

The Challenges of European Union Integration: The Parallel between Human Rights and Corruption Perceptions

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Abstract

With the concepts of rule of law, democracy and respect for human rights representing the most prominent values upon which the European Union is established, the EU accession process expectedly supplicates candidate countries to ameliorate the efficiency of their legal institutions. As a general rule, such fundamentals are habitually correlated with other equally relevant criteria concerning the EU accession process. Given that the Western Balkans are not ordinarily regarded as an exemplary model in terms of practically demonstrating the rule of law and economic well-being, this research paper analyzes the linear relationship between human rights and rule of law manifestations and corruption perspectives in some EU candidate countries as a potential mechanism for satisfying EU accession fundamentals. For that matter, a simple linear regression analysis was conducted in order to determine whether and how such correlation would benefit policymakers in some current EU candidate countries toward their paths to European integration.

Keywords: rule of law; human rights; corruption perceptions; EU accession; EU candidate countries.

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1. Introduction

The EU today is the most aspired organization of the continent countries, simultaneously the most rigorous one as regarding the accession criteria for the pretending countries. Even though, it's not to say that the current EU is a perfect organization; the EU still remains in the boundaries of being a “*sui generis*” creature,

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because it has not yet taken the definitive form, the enlargement process is still ongoing and there are a lot of institutional reforms to be done.³ Beginning with the Western Balkans, it must be underlined that the EU accession process is governed by the principle of own merits, which means that each aspirant country will proceed in accordance with its individual efforts and pace. This principle highlights the country's own responsibility for its European future.⁴ Human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights are the values on which the EU is founded. Being embedded in the TEU, such values have been notably reinforced by the Charter of Fundamental Rights. On that account, current EU candidate countries are inevitably expected to respect human rights, and so must countries which have concluded trade and other agreements with it.⁵ Nowadays, all countries in the Balkans are facing new political, economic and social challenges, which have become a serious threat to the stability of the Balkan region and the security of Europe. High-risk problems include crises of democracy, a revival of national aspirations and ethnic tensions, hybrid threats, migration from war-torn countries, pervasive economic insecurity, unstable access to energy resources as well as risks of secession.⁶ Obliquely, the principle of fair labelling would help to scrutinize the messages that different criminal labels carry for a number of different audiences – most obviously, the offender, the victims and survivors, and the broader community that the criminal law purports to regulate.⁷ Considering the strategic importance of this region for the EU on one side and the entangled relations between the states in the area on the other, the step-by-step integration of all states of the region into the EU is the most important if not the only tool for the social and economic progress of these states and for improving stability and security of the area and Europe as a whole.⁸ Imperfect though the Western Balkans still may be, this paper hypothesizes whether the corruption perspectives of selected EU candidate countries (Macedonia, Albania, Montenegro, Serbia and Turkey) depend on the quality of their institutions and more importantly, whether and how such correlation would influence policymakers to develop appropriate mechanisms regarding the accession process within the EU.

³ Elton Tota, *EU Enlargement and its Impact to the Western Balkans* (Berlin: Logos Verlag Berlin GmbH, 2019), 10.

⁴ E. Dionysiou, "The European Union Enlargement in the Western Balkans: A Never-Ending Story of High Hopes and High Disappointments" in *Challenges and Barriers to the European Union Expansion to the Balkan Region*, ed. Bruno Ferriera Costa (Pennsylvania: IGI Global, 2022), 49.

⁵ Marika Lerch, "Fact Sheets on the European Union", European Parliament, September 2022, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/fact-sheets/en/sheet/165/human-rights>.

⁶ Marzena Żakowska and Dorota Domalewska, "Social Security in the Balkans" in *Social Security in the Balkans – Volume I: An Overview of Social Policy in Croatia, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Greece, Romania and Bulgaria*, ed. Marzena Żakowska and Dorota Domalewska (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 2.

⁷ Javier S. Eskauriatza, "'Completing Labeling' and Domestic Prosecutions for Crimes against Humanity," *Criminal Law Forum* 32, no. 4 (December 2021): 474.

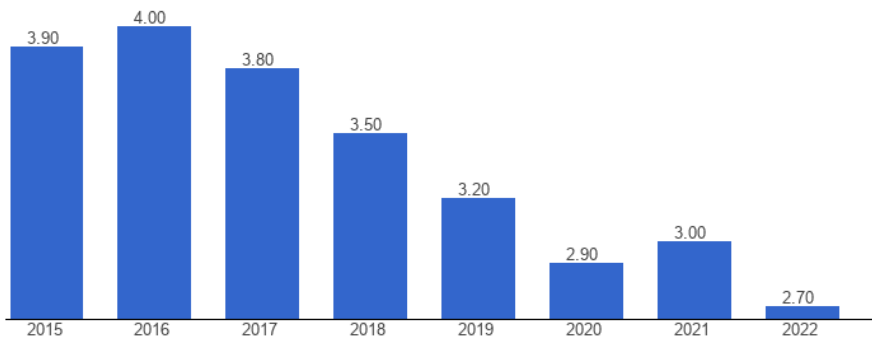
⁸ Silvo Devetak, "Reconciliation – A Prerequisite for the Integration of Western Balkans in the EU Stream of Values," *Balkan Social Science Review* 14 (December 2019): 183.

2. Statistical case-study analyses for the Republic of North Macedonia

2.1. Human rights and rule of law in Macedonia

According to the ‘*Key Findings of the 2022 Report on North Macedonia*’ issued by the European Commission⁹, Macedonia continued its efforts to strengthen democracy and the rule of law, despite some challenges. The Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE/ODIHR) assessed that they were competitive and fundamental freedoms were widely respected. On the other hand, the legal framework on the protection of fundamental rights is largely in line with European standards. The Ministry of Labor and Social Policy continues to invest in community services, including support for victims of gender-based violence. Continued improvements can be noted in gender mainstreaming and respect for women's rights. Implementation of the legislation on hate speech and of the national action plan for the Istanbul Convention's provisions needs to be improved.

Figure 1. Recent Values (2015-2022) concerning the Human Rights and Rule of Law Index for the Republic of North Macedonia



Note. Adapted from “North Macedonia: Human Rights and Rule of Law Index” by the Global Economy, (https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/Macedonia/human_rights_rule_law_index/)

We derive North Macedonia’s Human Rights and Rule of Law Index score from the ‘Global Economy’ database (2015-2022)¹⁰, where the provided data reveal that the average value for North Macedonia during that period was 3.9- index points with a minimum of 2.7 index points in 2022 and a maximum of 4.0 index points in 2016. The latest value from 2022 is 2.7 index points.

⁹ “Key Findings of the 2022 Report on North Macedonia,” European Commission, October 12, 2022, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/country_22_6092.

¹⁰ “North Macedonia: Human Rights and Rule of Law Index,” The Global Economy, 2022, https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/Macedonia/human_rights_rule_law_index/.

2.2. Corruption perspectives in Macedonia

According to the ‘Key Findings of the 2022 Report on North Macedonia’ issued by the European Commission¹¹, the country is moderately prepared in the prevention and fight against corruption. Some progress has been made as the country continued to consolidate its performance on investigating, prosecuting and trying several corruption cases, including at a high level. In line with previous years' recommendations, the State Commission for the Prevention of Corruption (SCPC) has been proactive in providing policy guidance to public institutions on preventing corruption and it opened several cases, including cases against high-level officials. Efforts to improve the functioning of the SCPC should continue with a further allocation of financial and human resources. Additional human and financial resources should be made available to the Public Prosecution Office, investigative centers and law enforcements units in charge of investigating corruption.

Figure 2. The North Macedonia Corruption Index (2012-2022)



Note. Adapted from “North Macedonia Corruption Index” by Trading Economics, (<https://tradingeconomics.com/macedonia/corruption-index>)

We derive Macedonia’s Corruption Index score from the “Trading Economics” database (2012-2022)¹², where the provided data reveal that the average value for Macedonia during that period was 43 index points with a minimum of 35 index points in 2017, 2019 and 2020, as well as a maximum of 45 index points in 2014. The last value from 2022 is 39 index points.

¹¹ “Key Findings of the 2022 Report on North Macedonia,” European Commission, October 12, 2022.

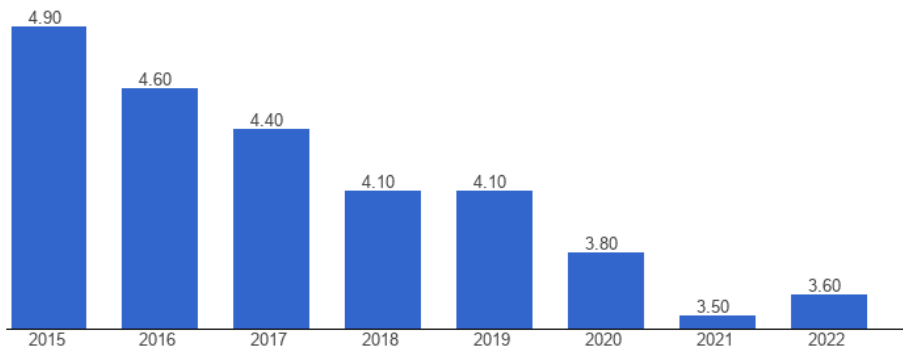
¹² “North Macedonia Corruption Index,” Trading Economics, December 2022, <https://tradingeconomics.com/macedonia/corruption-index>.

3. Statistical case-study analyses for Serbia

3.1. Human rights and rule of law for Serbia

According to the ‘*Key Findings of the 2022 Report on Serbia*’, issued by the European Commission,¹³ Serbia’s legislative and institutional framework for upholding **fundamental rights** is broadly in place. Serbia adopted new strategies on anti-discrimination and Roma inclusion, as well as action plans on gender equality and Roma inclusion. More efforts are needed to comply with the Law on the planning system, which requires that action plans are adopted within three months of the adoption of related strategies. Serbia needs to strengthen human rights institutions by allocating the necessary financial and human resources and by putting in place procedures to ensure compliance with the European Court of Human Rights’ measures, including interim measures.

Figure 3. Recent Values (2015-2022) concerning the Human Rights and Rule of Law Index for the Republic of Serbia



Note. Adapted from “Serbia: Human Rights and Rule of Law Index” by the Global Economy, (https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/Serbia/human_rights_rule_law_index/)

We derive Serbia’s Human Rights and Rule of Law Index score from the ‘Global Economy’ database (2015-2022),¹⁴ where the provided data reveal that the average value for Serbia during that period was 4.90 index points (simultaneously being the maximum index score) and with a minimum of 3.50 index points in 2021. The latest value from 2022 is 3.60 index points.

3.2. Corruption perspectives in Serbia

According to the ‘*Key Findings of the 2022 Report on Serbia*’, issued by the

¹³“Key Findings of the 2022 Report on Serbia,” European Commission, October 12, 2022, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/country_22_6089.

¹⁴ “Serbia: Human Rights and Rule of Law Index,” The Global Economy, 2022, https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/Serbia/human_rights_rule_law_index/.

European Commission,¹⁵ Serbia has some level of preparation in the **fight against corruption**. Overall, some progress was made during the reporting period, including on last year's recommendations. The recommendation on prevention of corruption has been further implemented, and the Council of Europe's Group of States against Corruption (GRECO) concluded in March 2022 that the adoption of amendments to the Law on prevention of corruption had addressed the previously identified shortcomings and was sufficient to strengthen the framework aimed at preventing and combating conflicts of interest of members of Parliament, judges and prosecutors. Serbia has still to prepare a new anti-corruption strategy and action plan and establish an effective coordination mechanism to operationalise prevention and repression policy goals and thoroughly address corruption.

We derive Serbia's Corruption Index Score from the "Trading Economics" database (2012-2022),¹⁶ where the provided data reveal that the average value for Serbia during that period was 39 index points with a minimum of 38 index points in 2020 and 2021, as well as a maximum of 42 index points in 2013 and 2016. The latest value from 2022 is 38 index points.

Figure 4. The Serbia Corruption Index (2012-2022)



Note. Adapted from "Serbia Corruption Index" by Trading Economics, (<https://tradingeconomics.com/serbia/corruption-index>)

4. Statistical case-study analyses for Montenegro

4.1. Human rights and rule of law in Montenegro

According to the 'Key Findings of the 2022 Report on Montenegro' issued by the European Commission,¹⁷ Montenegro is moderately prepared in the area

¹⁵ "Key Findings of the 2022 Report on Serbia," European Commission, October 12, 2022.

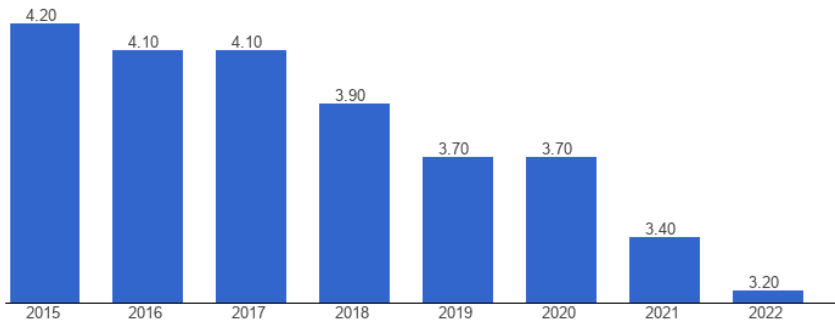
¹⁶ "Serbia Corruption Index," Trading Economics, December 2022, <https://tradingeconomics.com/serbia/corruption-index>.

¹⁷ "Key Findings of the 2022 Report on Montenegro," European Commission, October 12, 2022, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/country_22_6103.

of **fundamental rights**. The legislative and institutional framework is largely in place and Montenegro continues to meet its international obligations on human rights. However, additional efforts remain needed to implement it fully. The lack of effective judicial follow-up on important old cases remains a matter of serious concern. The revision of the legal framework and the drafting of a new media strategy remain pending, in order to ensure their mutual consistency and full alignment with the EU *acquis* and relevant European standards. Sustained efforts are needed to counter disinformation and limit the effects of online harassment and hate speech, without disproportionately limiting freedom of expression.

We derive Montenegro's Human Rights and Rule of Law Index score from the 'Global Economy' database (2015-2022),¹⁸ where the provided data reveal that the average value for Montenegro during that period was 4.20 index points (simultaneously being the maximum index score) and with a minimum of 3.20 index points as the latest value estimated in 2022.

Figure 5. Recent Values (2015-2022) concerning the Human Rights and Rule of Law Index for the Republic of Serbia



Note. Adapted from "Montenegro: Human Rights and Rule of Law Index" by the Global Economy, (https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/Montenegro/human_rights_rule_law_index/)

4.2. Corruption perspectives in Montenegro

According to the '*Key Findings of the 2022 Report on Montenegro*' issued by the European Commission,¹⁹ Montenegro has achieved some level of preparation in the **fight against corruption**. Limited progress was achieved during the reporting period, with last year's recommendations only partially met. The track record on prevention of corruption further improved, in particular due to the positive trend in the work of the Anti-Corruption Agency. However, more needs to be done to ensure the Agency's integrity, impartiality and accountability, and to improve its tangible results and public trust, in line with the recommendations of the peer review mission conducted in 2021. To demonstrate a credible criminal justice response, Montenegro still must

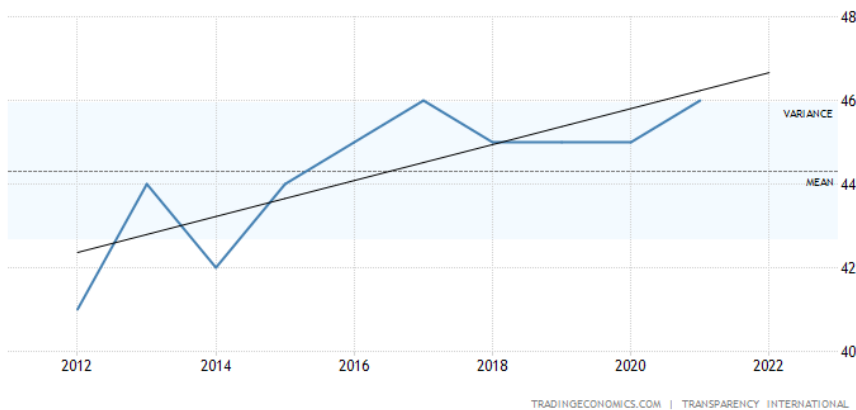
¹⁸ "Montenegro: Human Rights and Rule of Law Index", The Global Economy, 2022, https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/Montenegro/human_rights_rule_law_index/.

¹⁹ "Key Findings of the 2022 Report on Montenegro," European Commission, October 12, 2022.

improve its track record of investigations, prosecutions and final convictions in the fight against corruption, including high-level corruption. Furthermore, the legal and institutional framework must be improved in line with the EU *acquis* and European standards, including for the effective use of financial investigations and asset seizure and confiscation in such cases.

We derive Montenegro's Corruption Index Score from the 'Trading Economics' database (2012-2022),²⁰ where the provided data reveal that the average value for Montenegro during that period was 41 index points, simultaneously being the minimum value and a maximum of 46 index points in 2017, 2021 and 2022 as the latest value estimated.

Figure 6: The Montenegro Corruption Index (2012-2022)



Note. Adapted from "Montenegro Corruption Index" by Trading Economics (<https://tradingeconomics.com/montenegro/corruption-index>)

5. Statistical case-study analyses for Turkey

5.1. Human rights and rule of law for Turkey

According to the 'Key Findings of the 2022 Report on Türkiye', issued by the European Commission,²¹ the deterioration of human and fundamental rights continued. Many of the measures introduced during the state of emergency remain in force. The legal framework includes general guarantees of respect for human and fundamental rights, but the legislation and its implementation need to be brought into line with the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) case-law. The Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly continued to monitor Turkey's respect for human rights, democracy and the rule of law. Turkey's continued refusal to implement certain ECtHR ruling is a source of serious concern

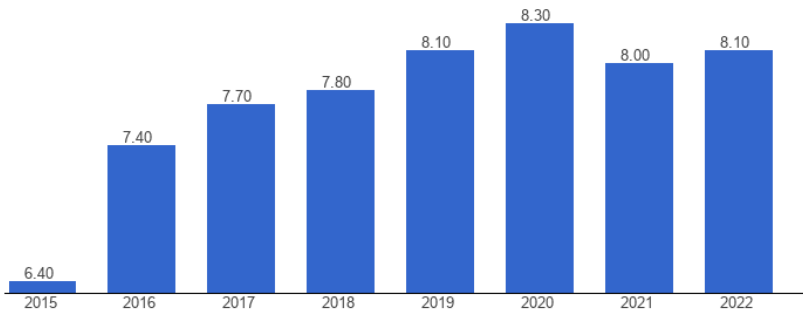
²⁰ "Montenegro Corruption Index", Trading Economics, December 2022, <https://tradingeconomics.com/montenegro/corruption-index>.

²¹ "Key Findings of the 2022 Report on Türkiye", European Commission, October 12, 2022, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/country_22_6088.

regarding the judiciary's adherence to international and European standards and Turkey's commitment to promote the rule of law and respect for fundamental rights. The human rights action plan adopted in 2021 continued to be implemented, but this does not address critical issues and has not led to an improvement in the overall human rights situation.

We derive Turkey's Human Rights and Rule of Law Index Score from the 'Global Economy' database (2015-2022),²² where the provided data reveal that the average value for Turkey during that period was 6.40 index points, simultaneously being the minimum index score and with a maximum of 8.30 index points for 2020. The latest value estimated in 2022 is 8.10 index points.

Figure 7: Recent Values (2015-2022) concerning the Human Rights and Rule of Law Index for the Republic of Turkey



Note. Adapted from "Turkey: Human Rights and Rule of Law Index" by the Global Economy, (https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/Turkey/human_rights_rule_law_index/)

5.2. Corruption perspectives in Turkey

According to the 'Key Findings of the 2022 Report on Türkiye', issued by the European Commission,²³ Turkey remained at an early stage of preparations and made no progress in the reporting period regarding the **fight against corruption**. The country has not set up anti-corruption bodies in line with its international obligations. The legal framework and institutional architecture need to be improved to limit political and undue influence in the prosecution and adjudication of corruption cases. The accountability and transparency of public institutions need to be improved. The absence of an anti-corruption strategy and action plan indicated a lack of will to decisively fight corruption. Most of the Council of Europe's Group of States against Corruption (GRECO) recommendations have not been implemented. Overall, corruption is widespread and remains an issue of concern.

²² "Turkey: Human Rights and Rule of Law Index," The Global Economy, 2022, https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/Turkey/human_rights_rule_law_index/.

²³ "Key Findings of the 2022 Report on Türkiye," European Commission, October 12, 2022.

Figure 8. The Turkey Corruption Index (2012-2022)

Note. Adapted from “Turkey Corruption Index” by Trading Economics, (<https://tradingeconomics.com/turkey/corruption-index>)

We derive Turkey’s Corruption Index Score from the ‘Trading Economics’ database (2012-2022),²⁴ where the provided date reveal that the average value for Turkey during that period was 49 index points with a minimum of 39 index points in 2019 and a maximum of 50 index points in 2013. The latest value from 2022 is 38 index points.

6. Statistical case-study analyses for Albania

6.1. Human rights and rule of law in Albania

According to the ‘*Key Findings of the 2022 Report on Albania*’, issued by the European Commission,²⁵ on **fundamental rights**, Albania complies overall with international human rights instruments and has ratified most international conventions on the protection of fundamental rights. Some progress was made in using alternatives to detentions and, in particular, in developing the probation service, which remains fully operational, including for juvenile offenders. On the protection of national minorities, Albania adopted a new piece of implementing legislation that creates a fund for civil society projects in support of minority rights. However, adoption of the remaining implementing legislation, including on freedom to self-identify as a member of a national minority and on the use of minority languages, is still pending.

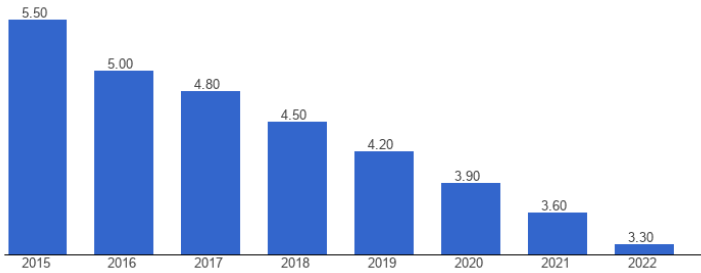
We derive Albania’s Human Rights and Rule of Law Index Score from the ‘Global Economy’ database (2015-2022),²⁶ where the provided data reveal that the average value for Albania during that period was 5.50 index points, simultaneously being the maximum index score and with a minimum of 3.30 index points as the last value estimated for 2022.

²⁴ “Turkey Corruption Index,” Trading Economics, December 2022, <https://tradingeconomics.com/turkey/corruption-index>.

²⁵ “Key Findings of the 2022 Report on Albania,” European Commission, October 12, 2022, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/press-corner/detail/en/COUNTRY_22_6091.

²⁶ “Albania: Human Rights and Rule of Law Index,” The Global Economy, 2022, https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/Albania/human_rights_rule_law_index/.

Figure 9. Recent Values (2015-2022) concerning the Human Rights and Rule of Law Index for the Republic of Albania

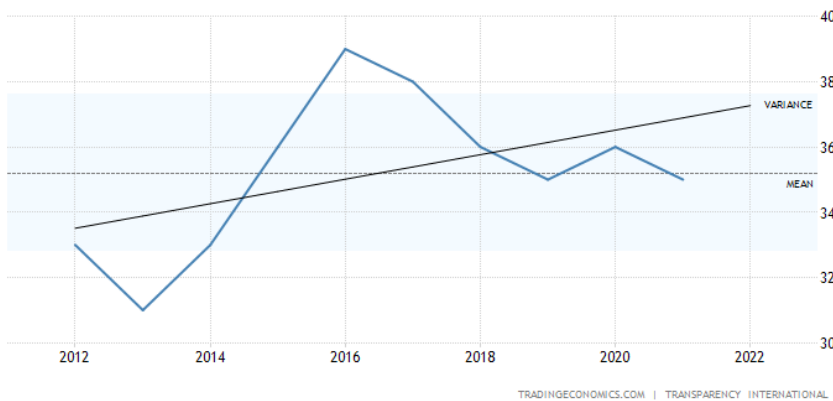


Note. Adapted from “Albania: Human Rights and Rule of Law Index” by the Global Economy, (https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/Albania/human_rights_rule_law_index/)

6.2. Corruption perspectives in Albania

According to the ‘*Key Findings of the 2022 Report on Albania*’, issued by the European Commission,²⁷ Albania has some level of preparation in the **fight against corruption**. It continued its efforts to build on its track record of investigation, prosecutions and convictions in the fight against corruption and delivered some results. These efforts need to continue. However, greater political will, further structured efforts, and adequate resources and skills remain necessary. Although the vetting of members of the judiciary is an administrative process, it continues to bring results in the fight against corruption within the judiciary. Overall, despite some progress, corruption remains an area of serious concern. Increasing the number of final convictions of high-level officials remains an important priority to further tackle a culture of impunity.

Figure 10. The Albania Corruption Index (2012-2022)



Note. Adapted from “Albania Corruption Index” by Trading Economics, (<https://tradingeconomics.com/turkey/corruption-index>)

²⁷ “Key Findings of the 2022 Report on Albania,” European Commission, October 12, 2022.

We derive Albania's Corruption Index Score from the 'Trading Economics' database (2012-2022),²⁸ where the provided data reveal that the average value for Albania during that period was 33 index points with a minimum of 31 index points in 2013 and a maximum of 39 index points in 2016. The latest value from 2022 is 35 index points.

7. The influence of human rights and rule of law on corruption perceptions in some EU candidate countries in comparison with EU legislation

In order to estimate the influence of human rights and rule of law on corruption perceptions, a simple linear regression analysis is performed, where the Human Rights and Rule of Law Index is defined as the independent variable (X), while the Corruption Perceptions Index is defined as the dependent variable (Y). We derive the independent variables (X) from the 'Global Economy' database where the *Human Rights and Rule of Law Index* considers the relationship between the state and its population insofar as fundamental human rights are protected and freedoms are observed and respected, by manifesting a scale of 0 (high) to 10 (low), where the higher the indicator's value, the less protected are the human rights and the rule of law in the country. On the other hand, we derive the depended variable (Y) from the 'Trading Economics' database where the *Corruption Perceptions Index* ranks countries and territories based on how corrupt their public sector is perceived to be. A country or territory's score indicates the perceived level of public sector corruption on a scale of 0 (highly corrupt) to 100 (very clean). Hence, the following data for the X and Y variables for 2022 displayed in Table 1 are provided in order to construct a linear regression model.

Table 1. Given Values for X Variables (Human Rights and Rule of Law Index) and Y Variables (Corruption Perceptions Index) for 2022 and Estimated Values for Computing the Regression Coefficients

EU Candidate Country	X	Y	X*Y	X ²	Y ²
Macedonia	2.70	39	105.3	7.29	1521
Serbia	3.60	38	136.8	12.96	1444
Montenegro	3.20	46	147.2	10.24	2116
Turkey	8.10	38	307.8	65.61	1444
Albania	3.30	35	115.5	10.89	1225
Total Values Estimated:	20.9	196	812.6	106.99	7750

Based on the estimated values for computing the regression coefficients, we have calculated:

²⁸ "Albania Corruption Index," Trading Economics, December 2022, <https://tradingeconomics.com/turkey/corruption-index>.

$$\bar{X} = \frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n X_i = \frac{20.9}{5} = 4.18$$

$$\bar{Y} = \frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n Y_i = \frac{196}{5} = 39.2$$

$$SS_{XX} = \sum_{i=1}^n X_i^2 - \frac{1}{n} \left(\sum_{i=1}^n X_i \right)^2 = 106.99 - 20.9^2/5 = 19.628$$

$$SS_{YY} = \sum_{i=1}^n Y_i^2 - \frac{1}{n} \left(\sum_{i=1}^n Y_i \right)^2 = 7750 - 196^2/5 = 66.79999999999999$$

$$SS_{XY} = \sum_{i=1}^n X_i Y_i - \frac{1}{n} \left(\sum_{i=1}^n X_i \right) \left(\sum_{i=1}^n Y_i \right) = 812.6 - 20.9 \times 196/5 = -6.679999999999999$$

Therefore, the regression coefficients (the slope m , and the y-intercept n) are obtained as follows:

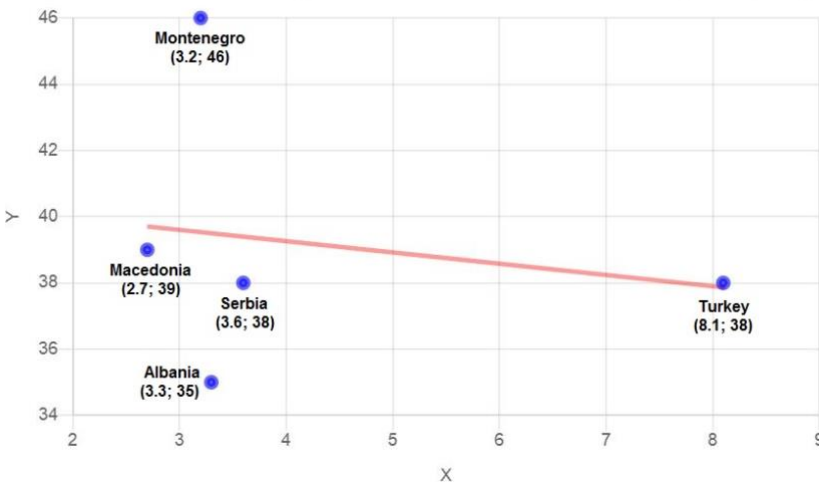
$$m = \frac{SS_{XY}}{SS_{XX}} = \frac{-6.679999999999999}{19.628} = -0.3403$$

$$n = \bar{Y} - \bar{X} \cdot m = 39.2 - 4.18 \times (-0.3403) = 40.6226$$

We find that the regression equation is: **$Y=40.6226-0.3403X$** . Based on the information provided above, the following scatter plot and regression plot are obtained:

Figure 11. Scatter Plot of the Influence of Human Rights and Rule of Law on Corruption regarding Selected EU Candidate Countries

The Influence of Human Rights and the Rule of Law on Corruption (2022)



The scatter plot displays the regression line sloping downwards, portraying the

negative relationship between X and Y, where as the X values increase, the Y values tend to decrease by a constant amount – the larger the Human Rights and Rule of Law Index score, the smaller the Corruption Perceptions Index score. However, remembering that the Human Rights and Rule of Law Index is manifested upon the scale of 0 (high) to 10 (low), the “higher” the Human Rights and Rule of Law index score, the higher the Corruption Perceptions Index score. The negative relationship obtained amounts to the majority of EU candidate countries manifesting “high” scores regarding the Human Rights and Rule of Law index. Regarding potential measurement errors, we identify the two closest points to the regression line, those being Turkey (8.1; 38) and Macedonia (2.7; 39), as well as the two farthest points from the regression line, those being Montenegro (3.2; 46) and Albania (3.3; 35), respectively.

8. Conclusions and recommendations

The growing divergence between EU standards and the initial level of preparedness in candidate countries particularly concerns conditionality relating to democracy and the rule of law, with older member states being concerned about the consequences of prematurely admitting countries with insufficient levels of compliance.²⁹ In these conditions, the overall ability of law enforcement and the judicial system to uphold the rule of law is profoundly undermined.³⁰ To prevent further democratic decline, the EU needs to sharpen its focus on monitoring the aspiring members on their paths to stable and prosperous democracies governed by the rule of law.³¹ One useful strategy that the Western Balkan countries can use for tackling the challenges related to their EU membership is regional cooperation.³² When investigating illicit crimes in the Balkans, for instance, given that the proceeds of kleptocracy are transferred abroad, beyond the reach of local law enforcement, and laundered, the use of settlement responses may be extended to negotiated arrangements with alleged kleptocrats suspected of laundering the proceeds of grand corruption.³³

Concerning the respect for human rights, we illustrate corporate human rights as an example where although the EU can remove some regarding obstacles, it cannot compel prosecutors to prioritize corporate human rights violations – only states can do so.³⁴ This consequentially results in providing Western Balkan citizens with the density

²⁹ Natasha Wunsch, *EU Enlargement and Civil Society in the Western Balkans: From Mobilisation to Empowerment* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 22.

³⁰ Andi Hoxhaj, “The EU Rule of Law Initiative towards the Western Balkans,” *Hague Journal on the Rule of Law* 13 (November 2020): 22-23.

³¹ Marko Kmezić, “Recalibrating the EU’s Approach to the Western Balkans,” *European View* 19, no.1 (April 2020): 56.

³² E. Dionysiou, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

³³ Aine Clancy, “A Better Deal? Negotiated Responses to the Proceeds of Grand Corruption,” *Criminal Law Forum* 33, no.2 (April 2022): 149, 151.

³⁴ Cedric Ryngaert, “Accountability for Corporate Human Rights Abuses: Lessons from the Possible Exercise of Dutch National Criminal Jurisdiction over Multinational Corporations,” *Criminal Law Forum* 29, no.1 (August 2017): 22.

of criminal justice provisions at the EU level, both legislative and institutional,³⁵ which only confirms that EU member states indeed matter in the theoretical and analytical debates concerning integration and governance.³⁶ Otherwise, skepticism about law and legal agents creates the risk of developing “legal cynicism” – the concept which focus on what happens in communities where individuals are distrustful of law and legal institutions.³⁷

Moreover, major multinational corporations operating from countries around the world continue to be implicated in bribery, contract manipulation, and other acts of corporate corruption.³⁸ Only by ensuring that individual public officeholders remain accountable and mutually answerable for their conduct can the threat of political corruption is meaningfully addressed.³⁹ To support and enhance efforts to fight corruption at lower levels, binding international juridical oversight must also be established by Western Balkan countries. Supranational judicial mechanisms are necessary to prosecute individuals and entities violating established norms on corruption when nations are unable to carry out such prosecutions; such mechanisms could also ensure the effective adjudication of cases of corruption at the international level that escape from or fall between national jurisdictions, or that involve multinational corporations, international criminal syndicates or other transnational actors that may be difficult for any one nation to prosecute.⁴⁰

Simultaneously, the Western Balkans should expect that the bar for accession has been set higher and it is accompanied by a greater scrutiny of applicants throughout the accession process.⁴¹ Nevertheless, it is to be hoped that the obtained results would serve as a guide to EU candidate countries’ policymakers and attempt to accomplish development of improved and more advanced progress regarding human rights and rule of law manifestations as parallel to the fight against corruption.

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³⁶ Simon Bulmer and Christian Lequesne, “The European Union and its Member States: An Overview,” in *The Member States of the European Union*, ed. Simon Bulmer and Christian Lequesne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 4.

³⁷ Ioana Sendroiu, Ron Levi and John Hagan, “Legal Cynicism and System Avoidance: Roma Marginality in Central and Eastern Europe,” *Social Forces* 101, no.1 (September 2022): 285.

³⁸ Tomáš Diviák and Nicholas Lord, “From Text to Ties: Extraction of Corruption Network Data from Deferred Prosecution Agreements,” *Data & Policy* 5 (January 2023): 2.

³⁹ Paul M. Heywood, “Can Focusing on the Ethics of Public Office Address the Challenge of Contemporary Political Corruption?,” *The Review of Politics* 84, no.4 (Spring 2023): 1.

⁴⁰ Augusto Lopez-Carlos, Arthur L. Dahl and Maja Groff, *Corruption as a Destroyer of Prosperity and the Need for International Enforcement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 408.

⁴¹ E. Dionysiou, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

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