

The Resurgence of “All-Serbism” and the Intensification of European Integration Stagnation

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Abstract

Taking the resurgence of All-Serbism as a point of departure, this article examines how it systematically impedes the extension of European integration into the Western Balkans through three interrelated pathways: historical legacies, political mobilization, institutional decoupling, and external linkages. Combining historical narrative and policy analysis, the study traces key developments since the disintegration of Yugoslavia—including the 2024 All-Serb Assembly in Belgrade—and evaluates the limitations of the EU’s conditionality instruments in addressing the revival of nationalism. The findings indicate three main patterns. First, All-Serbism has evolved from a domestic political discourse into a transnational identity and geopolitical strategy, becoming a structural force in the region. Second, the EU’s traditional mode of normative projection has lost efficacy in the face of security anxieties and sovereignty-centered politics, while internal Euroscepticism and decision-making fragmentation have further exacerbated enlargement fatigue. Third, external powers—particularly Russia—have amplified this ideology through security cooperation and discursive support. In response, the article argues that the EU should reconstruct its accession mechanism around a dual security-governance framework, implementing flexible and phased compliance, differentiated diplomacy, and socially embedded public diplomacy to enhance institutional resilience and weaken the societal roots of nationalism. The conclusion contends that unless the EU achieves coordinated reforms across institutional, diplomatic, and identity dimensions, the prospect of integrating the Western Balkans will remain constrained by nationalism and geopolitical competition. Future research should further explore the interplay among All-Serbism, Pan-Slavic identity, Russo-European rivalry, and the EU’s internal political cycles.

Keywords

All-Serbism, European integration, European Union, Western Balkans

1. Introduction

The Western Balkans remains a complex challenge within the contemporary European integration project. Despite successive EU enlargements eastward since the Cold War’s end, the region’s integration process has been persistently slow. The rise of “All-Serbism,” particularly within Serbia and its neighboring states, injects significant uncertainty into the regional political landscape, presenting unprecedented challenges to the integration strategy.

Historically, Serbian nationalism has been intimately linked with Balkan instability. From the Yugoslav dissolution to NATO’s military intervention, nationalist fervor subsided temporarily, only to resurge following Kosovo’s declaration of independence. Concurrently, Serb political entities in Bosnia and Herzegovina’s

Republika Srpska and Montenegro have manifested various nationalist stances, negatively impacting regional political stability and cooperation in the Western Balkans.

Existing scholarship often focuses on the tension between nationalism and European integration. The EU's normative power aims to shape the political order of candidate countries through institutional conditionality and value promotion to achieve regional stability and political amalgamation. Conversely, the political practices of Western Balkan states, particularly concerning geopolitical issues, often revolve around ethnic identity and a "sovereignty-first" logic, limiting the effectiveness of EU conditionality. However, a systematic analysis of how the resurgence of Serbian nationalism holistically impacts European integration at the regional level remains relatively underdeveloped.

This study's significance lies in its dual-level analysis (state and ethnic group), revealing that Serbian nationalism is not merely a domestic political issue within a single state but a transnational regional phenomenon. Investigating the nationalism-integration nexus not only elucidates the fundamental reasons for the Western Balkans' delayed EU integration but also provides a crucial perspective for analyzing the EU's future strategic dilemmas. This article seeks to answer three primary questions: What is "All-Serbism"? How does it hinder European integration? How should the EU respond?

The structure is as follows: The literature review surveys relevant research, clarifying core concepts and research gaps. The methodology section outlines the research design, logic, and framework. The analysis of "All-Serbism" traces its evolution over three decades, from the Yugoslav breakup to the 2024 All-Serb Assembly. Subsequent sections analyze "All-Serbism" from a European perspective, revealing its construction as a crisis and its impact on the EU. Finally, by synthesizing recent EU policy assessments towards Serbia and the Western Balkans, it deduces that, in the short term, Serbia and other Western Balkan states are unlikely to join the EU, forecasting strategic rigidity and tension in EU enlargement towards the post-Yugoslav space, alongside offering pertinent policy recommendations.

In summary, using the resurgence of Serbian nationalism as an entry point, this study attempts to explain the stagnation of European integration in the Western Balkans. This issue involves theoretical debates on nationalism and regional stability and bears practical implications for the EU's future institutional trajectory, thus holding significant academic and practical value.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Existing Research Fields and Findings

Scholarship on nationalism and European integration is extensive. However, within the post-Yugoslav context, "All-Serbism" is not merely a question of state identity; its influence extends as a transnational political force affecting states around Serbia. Simultaneously, integration is understood as a transnational governance process pursued by the EU through institution-building, norm diffusion, and conditional enlargement, fundamentally predicated on fostering a supranational unified order through pooled sovereignty.

Previous research unfolds along two dimensions: First, historical and contemporary studies of "All-Serbism" in the post-Yugoslav space. Scholars generally agree that Serbian nationalism is closely tied to the armed conflicts of the 1990s and continues to profoundly impact regional political stability. Recent studies indicate that with the resurgence of nationalist sentiment among Serb political groups on the Kosovo issue, governments instrumentalize nationalism as a source of domestic legitimacy in external negotiations. Second, substantial literature points to the limited effectiveness of EU conditionality in the Western Balkans, attributing this to the difficulty for political elites in candidate countries to compromise on sovereignty cession due to nationalist sentiments, thereby trapping integration in a quandary. A scholarly consensus exists regarding the negative impact of Balkan nationalism on political stability and the region's entry into a phase of slow-paced or stalled integration.

2.2 Synthesis and Limitations of Existing Research

Synthesizing existing findings reveals a dual constraint: nationalism is viewed as a root cause hindering internal reform and regional cooperation in Western Balkan states, while the EU's enlargement in the region is caught in a "conditionality dilemma"-requiring states to overcome nationalist divisions internally while

upholding the EU's normative power externally. This dualism leads to institutional failure of EU enlargement in the Western Balkans. Current research exhibits a degree of "Eurocentrism," focusing more on factors preventing Western Balkan states from joining the EU, yet displaying clear limitations in adopting a holistic perspective on Western Balkan issues within the context of integration dynamics.

However, research gaps persist. Firstly, there is a lack of systematic research on Serbian nationalism at the regional level. Most studies adopt a single-country focus, lacking a holistic view of the post-Yugoslav space to investigate how Serbian nationalism exacerbates the structural dilemma of European integration. Secondly, academia often focuses on the accession progress of European non-EU states and their cooperation with the EU. European scholars frequently treat Western Balkan states as default "followers" of the EU, downplaying their foreign policy autonomy. In reality, few studies objectively point out that the stagnation of European integration in the Western Balkans is closely linked to the region's increasing political autonomy and awareness of differentiated development, a pressing issue for the integration process.

2.3 Contribution of this Study

This study addresses the academic gap concerning the lack of regional, holistic research on "All-Serbism" and its interaction with European structures. Using the influence of "All-Serbism" as an entry point and combining EU policy documents with existing scholarship, it argues that the delay in European integration in the Western Balkans stems not solely from insufficient institutional reforms but is rooted in deeper conflicts between nationalism and sovereign identity, and attempts to delineate the interconnection of nationalist dynamics. This perspective facilitates a more comprehensive understanding of the structural causes of the EU's enlargement impasse. The article employs theories of nationalism to analyze its impact on the region and individual countries, ultimately summarizes causal mechanisms and processes of position-building to form a causal theory. Based on this theory, it deduces integration trends and offers targeted policy recommendations for the EU, enhancing the study's contemporary policy relevance. This research represents a sustainable project bridging the traditional divide between Balkan Studies and European Studies. Beyond the current theoretical inquiry, this field can enhance its sustainability through follow-up research: one direction involves ongoing quantification, refinement, and interdisciplinary approaches; another involves translating this research area into practical application, aiming to establish reliable intergovernmental communication mechanisms. Similarly, further interdisciplinary supplementary research will aid in expanding the scope of this and future studies.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The Balkans, long a focal point for nationalism studies, are often marginalized in European politics and foreign policy research. Currently, as the trend of great power centrality and small state dependency weakens within Europe, and obstructive forces emerge both inside and outside the EU, building a secure and prosperous "integrated Europe" has become an urgent goal. This study centers on the interactive relationship between "All-Serbism" and European integration, aiming to explore their causal mechanisms and structural impacts.

In terms of research paradigm, this article comprehensively employs empiricist and interpretative methods, utilizing historical analysis, comparative research, and policy analysis as primary tools. It reveals logical relationships between variables through case study induction and theoretical deduction. The study treats the evolution of "All-Serbism" as the independent variable and the degree of stagnation in European integration as the dependent variable, exploring how the former influences the latter through three pathways: political mobilization, institutional decoupling, and external alignment.

Methodologically, the research adopts a "mixed methods" framework: qualitatively, it combines historical documents and policy files for case analysis; quantitatively, it references reports from international organizations and public data to support the empirical validity of conclusions. The study emphasizes both factual observation and logical deduction, while also considering the interaction between values, order, and institutions, ultimately proposing targeted policy recommendations based on theoretical analysis.

3.2 Case Selection

Case selection follows the principles of typicality, representativeness, and comparability to ensure the scientific validity and generalizability of the analysis.

Firstly, in studying the evolution of “All-Serbism,” key historical nodal events are selected, such as the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the Kosovo crisis, and the 2024 “All-Serb Assembly,” to reveal the historical trajectory of Serbian nationalism’s transformation from “Greater Serbianism” to “All-Serbism.”

Secondly, in the contemporary dimension, the article focuses on timely and policy-relevant cases, particularly political mobilization among Serbs in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro, and the EU’s diplomatic, economic, and institutional responses. These cases offer both temporal span and policy continuity, comprehensively demonstrating nationalism’s structural impact on European integration.

Furthermore, selected EU official documents, Commission annual reports, and policy statements on the Western Balkans constitute crucial policy analysis samples. These texts allow for verification of the applicability and limitations of “conditionality policy” in real-world politics. Some cases are integrated and semantically processed to ensure research coherence and academic rigor.

Finally, the article utilizes some processed and adapted cases. The aggregated cases are diverse and representative, ensuring alignment with the article’s arguments and analytical framework, thereby effectively conveying the author’s and prior research findings, and aiding reader comprehension.

3.3 Data Sources

Data sources include primary and secondary materials.

Primary sources primarily comprise current affairs reports, government statements, and policy documents from the EU and Western Balkan states, sourced from official EU websites, respective governments, and mainstream media. All materials undergo scrutiny for bias and semantic comparison to mitigate the impact of political prejudice on findings.

Secondary sources consist mainly of academic research, think tank reports, and annual analyses from international organizations. The article synthesizes and compares literature from diverse perspectives to ensure objectivity and systematicity. Simultaneously, the author refines and integrates existing theories, verifying and reinterpreting different research conclusions to support the core arguments. Overall, the article uses the timeliness of primary sources as its backbone and the theoretical support of academic achievements as its framework, achieving a synthesis of empirical fact and theoretical analysis.

3.4 Analytical Framework

The analytical framework centers on causal logic, employing a three-tier “Structure-Mechanism-Outcome” model.

Firstly, at the structural level, the author explains the connotation of the independent variable, “All-Serbism,” through analysis of historical sources and recent cases, analyzing its formative logic, essence, and dynamic evolution.

Secondly, at the mechanism level, combining EU policy texts and regional cases, it analyzes how “All-Serbism” weakens the EU’s institutional integration capacity and political appeal in the Western Balkans through three mechanistic pathways: political mobilization, institutional decoupling, and external alignment.

Finally, at the outcome level, it treats the stagnation of European integration as the dependent variable, testing the feedback loop relationship-how the intensification of nationalism in turn exacerbates the EU’s enlargement impasse.

Within this logical framework, the study not only reveals the causal link between “All-Serbism” hindering European integration but also provides empirical support and theoretical basis for future EU policy adjustments based on its findings.

4. All-Serbism

Throughout Balkan history, complex ethnic issues have been dynamic factors influencing interstate politics. “All-Serbism” has consistently been a nationalism evolving with the times. From the dissolution of Yugoslavia to NATO’s military intervention, the political aspiration of “All-Serbism” to control interests within the Yugoslav space was directly challenged. When the aftershocks of Balkan fragmentation reached Kosovo, it signaled a crossroads for the Serbian nation—“explosion or demise.” Faced with the dilemma of integrating into Europe or safeguarding sovereignty within a Serbian context, governments influenced by “All-Serbism” have never abandoned their commitment to Serb primacy. Against the backdrop of European instability following the Russia-Ukraine conflict, “All-Serbism” appears to be developing a spontaneous foreign policy orientation turning away from Europe.

4.1 From Yugoslavia’s Dissolution to the Kosovo Crisis-Serbian Nationalism “From Silence to Outbreak”

The debate between a unitary or federal state structure was fiercely contested among Yugoslavia’s constituent nations. After Tito’s death in 1980, Milošević overturned the constraints on Serb political power and support for other nations’ autonomy under Tito, promoting “Greater Serbianism,” which intensified inter-ethnic conflicts (Gao, 2006). In the 1990s, following declarations of independence by Yugoslav republics, Serb paramilitary forces launched attacks. Perspectives on these armed conflicts differed vastly based on differing identities. From the political vision of “All-Serbism,” military actions aimed to preserve FR Yugoslavia’s integrity and secure substantial autonomy for Serbs, constituting a “controlled civil war” of sorts. However, from the Euro-American perspective grounded in sovereignty and human rights, occurring after recognized independence and involving events like the Srebrenica massacre and Kosovo ethnic cleansing, they were deemed “egregious fascist acts.” Serbian identity had already diverged from mainstream European ideology, foreshadowing a fundamental decoupling of Serb politics from European politics. Consequently, NATO launched two aerial bombing campaigns against the Republika Srpska and Serbian forces in Kosovo (Janković, 2019). While NATO’s direct military intervention suppressed Serbian nationalism and accelerated the fragmentation and independence of Balkan states, it did not constitute a final resolution. Conversely, it deepened ethnic contradictions and became a breeding ground for the rapid spread of Euroscepticism among Serb political groups.

Entering the 21st century, continuous EU enlargement eastward, contrasted with protracted accession negotiations for Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and other Western Balkan states, exacerbated Balkan fragmentation in some respects. Acute ethnic conflicts persist within Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, with Serbs often positioned on one side. The resurgence of “All-Serbism” is rooted in the multi-ethnic conflict situation in the Balkans. After a brief period of quiescence, Serbian nationalism resurged around 2010 with the International Court of Justice’s advisory opinion on Kosovo’s sovereignty. “All-Serbism” gradually coalesced against a backdrop blending historical legacies and contemporary political issues, unleashing a growing wave uniting Serb political groups across the Balkans.

4.2 Contemporary Manifestations of All-Serbism

In June 2024, the “All-Serb Assembly” convened again in Belgrade. Under the slogan “One Nation, One Assembly-Serbia and the Serbs” (Radio Television Serbia, 2024), it adopted the “Declaration on the Protection of National and Political Rights and the Common Future of the Serbian People.” The assembly featured significant discussion on the Dayton Agreement concerning Bosnia and Herzegovina, ultimately reiterating that Serbs are not a nation guilty of ethnic cleansing. Through this assembly, “All-Serbism” sought to promote a pan-Serb identity across the post-Yugoslav space, with Serb political elites even intending to construct a “Serb pole” in a multipolar world (Stojanovic, 2024).

This nationalist wave is termed “All-Serbism” due to its distinctness from past iterations like “Greater Serbianism” or the “Serbian World.” On one hand, “All-Serbism” represents an inheritance and amalgamation of past nationalisms, utilizing ethnic identity for political mobilization to advance Serb political groups’ pursuit of political independence and Serb primacy. On the other hand, its interaction with the contemporary Balkan landscape differs from the past. The current Balkans are more fragmented, with more complex relationships among different political groups and ethnicities. However, for Serbs, opposition forces within Western Balkan states are weaker than before, and “All-Serbism” fosters closer ties among Serb politics across different states.

Similarly, contemporary “All-Serbism” receives stronger external support, e.g., from Russia, while opposing forces are weakened, such as NATO’s reduced capacity for military intervention compared to the past. In sum, the current European configuration provides a fertile ground for the growth of “All-Serbism.”

4.2.1 Serbia’s Irredentism

In April 2013, Serbia and Kosovo signed the Brussels Agreement, stipulating neither side would obstruct the other’s EU path (European Union, 2013). Kosovo’s EU accession faces political pressure and public opposition, with Serbs expressing strong objections to Kosovo’s independence and potential EU membership (BPRG, 2017). The Kosovo issue’s current characteristic is a power struggle between two nationalisms within their respective contexts (Koneska et al., 2023). Kosovo’s EU membership remains unlikely in the short term, as achieving “substantial independence” under the influence of “All-Serbism” faces immense political pressure from Serb political groups. Serbian political elites struggle to accept EU demands for sovereignty cession; one EU condition for Serbian membership is de facto recognition of Kosovo’s “sovereignty” in diplomatic practice (European Commission, 2025). Despite some verbal assurances, the Serbian government has long declared Kosovo indivisible.

Furthermore, Serbia has increasingly engaged in cross-border political mobilization to broadly construct an “All-Serbism” identity. In June 2024, the “All-Serb Assembly” was jointly held in Belgrade involving Serbia, the Kosovo Serb community, Republika Srpska (Bosnia and Herzegovina), and Montenegro. This was viewed by Brussels as an assertion of pan-Serbian political identity, potentially leading to destabilizing, irredentist actions (European Commission, 2025). This cross-border mobilization forms the basis for expanding Serb political influence. Positions advocating Serb primacy and unity reflect the strong influence of nationalist sentiment in Serb politics, hindering the effective implementation of European institutions in Serb-administered areas.

4.2.2 Secessionism in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Although the Dayton Agreement brought peace to Bosnia and Herzegovina, the country faces escalating secessionist threats from Republika Srpska. RS President Milorad Dodik, adhering to “All-Serbism,” repeatedly acts against the state’s will, persistently attempting to secede RS from Bosnia and Herzegovina. In March 2025, following Dodik’s first-instance conviction by the Bosnian state court, he drafted a new RS constitution, proposed establishing an “RS Army,” declared RS’s right to “self-determination,” abolished the National Assembly and Vice Presidency, and rejected Bosnian citizenship, recognizing only RS citizenship (Boric, 2025b). Systemic and local corruption, dispersed responsibility, weak institutional capacity, and complex power-sharing make Bosnia a dysfunctional entity, yet it externally portrays itself as a non-power state reliant on collective security and prioritizes EU integration as its primary foreign policy goal (Koneska et al., 2023). The secessionist issue severely threatens Bosnia’s territorial integrity and sovereignty and has partially disrupted governmental functions. Political decision-making complexity stemming from ethnic diversity and recurring government failures due to ethnic interest conflicts create significant unpredictability in policy adjustments. However, in the short term, a more violent secessionist movement in RS is unlikely, nor can Bosnia embark on a European path.

4.2.3 The Resurgent “One Serb” Belief in the Post-Yugoslav Space

On one hand, some Western Balkan states have responded positively to the “One Serb” initiative, with Serb politicians from countries like Montenegro attending and supporting related “All-Serb Assembly” events. The influence of Serb identity on politics in Serb-inhabited areas across different states is deepening. On the other hand, EU members are also divided on responding to “All-Serbism.” EU states like Slovenia and Croatia have voiced positions differing from Western European counterparts regarding sanctioning or arresting Dodik and issues involving Republika Srpska: expressing non-support for sanctions against Dodik, a desire for negotiated solutions, and even skepticism about reaching a unanimous EU decision on sanctions (Boric, 2025a). Certainly, other Central and Eastern European states’ positions on the Serb issue are not based on Serb identity. However, reactive forces from now-independent nation-states against Serbian nationalism have diminished. Coupled with pervasive Euroscepticism, disagreements within the EU on whether and how to address Serbian nationalism are entrenched. Another concern for Europe emerges: “All-Serbism” has established an interaction with Euroscepticism, portending broader institutional decoupling in the Balkan Peninsula.

The essence of “All-Serbism” is complex, and its contemporary manifestations continuously enrich its meaning. Overall, however, it represents a pursuit of Serb independence, primacy, and even unity. Politically, the Serb political quest for independence and primacy originated with “Greater Serbianism” and remains one side of ethnic conflicts in certain regions. Diplomatically, Serb political groups do not consistently adopt the posture of a small state in all foreign policy aspects. Vučić and Dodik may meet humbly with Trump or Putin, but they are more likely to assume an equal stance towards Macron, Merz, or even von der Leyen. Serb political groups, at a minimum, do not accept internal European hierarchies.

At the societal level, Serb political groups, primarily analyzed through Serbia, practice a form of “democracy” distinct from the EU’s. A 2025 EU report noted Serbia faces significant “democratic backsliding” (European Commission, 2025). The Vučić government is undoubtedly “authoritarian” in a European context. However, compared to the political centralization of Milošević’s Greater Serbianism, the current government is more democratic. Moreover, under Vučić’s tenure, government-led Serbia has achieved notable results in international cooperation and infrastructure, undoubtedly contributing positively to Serbia’s development. Therefore, this study argues that the democracy practiced by the Serbian government is a particular form of “democracy,” “less democratic” relative to Western Europe yet suited to its specific national conditions. Both “Greater Serbianism” and “All-Serbism” have become cultural forces, influencing public attitudes and motivating popular agency towards Serb independence, primacy, and unity.

4.3 Potential Developmental Trajectory-Pan-Slavic Identity

From a geopolitical perspective, “All-Serbism” amidst the Russia-Ukraine conflict is moving towards a “Pan-Slavic identity.” Russia is a crucial diplomatic pillar for Serbia, an Orthodox “brother.” Regarding Ukraine, Serbia firmly opposes sanctions against Russia; Vučić publicly stated the withdrawal of Serbia’s vote against Russia in a UN General Assembly resolution on the conflict. In Republika Srpska, President Dodik also firmly opposed sanctions related to the Russia-Ukraine conflict, maintains close contact with Putin, and expressed opposition to NATO membership and a desire for RS’s independent accession to BRICS at the 2024 Kazan summit. To some extent, “All-Serbism” is not only experiencing a resurgence but also a development turning away from Europe. Conversely, Putin provides support and assistance to Serb political elites and high-level officials. Leveraging historical, cultural, and geopolitical power relations, Russians and Serbs have established more constructive political ties, constituting the third major pathway hindering European integration’s advance into the Western Balkans-“linkage with external powers.” Strong Russo-Serbian diplomatic foundations and pan-ethnic identity positively impact bilateral relations. Should Serbia develop a Pan-Slavic identity oriented towards Russia, it would significantly heighten European insecurity and strategic rigidity, representing the worst-case scenario for Europe.

5. Europe and All-Serbism

5.1 Today’s “One Europe”

The EU entered a honeymoon period in the 21st century: multiple Central and Eastern European states joined rapidly, and the EU’s swift enlargement signaled European integration progressing from “imagination” towards reality. Since the UK’s Brexit referendum, European integration seems to have encountered a bottleneck, even a “stopper”: internal member states face issues like rising financial burdens, unequal trade, hierarchical policies, and diverging positions on numerous issues; externally, lengthy accession processes and candidate countries’ distance from membership standards have plunged integration into a phase of slow development, even stagnation.

Internally, since the Eastern enlargement’s inception, the principle of “differentiated integration” was a key tool for rapid progress. Allowing members and candidates partial non-compliance or delayed meeting of standards accelerated CEE accessions and granted greater developmental freedom in the short term (Gao, 2024). Today, differentiated integration’s drawbacks are increasingly apparent: disparities in development speed and opportunity led to divergent development levels and unequal hierarchical status within the EU; it became a breeding ground for internal disagreements, with some states even contravening EU common foreign policy and values. Therefore, the EU’s primary task for ensuring sustainable integration is narrowing developmental gaps among members and resolving high-politics disagreements. The contemporary EU also

stricter limits “differentiated integration” and accession criteria, making compliance with these “non-negotiable” standards a hard condition for membership.

Considering the current international landscape, the Russia-Ukraine conflict remains a protracted contest. Europe urgently desires to establish a security community. At the June 2025 NATO Hague Summit, members signed the Hague Defense Investment Pledge, committing 5% of GDP to defense, a significant increase from the previous 2% benchmark (Council of the European Union, 2025). Beyond this, the EU faces other severe challenges like economic downturn, energy shortages, and migration. Furthermore, following Trump’s election, US officials like Defense Minister Hergeseth and Vice President Vance repeatedly signaled publicly that “Europe must stand on its own.” This necessitates Europe fully constructing a cohesive community.

5.2 The Western Balkans’ Appetite for Integration

Previous research often treated non-EU European states as EU “followers.” This somewhat overlooks their political and foreign strategic autonomy. Firstly, activities by Republika Srpska, Serbia, and other Serb political groups towards Russia and China signal that the European path is not the only option. Moreover, Western Balkan states display rising Euroscepticism. In Serbia, end-2024 saw anti-Vučić government protests; the government and its supporters attributed opposition strengthening to foreign attempts at color revolution, while public sentiment questioned EU economic policies and firmly opposed NATO. Recently, the EU’s role in Kosovo-Serbia dialogue has weakened, with talks often devolving into Serbian power plays over Kosovo (Axyonova and Kartsonaki, 2025). Ultimately, “All-Serbism’s” impact on Western Balkan EU aspirations is undoubtedly negative; nearly all states harbor intractable ethnic conflicts. The size of Serb populations means rising “All-Serbism” directly intensifies nationalist sentiments among Serbs in these countries. Furthermore, if the EU fails to effectively contain “All-Serbism’s” influence, it risks fueling Euroscepticism among other ethnic groups and the growth of other nationalisms. Consequently, the EU’s strategic rigidity is exposed. Western Balkan “neutrality” strategies will exhibit greater flexibility and dynamism if EU enlargement stalls (Stojković and Golubović, 2025), and societal enthusiasm will wane with prolonged processes.

5.3 Three Pathways of All-Serbism Hindering European Integration in the Western Balkans

The long-standing Serb desire for national liberation and unification inevitably impacts other states’ interests (Ljubomirović, 2024). European discourse has produced terms like “Serbian World” in response to Serbian policies perceived as “divisive,” “non-European,” or “aggressive towards neighbors” (Rakovic, 2022). The trajectory from “Greater Serbianism” to “Serbian World” to “All-Serbism” dynamically illustrates the 21st-century development of Serb nationalism in the post-Yugoslav space, from setback to resurgence. Through political mobilization, institutional decoupling, and linkage with external powers, “All-Serbism” constructs a political value orientation of “Serb primacy” and even “Serb unity” among Western Balkan states, thereby obstructing the EU’s conditional accession mechanism and integration process, evolving into a crisis from a European perspective.

Political mobilization is based on Serb political elites’ pursuit of greater autonomy, aiming to expand Serb political influence and construct a Serb popular identity. Influenced by a global election year, right-wing politics impacts Serb politics, but given “All-Serbism’s” diverse manifestations, it cannot be categorized purely as a right-wing issue; it resists both singular analysis and holistic conclusion. The growing influence of domestic politics and Euroscepticism significantly negatively impacts the implementation of EU policies and societal willingness for integration.

Institutional decoupling is a frequent occurrence in the Balkans and CEE. Due to relatively lower development levels in non-Western European states, differentiated integration allowed states delayed compliance in certain areas. However, uneven division of labor and distribution exacerbated differentiation among states. Based on relative gain calculations, many candidate and even member states decouple from EU institutions to varying degrees. The lack of coercive power makes it difficult for the EU to resolve this. Ultimately, policy and developmental disparities from institutional decoupling in non-member states hinder accession evaluation and integration, while significant strategic disunity emerges among members.

Alignment with external powers is another area where Serb political groups’ foreign policies diverge sharply from EU foreign strategy. The more successful their policies towards China and Russia, the thinner

the appeal of alignment with the EU's foreign strategic framework. Serb political groups, typified by Serbia, increasingly adopt pragmatic foreign activities, balancing in a game rather than simply aligning (Pavić, 2025). For a "Europe in relative decline," dwindling internal and external support risks making its decline irreversible.

The "All-Serbism" dilemma is ultimately a dilemma of perception. Purely defined outside interest conflicts, "All-Serbism" is indeed a radical nationalism with limited impact, unlikely to trigger structural changes globally. However, placed within the European integration context, through its three pathways, it prevents Europe's smooth enlargement into the Western Balkans. Differing ideologies and values prevent both sides from effectively and fundamentally resolving interest conflicts, thus constructing a unique "All-Serbism crisis" within the European context.

5.4 Integration Prospects

Currently, Trumpist US foreign policy significantly impacts European defense and trade. Europe remains unsettled by the Russia-Ukraine conflict, with European states refocusing on high-politics issues. While Europe retains some capacity to counter Serb irredentism and secessionism, it cannot prevent the deepening of "All-Serbism" in the post-Yugoslav space, which will further complicate EU enlargement into the Western Balkans and rigidify its regional strategy. Similarly, "All-Serbism's" resurgence implies short-term impossibility of Western Balkan states joining the EU or NATO. Given current trends, while EU membership remains a long-term goal for Serbia, Bosnia, etc., the era of European centrality is largely over; Europe may face its most significant decline and darkest two decades since the modern era. Moreover, the predominantly Russia-leaning foreign strategy of Serb political elites makes European integration no longer the sole option. A rigid stalemate ensues; the prioritization and independence stance of "All-Serbism" seems emboldened, while Eurocentric rhetoric loses its former persuasiveness. Previous research identified internal divergence and the Russian external threat as key reasons for integration stagnation. Following Trump's election, abrupt US foreign policy changes weakened European military, financial, and resource support, becoming another major impediment. The standstill in integration at the Western Balkan threshold (dependent variable) is highly correlated with the expansion and deepening of "All-Serbism" in the region (independent variable). Balancing the insistence of liberal democratic values and culture with greater investment in high-politics domains is a crucial task for Europe addressing the current integration "bottleneck."

5.5 Potential EU Policy Adjustments

Facing the revival of "All-Serbism" and Western Balkan integration stagnation, the EU urgently requires adjustments across institutional, diplomatic, and societal dimensions to restore the legitimacy and effectiveness of its enlargement policy. Traditional conditionality is trapped in a dual dilemma: candidate states struggle to balance national identity and sovereignty cession, while the EU internally is constrained by Euroscepticism and disunity. Without timely adjustment, the EU risks not only failing to resolve the Balkan nationalism crisis but also marginalization in geopolitical competition.

At the Institutional Level, the EU could:

1. Promote Internal Reforms to Mitigate Enlargement Fatigue: Internal political divergence weakens external decision-making capacity. Expanding qualified majority voting (QMV) for foreign affairs within the Lisbon Treaty framework could reduce veto power by individual members. Establishing an "Enlargement and Stability Council" integrating foreign, security, and financial coordination would enhance policy continuity and operational capacity.

2. Transition from Defensive to Resilient Integration: The EU's future hinges on shifting from "defensive integration" to "resilient integration," leveraging institutional learning and flexibility to transform crises into opportunities for deeper integration (Jones et al., 2016). Only by forming coordinated mechanisms across security, governance, and identity can European integration regain momentum in the Western Balkans.

At the Foreign Strategic Level, the EU could:

1. Strengthen a Conditionality Mechanism Integrating Security and Governance: The EU should reshape its accession framework based on a "security community" logic. Overemphasis on institutional reform while neglecting security concerns left candidate states lacking strategic security (Börzel and Risse, 2018). Introducing "security conditionality," incorporating defense cooperation, countering external interference, and

energy security into assessments, could alleviate external alignment risks for Serbia and others. Simultaneously, implementing “flexible conditionality,” allowing candidate states partial participation in EU mechanisms in specific areas, rewarding phased compliance with tangible benefits, could incentivize cooperation and build trust.

2. Implement Differentiated Diplomacy to Rebuild Regional Discursive Power: The EU needs to move beyond a singular “normative power” narrative towards “strategic autonomy diplomacy.” Past focus on value propagation while neglecting economic and security demands allowed Russia and China to fill the influence vacuum. A layered strategy is needed: towards Serbia, “engagement-constraint parallel,” offering economic assistance in exchange for foreign policy transparency; towards Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro, enhanced governance cooperation; towards North Macedonia and Albania, preferential market access. Differentiated diplomacy helps balance realpolitik interests with value-based goals, restoring EU leadership in the region.

At the Societal Level, the EU should focus on Building Societal and Media Identification:

“All-Serbism” is also a transnational social identity. The EU should reshape social cohesion through education, media, and public diplomacy. Initiatives like an “EU-Balkans Youth Exchange Program” and “Regional Historical Consensus Project” could strengthen multi-ethnic identification with a “European identity.” Simultaneously, a “Western Balkans Social Resilience Fund” supporting independent media and youth organizations could foster counter-nationalist social networks.

6. Conclusion

This article aimed to answer three core questions: What is “All-Serbism”? How does it hinder European integration? How should the EU respond? The research demonstrates that the resurgence of “All-Serbism” is a key factor in the prolonged stagnation of integration in the Western Balkans. It is not merely a nationalist revival but a transnational force combining political mobilization, social identity, and geostrategic functions. Through pathways like political discourse reconstruction, institutional separation, and external alignment, “All-Serbism” fosters a “non-European” political identity in the Western Balkans, posing a systemic challenge to the EU’s conditional accession mechanism and value-based order. Serbia’s stance on Kosovo and Republika Srpska’s secessionist tendencies reflect nationalism’s evolution from domestic political issues to a structural regional dilemma.

Macroscopically, the root of the integration impasse in the Western Balkans lies not only in the failure of EU policy tools but also in the limits of its normative power. The traditional conditional accession model struggles to address conflicts of national identity and sovereignty sensitivities, instead fueling Euroscepticism and resistance. Concurrently, internal enlargement fatigue, the rise of right-wing politics, and policy divergence among members weaken the EU’s external agency, creating an “internal-external dual dilemma.” This implies that without fundamental institutional and strategic transformation, the EU is unlikely to break the integration deadlock in the Western Balkans.

This study’s theoretical contributions are: 1) Proposing an analytical framework centered on “Structure-Mechanism-Outcome,” revealing the internal mechanisms through which “All-Serbism” weakens European integration via political mobilization, institutional decoupling, and external alignment; 2) Expanding the research perspective on the nationalism-regional integration relationship, incorporating “All-Serbism” into the European institutional studies framework and highlighting its realist challenge to EU normative power; 3) Providing policy-oriented directions for future EU adjustment, including the shift “from defensive to resilient integration,” strengthening the security-governance twin pillars, implementing differentiated diplomacy, and reshaping societal European identification, offering theoretical support and practical reference for understanding EU responses to structural crises.

Overall, “All-Serbism” reveals not only the complexity of Balkan ethnic politics but also the tension between normative export and realpolitik in European integration. If the EU wishes to restore political appeal in the Western Balkans, it must achieve synergy across institutional innovation, security cooperation, and societal identification. Future research could further focus on the interaction mechanisms between “All-Serbism,” Pan-Slavic identity, Russia-EU geopolitical rivalry, and the EU’s internal political cycles, thereby

deepening understanding of the relationship between politics in Europe's periphery and institutional integration, providing sustained theoretical support for EU strategic transformation and regional stability.

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Conflicts of Interest

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