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Democratization in the Western Balkans: Illiberal Regimes and the Leverage of International Actors

Abstract

The European Union (EU) may be presiding over the most successful democracy promotion program ever implemented by an international actor. Among postcommunist states with a credible EU membership perspective, we can see a significant – though far from complete – convergence toward liberal democracy. This is all the more interesting since ten years ago many of these states had illiberal or authoritarian regimes. I focus in this article on the sources of political change in previously illiberal regimes before and after 'watershed elections,' especially in the Western Balkans. I argue that over time the EU's leverage strengthened the hand of liberal forces by way of four mechanisms: creating a focal point for cooperation, providing incentives for adapting, using conditionality, and serving as a credible commitment for reform. Consequently, most political parties have changed their agenda to make it compatible with the state's bid for EU membership. I investigate the domestic conditions that have caused these mechanisms to function only weakly in Serbia and Bosnia.