

REVIEW

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Security policies and sustainable development in the Western Balkan region beyond 2022: current status, challenges, and prospects

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Abstract

Background The post-pandemic period, military conflicts, and geopolitical instability have all contributed to concerns regarding the world's sustainable and stable development, and small national economies are particularly vulnerable to these challenges. The five countries of the Western Balkan region (Republic of Serbia, Republic of North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Albania) have established their national interests and formulated security policies in line with their strategic commitment to the green transition and integration into the European Union. The region has been grappling with a multitude of challenges for several decades, and further instability may be expected beyond 2022. This paper aims to analyze the impact of sustainable development politicization on the security policies of Western Balkan countries and identify critical challenges to the region's sustainable development.

Main text The main research findings suggest that the security strategy of the Western Balkan countries was distinct from their economic and energy development until the beginning of the twenty-first century. Sustainable development is a strategic commitment of the Western Balkan countries, but it necessitates intricate changes, particularly in energy and economy. However, the Western Balkan countries have been confronted with new challenges due to the intricate geopolitical developments that emerged after 2022. The following are particularly noteworthy: frequently conflicting regional initiatives, the usage of energy resources and essential minerals, and significant impacts on how individuals form their opinion on these matters. The factors mentioned above are distinct security threats that require the Western Balkan countries to pursue solutions.

Conclusions A politicized approach to sustainable development is a novel phenomenon that has to be incorporated into current security policy. Specifically, the present approach, which prioritizes the state's security, often conflicts with the emerging concept of individual security (which focuses on the stability of the economy and the environment). This situation adds a layer of complexity to the position of the Western Balkan countries. They have a limited capacity to impact geopolitical developments, and in order to make progress, maintain stability, and foster social peace, they must make concessions and cooperate with influential economies that frequently have conflicting geopolitical interests.

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Keywords Security policy, Sustainable development, Economic stability, Energy sustainability, Social marketing, Western Balkan

Background

Following the COVID-19 pandemic and the Ukrainian crisis that escalated in 2022, the contemporary world is confronted with a multitude of diverse challenges, and the global geopolitical and economic landscape is defined by instability, uncertainty, and transformation [1]. Sustainable development, as a strategic commitment of numerous countries, particularly the European Union and candidate countries, is impeded by specific challenges in such an environment [2].

The EU Green Agenda was initially developed with a focus on international relations, trade agreements, and existing supply chains. Nevertheless, the security and geopolitical aspects of this development were not considered. As one of its fundamental objectives, the document's original text specifies a consistent supply of critical materials, which are to be predominantly sourced from the People's Republic of China. The COVID-19 pandemic did not significantly alter the fundamental objectives of the EU Green Agenda. The European Union additionally increased recovery funding and maintained its strategic commitment to achieving the status of a fully decarbonized continent by 2050 [3]. However, due to the change in geopolitical relations, the issue of critical materials obtained from the People's Republic of China has become one of the priorities [4].

The military operations in Ukraine and the Middle East have caused significant shifts in the global geopolitical landscape, resulting in changes in international relations, the formation of new alliances, the enforcement of sanctions, disruptions in the international banking market, challenges in energy supply, and other changes with currently unpredictable ramifications [5]. The strained ties between the European Union, the Russian Federation, the USA, and the People's Republic of China (including the nations inside their spheres of influence) will likely be the most significant factors contributing to the challenges mankind will confront in the next several decades [6]. Changes in the political landscape in European Union countries and uncertainty surrounding the presidential elections in the United States contribute to an elevated degree of uncertainty, the repercussions of which will have an impact on all countries and domains.

During major crises, governments often adopt a more inward-looking approach and prioritize their own interests, where the following priorities emerge: implementing a security and foreign policy that promotes stability, achieving favorable economic indicators,

ensuring energy security, and safeguarding the social well-being of citizens [7]. Sustainable development remains a declared priority for states, despite the fact that its prospects are not clearly predictable [8]. Conversely, most residents prioritize a sustainable environment and are unwilling to endorse actions that jeopardize it [9].

The energy crisis is one of the most significant repercussions of the events after 2022. European Union countries have ceased importing environmentally friendly gas from the Russian Federation as a form of political coercion through the imposition of sanctions. [10] Conversely, the aforementioned fact has sparked concerns about achieving the intended decarbonization [11] clearly demonstrating the direct correlation between security policy and sustainable development, [12], a well-known phenomenon that gained momentum after 2022. The European Union's energy security is in jeopardy, and citizens and businesses are confronted with exorbitant energy prices. This leads to the multifaceted nature of the problem [13].

Another challenge the European Union faces in terms of sustainable development is the provision of critical and rare minerals, which are primarily sourced from the People's Republic of China. As a result of the expansion of geopolitical tensions, the European Union is compelled to address the aforementioned issues as well [14].

The Western Balkan countries, which are geographically located in Europe, have opted to become members of the European Union. However, their security policies, strategic objectives, and natural resources conflict and are situated in the zone of interest of mutually opposing great powers [15]. Furthermore, all the countries in the region are confronted with economic challenges and obstacles throughout the transition process [16], making them very susceptible to global crises, [17]. The region's vulnerability is exacerbated by its historical heritage, unresolved issues of various kinds, underdeveloped institutions, and population outflow. On the other hand, all of the Western Balkan countries have opted to implement a green transition. Nevertheless, the region's future developments are difficult to predict due to the numerous challenges to sustainable development and the securitization of critical minerals and energy sources. In addition, it is crucial to consider the Western Balkans' considerable energy resources and essential minerals, as they contribute to the strategic interests of the great powers in the region and may inevitably cause instability [18].

The Western Balkans is rich in basic resources: food, water, energy and mineral raw materials [19, 20]. The economic sector gradually collapsed due to the instability that emerged after 1989. However, the natural resources enabled generations to survive, even during military operations in the region. The governments in the region tolerate the high and frequently hazardous pollution that results from coal exploitation because it ensures energy security, i.e., the consistent supply of energy to businesses and citizens at a reasonable price [21]. Renewable energy generation is currently at a low level. The regulatory framework has improved somewhat, but it is still insufficient [22]. All countries in the region have endorsed the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans [23]. Even though not binding, it serves as a roadmap for future actions. [24].

The Western Balkan region is becoming increasingly appealing to countries and alliances that require energy resources and critical minerals. As a result, countries are entering into contracts with foreign companies to exploit natural resources, with security and foreign policy playing a significant role since pure economic interest is not the sole incentive for such arrangements [25].

The excessive usage of land and exploitation of natural resources result in heightened public discontent, providing a conducive environment for the emergence of instability, the escalation of which leads to security challenges and potential crises [26]. Politics plays a major role in shaping the discourse around sustainable development, leading to divergent viewpoints among individuals and governments. This can have far-reaching consequences, potentially leading to significant instability [27, 28]. Given the current climate, it is very easy to manipulate the consciousness and perspectives of individuals, exploiting their environmental concerns in a manner that falls under the domain of hybrid warfare.

In light of the aforementioned facts, a study was conducted to demonstrate the origins of the security policies of the Western Balkan countries, the gradual integration of sustainable development into security and foreign policies, and the contemporary challenges that the region encounters in the realm of sustainable development. The politicization of this issue poses a significant challenge even for countries with significantly higher level of development and robust institutions [29].

Theoretical frameworks for security policies and the integration of sustainable development

Recent global events since 2022 indicate a resurgence of the ontological concept of security, which revolves around a country's internal perception of its vulnerability and sense of identity. The perception formed in this way becomes an established fact and the political goal of

the entire society. It serves as the fundamental foundation for formulating the state's foreign policy priorities, which currently revolve mainly around the imperatives of sustaining economic growth and ensuring the availability of essential energy and other resources. Identity, when considered a security category, plays a role in the democratic process within a state and thus impacts the electoral success of political actors [30]. The preservation of authority in a democratic system is contingent upon the foreign policy choices made by decision-makers, and a great number of decisions made by the governments of the Western Balkan countries is closely related to the exploitation of own energy resources.

Security

Security is a core human principle and a necessary requirement for living a respectable human life. Achieving ultimate security is undoubtedly unattainable due to factors outside one's control and influence. However, to make the notion applicable for research purposes, certain boundaries must be established. For the purpose of this research, it is considered appropriate to argue for security policies, i.e., practical security policies and security dynamics, based on two questions [31].

The first question pertains to the identification of the topic of security: citizen, state, elite, international system, or something else [32]. The second question clarifies the values that the security policy promotes, with freedom and equality being the most frequently referenced. When making decisions in this direction, it is crucial to understand that the diverse viewpoints of citizens and decision-makers on various issues related to the exploitation of energy resources primarily influence the question of sustainable development in the present and the future. On the one hand, decision-makers rationalize their decisions with economic benefits for the state, while on the other, citizens frequently prioritize environmental protection. In times of crisis, this is a particularly delicate matter [33].

The responses to these two questions serve as the foundation for examining a practical, concrete security policy. Undoubtedly, these two questions should be the primary ones that decision-makers must ask themselves when contemplating individual security policies to address security concerns, risks, and threats. The situation is further exacerbated by the fact that natural resources, particularly energy and rare, vital minerals, have become significant security concerns and threats, with a very uncertain influence on sustainable development and its objectives [34].

The answers to the questions above varied during the development of studies on safety. Specifically, during the Cold War, realists maintained that the security of the

state was the primary objective of any security measure and the primary national interest [35]. This is why states must prepare for self-defense by either increasing their own power, typically military, or forming alliances. The country faced a threat from other countries, necessitating the enhancement of its defense capabilities in all conceivable manners.

The end of the Cold War resulted in a global revolution in understanding the concept of security, which also affected the Western Balkans [36]. On one hand, there was a gradual disregard for the state-centric concept, which suggested that states were the answer to the question of “security for whom?”. Individuals, regions, and even the entire international system began to be considered entities in need of protection. State-centricity was disregarded based on two theses. First and foremost, the majority of contemporary conflicts occur within states. Secondly, the state’s capacity to safeguard its citizens has significantly diminished as security threats have become less military. Nowadays, those threats are primarily concerned with ecology, cyber security, human population growth, disease, fugitive issues, and a lack of resources [37].

Neoclassical realism

Neoclassical realism evolved as a response to structural realism and is an endeavor to rectify perceived deficiencies by reverting to specific tenets of classical realism [38]. Neorealism analyzes and explains the events that arise from the interaction between several actors on the global scene, and this was evident in the European Union even before 2022 [39]. Neoclassical realism, on the other hand, elucidates the actions of individual governments, specifically their foreign policy [40]. The aforementioned fact is of particular significance in the contemporary era, as the issue of natural resources and the security of supply is becoming increasingly interconnected with the behavior of individual states and international relations. In this scenario, the conduct of some member states is at odds with the interests of other member states [41], undoubtedly leading to challenges in the administration of the European Union’s single foreign policy regarding natural resources. This policy was observed and scientifically analyzed even prior to 2022 [42].

Ontological security

Ontological security is a comparatively novel concept developed at the dawn of the twenty-first century in an effort to reconcile two extremes in the field of security research. On the one hand, the traditional state-centric perspective posits that the subject of security is exclusively the state. On the other hand, the alternative perspective on human security asserts that security policy

should prioritize the individual’s well-being as the primary focus and the value that requires protection [43]. It is worth mentioning that this concept did not originate in the scientific discipline of security but rather was adopted from social psychology, where it pertains to individuals’ security requirements [44].

Today, citizens have almost unlimited access to information and possess a heightened awareness of the many issues surrounding them. As a result, they express concern about environmental events and the decisions made by authorities, recognizing the potential repercussions these may have on their safety [45]. This phenomenon becomes especially evident with the strengthening of social movements and protests that frequently conflict with government decisions, particularly about pollution and climate change [46]. It has been further exacerbated by the crisis during the COVID-19 pandemic [47], while the risks associated with sustainable development goals have come to the forefront during armed conflicts after 2022 [48].

The security dynamics in the Western Balkans from 1989 to the present day

Given the region’s turbulent history and the intricate changes that have impacted it, it is impossible to accurately predict the status and prospects of sustainable economic and energy development in the Western Balkans without prior knowledge and analysis of the situation in the region during specific historical periods. The contemporary position of the Western Balkans is significantly influenced by mutual relations, economic connectivity, population migrations, shared natural resources, and shared energy and other infrastructure, which have the potential to impact the region’s sustainable development in every aspect [49]. Conversely, the security policies of the countries in the region have evolved over time, resulting in a variety of security policies that significantly impact their geopolitical status as well as the trajectory and dynamics of economic and societal development. The exploitation of natural resources, particularly energy (or those related), has emerged as a multifaceted political issue that will significantly influence the region’s future development in the decades ahead.

Even though historical processes are integral and interstate relations are typically observed in their entirety, two historical periods were selected for analysis. The rationale for this division is that, as a result of the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the Western Balkans have evolved into a region that comprises numerous independent and internationally recognized states. Therefore, it is justifiable to conduct a separate analysis of the security dynamics and their connection to natural resources [50].

Bilateral security relations in the Western Balkan region

The fall of the Berlin Wall was followed by the demise of socialist regimes throughout Europe, including in the Western Balkan region. The civil war that resulted in the dissolution of socialist Yugoslavia is the primary factor that influenced the history of security dynamics in the Western Balkans and the countries under observation. From 1990 to 1999, the region under observation was a conflict zone in which all regional as well as some European and global security actors were involved [51]. During the period above, the economies of the Western Balkans suffered substantial damage. The region's ability to endure was primarily due to its abundance of natural resources and its self-sufficiency in critical resources such as food, water, and energy. Following the cessation of military operations, the countries in the region experienced a period of divergent relations. These relations were primarily influenced by the legacy of the past and the influence of great powers.

The civil war that ended with the Dayton Agreement placed a strain on interstate relations between the Republic of Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Additionally, the crisis and conflicts in Kosovo and Metohija,¹ which escalated due to the 1999 NATO intervention, affected relations between Serbia and Albania as well as North Macedonia. The primary issues revolve around the territorial integrity of the Republic of Serbia's territory, which aspires to achieve international recognition and independence. The Republic of Serbia strongly opposes this stance, while the international community remains divided on the issue. In such a scenario, there is currently no reliable data on Kosovo and Metohija's sustainable energy development.

The bilateral relations between the Republic of Serbia and the Republic of Albania are primarily influenced by the conflict in Kosovo and Metohija. This conflict is rooted in historical circumstances and characterized by the Albanian minority's aspiration to separate from the Republic of Serbia, establish an independent state, and unite with Albania to form a large national state. The sustainable development of both countries and the existing disagreements regarding the exploitation of the abundant energy and mineral resources in Kosovo and Metohija are significantly impacted by the aforementioned security issues that have persisted for decades [52],

The Republic of Serbia and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, today the Republic of North Macedonia, established diplomatic relations in the early 1990s after a peaceful separation. Macedonia's secession from

Yugoslavia, followed by Montenegro's secession later on, was notable for its absence of armed conflict or political violence targeting individuals. In 1999, the NATO intervention marked the beginning of the discordant security dynamics between these nations, as the Republic of Macedonia allowed its territory to be used for attacks against the Republic of Serbia. Shortly after the intervention concluded, the Albanian minority in some regions of western and northern Macedonia initiated an armed rebellion with the objective of ensuring that the rights of the Albanians were equal to those of the majority population. This conflict concluded with the Ohrid Agreement, which de facto transformed Macedonia into a federal state and turned the Albanian minority into a critical factor impacting state policy, including security policy, and substantially the country's energy policy [53], which is primarily based on the use of coal, with no indication of changes in this regard [54].

The Republic of Serbia and the Republic of Montenegro shared a security policy prior to the declaration of independence in 2006. Despite the frequent occurrence of political crises, there were no armed conflicts. The political crises were resolved through a referendum in which Montenegro gained independence with a narrow majority and subsequently became a member of NATO. NATO has its own vision of energy security, which sparks conflicting opinions among citizens and which is undoubtedly the cause of the destabilization in the region in terms of energy resources [55].

Internal dynamics within Bosnia and Herzegovina significantly influence relations with this country. The civil war concluded with the Dayton Agreement, and Serbia was one of the guarantors of its implementation. Nevertheless, NATO was granted unrestricted authority to dictate the security dynamics. The Dayton Agreement transformed Bosnia and Herzegovina into a peaceful but dysfunctional state in which, in theory, all three peoples should make decisions based on consensus. However, in practice, critical state decisions are generally made by the High Representative appointed by the Security Council. Considering the aforementioned facts, it can be inferred that foreign relations, security policy, and sustainable development mostly revolve around the power holder, whose main objective is to ensure the stability of the nation. However, the list of priorities does not include sustainable development [56].

The Western Balkan region is unquestionably influenced by great powers, and it is reasonable to anticipate that the relationships between great powers [57], which have their own requirements for natural resources, will significantly impact the region's sustainable development. A unique challenge to the sustainable development of the region may be posed by the European Union's ambiguous

¹ "This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UNSC 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence."

and wavering stance toward the dynamics of accession of these countries [58–60], as well as by China's influence, primarily through investments in the energy sector [61]. It is imperative to underscore that the European Union identifies energy resource-related issues, such as high pollution, monopoly markets, and non-transparency, as significant barriers to membership [62].

Security policy and sustainable development challenges of the Western Balkans beyond 2022

The fundamental challenges faced by the countries of the Western Balkans are characterized by three intricate, interconnected phenomena: implementation of regional initiatives, exploitation of natural resources, and influence on public awareness about the previously stated matters. These three characteristics described above will significantly impact the future stability and sustainability of the region.

Regional initiatives

Regional initiatives provide valuable insight into the status and prospect of steady development in the region. These initiatives play a crucial role in promoting cooperation and sustainable development and in facilitating the region's integration into European systems.

The *South-East European Cooperation Process* initiative was launched in 1996. Its origins can be traced to regional meetings held in the late 1980s, which were disrupted by the war of Yugoslav succession. All the Western Balkan countries are participants in this initiative. The primary objective of the initiative is, inter alia, to enhance political and economic links between neighboring countries, promote collaboration in addressing security concerns, and demonstrate dedication to humanitarian endeavors [63]. All the Western Balkan countries are members of the initiative. The fundamental concept behind the initiative is to coordinate development programs aimed at expediting the reforms of the governments in the region and their integration into the European Union. The *Regional Cooperation Council* focuses primarily on promoting sustainable development and fostering cooperation in the region, particularly in relation to collaboration and protection of vital energy infrastructure in times of crisis [64].

The initiative mentioned is likely to have a favorable influence on the region's sustainable development, as enhancing institutional systems and combating corruption are fundamental prerequisites for the sustainable utilization of natural resources and overall stable development.

Established in 1992, the *Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA)*, a regional economic initiative, gained greater significance for the region in 2006 when it expanded to include the Western Balkan countries as

members. It was created using the example of Central and Eastern European countries to facilitate the admission of new members to the European Union [65]. This improved the regional framework for more successful economic growth and the attraction of foreign investments [66]. However, it was found that the arrival of large corporations does not necessarily result in benefits for citizens and can have a negative impact on the environment. Certain changes have taken place because the Western Balkan countries actively pursue cooperation with non-European Union countries, specifically to provide energy stability [67].

The economic and social relations between the member states were further bolstered by the emergence of the most recent regional initiative, "Open Balkans", which was inspired by the concepts advocated by CEFTA. The initiative comprised the Republic of Serbia, the Republic of Albania, and the Republic of North Macedonia, explicit aim of engaging other stakeholders from the Western Balkans. Currently, neither Montenegro nor Bosnia and Herzegovina has any aspiration to engage due to the proclaimed narrative that the initiative is a substitute for European integration [68]. The objective is to progressively establish a common market for the member states and create a singular economic zone. The primary accomplishments of this initiative include implementing the EU four freedoms principle within the member states' territories—the freedom to move goods, services, capital, and labor. This is a crucial prerequisite for ensuring the region's sustainable development, but open questions arise regarding its feasibility [69].

Exploitation of energy resources and rare minerals

The Western Balkan countries possess abundant natural resources, including land, water, energy resources, and mineral raw materials. These resources were predominantly utilized for national needs for decades. The Republic of Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina generate electricity from coal and hydropower. North Macedonia and Montenegro rely predominantly on coal, while Albania exclusively uses hydropower. All the Western Balkan countries almost entirely rely on oil and natural gas imports [70].

Each country has jurisdiction over the exploitation of energy resources. All Western Balkan countries generate sufficient electricity to satisfy their needs. However, in specific circumstances, intervention is necessary, primarily due to the failure of the network, which is outdated and, therefore, susceptible to malfunctions and outages. Because electricity is considered a social category, the state establishes electricity prices that are heavily subsidized and adjusted to citizens' purchasing power. This practice has been in place for decades. The

states maintain a dominant monopoly despite the liberalization of the electricity market [71].

All countries in the region have gradually provided special subsidies for generating electricity from renewable sources, but the results have been only moderate. The Western Balkan region holds immense potential for harnessing renewable energy sources such as solar, wind, and small-scale hydroelectric plants [72]. However, the utilization of these sources has sparked considerable controversy. There was a specific concern that emerged regarding the generation of energy and small hydropower plants, as the planning of these projects has the potential to restrict people's access to water and frequently involves constructing inside national parks. The citizens voiced their strong discontent in protests, which resulted in the suspension of any future construction by the governments [73]. This is the first open example of a conflict of interests and priorities between the state and citizens regarding energy resources.

Energy generation from wind and solar sources generally does not provoke controversy, but it is mostly limited to individual instances. The above situation can be attributed mainly to the citizens' low purchasing power. When it comes to generating energy from these sources, companies primarily focus on investing in and using the energy for their own needs, which allows them to achieve substantial savings. Nevertheless, their primary focus is on their financial gains from exploiting Western Balkans resources [74]. The European Union supports the countries in the region by providing subsidies to enhance energy production from renewable sources and improve overall energy efficiency [75].

Coal mining relies on outdated technologies that cause extensive pollution throughout the region. This fact poses a significant challenge for the countries in the region as they aspire to join the European Union, which has stringent environmental standards [76]. Despite the collective commitment of all countries towards European integration, there is currently no evidence suggesting a decrease in the emissions of harmful gases derived from coal extraction and utilization. Conversely, investments are strategically planned and executed to expand coal extraction across the region [77]. From a state security perspective, ensuring sufficient energy supply for residents and the economy takes precedence over pollution prevention. Energy security and environmental security are in direct conflict. The People's Republic of China is the dominant investor in the coal producing sector in the region.

The countries in the region possess abundant natural resources, with copper and gold being the most prominent, particularly in the Republic of Serbia. Following several decades of state monopoly in this sector, the

market has been made accessible to foreign investors, with the People's Republic of China leading the way [78].

The Republic of Serbia, being the sole country in the region with substantial lithium deposits, is at the center of a contentious debate about its potential exploitation. Widespread citizen protests initially halted the project in 2022. However, a reevaluation is underway regarding its commencement. The situation mentioned above has the potential to trigger a significant conflict between the state's and residents' perceptions of security [79]. Both sides present arguments supporting their perspective and highlight mistakes made by the opposing side, employing various methods to persuade the other party to modify their stance on the matter [80]. The state is convinced that it is in its best interest to secure a rise in revenue from the sale of lithium. At the same time, the inhabitants believe it is in their best interest to safeguard the environment, fertile soil, and water supplies on the territory earmarked for exploitation [81]. Currently, the future of the lithium mining project in the Republic of Serbia remains uncertain.

Given the need for a stable electricity supply, the region is exploring the possibility of building nuclear power plants. However, this consideration has sparked varying opinions on security from both the government and the public, thus potentially introducing a fresh element of uncertainty in the years to come.

Citizens' perceptions of security policies and sustainable development

Following the disintegration of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, the Western Balkan region has experienced an ongoing state of instability.

The newly established states in the Western Balkans are exposed to various pressures from powerful and developed countries, primarily because of their geostrategic position and the abundance of natural resources in the region. Due to inefficient exploitation and feeble institutions in Western Balkans, natural resources pose a challenge, a risk, and even a threat to some countries [82]. Moreover, a phenomenon known as "the curse of natural resources" also manifests in certain European regions [83].

Raising citizens' awareness of significant problems or issues in a particular country or region, including the exploitation of natural resources, is one of the most critical factors in economic development and the smooth functioning of society. Social marketing endeavors to enhance the awareness of a targeted group of people about a particular significant problem or issue. Skillfully applying social marketing to a critical social mass has the potential to bring about beneficial social changes by influencing ideas, beliefs, attitudes,

and, consequently, value systems and behavior [84]. Social marketing is an influential instrument that may facilitate the adoption of improved and sustainable behavior and lead to beneficial societal transformation [85].

On the other hand, abuse of social marketing is becoming ever more evident [86]. The abuse of social marketing is specifically aimed at manipulating public opinion to facilitate the achievement of harmful objectives in a particular region or country, with unpredictable consequences, especially when it comes to the exploitation of a country's energy resources [87]. Social media has its advantages, but it also has drawbacks that can be described as perilous menaces to society when used to propagate violence, terrorism, the radicalization of opinions, and hybrid warfare [88].

These deliberately deceptive or misused social marketing tactics and actions can and frequently do achieve precisely the objective of causing destabilization in a specific region. Activities deliberately undertaken to manipulate opinions, beliefs, attitudes, and social value systems can have negative consequences and lead to wrong and harmful actions. If these activities are embraced and implemented by a broader segment of the social community, they can bring about social changes. When social change and activities have a negative impact, they can destabilize society. Misusing social media, especially for radicalization, can result in community conflicts [89]. The issue of exploitation of natural resources in the Western Balkan countries has generated a volatile scenario in terms of acceptance among some elements of the population, and this situation is still ongoing. This is evident through conflicting opinions conveyed in the media, street protests, and boycotts. Under such circumstances, the destabilization of society intensifies, leading to a situation in which the state and its citizens, both providing valid arguments, may find themselves on opposite sides [90].

Conventional and modern marketing actions and techniques have a significant impact on the creation and shaping of public and social perceptions. Propaganda is a very influential and powerful form of psychological manipulation. Alongside conventional propaganda media, methods, and resources like print and electronic media, all contemporary technologies and media within the realm of digital marketing are also employed. Social media exerts a significant impact on the shaping of public opinion and plays a crucial role in the digital era [91].

In the modern day, social networks are the most prevalent form of digital marketing and communication with the end user because news can reach the user much quicker. Above all, communication in cyberspace is highly persuasive and effective through social networks. Furthermore, alongside social media's benefits, there are

also instances of misuse and exploitation of these digital platforms [92].

Cyberspace, or the realm of digital communications, directly impacts the opinions, attitudes, and value systems of the target user or audience. Social media propaganda can even take on extremist forms, posing a direct risk to national security [93]. Social media has empowered individuals to express their thoughts and perspectives on various news stories and pieces of information. However, when specific individuals, such as terrorists and criminals, abuse this freedom, it can pose a threat to the national security of the state [94].

Hybrid wars are being waged and will continue to be waged in that domain. The European Union has also experienced an increase in its awareness of hybrid threats [95]. A notable feature of hybrid threats is the rapid dissemination of inaccurate information via social media, networks, and smartphone applications [96]. Hybrid wars aim to convince society that something that is highly questionable or even harmful is advantageous for them. When discussing natural resources, many viewpoints and information are rapidly disseminated without proper reasoning, resulting in a lack of opinion exchange or meaningful conversation. Instead, an atmosphere of persuasion and criticism toward the other party is fostered. Owing to several distinct specificities, the Western Balkan region is very vulnerable to the impact of hybrid warfare on its natural resources [97].

Companies with a vested interest in the exploitation of natural resources have the potential to manipulate social marketing strategies for their own benefit. Furthermore, these nefarious objectives employ both conventional and contemporary marketing techniques, including propaganda tools and strategies. Social networks have significantly altered the process of self-radicalization by providing a platform for terrorists to communicate and disseminate their harmful and extremist ideology [98]. Social media may be used by extremist groups for radicalization, and on the other hand, it may be used as a tool for self-radicalization [99]. An unstable society is an optimal environment for companies interested in acquiring natural resources in any way possible [100].

Conclusions

Sustainable development is undoubtedly the optimal choice for the future, as it facilitates the rational usage of resources, regulates pollution, and mitigates climate change. A significant number of countries have opted for sustainable development; however, its practical implementation is frequently contingent upon the level of economic development of the country and the decisions of the authorities. In reality, only countries with financial resources can pursue sustainable development initiatives.

Impoverished countries are unable to provide their population with a socially acceptable standard of living, and many of them are currently struggling with poverty. As a result, these countries are unable to implement sustainable development in its conceptual form.

The European Union is a world leader in the implementation of sustainable development, which it has incorporated into its development strategies, and its primary objective is to achieve decarbonization by 2050. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, the European Union resumed implementing the previously outlined plans, but these are considered questionable, particularly after the outbreak of crises in the Middle East and Ukraine in 2022. The aforementioned events resulted in intricate changes across the global geopolitical landscape, prompting the European Union to adopt specific measures that might threaten its sustainable development plans. Primarily, the above pertains to the sanctions imposed on the importation of natural gas from the Russian Federation, which is a political decision with negative repercussions for the economy and the majority of population, on several grounds. To replace natural gas, the European Union must find alternative energy sources at significantly higher prices, and the energy generated from renewable sources is insufficient to meet the demands. The use of nuclear power is currently under consideration, causing tensions between different stakeholders.

The Western Balkan region comprises five countries that have established distinct security policies in the 21st century and maintained intricate mutual relationships constrained by military developments in the past. Three countries are members of the NATO alliance, each relatively susceptible to the influence of great powers, primarily the United States, the People's Republic of China, and the Russian Federation.

Two commitments are universally applicable to all countries in the region: the commitment towards membership in the European Union and the commitment towards a green transition. The authorities' strategic resolve remains unaffected by the declining interest of countries in the region to join the EU, which is a consequence of the extended delay in the accession process. In terms of sustainable development, the countries in the region have implemented a specific legal framework and established a development roadmap centered on the progressive reduction of carbon emissions. However, the outcomes achieved thus far have been limited.

Following the onset of the crisis in 2022, the Western Balkan countries have been compelled to prioritize security and stability and subsequently strategize their choices and financial allocations accordingly. All the countries in the region are classified as minor economies, with no impact on intricate geopolitical developments. However,

they can function as training grounds for the activities of major global powers.

The research presented in the paper suggested that all domains, including sustainable development, have been significantly politicized. Due to their abundant natural resources, the countries of the region are of interest to foreign corporations, which support the countries they originate from. The countries in the region prioritize maintaining state security and stability over sustainable development due to the absence of well-established institutions and the need to maintain a certain standard of living for their citizens. On the contrary, citizens have different perspectives on security and express them in various ways, aiming to prevent the devastation of natural resources. On the other hand, major global corporations engage in several endeavors to shape public opinion with the goal of garnering support for their desired undertakings. In such an atmosphere, conflicts have arisen between the state and citizens regarding the interpretation of security. Given the ongoing nature of this crisis, it is probable that conflicting views will persist in the future. This is particularly alarming in a region plagued by unsolved interstate issues, where nations are impacted by geopolitical shifts and the influence of several global powers.

The region is inevitably confronted with the politicization of sustainable development since natural resources and low-cost labor are strong incentives for big multinational companies to prioritize their interests. In this context, the security policies of the countries in the region, which are primarily state-centric, collide with the security priorities of their citizens, which are frequently of a different nature. The aforementioned fact does not contribute to stabilization in the region. It necessitates the development of new security policies that can reconcile the interests of the state and citizens within the context of sustainable development.

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