

ECONOMIC, LEGAL AND MEDIA INTEGRATIONS OF BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA AND THE WESTERN BALKAN COUNTRIES AS KEY DRIVERS OF EUROPEAN VALUES

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Abstract

The process of European integration among the Western Balkan countries, particularly Bosnia and Herzegovina, represents not only a political and institutional challenges but also a multidimensional transformation encompassing economic, legal, and media frameworks. This paper explores how these three dimensions collectively serve as catalysts for the internalization and promotion of core European values such as democracy, rule of law, freedom of expression, transparency, and economic solidarity. Through comparative analysis of integration policies, reforms, and media discourse, the study highlights both progress and obstacles in aligning with EU standards. Economic cooperation fosters market stability and competitiveness; legal harmonization strengthens governance and judicial independence; while media convergence contributes to pluralism, informed citizenship, and the fight against disinformation. The integration of these sectors is thus essential not only for EU accession but for the long-term consolidation of European identity and democratic culture in the Western Balkans.

Keywords: *European integration, economic convergence, legal harmonization, media reforms and freedom, European values and identity*

JEL klasifikacija: F15, K38, L82

INTRODUCTION

The European integration of the western Balkans, particularly Bosnia and Herzegovina, represents one of the most complex and transformative political, economic and social processes in contemporary Europe. Since the signing of the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) and the initiation of numerous EU-supported reforms, Bosnia and Herzegovina has gradually aligned its institutions, laws and policies with the standards of the European Union (European Commission, 2024.). The process involves a deep internal transformation of economic structures, legal frameworks and media systems that collectively serve as key channels for embedding European values such as democracy, rule of law, freedom of expression, transparency and respect for human rights (Đorđević&Batori, 2021; Bieber, 2020.).

Economic, legal and media integrations are not isolated dimensions, rather, they function as interconnected pillars of a broader Europeanization process. Economic integration fosters regional stability, competitiveness and interdependence among the western Balkan countries, preparing them for inclusion in the EU single market (Bartlett, 2022.). Legal harmonization strengthens institutions, promotes judicial independence and ensures adherence to the *acquis communautaire* – the legal foundation of the European Union (Keil & Arkan, 2021.).

Media integration plays a vital role in promoting transparency, accountability and public debate, as well as in countering misinformation and strengthening democratic participation (Richter & Wunsch, 2020; Jusić, 2019.). Bosnia and Herzegovina continues to face structural and political challenges that hinder the full realization of these integrations. Fragmented governance, limited institutional capacity and political polarization often slow the pace of reforms and weaken public confidence in the EU process (Freedom House, 2024.). Yet, the continued pursuit of economic development, legal harmonization and media reform remains essential for the country's democratic consolidation and long-term stability (Elbasani & Šelo Šabić, 2018.).

1. ECONOMIC, LEGAL AND MEDIA INTEGRATIONS

Economic integration represents one of the fundamental pillars of Bosnia and Herzegovina's European path, as it directly links the country's economic performance with broader regional stability and competitiveness. Since the early 2000s, Bosnia & Herzegovina has taken gradual steps toward aligning its trade, fiscal, and market policies with the European unions economic standards, primarily through participation in the Stabilization and Association Process (SAP) and the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) (European Commission, 2024.).

Economic convergence in the western Balkans has been driven by regional cooperation, foreign investment and infrastructure development, yet remains hindered by weak governance, high unemployment and limited innovation (Bartlett, 2022.).

Bartlett and Prica (2021.) emphasize that the western Balkans economic transformation has been uneven, reflecting both internal structural challenges and the external conditionality imposed by the EU. Legal integration constitutes the backbone of Bosnia & Herzegovina's Europeanization process. The alignment of domestic law with the EU *acquis Communautaire* involves comprehensive reforms in the areas of judicial independence, anti-corruption mechanisms, public administration and human rights protection (Elbasani & Šelo Šabić, 2018.).

Bosnia & Herzegovina's fragmented constitutional framework, rooted in the Dayton Peace Agreement, poses unique challenges to legal harmonization and the establishment of coherent rule of law practices (Keil & Arkan, 2021.).

Legal integration is a normative transformation that embeds European values of justice, equality and accountability into the domestic legal order. Its success is closely tied to political will, institutional integrity and the active engagement of civil society. Media integration is another critical dimension of Bosnia and Herzegovina's European path, as it reflects the country's commitment to freedom of expression, pluralism and democratic governance

The European Union's enlargement framework recognizes independent media as an essential component of democratic consolidation and the protection of human rights. According to Jusić (2019.), Bosnia and Herzegovina's media sector has experienced slow progress in aligning with EU standards due to fragmented regulation, weak public broadcasters and growing exposure to disinformation. Media reforms supported by the EU and the Council of Europe have aimed to strengthen self-regulation, promote professional journalism and enhance digital literacy among citizens.

Through the lens of European values, media integration represents a transformative process that fosters informed public discourse, combats misinformation and strengthens public trust in democratic institutions. It also contributes to broader societal Europeanization by promoting transparency and pluralism as shared cultural and political norms.

2. INTERCONNECTION OF ECONOMIC, LEGAL AND MEDIA INTEGRATIONS

While economic, legal and media integrations are often analyzed separately, their independence forms the foundation of Bosnia and Herzegovina's Europeanization process. Each of these spheres supports and reinforces the others. Economic integration enhances the material and structural conditions necessary for democratic stability and institutional trust. As Bartlett (2022.) notes, regional economic interdependence and market growth foster political cooperation and reduce incentives for conflict, while simultaneously creating demand for stronger legal institutions that guarantee investor protection and fair competition. At the same time, both economic and legal reforms depend on the media environment, which functions as a watchdog and communication channel between institutions and citizens.

The integration of economic, legal and media systems reinforces Bosnia and Herzegovina's capacity to internalize and project European norms domestically. Economic modernization provides material stability; legal harmonization secures institutional legitimacy; and media reform guarantees transparency and democratic oversight. Together, these processes generate a self-reinforcing cycle of Europeanization, where improved governance, public trust and socio-economic progress converge to promote the enduring adoption of European values across society.

3. CHALLENGES AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

Bosnia and Herzegovina's path toward European integration remains hindered by deep-rooted political, institutional and social challenges.

Weak institutional capacity, corruption and state capture undermine the rule of law and erode public trust in democratic governance. Economically, Bosnia and Herzegovina faces high unemployment, dependence on remittances and limited competitiveness, all of which restrict convergence with EU markets (Bartlett, 2022; Bartlett & Prica, 2021).

Although many laws have been harmonized with the EU acquis, implementation remains inconsistent due to political interference and insufficient judicial independence. Meanwhile, the media sector, struggles with political influence, financial stability and the spread of disinformation, posing risks to freedom of expression and democratic accountability.

Despite these obstacles, the prospects for integration remain positive. Renewed EU engagement through initiatives such as the Berlin Process and the Growth Plan for the western Balkans has revitalized reform momentum (European Commission, 2024). Strengthening civil society, empowering youth participation and investing in digital and institutional capacity can accelerate alignment with EU values. The future of Bosnia and Herzegovina's European integration ultimately depends on the synergy of economic modernization, legal accountability and media freedom-together forming the foundation for a stable, democratic and European-oriented society (Đorđević & Batori, 2021).

CONCLUSION

The process of European integration in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the wider western Balkan region is far more than a political or institutional endeavor – it is a multidimensional transformation encompassing economic, legal and media domains that collectively promote the internalization of European values such as democracy, the rule of law, transparency and human rights. Each of these sectors plays a distinct but interlinked role in advancing the Europeanization process. Economic integration supports growth, regional stability and social cohesion; legal harmonization strengthens governance, accountability and judicial independence, while media reform ensures transparency, pluralism and public participation. The interconnection among economic, legal and media integration is crucial for embedding European norms within Bosnia and Herzegovina's institutional and societal frameworks. Economic reforms create the conditions for stability and development but cannot succeed without strong legal safeguards and effective rule of law. Legal and economic progress remain unsustainable without a free and independent media capable of ensuring oversight, promoting informed debate and countering disinformation (Jusić, 2019., Richter & Wunsch, 2020.). The path to EU membership requires not only technical alignment with the *acquis Communautaire* but also the genuine internalization of European values across all levels of governance and society. In conclusion, the integration of Bosnia and Herzegovina into the European union depends on the synergistic development of its economic, legal and media systems. Sustainable progress requires not only policy alignment but also the cultivation of a democratic ethos that upholds freedom, justice and equality. By strengthening these three dimensions in a coordinated manner, Bosnia and Herzegovina can move closer to becoming a stable, democratic and European-oriented society-anchored in the shared values that define the European project.

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