

## WASTE MANAGEMENT AS A DRIVER OF EUROPEAN INTEGRATION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

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**Abstract.** *This article examines how waste management functions as an overlooked yet consequential driver of European integration in the Western Balkans. Although the region faces chronic deficiencies in waste infrastructure, regulatory enforcement, and public environmental awareness, these challenges intersect directly with EU accession requirements, particularly under Chapter 27 of the acquis. Drawing on neofunctionalism, Europeanisation theory, and environmental-governance perspectives, the article argues that waste management generates functional spillovers, administrative alignment, and cross-border cooperation that advance integration even when political progress stalls. Looking at projects such as the transboundary cooperation on the Drina river or the Vinča landfill's modernisation, waste governance represents a strategic entry point for deepening Europeanisation in the Western Balkans, reinforcing regional cooperation, and supporting the long-term credibility of the EU enlargement process.*

**Keywords:** *European integration, Western Balkans, Waste Management, Environmental governance*

### 1. INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

European integration has long been understood as a multidimensional process shaped not only by political and economic developments but also by functional cooperation in sectors that create interdependence among states. Environmental governance has increasingly emerged as one such area, especially in the context of the European Union's evolving climate and sustainability agenda. For the Western Balkans, comprising Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia, environmental challenges are particularly acute and structurally intertwined with the region's accession trajectory. Among these challenges, waste management stands out as a domain where domestic shortcomings, regional spillovers, and EU expectations intersect in ways that make the field both a pressure point and a potential catalyst for deeper integration.

Waste generation has grown steadily as urbanization, consumption patterns, and economic activity have increased. Yet waste management systems have not kept pace with these developments, resulting in chronic reliance on landfilling, widespread illegal dumping, rudimentary and even inexistent recycling practices, and insufficient institutional oversight. These deficiencies have severe consequences for environmental quality, public health, and the region's economic prospects, while also creating transboundary effects that directly affect neighbouring states and EU member countries. As a result, waste management has become a domain where the need for coordinated

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action is not theoretical but immediate and observable. At the same time, the EU has significantly strengthened its environmental acquis in recent years, culminating in the European Green Deal and its associated frameworks aimed at achieving climate neutrality, advancing a circular economy, and reducing pollution.

Because the EU enlargement process requires alignment with the acquis, environmental reforms, especially in waste management, form a core component of the Western Balkans' accession efforts. This creates both obligations and opportunities: while states must undertake costly and complex reforms, they are also supported by EU funding, technical assistance, and participation in regional mechanisms that build administrative capacity and foster cooperation.

This article examines how waste management can function as a strategically relevant yet underestimated driver of European integration in the Western Balkans. It aims to show how environmental pressures can create functional incentives for cooperation and how real-life initiatives such as a river-basin clean-up collaboration or the modernisation of a dangerous landfill, can deliver results even where other reform areas stall. Although the region faces persistent deficits in waste infrastructure, regulatory enforcement, and public environmental awareness, these challenges intersect directly with EU accession obligations. The study's scope includes all six Western Balkan countries and focuses on how environmental pressures, EU conditionality, and cross-border ecological interdependence shape alignment with EU standards.

The objectives of the article are to identify how waste management generates functional spillovers, encourages administrative Europeanisation, and fosters regional environmental cooperation. The guiding hypothesis is that waste governance serves as a practical entry point for European integration, advancing institutional alignment and cooperation even when political progress is limited. The study draws on both quantitative and qualitative data from academic literature, EU reports, regional data sources, and two illustrative case studies: the Drina River clean-up initiatives and the redevelopment of Serbia's Vinča landfill. The utility of this research lies in highlighting how the environmental sector, especially waste management can offer tangible pathways for supporting the EU accession process. Waste management emerges not as a peripheral issue, but as a strategically important component of the region's European trajectory.

## **2. THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

Understanding the relevance of waste management to European integration in the Western Balkans requires situating the issue within broader theories of regional cooperation and EU enlargement. Three perspectives are particularly useful: neofunctionalism and its concept of spillover, institutionalist accounts of administrative Europeanisation, and the role of environmental governance in generating interdependence. Together, these frameworks help explain why technical policy areas can become significant drivers of integration.

Neofunctionalism, one of the foundational theories of European integration, argues that cooperation in one sector can generate spillover effects that gradually extend integration into adjacent policy areas and institutions (Dunn, 2012). Integration often begins in domains that are non-political and administrative, but as the web of interdependencies grow, states face pressures to coordinate more broadly and the process itself becomes transformative and integrative (Niemann et al., 2019). Waste management fits this logic closely. It is a technical and heavily regulated sector, marked by strong cross-border externalities: inadequate disposal in one country can degrade rivers, soil,

and air across the entire region. Such problems cannot be addressed through unilateral action alone and therefore create incentives for shared standards, joint monitoring, and forms of delegated authority, just like the dynamics neofunctionalism identifies as functional spillover. In the Western Balkans, these pressures appear in the need for interoperable waste-management systems, cross-border environmental monitoring, and alignment with EU directives. Although the states in the region are not yet EU members, participation in pre-accession instruments links them to EU rules and administrative practices. Waste management thus becomes more than an environmental obligation: it functions as a process channel through which political and administrative ties with the EU deepen over time.

Another useful analytical perspective the concept of Europeanization, which describes how EU rules and practices become embedded in non-member states focusing on their effects on domestic policy and politics (Radaelli, 2003). Europeanization can be easily visible in the environmental sector because the EU *acquis* is extensive, highly technical, and requires strong administrative capacities for implementation. In the Western Balkans, states must not only transpose EU directives into national legislation but also build or adapt institutions capable of enforcing them: environmental agencies, inspectorates, and municipal waste services. Despite showing commitment in aligning with the EU's environment *acquis*, there are serious delays and incontestable need for action (Belis et al., 2024). Waste management can operate as an entry point for administrative Europeanization, embedding EU governance practices into domestic structures and creating lasting forms of cooperation that support the broader accession process. These reforms can produce integrative effects well before accession. Civil servants adopt EU terminology, planning instruments, and procedural routines; municipalities work with external experts and EU bodies; and regulatory expectations increasingly resemble those in member states.

A third conceptual perspective centres on environmental governance as a driver of cross-border cooperation and European Integration (L. M. Brown, n.d.). Ecological challenges, particularly those involving air, water, and waste, do not conform to territorial boundaries and therefore can incentivize states to participate in joint solutions. This is especially true in regions with shared river basins, connected ecosystems, or overlapping pollution pathways, all of which characterize the Western Balkans. In this framework, waste is understood as part of a broader ecological system in which actions in one country produce consequences for others. Floating waste in rivers, landfill fires that release airborne toxins, and cross-border illegal waste trafficking all create interdependence that cannot be addressed by unilateral solutions. These dynamics necessitate cooperative governance arrangements that facilitate information exchange, shared monitoring, capacity building, and coordinated infrastructure planning. Because waste management is technocratic and materially grounded, it can be less susceptible to nationalist rhetoric or political obstruction. This resilience makes the environmental sector one of the few domains in which consistent regional progress is possible, even when political relations fluctuate.

Bringing these theoretical strands together, several characteristics make waste management particularly suitable as a driver of European integration. It is a technocratic rather than ideologically charged issue, making it less vulnerable to political obstruction. Its impacts can be immediately visible, giving citizens a clear sense of the benefits of reform. Waste management can also have the power to generate natural spillover effects,

necessitating cooperation across related sectors such as water, public health and municipal governance. It also requires long term financial and administrative planning, which aligns domestic processes with EU standards. Moreover, it can build cross border cooperation, reinforcing regional stability and interdependence. These characteristics explain why waste management has emerged as one of the few environmental sectors where the Western Balkans engage in regional cooperation platforms, participate in joint projects, and mobilize EU resources effectively.

### **3. WASTE MANAGEMENT IN THE WESTERN BALKANS: STRUCTURAL CHALLENGES AND REGIONAL DYNAMICS**

Waste management in the Western Balkans reflects a combination of historical legacies, economic constraints, and institutional shortcomings that collectively differentiate the region from most EU member states. While progress has been made over the last two decades, the sector continues to face systemic obstacles ranging from inadequate infrastructure, lack of data, to weak enforcement of environmental regulations, calling for more cooperation inside the region (Belis et al., 2024:59). This section examines these challenges in greater depth, situating them within broader regional patterns while highlighting the ways in which they intersect with European integration processes.

The contemporary waste-management landscape in the Western Balkans cannot be fully understood without acknowledging the region's political and economic trajectory. The dissolution of Yugoslavia and subsequent conflicts of the 1990s created severe disruptions to public administration, environmental services, and municipal governance. This historical context resulted in an infrastructure deficit in numerous domains, among them the environmental sector. As a result, the Western Balkans entered the EU accession process with far weaker environmental systems than most previous enlargement rounds. This context has shaped the pace and complexity of reforms in the waste sector and has amplified the importance of EU assistance.

Waste management typically involves a broad range of stakeholders: environmental ministries, public utilities, inspectorates, local governments, inter-municipal companies, and private contractors. As it can be seen in the Revised Action Plan for Implementation of the Sofia Declaration on the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans between 2025-2030, there is a tremendous amount of work and harmonisation left to implement. As stipulated in the revision of pillar 2, the Balkan 6 should adopt Extended Producer Responsibility schemes, align with the minimum standards of the EU Waste Framework Directive, adopt Waste Management Plans with targets and investments in line with the waste hierarchy, raise consumer awareness, aim to stop using single-use plastics, and set up monitoring mechanisms (Regional Cooperation Council, 2025).

One of the defining features of waste management in the Western Balkans is the heavy reliance on landfilling as the primary disposal method. Despite EU requirements to reduce landfill dependency and increase recycling and waste-prevention measures, most Western Balkan countries continue to send the majority of their municipal waste to landfills—many of which fail to meet EU environmental standards (European Environment Agency, 2022). The region faces several interconnected problems such as: insufficient sanitary landfills, overflowing and non-compliant disposal sites, illegal and unregulated dumpsites and very limited recycling infrastructure (European Environment Agency, 2022). This infrastructure deficit reflects decades of underinvestment, but it also

highlights the scale of the reforms required to align with EU standards. The construction of regional landfills, transfer stations, sorting lines, and recycling facilities demands substantial financial resources, mostly beyond the budgets of local governments. This financial dependency reinforces the necessity of EU funding mechanisms such as the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance, underlining once again the integrative function of environmental governance.

Waste management reforms also face economic and societal challenges. Municipal waste fees are often too low to cover operational costs, leading to chronic underfunding of public utilities (European Environment Agency, 2022). In many Western Balkan countries, trust in public institutions remains relatively low (Balkan Barometer 2024. Public Opinion, 2024:73), so citizens would often be reluctant to pay higher fees for services they perceive as inefficient or coming from unreliable sources. Furthermore, public perception of environmental issues remains low, with a significant portion of the population perceiving them at the bottom of the list of concerns (Balkan Barometer 2024. Public Opinion, 2024:15). If inquired directly about environmental issues, most respondents' concerns were related to air and water pollution, followed by poor waste management, especially in Kosovo, North Macedonia and Serbia (Balkan Barometer 2024. Public Opinion, 2024:69).

While awareness campaigns have been implemented across the region, survey data indicate that household waste separation is gravely lagging behind not only compared to European standards, but also to the rest of the world. Kosovo, Montenegro, and Albania rank among the top ten countries globally where respondents report not separating household waste before disposal (World Risk Poll 2024 Report, 2024:12). Furthermore, Kosovo, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and North Macedonia are all listed among the top eight countries where waste is collected but not separated at the source (World Risk Poll 2024 Report, 2024:33). These attitudinal and economic barriers highlight another reason why waste management is relevant to the European integration process: successful reforms require engagement with civil society, private sector actors, and local communities. A multi-level engagement mirrors the participatory governance models promoted by the EU and supports the development of democratic practices in public administration.

Although each Western Balkan country faces domestic obstacles, many waste-related problems have a regional character. Rivers such as the Drina and its tributaries, transport floating waste across multiple Balkan borders, creating visible and often internationally reported environmental incidents (Petkovic, 2025). Landfill fires, often happening in illegal and corruption woven landfills such as the case in Albania's Elbasan and Vlora (Zhabina, 2025), are common in parts of the region, releasing air pollutants that can travel across national boundaries. These shared vulnerabilities reinforce the need for regional cooperation. Environmental challenges do not adhere to political borders, and unilateral solutions are often ineffective.

As such, waste management becomes a natural platform for cooperation, even among governments with political disagreements. This dynamic is particularly important in the Western Balkans, where environmental issues can serve as one of the few areas in which sustained regional collaboration is politically feasible. Cross-border vulnerabilities also increase the relevance of EU involvement. Regional environmental problems directly affect EU candidate and potential candidate states, which in turn affect the Union's own environmental resilience. Therefore, waste management gains

prominence not only as a domestic governance issue but also as a matter of regional stability and EU environmental security.

Taken together, the structural challenges of waste management in the Western Balkans—historical legacies, institutional weakness, underdeveloped infrastructure, economic constraints, and transboundary environmental risks—create a complex landscape in which domestic reforms alone are insufficient. Each of these challenges points toward the necessity of deeper cooperation, stronger institutions, and sustained financial investment. This is precisely where the European Union becomes indispensable. Waste management is not merely an environmental problem but a domain that illustrates the broader dynamics of integration, conditionality, administrative alignment, and regional interdependence.

#### **4. THE EUROPEAN UNION'S ROLE AND THE MECHANISMS OF INTEGRATION THROUGH ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY**

The European Union has long understood that environmental policy carries a heavy burden in integration. In the Western Balkans, the EU has strategically positioned waste management as a sector through which it can advance both environmental improvements and broader Europeanisation objectives. This section examines the specific mechanisms through which the EU exercises influence—conditionality, capacity-building, financial assistance, policy diffusion, and regional cooperation frameworks—and illustrates how these mechanisms make waste management an important accelerator of integration.

Environmental harmonisation is embedded in the accession process through Chapter 27 of the *acquis communautaire*, which covers environment and climate change (*European Commission*, 2012). The demands of Chapter 27 are among the most extensive and costly in the entire *acquis*, requiring candidate countries to transpose dozens of directives, implement monitoring and reporting systems, and upgrade infrastructure to EU standards. This makes the environment one of the most influential chapters in terms of shaping domestic governance. Waste management is central to this chapter, as it involves the Waste Framework Directive, the Landfill Directive, the Packaging and Waste Packaging Directive, the End-of-Life Vehicles Directive, and related regulations. For Western Balkan governments, compliance with these directives requires comprehensive legislative reforms, long-term planning, and the establishment of functional waste-management systems. Thus, environmental conditionality becomes a powerful driver of reform: governments seeking to advance in accession negotiations must demonstrate credible progress in waste legislation, enforcement, and infrastructure planning.

This dynamic is particularly significant in the Western Balkans, where progress in other policy areas can often be hampered by ideological disputes or governance shortcomings. Because waste-related risks are concrete, visible, and measurable, they can lend themselves more naturally to technocratic forms of governance and empirical assessment. For the EU, this makes waste management a reliable channel for promoting legal approximation and institutional improvements in contexts that might otherwise be politically contentious.

The EU's financial instruments constitute another major mechanism through which environmental integration advances. The Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance can be a key source of funding for environmental projects in the Western Balkans. Window 3 of the IPA III funds between 2021 and 2027 are allocated to green agenda and

sustainable connectivity with a 42% of the total funds, while window 5 is open for cross border waste and energy facilities, albeit with just 3.5% of the total operational budget (EuroAccess, n.d.). In Western Balkan countries, environmental infrastructure development would be impossible without any EU support. Municipal budgets remain constrained, and large scale waste management projects such as the construction of EU-standard landfills or sorting facilities require financial resources that far exceed local capacities. The EU's role as the principal funder not only enables these projects to occur but also ensures that they conform to EU standards. Importantly, EU financial assistance also encourages inter-municipal cooperation. Because many projects require regional coordination to be eligible for funding, local governments are incentivised to collaborate, share administrative responsibilities, and adopt integrated waste-management plans. In this way, EU funding not only builds infrastructure but also reshapes institutional relationships, strengthening multi-level governance in line with EU models.

Administrative capacity is especially relevant in the Western Balkans, where local and national institutions often struggle with weak coordination mechanisms, coherent policy proposals and lags in transparency (OECD, 2024). EU-driven capacity-building can directly address these weaknesses. By strengthening the state apparatus in ways that align with EU practices, capacity-building can contribute to the broader process of accession-preparedness. This mechanism also has the potential to reduce political resistance to reform. When civil servants and municipal managers develop competence and confidence in managing modern waste systems, they become practitioners, not merely implementers, of Europeanisation. Thus, capacity-building contributes to internalising EU norms and making reform sustainable beyond immediate accession incentives.

Because environmental challenges and potential solutions tend to be similar across borders, states in the region face comparable pressures to modernise their systems and align with EU norms. To support this, the EU has established and funded several regional cooperation platforms—including the Regional Cooperation Council, the Western Balkans Investment Framework, and the Environment and Climate Regional Accession Network through which officials can exchange best practices, coordinate reform strategies, and address common implementation challenges related to EU environmental legislation.

Over time, these mechanisms can collectively promote increasing convergence in administrative procedures, professional norms, and policy expectations across the region. The cumulative effect is a form of horizontal Europeanisation, in which Western Balkan states integrate not only through their vertical relationship with the EU but also through peer-to-peer cooperation with one another. This is a regional learning environment structured and incentivised by EU frameworks which can embed European standards more deeply and sustainably within national waste-management systems.

Another reason why the EU could favour waste management as an integrative sector is that it tends to be less politicised than issues such as minority rights, constitutional reforms, or foreign policy alignment. Environmental reforms, especially in waste, are grounded in technical, scientific, and measurable criteria, making them less vulnerable to nationalist rhetoric, identity or political obstruction. Waste management cannot be effectively reformed through symbolic gestures or rhetorical commitments; it requires measurable progress, infrastructure development, continuous financing, and regulatory enforcement. This makes it an ideal platform for embedding European norms

and practices at the core of domestic governance. Because waste systems are long-term and investment-intensive, they naturally create extended relationships between local institutions and EU counterparts. In this sense, waste management has the potential to generate a functional spillover: improvements in one area of environmental governance stimulate reforms in adjacent sectors, such as water management, industrial pollution control, public health, and municipal administration. Over time, these cumulative reforms expand the scope of Europeanisation and strengthen institutional resilience across the governance spectrum. Waste management thus becomes both a driver and a manifestation of deeper integration trends in the region.

## **5. WASTE-MANAGEMENT-DRIVEN COOPERATION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS**

This section looks at examples in which waste management that not only illustrate the environmental challenges confronting the Western Balkans but has also served as a catalyst for cooperation, administrative reform, and alignment with EU standards. While the region continues to face severe structural obstacles, there are projects which indicate that environmental pressures can drive integrative policy outcomes, supported by EU funding, technical assistance, and regional mechanisms. These examples show how environmental problems, particularly those related to waste, can generate shared interests, provide entry points for institutional cooperation, and reinforce Europeanisation processes.

### ***5.1. Transboundary Cooperation in the Drina River Basin***

The Drina River Basin, shared by Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia, represents one of the most visible and widely discussed examples of transboundary waste pollution in the Western Balkans. The river regularly accumulates large quantities of floating waste, particularly during periods of heavy rainfall and snowmelt, when a dense carpet of waste from poorly managed or illegal dumps is washed into tributaries before being carried downstream (H. Brown, 2023). Beginning in the late 2010s, the three riparian countries initiated a series of coordinated actions supported by the EU, World Bank, Global Environment Facility and the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River (World Bank, 2023). This cooperation resulted in developing a strategic action plan endorsed by the three countries in 2021, an integrated environmental monitoring system, the Drina Task Force was formed as an inter-agency for cooperation, along with small grants, pilot projects and public awareness campaign to protect the basin (World Bank, 2023).

These efforts encouraged administrative convergence with EU waste directives, particularly regarding landfill monitoring and river-basin management. The Drina case demonstrates how transboundary pollution creates unavoidable incentives for cooperation regardless of political tensions among states. It also shows how environmental crises can elevate EU involvement, reinforcing the mutual dependence that underpins European integration in the region. Although initial measures have been implemented, the river continues to experience significant amounts of floating waste, underscoring the ongoing need to advance and intensify cooperative efforts.

### ***5.2. Serbia's Vinča Landfill Redevelopment***

A second example illustrates how a project initiated by integration driven reform led to the transformation of Serbia's Vinča landfill to an energy from waste facility. For

decades, Vinča functioned as one of Europe's largest uncontrolled landfills, receiving a large portion of Belgrade's municipal waste without adequate environmental protection (Beo Čista Energija, n.d.). This project was a first of its kind in the Balkan region, as an international cooperation between public and private sectors, Serbian, Japanese and French parties, receiving financial help from the International Finance Corporation, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and also the Austrian Development Bank. Serbia's experience at Vinča demonstrates that even within politically sensitive settings, technical cooperation and regulatory alignment in the waste sector can advance both environmental outcomes and the administrative adjustments required for EU membership. Nevertheless, the project faced substantial criticism in 2019. Analysts argued that private interests ultimately outweighed longer-term sustainability goals associated with EU waste-management standards. The project's emphasis on direct waste incineration—contrary to the EU's preferred hierarchy—required amendments to the landfill's Detailed Regulation Plan to legitimise this approach (Radovanović, 2019). Moreover, Serbia's misapplication of the EU's 2009 Renewable Energy Directive, and its failure to account for the updated Renewable Energy Directive II, enabled the private operator, Beo Čista Energija, to obtain 12-year subsidies for waste incineration (Radovanović, 2019). The company was even granted temporary privileged-producer status before all legal conditions had been met, illustrating the extent to which regulatory discretion favoured the private partner.

### ***5.3. The Integrative Potential of Waste Management***

Taken together, the Drina River Basin initiatives and the Vinča landfill, show that waste management is not a peripheral or technical domain but an arena in which tangible forms of cooperation materialise. First, environmental necessity often creates political feasibility: governments find it difficult to ignore visible, transboundary harms caused by unmanaged waste, making environmental cooperation more attainable than cooperation in more politically sensitive fields. Second, EU involvement is structurally embedded throughout the process. Technical assistance, financial mechanisms, and acquis-related conditionality shape national and local policies at every stage, guiding reforms and creating incentives for long-term alignment with European standards. Municipalities gain experience with EU-compatible waste-management models, especially through the development of regional landfills and inter-municipal cooperation structures that require coordination, transparency, and technical expertise.

Finally, waste-management improvements carry significant public visibility, which contributes to democratic legitimacy. Because citizens can directly observe cleaner riverbanks, reduced illegal dumping, or improved waste-collection services, the benefits of alignment with EU norms become more concrete and tangible than in many abstract or highly technical policy areas. These case studies therefore illustrate that waste management is not only an environmental concern but also a meaningful driver of Europeanisation, capacity-building, and regional cooperation in the Western Balkans.

## **6. WHY WASTE MANAGEMENT MATTERS FOR THE FUTURE OF EUROPEAN INTEGRATION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS**

Waste management occupies a unique position within the broader landscape of European integration in the Western Balkans. Although it is sometimes viewed as a technocratic or low-politics policy area, its strategic relevance becomes clear when examined through the lens of institutional capacity-building, regional stability, public

legitimacy, and policy convergence. This section synthesises the preceding analysis to demonstrate why waste management, more than many other environmental domains, can serve as a catalyst for integration and why it will continue to shape the trajectory of EU–Western Balkans relations in the coming years.

One of the core arguments emerging from this study is that waste management serves as a litmus test for readiness to join the European Union. Unlike domains where legislative compliance alone may suffice, waste management requires the full spectrum of public-administration competencies: long-term planning, inter-municipal coordination, financial management, monitoring, enforcement, and public communication. Success in waste governance thus provides a reliable indicator of a state's institutional maturity. For the EU, this makes the waste sector a valuable diagnostic tool. Progress in implementing the Waste Framework Directive or constructing compliant landfills signals that a candidate country can plan strategically with sustainability in mind, absorb EU funds effectively, and maintain regulatory discipline.

Unlike policy areas where the benefits of Europeanisation are abstract or long-term, the waste sector can produce visible, concrete outcomes that citizens and local governments can directly experience. Improvements such as cleaner public spaces, the closure of illegal dumpsites, new recycling infrastructure, and reduced river pollution serve as material evidence of what EU alignment can deliver. This tangibility is significant in the Western Balkans, where public scepticism toward government institutions and enlargement promises remains widespread. This generates bottom-up legitimacy for the accession process, a dynamic that is often lacking in domains associated with constitutional reform, judicial restructuring, or foreign policy alignment. Waste management thus represents a rare domain where the EU's influence is simultaneously technical, political, and socially visible.

Environmental issues, including waste pollution, frequently transcend political borders and challenge traditional conceptions of sovereignty. Transboundary rivers, shared mountain ecosystems, and cross-border waste flows create pressures that no single state can resolve alone. When floating waste accumulates at the Visegrad hydropower reservoir or landfill fires in one country generate pollution that drifts across borders, governments are forced to engage in dialogue. Environmental urgency can therefore soften political resistance and create openings for pragmatic collaboration.

Waste management is not only an environmental challenge but also a pivotal component of the broader transition to a circular economy. For Western Balkan states, aligning with EU waste directives requires investments in recycling systems, extended producer responsibility schemes, green technologies, and environmental services. These reforms catalyse economic modernization, contributing to the development of new markets and employment opportunities. The shift toward circular-economy principles—such as waste prevention, reuse, and resource recovery—supports broader EU environmental strategies, including the European Green Deal. Through this alignment, Western Balkan countries gain access to European value chains, funding opportunities, and technological innovations. Waste management becomes a gateway for integrating regional economies into the EU's evolving green market model.

Municipal authorities are central actors in waste management, making it one of the policy areas most directly connected to everyday governance. Reforms in this sector therefore have a pronounced impact on local-administration quality. When municipalities adopt EU-style waste-collection systems, introduce transparent tariff structures, or professionalise their public utilities, they become more efficient and accountable

institutions. This has broader implications for Europeanisation. Through waste-related reforms, local governments adopt practices that align with EU principles of subsidiarity, transparency, and participatory governance. Citizen engagement increases as households become responsible for waste separation, recycling, and adherence to new rules. Public awareness campaigns and community-based initiatives—often supported by the EU—strengthen civic responsibility and environmental consciousness. These changes contribute to the democratisation of governance practices at the local level, supporting long-term capacity-building. Waste management thus reinforces not only technical compliance with EU directives but also the social foundations of integration.

The discussion above suggests that waste management is a sector in which the strategic interests of the EU and Western Balkan states converge. For the EU, ensuring environmental security in its neighbourhood reduces cross-border risks and supports the credibility of its Green Deal ambitions. For Western Balkans countries, improving waste governance enhances public health, economic sustainability, and administrative capacity—all of which are prerequisites for successful EU accession. This convergence creates a mutually reinforcing dynamic: the EU offers financial and technical support, while Western Balkan governments gain incentives to strengthen institutions and align with the acquis. Waste management becomes both a means and an end of integration—a sector where Europeanisation is simultaneously a practical necessity and a pathway toward achieving long-term accession goals.

## 7. CONCLUSION

This article has argued that waste management, often seen as a technical policy field, functions as a meaningful driver of European integration in the Western Balkans. By examining regional trends and concrete cases such as the Drina River Basin cooperation or the Vinča landfill's transformation, the analysis demonstrates that environmental governance produces tangible outcomes that directly support the EU accession process. The findings support the hypothesis that waste management operates as an effective driver of European integration in the Western Balkans. Across the region, environmental pressures and EU requirements create spillover dynamics, while alignment with EU waste directives strengthens administrative structures. The case studies demonstrate that even amid political sensitivities, environmental projects can foster institutional convergence, regional cooperation, and improved governance.

The requirements of EU waste legislation strengthen administrative capacity, improve regulatory compliance, and create structured incentives for long-term policymaking—key indicators of accession readiness. Because waste pollution is inherently transboundary, the sector pushes governments toward cooperation even when political relations are strained. EU-funded platforms and regional initiatives facilitate shared learning, harmonisation of standards, and joint planning, contributing to a form of horizontal Europeanisation within the region. Importantly, the visible results of improved waste management—cleaner environments, better services, reduced dumping—make the benefits of EU alignment concrete for citizens, helping to build public trust in the enlargement process.

Overall, the evidence suggests that waste management is not merely an environmental responsibility but a strategic entry point for advancing integration, strengthening institutions, and fostering regional cooperation. In a context where political progress toward EU membership is often uneven, the environmental sector—and waste

governance in particular—offers a rare and practical pathway for sustained, measurable convergence with European standards.

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