

# The Path to Democracy: A Critical Evaluation of the Impact of Region on the Democratic Process in the Western Balkans

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## *Abstract*

**Purpose:** The present research is placed within the strand of studies on the quality of democracy and state-building in the Western Balkans (WB). We aim to explore the impact that both variables have on each other and on fostering democratic values in the specific given region. **Methods:** The method implied for the present work is desk research based on cohort studies or the path of Democratic evolution of the region. Data results, scored by MAXQDA software for desk and cohort-comparative research, comparing the World Government Index (WGI), the Bertelsmann Stiftung Index (BTI), and Freedom House reports for trends and predictions for the WB in a 30-year continuum and democratic transition, from 1992-2022. **Results:** Descriptive statistics revealed a linear distribution of both variables in all the 6WB countries ( $M=1.33$ ;  $M_{tot}=36.33$ ;  $SD=22.017$ ) meaning the same probability of partial democratic scores in all the Region's countries. Pearson correlation data revealed that there is a relation between the two variables ( $r_w=.642$ ;  $p<0.05$ ). Regressive analysis revealed a good variability and  $R_{square}=.612$  indicating that both variables encountered of a total of 95% of the total variance and stability. Linear regression also revealed a good influence between the 6WB region and their democratic status, confirming our primary assumption ( $R=.642$ ;  $Sig2. p=0.63<0.05$ ). **Conclusions:** One of the detrimental addresses of the present work is related to the conceptions of "Democracy", "Geolocalisation", "Rule of Law" and "Political Stability" and their impact on the policy effectiveness of the WB. In the end, the authors recommend a broad technical review of the Region's Democratic Values and evolution achievements in the light of adherence to the European Union Value market.

**Keywords:** Western Balkans, democracy, geolocalization, democratic values, political stability.

## 1. Introduction

The paths of democratic consolidation of the states of the Balkan area are currently still for the most part incomplete, except for the systems part of the European Union, whose membership represents a guarantee of the results obtained. Democracy – a contraction of *demos and cratia* – is essentially the rule of people (both people themselves and through elected representatives), influenced and controlled by the people. *It is the government of the people, by the people, and for the people.* This is the idea behind it: people are the driving force behind everything that happens in the public sphere. This basic idea is central to any general definition

either of a “sensitive rule”, “popular government”, or “popular sovereignty” (Lai, 2019; Michels, 2015; Habermas, 2015; Schmitter, 2003).

According to the Freedom House 2022 report, both Slovenia and Croatia are considered democratic regimes, although the definition of established democracy does not is fully applicable to the Croatian case, which is one of the semi-consolidated democracies (Freedom House, 2022). As argued by Acemoglu et al. (2008), when considering a democratic and an oligarchic regime, we can go and analyze the effect of distortive policies. In the first case, we hypothesize that the key distortive policy is high taxation deriving from the need for greater redistribution causing a decrease in the level of investments, while in the oligarchic setting, the distortive policy that will tends to form is the creation of barriers to entry, whereby the oligarchs aim to keep demand lower and consequently pay lower wages. The study of the model shows that the distorting policies of different institutional arrangements affect differently over time. In the short term, the redistribution tax has a much greater impact than the entry barriers, so we can say that it is preferable to adopt an oligarchic system in the short term. Over time, however, the distorting effects of entry barriers become increasingly intense and taxes for redistribution will have a decreasing trend, as the redistribution policies adopted lead to a society with lower inequality rates. Faced with the situation, we can observe that democracy is preferable in the long run, as it favors development, especially in new sectors, where the oligarchy creates even more robust barriers instead. Here then is that, due to external isolation and the formation of barriers, the oligarchy finds itself in the long-term running much less than democracy, creating a growing gap in economic development. In recent years, the theme of the quality of democracy has assumed increasing importance in political science studies. Ulbricht (2018) proposes the following definition of a “good” democracy: “*the regime that creates the best institutional opportunities to realize freedom and equality*”. In this proposal, the quality is declined concerning the content and therefore the two great values of democracy – freedom and equality – which, as seen above, are always remembered, and reaffirmed by most normative concepts. Then there is the quality understood in procedural terms, once concerning institutions, the rules, and their functioning. Lastly, an attentive look is given to the outcomes. Considering, therefore, the three dimensions of quality it can be said that a good democracy is “*that set-up stable institutional than through properly functioning institutions and mechanisms creates freedom and equality of citizens*” (ibidem). Roberts (2010) instead starts from the institutions. According to the author, the latter allows citizens to influence their government. In the modern world, these institutions are free, fair elections and civil rights allow citizens to express their opinions for and about their government. Citizens can influence the behavior of their government under other types of regimes as well, but this is not done through formal institutions. Only democracy formalizes and institutionalizes public influence over rulers. It is possible to have democratic institutions without citizens controlling their government. Starting from this observation, Coglianese and Dahl (1990), when identifying some opportunities or links between citizens and rulers, argue that democratic quality is “*the strength of the connection alternatively out of popular control.*” On the contrary, it is precisely this potential for influence that leads us to identify democracy with the government of the citizen. Democratic institutions allow citizens to control their government, but they do not guarantee that they exercise such control. The institutions of democracy are complex instruments. Citizens can use them to punish, select political orientations, and channel their preferences. Such actions tend to give them the kind of government they want, but there is no guarantee that citizens will seize these opportunities or that politicians will respond to the incentives they receive. In strong ties, citizens govern by controlling the work of the government.

This does not necessarily mean that the government will be better, but it will certainly be more democratic (Zaimi, 2021; Besley & Persson, 2019; Lundåsen, 2013; Agh, 1995). Following the footsteps of Manin, Przeworski, and Stokes (1999), Roberts points to three fundamental links to the basis of democratic quality: *electoral accountability, mandate responsiveness, and policy responsiveness*.

Table 1. Freedom House Scores for the Western Balkans and Reference Group in democratic values

<i>Country</i>	<i>Total Score and Status</i>	<i>Political Rights</i>	<i>Civil Liberties</i>
<b>Albania</b>	Partly Free (67)	28	29
<b>Bosnia and Herzegovina</b>	Partly Free (52)	18	34
<b>Kosovo</b>	Partly Free (60)	28	32
<b>Montenegro</b>	Partly Free (67)	26	41
<b>North Macedonia</b>	Partly Free (68)	29	39
<b>Serbia</b>	Partly Free (60)	20	40
<b>Croatia</b>	Free (84)	35	49
<b>Slovenia</b>	Free (95)	39	56

\*Source: Freedom House, 2023.

## 2. Democracy in the Western Balkans

As regards the guarantee of access to political rights and civil liberties in the Western Balkans, Slovenia and Croatia have a degree of freedom in line with the EU average European Union, and in particular, Slovenia reached a score equal to ninety-four cents – equal to that achieved by Germany and higher than that attributed to Italy – while Croatia was assigned a score of eighty-five cents.

Table 2. Democracy scores for the Western Balkans and Reference Group

<b>Country</b>	<b>Total Score and Status</b>	<b>Democracy Percentage</b>	<b>Democracy Score</b>
<b>Albania</b>	Transitional or Hybrid Regime	45.83	3.75
<b>Bosnia and Herzegovina</b>	Transitional or Hybrid Regime	33.93	3.04
<b>Kosovo</b>	Transitional or Hybrid Regime	37.50	3.25
<b>Montenegro</b>	Transitional or Hybrid Regime	47.00	3.82
<b>North Macedonia</b>	Transitional or Hybrid Regime	47.00	3.82
<b>Serbia</b>	Transitional or Hybrid Regime	46.43	3.79
<b>Croatia</b>	Semi-consolidated democracy	54.17	4.25
<b>Slovenia</b>	Consolidated Democracy	70.83	5.25

\*Source: Freedom House, 2023.

A different scenario is instead the one described by the other countries of the Balkan region, defined in the Freedom House report as hybrid or transitional regimes. The main issues highlighted are represented by systemic corruption, the presence of inadequately contrasted organized crime, a scarce alternation of the political forces in power, insufficient independence of the judiciary, and a polarized political environment, often on ethnic grounds – particularly among the states of the former Yugoslavia. The fragile and incomplete democracies of the Balkans have also inevitably suffered from the events of 2020, which highlighted its structural weaknesses; the health emergency has in some cases represented an alibi for the introduction of restrictions that are not limited over time to civil liberties and highly controversial measures as well as changes to electoral laws and accelerated legislative procedures, the attribution of full powers to the

presidents of the republics and the indefinite declaration of a state of emergency and the postponement of elections as happened, for example, in Serbia or North Macedonia. This kind of action, combined with longer-term trends of democratic regression has led to the Freedom House downgrading Serbia and Montenegro from democratic – albeit not yet consolidated – regimes to hybrid regimes (Darmanovic, 2007). Overall, the path of democratic consolidation of the Western Balkans has recorded a decline with scores achieved in recent decades, which the last developments seem to have called into question. The risk of frustrating the efforts is concrete and has high costs in social and economic as well as political terms, also in consideration of the fact that the transition paths from the socialist authoritarian model to the liberal-democratic constitutional model of the Western Balkans have started late; the first competitive plural elections were held in 1990 in the Yugoslav republics in 1991 in Albania, and a relatively mild form, recording a change dominated by the previous communist elites, in the absence of strong oppositions in Serbia and Montenegro (Grimm & Mathis, 2017; Kalemaj, 2016). As a result, the Albanian transition turned out to be incomplete as well as much delayed, while in the case of the ex-Yugoslavia WB countries, the start of a more apparent transition process provided a boost to the claims of self-determination, then taken to the extreme during the 1990s – except for Slovenia. In Albania, the constitutional transition process started in 1991 had provided for the adoption of a provisional constitutional text of limited scope, pending the drafting of a constitution that would be later drafted by a special commission session of the People's Assembly in anticipation of the abrogation of the 1976 Constitution, progressively amended following the early elections of 1992 (Kushtetuta e RSH, 1992). The subsequent constitutional text would be approved in 1998, with the assistance of the Council of Europe through the Venice Commission but would have needed further revisions regarding the independence of the judiciary. According to the Freedom House:

Albanian democracy was tested to its core in 2021 by the country's tenth multiparty parliamentary elections since the collapse of communism. The incumbent Socialist Party was reelected for a third term, a feat no political party had ever achieved in post-communist Albania, retaining 74 seats in the 140-seat Kuvendi, Albania's unicameral parliament (Hartz, 21). However, much of the pre-and post-election public discourse was filled with mutual recriminations and divisive rhetoric by leaders of the main political parties and the president, which led to incidents of public intimidation, injuries, and even deaths during the electoral campaigns). Based on the Electoral Code amended in 2020, the parliamentary elections included several novelties, such as electronic voting in several polling centers as part of a pilot project and preferential voting on party lists. The amendments allowed party leaders to run for the parliament in up to four districts at a time (Ligori, 2021).

In regard to ex-Yugoslavia, the first signs of innovation in terms of revisions of the constitutional reforms at the federal level and of the constituent republics had been registered in 1988, with an opening to the recognition of private property, and in the constitutional revision of 1990, which expanded the provisions concerning citizens' rights, guaranteeing, among other things, the full recognition of all types of property, and the recognition of the autonomy of courts and political pluralism. The constituent republics had moved in the same direction, with the elimination of the terms and symbols relating to socialism – Croatia, Slovenia – and the introduction of multi-parties and the reference to the freedom of political organizations and the prohibition of violent overthrow of the constitutional order – North Macedonia, Bosnia, and Herzegovina. Furthermore, in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the ethnic element was central as a basis for political legitimacy. Overall, within the same constitutional revisions, the underlying secessionist tendencies are also recognized, with the elimination of Yugoslav symbols and, in the case of Slovenia, the proclamation of the superiority of the national constitution over the federal one. Following the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the successive constitutions adopted by the former constituent republics starting from 1992 reveal a mixture of elements inherited from the socialist past and others taken up by Western constitutionalism, with a large space dedicated to social rights and a residual provision of capital punishment alongside an expansion of rights, duties, and

freedoms of citizens (Vorpsi, 2023; Smith et al., 2021; Lavrič & Bieber, 2020; Milačić, 2019; Konitzer, 2013; Losoncs, 2013). The Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina represents a special case, the elaboration of which, contextually to the Dayton negotiations, is substantially other-directed, with a role preponderant of the c.d. Negotiation contact group. Serbia and Montenegro, on the other hand, have a text which was in force during the period of the confederal solution and the constitutional law of direct derivation of the “*Starting bases for the restructuring of relations between Serbia and Montenegro elaborated with EU intermediation*”, adopted in 2003 and inclusive of a catalog of rights adopted separately in the “*Charter of Human and Minority Rights and Civil Liberties*” part of the Constitution itself (Keil & Perry, 2016; Greenberg, 2009). Following the secession of Montenegro, the process of drafting the Montenegrin Constitution took place with greater involvement of international actors, due to the need to present a second application for membership of the Council of Europe concerning one presented by the Union of Serbia and Montenegro; this entailed a higher level of protection of rights compared to what was foreseen according to the previous constitutional provision, an unnecessary requirement for the Republic of Serbia, as a successor state of the Union (Draško et al., 2020; Vetta, 2019; Presnall, 2009). The Serbian Constitution of 2006 was approved a few months after the official proclamation of Montenegrin independence, without intervention by the international community, and on the one hand provided greater certainty of property rights, a reduction of the space dedicated to social rights, and guarantees, and a discipline relating to the protection of minority rights that was more detailed but less advanced than that provided for in the 1990 Constitution. Elements of democratic regression have been recorded above a level of practice, going beyond the constitutional provisions by circumventing or forcing their limits; despite the presence of a Parliament formally elected according to democratic principles, the current conduct of the elections and the information underlying electoral choices are subject to the control of the dominant political forces, which, on the other hand, have a large portion of the means of communication as cash resonance for a permanent electoral campaign based on sovereigntist, nationalist and ethno-nationalist rhetoric, as demonstrated in the Serbian parliamentary elections of 2020 (Draško et al., 2020). The very functioning of the legislative assemblies was often reduced to a level barely sufficient to approve the budget necessary for the maintenance of the Bosnia and Herzegovina Assembly (2019) and their representativeness was undermined by the marginalization of the opposition (Keil & Perry, 2016). Another characteristic of the path of democratic transition in the Balkan countries is the strong influence of external actors, linked to the resolution of the conflict in former Yugoslavia before the adherence to membership of the European Union or international organizations such as the Council of Europe and NATO; in particular, it stands out in the context of the so-called catalog of rights a conditional script, common to the Balkan states as a whole, a guided script – Albania, North Macedonia, the Union of Serbia and Montenegro, and finally Montenegro – and of internationalization of the constitutions of Bosnia and Herzegovina and, Kosovo. If on the one hand, this has favored better structuring in cases such as the Albanian constitutional context, on the other hand, this presents the corners of a democratic deficit of the adopted constitutions, as regards the Bosnian-Herzegovina, contained in attachment no. 4 of the 1995 Dayton Accords, and elaborated in a purely international context (Gafuri, 2021; Mujanović, 2018; Meurs, 2018; Grimm & Matthis, 2017; Silander & Janzekovitz, 2012; Vuckovic, 1999).

### 3. The route to the EU membership

The credibility of the enlargement process has inevitably suffered from the discontinuity shown by both sides. The leaders of the Balkan countries themselves are involved in the question of the credibility of their commitment to membership, which is inextricably linked to the issue of democratic consolidation. Even signals of a potential change of direction in a democratic sense have favored the opening to a dialogue on the European perspective of the area,

as happened for Greece, Spain, and Portugal in the years of their adherence: the fall of the Milošević regime in October 2000 was, in fact, one of the major contributions to the normalization of relations with the governments of the Balkan countries, qualified to start from Feira Council as potential candidates for EU membership, the inclusion among the beneficiaries of the program of CARDS financial assistance, the development of contractual relations with the European Union and the extension of the asymmetric trade measures adopted against other Balkan States (Milačić; 2019; Kontzier, 2013; Pond, 2012). Although it is necessary to note how the effectiveness of the protection tools provided by the EU against authoritarian tendencies is anything but obvious, as demonstrated by the cases of Poland and Hungary, European integration and democratic consolidation can therefore be defined in terms of a two-way relationship of strengthening – or weakening – reciprocal: a lower commitment shown in terms of democratic consolidation slows down the accession process, as well as being a possible indicator of reduced interest. In this sense, the democratic decline currently underway in the Western Balkans, particularly marked in Serbia since 2013 and between 2008 and 2007 in North Macedonia (Kmezić, 2020; Hehir, 2020; Kmezić et al., 2014; Dawisha, 1997), can be viewed as a symptom of a growing indifference towards the prospect of membership and the commitments connected to on the part of the respective political elites. As noted in the World Governmental Index (WGI), the rule of law and democratic consolidation have presented and still represent fundamental and mandatory requirements for the construction of a privileged relationship with the European Union, up to the prospect of actual membership, also to minimize the risk of including politically and economically unstable members (Kmezić, 2020; Kmezić et al., 2014). The Balkan scenario today places the European Union in front of a further challenge compared to the integration of the countries of the former USSR, considering that the process of European integration develops simultaneously with the process of democratization but also of state-building in the context of the long Yugoslav post-war status (Potter, 2017; Bianchini & Minakov, 2018; Bassauner, 2016). But it might be worth citing, the fact that in the enlargement of the 6WB States the European Union was called to face the state-building issue (Bianchini & Minakov, 2018). On this front and on that of mediating conflict situations, it is possible to refer to the experience of the European impact in the context of crisis management between Podgorica and Belgrade, in which the incentive of the prospect of joining the European Union had been functional to reaching a compromise (Habermas, 2015). A similar mechanism, which outcomes are however still to be defined, can be seen in the mediation facilitated by the EU in the dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo regarding the recognition of the latter as a state entity independence and the normalization of diplomatic relations between the two countries (Silander & Janzekovitz, 2012). In both cases, in addition to providing guidance and a practical incentive conditional on the achievement of results, the intervention of the Union stands as a confirmation of the commitment on the European side to keep the prospect of membership concrete, showing a stable and long-term commitment in the area. The effectiveness of conditionalities and transformative power of European integration, however, fails if the EU institutions fail to demonstrate this commitment in practice and with a certain continuity. Below is a summary of the BTI democracy progress of the 6WB countries group.

Table 3. Summary of BTI democracy index 6WB to reference group

	Albania	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Kosovo	Montenegro	North Macedonia	Serbia	Croatia	Slovenia
<b>Ranking</b>								
<b>Economy Status</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Economy Status</b>	<b>6.25</b>	<b>6.25</b>	<b>5.96</b>	<b>6.82</b>	<b>7.14</b>	<b>6.71</b>	<b>7.96</b>	<b>9.11</b>
<b>Level of Socioeconomic Development</b>	5.0	6.0	5.0	6.0	6.0	6.0	8.0	10.0
<b>Socioeconomic barriers</b>	5	6	5	6	6	6	8	10
<b>Organization of the Market and Competition</b>	8.3	7.3	6.8	8.3	8.5	7.5	9.3	9.8
<b>Market organization</b>	7	5	5	7	7	7	8	10
<b>Competition policy</b>	8	7	6	8	8	6	10	9
<b>Liberalization of foreign trade</b>	10	9	9	10	10	8	10	10
<b>Banking system</b>	8	8	7	8	9	9	9	10
<b>Monetary and Fiscal Stability</b>	7.0	8.0	7.0	7.5	8.0	7.5	8.0	9.0
<b>Monetary stability</b>	8	9	8	9	9	8	9	10
<b>Fiscal stability</b>	6	7	6	6	7	7	7	8
<b>Private Property</b>	6.0	7.5	7.0	8.0	8.5	7.0	8.0	10.0
<b>Property rights</b>	6	8	7	8	8	7	9	10
<b>Private enterprise</b>	6	7	7	8	9	7	7	10
<b>Welfare Regime</b>	6.5	5.5	5.5	7.0	7.0	7.0	8.0	9.0
<b>Social safety nets</b>	6	6	5	7	7	7	8	9
<b>Equal opportunity</b>	7	5	6	7	7	7	8	9
<b>Economic Performance</b>	6.0	5.0	6.0	5.0	6.0	6.0	7.0	8.0
<b>Output strength</b>	6	5	6	5	6	6	7	8
<b>Sustainability</b>	5.0	4.5	4.5	6.0	6.0	6.0	7.5	8.0
<b>Environmental policy</b>	5	4	4	6	6	5	8	8
<b>Education / R&amp;D policy</b>	5	5	5	6	6	7	7	8

#### 4. The present study

##### 4.1 *Materials and methods*

###### 4.1.1 *Purpose*

The present article aims to explore the relationship between geographical belonging to democracy development with a special focus on the Western Balkans.

The methodology of the present work is desk research and cohort-qualitative based on the BTI index and Democracy indices in the Western Balkans in a longitudinal study from 1992-2022.

###### 4.1.2 *Research design*

This study is of predictive typology because it seeks to predict the influence of the constant variable on the independent one. We referred to the BTI Transformation Index which includes the following criteria to assess Democracy Ranking in the WB:

- **Stateness;** which is seen as a precondition to democracy is included in the definition of political transformation and examined through questions related to the *state's monopoly and use of force and basic administrative structures including the rule of law and separation of powers;*
- *Persecution of office abuse and Civil rights.*
- *State Identity and the Interference* (or not) of religious dogmas.
- **Political participation:** the second criterion focus on free and fair elections.
- *Effective power to govern.*
- *Association/Assembly rights and Freedom of expression.*
- *Stability of political institutions:* the third criterion includes the performance and commitment to political parties.
- *Political and social integration:* the last criterion includes the party system, interest groups, approval of democracy, and social capital.

###### 4.2 *Data analysis*

The statistical program MAXQDA for qualitative research and content analysis was used for the collected data of the present study.

#### 5. Results

The following table presents descriptive statistics of the study variables: region and democracy status. The indices show a total arithmetic mean equal to  $M=1.33$  and  $M=36.33$  in both variables. In variability, it is seen that Ranking Democracy scores maintain a high dispersion ( $SD=22.017$ ). It is also seen that both variables maintain a positive asymmetry in the distribution which means that there is a low tendency toward scoring.



Table 4. Descriptive statistics for the relation of 6WB to their ranking democracy status

	Descriptive Statistics		
	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
<b>Region</b>	1.33	1.000	6
<b>Ranking Democracy Status</b>	36.33	22.017	6

The following table introduces the Pearson correlations between study variables, geographical placement, and democracy ranking. As it can be deduced, a relationship between the geographical placement (the 6 WB) and democracy status is positive ( $r_w=.642$ )

Table 5. Pearson correlations between 6WB countries Region and their democracy status

Correlations			
		Region	Ranking Democracy Status
<b>Pearson Correlation</b>	Region	1.000	.642
	Ranking Democracy Status	.642	1.000
<b>Sig. (1-tailed)</b>	Region	.	.061
	Ranking Democracy Status	.061	.
<b>N</b>	Region	6	6
	Ranking Democracy Status	6	6

To fully understand the region's impact on democracy status, we performed a linear regression. Referring to the correlation variables in the Model Summary, a value of 0.4 is considered significant. The present  $R=.642$  which reveals a good variability and  $R_{square}=.612$  reveals that there is enough influence between the 6WB region and their democracy status.

Table 6. Regressive analysis between the 6WB countries and their democracy status

Variables Entered/Removed			
Model	Variables Entered	Variables Removed	Method
1	Ranking Democracy Status	.	Enter
a. Dependent Variable: Region			
b. All requested variables entered.			

Model Summary				
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. The error in the Estimate
1	.642 <sup>a</sup>	.612	.528	.820
a. Predictors: (Constant), Ranking Democracy Status				

ANOVA <sup>a</sup>						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	3.293	1	3.293	4.896	.063 <sup>b</sup>
	Residual	4.707	7	.672		
	Total	8.000	8			
a. Dependent Variable: Region						
b. Predictors: (Constant), Ranking Democracy Status						

As can be inferred by the ANOVA indices, these results estimate a Sig2.  $p=0.63 < 0.05$  which confirms the impact that the region has on ranking democracy. These indices are also in line with the index of the coefficients table below.

Table 7. Coefficient scores of regions and ranking democracy status

Coefficients						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	.275	.551		.498	.633
	Ranking Democracy Status	.029	.013	.642	2.213	.063
a. Dependent Variable: Region						

Following is a set of graphs that give some details of the influence of the Western Balkans and their reference group countries (Croatia and Slovenia) on the democracy ranking. As it can be inferred, the ratio between the 6WB regarding their reference group countries is visible. Despite Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, and Montenegro (14%), Albania (12%), Bosnia and Herzegovina (11%), North Macedonia (10%), and Kosovo (7.8%) have a relatively low trend of consolidating their democratic state to the region.

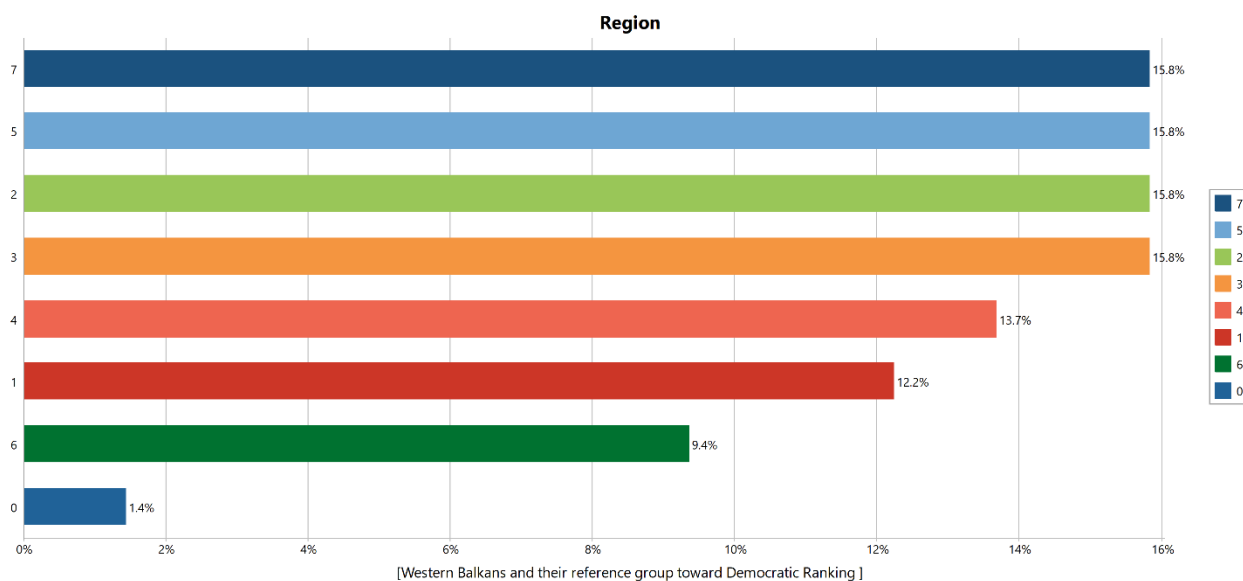


Figure 1. Relation between Region and democratic ranking

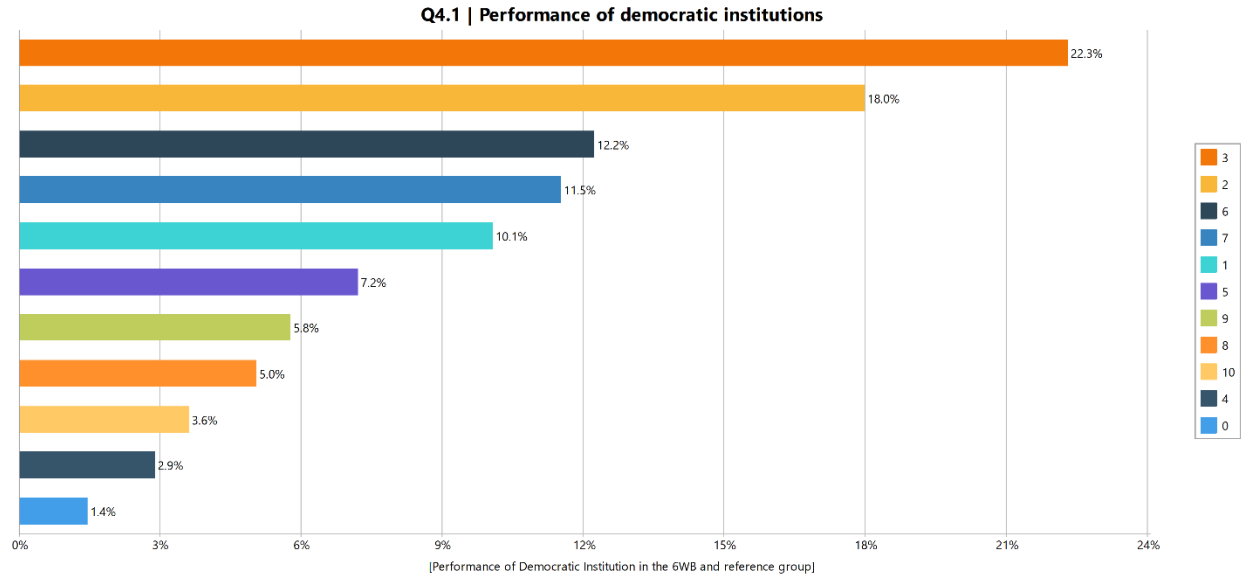


Figure 2. Performance of democratic institutions in the 6WB and their reference group

Regarding the performance of the democratic institutions in the 6WB, the highest performance relates to Montenegro (12.2%), Bosnia and Herzegovina (11.8%), and North Macedonia (10.1%) while Albania (5.8%), Serbia (2.8%) and Kosovo (1.4%) have the lowest scores. This means that the public sense and trust in institutions are much fragile in Albania, Serbia, and Kosovo although their political engagement is to improve and increase the public support for the administration and institutional policies. Corruption and state capture in WB is considered a double cause-consequence concern in terms of the lack of democratic institutions (Radeljić, 2018; Ritcher, 2012; Montinola & Jackman, 2002; Treisman, 2000).

## 6. Discussion

In the current paper, we were interested in examining the relationship between regional belonging and the level of democracy, i.e., the Western Balkans and their democratic path. Our objective was to analyze the impact of the region on the current democracy development and predict if there is any significant role of the previous to the latter. Data results, scored by MAXQDA software for desk and cohort-comparative research, comparing the WGI, BTI, and Freedom House trends and predictions for the Western Balkans in a 30-year continuum and democratic transition, from 1992-2022. We referred to the BTI division of the democracy transformation index.

Referring to the level of democracy we compared the current scatter scores of the 6WB to their most similar reference group, Croatia, and Slovenia. Our results revealed that there is a relation between the two variables ( $r_w=.642$ ;  $p<0.05$ ). Regressive analysis revealed a good variability and  $R_{\text{square}}=.612$  indicating that both variables encountered of a total of 95% of the total variance and stability. Linear regression also revealed a good influence between the 6WB region and their democratic status, confirming our primary assumption ( $R=.642$ ; Sig2.  $p=0.63<0.05$ ). These findings are also supported by the research of various scholars who showed the impact that geographical placement has on the democratic route (Smith et al., 2021; Fukuyama, 2020; Milačić, 2019; Kablamaci, 2018; Potter, 2017; Streklov, 2016; Rodrik, 2016; Konitzer, 2013; Schmitter, 2003; Diamond, 2002; Power, 2000).

## 7. Conclusions

The advent of democracy has attracted attention in recent decades, not only from social scientists but also from economists, curious to perceive elements that could associate the democratic regime with the subsequent economic development. This paper aimed to analyze the relationship between democracy and regional placement focusing on the special case of the Western Balkans. The democratization processes combine with other phenomena, such as social development, political stability, rule of law, accountability, economic growth, and welfare. The social and economic development that has been triggered is a very long process in the Region, concerning most of the countries that have undergone democratic transitions, making scholars argue that have a huge influence on the democratic path.

The results of the present research, based on a vast desk research analysis, revealed that being in a 6WB region had a significant impact on the establishment of a democratic route ( $R=.642$ ; Sig2.  $p=0.63<0.05$ ) and that there is a linear distribution of both variables in all the countries ( $M=1.33$ ;  $M_{tot}=36.33$ ;  $SD=22.017$ ) meaning a same probability of partial democratic scores in all the Region's countries. Future research should be placed on revealing the impact of this fragile democracy status on the ability and attractiveness of the Region in terms of domestic and foreign diplomacy and stability.

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