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CHAPTER 4

The Unknown Knowns of the Just Green Transitions: A Meta-Governance Approach for a Possible Enlargement of the European Union

Yahya Shaker

4.1 Introduction

As the future of Europe undergoes crucial transitions (European Commission, 2019), this chapter delves into the pivotal role of Just Green Transitions (JGT) at the nexus of European Union enlargement and the accession of the Western Balkans. These expected transitions are vital for integrating the Western Balkans into the European Union (Berisha, 2025a). Anchored by the European Green Deal (EGD) and the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans (GAWB) (European Commission, 2020a, European Commission, 2020c; European Commission, 2023), the chapter highlights the intricate challenges of conceptualising, operationalising, and advancing the JGT within a region marked by diverse governance structures and varying institutional capacities. Through a Meta-Governance perspective (Jessop, 2011), the chapter examines what the EU can offer the Western Balkans and how the region serves as a critical pivot in realising a unified European vision (Berisha, 2025a, b). The aims of this chapter are threefold. Firstly, it explores the intersection between the Western Balkans' transition towards carbon neutrality and their paths to EU accession. Secondly, it argues for the notion of a Meta-Governance approach to navigate the complexities of a macro-regional transition, ensuring no state is left behind. Finally, the chapter sheds light on the geopolitical dimension of the JGT within the broader context of EU enlargement, emphasising the

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interconnectedness of institutional reforms inherent in aligning the Western Balkans' accession with the European Green Deal. The chapter is structured as follows: the first section establishes the linkage between the EU's enlargement strategies and the European Green Deal. The second section focuses on the geopolitical dimensions of the Just Green Transitions and their impacts on possible EU macro-regional integration. The third section introduces a Meta-Governance framework as a strategic tool for advancing both the JGT and EU accession goals. By addressing these interconnected themes, the chapter provides a holistic perspective on the transformative potential of the Just Green Transitions in shaping the future of the Western Balkans in the European Union.

4.2 A European Deal or a European Union Deal

The European Union—and not only—has been facing waves of compound crises. In particular, the Balkans is one of the most affected European regions, not only when it comes to the impacts of climate change (European Commission, 2020c). Simultaneous geopolitical, climatic, and economic challenges have affected the European Union's strategic partnerships (Bonomi, 2021) and its enlargement plans (European Commission, 2022). Simultaneously to the global pandemic, the European Commission introduced its European Green Deal, a once-in-a-lifetime transnational roadmap (IEA, 2021) and a geopolitical and geo-economic continental agenda (Leonard et al., 2021) pivoting on a transnational twinned transition which ought to be green, just, inclusive, fair (European Commission, 2019), and now also became competitive (European Commission, 2024b).

This continental agenda aims to forge institutional reform, which not only the Member States are required to undertake but also the Candidate States,[1] including the Western Balkans[2] (European Commission, 2020c) and is aligned with the New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans (European Commission, 2023) and the long-standing interest in enlarging the EU towards the East.

[1] See the Council conclusions on Enlargement, 17 December 2024, the 2024 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy (Council of the European Union, 2024). See also the speech (2024b) at the Interparliamentary Conference for CFSP and the CSDP—Europe and the countries wishing to join the EU, 09.09 2024. Candidate Countries in 2024: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kosovo, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Türkiye, and Ukraine.

[2] On the Spectre of the Balkans, see the reading of Žižek (1999). In this contribution, the term Western Balkans refers to a geo-political neologism used by the European Union referring to six countries formed during the collapse of The Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, located in Southern and Eastern Europe in the Balkan area: Republic of Albania (*Republika e Shqipërisë*), Bosnia and Herzegovina (*Bosna i Hercegovina*), Republic of Kosovo (*Republika e Kosovës; Република Косово*), Montenegro (*Црна Гора*), Republic of North Macedonia (*Република Северна Македонија*), and Republic of Serbia *(Република Србија*).

Its Reform Agenda has been aligned with the objectives of both the European Green Deal and the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans (European Commission, 2020a; European Commission, 2020c; European Commission, 2023), mobilising European funds for a "Green Transition" and a "Just Transition" (European Commission, 2019). On July 1st, 2021, the European Commission put into action the Just Transition Mechanism (JTM), aiming at leaving no person nor region behind and accompanying the Member States in preparing their Territorial Just Transition Plans targeting the most vulnerable carbon-dependent regions (European Commission, 2021). Within the framework of the JTM, both the Member States and the Candidate Countries—with their different spatial governance and planning systems (Berisha et al., 2021; Faludi, 2012; Nadin et al., 2018)—are still trying to conceptualise, operationalise, and implement the so-called Just Green Transitions while facing the predicament of not having completely agreed upon this conceptual compound terminology (Shaker & Berisha, 2024, 2025).

To achieve these transitions, the European Commission has been intensively investing and coordinating between the Member States, financing the transitions of the Candidate Countries, and creating agreements with the EU Neighbours included in its Enlargement Packages of the European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations (European Commission, 2020b; European Commission, 2024c). Accordingly, several economic packages, political measurements, and reform support are in course, including the NextGenerationEU, the JTM, the Fit-for-55 package, the REPowerEU plan, the EU Reform Agenda, and the New EU Strategy for the Potential Enlargement of the European Union (European Parliament, 2021). Yet, there is still no common agreement on the definition of the Just Green Transitions (Shaker & Beirsha, 2024; Shaker & Persico, 2024). This deal, thus, represents an ambitious masterplan for the WB not only to address long-lasting socio-economic issues while trying to achieve carbon neutrality through the utilisation of the Just Transition Fund but, most importantly, it presents an opportunity both for macro-regional cohesiveness and a strategy for an institutional reform possibly leading to the accession to the EU. Meaning that this "deal" could be strategically utilised as a path towards a macro-regional integrative social vision, advocating for fairness and inclusivity to ensure that all vulnerable populations within the WB could truly benefit together from the transitions as one macro-region while *leaving no one nor region behind* (European Commission, 2019). As no one-size-fits-all, the Green Agenda of the Western Balkans (European Commission, 2020a) not only represents one foundational step towards the region's prospective integration but also a complementary strategic chess piece to the accession through the alignment with the EGD. Consequently, the Western Balkans are adapting to the European Green Deal objectives while tailoring a more suitable fit for their societal, political, and geopolitical contexts (Tahirović, 2024). The intersection of the two objectives—achieving the so-called JGT while simultaneously

advancing the EU's enlargement—brings to the fore the geopolitical complexities entangled within the EGD, which is expected to be just, inclusive, and without leaving no person or region behind (European Commission, 2019), especially in a region characterised by complex (geo)political interests and (geo)economic disparities (Bieri, 2015). Borrowing from critical theory and political philosophy, without delving into the ontological, philological, and axiological polylemma of what are the *Balkans* and what are the *Western Balkans*, this chapter is building upon Slavoj Žižek's theorisation on the "*unknown knowns*" (2006) and *The Spectre of the Balkans* (1999), highlighting the cultural identity, strategic, and geopolitical value of the Balkan region as one fundamental missing pillar—or a phantom limb of European Union—to the full integration and cohesion of the European Union; culturally, politically, geographically, and geopolitically. In an analogy to Kennedy's proposition (Mehltretter, 2009), this chapter looks at what the Western Balkans can offer for the EU or whether the EU can lead the Just Green Transitions in the Western Balkans (Prelec et al., 2023), but rather what the EU can offer the Western Balkans and whether the Balkan Region, in turn, is one pivotal as the geopolitical region of the European Green Deal. Following this introductory section, The following one aims to find an association between the transitions of the Western Balkans in terms of European integration and accession to the European Union and their paths towards the so-called Just Green Transitions, while the third one advocates for a Meta-Governance approach for the transitions both to a carbon-neutral and an EU future for the Western Balkans.

4.3 The Geopolitical Dimension of the Just Green Transitions

Transition is an ambiguous terminology in social and political sciences (Škuflić, 2010. The EU Twin Transitions (European Commission, 2019) pivot on the security of energy. Their realisation has become the nucleus of the current global geopolitical environment (Najetović, 2024) and depends on the formation of global energy alliances, which both are influencing the ongoing accession processes of the Western Balkans into the European Union (Tziarras, 2019). The process of accessing new Members to the European Union is determined by the candidate Countries' institutional capacities (Abramowitz et al., 2011) to reform (Stanicek et al., 2023). Following the 2019 global pandemic emergency and its consecutive Energy and Food crises of 2022, the European Green Deal became the EU First Agenda (Almeida et al., 2023) for the Member States and the Western Balkans to progress key institutional reforms (European Commission, 2020b) required for the enlargement (European Commission, 2024c) and possibly another aspiration to join the EU block. The idea of joining the Western block following the fall of Yugoslavia has been subject to sociopolitical, geopolitical, and territorial governance entanglements in the Balkans (Berisha et al., 2018, 2024; Oberschall, 1996),

which all have been highly influenced by identity projections (Hayden, 2012), ideological impositions, and Westernisation metonymicity (Tsaroucha, 2019), which all might have contributed to counteractive and retroactive bifurcation of the Balkan region from the rest of the Western world (Jukić, 2013). It is worth mentioning that it has been over a quarter of a century since the great expectations for EU stability and the WB's eventual accession to the EU have been first discussed (Steil & Woodward, 1999). Fifteen years passed, and the Paris Climate Deal 2015 (Ratha, 2019) offered room for new opportunities for EU accession through common Climate Change Policies tying the Western Balkans to the EU (Cierco Gomes, 2019). The term *Just Green Transitions* (JGT) remains an emerging and not yet widely established notion within either European Union policy discourse or academic literature. Positioned as a *meta-concept*—a synthesis of existing concepts and a concept of concepts (Shaker & Persico, 2024)—it is intended to capture the multi-perspectival and pluralistic nature of transitions across diverse socio-spatial-temporal contexts (Levin-Keitel et al., 2018). Unlike the terminological and conceptual paradigms of the *Green Transition* and the *Just Transition*, the Just Green Transitions, as an umbrella term, extends far beyond the separate yet connected policy constructs, offering a Meta-Governance (Jessop, 2011) perspective that acknowledges the interconnected, multi-layered, and simultaneous dynamics of change. JGT, therefore, emerges as an adaptive and integrative paradigm capable of addressing the complexities and inequities inherent in the ongoing processes of ecological and societal transitions/transformations (Shaker & Berisha, 2024, 2025). Putting into perspective both the possible geopolitical implications of the EGD and the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans (GAWB) (European Commission, 2020a), it is crucial to encompass the potential for the EU enlargement towards the East and the multifaceted dimensions of integrating the WB into the EGD ambitions. However, conceptualising, operationalising, and advancing the JGT present major challenges (Ignjatović et al., 2024) due to the sociopolitical, economic, and territorial governance specificities and varying levels of institutional capacities within the region (Berisha & Cotella, 2021). In a context where the EU strategies and deals go beyond the EU borders (Lavenex &Schimmelfennig, 2009), it could be argued that geopolitics is momentous in the attainment of the European Green Deal (EGD) (Official Journal of the European Union, 2022) and thus, current internal and external geopolitical interests in the Eastern Regions could shuffle the geopolitical landscapes and put governance models, frameworks, and decision-making processes to the test (European Commission, 2022). Both the European Green Deal and its twin transitions—inevitably—are forecasted to have a sociopolitical and geopolitical influence on the enlargement of the European Union (Official Journal of the European Union, 2022), not only at a transnational scale but at a macro-regional one as well.

The EU's rivalry in the clean energy space race (Official Journal of the European Union, 2022) aiming to make Europe the first climate-neutral

continent (European Commission, 2019) is retroactively, retrospectively, and consequently re-establishing not only the speed, the geographic and [geo]political direction of the transitions (Scholten et al., 2019) but rather the level playing field (Borrell, 2023) of the global governance and its transitions. Viewing the EGD from an EU foreign and regional development perspective (Teevan et al., 2021), the geopolitical dimension of the JGT (Shaker & Persico, 2024) is thus becoming almost undetachable from the concepts of European territorial fragmentation (Sharpe, 1989) and the territorial phantom limbs (Billé, 2014) meaning that both the climatic and the geo-economic spatiality of the Deal goes beyond the territoriality of the European Union. In the case of the Balkan region—where a definition is beyond linguistic complexity, but both geographically and even more so geopolitically (Tahirović, 2024)—the path to the European Union (Dabrowski & Myachenkova, 2018) has been a constant topic on the European Council's agenda since 2009 (Anghel, 2020). It is, however, somehow interesting to observe the paradigm shift from Balkanisation towards Europeanisation (Jano, 2008), especially when, for the first time in European politics, adding the term *Western* to a political terminology counteracts the notion of Westernisation, the Western world, and Western Europe (Liridon, 2023). Semantically, one might argue that the term Western, in the Balkan case, might have been deliberately acting as a geopolitical identity inhibitor, identifying the last six states that have not yet joined the union away from Western Europe's cultural and political identity. Instead, in this context, the term Western indicated literally where these states are geographically located in the Balkan Peninsula. Logically, one might as well wonder, but what about Slovenia and Croatia, since their accession in 2004 and the latter in 2013, are no longer conceptually associated with the WB (Hayden, 2012; Liridon, 2023). These quasi-esoteric geo (graphical, political, social, economic) realities and their definition denote an issue of ideological antagonism (Žižek, 1999). One could also question this neologism "Western Balkans" (Vienna European Council, 1998), with its terminological implications and identity contrast from the term Balkans, which might present not only a strategic geopolitical chessboard predicament (Bieber &Tzifakis„ 2019) for various local realities having been reshaped over and over by global players' interests making the geopolitical game in this region particularly intricate. Mainly, the coining of this term (Dabrowski & Myachenkova, 2018) and its continuous use is paradoxically one main issue that might have been causing more avulsion than twinning, for it might have ideologically differentiating the Western Balkans from the rest of the Balkan Region (Liridon, 2023).

4.4 Towards a Meta-Governance Approach to the Just Green Transitions

The most pressing issue regarding the Just Green Transitions is how to govern these transitions, not only at the level of the Member States but also at the level of the Candidate Countries that are aiming to join the European Union within its Enlargement Plan (European Commission, 2024c) within its Western Partnership (European Commission, 2020b). Within the EU Multi-level Territorial Governance model (Faludi, 2012), the operationalisation processes can barely have all the necessary socio-territorial and institutional policy mixes (Zepa & Hoffmann, 2023) and (macro)regional capacities to govern energy transitions (Van Dijk et al., 2022) for advancing such ambitious transitional territorial strategies across various vertical and horizontal multi-level, multi-actor, and multi-sectoral institutional dynamics (Cotella et al., 2021) that reflect the various realities experienced by individuals, societies, communities, and regions. Moreover, the coordination and decision-making of the JGT at the transnational, national, and subnational levels are quite challenging (Pisano et al., 2014) due to the variety of the existing socio-territorial models, institutional and administrative traditions and technical and political cultures of the Member States. This issue becomes even more complex when added to the enlargement of the Eastern Neighbours (European Commission, 2024b) and their various Territorial Governance and Planning Systems (Cotella & Toto, 2021). Since the EGD extends beyond EU borders (Walker, 2024), emphasising partnerships to achieve climate neutrality for the Western Balkans, beyond the place-sensitive governance complexities (Cotella &Toto, 2021), a Meta-Governance approach (Jessop, 2011) of holistic, adaptive, flexible, and inclusive intergovernmental structure (Fratianni, 2003) and multilateral, regional cooperation (Tahirović, 2024) for advancing the Western Balkans' accession to the European Union through the European Green Deal might offer a possible governance path both to realise the Just Green Transitions and achieve the full accession to the EU. This contribution is thus arguing that a Meta-Governance framework forging a real-time (Meuleman, 2022) (Fig. 4.1).

Intergovernmental macro-regionalisation (Gänzle &Kern, 2016) framework corresponding to the New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans and bridging both the EGD and the GAWB through strengthening vertical and horizontal coordination across scales, sectors, actors, and levels of decision-making, and homogenising a strategic alignment on the accession of the rest of the Balkan countries to the EU (European Commission, 2023), could offer a more holistic governance mechanism for a macro-regional accession project. This meta approach could offer room to align the conceptualisation of the GAWB at various operationalisation levels:

- Environmental and climate directives and regulations (Knez et al., 2022),



Fig. 4.1 The Balkan, the Western Balkans, and Europe. (*Source*) author's own elaboration

- Trans-sectoral decarbonisation targets in the different WB countries (Jovanović et al., 2024), (c) Transnationally coordinating macro-regional energy governance (Cotella & Toto, 2021; Valkenburg & Cotella, 2016),
- Coordinating and monitoring the essential institutional reforms required for the alignment with the EU (European Commission, 2023),
- Ensuring that no country nor Balkan community should be left behind during the accession.

In other words, a macro-regional governance twinning process includes all the WB states under one regional accession to the European Union.

4.5 Conclusions

This contribution started with deconstructing the European Green Deal and its relevance to the European Regions, especially the Balkans. Followed by framing and debugging the undefined meta-concept of the so-called Just Green Transitions and their interconnectivity to both the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans and their relevance for possible accession to the

European Union. The chapter then examined the geopolitical dynamics underpinning both the EU's JGT and its enlargement policy, particularly towards the Western Balkans. This chapter discussed how the Meta-Governance could influence the political, social, and economic integration of the Western Balkans through a macro-regional Just Green Transition and advocating for a meta-conceptual approach, which recognises the multiplicity, simultaneity (Shaker & Berisha, 2024), diversity, and complexity of the transitions and emphasises the role of Spatial Planning and Territorial Governance (Berisha & Cotella, 2021; Berisha et al., 2021; Nadin et al., 2018) in achieving both institutional integration and accession and carbon neutrality. The chapter concludes that the Just Green Transitions, as envisioned in the European Green Deal, offer a viable framework for the Western Balkans' integration into the EU, but only if they are accompanied by a tailored meta-governance approach that addresses the macro-regional challenges and opportunities included in the Western Balkan' Green Agendas. By adopting a meta-governance approach into the broader framework of institutional reform, the Western Balkans would successfully navigate the internal challenges and take a step towards the expected EU enlargement (European Commission, 2024c).

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