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ASSESSING DETERMINANTS AND IMPACT OF POSSIBLE RUSSIAN INFLUENCE IN THE WESTERN BALKAN COUNTRIES

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Abstract

For Russia, the Western Balkan region holds significant historical, cultural, and religious ties, and while from a historical point of view the Western Balkans represents an area where Russia tries to be a long-time actor, the relationship between Moscow and Western Balkan states also depends on international factors such as EU integration. Additionally, this relationship is further impacted by current international crises. The objective of this article is to confirm the rise of Russian influence in the Western Balkan countries, and to determine how and to what extent it has impacted the region. For this purpose, a qualitative analysis is conducted with secondary data from many sources, including reports and policy events; the analysis also includes a rhetorical review of public appearances by the political leadership of the Western Balkan countries. First, we consider Russia's pro-active approach manifested through its economic involvement in the region, and second the reactive approach of the Western Balkan countries due to their disillusionment

with the EU, and the Covid-19 pandemic. Further, we argue that Russia's invasion of Ukraine is a strong catalyst, as it directly affects the relationship of the Western Balkan countries with Russia, the EU, and vice versa.

Keywords

Enlargement policies, EU, Russia, Ukraine war, Western Balkans

INTRODUCTION

The Western Balkan region has been an arena of great power interest for decades. With the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the following conflicts in the 90s,[1] the region attracted even more external attention, including Russia. Much of the academic debate has focused on examining the determinants of its influence and impact in the Western Balkan countries. Firstly, to understand the nature and depth of Russia's involvement, a clear conceptual framework is required for key concepts such as influence and impact. The academic literature on impact in International Relations is vast and varied, as those terms can be defined and understood differently based on the context and the theoretical lens through which they are viewed. While Keohane and Nye argue that the use of soft power can be equated with influence, especially in the context of non-coercive state actions,[2] Baldwin differentiates between the power to influence and the actual exercise of that power, which can be seen as the realisation of impact.[3]

Nevertheless, there is an ongoing debate on the definition provided by Keohane and Nye from the different theoretical camps. For realists influence is often equated with hard power resources like military or economic strength[4], constructivists argue that it emerges from the intersubjective understanding of states as it is defined in terms of shared beliefs and norms[5], and neoliberals believe in cooperative frameworks, institutions, and the proliferation of democratic ideals as the main channels of influence.[6] On the contrary, a common understanding and consensus about the importance of differentiating these two concepts, as these terms are often incorrectly referred to as synonyms, unites the different theoretical camps. While influence is about the potential to shape outcomes, impact is about the actual outcomes themselves. In this sense, a systematic approach to distinguishing between the potential to shape and the actual outcomes can offer clear insights into the nature and extent of Russian involvement in the Balkans.

Russia's potential to shape the Western Balkans is the subject of main debates and discussions that follow a rather dichotomous logic. Existing literature shows that they proposed various ways to assess and understand the nuances of this influence and that typically, the discourse revolves around several polarising dimensions, reflecting mainly strategic versus tactical dimensions[7], the ongoing tug-of-war competition between the EU and Russia, and the role of local agencies.[8]

Bechev argues that Russia's approach to the Balkans, while pursuing significant strategic interests, is often more tactical than strategic. Although he offers a nuanced view of Russian influence by emphasising the interplay between external powers and local actors, he highlights that it is more likely for Russia to react to emerging opportunities and challenges rather than having a long-term plan for the region.[9] While Galeotti

1 Dejan Jovic, *Yugoslavia: A State that Withered Awa*y (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press: West Lafayette, 2009), 47.
2 Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, *Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1977), 216.
3 David Baldwin, *Power and International Relations: A Conceptual Approach* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016), 141.
4 John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014), 55-57.
5 Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy is what States Make of it: The Social Construction of Power Politics", *International Organizatio*n, vol. 46, no. 2 (1992): 393-394.
6 Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005), 5-7.
7 Dimitar Bechev, *Rival Power: Russia in Southeast Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 228.
8 Roberto Belloni, *State Building and International Intervention in Bosnia* (Oxfordshire: Routledge 2007), 189.
9 Dimitar Bechev, supra note 7, 228-230.

highlights the opportunistic and reactive nature of Russia's foreign approach towards the Western Balkan countries,[10] scholars such as Mujanovic contest the idea of a solely reactive engagement of Russia in the Balkans, by arguing that Russia has a clear and forward-looking strategy in the area, trying to create lasting alliances, strategic dependencies and even disrupt Western cohesion.[11] Although existing literature sheds light on Russia's tactics and strategies, there remains an ongoing debate on the effectiveness of this influence, especially given the strong pull of EU membership for many Balkan states. This goes along with some conceptual and methodological challenges, such as defining and determining the tangible impact of Russia's influence in the Balkans. Furthermore, it must be emphasised that both concepts, while vital, pose challenges for empirical research. Influence, being intangible, is hard to measure directly. Impact, on the other hand, requires establishing causality, which seems a daunting task given the myriad of variables in international relations. Insufficient access to reliable data poses another empirical research risk. Especially when dealing with covert operations, disinformation campaigns, or unofficial channels of influence, obtaining reliable data is challenging, as influence may be exercised behind closed doors or through non-official means, making it hard to track and analyse.

We argue that Russia's proactive approach in the Balkans has been amplified due to a reactive stance by the European Union, whereas the EU's delayed or passive responses to Balkan issues provide a strategic window for Russia to increase its influence and fill the geopolitical vacuum. The hypothesis implies that the existing literature on Russia's influence in the region has overemphasised Russia's role and diminished the importance of local agencies in the Balkan countries. This is especially important considering that some Balkan states frequently pursue complex foreign strategies[12] in search of alliances and benefits from both the East and the West.

The objective of this case study is to determine Russia's current influence and the resulting impact in the Western Balkan countries by taking into account how the EU's action and influence in the region might have affected it (i.e. Russian's influence). After a short overview of the main theoretical concepts, the article focuses on the importance of historical, cultural and religious linkages that might have influenced the relations between states. For the empirical analysis, a two-fold approach is used: first, a Russia-centred approach that focuses on assessing its proactive engagement in the Balkans, mainly through political and economic instruments, and second, a reactive approach which is driven by the reaction capacities and modalities of the Western Balkan countries. Specifically, we explain how much effort Russia puts into maintaining or further strengthening its influence in the Balkans, and if political opportunism, due to the EU's hesitant attitude towards the region, guaranteed a so-called not-to-waste momentum to the Russian government. For this purpose, both primary and secondary data are used. Finally, conclusions are drawn and further remarks provided.

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[10] Mark Galeotti, *Russian Political War: Moving Beyond the Hybrid* (Oxfordshire: Routledge 1st edition, 2019), 17.

[11] Jasmin Mujanovic, *Hunger and Fury: The Crisis of Democracy in the Balkans* (London: Hurst and Company, 2018), 106.

[12] Noela Mahmutaj, *Albanian-Russian relations after the Collapse of Communism* (Tirana: Ani-Print, 2023), 147.

1. Historical, cultural, and religious linkages as leverage for influence

The ties between Russia and the Balkans can be explained using multiple lenses, but existing literature highlights the importance of assessing historical, religious, and cultural ties to comprehend the bond that has made the region particularly appealing and important to Moscow. Academics emphasise that the historical connections, stemming from the 19th-century Pan-Slavic movement and Russia's backing for Serbia's independence from the Ottoman Empire, serve as instruments of soft power, contending that the Kremlin possesses a subtle soft power appeal, particularly in Serbia.[13] Consensus exists on the assumptions that Russia has traditionally seen itself as a protector of Slavic nations, and since many Balkan countries share Slavic heritage, a sense of kinship and mutual understanding has been fostered. Moscow is perceived to be leveraging Balkan Orthodox nations as tools for amplifying its influence in the region[14]. In addition, the shared religious tradition of Orthodox Christianity between Russia and some Balkan states strengthens cultural and emotional ties and has shaped Russia's foreign policy towards the Balkans.[15] The importance of religion is highlighted also by Karčić, who argues that Serbia has been perceived as Russia's kin state in the region.[16] He further adds that this is mainly due to Moscow playing the shared cultural and religious ties card among the region's Orthodox Christian population, which constitutes significant percentages in Bosnia in addition to majorities in Serbia, Montenegro, and North Macedonia.[17] This religious connection gains importance, as it is usually considered a gate-opener for more consequential deals including in strategic sectors such as energy and real estate, and hence gradually leads to political and economic dependence[18]. Russian scholars also acknowledge the crucial role of historical and religious links to Moscow in shaping ties between Russia and the Western Balkans. They further contend that the deep-rooted historical, cultural, and religious connections between Russia and the Slavic countries in the Balkans guarantee Moscow's sustained and significant presence in the region's upcoming developments.[19]

Beyond the historical and cultural connections, the Balkan states hold a pivotal role in Russia's foreign policy ambitions. Moscow aims to foster a multipolar world, standing in opposition to the prevailing unipolar Western hegemony.[20] Well-known specialists in Russian foreign policy universally acknowledge Russia's significant geopolitical interest in the Balkans. Bechev views Russia's strategic manoeuvres in the Balkans as a means to counterbalance potential NATO and EU expansion.[21] In contrast, Stent delves deeper, asserting that under Putin, Russia has been actively challenging the post-Cold War global structure that they see as Western-dominated, a stance manifestly apparent in Russia's

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13 Dimitar Bechev, supra note 7, 52.
14 Angela Stent, *Putin's World: Russia Against the West and with the Rest* (New York: Twelve Illustrated edition, 2019), 38-39.
15 Noela Mahmutaj, "Russian Government Policy in the Western Balkans": 127, in: Anja Mihr, Paolo Sorbello and Brigitte Weifen, eds., *Securitization and Democracy in Eurasia*. Springer, Cham., 2022. // doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-16659-4_8
16 Harun Karčić, "Russia's Influence in the Balkans: The Interplay of Religion, Politics, and History," (July 2022) // https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/posts/russia-s-influence-in-the-balkans-the-interplay-of-religion-politics-and-history
17 Ibid.
18 Harun Karčić, supra note 16.
19 Konstantin Khudoley and Evgeniy Koloskov, "Politika Rossii na Balkanakh: sovremennoye sostoyaniye i perspekti (Russia's policy in the Balkans: current state and prospects)": 94, *Mirovaya ekonomika i mezhdunarodnyye otnosheniya* 65, № 1 (2021); Elena Ponomareva, "Novyye gosudarstva na Balkanakh'' (New states in the Balkans)" . M.: MGIMO (U), (2010).
20 Branislav Stanicek and Martin Russell, "Russia's influence in the Western Balkans," (June 2022) // https://epthinktank.eu/2022/06/09/russias-influence-in-the-western-balkans/
21 Dimitar Bechev, supra note 7, 246.

endeavours in the Balkans and beyond.[22] Specifically, in the Balkans, Moscow's actions seem to reflect its overarching ambition: to establish a world order marked by multiple influential powers, including Russia, rather than one solely under Western dominance.

The Balkans are increasingly viewed as a nexus of geo-economic contention. As the region gains prominence in the political, security, trade, and economic strategies of international players, new prospects surface. While regional powers like Turkey play a role, global entities such as the EU, USA, China, and Russia are also key stakeholders. Their interventions not only impact the resolution of the Balkans' internal challenges but are intertwined with their wider strategic interests. The situation surrounding Kosovo serves as a prime example. While Serbia does not recognize Kosovo's independence within the region, Russia also withholds recognition. Moscow supports the UN Resolution 1244, which acknowledges the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Serbia, encompassing Kosovo.[23] This position impacts the region's growth and stability, and the dynamics between nations, as well as the involvement of global players in the region. Given Moscow's alignment with Belgrade's stance and its differing position from many nations on Kosovo's recognition, it remains an influential and competing actor in the region.

Simultaneously, a myriad of internal issues in the Balkans, stemming from the fall of the communist regimes, modulate the scope of Kremlin's influence in the area. Problems like ineffective governance, entrenched corruption, organised crime, and money laundering undermine the region's ability to properly respond to international challenges and shifts.[24] These domestic weaknesses provide an avenue for other global entities to assert and enhance their dominance within the region. The incursion of these actors plays a direct role in shaping the trajectory and stability of the Balkans. Consequently, the region often finds itself stuck in a tug of war competition, where various regional and international actors fight for supremacy and influence. Both Bechev and Belloni emphasise the crucial role of local agency amidst these dynamics. Bechev suggests that local Balkan actors frequently engage with Russia, at times leveraging their association with Moscow to bolster domestic political agendas.[25] Belloni, on the other hand, posits that local elites can either resist, adapt, or utilise the intentions of international entities to suit their own ends.[26] What transpires is often a nuanced interplay between these local aspirations and international objectives. The penetration of these external powers indelibly shapes the Balkans' trajectory and stability. Consequently, the region transforms into a battlefield of power dynamics, characterised by competition and overlapping geopolitical agendas.

2. Russia's proactive approach in the Western Balkan countries

Russia's assertive strategy, realised through political initiatives including extensive diplomatic interactions marked by high-level visits from Russian dignitaries, as well as the endorsement of political entities and personalities favourable to Russian objectives, and economic engagements, especially in energy sector, is predominantly visible in Serbia,

[22] Angela Stent, supra note 14, 380-381.
[23] Tass, "Volodin: Rossiya zayavlyayet podderzhku Serbii i osuzhdayet provokatsii v Kosove (Volodin: Russia declares support for Serbia and condemns provocations in Kosovo)", (June 2019) // https://tass.ru/politika/6501982
[24] Noela Mahmutaj, supra note 15, 126.
[25] Dimitar Bechev, supra note 7, 58.
[26] Roberto Belloni, supra note 8.

Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. As part of its overarching strategy to sustain its regional influence and counteract Western progression, Russia has amplified its diplomatic and political engagements in countries of the Western Balkans. When assessing Russia's political foothold in the Balkan countries, it is pivotal to underline that due to the lack of robust multilateral structures, engagements between the Western Balkan states and Russia mainly hinge on bilateral interactions.

Contrary to other regional nations, Serbia naturally aligns more closely with Russia. They share a relationship steeped in mutual ideologies and historical and fraternal sentiments. The two countries have cemented various cooperative deals spanning areas such as trade, defence, diplomacy, energy, and visa-free commutes.[27] Current research indicates that a significant portion of Serbia's political spectrum maintains robust connections with Russia. The foundation of this influence primarily stems from Russia's role as a UN Security Council member that backs Serbia's stance on Kosovo. This support is a primary reason why the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) under President Aleksandar Vučić has consistently adopted a pro-Russian foreign policy stance, even following Russia's incursion into Ukraine.[28]

Serbia's reluctance to join NATO[29] has positioned it as a more prominent ally for Russia, thereby creating a conducive environment for Russia's political influence. The geopolitical approach of the Serbian government has shaped the perception of alliances among its citizens. In Serbia, 54% view Russia as an ally, by defining it as a country that shares the same values and interests. Furthermore, when considering those who regard Russia as a necessary partner, 95% of Serbians perceive Russia as, at the very least, a crucial partner.[30] Historically, Putin has expressed support for Serbia's EU aspirations, anticipating that if Serbia joined the EU, it might act in favour of Russia within the Union.[31] However, the contemporary situation contrasts this earlier view, especially given the stipulation that Serbia can only join the EU after meeting the Copenhagen criteria in its entirety. This includes aligning fully with the EU's Common Foreign Security Policy and normalising its relations with Kosovo, which cannot be in Russia's interest.

Russia's political involvement is evident when considering the endorsement of political entities and personalities favourable to Russian objectives. A prime example is Aleksander Vulin, the ex-Minister of Internal Affairs who now leads Serbia's Security Intelligence Agency. His interactions in Moscow in 2022 and speculated involvement in sharing wiretapped recordings with Russia's Security Council Secretary Patrushev highlight his pro-Russian stance.[32] Additionally, the Socialist Party of Serbia, with Ivica Dačić at the helm, leans towards Russia. On the far-right spectrum, the Serbian Radical Party led by Vojislav Šešelj, previously a guiding influence on President Vučić, embodies this ideology. While they currently lack a parliamentary presence, the Serbian political arena isn't devoid of far-right entities.

Political assertiveness is evident also in Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia. In both cases, Russia sought to strengthen its influence, particularly in the

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27 Wouter Zweers et al., Little Substance, considerable impact. Russian influence in *Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro* (Clingendael Report, August 2023): 15.

28 Ibid, 19.

29 NATO, "Relations with Serbia", (May 2023) // https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_50100.htm

30 Joanna Hosa and Vessela Tcherneva, "Pandemic trends: Serbia looks east, Ukraine looks west", (August 2021) // https://ecfr.eu/article/pandemic-trends-serbia-looks-east-ukraine-looks-west/

31 Mark Galeotti, "Do the Western Balkans face a coming Russian storm?" (April 2018) // https://ecfr.eu/wp-content/uploads/ECFR250_do_the_western_balkans_face_a_coming_russian_storm.pdf

32 Orhan Dragaš, "Serbia's Vulin in Moscow – a disaster for Belgrade," Euractiv, (August 24, 2022) // https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/opinion/serbias-vulin-in-moscow-a-disaster-for-belgrade/

political sphere. North Macedonia's pro-western approach, mostly evident through its NATO membership and its aspirations to join the EU, has diminished the possibilities of a Russian influence in its political sphere.[33] Nevertheless, the Kremlin is still working to strengthen connections with North Macedonian opposition groups, particularly the Left Party, which the EU has strongly criticised for supporting Russia's activities in Ukraine.[34]

In Bosnia and Herzegovina a more complicated reality is pictured. Especially in Republika Srpska, where pro-Russian parties become more prominent,[35] Russia exercises its political influence by leveraging proxies that represent only a segment of the political landscape of Bosnia and Herzegovina.[36]

Experts argue that the bond between Republika Srpska and Russia often overshadows that of Serbia and Russia, primarily because Russia has placed significant trust in Milorad Dodik, as he displays an overt affinity for Russian involvement.[37] Although there are other politicians from the United Srpska party, who also lean pro-Russian,[38] Dodik has positioned himself as the Balkan leader most devoted to Moscow.[39]

While it might not be reflected in official records, Russia is a major investor in the Republika Srpska, by even funding Dodik's election campaigns.[40] It is evident that Russia has identified the Bosnian Serb leadership as a strategic partner to bolster its regional goals and has actively worked to fortify this relationship. But by supporting the notion of Republika Srpska, Russia doesn't just challenge Bosnia's Western orientation and its ambitions for EU and NATO integrations but also enhances existing tensions in an already sensitive region. This move indicates Russia's keen interest in reshaping geopolitical dynamics to suit its interests, highlighting the intricacies of Balkan geopolitics.[41]

Because of its NATO membership, Montenegro is classified as one of Russia's "unfriendly" countries. Nevertheless, Russia continues to retain some influence in Montenegro, which is especially evident in its support for opposition groups and its efforts to promote anti-NATO and anti-EU sentiment in the country.[42] This influence surged in 2020 when parties sympathetic to Russia and Serbia displaced the enduring parliamentary rule of the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS), led for many years by Milo Đukanović. Notably, the "For the Future of Montenegro" movement secured approximately 15% of the vote in the 2023 parliamentary elections, and is viewed as having a pro-Russian stance. Evidence suggests that the Kremlin directly financed the constituent parties of this alliance.[43] Their representatives openly opposed Montenegro's

33 RCC, "Balkan Barometer Public Opinion" (2023) // https://www.rcc.int/balkanbarometer/key_findings/2/public

34 Sinisa Jakov Marusic, "North Macedonia's Left Condemned for Aligning with Russia on Ukraine" (March 2022) // https://balkaninsight.com/2022/03/18/north-macedonias-left-condemned-for-aligning-with-russia-on-ukraine/

35 Volker Wagener, "What is Republika Srpska?" (January 2023) // https://www.dw.com/en/what-is-republika-srpska/a-64373205

36 Wouter Zweers, et. al, supra note 27, 17.

37 Hamza Karcic, "Putin's most loyal Balkan client," (October 2022) // https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/10/07/bosnia-elections-milorad-dodik-putin-russia/

38 Wouter Zweers, et. al, supra note 27, 18.

39 Una Hajdari, "EU, US slam Bosnian Serb leader for awarding Putin highest honour," (January 2023) // https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-us-slam-bosnia-serb-leader-molorad-dodik-awarding-putin-honor/#:~:text=SARAJEVO%2C%20Bosnia%2DHerzegovina%20%E2%80%94%20European,joining%20the%2027%2Dmember%20bloc.

40 Jelena Dzankic, "A Year Later: War in Ukraine and Western Balkan (Geo)Politics": Simonida Kacarska and Soeren Keil, eds., (Publications Office of the European Union, 2023).

41 Amarildo Gutić, "Bosnia and Herzegovina is a powder keg on the Balkans" (February 2022) // https://zurnal.info/clanak/bosnia-and-herzegovina-is-a-powder-keg-on-the-balkans-under-the-control-of-russia/24713

42 Aljazeera, "Russia issues list of 'unfriendly' countries amid Ukraine crisis," (March 2022) // https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/8/russia-deals-with-unfriendly-countries-require-moscow-approval

43 Jelena Dzankic, supra note 40.

affiliation with NATO, travelled to Moscow in 2016 for dialogues with Russian officials, and endorsed the Lovćen Declaration, which outlines cooperation between Knežević's Democratic People's Party and the United Russia party.[44]

In summary, to fortify its relationships and advocate its regional interests, it is evident that Russia has intensified diplomatic relations, marked by prominent visits from Russian dignitaries to nations like Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina.[45] Furthermore, Moscow extends its support to political factions and figures in the Western Balkans that align with its goals. A primary avenue of Russian political intervention is its backing for opposition entities and leaders who express reservations or opposition towards EU and NATO affiliations. Moscow actively seeks to foster ties with these factions, viewing them as instrumental in advancing its regional strategy.

This involvement encompasses a wide range of tools including disinformation campaigns and financial backing for particular political units.

Evaluating Russia's political influence in terms of impact on the region, it seems obvious that Russia's backing for Serbia's far-right political entities implicates the region. It extends instability beyond Serbia, influencing its neighbours. Many of these politicians and nationalist proxies endorse the idea of a "Greater Serbia," reminiscent of the vision pushed by ex-Serb president Milošević in the 1990s, by using concepts that imply a form of territorial expansionism.[46] Through this support, Russia potentially jeopardises the stability and autonomy of nearby nations like Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Montenegro.[47] In essence, by endorsing such ideologies and actors, Russia not only manoeuvres its geopolitical interests but also adds layers of complexity to the already intricate Balkan political landscape.

Economic involvement

Despite the EU being the dominant economic partner in the Western Balkans, Russia's economic influence in the region is significant, primarily through its energy sector, supplying oil and gas to several Western Balkan countries. This economic engagement is a key tool for Russia to bolster its influence in the region. Understanding Russia's economic role in the Western Balkans requires examining its bilateral economic agreements with countries of the region, as well as evaluating energy relations, investments, and connections in tourism and real estate. The Balkans hold strategic significance for Russia, serving as a primary conduit for supplying gas and oil to Europe.[48] Russia's engagement in the Balkans is primarily channelled through energy and infrastructure policies, treating its economic endeavours there as top-priority geopolitical initiatives. Through these policies, Russia has fostered political and economic dependencies by cementing bilateral agreements with countries in the region. While some suggest that Russia's regional economic influence has waned due to economic downturns and sanctions following the

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44 Ivana Gardasevic, "Russia and Montenegro: How and Why a Centuries' Old Relationship Ruptured." Connections: *The Quarterly Journal 17*, no. 1 (2018): 61–75. https://doi.org/10.11610/connections.17.1.04.

45 Yekaterina Entina and Aleksandr Pivovarenko, "Rossiyskoye diplomaticheskoye prisutstviye na zapadnykh Balkanakh (Russian diplomatic presence in the Western Balkans)", // https://russiancouncil.ru/russia-balkans

46 Wouter Zweers et. al, supra note 27, 20.

47 Hamza Karcic, "Serbia Is Taking a Page Out of Russia's Book," (April 2023) // https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/04/24/serbia-balkans-expansionism-russia-montenegro-elections/

48 Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation Approved by President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin (February 2013), art. 66 // https://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptICkB6BZ29/content/id/122186

Crimea annexation,[49]it is evident that its impact has been historically underestimated by other major global players.

In Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia, Russia dominates the energy sector, supplying nearly 100% of their gas needs and owning assets like the Lukoil gas station network.[50] This increasing control of the energy sector by Russian companies symbolises Russia's significant economic presence in the region.[51] As per a 2018 CSD report, the energy trade is central to the trade deficits of these three countries, with crude oil and natural gas accounting for 75 to 95 percent of their imports from Russia.[52]

Russia wields significant economic leverage in Serbia, surpassing its influence in other Balkan states, predominantly through its stronghold in the energy sector. Both Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina heavily depend on Russia for gas imports, with Gazprom owning essential energy infrastructure in these nations.[53] Notably, Gazprom Neft has secured a controlling stake in Serbia's NIS oil company. Concurrently, long-standing gas supply agreements and plans for expanded gas pipeline networks amplify Russia's economic footprint in Serbia and its gateway role for supplying gas to Europe. But it is not only Russia reaping benefits from economic ties in the region. Experts contend that Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina leverage energy relations for political gains.[54] In 2008, Gazprom secured a 51% majority in Serbia's Naftna Industrija Srbije at a significantly discounted price,[55] believed to be a strategic move by Serbia to gain Moscow's backing on the Kosovo matter and ensure the South Stream pipeline passed through Serbia.[56]

Russia uses its energy ties to wield political clout in the Balkans. This was evident in May 2022, when amidst the Ukraine conflict and global sanctions on Russia, Belgrade secured a favourable three-year gas contract with Gazprom.[57] Moscow's intention appeared to be bolstering Serbia against EU pressures to endorse anti-Russian sanctions. While gas constitutes a minor portion of these countries' energy sources, experts report that the Serbian government has begun citing Russian ownership of energy infrastructure as a hurdle to its energy diversification goals, despite encouragement and support for such diversification from both the EU and the US.[58]

In Republika Srpska, the Russian company NeftGazInkor, partly state-owned, acquired the primary oil refineries in Brod and Modriča in 2007. By the end of 2022, these refineries reported losses amounting to €1.3 billion.[59] Despite these financial setbacks, experts suggest that Russia prioritises the political influence gained from these investments over direct economic profit.[60] However, EU sanctions against Russia, which affect the importation of Russian gas through EU territories, are anticipated, which will dimin-

49 Branislav Stanicek, supra note 20.
50 Ibid.
51 Martin Vladimirov et. al, "Russian Economic Footprint in the Western Balkans: Corruption and State Capture Risks" (Center for the Study of Democracy, Sofia, 2018), 21.
52 Ibid.
53 Branislav Stanicek, supra note 20, 1.
54 Wouter Zweers et. al, supra note 27, 26.
55 Sergiu Mitrescu and Vuk Vuksanovic, "The Wider Balkan Region: at the Crossroads of a New regional energy matrix," (October 2022)// https://bezbednost.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Joint-Study-NCS-BCSP-FINAL.pdf
56 Wouter Zweers et. al, supra note 27, 27.
57 Sergiu Mitrescu and Vuk Vuksanovic, supra note 55, 29.
58 Wouter Zweers et. al, supra note 27, 27.
59 Ibid.
60 Stanislav Secrieru, "Russia in the Western Balkans Tactical Wins, Strategic Setbacks," *European Union Institute for Security Studies* (2019), 3.

ish Russia's influence. As a result, even without endorsing the sanctions, Serbia will feel that impact, possibly pushing Belgrade to seek diverse energy sources. Yet, for the time being, Serbia continues its substantial Russian oil and gas imports.[61]

In contrast, Russia's influence in Albania and Kosovo is relatively limited due to political and cultural conditions and both nations are primarily tied politically and economically to the EU and the US.

Since Russia does not recognize Kosovo as an independent state there is no diplomatic relationship between the two countries. A limited presence is evident in Albania, mainly due to its pro-Western stance, the non-recognition of Kosovo, the non-ratification of the Treaty on Cooperation and Friendship and a general lack of trust between both states[62]. As a result, in the political aspect there is stagnation, while in other fields, such as trade, energy, tourism, culture and education, it is at a very low level compared to other countries in the region. In this regard, Russian influence in Albania is more limited than in the four Western Balkan states.

Despite this, in recent years an expansion of Russia's involvement into other economic areas has been witnessed. The growth of Russia's economic influence in Serbia is not just fueled by exports but also by a notable Russian corporate footprint. While gas and energy remain dominant sectors, Russia's economic involvement extends beyond them, with around 1,000 companies in Serbia being wholly or partially owned by Russian entities. In addition, in some Western Balkan countries, Russia is involved in finance, and real estate, as well as in mining and metallurgy.[63]

In Montenegro, you can find a visible trace of Russia's economic influence in terms of foreign direct investment as a share of their GDP, with nearly 30 percent of Montenegro's GDP composed of Russian FDI.[64] As it is clearly stated by the report of the CSD, these investments primarily protect Russia's economic and political interests, but at the same time they can be instrumentalized to promote an enhanced level of interdependence among the countries.[65] This interdependence can lead in special cases not only to trade vulnerability in terms of supply cuts but to political pressure as seen in the aftermath of the Ukrainian invasion. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Montenegro, despite its strained relations and sanctions against Moscow, has seen a surge in Russian investments. As of July 2022, Russians were the top investors in Montenegro, pouring over €41 million into the nation post-invasion. A significant portion of this investment is in real estate, with Russians believed to own over 40% of Montenegro's property, especially in coastal towns, which have notable Russian communities.[66] Furthermore, Montenegro experienced a rise in Russian visitors in 2022 compared to 2021, though it is uncertain if these are genuine tourists or individuals fleeing the conflict in Ukraine.[67]

In Serbia, a unique trend emerged post Russia's Crimea annexation and the global sanctions that followed. While most Western Balkan countries saw a stagnation or reduction in Russian investments, Serbia stood out.[68] The country became a favoured

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61 Marta Szpala and Andrzej Sadecki, "Serbia: The Forced Abandonment of Russian Oil," (October 2022) // https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2022-10-13/serbia-forced-abandonment-russian-oil

62 Noela Mahmutaj, supra note 12, 150.

63 Martin Vladimirov, et. al, supra note 51, 18.

64 Ibid.

65 Ibid.

66 Samir Kajosevic, "Russian Interest in Montenegrin Real Estate Spikes Despite Sanctions," (July 2022) // https://balkaninsight.com/2022/07/07/russian-interest-in-montenegrin-real-estate-spikes-despite-sanctions/

67 Wouter Zweers et. al, supra note 27, 29.

68 Branislav Stanicek and Anna Caprile, "Russia and the Western Balkans Geopolitical confrontation, economic influence and political interference," (April 2023) // https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI(2023)747096

destination for Russian businesses looking to redirect their investments amidst geopolitical tensions.[69] In 2022, Serbia experienced a record-breaking surge in foreign direct investment, outpacing previous averages by €500-600 million. The year also witnessed considerable growth in Russian businesses setting up in Serbia, with a twelvefold rise compared to 2021.[70] In terms of trade, Russia aimed to integrate Western Balkan nations into its Eurasian Economic Union initiative. However, only Serbia signed a free trade agreement in 2019, even though Russia had plans to establish a similar deal with Bosnia and Herzegovina.[71] Conversely, Montenegro, which had been discussing the expansion of its free trade agreement with Russia in the early 2010s, faced a halt in negotiations in 2014 after siding with EU sanctions due to Russia's Crimea annexation.[72] By 2022, trade between these countries and the EU had surpassed their trade volumes with Russia, which stood as their fourth primary trading partner, following the EU, China, and Turkey.[73]

In conclusion, Russia's economic engagement in the Western Balkans varies across sectors and nations. While its investments have grown in absolute terms, Russia's overarching economic presence in the Western Balkans isn't guaranteed. Its significant economic ties with Serbia are undeniable, but the EU stands as the dominant trade partner for the region, overshadowing Russia in both imports and exports.[74] Despite this, the inherent vulnerabilities of the Western Balkan countries render them prone to political and economic pressures, potentially heightening the risk of state capture.[75] Though the EU surpasses Russia in economic influence, especially in trade, Russia's significant role in the energy sectors of BiH and Serbia grants it considerable political clout. However, many of these investments are not necessarily economically sustainable. The aftermath of Russia's Ukraine invasion saw a pivot of Russian businesses towards Serbia and a surge in Montenegrin real estate investments, but these shifts do not inherently amplify Moscow's political influence in the region.

3. EU's reactive approach to Russia's influence in the Western Balkans

The EU's response to Russia's growing influence in the Western Balkans has been predominantly reactive, prioritising the preventing of further destabilisation in the region and promoting the EU's values and institutions. While the EU has sought to counter Russia's foothold through strategies like enlargement, heightened political involvement, security alliances, and economic aid to the Western Balkan nations, such a reactive stance might fall short in the long haul. Addressing symptoms rather than the root causes of Russia's expanding influence in some countries of the Western Balkans might limit the effectiveness of the EU's approach.

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69 Paul Stronski and Annie Himes, "Russia's Game in the Balkans," (January 2019) // https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/02/06/russia-s-game-in-balkans-pub-78235

70 RadioFreeEurope, "Serbia Records Big Year For Foreign Direct Investment, Despite Ukraine War," (January 2023) // https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-fdi-russia-ukraine-war/32218795.html

71 Zeljko Trkanjec, "Russia would like BiH to conclude free trade agreement with Eurasian Customs Union," (November 2021) // https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/russia-would-like-free-trade-agreement-with-eurasian-customs-union/

72 European Commission, "Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: Montenegro 2015 Report," (November 2015) // https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/MT/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52015SC0210

73 Wouter Zweers et. al, supra note 27, 24.

74 Eurostat, "Western Balkans – EU – international trade in goods statistics", (April 2022) // https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Western_Balkans-EU_-_international_trade_in_goods_statistics&oldid=526493

75 Branislav Stanicek, supra note 20.

One might contend that the EU has not fully manifested the potential of the enlargement perspective as a reactive mechanism to counter Russian influence in the Western Balkans. The drawn-out EU accession process has left many Western Balkan nations feeling disenchanted as these nations have found the journey towards EU membership to be frustratingly long. Furthermore, this disillusionment imposes possibilities to enhance people's underlying scepticism about their countries joining the EU. On average, 20.8% of the region's respondents believe their countries will never join the EU and when considering those who think joining will take over 20 years, the scepticism rises. Nearly 41% of the Western Balkans population believe in joining the EU only after 2040, if at all.[76]

While the EU, theoretically, supports the European ambitions of the Western Balkans, offering both financial and technical assistance to facilitate requisite reforms, the pace and progression of integration remain inconsistent across the region. Each Western Balkan country faces difficulties with its distinct set of challenges, influencing its respective progress toward EU accession. Obviously, the enlargement process in general, but specifically in the Western Balkans, is, apart from the country-specific speed in meeting EUs demands, also dependent on internal EU issues and the high need for reform.[77] The Western Balkan countries have largely remained committed to their EU aspirations, even though the support for EU membership in the Western Balkans has slightly declined from 62% in 2021 to 59% in 2023, according to the Balkan Barometer 2023. Albania remains the most enthusiastic with 92% in favour, while Kosovo and Montenegro have reduced levels of support at 66% and 60% respectively.

Serbia has the least enthusiasm, with only 34% in favour of joining the EU[78]. However, their long path towards EU membership, coupled with enhanced disillusionment with the EU's enlargement strategies, has created possibilities for Russia to intensify its involvement in the region. In other words, while the EU missed the opportunity to strengthen the ties with the Western Balkan countries formally, new possibilities and ways opened for Russia, in terms of an enhanced space for political opportunists.[79] Russia's deep-rooted historical, cultural, and religious connections in the region further facilitate its endeavours and the EU, as the region's primary geopolitical stakeholder had to acknowledge its role in inadvertently paving the way for a resurgent Russian presence in the Western Balkans.

In late 2017, Albania's Prime Minister, Edi Rama, expressed his concerns, hinting at the attractive offers from Russia and China in the face of the European Union's perceived inaction. Rama's remarks underscored the risk of alternative global powers filling the void if the EU didn't intensify its engagement. He cautioned that if the EU does not actively engage with the Balkans, complications could arise that would make future integration more challenging and expensive.[80] Rama's words, a mix of warning and call to action, highlighted the potential vacuum other global powers could fill in the Balkans. Notably, by February 2018, the EU appeared to respond to such sentiments by unveiling a renewed commitment and strategy towards the region. The European Commission

[76] BiEPAG, "Between a rock and a hard place: Public opinion and integration in the Western Balkans," // https://biepag.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Between-a-rock-and-a-hard-place-English-1.pdf
[77] Dimitar Bechev, "What has stopped the EU enlargement in the Western Balkans?", (June 2022) // https://carnegieeurope.eu/2022/06/20/what-has-stopped-eu-enlargement-in-western-balkans-pub-87348
[78] Balkan Barometer Public Opinion, (2023) // https://www.rcc.int/balkanbarometer/key_findings/2/public
[79] Martin Vladimirov et.al, supra note 51, 18.
[80] Zoran Radosavlijevic, "EU must 'marry' Western Balkans quickly to avoid new risks – Albania PM", (December 2017) // https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/eu-must-marry-western-balkans-quickly-to-avoid-new-risks-albania-pm/.

underlined the intrinsic relationship between the EU and the Western Balkans in its statement. The Commission emphasised the geographical, historical, and cultural ties binding the EU and the Western Balkans together. With its reference to the Thessaloniki European Council of 2003, the EC reiterated its longstanding commitment to the region's future within the European fold. The message was clear: the EU perceives the Western Balkans as part of its own realm, asserting that the ties they share run deeper than transient political affiliations.[81]

Implicit in this message was a diplomatic assertion that other external actors, like Russia, have limited room for influence in a region where the EU has held significant sway for decades.

While the EU has showcased a prolonged commitment to the Western Balkans, the reality is that these nations have lingered in a state of anticipation for almost twenty years. Even though the EU's engagement with the region was highlighted at the 2003 EU-Western Balkan summit in Thessaloniki, the absence of significant follow-up actions until the Berlin Process made the prospects of EU accession seem increasingly distant for the countries in the Western Balkans, leading automatically to a fading prospect of EU accession.

The initiation of the Berlin Process was perceived as a fresh impetus to invigorate the languishing accession procedures, aiming to reinforce the Western Balkan countries' commitment to EU values and the stalled enlargement trajectory. However, it was also criticised as a veiled effort to hide the slow pace of EU expansion ambitions.[82] Conversely, experts argue that it is evident that the EU's internal discord resulted in the 'three Cs dilemma', heightened Conditionality, diminished Credibility, and escalating domestic Costs.[83]

Due to these factors, the Western Balkan countries are faced with an ambiguous membership outlook, continually ensnared in ongoing negotiations and reform cycles with no clear timeline for prospective membership.[84] Moreover, this paves the way for heightened receptivity towards other players. In addition, this kind of sensitivity towards third actors shows that not only did the EU respond in a reactive manner to Russia's efforts to enhance its presence in the Western Balkans, but also the Western Balkan countries could be held responsible for the increased Russian presence in their countries. After all, these countries have provided a breeding ground for Russia's political and economic involvement in their countries. Being aware of the geostrategic interest both Russia and the EU have in the Western Balkans, some of those countries tried to use the special commitment of Russia as a reactive instrument toward the European Union.

In conclusion, the EU has consistently shown commitment and engagement in the region, indicating a long-standing relationship. Yet, inconsistencies within the Union's institutions concerning conditions and observed progress, coupled with the EU's eroding credibility. The "lack of a clear a consistent membership perspective"[85], has led to an

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81 European Commission, "A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans: six new flagship initiatives to support the transformation of the Western Balkans", (August 2018) // https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2775/902991

82 Christina Griessler, "The Berlin Process. Bringing the Western Balkan Region Closer to the European Union." *Südosteuropa* 68, no. 1 (May 26, 2020): 1.

83 Jure Pozgan et. al, "Never let a good crisis go to waste; strengthening EU actorness amid the increased competition of external actors in the Western Balkans," *Teorija in Praksa*, Vol. 57, no. 4 (2020): 1127.

84 Christina Griessler, supra note 82, 2.

85 Jure Pozgan, supra note 83.

ambiguous membership outlook for the Western Balkans. This uncertainty might have made these countries more receptive to influences from other global actors.

The heightened sensitivity of the Western Balkan countries to third-party actors indicates that both the EU's reactive approach to Russia's growing involvement in the region and the strategic manoeuvrings of the Western Balkan nations have played a part in Russia's increased foothold. Whether intentionally or not, these nations have cultivated an environment conducive to Russian political and economic participation. Recognizing the geopolitical stakes both Russia and the EU have in the Western Balkans, some of these countries have wielded Russia's vested interest as a counterbalance against the EU. While these nations may not have specifically sought Russian involvement, they might have employed it as a cautionary tale for the EU to expedite the prolonged enlargement process. As we will further elaborate, the notion of Russia playing a pivotal role in the dynamics between the Western Balkans and the European Union was particularly highlighted during crisis periods, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing vaccine diplomacy.

4. Crises as a window of opportunity for a rising influence?

Both the Covid-19 pandemic and the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in 2022, opened a 'window of opportunity' as they have provided pivotal moments that could reshape geopolitical dynamics. These events not only offered the EU and the Western Balkans an opportunity to rejuvenate their commitment towards enlargement, but they also granted external players, especially Russia, a potential juncture to bolster their stature and footprint in the region. It is thus crucial to examine these crises in the context of their repercussions on the Western Balkans' EU integration journey, the evolution of the EU's enlargement blueprint, and the manifestation of Russia's objectives in the Balkan landscape.

COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has notably influenced the EU integration trajectory, slowing it down in certain aspects while hastening it in others. Specifically, the pandemic has impeded the pace of discussions concerning the EU's Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) and the EU's recovery package.[86] This delay required strenuous effort from the EU to find a middle ground among its member states regarding the MFF's details. Moreover, the onset of the pandemic resulted in border shutdowns and travel bans within the EU, obstructing the seamless movement of individuals, goods, and services throughout the union. This disruption posed a significant challenge to the EU's core principles of encouraging unrestricted movement of goods, services, and individuals. This has been a major setback for the EU's integration efforts, which have traditionally focused on promoting exchange and mobility.

The pandemic acted as a catalyst in some dimensions of EU integration. The crisis fostered deeper collaboration among member states, especially in health policy, research, and vaccine distribution. Such collaboration underscored the need for unity and mutual support, fortifying the EU's collective ethos. Additionally, the pandemic highlighted the urge to adopt digital technologies across various EU policies, such as

[86] Echebarria J. Fernandez, "A critical analysis on the European Union's measures to overcome the economic impact of the covid-19 pandemic", *European Papers*, Vol. 5, Nr. 3, (2020): 1401.

telecommuting and e-learning. However, amidst these advancements, the further integration of Western Balkan nations was put on hold. This pause presented an opportunity and provided an opening for other global players, especially when some Western Balkan nations perceived themselves as abandoned during the crisis[87]. While the EU offered support, its late timing and poor communication strategy rendered it less visible to the public. Although the EU donated nearly 4 million vaccine doses to the Western Balkans, Serbian officials often downplayed this support, causing a public perception that other countries, like Russia or China, were more generous.[88] In addition, nearly a quarter of the Serbian population (28%) believed that they could rely on Russia during the recovery from the pandemic, only 13% had this belief in the EU.[89] This opinion was not shared throughout the whole Western Balkan region.[90] The pandemic seemed to have amplified geopolitical tensions among the EU, its Member States, the Western Balkan nations, and various other players. While it diminished the political influence of the Union, it intensified the role of other geopolitical actors, positioning them as rival external forces in the EU's enlargement strategy. Experts argue that the pandemic slowed down rather than sped up the integration process of Western Balkan countries, as it created a situation in which external actors: 1) were in a position to disrupt the integration efforts of specific Western Balkan countries, by acting as 'external spoiler'[91]; and 2) tried to strengthen their presence in the Western Balkan region, by using primary soft power mechanisms to challenge their pro-EU orientation.[92]

Some have argued that prior to the pandemic Russia had managed to weaken the Union's external credibility, offering an alternative regional governance model to that promoted by the EU[93]. However, during and after the pandemic, they used the 'window of opportunity' to instrumentalize their soft power. This was primarily achieved through what is commonly referred to as 'vaccine diplomacy,' and secondarily through media propaganda and anti-EU disinformation campaigns.[94] While both of these strategies were aimed at enhancing Russia's international standing and diminishing its post-Crimea isolation from the West, it stands out that both soft power mechanisms were primarily focused on Serbia.[95] Although it can be assumed that Russia's involvement in the region during the Covid-19 crisis aimed to re-establish its former influence, especially in countries like Montenegro and North Macedonia, it failed at enhancing its

87 OECD, "The territorial impact of Covid – 19: Managing the crisis across levels of government", (November 2020) //https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=128_128287-5agkkojaaa&title=The-territorial-impact-of-covid-19-managing-the-crisis-across-levels-of-government

88 Milos Pavkovic, "Serbia": 39; in: Jelena Simic, eds., *Has Covid-19 Moved Western Balkan Countries Closer to or Further from the EU? The Effects of Covid-19 on Democracy in the Western Balkans* (Bruxelles: European Network of Political Foundations, 2022).

89 Joanna Hosa and Vessela Tcherneva, "Pandemic trends: Serbia looks east, Ukraine looks west" (August 2021) //https://ecfr.eu/article/pandemic-trends-serbia-looks-east-ukraine-looks-west/

90 Nikoleta Pacevic, "Montenegro": 15; in: Jelena Simic, eds., Has Covid-19 Moved Western Balkan Countries Closer to or Further from the EU?The Effects of Covid-19 on Democracy in the Western Balkans (Bruxelles: European Network of Political Foundations, 2022).

91 Dusan Reljic, "The Influencers' Futile Toils: Russia and Turkey in the Balkans", *European Institute of the Mediterranean*, (2019) // https://www.iemed.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/The-Influencers-Futile-Toils_-Russia-and-Turkey.pdf

92 Maja Bjelos, "Country Report 1 – Serbia": 18; in: Barbora Chrzova et.al, eds., *Western Balkans at the Crossroads: Assessing Influences of Non-Western External Actors* (Prague: Prague Security Studies Institute, 2019).

93 Jure Pozgan et.al, supra note 83, 1139.

94 Ibid.

95 Madalin Necsutu, "COVID-19 Provides New Material for Russian Anti-EU Disinformation" (September 2020) // https://balkaninsight.com/2020/09/22/covid-19-provides-new-material-for-russian-anti-eu-disinformation/.

influence in the whole region, as the sentiment in most of the Western Balkan nations remained consistent pro-European.[96]

Russian Invasion of Ukraine

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has had a mixed impact on the whole geopolitical order and the complex international system, affecting not just the relationship between the Kremlin and the Western Balkan states but also the Western Balkans' approach toward the EU's efforts. Since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the Western Balkans have constantly been asked to act diplomatically and economically against Russia, imposing sanctions against the Kremlin, or even expelling Russian diplomats from the country. The measures taken against the Kremlin were not supported, then and now, equally by all the Western Balkan countries.

Serbia is the only Balkan country that considers the Kremlin as a true ally and has not sanctioned Russia for its invasion of Ukraine[97]. In this respect, the war in Ukraine has divided the region into two groups: pro-Western and pro-Russian. The pro-Western countries such as Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro, and North Macedonia, are following the Euro-Atlantic perspective, by condemning the Russian occupation, supporting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine, and joining in the implementation of sanctions against Russia. Since the beginning of the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, those pro-Western countries joined EU sanctions against Russia in retaliation for its attack on Ukraine and have imposed tough sanctions on Russia such as freezing the foreign assets of Russian citizens and excluding Russian banks from the Swift international payments system. In response to this policy, the Kremlin added Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia to its list of 'enemy' states,[98] while Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina remained the only pro-Russian Western Balkan states. Their pro-Russian stance was highlighted also by the decision of high officials in countries such as Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Bosnia and Herzegovina not only failed to impose sanctions because of Dodik's resistance, but he furthermore sought to intensify the relations with the Kremlin following its invasion in Ukraine.[99] The special bond was highlighted explicitly when Dodik awarded Putin with the highest medal of Honor in January 2023,[100] and Putin returned this favour in June 2023.[101]

A pro-Russian picture is clear even by the people's reaction where in Serbia and Republika Srpska, people spray-painted the 'Z' symbol, associated with support for the attack on Ukraine, in public places to show their solidarity with Moscow.[102] This solidarity is highlighted furthermore by a significant 63% of the Serbian population blaming

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96 Balkan Barometer Public Opinion, (2023) // https://www.rcc.int/balkanbarometer/key_findings/2/public

97 Euronews, "Vučić: Serbia will not impose sanctions on Russia for as long as we can", (September 2023) // https://euronews.al/en/vucic-serbia-will-not-impose-sanctions-on-russia-for-as-long-as-we-can/

98 Samir Kajosevic, "Russia Adds Montenegro, Albania and North Macedonia to 'Enemy' List", (March 2022) // https://balkaninsight.com/2022/03/07/russia-adds-montenegro-albania-and-north-macedonia-to-enemy-list/

99 Aleksandar Brezar, "Why is Bosnia not joining rest of Europe in sanctions against Russia?" (March 2022) // https://www.euronews.com/2022/03/18/why-is-bosnia-not-joining-rest-of-europe-in-sanctions-against-russia

100 European Western Balkans, "EU strongly condemns RS's decision to award Vladimir Putin", (January 2023) // https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2023/01/09/eu-strongly-condemns-rss-decision-to-award-vladimir-putin/

101 Una Hajdari, "EU, US slam Bosnian Serb leader for awarding Putin highest honor," (January 2023) // https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-us-slam-bosnia-serb-leader-molorad-dodik-awarding-putin-honor/#:~:text=SARAJEVO%2C%20Bosnia%2DHerzegovina%20%E2%80%94%20European,joining%20the%2027%2Dmember%20bloc

102 Aljazeera, "Why has 'Z' been embraced by supporters of Russia's Ukraine war?" (March 2022) // https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/8/why-has-z-been-embraced-by-supporters-of-russias-ukraine-war

the West for the ongoing dispute between Russia and Ukraine.[103] The results of a public opinion survey conducted by the Belgrade Center for Security Policy, highlighted that 45.5% of the respondents in Serbia believe that their country should be neutral in the Ukraine war and not impose sanctions on Russia.[104] In fact, Serbia refused to join Brussels' sanctions against Russia, by explaining that it would harm itself with such an action,[105] but voted in favour of the UN resolution condemning Russia's actions. However, Serbia's President Aleksandar Vučić tried to continue his policy of balancing between the West and Russia.[106] He strengthened the ties with Russia by signing an agreement of mutual consultations in foreign policy matters in September 2022.[107]

These dynamics confirm a situation of opportunity for both the EU and Russia, depending on the measures they will take to be more present. The only way for the EU to be more present in the Western Balkans is by demonstrating an enhanced enlargement strategy towards the countries. The conflict has led to an increased sense of urgency among some EU member states to support enlargement policies and furthermore the integration of Ukraine and other Eastern Partnership countries into the EU. The conflict has also highlighted the need for the EU to have a more coherent and coordinated approach to its neighbourhood policy.

In response to the conflict, the EU has increased its financial and technical assistance to Ukraine and other Eastern Partnership countries and has launched new initiatives, like the new Eastern Partnership framework that aims to deepen political and economic integration between the EU and its Eastern neighbours.[108] However, the conflict has also created new challenges for EU integration. The EU's relationship with Russia has become more strained, making it more difficult for the EU to engage with Russia on issues of mutual concern. In addition, the conflict has created new security concerns for the EU, leading to a renewed focus on defence and security cooperation. All these elements together have positively impacted the integration process of the Western Balkan countries. The increased sense of urgency paired with the highlighted need for a renewed enlargement approach and furthermore, the need for a renewed defence and security cooperation was perceived in some Western Balkan countries as a new impetus for the enlargement policies of the EU in general[109]

One can argue that the war in Ukraine will postpone EU enlargement. However, considering the need to concentrate diplomatic engagement and financial resources on the armed conflict, because 'dealing with peacebuilding may monopolise the resources needed to speed up enlargement in the Western Balkans'[110] Russia's invasion of Ukraine

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[103] Vuk Vuksanovic et. al, "Beyond Sputnik and RT: How does Russian Soft Power in Serbia really work?" (December 2022) // https://bezbednost.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/How-does-Russian-soft-power-in-Serbia-really-work.pdf

[104] Vuk Vuksanovic at.al, "Public Perception of Serbian Foreign Policy in the Midst of the Ukraine War" (December 2022) // https://bezbednost.org/en/publication/public-perception-of-serbian-foreign-policy-in-the-midst-of-the-war-in-ukraine/

[105] Euronews, "Despite EU sanctions, Serbian president secures gas deal with Putin", (May 2022) // https://www.euronews.com/2022/05/29/despite-eu-sanctions-serbian-president-secures-gas-deal-with-putin

[106] "The effects of the war in Ukraine on the Western Balkans", *Strategic Comments*, 28(4), x–xii.(April 2022) https://doi.org/10.1080/13567888.2022.2110743

[107] AP News, "EU candidate Serbia and Russia sign foreign policy agreement", (September 2022) // https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-united-nations-general-assembly-foreign-policy-moscow-serbia-c63b0ca1271dd5b2ee3008bdcbb7de23

[108] Piotr Buras and Kai Olaf Lang, "Partnership for Enlargement: A new way to integrate Ukraine and the Eu's Eastern Neighborhood" (June 2022) // https://ecfr.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Partnership-for-Enlargem.ent-A-new-way-to-integrate-Ukraine-and-the-EUs-eastern-neighbourhood.pdf

[109] Vuk Vuksanovic, et. al, supra note 104.

[110] Andre Sapir, "Ukraine and the EU: Enlargement at a New Crossroads", *Intereconomics*, Vol. 57, No. 4 (2022): 215.

and the shift in the current geopolitical landscape showed that the EU had to reassess how the enlargement policies can respond to new realities. As described above, the EU has long been strongly engaged in the region and this was reaffirmed by the different initiatives the EU launched. But, despite all this, while theoretically the Berlin process demonstrated and reaffirmed the EU's commitment, in practice the political reality shows another picture, since accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia started only in July 2022, nearly five months after the outbreak of the war between Ukraine and Russia.

One can argue that the Berlin process has achieved its objective of "renewing attention towards the Western Balkan countries' EU aspirations"[111] or that the communication from the EC in 2020 enhanced the accession process by giving a more credible EU perspective. However, in the end, it was neither the Berlin Process nor the Commission's communications but the political context and especially the war in Ukraine which strengthened the EU's actorness and catapulted the European Union towards greater geopolitical assertiveness and unity. This is a long-awaited response to the Unions' considerations of the existing external actors as competitors and as their counterweights[112]. Thus, "things are changing"[113] as stated by Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama at the EU-Western Balkan summit, held in Tirana in December 2022, where Western Balkan leaders welcomed the EU's new mindset to strengthen ties with the region through a series of agreements, a drive reinvigorated by Russia's war in Ukraine.

EU officials and diplomats stated that Russia's war in Ukraine had underscored the importance for the bloc of bringing the Western Balkans closer to stabilise the region and counter the influence there of both Russia and China.[114] The evidence shows that just after the invasion, huge steps were taken in the integration process of the Western Balkan countries. The EU started accession talks with both Albania and North Macedonia in July 2022, and in December 2022 the EU granted candidacy status to Bosnia and Herzegovina and offered candidacy status for Ukraine and Moldova, and membership perspective for Georgia – evidence that the geopolitics of enlargement are gaining importance.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis highlights that Russia exercises its influence by using a proactive and reactive approach. While the proactive approach is mainly determined by their political and economic involvement, Russia exerts its power reactively by mainly capitalising on the EU's hesitant commitment regarding the countries' integration process. This is particularly pronounced in times of uncertainties and crises, as seen during the COVID-19 pandemic and the Ukraine war, as both Russia and the EU could amplify their stand in the Western Balkans.

Not only are historical, cultural, and religious ties profound in shaping Russia's influential reach in some of the Western Balkan countries, but these connections are used as political leverage and serve as a foundation for ensuring active participation in their political and economic affairs, as is evident in the case of Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (Republika Srpska). Nevertheless, specifically in the pro-Russian countries

[111] Christina Griessler, supra note 82, 24.
[112] Maja Bjelos, supra note 92, 19; Jure Pozgan et.al, supra note 83, 1139.
[113] European Council, "EU-Western Balkans summit in Tirana", (December 2022) // https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-summit/2022/12/06/
[114] Ibid.

of the Western Balkans, the EU's wavering commitment towards the region might have amplified Russia's leverage and, in the meantime, diminished the EU's role as a significant ally. Especially after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, the impact of Russia's influence became obvious, as the absence of sanctions in some Balkan countries, combined with the prevailing public view that Russia is not the aggressor in the conflict, served as telling indicators of Russia's sway in these nations. This further reveals that Russia's influence and impact penetrate beyond the political elite of these countries and have been ingrained in the perspectives and sentiments of a substantial segment of the population, especially in Serbia and in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

We must not treat the Western Balkan countries as a uniform entity when assessing and evaluating Russian influence and its impact. Despite periods of crisis and feelings of disappointment with the EU, the majority of Western Balkan nations have consistently upheld their pro-Western alignment. This was evident following Russia's invasion of Ukraine when most Western Balkan countries adopted a pro-Western stance in response. Hence, the current war in Ukraine and the pandemic are considered an impetus for a possible redefinition of the existing relations. While the pandemic bolstered Russia's position in the Western Balkans in general, the ongoing war highlights the existing pro-Russian and pro-Western fronts in the region. With the majority of Balkan nations taking a pro-Western stance and adhering to the EU agenda as their main national priority, the war affected undeniably the political perspective of the region's nations.

In these circumstances, the pro-Russian countries may have to deal with an as-yet-undefined set of obstacles when considering their integration efforts into the Euro-Atlantic structures. At the same time, the pro-Western and pro-Russian division has created a complex challenge not only for the countries of the Western Balkans but also for the other actors, who are "uncomfortably" placed to undertake new political decisions that must be clear and careful to maintain peace and stability in the region.

In conclusion: the relationship between the six countries of the Western Balkans and Russia will depend on the attitude or the relationship that will be established between Brussels and the Kremlin after the war in Ukraine, which is hard to accurately predict in the long term. However, the war in Ukraine can be seen as a catalyst to set the EU in motion. Firstly, it provided evidence that the geopolitics of enlargement are gaining importance and should rightfully be considered one of the most important foreign policies. Secondly, it has led to the realisation that the EU's strategic interest in a stable and secure environment in its near neighbourhood must go beyond who will be the next member.

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