack of completed Democratisation plays a key

role in the regional lack of peace and security, and could improve the prospects for peace.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Adapting the Democratic peace theory to the western Balkans region, which, as it seems, is undergoing a democratic backsliding together with increased instability, we argue that the latter is a consequence of the former. Based on theoretical insight and testing the theory, we analyse the level of democracy and regional relations over five years to examine how they are correlated. Democracy in the region has not been sufficiently analysed regarding peace and security, and there is a general lack of comparative case studies of the area, necessitating such an approach. From the theory, we assume that an increase in Democratisation would increase regional peace, as democracies are less likely to have conflict with each other, expecting that incomplete Democratisation and the existence of flawed democracies would increase tension and the possibility of conflict. Likewise, we would expect that any decrease or increase in Democratisation would have an effect, and that formal Democratisation without deeper internalisation of democratic norms would not yield positive results.

Democratic, legitimate, and inclusive governments are expected to have better relations with neighbours who share the same values, and we hope that the influence of the EU would be significant due to its regional approach to Democratisation, yet only if it applies pressure on the regional states. A lack of stable democracy should prevent regional security and peace consolidation. As such, our research explores the level of democracy of regional states and their bilateral and regional relations to find correlations and support for our theory. We argue that the empirical data will show that democracy and regional peace are directly correlated, especially concerning the pressure of the EU and the likelihood of regional accession to it, confirming the democratic peace theory and highlighting its significance. The arguments related to the internalisation of democratic values, the need for a regional rather than national Democratisation for regional peace, and those related to the dangers of incomplete Democratisation, would then answer the paradox that even with over two decades of Democratisation and orientation towards EU accession there is still no positive peace or stable security in the region, harming the national interests of all in the area.

## METHOD

We conduct case studies of the five sovereign states in the Western Balkans, which are analysed comparatively to provide an exhaustive overview of the specific situations under a general regional framework. The period includes the previous five years, as the most current and significant to current issues and developments. The empirical section is comprised of two halves, the first devoted to examining the level of regional democracy, which is done through various notable indices and reports that discuss the level of democracy and its components in the region in detail, including data from the previous five years for each index to provide an analysis with a broad context and perspective. Democracy is analysed through its three main components, including civil rights, fair elections, and the level of polarisation. The second half of the empirical section analyses the five states' regional relations, which is done through document analysis of EU reports on enlargement, which are objective and encompassing. EU reports on the rule of law and democracy are used in the first half of the empirical section, keeping the second section aimed at political relations in the region and towards the EU. These reports are followed chronologically to examine cause and effect, and the countries are reviewed individually and in the regional context while being treated as a part of a whole. The analysis is widened by reference to the public discourse of regional political leaders. Therefore, our method relies on the comparative case study approach, document analysis, and an implicit process tracing. The immediate comparisons between the case studies allow for a discussion on the regional situation concerning the theoretical framework provided. The discussion provides a final analysis of regional democracy about regional relations, and in the framework of the democratic peace theory, to give a description and an explanation.

## DEMOCRATISATION IN THE REGION

Civil liberties are essential to Democratisation, and a democratic overview must start with them. There are commonalities in the region regarding problems in the media sphere, which is under intense political pressure and governmental interference, which includes non-transparent subsidies, state ownership and control, as well as strong links between media and political parties, which cause bias (WPF Index 2022; 2023). Serbia has specific issues with extensive state ownership of television

channels, with opposition channels not achieving a national broadcast licence, undermining fair competition. BiH suffers from more substantial limitations of media freedom and freedom of speech, with intense state pressure in the respective entities. It likewise has a fragmented media landscape and a problematic situation for journalists. The fragmentation of media space is a feature of the region, with transparency being generally low and bias being considerable. Montenegro has inclusion issues, as due to its history of ethnic and religious tension, the public space is divided between communities that have mistrust towards each other. (EC rule of law reports 2021; 2022; 2023) This often leads to marginalised opposition channels, limiting pluralism and access to information (Freedom House NiT 2022; 2023).

The rights to assembly and association are generally respected in the region, even though protests occur often. Chronic problems from previous democratic deficiency and improperly carried out privatisation remain, which allows links between the private sector and political parties (Vdem 2021; 2022; 2023). While most regional states have an open media space, critical voices are marginalised and undermined, without a transparent dialogue between position and opposition, especially in Serbia and BiH, while in Albania, private interests and politics overlap and lead to a consolidation of power and influence (EU Human Rights reports 2022; 2023). Another regional deficiency is found in the independence and professionalism of journalism, with a tabloidisation of the media space preventing essential topics from being approached comprehensively and objectively (Economist democracy index 2022; 2023). In Serbia, the state-owned telecommunications company “Telekom” has been taking over smaller operators (Politika 2025a) while the government criticises opposition channels in harsh and polarising terms (B92 2025; Politika 2025b). The president has connected internal democratic issues with regional relations, claiming Serbia’s neighbours want to undermine it (Politika 2025c). Albania has even seen police raids on independent media, which criticised the government (TVP 2025) and showed the difficulties of media freedom in the region.

Judging by recent elections, it can be argued that the region has been undergoing a democratic decline over recent years. Elections are hampered by institutional problems, lack of reform, and the ruling parties’ use of dominating and arrogant behaviour, which leads to election results being challenged (Freedom House NiT 2022; 2023; 2024). Political

institutions in the region are still not fully consolidated and stable, as there are issues with accountability and transparency. Democratic political culture is still deficient, leading to a volatile situation, allowing for protests and discontent, although there is a certain improvement in electoral competitiveness in the region (EIU Democracy Index 2023; 2024). Albanian political elites do not accept liberal democratic values, and like elsewhere in the region, political parties are still dominated by strong leaders and have limited internal democratic practice. This contributes to the overall democratic practice in the region being unstable and in danger of backsliding, with weak consolidation (BS Transformation Index 2022; 2023). In Serbia, the ruling party's structural advantages are not significantly different from those of the rest of the region. Yet, the opposition is most vocal in contesting it, with its electoral process causing the region's most post-election instability and protest. The decline of societal trust in institutions and the decreased perception of government legitimacy are regional problems tied to political unrest (ODIHR reports 2023; 2024; WPJ rule of law index 2023; 2024).

BiH's electoral process is entirely determined by ethno-national divisions, with strong structural problems and fragmentation. North Macedonia has recently improved its democratic stability after years of instability, yet it still has an unstable and unconsolidated system. Montenegro has also recently moved towards democratic improvements and increased political inclusion, although the legacy of the past remains as a destabilising factor. While elections in the region can be considered free, they are not always fair, as the ruling parties have significant structural advantages and means of pressure, leading to protests and instability in several states and a general decrease in trust towards public institutions. Montenegro and North Macedonia have recently had democratic changes after a long time, and seem to have improved electoral conditions. (IDEA GSoD 2023; 2024; ODIHR reports 2023; 2024). This shows a regional struggle with upholding democratic norms and ensuring a transparent and fair environment for elections, undermining the legitimacy of democratic government and the stability that would emerge from it. In several regional countries, there has been a lack of government change, with most leaders remaining in power for a long time, undermining the trust in democracy of the opposition voters. The Albanian leader has been criticised for this (Vreme, 2025). The Serbian opposition has become so disappointed by the durability of the ruling party, which they connected to unfair elections, that they

even demanded a transitional government. President Vučić refused any compromise outside of elections, rejecting that the process is unjust (RTS 2025).

Especially significant is the level of political polarisation, which is substantial in the entire region and is increasing. The rift deepens between citizens who support different political options and between politicians themselves, with debates in parliament marked by strong tension and protesters taking to the streets. Polarising political issues are being given prominent yet biased media attention, leading to a lack of public consensus and a deepened divide in the information space. Frequently, harsh and intolerant language is present in political debates and the media, and there is a lack of confidence that democracy can solve these issues (Freedom House FiW 2022; 2023; 2024). These political issues are most felt in BiH. They are worsened by the division existing along ethno-religious lines, with identity questions overshadowing political liberties and rights, leading to strong mistrust. The media exhibit divisive narratives and hate speech, while confrontational positions and limited dialogue characterise the political actors, preventing consensus-building (EU Human Rights Reports 2022; 2023; 2024). Vučić has accused opposition media of deepening polarisation (Danas 2025), while media supportive of him have continually accused the opposition and its media of calling for violence (Politika 2025d). In BiH, the president of the Serb entity, Dodik, has threatened to create a department that would fight against “lies and disinformation” (FTV 2025), another example of the polarised state of media in the region.

Political tolerance is at a low level in regional political culture. Intolerant and divisive rhetoric is regular, and divisive narratives are normalised. Media are likewise sharply divided along political and ethnic lines, with political elites being even more polarised than the general population. Corruption contributes to polarisation and the feeling that the democratic system is unfair, and it is common in the region. The deep ethnic, religious and political divisions undermine democracy in the entire area, worsened by the authoritarian political culture inherited from the past, and prevent reaching consensus on key public interest issues (Global Peace Index 2022; 2023; 2024). Albania is less ethnically divided, yet its politics suffer from a large amount of personality-driven rivalry. In Montenegro, the recent fair elections failed to remove the identity-based divide in the country, and recent identity-based issues have also undermined North Macedonia. Serbia’s political

polarisation has even led to violent protests, while in BiH, it threatens the country's unity. The media in the region is likewise highly fragmented and polarised, exhibiting hate speech and political intolerance, especially between government and opposition actors (IEP positive peace report 2022; 2023; 2024) Most countries in the region seem to have high political and media polarisation, and a political culture oriented towards conflict rather than dialogue, causing political and social issues both within and between states. This polarisation prevents the development of an inclusive democratic political culture oriented towards compromise and stability, which could be externalised to the region.

## REGIONAL RELATIONS

While Serbia emphasises developing good neighbourly relations and regional cooperation, practice shows deficiencies due to their importance for regional stability and peace. The Open Balkan initiative did not achieve its results, even with strong optimism when launched in 2021; however, it allowed for improved relations with Albania and North Macedonia during the last several years. However, relations with Montenegro and BiH were strained by unresolved disputes, ethno-religious tensions and political complications, which increased over the years. Political friction between the three states led to regional fragility and public outbursts of enmity, while antagonistic exchanges prevented high-level dialogue. These challenges became more pronounced in 2021 and continued, leading to a decline in trust and a worsening of regional stability due to mistrust and a lack of dialogue or compromise (EU Serbia reports 2021; 2022). Serbia's regional relations remained fragile and susceptible to internal political and democratic crises, as the deteriorations in relations were often related to internal issues. Later, the EU introduced added conditionality through the "growth plan" initiative, combining a demand for democratic and rule of law reforms with improvements to regional relations to limit backsliding on both and treat them as connected. The regional multilateral forums which were attempted did not resolve political issues and instead focused on economic integration, while unresolved issues surfaced to undermine progress. Serbia's formal commitment to EU integration was hampered by its lack of alignment with the EU's foreign policy, and the maintenance of strategic relations with the EU's rivals (EU Serbia reports 2023; 2024)



BiH initially engaged constructively with the EU and its neighbours, even with its political divisions. Still, its efforts were marked by persistent challenges and growing political tension within and without, which undermined both the country and its regional credibility. Despite formal participation in the accession process, BiH did not move much towards the EU, and it was the only regional state that failed to participate fully in the growth plan. Relations with Serbia are stagnating or gradually deteriorating, with many unresolved issues. They are determined mainly by Serbia's relations with Republika Srpska, with the two remaining closely engaged in a spirit of cooperation. Relations with Albania and North Macedonia remained generally stable and professional, while those with Montenegro became more stable over time and were undermined by certain acute deteriorations (EU BiH reports 2021; 2022). Relations with neighbours remained complicated for BiH due to the sensitive legacy of past conflicts, with reconciliation remaining very limited due to a lack of political compromise. Internal divisions continued to prevent a singular foreign policy or complete alignment with the EU's foreign policy, as the constituent nations of BiH have different foreign policy goals. The internal democratic fragmentation thus extended to foreign and regional policy issues, as its foreign policy remained fragmented and contradictory. These internal problems have prevented resolving regional and bilateral issues and strengthening stability (EU BiH reports 2023; 2024).

Montenegro has maintained a strong commitment to regional cooperation and European integration, with periods of internal democratic problems undermining this. Relations remained complicated with Serbia and BiH, but are solid with Albania and N. Macedonia. Its internal democratic issues and lack of tolerance, which were related to identity and caused wide polarisation, spilt over into the region and destabilised relations significantly, especially with Serbia (EU Montenegro reports 2021; 2022). After its 2023 democratic changes, its relations improved further, as the internal divisions were no longer externalised to complicate regional issues, nor were identity politics and nationalism used for political gain in an unstable democratic environment—even the bilateral relations, which were complicated by historical and political issues, improved after this. The increased democratic inclusion lowered identity-based polarisation, allowing tensions with Serbia, which even led to a temporary pause of diplomatic relations, to improve significantly. At the same time, its foreign policy remained stable and pro-EU. Montenegro

consistently aligned with the EU foreign policy while consolidating its democracy, including restrictive measures against Russia and its actions in the UN. It has become more closely integrated economically with the EU, and its accession negotiations are progressing significantly (EU Montenegro reports 2023; 2024).

North Macedonia has also maintained a stable commitment to regional cooperation and its EU integration process, supporting initiatives of regional collaboration like the Open Balkans that Serbia developed. Its regional bilateral relations remained positive and constructive with all regional states; however, it has had tension with Bulgaria due to cultural and identity issues, which did not undermine its regional role. It has continued to align its economic and foreign policy very closely with the EU; however, it is not without political and democratic challenges, which limit its regional cooperation. It pursued regional integration for its practical use in relation to accession, and as its general direction, while trying to follow the EU's democratic and foreign policy standards. Most of its bilateral relations are stable and constructive, and the shared goal of EU accession provides an avenue of cooperation in the region (EU North Macedonia reports 2021; 2022; 2023; 2024).

Albania likewise has stable regional relations and a less polarised political space, although its democracy is deficient. It is fully oriented towards EU integration, has accepted good neighbourly relations as a core requirement, acts constructively, and has not let internal democratic divisions be externalised. It has also accepted Serbia's attempts to improve regional relations and develop economic ties, being open to multilateral and bilateral cooperation even with interethnic tension (EU Albania reports 2021; 2022). It has increasingly tried to address bilateral tensions, historical legacies, and unresolved disputes, including the socio-political aftermath of the previous regional conflicts, to hasten its EU accession process, which is progressing steadily. It has had a significant role in EU-Western Balkans engagement and interface. The increased democratic consolidation and progress on EU accession have supported Albania's constructive regional role, positively affecting its democracy. It has maintained good relations with Serbia despite its support for separatism in its southern province and prioritised constructive relations and dialogue (EU Albania reports 2021; 2022; 2023; 2024).

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In the Paper, we applied Democratic Peace Theory to the Western Balkans to examine how internal Democratisation affects regional peace and stability, with a view to testing and adapting the democratic peace theory, through an interface with empirical data for five states over five years. We found that democratic deficits, exceptionally high polarisation, are present regionally, and the region is deteriorating, undermining stability. We found that regional relations correlate with democratic quality, as states with more substantial democratic consolidation showed more constructive bilateral and multilateral engagement. High polarisation is a hallmark of regional democratic backsliding, which makes bilateral relations fragile and regional relations unstable. We found that the internal democratic context of one state affects the region, and that, in accordance with the theory, democratic backsliding destabilises the region as relations deteriorate and trust is limited. EU influence is significant; however, its conditionality has a limited effect in the area, with some states internalising its democratic norms through accession and others stalling with both.

We saw a correlation between incomplete Democratisation and instability, and that regional democratic quality, not just bilateral state interactions, drives peace in the post-conflict region. Internalisation of democratic norms seems to be as important as formal democratic institutions. The EU's conditionality would fit here as a moderating factor, yet its influence is sporadic. However, the primary responsibility is with the states, as democratic consolidation can serve as unilateral regional stability and peacebuilding. We have provided up-to-date, comparative empirical evidence on democratic backsliding and regional relations over the previous five years to argue for the continued usefulness of the democratic peace theory, providing a case study that conforms to its predictions. By extending the theory to a regional system to show how varying levels of democracy across multiple states interact to influence regional peace, we saw that internal democratic contexts seem to be almost as crucial to regional stability as bilateral relations.

We linked democratic backsliding to the destabilisation of multilateral regional relations, less explored in the literature. The theory usually looks at long-term historical data over large areas. At the same time, we focus on the current period and a specific region to test the theory on a case study. We explore the direct effect on stability to show

that short-term stabilisation efforts without democratic consolidation are insufficient, adding a dynamic, temporal dimension. This indicates that EU and regional policymakers cannot prioritise short-term stability at the expense of democracy, as there is a causal link between domestic democracy quality and regional stability. Ignoring democratic deficiencies creates the potential for renewed regional tension and weakens regional integration and EU accession. The Paper has thus demonstrated that democratic backsliding negatively affects regional peace, confirming the old theory while refining it for transitional and incomplete democracies. By providing recent comparative evidence from the region, we contribute to both theoretical debates in international relations and security, and offer a practical approach of use to national and regional interests, finding that democracy is not only desirable domestically but is also a significant cause of sustainable regional peace. Future research could address the limitations of these studies by observing the wider region and with a wider temporal frame, or could even explore similar post-conflict areas. It could also explore informal political dynamics and the broad adoption of democratic norms.

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**Урош Попадић\***

*Независни истраживач*

## **ДЕМОКРАТСКИ МИР У ОДНОСУ НА РЕГИОНАЛНИ МИР И СТАБИЛНОСТ НА ЗАПАДНОМ БАЛКАНУ\*\***

### **Резиме**

Рад се бави истраживањем стања мира и безбедности у региону западног Балкана кроз призму теорије демократског мира. Полазећи од ширег друштвено-политичког контекста региона, установили смо да већина држава западног Балкана не испуњава стандарде консолидоване либералне демократије, већ се налази у продуженом процесу демократизације који је у великој мери застао. Узимајући у обзир да су билатерални и регионални односи и даље оптерећени историјским споровима, одсуством отвореног дијалога, као и све већим утицајем популистичког национализма, дошли смо до закључка да се регион налази у стању политичке и институционалне нестабилности. Анализом водећих индикатора демократије и разних извештаја ЕУ, као и компаративном студијом регионалних односа, показали да ниво демократије има корелацију са стабилношћу регионалних односа. Државе региона показују висок степен политичке поларизације, ниску институционалну транспарентност и слабе механизме политичке одговорности, што их чини подложним унутрашњим и међународним тензијама. Такође смо указали да формална демократија сама по себи није довољна, већ да је интернализација демократских вредности кључна за стабилан мир, као и да је утицај ЕУ значајан модерирајући фактор.

Изнели смо став да тренутно одсуство позитивног мира у региону у великој мери проистиче из недовољно развијених демократских институција, а не искључиво из билатералних несугласица или историјског наслеђа. Ово омогућава проширење

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теорије демократског мира кроз регионални систем, показујући како различити нивои демократије међусобно делују и обликују мир. Висока поларизација и демократски дефицити показују да краткорочне стабилизационе мере без унапређења демократије нису одрживе, наглашавајући да занемаривање унутрашњих демократских процеса повећава ризик од регионалних тензија и слабљења интеграције. Управо зато предлагемо алтернативни пут ка регионалном миру, где се, залажемо за стратегију индиректне градње мира, где би свака држава унапредила своју демократију као унутрашњи процес, чиме би се створили предуслови за успешнију мултилатералну сарадњу. Закључили смо да без продубљења процеса демократизације, регион ризикује да и даље буде изложен геополитичким притисцима, економској и политичкој зависности од спољних актера, као и потенцијалним унутрашњим и међудржавним сукобима.

**Кључне речи:** теорија демократског мира, односи на Западном Балкану, регионална стабилност, мир и безбедност, демократизација.

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