



**For a renewed EU leadership in its neighborhood. Bring a new life to the Eastern  
Partnership and the Western Balkans**

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**Brussels, March 2021**



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With the financial support of the European Parliament





## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

*The research project would analyse the political similarities between the Western Balkan states and the Eastern Partnership states. Even if the states from the two regions have been receiving a different political treatment from the EU - with the European membership option only for the Western Balkan states - in fact the similarities between them are more important than the differences. The DFCTAs states from the Eastern Partnership have been engaged in a difficult reform process. Yet their strategic goal is to become even closer to the EU. As such they are comparable with the Western Balkan states from the point of view of political indicators and they deserve a revision of the EU policies towards them. Keeping the statu quo can only generate disenchantment in these states and a possible democratic regress. A new EU leadership could see here the makings of an early win for its current foreign and security policy as well as a sign of the strength of the EU's soft power.*

### **Keywords**

Eastern Partnership; Western Balkans; democracy

### **Short bio**

Mihai Sebe, PhD, is an expert in European affairs and Romanian politics, currently working at the European Institute of Romania. He is also a member in the Scientific Committee of the Institute of European Democrats. His area of expertise includes topics such as: the history of the European idea; populism; future politics. He writes extensively on European politics both at home and abroad.

*\* This represents a work in progress given the constant evolution of the region.*



## Contents

1. Introduction. Methodological clarifications. Key concepts .....	5
2. The key actors. Background elements. Why a political comparison is in order.....	6
1.1 Western Balkans area and the relationship with the EU .....	6
2.1 The Eastern Partnership countries .....	9
3.1 Eastern Partnership countries versus Western Balkans: is the comparison justified ? .....	12
3. Political comparison .....	13
4. Recommendations.....	21
References .....	24

## Table of Figures

<i>Figure 1. Conditions for membership that need to be fulfilled by the both sides involved.....</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>Figure 2. Current status of the Western Balkan states in relation with the European Union (November 2020).....</i>	<i>8</i>
<i>Figure 3. The Eastern Partnership .....</i>	<i>11</i>
<i>Figure 4. Political similarities between the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership states .....</i>	<i>12</i>
<i>Figure 5. The Global Freedom score between 2019 and 2021 .....</i>	<i>15</i>
<i>Figure 6. Political transformation index 2016 - 2020 .....</i>	<i>16</i>
<i>Figure 7. Corruption index 2018 - 2020 .....</i>	<i>17</i>
<i>Figure 8. EU membership perception in the Western Balkans states in 2019 and 2020 .....</i>	<i>19</i>
<i>Figure 9. EU perception in the Eastern Partnership states (2017) .....</i>	<i>20</i>



## 1. Introduction. Methodological clarifications. Key concepts

The present paper was designed starting from the identified need for reform and rethinking by deepening of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) and advancing with the enlargement process in the Western Balkans. The two key regions are presented in a comparative manner from a political point of view as it is the author's opinion that they both face similar problems in their process of transition toward democracy and many of the lessons learnt from the Western Balkans can be translated to the EaP countries.

The relevance of the theme is high in the context of new geopolitical realities in Eastern Europe and Western Balkans and against the need to reform European policies, mechanisms and instruments for the neighbourhood and enlargement process, in the context generated by the many external and internal crises that the European Union has had to deal with.

Since the launch of this initiative in 2009, the EaP States have had to meet many challenges, including strengthening and promoting key national interests related to survival and national security. Given Russia's increasing influence in the area, large regions have been destabilized, with constant pressure to divert them from European integration, with current troubles in Ukraine and Belarus.

The paper would have an introduction focused on the Eastern Neighborhood of the European Union as well as the situation of the Western Balkans countries in relation with the European Union. The launch of the Eastern Partnership has been seen as an attempt to revitalize the Eastern Neighborhood Policy and it represent an continuously updating policy, as the EU instruments for the EaP are diversifying and consolidating both qualitatively and quantitatively.

On the other hand, the Western Balkans are already on the way of negotiating the EU accession and their context is a more standardised one, as they follow a pattern already addressed by the new Member States.

However, both regions face a series of similar problems, both internally related (structural and reform issues) as well as externally generated by third party actors. Thus, the paper would try to present these ongoing issues and see how they can be treated with similar instruments (if circumstances would require it).

This paper must be seen as a work in progress given the high volume of information available and the dynamics of this process.



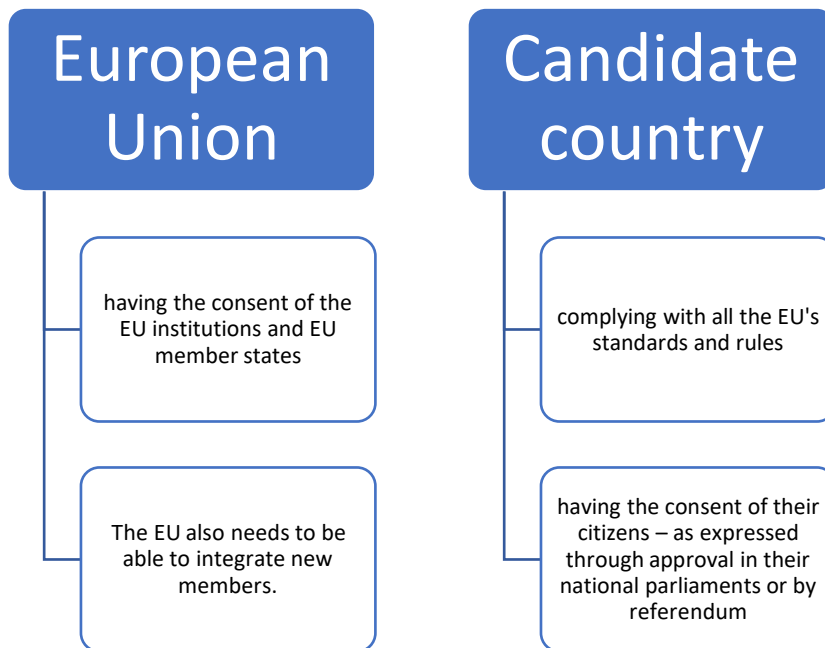
**2. The key actors. Background elements. Why a political comparison is in order.**

**1.1 Western Balkans area and the relationship with the EU**

Although the purpose of this paper is not to offer an overview on the enlargement process, given the limited space and scope, some precisions are needed in order to understand the background of the debate.

The Western Balkan states are states with a particular background, most of them being recent states, with no tradition of independence that have become independent following the disappearance of Yugoslavia (in the 1990's) often in a context of violent confrontations (with the exception of Albania, an independent state). They are all either candidate or potential candidate states, with the perspective of becoming Member States of the European Union.

In order to become a member of the European Union, the candidate states need to fulfill a series of conditions. However they are not the only one that need to fulfil a series of preconditions but in fact both sides need to advance in this process, a factor that is often overlooked when we speak about the enlargement process.



*Figure 1. Conditions for membership that need to be fulfilled by the both sides involved*

(Source: Conditions for membership, European Union<sup>1</sup>)

<sup>1</sup> Conditions for membership, European Union. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/policy/conditions-membership\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/policy/conditions-membership_en) Last visited on 29 March 2021.



The most recent enlargements of the European Union with new Member States required for the candidate countries to fulfill the so-called Copenhagen Criteria, established at the Copenhagen European Council in 1993 and strengthened by the Madrid European Council in 1995. They are the following:

The Candidate countries are required to prove :

- The stability of the institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities;
- a functioning market economy and the ability to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the EU;
- their ability to take on the obligations of membership, including the capacity to effectively implement the rules, standards and policies that make up the body of EU law (the 'acquis'), and adherence to the aims of a (or the) political, economic and monetary union<sup>2</sup>.

The Western Balkans country are also submitted to a supplementary series of conditions set out in the so-called 'Stabilisation and Association process'<sup>3</sup>, that is mostly focused on regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations, due to their turbulent historical background.

As of November 2020, out of the six Western Balkan states, 4 states had acquired the candidate status while 2 other states had reached the status of potential candidate (a higher status than any other states from the Eastern Partnership (see Figure 2).)

However we must also have in mind, when speaking about the Western Balkans states, the particular situation of Kosovo<sup>4</sup> that is not fully recognized as an independent state by some European Union Member States (such as Spain, Slovakia, Cyprus, Romania and Greece). Thus any advance of Kosovo towards joining the EU must take into consideration the need for it to be recognized by all these Member States. It also affects the negotiation process, even though the European perspective offered to this region as a whole is and must remain unambiguous.

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<sup>2</sup> ACCESSION CRITERIA (COPENHAGEN CRITERIA), available online at [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/summary/glossary/accession\\_criteria\\_copenhagen.html](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/summary/glossary/accession_criteria_copenhagen.html) Last visited on 29 March 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Stabilisation and Association Process, available online at [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/policy/glossary/terms/sap\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/policy/glossary/terms/sap_en) Last visited on 29 March 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Often the references to Kosovo are accompanied by a footnote that stipulates: "This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence." The present paper also uses this stipulation.



The **Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP)** is the European Union's policy towards the Western Balkans, established with the aim of eventual EU membership. Western Balkan countries are involved in a progressive partnership with a view of stabilising the region and establishing a free-trade area. The SAP sets out common political and economic goals although progress evaluation is based on countries' own merits.

The SAP was launched in June 1999 and strengthened at the Thessaloniki Summit in June 2003 taking over elements of the accession process. It rests on:

- Contractual relationships (bilateral Stabilisation and Association agreements);
- Trade relations (autonomous trade measures);
- Financial assistance (the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance – IPA);
- Regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations.

(Source: *Stabilisation and Association Process*)

## Overview: EU relations with the Western Balkans

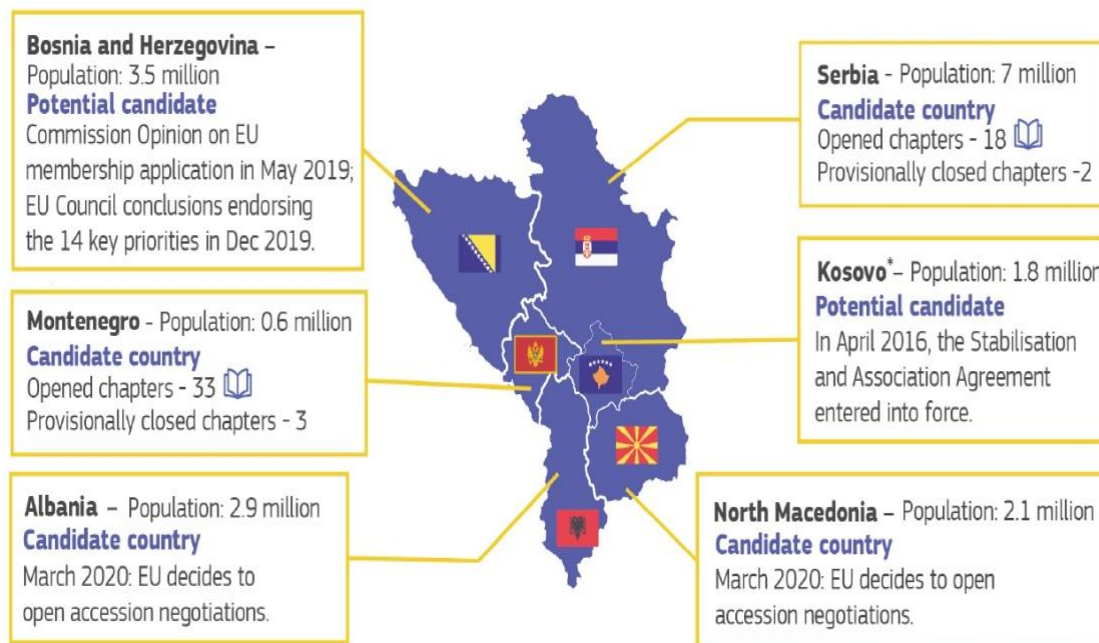


Figure 2. Current status of the Western Balkan states in relation with the European Union (November 2020)

(Source: EU – Western Balkans relations<sup>5</sup>)

<sup>5</sup> EU – Western Balkan relations, available online at: [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/default/files/eu\\_wb\\_relations.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/default/files/eu_wb_relations.pdf) Last visited on 29 March 2021.





## 2.1 The Eastern Partnership countries

The European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) was launched in 2004 in order to create the framework and provide the tools for the European Union to related to its immediate Southern and Eastern neighbourhood in order to generate stability, security and to stimulate the reform processes in the political, economical and social sectors<sup>6</sup>.

ENP was revised in November 2015 in order to become more flexible and responsive to the challenges of the region. It was thus designed on the principles of differentiation, flexibility and ownership / responsibility. There was a growing consensus amidst all the parties involved that the European Union needed a stronger neighbourhood and stronger partnerships and that:

- Our partners have different aspirations: our relations should reflect this more fully
- The ENP should reflect the EU interests and the interests of our partners
- Partnerships should be focused on fewer priorities
- There should be greater involvement of Member States in the ENP
- Ownership by the partners should be enhanced<sup>7</sup>

The ENP was completed in 2009 with the Eastern Partnership (EaP), a joint initiative of the EU, the Member States and 6 Eastern European partners : Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. It is meant to bring to the region a climate of security, stability and democratic reform, economic and social progress, through stronger political association and economic integration. It aims at facilitating the convergence of partner states with EU values and norms based upon their capacity and willingness.<sup>8</sup>

From the beginning this was not designed to be a process that leads to EU membership, which, as I would show below, is an objective that needs to be revised. It was meant to provide an inclusive framework for cooperation in areas such as: “(1) economic development and market opportunities;

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<sup>6</sup> European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), available online at [https://eeas.europa.eu/diplomatic-network/european-neighbourhood-policy-enp/330/european-neighbourhood-policy-enp\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/diplomatic-network/european-neighbourhood-policy-enp/330/european-neighbourhood-policy-enp_en) Last visited on 28 March 2021.

<sup>7</sup> JOINT COMMUNICATION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS Review of the European Neighbourhood Policy, SWD(2015), 18.11.2015, Available online at: [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/joint-communication\\_review-of-the-enp.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/joint-communication_review-of-the-enp.pdf) Last visited on 28 March 2021.

<sup>8</sup> Eastern Partnership, available online at: [https://eeas.europa.eu/diplomatic-network/eastern-partnership/419/eastern-partnership\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/diplomatic-network/eastern-partnership/419/eastern-partnership_en) Last visited on 28 March 2021.



(2) strengthening institutions and good governance; (3) connectivity, energy efficiency, environment and climate change; and (4) mobility and people-to-people contacts.”<sup>9</sup>

For the purposes of this paper, I would like specially to emphasise the fact that the Eastern Partnership states should not be treated as a whole. Just like the Western Balkans state are divided between candidate and potential candidate states, in the Eastern Partnership one needs to differentiate between the states that have Association Agreements (AAs) including Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTAs) with the EU (Georgia, Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine) and the other 3 states (Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus)<sup>10</sup> (see Figure 3).

The *Association Agreements* and *Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (AA/DCFTAs)*, concluded in 2014, have brought the relations between the EU and Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine to a new level. The agreements aim at strengthened political association and economic integration. They entail significant reforms that aim to bring the Partner Countries closer to the EU by aligning their legislation and standards to the EU ones. Most importantly, they have the objective of improving the lives of citizens in a tangible way. A notable example is the Visa liberalisation that entered into force for Georgia and with Ukraine in 2017 – in addition to the Republic of Moldova in 2014.

(Source: *Eastern Partnership*)

<sup>9</sup> Myths about the Eastern Partnership – Factsheet, 2019, available online at: [https://eeas.europa.eu/diplomatic-network/eastern-partnership/35712/myths-about-eastern-partnership-factsheet\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/diplomatic-network/eastern-partnership/35712/myths-about-eastern-partnership-factsheet_en) Last visited on 28 March 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Eastern Partnership, available online at: [https://eeas.europa.eu/diplomatic-network/eastern-partnership/419/eastern-partnership\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/diplomatic-network/eastern-partnership/419/eastern-partnership_en) Last visited on 28 March 2021.

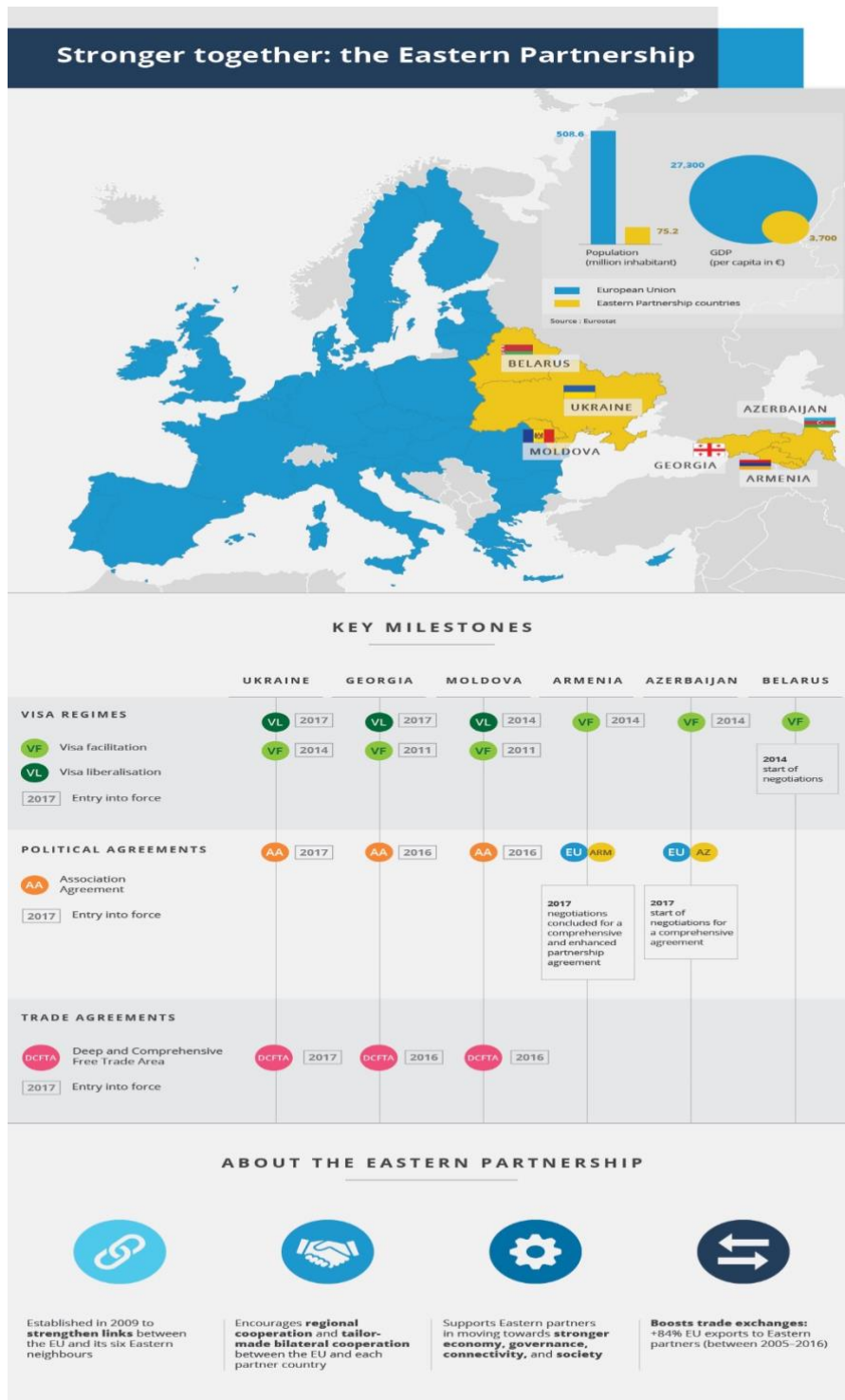


Figure 3. The Eastern Partnership

(Source: Council of the European Union, 2020<sup>11</sup>)

<sup>11</sup> Infographic - Stronger together: the Eastern Partnership, Council of the European Union, 2020, available online at <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/towards-stronger-eastern-partnership/> Last visited 29 March 2021.



### 3.1 Eastern Partnership countries versus Western Balkans: is the comparison justified ?

When speaking about the states from these two regions, one question that arises is: *Are they similar enough to allow a comparison?* In brief, the answer is: Yes! There is a growing interest, from both an academic and political point of view, to compare the Western Balkan states with the Eastern Partnership states, with a special focus on the AA/DCFTAs states from the latter.

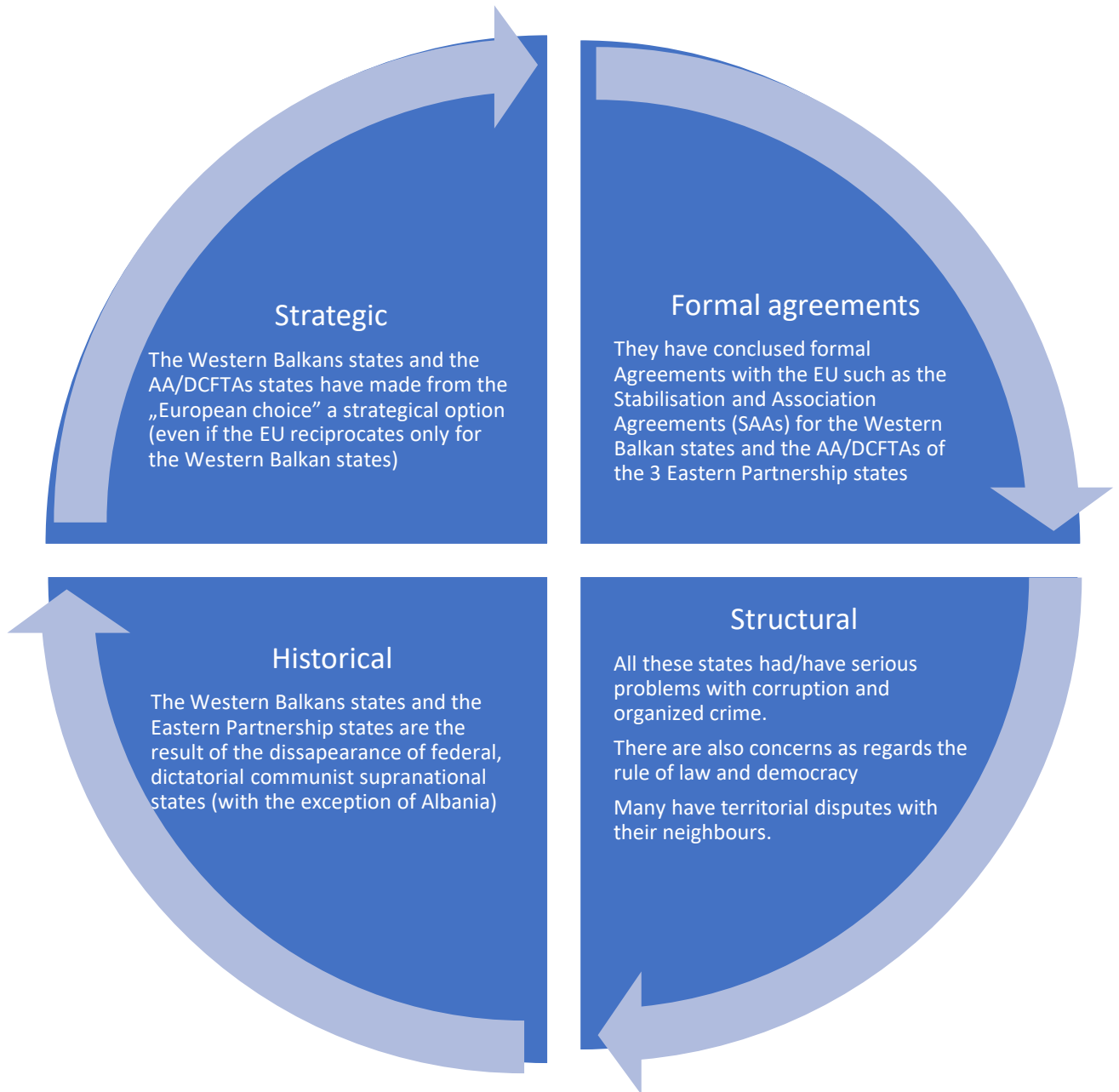


Figure 4. Political similarities between the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership states

(Source: Own creation)



### 3. Political comparison

For the purposes of this research, the main focus would be put on the aspects related to political governance of the above mentioned states. In the symbolical hierarchy of the European Union neighbours the most privileged group of states is the Western Balkan states group that have received the highly desired status of candidate / potential candidate and the promise of a future membership. They are followed by the DCFTAs states and by the rest of the 3 Eastern Partnership states.

While there is this important distinction generated by the promise of EU membership, the countries in the two groups try to adopt or adapt the EU laws and policies in a quite similar fashion. Overall, their political governance is similar. For instance states such as Georgia may be seen as slightly more advanced in comparison with Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo that are potential candidate states. This situation inevitably generates the question: “Why cannot Georgia be considered as a potential candidate country?”.

This question arises as the academic literature as well as the empirical realities have shown that the perspective of EU membership has been a driving force in the political reform of the European countries after 1989.

For authors such as Calic (2005), when analyzing the Western Balkans states, she notices that: “The European prospect constitutes a powerful incentive for reform and conflict resolution in the region. There is evidence that it has worked as a carrot to enhance and sustain ongoing reforms; as a framework for conflict resolution; and as an incentive to improve regional cooperation.”<sup>12</sup> Yet the same author states that the EU needs to be careful as this process by itself is not an absolute guarantee that reforms would take place, but rather that there is a motivation which can reinforce the political reforms needed. Moreover, the more distant the accession perspective is, the less incentive it has. “Also, experience from CEEC countries shows that the prospect of accession can motivate countries to undertake reforms in a decisive fashion if membership is not too far away.

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<sup>12</sup> Calic, Marie-Janine (2005), “The Western Balkans on the Road towards European Integration” *Internationale Politikanalyse – Frieden und Sicherheit*, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, pp. 9 – 10. Available online at: <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/id/03273.pdf> Last visited 30 March 2021.



If there is no short-term incentive, however, EU-oriented governments find it difficult to get the support they need from their electorates.”<sup>13</sup>

This claim is supported later on by authors such as Börzel and Schimmelfennig (2017) who underline the positive role played by the membership conditionality that they call “the backbone of the EU’s external political integration capacity”. Moreover, they say that this option cannot be replaced by anything else and that, no matter what form of association is envisaged, it cannot generate the same drive toward political reforms. “Conversely, partnership and association agreements cannot compensate for the lack of a membership perspective when it comes to improving democracy and governance effectiveness.”<sup>14</sup>

This academic support is also been backed by the empirical observations made by various practitioners from the region. For instance Mr Nicholas C. Garganas, Governor of the Bank of Greece, spoke in 2007 about the issue of enlargement and why it matters. Speaking about the political and economical advantages of the enlargement, he stated that it “has increased prosperity in the Union and has strengthened the security of all EU citizens.” Enlargement has also been perceived by the people on the ground as a reform catalyst and a game changer. “The prospect of EU accession offered to the countries of the Western Balkans and to Turkey is an important catalyst for reform in these countries. There are clear benefits on the whole for the EU in terms of growth, stability and security. However, these need to be better communicated to the public. It is essential to listen to citizens and address their concerns.”<sup>15</sup>

Based on this, then, having a more favourable attitude towards enlargement should be a priority for the Union as it can generate positive results on an exponential basis.

*One of the first element of comparison is the Global Freedom Score calculated by Freedom House. As Figure 5 below shows the states with a candidate status tend to be more democratic and are labeled as “Partly Free”. This suggests the fact that the candidate status has helped to maintain*

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<sup>13</sup> Calic, Marie-Janine (2005), “The Western Balkans on the Road towards European Integration” *Internationale Politikanalyse – Frieden und Sicherheit*, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, p. 9. Available online at: <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/id/03273.pdf> Last visited 30 March 2021.

<sup>14</sup> Tanja A. Börzel & Frank Schimmelfennig (2017) “Coming together or drifting apart? The EU’s political integration capacity in Eastern Europe”, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 24:2, pp. 278-296, DOI: 10.1080/13501763.2016.1265574, p. 279.

<sup>15</sup> Nicolas G. Garganas, “EU enlargement”, Remarks by Mr Nicholas C. Garganas, Governor of the Bank of Greece, at the panel discussion: “The Future of Europe”, at the Cultural Days of the ECB, Frankfurt am Main, 24 October 2007. Available online at: <https://www.bis.org/review/r071107b.pdf> Last visited 30 March 2021.



their democratic stance and helped steer a more civil way of doing politics. The potential candidate countries are less developed in that sense but, still, they are democratic.

As regards the DCFTA states and their democratic progress, they are more evolved than the rest of the 3 other Eastern Partnership states who have their democracy status under doubts. Thus, having a European incentive seems to stimulate the democratic governance as these three countries are ahead of the rest of the other three EaP states, as Azerbaijan and Belarus are labeled as “Not free” countries.

One needs also to note that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the political governance standards is not as dramatic as expected and the Western Balkans countries have had a balanced trajectory.

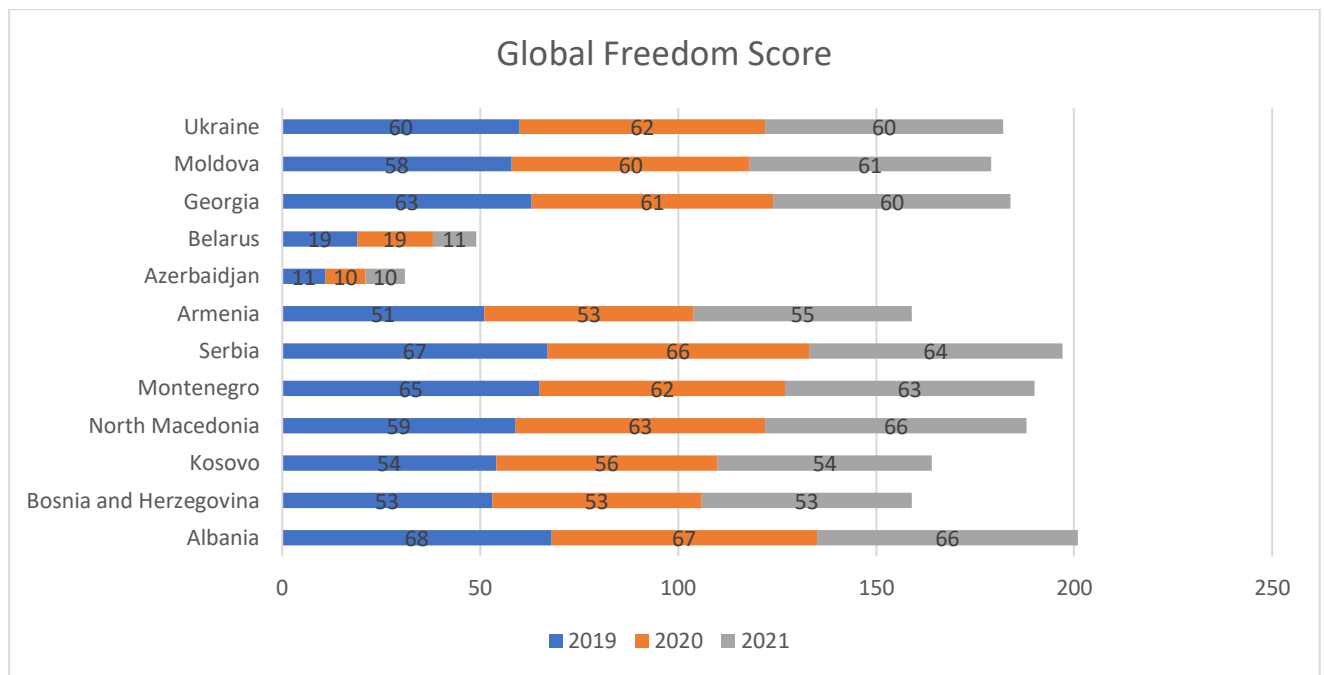


Figure 5. The Global Freedom score between 2019 and 2021

(Source: Own calculus based on the data provided by Freedom House<sup>16</sup>)

<sup>16</sup> Freedom House, available at <https://freedomhouse.org/> Last visited 21 March 2021.



We notice a similar result if we analyse the *Political transformation index* created by Bertelsmann Stiftung which analyses indicators concerning: the stateness, political participation, rule of law, stability of democratic institutions and political and social integration (see Figure 6).

If the Western Balkans states have had a rather higher and more stable result, we need to have in mind, when looking at the data, that the DCFTA countries have had to face important political pressures as the Russian Federation was accused of interfering in their internal politics and generated a high pressure on their democratic systems, having to pay a price for their pro-EU stance. Also the EU – Russian relations have worsen in the last years with mutual sanctions and open confrontations in the region which affected them.

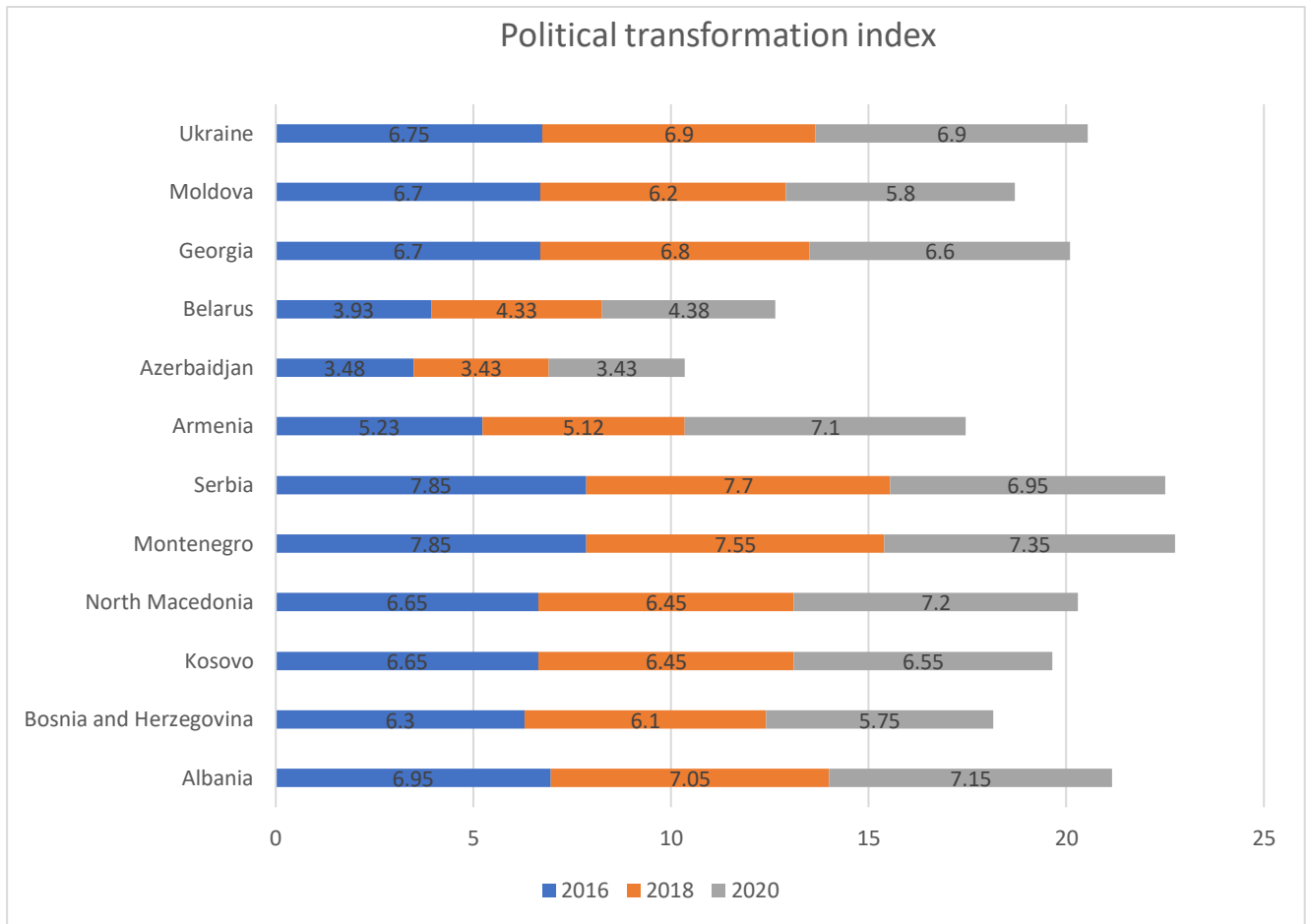


Figure 6. Political transformation index 2016 - 2020

(Source: Own calculus based on the BTI Transformation Index<sup>17</sup>)

<sup>17</sup> BTI Transformation Index, available online at <https://www.bti-project.org/en/home.html?&cb=00000> Last visited 28 March 2021.





One of the main visible aspects of the poor governance, at least as it arises in the international media, in both the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership states, is represented by the issue of corruption, as reflected in the Corruption Index done by Transparency International. The weak rule of law has affected the lives of the citizens in direct ways. Figure 7 shows that, in average, there are no such big differences between the states. Also another surprising result is that autocratic states such as Belarus can have a better perception in the Corruption index realized by Transparency International. Also, surprisingly, Georgia is above all the other states and is a better performer than the candidate and potential candidate states of the Western Balkans.

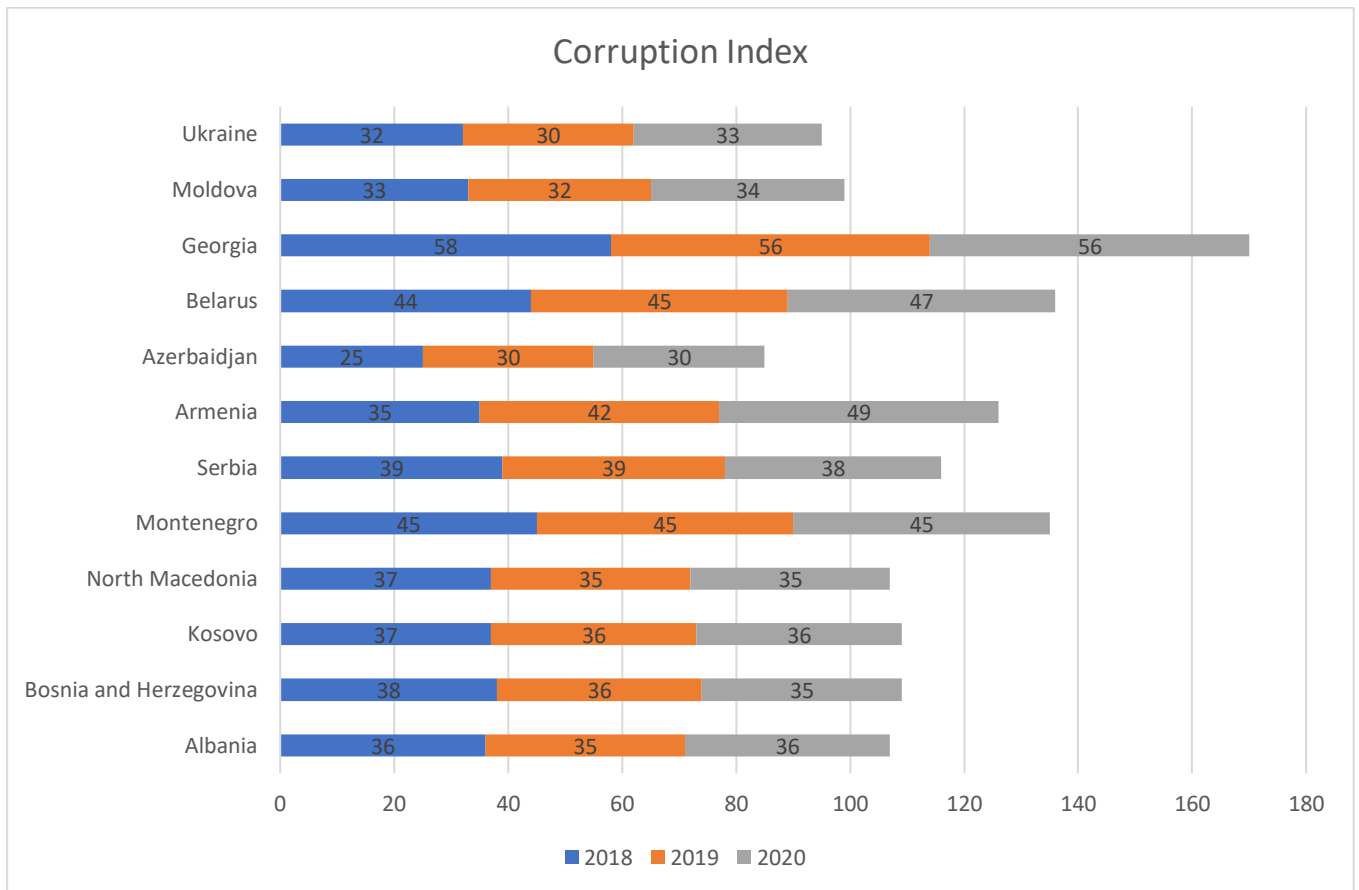


Figure 7. Corruption index 2018 - 2020

(Source: Own calculus based on the Transparency International data<sup>18</sup>)

<sup>18</sup> Corruption Perceptions Index, Transparency International, available online at : <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2020/index/nz> Last visited 28 March 2021.



*One final element analysed is that of the EU perception in the states in the given region.* The below Figures 8 and 9 show that the EU is seen in a more positive light in the Western Balkans than in the Eastern Partnership states. The most enthusiastic seems to be Albania with 86% of the population believing that the EU membership is going to be a positive thing for the economy in 2019 and a similar 87% in 2020. Kosovo is on the second place with 69% of the population believing that the EU membership is going to be a positive thing for the economy in 2019 and 75% in 2020. The highest increase can be observed in the Republic of North Macedonia where the positive opinion rose from 32% in 2019 to 57% in 2020. The most Eurosceptic seems to be Serbia who saw a decrease from 51% in 2019 to just 26% in 2020 (see Figure 8).

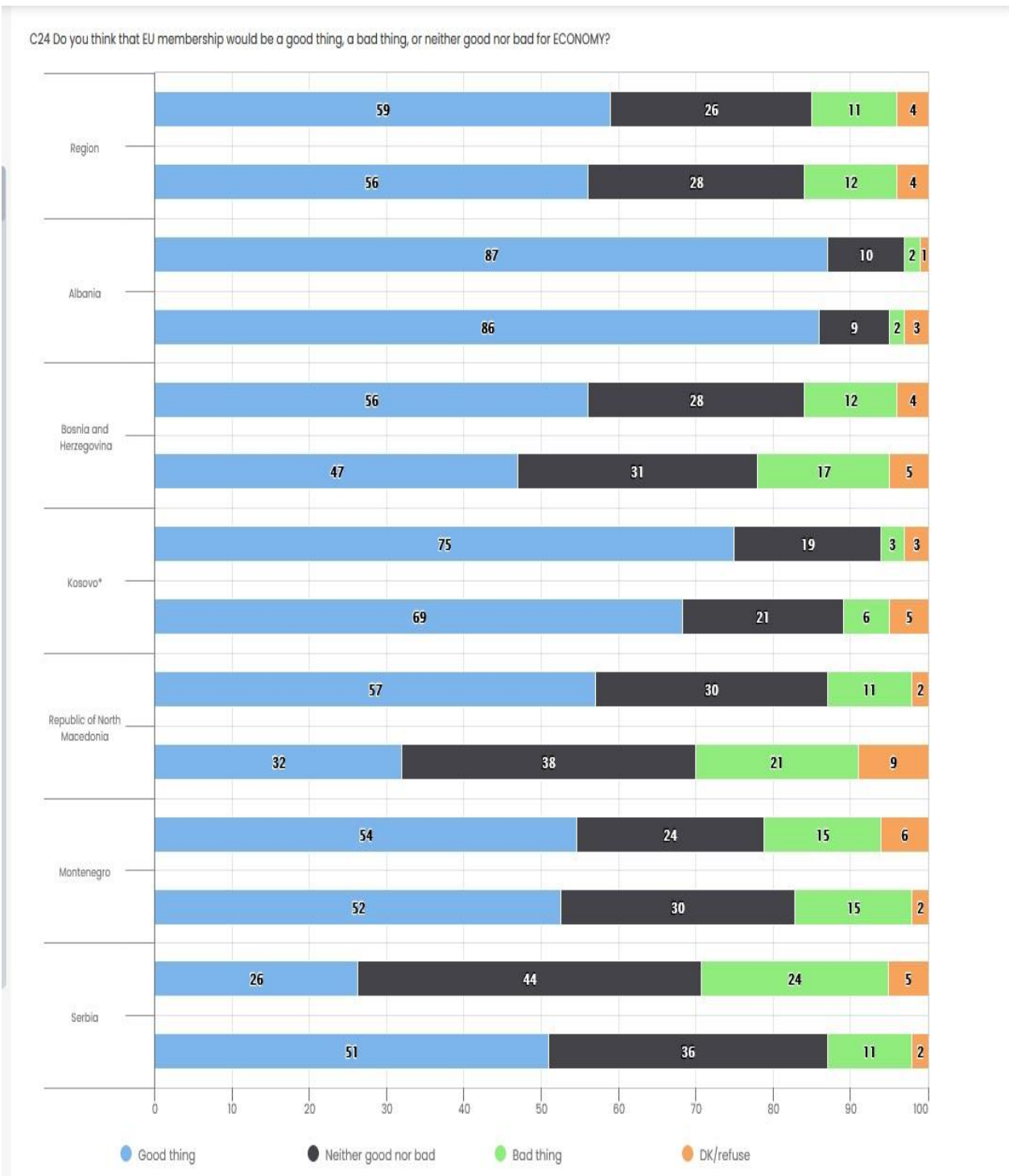


Figure 8. EU membership perception in the Western Balkans states in 2019 and 2020

(Source: Balkan public barometer<sup>19</sup>)

<sup>19</sup> Balkan Public Barometer, 2021, available online at <https://www.rcc.int/balkanbarometer/results/2/public> Last visited on 28 March 2021.



As for the EaP countries, at the time of the opinion poll (2017), the EU was associated with values such as democracy, human rights and the rule of law, with slighter lower positive perceptions (see Figure 9)

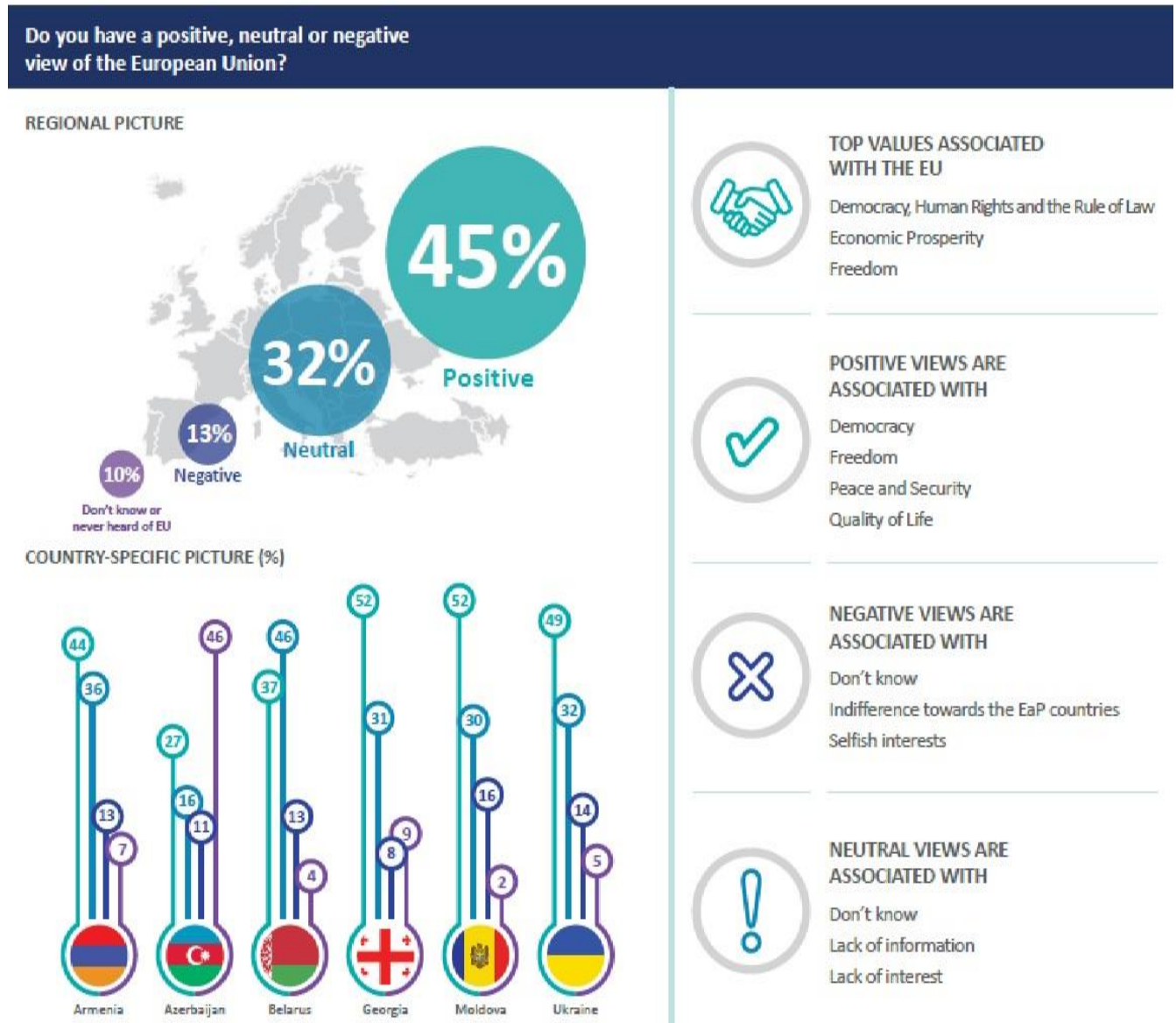


Figure 9. EU perception in the Eastern Partnership states (2017)

(Source: EU NEIGHBOURS east<sup>20</sup>)

<sup>20</sup> Perceptions of the European Union in Eastern Partnership Countries, EU NEIGHBOURS East, available at: [https://www.euneighbours.eu/sites/default/files/publications/2017-08/EU%20Neighbours%20East\\_Factsheets\\_2016\\_REGIONAL%20OVERVIEW.pdf](https://www.euneighbours.eu/sites/default/files/publications/2017-08/EU%20Neighbours%20East_Factsheets_2016_REGIONAL%20OVERVIEW.pdf) Last visited on 28 March 2021.



#### 4. Recommendations

An initial result of the political aspects compared above is that both the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership states have a similar level of political development, especially the DCFTAs states. Furthermore, Georgia is more advanced than many potential candidate / candidate countries with a good anti-corruption stance.

At a glance, a series of common elements of both the Western Balkan and DCFTAs states are rather obvious:

- They have common borders with or are in the close proximity to the European Union (Georgia is the most distant state);
- at the public speech level, they have the strategic objective of becoming Members States of the European Union and are supported in various degrees by different Member States of the European Union (see the support of Romania for the Republic of Moldova);
- they face similar challenges as they implement the EU rules and regulations.

Moreover, the DCFTAs states are - at least on a theoretical level - eligible for becoming Member States.

Thus, one preliminary conclusion can be drawn: the above mentioned states have common characteristics, common problems and often common approaches as regards the EU and they are all implementing its rules and regulations, with often similar results, thus becoming more and more convergent.

If there are so many common elements then the questions arise: *What is to be done? And how long can this differentiated treatment be maintained without a significant political backlash?*

**One policy recommendation that can be made is to analyse whether the DCFTAs states can receive a real European perspective.** EU should become more serious as regards its relationship with these states and, at first glance, the Republic of Moldova and Georgia can receive the highly rewarding “membership perspective” as they have some relative advantages: low size, low population and the support of some of the EU Member States (especially true for the Republic of Moldova and Romania). If that works, the talks can be also extended to Ukraine.

This policy option can also include the harmonisation alongside NATO of the security policies related to the Eastern Partnership states (especially the DCFTAs states) and their Euro-atlantic



perspective. Often, for many of the new Member States, the NATO enlargement process was the antechamber to the EU membership as it was the case with the Central and Eastern European states.

We can apply here the same arguments as those mentioned in the *2020 European Commission Communication on Enhancing the accession process - A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans* that mentioned the prospect of full EU membership for the Western Balkans as “**a geostrategic investment** in a stable, strong and united Europe. A credible accession perspective is the key incentive and driver of transformation in the region and thus enhances our collective security and prosperity. It is a key tool to promote democracy, rule of law and the respect for fundamental rights, which are also the main engines of economic integration and the essential anchor for fostering regional reconciliation and stability. Maintaining and enhancing this policy is thus indispensable for the **EU’s credibility, for the EU’ success and for the EU’s influence in the region and beyond**- especially at times of heightened geopolitical competition.”<sup>21</sup>

However, often the European perspective for the DCFTAs states is being rejected due to the fact that the strong opposition of Russia and the internal weaknesses proved by some EU states show that the enlargement process can weaken the EU. **These elements suggest that, for the Eastern Partnership states, the fact should once more be reaffirmed, as a realistic policy option, that they cannot become EU Member States at this moment and that the Eastern Partnership is not designed as a new sort of enlargement policy.** This would put an end, for the time being, to further speculations regarding the EU intents in the region and provide a reality check for all those involved as well as a starting point for new more realistic policies. A system of association to the EU can be designed with the goal of having as much policies in common, while falling short of full membership for the time. These states should know that, for the time being, the EU cannot take them in, also due to its internal challenges. The main risk would be, however, to demotivate the reformist parts of society of these states .

**Another option should be the use of the opportunity of the Conference for the Future of Europe to create a new system that would bring together the EU and the willing states in a new technical and political format under the mantra of “everything but formal membership”.** The old projects of multi-speed Europe can be developed and thus, we can create

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<sup>21</sup> *COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS Enhancing the accession process - A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans*, COM (2020), available online at [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/enlargement-methodology\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/enlargement-methodology_en.pdf) Last visited on 30 March 2020.



a new structure that would satisfy all the parties involved. More precise provisions and pragmatic approaches as well as having a partial saying in the EU policy-making processes may go a long way towards creating a more stable region.

This third option is also in line with the *Joint Letter* by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova and addressed to the European Union on the importance of ambitious support for the Eastern Partnership. In this letter, they reaffirmed their intent to advance the process of political association and economic integration with the EU and required that the Eastern Partnership be adapted to the new realities and that new ways be found for a deeper cooperation into new thematic areas. Also a further point of interest for them is to speed up their integration in the EU Internal Market<sup>22</sup>. Thus the DFCTAs states have once more reaffirmed their strategic option for the European Union, which differentiates them in the ranks of the Eastern Partnership, and also have put forward some possible solutions for this new type of enhanced cooperation that can be discussed.

The present paper intends, in the end, to keep the debate open as regards the relations of the EU with the Western Balkans (already clear) and the Eastern Partnership states. As they are comparable, a better solution for enhanced cooperation and a new perspective should be envisaged for the DFCTAs states as the current statu quo can only be frustrating. With enough political imagination and will a new roadmap for the aspiring states that would provide the necessary incentives for reform can be designed.

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<sup>22</sup> *Joint letter* to the EU institutions and Member States by the ministers for foreign affairs of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, 1 February 2021, available at: <https://3dcftas.eu/library/documents/joint-letter-of-georgia-moldova-and-ukraine-on-enhanced-cooperation-with-the-associated-partners-within-the-eastern-partnership> Last visited on 28 March 2021.



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