

Institutional and actors-oriented factors influencing transposition of the European timber legality requirements in selected Western Balkan countries: the need for capacity building

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Research on deforestation and illegal forest activities in Balkan countries received less attention than in other high-risk regions and countries, such as tropical ones. Although some studies focus on the legal aspects associated with forest management, timber harvesting, and processing in the Western Balkan countries, they mainly target the topic just partially (e.g., focusing on trade data and trends) or pay attention to the role of existing policy tools (e.g., forest certification) in coping with the problem. This paper uses actor-centred institutionalism to assess the transposition of the European Union Timber Regulation (EUTR) requirements within policies of selected Western Balkan countries (i.e., Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro, and the Republic of Srpska, BH). By adopting a multiple-embedded case study design, we investigated the national policy frameworks using qualitative content analysis and conducted interviews with 36 key actors. We analysed interviewees' perceptions about EUTR and the forthcoming EU Regulation on deforestation-free commodities (EUDR), looking into five main dimensions, i.e., awareness, transparency, information flow, resources, and challenges of ensuring timber legality. We distinguished institutional and actor-oriented factors influencing the transposition of EUTR. Our results point out that major institutional factors are related to external political processes (e.g., EU accession), implying that new forest national policies will be adopted, and actors established. Certification schemes, e.g., FSC, are often perceived by actors as a means for verification of timber origin and legality. Informal actor-oriented factors (e.g., corruption) remain the main negative influencing factors on timber legality, as all countries face limited resources for legality monitoring and verification. Forthcoming EUDR requirements are stricter than EUTR ones and will probably challenge all countries targeted by this study. Besides revised policies and increased technical capacities, further investments in capacity building and awareness raising would help overcome identified challenges. Some initiatives, such as the Erasmus+ Project EMMA4EU, are already in place to raise awareness and build skills on EUDR but more actions would be needed specifically targeted at Western Balkan (as well as other) countries to support the effective implementation of normative requirements, thus improving forest resource governance and responsible management.