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Chair of Russia and The International Order: History And Challenges

External Actors Shaping the National
Security Complex in the Western
Balkans: the EU's and Russia's Impact
in Kosovo and Serbia

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1. Abstract

The Western Balkans region is at the centre of international attention due to its complex geopolitical dynamics and historical conflicts. It is enclosed by the European Union, yet it remains one of the few areas on the continent's map not included in this "ever-closer union". Non-Western players now have more room to expand their influence in the area as a result of changes in the global geopolitical balance of power and EU expansion weariness. Employing a range of tools, Russia, Turkey, China, and the Gulf nations have stepped up their influence and contested the pro-Western stance of the area, influencing politics, economy, culture, and religion. However, the extent and character of their involvement vary considerably. The national security complex in this region, especially in Kosovo and Serbia, is significantly shaped by both the EU and Russia. This paper therefore examines the multi-layered dynamics of the security complex in the Western Balkans, focusing on the influences exerted by external actors on Kosovo and Serbia. Against the backdrop of historical rivalries and geopolitical tensions, the study examines the complicated interplay of political, economic, and security interests that define the region. Through a comprehensive analysis of primary sources and academic literature, the research sheds light on the different interests involved and highlights each country's role in shaping security dynamics. In addition, the paper examines the impact of these external interventions on regional stability and state sovereignty. By examining the nuanced interactions between external actors and local stakeholders, this study offers insights into the complex geopolitical landscape of the Western Balkans and its broader implications for international security and diplomacy.

2. Introduction

This chapter will focus on an historical and socio-economic analysis of the Western Balkans, with a stress on Serbia and Kosovo. Here, it is explored how the region's historical background affects its present geopolitical landscape and why, in order to fully comprehend today's reality, it is crucial to begin with this consideration. Moreover, this chapter provides analysis of the current military, political, economic, and social conditions of the concerned states, with special attention to their interactions with Russia and the EU. This contributes to the development of an improved understanding of regional dynamics. Thus, the general premises of the study will be determined, from which a more in-depth examination of the two major powers' respective influences will be deduced.

2.1 Terminology

This paper attempts to use the term “the Balkan peninsula” in a neutral sense to describe a particularly rocky and mountainous tongue of land that rises southeast of Europe and is itself a peninsular appendage of the vast Eurasian landmass. It is generally accepted that “Balkan” is a word and a name that came to the peninsula during the 14th-century Ottoman Turkish occupation¹. According to various sources, the word is actually derived from Turkish and means “mountain”². However, it is well known that the words “Balkan” and “the Balkans” are loaded with numerous cultural connotations and stereotypical images, some of which are understandably perceived as disparaging, derogatory or ambiguous at best, and that consequently the local population does not entirely accept these terms. The main practical reason why this paper uses them is because, to the majority of people, they most properly and instantly describe the region in question. The primary issue with the more neutral sounding term “South-eastern Europe” is that it encompasses a considerably larger region, which commonly includes Turkey, Cyprus and Moldova and ought also to include Georgia, Armenia, and Ukraine. A further problem that has been frequently overlooked in the West is that the term “South-eastern Europe” (*Südosteuropa*) “became an important concept in the geopolitical views of the Nazis”, which resulted in “the complete discrediting of this term in its German usage”³.

For several centuries, the term “Balkans” did not refer to the peninsula as a whole. The precise topography of this region of Europe remained poorly known in the West at the beginning of the 19th century, mostly due to the common notion that a massive mountain range existed that would

¹ Todorova, 2009, p. 27

² Weibel, 2002, p. 11; Castellan, 1994, p. 9

³ Teodorova, 1997, p. 28

have spanned the whole width of the Peninsula⁴. Between the 15th and the 18th centuries, a number of Western European explorers and geographers travelled to the area, but they were unable to identify the peninsula by name or by accurate physical description. It was not until 1808 that the German geographer Johann August Zeune used the term “Balkan Peninsula” for the first time to refer to this area⁵. Although the term “Balkans” was first used in literature to refer to the entire peninsula at the start of the 19th century, it took several decades for it to become widely accepted or exclusive. Actually, most writers did not use it with this meaning until the mid-19th century⁶. Other titles, including “Europa Balcanica”⁷ and “Eurasia Minor”, which encompasses the Balkans and the Near East⁸, have been adopted by certain Western authors in their works. The terms “European Turkey”, “Turkey of Europe”⁹, “Turkey in Europe”, “the European Ottoman Empire”, and “the Eastern Peninsula” were among the most widely used designations until the Congress of Berlin in 1878, particularly in Western Europe¹⁰. On the other hand, the area was known as “Rumelia” by the Ottoman emperors, which translates to “the land of the Romans”, i.e. Christians. The Ottoman rulers consequently favoured phrases like “Ottoman Europe” and “Imperial Rumelia” in opposition to the Europeans¹¹. Therefore, the concept of the Balkan region is fairly new.

The First World War definitively changed the perception of the Balkans in the rest of the continent by systematically associating it with negative political, social, cultural, and ideological connotations, thus giving to the term a pejorative dimension¹². As a result, the area started to conjure up ideas of strife and division. According to Castellan, the name Balkans has a “bad press” due to its complicated history, and “nobody wants to be Balkan”¹³. For example, many Croats have long maintained that their culture is alien to such traditions and that their identity is rooted exclusively in Central Europe. Hungarians, Slovenians, Moldavians, and Romanians do not want to be counted as part of the Balkans either; rather, they claim that their respective countries belong to Central or South-Eastern Europe¹⁴. The Greeks, for their part, prefer a Mediterranean affiliation.

⁴ Weibel, 2002, p. 11

⁵ Todorova, 2009, p. 26; Carter, 1977, p. 7

⁶ Todorova 2009, p. 26

⁷ Sundhaussen, 1999

⁸ Kaser, 2015

⁹ Boué, 1840

¹⁰ Todorova, 2009, p. 26

¹¹ Davutoglu 2010, p. 159

¹² Weibel, 2002, p. 14

¹³ Castellan, 1994, p. 11

¹⁴ Boia, 2001, p. 11

The EU presented the political idea of the Western Balkans during the Vienna European Council in December 1998¹⁵. Since then, EU politicians have used this phrase as a formula in their speeches. At the time, the EU did not provide a definition to clarify what exactly this concept means. Constructivists interpret it as referring to the sub-regional objective of European policy within a specific framework of “differentiated integration”¹⁶. Thus, a new term was conceived by the EU to refer to a particular area comprising the non-EU member states in the region¹⁷. Abazi and Doja state that “the Western Balkans are actually defined by what they are not (. . .). They are not EU members, and there is not an ‘Eastern’ counterpart but only the ‘Western Balkans’ and the European Union”¹⁸. Romania and Bulgaria could possibly have been categorised under the notion of “Eastern Balkans”, Greece as “Southern Balkans”, Slovenia or Hungary as “Northern Balkans”, but these terms were missing from the EU vocabulary. The Western Balkans situation perfectly illustrates how the EU’s standards-dissemination techniques are not only predicated on mental representations but also have the power to reconfigure the political geography of the area¹⁹. In this paper, the term “Western Balkans” is used to refer to the Balkan countries that are not part of the EU but are at various stages of EU accession: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro, and Serbia.

¹⁵ Vienna European Council, 1998

¹⁶ Dyson and Sepos, 2010, pp. 4–5

¹⁷ Kolstø, 2016, p. 1249

¹⁸ Abazi and Doja, 2016, p. 599

¹⁹ Bechev, 2011, p. 79

2.2 Historical background and social-economic context of the Western Balkans

2.2.1 Historical Overview

In ancient times, the Balkan peninsula served as a vital conduit between people in Europe and the eastern Mediterranean. But the area appeared to recede within itself after the Middle Ages. It was cut off from the rest of Europe first by Ottoman control and subsequently by Orthodox culture. It was not until the late 18th and early 19th centuries that the area experienced another contact with the wider world. Relations with Western Europe were particularly significant, as the locals tried to imitate the more politically and economically advanced Western European governments. Throughout the 20th century, these attempts caused plenty of turmoil and violence. Compared to the rest of Europe, the peninsula had a more complex topography, a more unique population, and a more obscure political system. Although it established peace, the Communist era partially cut off the region from the rest of Europe once more. Even though Yugoslavia plunged into violence with the fall of Communism, the Balkans remained rather peaceful during the Cold War era, and the West began to place a major focus on the area. Formerly merely latent centrifugal and nationalistic impulses were unleashed with the collapse of the communist regime and the strict bipolarism that characterised the postwar era. Separatist, ethnic, and religious clashes led to the dissolution of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Following their declarations of independence in 1991–1992, Bosnia, Macedonia, Slovenia, and Croatia fought a violent civil war with Serbia to protect their various ethnic enclaves in adjacent territories; following years of distress and UN and NATO operations, Kosovo and Montenegro likewise achieved independence. In fact, only a charismatic figure as Tito was able to maintain national unity among such a diverse mosaic of peoples. In a commentary in 2010, Ivan Krastev noted, rather dramatically, that “the Balkans still comprises an assemblage of frustrated protectorates and weak states”²⁰. It is actually challenging to limit the disintegrative behaviour that appears to be so typical of the Western Balkans in terms of both time and location. Until date, no nation, universal organisation, or regional body has been able to act alone to stop or resolve a crisis in the Balkans. This has solely been accomplished thus far through collaboration between a number of entities with distinct functional areas of expertise. Furthermore, although the ten-year ethnic-territorial fragmentation of Yugoslavia was temporarily ended by NATO’s unilateral military intervention in Kosovo, it did not eradicate any of the underlying socio-economic and political hazards to the region’s stability.

²⁰ Krastev, 2010

The US, the EU, and a few of its member states - most notably Germany, Austria, Italy, and the UK - have been the main external actors in the Western Balkans since the 1990s. The majority of the Western Balkan nations have their sights on Europe and seek to join the EU. While some of them - Montenegro and Serbia - have already started negotiations, others - Albania and North Macedonia - have candidate or potential candidate status. The enactment of the Stability Pact for Southeastern Europe in 1999 and the launch of the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP) in the same year served as milestones of the Union's engagement in the region. In light of Kosovo's independence, this approach was intended, among other objectives, to provide the Serbian population with a European viewpoint²¹. In addition, the European Council conference in Thessaloniki in 2003 marked a significant turning point in bilateral ties when the EU acknowledged the Western Balkan nations as prospective candidates. However, following Croatia's entry, it became evident that more expansion is improbable in the near future because of the internal tensions in Europe caused by the migrant issue and the extraordinary difficulties posed by Brexit. A vast majority of the local populace continues to favour the EU admission process, according to various opinion surveys, but this "enlargement fatigue" caused a loss of momentum, further reducing the likelihood of ultimate integration. The expansion agenda has slowly come back into focus as more EU officials grow concerned about democratic backsliding²² or escalating socioeconomic and racial tensions in the area. The European Commission approved a plan for "A credible enlargement perspective for an enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans" in February 2018 in response to EU Commission President Juncker's 2017 State of the Union address, which reaffirmed the region's openness to a European future. 2018 saw also two significant meetings between the EU and Western Balkans representatives, during which the European belief on the subject was reaffirmed. Nonetheless, those who demanded a far stronger EU commitment were not satisfied with the discussions. The disenchantment is mostly expressed by civil society actors who are frustrated by the EU's passivity towards rebuking the authoritarian inclinations of certain contemporary political figures. They accuse the EU of prioritising stability over upholding the democratic principles it purports to advocate. Actually, the EU and NATO were plagued by an overwhelming sense of fragility following the migrant crisis that culminated in 2015, the Brexit referendum in June 2016, and the election of Donald Trump as president. The EU member states struggled to maintain cohesion on border protection and migration regulations, two important issues that inevitably touch and are connected with Western Balkan security, in addition to the

²¹ Flessenkemper and Bütow, 2011

²² For explanation of Backsliding see Stojić, 2016

ongoing financial and Euro governance challenges. As a result, the two organizations - which were thought to represent the cornerstones of security and stability in the region - were found to be embroiled in an internal struggle.

The Republic of Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence on February 17th, 2008, was the single most significant break in the Western Balkans' goal of European integration. This challenged and encouraged disruptive trends in the Euro-Atlantic security framework, paving the way for more violations into Western Balkan security. Three sets of unresolved issues coexisted concurrently that made the Euro-Atlantic project vulnerable: the absence of EU cohesion in relation to the region (e.g., the recognition of Kosovo); persistent disagreements between the states; and ongoing internal vulnerability triggered by high-stakes political rivalries and ethnic tensions. As a result of its degradation, gaps were left open for other foreign actors - like Russia - to impact collaboration on both internal and external security. It must be noted though that the Russian Federation and the Balkans have a long history that dates to the 18th and 19th centuries. There, it has had a significant impact, notably on the Slavic and Orthodox populace, including the Macedonians, Montenegrins, and Serbs (both in Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina). With the goal of sowing discontent with the West and establishing itself as a contender to Western domination, Russia has worked to reinstate its historic role as the defender of Orthodox Christianity since President Vladimir Putin took office. Russia has also firmly stood with Serbia in the Kosovo conflict. Due to Russia's leverage as a permanent member of the UN Security Council and its ability to veto any binding decision on Kosovo in favour of Serbia, the country moved into the gaps with diplomatic, political, and media efforts on the Kosovo question²³. As the talks on Kosovo's status began in 2006, Russia became even more assertive²⁴. This ultimately led to an alliance of convenience and collaboration between the two states.

Overall, due to the peninsula's strategic location, intricate ethnic background, competing religious views, and economics, regional and supra-regional forces have long regarded it as vital and made it the focus of international competition. The slow-boiling instability in the Western Balkans, in actuality, has far less to do with ethnicity than it does with the interference of external players who use the socioeconomic circumstances to their own benefit. Federica Mogherini, then-vice president of the European Commission and high representative of the EU for foreign affairs and security policy, stated in March 2017 that "[t]he Balkans can easily

²³ Radeljić, 2017

²⁴ Maass, 2017; Bechev, 2017

become one of the chessboards where the big power game can be played”²⁵. A few days later, David McAllister, the Foreign Affairs Committee Chair of the European Parliament at the time, said on a similar note that “[g]eopolitics has returned to the Balkans [...] We are seeing growing Russian influence, we are seeing growing Turkish influence, the United States is a player, the European Union is a player, so there are different interests at stake”²⁶.

In this context, the Western Balkan states most in favour of the EU are Kosovo and Albania, followed by North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina²⁷. Yet things differ in Serbia, which formally professes itself friendly to the EU while also forging closer ties with China and Russia²⁸. In actuality, Serbia has navigated the bipolar tension since the historic break with Stalin in 1948 by becoming entangled in the rivalry between the US and the USSR: Tito, an orthodox Communist until his passing, backed Moscow’s intervention in Hungary in 1956 but denounced it in 1968 on the grounds that it was an attempt to stifle the Prague Spring; if Yeltsin’s Russia failed to assert itself diplomatically against the United States and NATO in the 1990s, despite offering Belgrade some limited economic support and serving as a mouthpiece for Serbian requests in the UN Security Council, Vladimir Putin’s ascent has brought Moscow back to prominence in the Western Balkans²⁹. Despite Serbia’s commitment to EU membership and the worsening of ties between the EU and Russia, relations between the two countries have actually continued to improve.

To fully appreciate the complexity of Russian and EU participation in the area today, one must have a solid knowledge of these past occurrences. In actuality, it makes it possible to spot behavioural patterns and strategic inclinations, offering insightful information about the long-term goals and ambitions of every player. Moreover, modern politics and international relations are greatly impacted by historical legacies. The current political attitudes and behaviours of Serbia and Kosovo are influenced by historical grievances, ethnic conflicts, and territorial disputes. These factors also determine their positions when interacting with other entities such as the EU and Russia. Through the examination of them, the following chapter will provide a deeper understanding of the limits and incentives guiding the behaviours of important stakeholders in the area.

²⁵ European External Action Service, 2017

²⁶ Rankin, 2017

²⁷ Lika, 2021, p. 18

²⁸ Sainovic, 2021, pp. 75–76

²⁹ McBride, 2023

2.2.2 *Socio-economic environment*

According to Sundhaussen, the Balkan area stands out from the rest of Europe and became a historically distinct entity due to nine unique characteristics: the modes of state and nation-building processes; mindset and tendency to historical mythopoesis; anti-Western attitudes and patterns of cultural insulating from western and east central Europe; instabilities and ethnic diversity; Byzantine-Orthodox heritage; loss and late acceptance of ancient heritage; Ottoman-Islamic past; socio-economic stagnation in the modern era; being an instrument of Great Power politics³⁰.

Internal vulnerabilities, which are defined as sources of instability that can increase a country's or region's susceptibility to outside pressures from state or non-state actors, are present in the Western Balkans at both the national and regional levels, contributing to the region's overall instability. The emergence of nationalism, old grudges, corruption, inadequate governmental institutions, a degraded media landscape, and unstable economic conditions are some of these weaknesses.

As a matter of fact, the Western Balkan nations have experienced a rise in nationalism over the past twenty years, which has affected all aspect of life including politics, economics, civil society, and the media. In particular, revisionist history and nationalism are still undermining Serbia's ties to its neighbours in the Balkans, especially with Kosovo and Croatia.

Significant instability has also been generated by corruption in the media, governmental system, private sector, and civil society. Prime Minister Alexander Vucic of Serbia shifted from being an ultranationalist to a pro-EU reformer, pledging to give the fight against corruption top priority. Although Vucic gained prominence on this front³¹, several believe that by weakening state institutions and ruling by nepotism, he is personifying political power³². Furthermore, Western Balkan nations are especially vulnerable to external pressure and transnational attacks because of their weak and repressed governmental structures. Serbs are gravely concerned about Vucic's growing power concentration and even his encroaching dictatorship. In recent years, members of the ethnic group that is majority Albanian in Kosovo have regularly participated in violent anti-government rallies that use tear gas and burning in an effort to sabotage efforts to draw boundaries and normalise ties with Serbia and Montenegro. An obvious example is the opposition to the agreement to establish the Association of Serb Communes in

³⁰ Sundhaussen quoted in Rutar, 2014, p. 11

³¹ Carmona, 2016

³² Drogojlo, 2016

Kosovo, which resulted in violent demonstrations and a political crisis due to concerns that giving minority Serbs more autonomy would jeopardise Kosovo's sovereignty.³³

The media environment has been significantly damaged and constrained by state control of the media and limits on press and speech rights. This is especially true in Serbia because of unclear media ownership, lax laws and regulations, and a general lack of confidence in the media and the journalism field. It has been said that the tabloid press practices yellow journalism, while television is more likely to provide "info-tainment" that "casts a serious shadow over serious news".

In summary, the most important challenges since the fall of communism have been to create more "horizontally structured" civil societies and economies based on the rule of law by eschewing the dominance of "vertical" power relations and structures, "ethnic collectivism", and frequently gangsterish "power clans" based on extensive use of patronage and corruption.

In actuality, the Western Balkans' terrible economic circumstances represent yet another significant weakness. Emerging Europe had a period of transition in the 1990s, but with significant regional and national differences in the magnitude of changes. The Western Balkans also lagged behind Central and Southeastern Europe in a number of transitional metrics. As in other parts of Emerging Europe, the economic boom of the early 2000s delivered sustained rises in earnings. Both the absolute numbers of poverty (as determined by the headcount) and its depth (as determined by the poverty gap) declined precipitously³⁴. Still, mean consumption in Central and Eastern Europe remained significantly lower. Inequality benefited unevenly from rapid development, and the early 2000s saw significant rises in disparity (as assessed by the Gini index), driven by increases at the top³⁵. In absolute terms, everyone seemed to have prospered but as the top's part climbed compared to the bottom's section, discrepancies widened

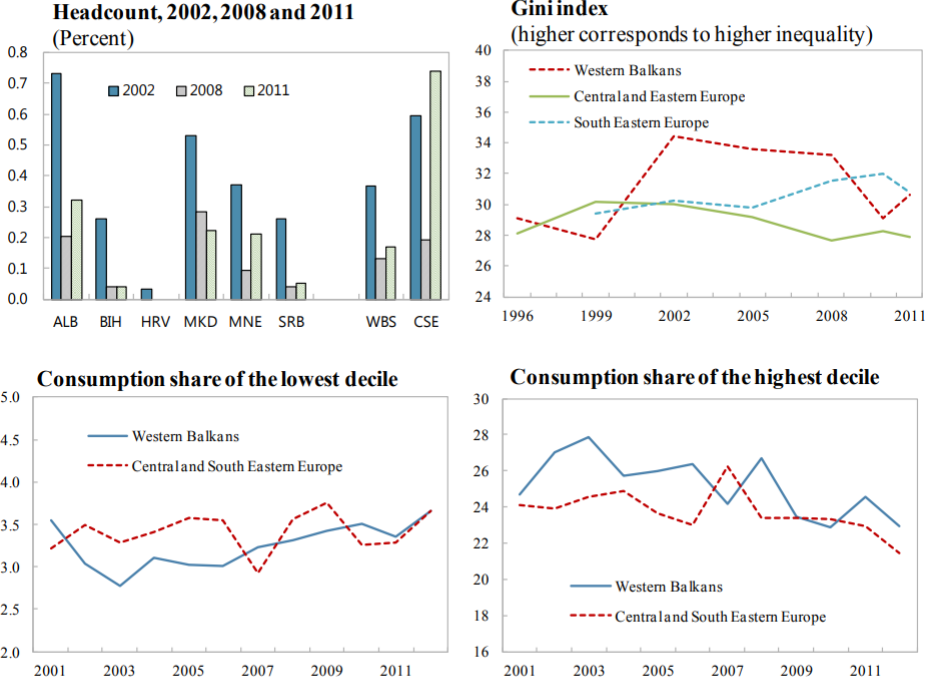
³³ Tiffin, 2016

³⁴ The headcount is the percent of the population living in households with consumption per person below the poverty line. The poverty line used in this section is USD 38 per month, corresponding to the World Bank USD 1.25 per day extreme poverty line (in 2005 PPP, as proposed by Ravallion, Chen and Sangraula, 2009). The poverty gap is the mean distance below the poverty line as a proportion of the poverty line. While the headcount provides an estimate of the number of poor, the poverty gap provides an additional metric of the depth of poverty. Poverty rates at national poverty lines are considerably higher, in the order of magnitude of 15-30 percent. As these vary across countries, focus here is on the 1.25 USD per day line; alternative poverty lines, including national poverty lines are discussed in Section VI.

³⁵ The Gini coefficient is the most commonly used measure of inequality, ranging from 0 (full equality) to 100 (maximum inequality). It is computed based on the Lorenz curve, which plots the proportion of the total income of the population (y axis) that is cumulatively earned by the bottom x percent of the population. The line at 45 degrees thus represents perfect equality of incomes. The Gini coefficient can then be thought of as the ratio of the area that lies between the line of equality and the Lorenz curve over the total area under the line of equality.

(Figure 2). Throughout the area, inequality increased until 2005; however, following that year, the proportion of the top decile decreased in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, and to a smaller extent, Montenegro. Prior to the economic downturn, poverty was still declining in the Western Balkans. Data at the macro level indicates a rise in poverty in Serbia. Since the 2008 financial crisis had a significant impact on several of these nations, so the region's rates of poverty, unemployment, and public debt are still quite high nowadays. Tens of thousands of Kosovars left their nation in 2016 to seek safety in Western Europe, escaping the failing government and corrupt economy.

Figure 2: Poverty, inequality and consumption shares



Source: World Bank, Povcal.
 Note: Some year-on-year fluctuations (for instance in 2007 and 2009) can be explained by changes in the sample as data is not available for all countries, for all years.

In terms of society, the challenging geography permitted an intricate anthropological evolution. Peoples and cultures mix together as a result of the lack of distinct ethnic and cultural boundaries. In truth, the Balkan Peninsula is typically portrayed as a border between various traditions - Catholicism, Christian orthodoxy, and Islam - as well as a region where problematic interactions exist between various ethnic groups and peoples with Slavic, Latin, Finno-Ugric, Greek, and Turkish ancestry. This strange reality is exemplified by the fate of a Balkan people of southern Slavic origin who belong to the so-called Dinaric race: although speaking one language, they write with two different alphabets and identify as Muslims (Bosnians), Serbians, and Croats. The sole attribute that separates them from one another among the many cultural characteristics is their religious affiliation: some are Muslims, others are Catholic Christians, and some are Orthodox Christians. These individuals, who were separated into three groups,

were involved in historical conflicts between various political factions. Nonetheless, these three ethnic groups joined together many times in the 20th century to establish a unified state, creating the multicultural society that would eventually become the first and second Yugoslavia, the kingdom of Serbians, Croatians, and Slovenians.

The media has failed to do an adequate job of portraying the times of harmonious cohabitation and appropriate applications of multiculturalism; in fact, Yugoslavia is frequently mentioned in terms of tyranny, dictatorship, and an absence of freedom. However, it is remembered by the former Yugoslavians as a time of harmony, brotherhood, cooperation, openness, and multiethnic building of a common future. Open to both the East and the West, it was a politically close European nation that had supported the Movement of Non-Aligned Countries against all forms of imperialism in Africa, Latin America, and Asia. In the past, neighbours would gather together to celebrate all different festivities. This bilingual, multireligious, egalitarian community served as an example of harmonious cohabitation with a high level of citizen security, respect for one another, and intercultural communication. There was a sense of both unity and totality at the same time: a common future vision and a sense of community.

There were other moments when the Balkans' cultural plurality turned out to be a liability: during global financial crises, hegemonic lust, and destabilising behaviours, multicultural communities seemed particularly exposed. To seriously destabilise a multicultural community, it was sufficient to highlight the contrasts rather than the similarities and to begin praising specific models of society, nation, and culture as opposed to other types that were presented as a competing example. These customs originated in the years leading up to the First and Second World Wars, and in the case of the Western Balkans, in the years following the collapse of the Berlin Wall. Peoples and nationalities who had lived in peace for fifty years collided once more in the late 20th century: Albanians against Greeks, Macedonians against Bulgarians, Serbians against Croatians, and so on. There is a lexicon that has persisted from those crises and multiculturalism-fuelled periods that is employed when discussing Balkan identity, that is "Balkan hatred", "powder keg" and "Balkanization", warning signs of the danger that multiculturalism poses.

In conclusion, the post-Communist countries of the Western Balkans continue to struggle with extensive organised crime, high unemployment, and the displacement of tens of thousands of people. No place in the region is immune to the social deformation that has followed the atrocities of the 1990s Yugoslav conflicts, despite Kosovo and Bosnia Herzegovina being the

most hit³⁶. Though several of the Western Balkan nations present the vulnerabilities under examination, not all of them do. This is an important point to keep in mind. Table 1 illustrates the overall vulnerability picture and this variance by showing the presence of such vulnerabilities in Serbia and Kosovo, two countries that will be the focus of this paper. The scale of vulnerability ranges from least vulnerable (one diamond) to most vulnerable (three diamonds).

Table 1. Internal Vulnerabilities in the Western Balkans

COUNTRY	NATIONALISM	HISTORICAL GRIEVANCES	CORRUPTION	WEAK STATE INSTITUTIONS	WEAK MEDIA	ECONOMIC INSTABILITY
SERBIA	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆
KOSOVO	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆◆

Source: Danielle Johnson, Vera Zakem, and Bill Rosenau, CNA

To comprehend structural weaknesses, evaluate economic linkages, and determine policy objectives and trade-offs, this socioeconomic study was critical. The examination of these variables yielded insights into the effectiveness and leverage of external actors' attempts to win over hearts and minds, foster stability, and further their geopolitical interests, as well as structural shortcomings and imbalances within Kosovo and Serbia that may affect their susceptibility to outside influence. The two case studies selected for this research, Kosovo and Serbia, are examined in further detail in the next two sections. This will give a greater understanding of each of their situations, which will be helpful in the analysis about the local involvement of the EU and Russia.

³⁶ See Kaldor, M., Bojičić, V., and Vejvoda, I., 1997. See also Gligorov, V., Kaldor, M., and Tsoukalis, L., 1999; Emerson, M., 1999; and Pugh, M., 2002

2.3 A closer look at Serbia

With seven million residents, an extensive territory in comparison to its neighbours, and a longstanding diplomatic history, Serbia possesses an important role in the area. Due to its position, the nation has interacted with a wide range of Western and non-Western players, including Turkey, China, Russia, and the United Arab Emirates. As a result, Serbia faces difficulties and conundrums regarding its place in the modern world, wondering about its allies, whose support and understanding it can rely on, its place and values, and the dangers that lurk in the tumultuous international environment of today.

In recent years, Serbia has demonstrated a desire to become more European and has started the process of integration. When Serbia signed the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) with the EU in 2008, the accession process formally got underway. As a result, Serbian nationals visiting the Schengen region are no longer required to have a visa. The country filed its application in 2009, and it was officially given candidate status by the European Council in 2012. Up to 24 chapters were covered in the screenings and discussions that started in 2013 and 2014.

However, ties between Serbia and Russia date back many centuries. Relations between the two nations deteriorated as a result of Yugoslavia's collapse and the Soviet Union's disintegration, and during the 1990s, Russia focused more on its internal reform programme as fighting flared in the Western Balkans. Nonetheless, the discussions surrounding Kosovo's political status provided fresh momentum to ties between them³⁷. Together, the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) and President Aleksandr Vučić's Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) administration are steadfast opponents of increased transatlantic and European integration and Kosovo's sovereignty acceptance. The symbiotic support that the Serbian government and church enjoy from Russian Federation President Vladimir Putin is an essential element of their operations. Accordingly, there exists a Belgrade-Moscow-Russo-SOC triumvirate bound together by shared as well as distinct goals. Their propaganda efforts and influence operations create and strengthen ethnic Serb populations who are either hostile to or suspicious of liberal Western institutions, or they support elites who are subservient to Moscow.

The Kosovo issue continued to dominate Serbian internal and international affairs in the early 2010s, as Pristina stepped up its diplomatic efforts to gain legitimacy. In 2010, Serbia replaced its pro-European catchphrases with a real pro-European strategy under Tadić's leadership, a

³⁷ Bechev, 2017, p. 53

marked divergence from the Kostunica government's initiatives in both tone and content. Serbia consented to unrestricted open discussions with Kosovo in September 2010, covering a range of specific bilateral problems as well as the relationship between Kosovo Serbs and Serbia. This changed approach was due to the International Court of Justice's decision on July 22, 2010, which stated that Kosovo's declaration of independence was not against international law³⁸. This was a setback for Serbia, which believed it had a compelling legal case even as the actual political landscape was shifting in a different way. In truth, Kosovo's 2008 decision to secede from Serbia has had a significant impact on its foreign and domestic policy. Both the opposition and the government firmly opposed this unilateral action, which also resulted in miscommunications and hostilities with bordering governments and other entities who acknowledged Kosovo's independence. Significant economic concessions were offered to Russia in return for its support (both within and outside the UN Security Council) of Serbia's refusal to recognise Kosovo's independence. One such concession was the transfer of control of Serbia's oil and gas monopoly, NIS, to Gazprom. Nonetheless, the EU's ability to work with Serbia to draft a common statement and act as a mediator in the negotiations between Pristina and Belgrade was undoubtedly a major achievement.

Regarding military matters, the signing of a bilateral defence pact in November 2013 gave Serbia and Russia's military cooperation more impetus. Connections were strengthened in line with the objectives delineated in the updated strategic partnership framework, which was signed in May 2013. Joint military exercises and enhanced military-technical cooperation were consequently made possible. In November 2014, the first military exercise involving Russian and Serbian soldiers was held (SREM-2014). It was the biggest military drill Serbia has held in decades, with over 400 participants³⁹. Russia hosted the second military exercise, known as Slavic Brotherhood, in September 2015. It involved Serbian, Belarussian, and Russian forces participating in a drill meant to face a Maidan scenario. In October 2016, Serbia conducted its third military exercise, known as Slavic Brotherhood 2016, while Serbian soldiers also participated in a civil emergency practice organised by NATO in nearby Montenegro. In June 2017, Belarus hosted the fourth trilateral military exercise, Slavic Brotherhood 2017, which focused on teaming up to combat terrorism. Additionally, Serbia and Russia have been conducting annual flying and tactical drills known as the Brotherhood of Aviators of Russia and Serbia since 2015⁴⁰. The EU has frequently voiced its displeasure with Serbia's involvement in

³⁸ Declaration by Judge Simma, 2010

³⁹ In Serbia, 2014

⁴⁰ see, e.g., Balkan Insight, 2016a

military exercises between Russia and Belarus, claiming that it “sends the wrong signal”⁴¹. Despite being militarily neutral, Serbia has developed strong ties also with the EU, which has allowed it to take part in many EU crisis management initiatives, including those in the Horn of Africa, Somalia, Mali, and the Central African Republic, as well as the EU’s Balkan Battle Group (HELBROC). Additionally, Serbia has increased its collaboration with NATO over time. The nation completed an Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) in 2015, joined the Partnership for Peace programme (PfP) in 2006, and actively participates in NATO’s Peace and Security programme. As seen above, its participation in the Western military cooperation architecture, which the EU commends in its annual reports, has occurred concurrently with (rather than at the price of) increased military collaboration with Russia. As stated by the Ministry of Defence of Serbia, “when it comes to activities with the Russian Armed Forces [...] equal attention [is paid] to all other key partners”⁴². In short, it “is doing its best to profit from military co-operation with both the West and Russia”⁴³. As an example, Serbia concurrently matched its heightened involvement in NATO institutions with a prompt entry into the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). It joined as the sole non-CIS country (apart from Afghanistan) in early 2013 and was later invited to participate as an observer in joint exercises and to support the sub-regional anti-drug operation “Channel”⁴⁴. The Serbian army’s engagement in fourteen exercises with NATO members and allies and four military drills with Russia in 2021 shows that, overall, Serbia's ties in this area remain far closer to NATO and the EU than they are to the CSTO and Russia. It had conducted five military drills with Russia and twenty-three with NATO in 2019⁴⁵.

By laying this foundation, Vučić has put Serbia in a position to quickly capitalise on any possible conflicts in the area. His goal is empowerment, pursued at the right moment. In actuality, Serbia’s foreign policy will most likely continue to involve opportunistic oscillations between Russia and the EU. Undoubtedly, the EU was Serbia's only choice at the start of the previous ten years. Later, a growing number of people started to express concerns as they realised that Europeanization was difficult and required sacrifices, some of which would have an impact on national pride. EU scepticism was ripe because, in the meanwhile, EU membership had evolved into a sort of movable goal that was always ten years away. Thus, the idea that joining the EU would not be the wisest course to take was raised. Kosovo’s separation

⁴¹ Balkan Insight, 2015b

⁴² Balkan Insight, 2015a

⁴³ Bechev, 2017, p. 190

⁴⁴ Belarus News, 2017

⁴⁵ Sterić, Bjeloš, & Ignjatijević, p. 37

was the last, essential step that demonstrated that this was not indeed Serbia's unquestionable objective. Prime Minister Kostunica's Democratic Party of Serbia, the dominant force in the ruling coalition at the time, attempted to persuade its allies, particularly Tadic's Democratic Party, that Serbia ought to renounce both NATO and the EU since they helped facilitate Kosovo's secession. It was easy to notice the signals that Serbia had identified a new path. The parliament unexpectedly and without public discussion approved a resolution in December 2007 declaring Serbia to be neutral. At the time, being neutral meant (and still means) little more than "no NATO membership," but it was the most exquisite surprise Russia could have gotten because it prevented the Atlantic Alliance's expansion into the Balkans.

Following 2008, Serbia's foreign policy was based on an ideological formula that aimed to appease both internal supporters and international allies, with Brussels, Moscow, Washington, and Beijing serving as the four pillars. The order of the capitals in the formula would sometimes change, but Brussels always kept the leading position. This formula contained many messages, and the message to the EU was that Serbia had alternatives it might use if Brussels continued to keep Serbia on a tightrope, constantly raising the accession bar and asking the impossible.

2.4 A closer look at Kosovo

Kosovo is an unfinished state. Serbian authority over it was ended by NATO airstrikes in 1999, and UNMIK established a *de facto* protectorate with strong NATO and EU participation. When EULEX took over from UNMIK in 2008, the EU gained total authority. Kosovans continued to be *de jure* citizens of both Serbia and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, and from 2003 to 2006, they were also citizens of the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro, despite their total separation from Serbia. Kosovans were officially converted into citizens of the Republic of Serbia only when the former broke up in 2006. A new constitution founded on the Ahtisaari plan was passed in the wake of Kosovo's 2008 declaration of independence, characterising the territory as "a state of its citizens". The new citizenship legislation for Kosovo also went into force on the same day. The primary goal was to create a population by applying a very liberal and inclusive "new state" model⁴⁶ that grants citizenship to all people who permanently reside on its territory (in this case, former FRY citizens who were living in Kosovo in 1998 and/or holders of UNMIK documents)⁴⁷. Despite the fact that the first Kosovo passports were distributed in the summer of 2008, the towns with a majority of Serbs, particularly those in northern Kosovo near the town of Mitrovica, reject the authority of the Kosovan government. Serbian law is still in effect in these enclaves. After the general political marginalisation of ethnic Albanians in the 1990s, their political self-exclusion from Serbian citizenship, and the establishment of a parallel society, matters have turned around since 2008. Numerous members of the Serb minority now reject Kosovo citizenship, believing it to be illegitimate, and have established a new opposite community. A portion of Kosovo's territory known as "the North", which consists of three municipalities with a predominantly Serb population, is effectively unchecked by the government.

Since its founding, Kosovo's international legitimacy has been disputed. The UN Security Council, which is the last arbiter of international legitimacy, refused to recognise its proclamation of independence, notably China and Russia rejected the request. There are three levels of contestation. First, it is essentially territorial; Serbia maintains that Kosovo is still a part of its territory. In the second, European identity is at stake. Five of the 27 EU members have refused to acknowledge Kosovo's independence, depriving it of legitimacy within the

⁴⁶ See Brubaker, 1992

⁴⁷ The first major intervention affecting the totality of Serbian citizens on the territory of internationally-administered Kosovo and the first move towards the establishment of a separate body of Kosovo residents/citizens was initiated already in 2000. UNMIK issued a regulation establishing the Central Civic Registry for 'residents of Kosovo' and had been issuing new Kosovo identification cards and travel documents that, as it was stated, did not determine a resident's citizenship. See Imeri, 2006 and Krasniqi, 2010

framework of the strongest post-war historical trend on the continent - European integration. The third layer involves a global/ideological tug-of-war in which some nations perceive Kosovo as an outcome of either US or Western unilateralism, with the consequence that Kosovo is accepted by 75 countries globally, with a low number of non-aligned governments. The concept that Kosovo may have a status other than the one it currently has unites all three layers and creates a psychological weight for the region in its interactions with the world at large.

The desire for independence from Yugoslavia emerged far earlier than comparable aspirations elsewhere, notwithstanding Kosovo's late formal declaration of independence. It differs from the other ones, though, in that it was the only country that was never a Yugoslav republic, making it unable to assert its sovereignty based on the Badinter Committee's ruling⁴⁸. Rather, the Kosovo case is made on the grounds that it is justified by a certain set of conditions (international protectorate, *de facto* independence, international status mediation, quasi-federal entity within Yugoslavia, and widespread breaches of human rights)⁴⁹. This has frequently been referred to as *sui generis*, i.e. a singular instance of a nation asserting its right to self-determination⁵⁰.

In order to achieve "statehood", Kosovo had to negotiate with outside parties in a pragmatic way, allowing for hitherto unheard-of levels of outside influence over its policies in return for financial and political backing. This approach inexorably led to the development of numerous dependencies and relationships with foreign parties⁵¹. Specifically, the necessity to globalise the self-determination dilemma in the 1990s established the current framework of essential reliance on Western nations⁵². The state's political elite allowed an unparalleled degree of foreign involvement in micromanaging the whole post-conflict rebuilding, institution-building, and policymaking process for over ten years following NATO's intervention and throughout the UN's governance of the region. In order to complete its monitored independence, solidify its internal and external autonomy, and integrate into regional and international organisations after 2008, Kosovo depended on external assistance. Its international connections are pursued within

⁴⁸ The opinions of the Badinter Committee have been also criticised for transferring the concept of *uti possidetis* from the post-colonial context to Eastern Europe and thus precluding the redrawing of administrative boundaries. See for example Radan, 2002

⁴⁹ Written Statement by the United Kingdom, 2009

⁵⁰ The declaration of independence also advances a *sui generis* argument. 'Observing that Kosovo is a special case arising from Yugoslavia's non-consensual break-up and is not a precedent for any other situation': Preamble, Kosovo Declaration of Independence

⁵¹ Visoka, 2018

⁵² Weller, 2009

the framework of this state creation and recognition battle, which has unparalleled impact over foreign policy decisions.

Weak and small governments typically try to make up for their lack of security by allying with more powerful ones and reaping the rewards of military affiliation. Kosovo's national security is wholly dependent on Western nations. Even though the country has its own internal law enforcement agencies, EULEX's European police and NATO forces keep watching over zones that are sensitive to ethnic tensions. Legal limitations on the military operations of Kosovo's Security Forces remain in place, and the Serb minority is opposing present attempts to establish a legitimate army and causing international hesitancy. Kosovo hopes to eventually become a member of NATO in order to safeguard its security, but the prospects are still far off as there are substantial barriers both domestically and internationally. Despite these obstacles, Kosovo succeeded in 2014 to gain access to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly as an observer state, has improved communication with NATO, and has proactively engaged in talks about the U.S.-Adriatic Charter (A5).

Kosovo's alignment with Western states also derives from its foreign aid dependency. Kosovo is among the poorest countries in Europe. Its projected GDP per capita was US\$9,600 in 2016, and although it had grown at a pace of 3–5 per cent during the previous ten years, unemployment lingered at over 30 per cent. With an estimated yearly contribution of between €60 and €70 million, the EU is Kosovo's largest benefactor. Germany has donated more than €43 million, the United States around €30 million, and Switzerland about €13.5 million. Through World Bank programmes, since the conflict's conclusion Western governments have also contributed and overseen around \$400 million in different sectors, including energy, education, public sector reform, agriculture, the financial sector, and social inclusion⁵³. With the help of this aid, Kosovo's public finances, public transit, economy, environment, education, and rule of law have all improved⁵⁴.

While Kosovo has primarily focused on gaining recognition for its statehood, which has hindered the country's ability to formulate a true foreign policy and voice opinions on regional and international issues⁵⁵, the state has also supported several foreign policy initiatives by Western nations, such as denouncing Russia's acquisition of Crimea and enforcing sanctions on the latter. "Russia has lost most of the international credibility and legitimacy that would allow

⁵³ World Bank, 2015, p.11

⁵⁴ MEI, 2016

⁵⁵ Visoka, 2018

it to preach about international peace, justice, and stability”, said Kosovo’s Foreign Minister Enver Hoxhaj in August 2014. For him, at the moment Russia is the biggest danger to global peace and security⁵⁶. In actuality, Kosovo is among the Western Balkan nations that is most supportive of American and European integration⁵⁷. According to a 2018 public opinion study, 93.6 per cent of Kosovars are in favour of joining the EU⁵⁸. Notwithstanding its repeated and persistent inability to carry out the necessary changes, the administration has elevated EU integration to the top of its national policy agenda. For example, Kosovo signed the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) in 2015, but since it came into effect in April 2016, the nation has not made much headway in implementing the extensive political, economic, and legal changes required for eventual membership. Additionally, the lengthy changes needed and the fact that some EU countries have not yet recognised Kosovo make the chances of joining in the near future bleak. It is accurate to state, therefore, that contradictory signals have been given: although the EU has a strong presence in Kosovo, the country’s future EU membership process is not anticipated to get underway in the foreseeable future. Meanwhile, the EU practically controls the region, but because five EU members still reject Kosovo's independence, it is unable to speak or act with a unified voice.

Overall, Kosovo’s political inclination is definitely towards the Euro-Atlantic alliance; this is largely due to strategic involvement to secure the legitimacy of its sovereignty from beyond, but it also reflects the ideological inclinations of its elite. The growing rivalry between Kosovo’s supporters and detractors has drawn the nascent state into intricate procedures that run the risk of undoing the advancements produced during the first fifteen years of its independence, including diplomatic recognition and participation in international organisations. Gëzim Krasniqi correctly states that Kosovo runs the risk of being perceived as a “satellite” or “client” state in international relations due to its reliance on the US and the EU and its following conformity in foreign policy⁵⁹. Recently, efforts have been made by Kosovo’s foreign partners to motivate the authorities to be more assertive in the process of gaining new diplomatic acknowledgment and obtaining admittance to international organisations. The discussion of giving Kosovo diplomatic ownership is not a sign of Kosovo’s diplomatic development; rather, it is a calculated retreat by its Western allies from their pledge and dedication to completely incorporate it into the global community of sovereign and independent states. In reality, many

⁵⁶ UN Security Council, 2014, p. 25

⁵⁷ KCSS, 2016, p. 8

⁵⁸ KCSS, 2018, p. 29

⁵⁹ Krasniqi, 2014, p. 216

in Kosovo today believe that the West has abandoned them, having broken its commitment to assist Kosovo in regaining its proper role in the global democratic society⁶⁰.

In summary, Kosovo is dealing with an internal conflict involving two historical trends that are happening at the same time: integration and disintegration. Stated differently, the “unfinished space” is experiencing the aftereffects of the breakup of the former Yugoslavia whilst it is actively pursuing EU membership.

⁶⁰ see Visoka, 2018

3. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

3.1 Research Questions, Objectives and Design

Nowadays, this region's complicated geopolitical dynamics and long history of warfare have brought it to the attention of the world. It is enclosed by the European Union, yet it remains one of the few areas on the continent's map not included in this "ever-closer union". Five of the seven states that resulted from the violent breakup of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), namely North Macedonia, Kosovo, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro, are on the doorstep of the EU, along with Albania. Additionally, they remain outside of the Western alliance and its framework for collective security, with the exception of Montenegro and North Macedonia, which joined NATO in 2017 and 2020, respectively. Non-Western players now have more room to expand their influence in the area as a result of the US diminishing involvement in the region and the EU's inability to replace it, alongside changes in the global geopolitical balance of power and EU expansion weariness. Employing a range of tools, Russia, Turkey, China, and the Gulf nations have stepped up their influence and contested the pro-Western stance of the area, influencing politics, economy, culture, and religion. However, the extent and character of their involvement vary considerably. What makes the current research relevant is that in the shifting global context characterised by troubled relations between Russia and the West, the region has once again become an attractive playing ground in the global geopolitical game, split between the EU, which has persistently pursued Euro-Atlantic enlargement, and Russia, whose foreign policy towards Serbia has become more decisive following Kosovo's independence in 2008, thus shaping its position in Kosovo itself. Therefore, it is crucial to look more closely at the intricate interactions between the two aforementioned players' competing interests and the impact they have on the national security complex of states, especially Serbia and Kosovo.

But how do these outside players exert their influence and what impact do they have on the dynamics of the national security complex in the aforementioned Western Balkan states? More precisely, what goals and potential strategic gains do they hope to achieve? What means do they employ and what are the consequences of their involvement? Are Serbia and Kosovo puppets in foreign powers' hands, or do they have agendas of their own?

By addressing these questions, this focused research will offer a more thorough examination of the circumstances. It will shed light on how the EU and Russia interact with one another, their respective policies, interests, and tactics, and how their competing goals affect the general security landscape in Serbia and Kosovo. These two states were chosen among all the other

Western Balkan ones because of their key role in the region and the close links between them and the two abovementioned external actors.

In this context, one main hypothesis can be identified, namely one of geopolitical competition.

According to the geopolitical competition theory, different state and non-state actors engage in power struggles and strategic manoeuvring to obtain influence, manage resources, and shape the political and security environment of a particular region. According to this theory, a complex interaction of variables including past rivalries, financial interests, security concerns, and differences in ideology is what propels geopolitical competition. Players engaged in geopolitical competitiveness frequently use a variety of instruments and strategies, such as economic investments, diplomatic cooperation, military deployments, and information warfare, to further their strategic goals and erode the power of their competitors. The outcomes of geopolitical rivalry can have a significant effect on the governing frameworks, population well-being, and stability of the impacted region. Furthermore, traditional state actors are not the sole parties involved in geopolitical rivalry. Through their economic, social, and political actions, non-state players including civil society organisations, multinational businesses, and transnational criminal organisations also significantly influence the geopolitical environment. Therefore, comprehending the complexities of geopolitical competition necessitates a comprehensive approach that examines the interactions among the many players, their respective objectives and capacities, as well as the larger geopolitical framework in which they perform.

Given the strategic position of the Western Balkans and the history of conflicting interests of foreign parties, particularly the EU and Russia, the notion of geopolitical rivalry is especially relevant in this context. Here, the battle between geopolitical blocs is represented by a multifaceted struggle for resources, influence, and allegiance. With the goal of securing local authority within its area of influence, the EU has pursued an expansion agenda in an effort to advance stability, democracy, and European integration. In order to fight EU's sway and reinforce its power, Russia has frequently used energy agreements, cultural connections, and political coalitions in an effort to preserve its historical links and strategic ambitions. This geopolitical struggle between Russia and the EU for the allegiance of the Western Balkans takes many forms, such as economic investment, diplomatic manoeuvring, and soft power measures. Future prospects, economic growth, and regional stability are all greatly impacted by the outcomes of this competition. They serve as an example of how crucial it is to comprehend and handle the complex interactions between conflicting interests and forces that characterise

the area. Reconciliation efforts are being hampered by the escalating rivalry between the EU and Russia striving for influence in Kosovo and Serbia, which is causing political division. This conflict may reveal itself as support for opposing political parties, escalating racial tensions and impeding attempts to resolve protracted disputes in an amicable manner. This dynamic has periodically resulted in conflicts between governments that lean more towards the West and those that have closer relations to Russia, which has complicated regional politics as well as inhibited efforts to achieve stability.

It is imperative to acknowledge, therefore, that the concept of regional stability in the Western Balkans is not only attributable to outside factors. The stability of the region is also significantly influenced by internal issues, including weak institutions, economic inequalities, and unresolved ethno-nationalist conflicts. Furthermore, the quest for peace is further complicated by the Western Balkans' geopolitical location at the intersection of the East and the West, which exposes it to the influences of not only the EU and Russia, but also the United States, Turkey, and China.

In summary, the stability of the Western Balkans is influenced by a number of external factors, including Russia's influence and the EU's integration efforts. However, the complex interaction between these variables highlights the need for a multifaceted strategy to tackle the unique challenges faced by the region.

Therefore, the aim of this research is to investigate compare how the EU and Russia have affected the national security complexes of two Western Balkan states. By analysing their interaction, the study attempts to clarify the particular tactics, policies, and approaches used by these nations and demonstrate how their competing goals affect the general security landscape in the two case studies stated above. It aims to steer clear of a standard judgement and a simplistic black-and-white presentation that either unquestioningly defends non-Western foreign engagements as a counterweight to Western dominance or presents them as intrinsically dangerous and malignant.

The main objectives of the research are the following:

- To deepen the understanding of the complex dynamics and factors shaping the national security environment in the Western Balkans through insights into the historical legacy of the region, Serbia and Kosovo;
- To identify the main tactics employed by the EU and Russia to exert influence, including their respective strengths and weaknesses, their effectiveness and consequences;

- To examine local perceptions to gain valuable insights into how external interventions are perceived by the local population, including their attitudes towards integration, sovereignty, and foreign interference;
- To predict future trends in geopolitical competition and regional dynamics in Serbia and Kosovo;
- To contribute to policy discussions by generating knowledge that can better inform political actors and stakeholders during decision-making processes.

Theoretical research on Serbia's and Kosovo's interactions with the EU and Russia dates at least as far back as the disintegration of Yugoslavia. There has been a great deal of scholarly study done thus far on the impacts of these foreign players on the two Balkan states, with an emphasis on a number of various themes such as geopolitics, security dynamics, economic linkages, and diplomatic relations. Research frequently examines the ways in which these outside parties impact the political climate, process of decision-making, and chances for regional stability and conflict resolution.

Scholars have investigated the EU's involvement in the establishment of states, institutions, and attempts towards reconciliation in Kosovo after the 1999 War. They have evaluated the success of EU-led programmes including the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP) and the European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo (EULEX) in advancing democratic governance and normalisation between the conflicting parties. Russian support for Serbia's territorial integrity and its position on Kosovo's independence have also been addressed by academics; such studies frequently place these issues within larger geopolitical conflicts between Russia and the West.

Academic inquiries into Serbia have centred on the nation's precarious balancing act between its historical connections to Russia and its ambitions to join the EU. Research has examined how Serbia manages to reconcile EU requirements and Russian pressure in areas including energy, commerce, and defence cooperation as part of its strategic positioning between the East and the West. Scholars have also looked at Russia's influence on media narratives and backing for nationalist organisations in Serbian domestic politics.

Numerous authors have contributed to the academic discussion on the subject by providing insightful viewpoints on the complex factors influencing the political, economic, and security environment in that region. Among them, some have been mentioned in this study: Dimitar Bechev, who has investigated the geopolitical aspects of the EU's enlargement policy, Russia's

influence, and the implications for regional stability and security; Florian Bieber, whose work explores issues of state-building, democratisation, and EU integration, providing perspectives on the complex nature of external influence and its effect on domestic politics; James Ker-Lindsay, whose work revolves around issues of sovereignty, state recognition, and conflict resolution, examining the role of outsiders like the EU and Russia in defining the regional political landscape...

Scholars have also emphasised the importance of conducting comprehensive assessments that take into account the agency of regional players, historical legacies, and shifting geopolitical factors in determining the region's future course. What makes the current research significant is the shortage of prior investigations on these aspects. Rather than limiting itself to the analysis of business and political ties, it takes a look at how influence is exerted from a wider perspective, including politics, economics, culture, religion, history and the media. This wide focus permits to gain unique comparative insights into the various goals and strategies of different external actors, as well as into how they approach and take advantage of particular socio-economic and strategic contexts and the particular vulnerabilities of each of the Western Balkan countries under attention.

Furthermore, this field of study has gained new dimensions in recent years due to a number of rising trends and areas of attention, which are taken into consideration in this work. Since resource dependence and energy infrastructure projects drive geopolitical dynamics and affect foreign players' strategic calculations, for example, energy geopolitics has gained prominence in academic debates. This is demonstrated by the emphasis placed on Russia's position as the region's main energy provider and the EU's initiatives to encourage the diversification of the energy sector. The study also provides fresh perspectives on the relationship between political goals and economic interests, how these interactions affect decision-making, and how these relationships affect regional security and stability.

Finally, the master's work materials may be utilised for more research and can be helpful in the development of academic and scientific papers on the subject.

In order to conduct the research, some classical viewpoints about security have been taken into consideration.

Power and security play a major role in international relations according to realism, especially in its classical and neo-realist versions. Realists believe that states are rational entities that use power and influence to further their objectives as states. It follows that in order to preserve and

strengthen their strategic positions in the Western Balkans, the EU and Russia exert their weight on these governments. In the view of realists, individuals, social groups, the state, or regional or international organisations may attain objective security when they avoid, prevent, manage, cope with, mitigate, and adapt to the dangers posed by various threats, challenges, vulnerabilities, and risks. Thus, the study has examined the military's presence as well as economic boundaries and political affiliations.

On the other hand, constructivism emphasises how ideas, identities, and norms influence state conduct and global effects. Using this theoretical framework as a guide, the study looks at how national identities and historical narratives in Serbia and Kosovo affect foreign policy choices, as well as how openly these actors accept influence from the EU and Russia. Social constructivists hold that social norms, collective identities, and cultural traditions play a crucial role in the process of socio-political interaction that leads to security. For them, security is attained when people's concerns and perceptions of security "threats", "challenges", "vulnerabilities" and "risks" are soothed and overcome. Thus, the study examines how these states view possibilities and challenges in the international context, which is heavily influenced by cultural affinities and historical legacies.

Finally, in light of the capacity to clarify how Serbia's and Kosovo's strategic location affects international players' involvement in the area with regard to, for example, energy politics and military strategy, a geopolitical perspective has also been employed.

More precisely, two theories - the regional security theory by Buzan and Wæver and the link and leverage approach by Levitsky and Way - have been applied to study the nuanced and complex interaction of forces at play.

A combination of research methods, including desk research, media monitoring, and data analysis, were used to conduct this study. The desk research included the analysis of current primary and secondary sources, such as journal articles, media reports, and investigations, reports from local, regional, and international organizations, opinion pieces, and official reports of international organizations active in the region. The work thus uses historical and analytical approaches in order to assess the multifaceted dynamics of the national security complex in the Western Balkans, focusing on the influences exerted by external actors, specifically the EU and Russia, within the contexts of Kosovo and Serbia.

Lastly, the structure of the study is as follows: it consists of an introduction, two chapters, a conclusion and bibliography used. It is so organised in order to provide a comprehensive analysis through the abovementioned meticulously planned sections.

The introduction sets the stage for the study, which emphasises its significance and applicability in the context of European security and regional stability. It describes the research question and objectives that serve as the inquiry's compass, together with the methods employed for gathering data and analysis. A brief explanation of the terminology used in the paper also prepares the reader for the main body of the research.

Secondly, the first chapter titled "Historical background and socio-cultural context of the Western Balkans" explores Serbia and Kosovo's socio-cultural backgrounds and historical legacies, as well as past contacts with Russia and the EU. It looks at significant moments in the histories of the two Western Balkan states and evaluates how they influenced the political and social environments of the present. The ethnic, religious, and cultural elements that affect both areas' foreign policy and international relations are also covered in this chapter.

The second chapter, instead, analyses the initiatives and contributions of the EU and Russia in Serbia and Kosovo. It compares and contrasts their strategies, including Russian geopolitical ambitions and influence tactics in addition to EU policies and activities. The comparative analysis conducted in the last section of the section focuses on how the strategies used have affected the political, economic, and social environments of Serbia and Kosovo. It also examines the foreign media's presence and its impact on public opinion, as well as the collaboration and outside support of various academic institutions and cultural or religious organisations.

The conclusion, which summarises the main points raised and discusses the consequences for larger regional and European settings, finalises the findings from the historical and engagement examinations. It makes recommendations for future study paths while considering the enduring significance of foreign engagement in the changing political contexts of Serbia and Kosovo.

This research is a valuable resource for scholars, politicians, and anybody interested in Western Balkan geopolitics given that every section builds on the one before it to give a comprehensive grasp of the foreign variables impacting Serbia and Kosovo.

3.2 Explanation of the methodology employed and the theoretical framework

Regional systems have been gaining significance in recent years for comprehending global security dynamics⁶¹. The majority of security activity takes place at the regional level, which Buzan and Wæver defined as the interaction between the national and international levels⁶². They maintained that a more comprehensive and coherent theoretical and empirical knowledge of the mechanisms of international security could be obtained at the regional level⁶³. Only two extreme levels—national and global—had dominated security analytic discourse until a few years ago, and the idea of regions had not received much attention in academic or policy discourse until lately. The criteria used to define a region and determine its “regionness” vary depending on the situation or issue being studied⁶⁴. As a result, the idea is vague and difficult to describe, and analysts cannot agree upon how to best define it. A region is usually referred to as a collection of states that have comparable features and a separate geographic boundary⁶⁵. Confusion results from this kind of framing since it proves difficult to identify start and endpoints⁶⁶ and ignores other important factors that contribute to a region’s “regionness”. According to Fawcett, it is hard to restrict them to the idea of just geographical reality - that is, states that are physically close to one another and share a territory on Earth - ⁶⁷ and he emphasises the significance of significant relations between nearby states as a measure of “regionness”. However, adding such variables does not lessen the significance of physical proximity - here, defined as geographical contiguity. The argument holds that geographic closeness, along with other elements like significant interactions, is essential for the formation of a secure zone, even if this component should not be overemphasised. Russett, on the other hand, defined a region as one that is connected geographically, has a common social and cultural identity, shares political structures and behaviours, and is economically interdependent⁶⁸. However, Thompson also took into account interaction alongside vicinity and location⁶⁹. A “limited number of states linked by a geographical relationship and a degree of mutual interdependence” is what Kacowicz describes as a region⁷⁰. Thus, the foreign policy orientation of local nations within a regional system can be influenced by the activities or apathy of other

⁶¹ Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Hurrell, 2005

⁶² Buzan & Wæver, 2003, p. 43

⁶³ Ivi, p. 30

⁶⁴ Hurrell, 1995

⁶⁵ Kassimeris, 2009

⁶⁶ Mansfield and Solingen, 2010

⁶⁷ Fawcett, 2004

⁶⁸ Russett, 1967

⁶⁹ Thompson, 1973

⁷⁰ Kacowicz, 1999

system members⁷¹. In summary, the ontological dispute over a region's "regionness" arises from the concept's ambiguity, since observers adjust it to suit their own objectives.

These factors - geographical closeness and significant interaction - have shown to be critical in elevating the regional system to the forefront of security problem analysis. According to Buzan and Wæver, the regional system should be the correct scale for security analysis in order to implement the RSC concept.⁷² In this context, Stewart-Ingersoll and Fraizer contended that there are two main reasons why the regional system is the ideal level to examine security dynamics⁷³. First, security risks that local governments deem significant are those that include nearby states. As noted by Lemke and Reed, the majority of governments place a higher priority on cordial or antagonistic relationships with neighbouring states⁷⁴. Second, because power deteriorates over long distances, most nations are incapable of projecting their strength beyond their own borders. As a result, nations frequently securitize issues and nearby actors. According to Mearsheimer, even nations that possess the ability to convey power over great distances prioritise maintaining their supremacy in a specific region. To phrase it differently, big powers will be far more concerned about safety risks that are proximate⁷⁵. Thus, rather than concentrating on those in a distant "region", they will concentrate on those that are closer to home and have the potential to affect their borders, even if they have the ability to project power and have unique rights and responsibilities to handle global issues well beyond their boundaries. Bull said that great powers are recognised by others as possessing these unique privileges in addition to knowing they have them⁷⁶. It is important to clarify, nonetheless, that this does not imply that superpowers have the authority to infringe the territorial integrity and sovereignty of neighbouring or regional governments. Stated differently, the primary means of identifying a security area is the presence of observable patterns of hostility or amity that are supported by security interconnectedness. However, it is essential to remember that a great power's engagement may also work against the development of a process of region-building, since they are capable of creating turmoil for their own benefit.

"A group of states whose primary security concerns links together sufficiently closely that their national securities cannot realistically be considered apart from one another" is how Buzan

⁷¹ Nye, 1968; Cantori and Spiegel, 1970

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Stewart-Ingersoll and Fraizer, 2012, p. 4

⁷⁴ Lemke and Reed, 2001

⁷⁵ Mearsheimer, 2001, pp. 40–42

⁷⁶ Bull, 1977

defined the Regional Security Complex in the context of security regions⁷⁷. The definition of “a set of units whose major processes of securitization and desecuritization or both are so interlinked that their security problems cannot reasonably be analysed or resolved apart from one another” was revised to reflect the concept’s evolution after two decades⁷⁸. Barry Buzan’s proposal was questioned by Iver Neuman, who queried “whose region is Buzan referring to?”⁷⁹. He emphasised that “regions are spoken into existence; thus, lie where politicians want them to lie”⁸⁰. Kavalski examined this claim and brought up two crucial points: who outlines it and how it counts⁸¹. In this regard, one may contend that a great power’s desire to reduce security concerns in a close-by geographic area can give rise to security regions. In this case, the establishment of the borders of the emerging territory depends heavily on the involvement of a nearby major power. Söderbaum claims that “there are no ‘natural’ regions; all regions are heterogeneous with unclear territorial margins”⁸². He does point out, though, that a hegemon or “stabiliser” might promote regional ties and institutions in a number of ways⁸³. In other words, an outside force can bring together a collection of nations to cooperate in order to further its own objectives, be they security, economic, or otherwise. Starr argued that “if the countries [. . .] included in the territory lack defining common characteristics, or if those common characteristics that exist are irrelevant to [security], economic and social development, then it would be natural for the region to be organized from without”⁸⁴. In this respect, Katzenstein comes to the conclusion that “regions are politically made”⁸⁵. There are therefore no “natural” or “given” regions since, as was previously said, regions are formed and reproduced throughout the process of global evolution⁸⁶. For Buzan and Wæver, “security complexes are regions as seen through the lens of security”⁸⁷.

In particular, the security dynamics between Serbia and Kosovo, especially with regard to the effect of foreign players like the EU and Russia, may be examined using Barry Buzan’s formulation of the notion of an RSC. Understanding the connections between geopolitical and regional security issues within the Western Balkans - a historically unstable region marked by

⁷⁷ Buzan, 1983, p. 106

⁷⁸ Buzan & Wæver, 2003, p. 44

⁷⁹ Neumann, 1994, p. 57

⁸⁰ Neumann, 2001, p. 57

⁸¹ Kavalski, 2011

⁸² Söderbaum, 2012, p. 14

⁸³ Ivi, p. 11

⁸⁴ Starr, 2008, p. 6

⁸⁵ Katzenstein, 2015, p. 9

⁸⁶ Hettne and Söderbaum, 2000

⁸⁷ Buzan & Wæver, 2003, pp. 43–44

political instability, ethnic conflicts, and strategic rivalries - is simplified with the help of this framework. The Western Balkans may be classified as an RSC where, because of their close proximity and common security concerns, the security policies and opinions of one state are intrinsically related to those of other states in the area. Because of their unsettled position following Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence in 2008 - which Serbia does not recognize - Serbia and Kosovo constitute a subcomplex at the centre of this RSC. In light of their shared ethnic and political tensions, there exists a situation where one party's activities are interpreted as a threat by the other, resulting in a relationship marked by plenty of suspicion and periodic political crises that frequently call for international intervention.

The effect of the EU may be comprehended in this context by applying Buzan's idea of "overlay", which states that an external power affects an RSC's internal dynamics. The EU maintains stability through operations such as the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP), which requires adherence to EU norms, including the settlement of regional issues, in order to receive economic aid and membership possibilities. On the other hand, Russia's involvement might be interpreted as an external counterbalance to Western dominance in the Balkans as well as a component of the regional power structure. Due in large part to Serbia's feeling of increased strategic depth and diplomatic support - especially given its non-recognition position towards Kosovo's independence - this foreign participation affects the security dynamics inside the area.

The interdependence of each state's security within the region increases as it interacts with the security of other states, underscoring the significance of the regional component in comprehending security in a broader context⁸⁸. According to Buzan, security encompasses a wide variety of issues regarding cohabitation circumstances along with survival⁸⁹. He provided a more comprehensive framework based on levels (individual, state, and international) and sectors (political, military, economic, sociological, and environmental) as the notion became more intricate and multifaceted. Since one is intricately and complexly related to the others, they alone are unable to fully address the security challenges⁹⁰. This thorough approach and awareness of modern national security through wider security, encompassing all the security parameters within which every sector has its own security dimension, will function as a central instrument in breaking down individual components of the intricate security situation in Serbia and Kosovo⁹¹.

⁸⁸ Buzan & Wæver, 2003

⁸⁹ Buzan, 1991

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ See Buzan, 1991, pp. 432-433

All things considered, the RSC framework helps to understand the security issues at the local level as well as how greater geopolitical activities affect them. It shows that, in order to successfully manage security challenges in this region, consideration must be given to the external variables that periodically shape and modify local security settings. Therefore, this study is crucial for advancing policy discussions as well as forecasting the conduct of the main parties in the years to come.

Yet another theoretical approach to be considered is the link and leverage one.

For a regional or large power to exert influence over the policies of a small power, connections between them must be established. Links are more than just ways for actors to be connected to one another. Linkages impact the goals, priorities, and abilities of the players while also facilitating the transfer of ideas and norms, as explained by Levitsky and Way⁹². They build mutually dependent interactions by generating costs and rewards, as well as opportunities and limits⁹³. Conversely, leverage describes the capacity of outside forces to affect events within a state. Sticks (like sanctions or diplomatic isolation) and carrots (like economic help or the possibility of joining international organisations) are frequently used to exert this power. The degree to which a regime prioritises the advantages of its relationship over the internal costs of complying with demands determines how effective leverage is.

There are many different kinds of linkages possible today that might bring together major/regional and small powers. They can develop between many players, including individuals, NGOs, businesses, governments, and bureaucracies, as well as between the public and private sectors. In their landmark study on the impact of the West on the democratisation of third countries, Levitsky and Way contend that international linkages are made up of “the density of ties (economic, political, diplomatic, social, and organisational) and cross-border flows (of capital, goods and services, people, and information)” between various nations⁹⁴. According to them, connections can be found in the following categories: social (cross-border movements of individuals as tourists, migrants, refugees, and members of diaspora communities); information (flows of news and ideas via mass media, the internet, and telecommunications); economic (flows of trade, investments, and credit); intergovernmental (diplomatic and military ties as well as participation in international institutions); technocratic

⁹² Levitsky and Way, 2010, p. 45

⁹³ Keohane and Nye, 2012, p. 8

⁹⁴ Levitsky and Way, 2010, p. 43

(elite-level education and professional links); and civil society (ties at the level of NGOs, religious and party organisations, and other transnational networks)⁹⁵.

It is possible to claim, for analytical reasons, that linkages can act as catalysts for power on their own right or as channels for the transmission of influence, although this would be minimising a much more complex picture. The latter, in part, establish each side's possible impact in their connection, while the former reflect avenues of interaction that each actor may attempt to utilise to sway the other. However, the two linkage functions are perhaps complementary rather than conflicting. Furthermore, not every attempt at persuasion has the same goal. In accordance with Hay's theory of power, it can be distinguished between influence intended to mould another person's behaviour and influence intended to shape the environment in which another person would subsequently make judgements or engage. The power to "influence directly the actions and/or choices" of others is addressed in the first section, whilst the ability to indirectly impact the "context which defines the range of possibilities of others" is covered in the second.⁹⁶

There exist four non-exclusive ways in which linkages and influence might be associated based on these two analytical dichotomies.

When the power bases of networked entities differ significantly, links frequently serve as intermediaries. This is usually the case when minor powers and regional or major powers, like those this study examines, have interstate (i.e., military/political and, to some extent, economic) relations. In this kind of relationship, a link might serve as a means of communication that A, the stronger actor, uses to influence B, the weaker actor, "to do something that B would not otherwise do"⁹⁷. When a smaller state complies with the demands of its counterpart⁹⁸, it demonstrates influence, which is defined as control over outcomes⁹⁹. Since all power ties need communication of some kind in order for influence to be transmitted, lesser powers that link with stronger forces become more susceptible to outside pressure. On the other hand, powerful countries are often driven to establish connections with lesser powers in order to obtain some influence over them.

Links can also serve as a conduit for standards and ideas intended to indirectly affect players' medium-term conduct. Li argues that the process of reaching a consensus among interconnected players might indicate the presence of either internalisation or identification. Identification is

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Hay, 2002, pp. 185–186

⁹⁷ Dahl, 1957, pp. 202–204

⁹⁸ Singer, 1963, pp. 426–427; Jönsson, 1981, pp. 251–252

⁹⁹ Keohane and Nye, 2012, p. 10

the term employed to define an interaction in which one actor's impact over another has grown to the point where the other player seeks to have a close relationship with the former. In terms of internalisation, it represents a relationship in which one actor has adopted the ideals of its counterpart¹⁰⁰. All aspects of linkages may lead to identification and internalisation processes. Joint exercises, for example, may result in a convergence of strategic thought at the military level. When it comes to education, elites from two nations may come to share similar ideas if a significant number of one nation's elite studies in another, exposing them to those values. At the level of information links, people's perceptions of and attitudes towards international reality are also influenced by the dissemination of news information produced in one country to another¹⁰¹.

Linkages generated from agreements that specify the costs and advantages of each actor's interaction can be used as forms of influence over other people's behaviour, and they have measurable, quantifiable impacts¹⁰². Because the advantages and disadvantages of this kind of connection are typically not equally allocated or viewed as such, they create asymmetrical interdependent relationships¹⁰³. The party that has the most likelihood to suffer from a break in ties would thus have less negotiating leverage.

Lastly, the development of such connections may also have an impact on the environment in which nations with ties to one another make decisions. This is due to the fact that linkages that have costs and benefits always have an impact on the interests and preferences of stakeholders in both countries. Each one of them develops constituencies as a result of the benefits distribution, and these communities of interest focus on the maintenance and expansion of connections (such as trade, investments, and tourism). In this situation, agreement may form quickly and even before links are established, in contrast to the spread of ideas and norms, to the point where expectations of advantages alone often lead to a confluence of viewpoints. It is noteworthy to note that domestic interested parties and stakeholders may apply pressure on their government if links and their consequences are threatened, so reducing its negotiating strength¹⁰⁴.

Although the creation of linkages is necessary for the exercise of influence, it does not ensure that any endeavour would be fruitful. First of all, connections are by nature two-way, and both

¹⁰⁰ Li, 1993, pp. 353–354

¹⁰¹ Moon, 1985, pp. 307–308; Holzinger and Knill, 2005, p. 784

¹⁰² Li, 1993, pp. 351–352

¹⁰³ Keohane and Nye, 2012, pp. 9–10

¹⁰⁴ Levitsky and Way, 2010, pp. 47, 51

sides may hope to have an impact on some of the policies of the other. Furthermore, asymmetries in resolve have the potential to neutralise differences in power bases¹⁰⁵. Throughout history, small countries have frequently opted to bear the costs of their noncompliance. Similarly, agreement between two intricately linked parties is never acknowledged by everyone. Commonly held ideals do not always translate into consensus on all matters of policy. The regular arguments amongst EU member states on a wide range of topics serve as a prime example of this. Furthermore, it is not always feasible to take advantage of the linking effects of asymmetric interdependent interactions. In Wagner's words, not all inequalities in economic linkage effects represent "unexploited opportunities to trade economic resources for political concessions"¹⁰⁶. Furthermore, a party with little negotiating power may nonetheless determine that the price of punishment is greater than the price of compliance¹⁰⁷.

When everything is accounted for, this approach provides a useful framework for researching how the EU and Russia have affected Serbia and Kosovo from the outside and helps to comprehend how international relations may affect domestic politics. By using the "link and leverage" paradigm, analysts may understand the complex interplay between domestic changes in politics and external forces in the two selected case studies. It illustrates how foreign contacts may influence state behaviour, shape political outcomes, and alter the trajectory of regional politics throughout the Western Balkans.

¹⁰⁵ Jönsson, 1981, pp. 254–256

¹⁰⁶ Wagner, 1988, p. 473

¹⁰⁷ Ivi, pp. 474, 477

4. *EU's Engagement in the Western Balkans*

This and the following chapter focus on the practicalities of the chosen topic. More specifically, an analysis of the dynamics and directions of EU's and Russia's influence over the years is carried out with an emphasis on the *leitmotiv* at the core of the identified dynamics. The extents and layers of these actors' impact is examined in more details, together with the reasons behind their actions and policies. On the basis of this analysis, the main causes for engagement and their effectiveness are esteemed; in particular, attention is paid to the exercise of soft power on Russia's side, as exemplified by the case of memory diplomacy.

4.1 *Analysis of key events, policies, relationships and their impact*

One of the most devastating events to happen in Europe after the conclusion of World War II has been the disintegration of the SFRY. Following nearly half a century of peace, conflict flared up again in the Southeast precisely as twelve Western European nations redefined structured collaboration with the founding of the European Union. The European Communities (EC) and subsequently the EU led global attempts to halt the intensification of the armed struggle from the outset of the crisis, which followed the commencement of war in Slovenia and Croatia in 1991. However, even though some predicted that “the hour of Europe ha[d] dawned”¹⁰⁸, the crisis struck the European Communities at the wrong time¹⁰⁹. Even while the EC had grown into a significant commercial bloc, matters of foreign policy and even international security continued to fall mainly outside of its jurisdiction. While the first legal groundwork for collaboration in the area of foreign and (non-military) security policy had been set up by the Single European Act's Article 30, the legal underpinnings for a more extensive Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) had not yet been agreed on within the context of the pre-Maastricht Intergovernmental Conference (IGC). Following Maastricht and for the remainder of the 1990s, the EU continued to be what Belgian Minister of State Mark Eijskens had infamously equated it to: “an economic giant, political mouse and military worm”¹¹⁰. By and large, the EU was able to exert significant influence not just via diplomatic and political channels, but also through economic ones, with little to no military component. The fact that

¹⁰⁸ Poos, 1991

¹⁰⁹ See D'Estmael, T. de W. (1998). *La dimension politique des relations économiques extérieures de la Communauté européenne: sanctions et incitants économiques comme moyens de politique étrangère*. russels, Émile Bruylant 1998) at pp. 282-283: ‘Si l'heure de l'Europe avait en apparence sonné, les Douze furent bien incapables d'assumer toutes les obligations du rendez-vous, tant en raison de la faiblesse des moyens de persuasion de la CPE/PESC que les divergences entre Etats membres sur la politique à mener. D'où l'émergence de ce syndrome d'autant plus aigu que la faillite européenne eut de tragiques conséquences à Dubrovnik, Vukovar, Sarajevo, Srebrenica, [...] Ce n'était toutefois pas faute d'avoir essayé’.

¹¹⁰ Eyskens, 1985, p. 316

the independent initiatives of the EU were occasionally somewhat effective but ultimately failed woefully to achieve their aims may probably be explained by the absence of an exhaustive array of tools to handle violence in the former Yugoslavia.

The “Balkan question” is still very much a “European question” today, over thirty years after the conclusion of the wars that caused Yugoslavia to fall apart, with Kosovo acting as a catalyst for the development of the CFSP. With the conclusion of the operation of redesigning the region’s map over the past ten years, the main focus of EU policy regarding the Balkans has shifted from security concerns connected to warfare and its aftermath to the prospect of the Western Balkan states’ joining the Union, to which all EU Member States have made a formal political pledge since the June 2003 Thessaloniki Summit. The political elites in the area were ostensibly dedicated to prioritising Europe, the framework had been put in place, and everyone was meant to be acquainted with the policy instruments following the last round of Eastern expansion.

The EU is currently the principal foreign player in Kosovo, progressively gaining ground in the areas of politics, justice, the economy, and security. Over ten years of direct participation in stabilisation, rebuilding, and Member State creation have resulted in the EU's local ubiquity. However, the engagement in the region has been marked by the absence of a distinct and unified vision for state building, as well as by internal conflicts and the preference of specific state goals over those of larger Europe, along with Kosovo’s unique legal and political difficulties. Moves including dispatching diplomatic *démarches*, enabling Kosovo’s inclusion in world conferences and employing bilateral diplomacy and multilateral influence to persuade other governments to recognise statehood were all part of the attempts made in favour of acknowledgment. Moreover, Western powers have been a trustworthy advocate in favour of Kosovo’s cause for sovereignty throughout the International Court of Justice (ICJ) proceedings regarding the legal legitimacy of the country’s declaration of independence, viewing it as distinct, legitimate, and compliant with international law¹¹¹. Due to shifting foreign policy objectives and changing global conditions, Western assistance for recognition declined dramatically after 2011, leaving the country’s recognition mission to be further advanced by its own negotiating capabilities. Five EU members - Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia, and Spain - have refused to recognise Kosovo statehood because of internal or regional disputes. Some are showing support for other states impacted by secessionism, while others worry that it could create a precedent for their own internal disputes involving minorities and detached

¹¹¹ See written Statement by the UK, 2009

regions. Nevertheless, Germany recently pledged to assist Kosovo in gaining recognition from the five EU members that have not done so already.

Conversely, Serbia's connections to Western Europe date back to the Cold War. The breakup of Yugoslavia and subsequent ethnic wars compelled the recently established Union to become involved in the region, but because of its internal weaknesses, the USA and NATO took the lead. Nonetheless, the EU maintained strong ties with Serbia, which helped to ease the country's transition and ultimately enabled the opposition to defeat Slobodan Milosevic and seize power in 2000. The EU started a number of measures in the mid-1990s in an effort at stabilisation: the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP), the Southeast European Cooperative Initiative (1996), the Stability Pact for South-Eastern Europe (1999-2008), and the South-East European Cooperation Process (1996). Amid the NATO campaign of 1999 and the opposition's triumph (obtained through polls and street demonstrations) in fall 2000, the EU's June 1999 launch of SAP served as a fresh tool of leverage, stressing among other things the necessity of regional alliances and dispute resolution. The fulfilment of the commitments assumed under a SAA and EU membership talks, which should set the stage for accepting all political, economic, and legal duties associated with affiliation, are the two concurrent processes that define Serbia's current European integration process. Serbia accepted the fundamental tenets of the SAP when it became a participant in November 2000. These tenets emphasise the significance of regional and good-neighbourly interaction among the Western Balkan states, as well as the necessity of each state making advancement towards satisfying the Copenhagen criteria and implementing the SAA. Signed on April 29th, 2008, the SAA and the Interim Agreement on Trade and Trade-Related Matters have totally eliminated tariffs on trade between Serbia and the EU since January 1st, 2014, with the exception of agricultural commodities that are deemed highly sensitive by both parties.

Amidst fresh tensions and crises last summer, France and Germany put out a proposal to resume the reconciliation process between Belgrade and Pristina. Eventually, all of the EU's member states - including the five that do not recognise Kosovo - endorsed the idea. Thus, the Union's strategy for Kosovo subtly accomplishes two goals: it normalises ties between Belgrade and Pristina, averting the emergence of new flashpoints for European unrest, and it advances Serbia's convergence with EU foreign policy. At the high-level conference in Brussels on

February 27th, Vučić and Kosovo's Prime Minister Albin Kurti ultimately consented to the plan's formal provisions¹¹².

¹¹² EEAS Press Team, 2023

4.2 EU's strategy and objectives in Serbia and Kosovo

A vital aspect of both the European and transatlantic plans, which see the Western Balkans as an essential component of Europe and the European expansion project, is the notion of a Europe that is “whole, free, and at peace”. The Western Balkan nations were viewed by European authorities as vulnerable and were advised to undergo several changes before submitting a viable bid for EU membership¹¹³. However, an incomplete approach has put EU involvement in Kosovo and the country itself in limbo. In accordance with President Ahtisaari's proposal, the EU was given two roles in Kosovo: monitoring independence and executing administrative authority for the rule of law. Since the onset of becoming independent, this vigorous supervisory function has been discussed and renegotiated to the extent that it remains altogether unclear what the EU's position in Kosovo is meant to be. Is it (as per the Ahtisaari plan) to oversee autonomy? Is it to thwart independence (as perceived by the five EU non-recognition states)? Is the goal to split the work with UNMIK, whose purpose is upheld by the Security Council members who refuse to recognise it?

Given that Kosovo has historically and currently poses a danger of ethnic unrest and regional insecurity, the West has extended significant backing for the area based on risk management principles. The logic of Western powers is pragmatic; they want to strengthen their geopolitical interests, spread neoliberal economy, and minimise impediments to the advancement of democracy. The majority of European states and their close neighbours have endorsed state-building and Kosovo's acknowledgment in the hopes that these actions will contribute to stability and peace in the area and halt a wave of armed disputes that has been affecting the Western Balkans for the past ten years. Kosovo's geographic location has played a significant role in this process¹¹⁴. Western states forced Kosovo to implement reforms in public administration, the rule of law, and the fight against corruption, organised crime, and war crimes via international missions like UNMIK, EULEX, and the International Civilian Office (ICO). They also wanted to advance minority defence, reform the economy, and settle bilateral disputes with adjacent nations. Instead of responding rapidly to issues of organised crime, illegal migration, drug and human trafficking, the arms trade, and other criminal acts, the EU has attempted to create a strong Kosovo through the tools provided by its expansion policy,

¹¹³ Economides, 2010, p. 116

¹¹⁴ see Weller, 2009

emergency management, preventive diplomacy, development aid, and state-building assistance¹¹⁵.

In order to realise their foreign policy goals of expanding Euro-Atlantic structures in the Balkans, combating outside threats presented by Russian interference through covert or semi-covert backing for peace bumpers and ethno-nationalist parties, and reducing dangers from transnational terrorism and violent extremism, Western states are therefore interested in promoting Kosovo's acknowledgment and affiliation in international bodies, rather than strengthening the sovereignty of the country *per se*. Retaining NATO's peacekeeping mission in Kosovo after its military involvement in 1999 and safeguarding Kosovo's independence and international status also served to preserve these results. Furthermore, most of the multilateral agreements that the country has ratified up to this point have dealt with Western governments' interests as well as political, security, and economic issues¹¹⁶.

On the other hand, the primary rationale behind the negotiations with Serbia is that its government views EU membership as both a strategic objective and a way to modernise its institutional, legal, and economic framework. Thus, it emphasised in its opening remarks at the inaugural Intergovernmental Conference that "...the Republic of Serbia sees EU accession as a mechanism for changing and adjusting to the conditions required from all EU members, and as a way to improve the overall efficiency and competitiveness of the EU, as well as its own reputation in Europe and worldwide. The accession process greatly boosts the political and economic reforms in Serbia"¹¹⁷.

Neutralising the geopolitical impact of China and Russia constitutes one of the motives the EU is opening its gates to the Balkans. Both have made significant investments in the area in recent years, solidifying their position as significant partners in trade. The EU has long strived to bring peace to the area, which is another cause why it is broadening its borders. The region is rather unstable, plagued by organised crime and ethnic strife. Additionally, there's a chance that the issues affecting the Balkans may continue and eventually make their way into the EU. Thirdly, as the Balkans are a transit zone, coordination with the EU's energy supply institutions is necessary. This is particularly crucial for the western nations of the continent.

Considering it makes the expansion process "discreet" enough to satisfy Western public sentiment and ostensibly intriguing enough for the ruling political elites' reforming agenda in

¹¹⁵ see Visoka and Doyle, 2016

¹¹⁶ KCSS, 2016

¹¹⁷ Opening statement of the Republic of Serbia

the Balkan nations in question, the “regatta” method appears to be operating well for the EU. However, this is also the point when “accession fatigue” and “enlargement fatigue” collide. The latter takes two forms: while there is a decline of public support for EU admission, the local political elites occasionally exploit rhetorical pledges to EU integration as a cover for politics as a business model.

Statements such as the “future of the Western Balkans is within the EU”¹¹⁸ or the “EU is not complete without Western Balkans”¹¹⁹ are frequently part of official EU announcements and publications. On the same note, during the 2017 EU-Western Balkans meeting in Trieste, the Italian chair’s statement emphasised that “The future of the Western Balkans lies in the European Union, a Union open to those European countries which respect its values and are committed to promoting them. In Rome, at the celebration of 60th anniversary of the signing of the Treaties, the EU advocated for a stronger and more differentiated Europe. Now, in Trieste we pledge to work for a better inclusion of Western Balkans, with a view to consolidate and unite the continent. Integrating the Western Balkans with the EU is a strategic investment in peace, democracy, prosperity, security and stability of Europe as a whole”¹²⁰. The same phrases were restated in the European Commission’s enlargement strategy paper in 2018: “The European perspective of the Western Balkans is clear and unambiguous, and the conditions and criteria for EU membership are well established”¹²¹.

¹¹⁸ EU-Western Balkans Summit Thessaloniki, 2003

¹¹⁹ Borrell in EEAS, 2022; European Western Balkans, 2020

¹²⁰ EU-Western Balkans summit Trieste, 2017

¹²¹ European Commission, 2018

4.3 *Assessment of political, economic, and military influence*

Notwithstanding the divergent interests of its constituent nations, the EU has progressively positioned itself as an influential global force, striving to wield normative authority via its foreign relations. Therefore, it is imperative to look at the impact of the EU's normative influence on the Western Balkans, the instruments it has employed, and the main obstacles it has faced.

In order to stop basic human rights breaches by police and internal security structures, which had occurred during Communism and the 1990s disputes, the goal of Euro-Atlantic involvement in the field of internal security from the 1990s to the mid-2000s was to encourage democratic law enforcement procedures and provide training and supplies for police and internal security forces¹²². Visa liberalisation for individuals living in the Western Balkans was introduced in 2008 as a means of providing pressure for the governments to abide with EU criteria for police and military reform, so as to enable an effective civilian monitoring system for frontier zone defence¹²³. The Justice and Home Affairs pillar's goal of integrating the area into the larger EU border management system was also pursued via the liberalisation of visa. The nations in the region gained from their progressive entry into the EU, although temporarily as observers, and their incorporation into global law enforcement systems in addition to funding and training programmes.

Serbia is regarded by the EU as an especially important nation in the Western Balkans. Judah contends that as a result, the EU has an impact on not just Serbia but also the whole Serbian region, which includes a sizable portion of the bordering nations that "consume the same media, academics, students, doctors ... and the area is ... a single cultural sphere"¹²⁴. The EU has reportedly accepted this and branded Serbia as "too big to fail", according to some. Although this perseverance has been ineffective, it did not fail either. The people who the EU had previously trusted to rule Serbia are no longer in that position, but the prospect of true reform is implied by the fact that erstwhile nationalists have evolved into sincere proponents of European integration and have been willing to acknowledge that Serbs have perpetrated crimes and made missteps in their history¹²⁵. It also reveals something about the EU's capacity for transformation, particularly if its requirements are vigorously and persistently enforced.

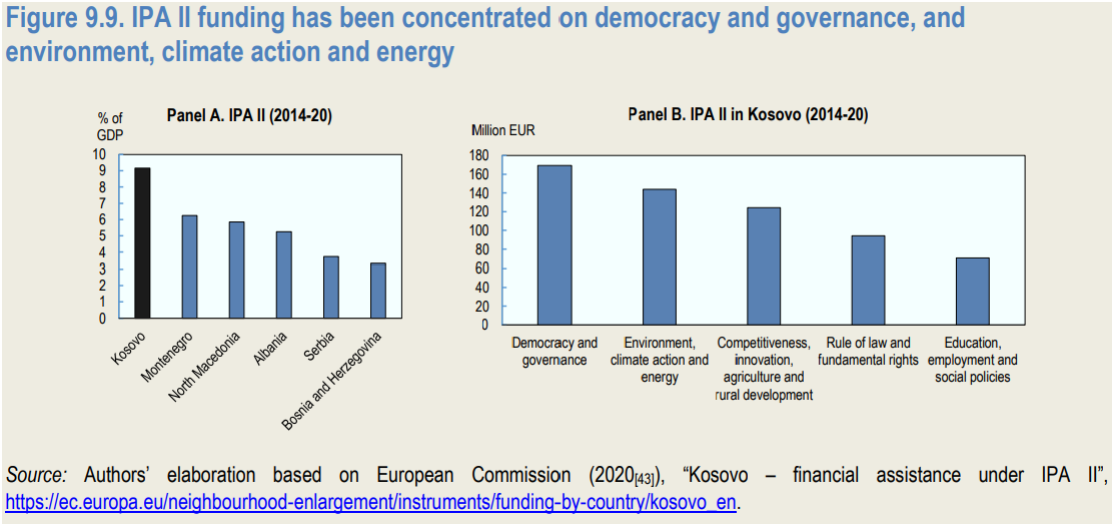
¹²² Flessenkemper, 2018

¹²³ Trauner, 2011

¹²⁴ Judah, 2009, p. 30

¹²⁵ FAZ, 2014

The Western Balkans’ process of joining into the European Union has been a major force behind democratisation and the formation of institutions. It has also given the area significant technical and financial backing for its growth and territorial integration. The local economies have attempted to harmonise their laws with the EU *acquis* as part of this endeavour. The SAA, the Instrument for Pre-accession aid (IPA), economic ties (inclusive trade agreements), and regional cooperation (such the Central European Free Economic Agreement) are the four main pillars that support the SAP. While Kosovo started the process in 2016, Serbia launched it already in 2013. Particularly the IPA has played a pivotal role in offering Kosovo financial and technical support for reforms. With 9.2per cent of GDP (EUR 602.2 million) coming from IPA II (for 2014–20) (Figure 9.9 – Panel A), Kosovo received the fourth-largest IPA in the Western Balkans in terms of GDP share. Approximately EUR 169.4 million, or 28.1per cent of the total IPA II funds for the time, were earmarked for the purpose of bolstering democracy and governance. A sizeable portion was allocated to energy, climate action, and the environment (Figure 9.9 – Panel B).



Serbia’s exports to the EU now reach €40 billion, compared to just €3.2 billion in 2009¹²⁶. Additionally, EU Member States account for 63per cent of all current foreign direct and indirect investment, and Serbia has received more than €3.5 billion in EU awards throughout the years. The warmer relationship with the EU since 2008 has benefited Serbian people, as evidenced by the abolition of the visa obligation in 2009 and their enrolment in the Erasmus+ programme since 2019. Ursula von der Leyen, the president of the EU Commission, recently unveiled a €1 billion energy support package intended to help the Western Balkans develop resilience in the short- and medium-term and lessen the effects of the energy crisis as well as build resilience¹²⁷.

¹²⁶ EU in Serbia, 2022
¹²⁷ EC, 2022

In the same spirit, the Commission suggested allocating up to €9 billion in IPA financing for the years 2021-2027 following the Covid-19 pandemic “through investments and support to competitiveness and inclusive growth, sustainable connectivity, and the twin green and digital transition”¹²⁸. When one of the biggest floods in Serbia’s history struck the nation in 2014, the EU Commission moved swiftly to assist, providing over €170 million in flood prevention and recovery¹²⁹. The EU continues to be unpopular among Serbians, despite being a vital trading partner and offering support during difficult times. Actually, as a political collaborator, the EU has let down even the most ardent of its supporters over the years, and the proportion of people who in a referendum would vote in favour of joining the bloc is declining¹³⁰.

The absence of a definite and foreseeable membership perspective has had a detrimental impact on domestic political advancements in the Western Balkans, diminishing the desire for the most essential - and crucial for EU membership - modifications concerning the workings of democratic establishments, administration, and the rule of law. The EU has wounded itself by missing the opportunity to appropriately compensate audacious political choices and reforms with similarly audacious moves towards membership. As a result of the process’ declining legitimacy and the lack of imminent admission, the local ruling class has turned to more favourable, albeit extremely controversial, internal methods that are less politically expensive. Among these were involuntary exposure to the economic and political sway of third parties, primarily China and Russia. Interactions between the EU and Serbia clearly operate better than Serbia’s ties to other players in terms of their strategic nature, structured advancement, scope, and depth. However widespread the EU’s ties with Serbia may be, they have not stopped Belgrade from preserving and fostering ties with other significant players, as mentioned above.

The position of Kosovo continues to be a major barrier to EU influence. Although formal recognition of Kosovo was not stated as a requirement for membership, “it is evident that Serbia will not be able to join without some sort of ‘silent recognition’, which is an essential element for establishing bilateral relations between the two countries with a minimal degree of normalcy”. On the other hand, requesting that a state quietly accepts the loss of a portion of its territory is far more demanding than requesting that democratic standards be applied.

One may argue that, in contrast to a distant promise of membership granted in exchange for an agreement to carry out often difficult reforms, the visa liberalisation process is the most clear

¹²⁸ EC, 2020

¹²⁹ EU in Serbia, 2020

¹³⁰ Zdravković, 2023

and apparent manifestation of the EU's power for inhabitants of the Western Balkans. The EU exerted pressure by using the process of easing visa requirements. In order to meet the requirements, the nations on the Schengen "blacklist" (which could result in their exclusion at any time) had to enact substantial administrative and police changes as well as amend portions of their foreigner and asylum laws, involving the penal code in certain situations. The procedure itself became entangled in controversy and exacerbated the intense feeling of seclusion felt by those left behind. This included the assessment of the targets and the decision to grant visa-free travel to owners of passports from Macedonia, Serbia, and Montenegro at the end of 2009, but not to citizens and residents of Kosovo (including those with passports and citizenship from Serbia). In summary, the EU was simultaneously pursuing measures that compromise those attempts as well as compel people to look for less legal ways to obtain useful travel documents, while also working to strengthen Kosovo statehood and obtain the loyalty of minorities (specifically, the Serbs) to the new state. Currently, there is no doubt that the Western Balkan people are increasingly becoming citizens of Europe. Additionally, it is anticipated that many people in the area will hold dual citizenship.

This brings up a few last points about Serbia's EU membership. The recent local and international circumstances in Serbia have given rise to yet another novel phenomenon that may be dubbed "accession fatigue". It relates specifically to those who are frustrated and unsatisfied with the outcomes of the accession process thus far in Serbia and elsewhere in the "EU waiting room". They believe they have made too many sacrifices and have been deceived by largely meaningless promises. And they hold the Union and local EU supporters accountable for this letdown. Their hopes have been dashed, and as a result, they have either fully given up on EU membership or grown incredibly cynical of it.

5. *Russia's Engagement in the Western Balkans*

5.1 *Analysis of key events, policies, and relationships and their impact*

Russia's ties to the Balkans are based on a complex web of interests. Despite being at the core of some of the most profound and momentous political, economic, and border upheavals that the modern world has witnessed to date, the relationship between the two regions has stayed contentious throughout its history. The Treaty of Kucuk Kaynarca (1774), which handled the fatal blow to the Ottoman Empire's slow but unstoppable decline, gave the Tsarist Empire control over the safety of the multiple Orthodox prelates, as well as the privilege of transit through the Dardanelles and a gateway to the Black Sea, eager as it was to continue the territorial expansion programme that would propel Russia to absolute supremacy over the straits of the warm seas.

The tsarist leadership considered the Serbian factor and its aspirations for self-realization as a possible game changer that might topple the Ottoman dominion over south-central Europe. Therefore, a century of uprisings and the Sublime Porte's slow acknowledgement of Belgrade's independence followed. Even now, these relationships are attested to by a very ancient passage. In 1812, Alexander I, the Russian Emperor, asked Karadorđe to strike a peace deal with the Turks so that he could remove his forces from the Balkans and protect Russia against Napoleon. He said, "if Russia holds out, that will be also good for Serbia, and if Russia fails, there will be no Serbia". However, Russia and Serbia retained a fluctuating, unclear, and occasionally very unpleasant connection notwithstanding their common political objectives and their solidarity, which was anchored by language, family, and faith. In spite of its endorsement of Austria's original doctrine of neutrality (1853-1856), Belgrade helped St. Petersburg combat the Turks during the Crimean War, which lasted from 1806 to 1812. Still, the Tsarist Empire backed the rebellion that resulted in Serbia and Montenegro declaring hostilities against the Sublime Porte in 1876. But after initial military setbacks for the two Balkan countries, the Tsarist Empire redirected its focus to Bulgaria and terminated its assistance. Consequently, Austria-Hungary's approval enabled Serbia - led by the Obrenovic dynasty - to achieve complete international independence at the Congress of Berlin in 1878. Austria-Hungary also intervened to guarantee that Serbia was awarded the territories that St. Petersburg had meant for Bulgaria. After a horrific slaughter in June 1903, the pro-Obrenovich Obrenovic line was restored to the Serbian monarchy, replacing the pro-Russian Karadjordjevs. The First World War remains the greatest enduring testament to the newly established coalition. Among other things, it brought about two significant changes: first, the creation of the Soviet Union; second, the unification of a kingdom

including Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes under one governing body, which took the name Yugoslavia following the (ninth) coup d'état in 1929.

A decade into the post-Soviet/post-Yugoslav phase, Moscow and Belgrade took different paths. Controversies with Belgrade grew more intense as a result of Moscow's extremely liberal international and internal policies. At a critical juncture, Serbia found itself without Russia's key help. The Milošević dictatorship was in no way associated with the Yeltsin administration or Andrei Kozyrev's diplomacy. Serbia's dissatisfaction with Russia reached a peak when the latter refused to defend it against NATO assault by voting in favour of sanctions on the FRY on May 31st, 1992, and the establishment of the Hague-based Tribunal mere years later (1995). Conversely, Belgrade was never pardoned by the Kremlin for its assistance in the October 1993 plot to topple Yeltsin and for dispatching an entourage to the victory celebrations held in the Red Square. Moscow, nonetheless, did show some empathy and assistance for the resistance under the Milošević government. In fact, formal and informal discussions were held between Igor Ivanov and the Russian Foreign Ministry at Smolensk Square. In the midst of the Kosovo status dispute, Serbia's relations with Russia began to pick up steam in the mid-2000s.

All in all, Russia's stance towards Southeast Europe is mostly influenced by its interactions with the EU and the US. When interactions are positive, Moscow seizes political and economic possibilities without confronting the West. However, Russia switches to being a strong opponent during times of tensions. For instance, when the Russian Federation sprang from the ruins of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, the Balkans were a top priority for Moscow, which sought to take the lead in managing the wars in Bosnia (1992–1995) and Kosovo (1998–1999) under President Boris Yeltsin and Foreign Ministers Andrei Kozyrev (1992–1996) and Evgeny Primakov (1996–1998). The implications were serious: Russia's position within the European security framework, as well as its links to NATO and the US. Yeltsin and his ministers attempted to strike a precarious equilibrium by working with the West in the UN Security Council and the 1994-established "Contact Group", while simultaneously fostering relations with Slobodan Milošević and the Bosnian Serbs in order to increase their bargaining chip¹³¹. In the former Yugoslavia, assertive measures also sought to stifle the fiercely anti-Western opponents rooted in the Russian parliament. Russia experienced multiple setbacks and was unable to stop NATO actions in Kosovo, particularly in Bosnia, between March and June 1999. Embracing the odds, like the infamous race to Prishtina, proved to be ineffective¹³². The state

¹³¹ Nikiforov, 1999; Gus'kova, 2001; Romanenko, 2002; Headley, 2008

¹³² Simić, 2001; Antonenko, 1999; Levitin, 2000; Headley, 2008

was repeatedly pressured to give in and follow the West's lead, participating in NATO peacekeeping operations like IFOR/SFOR in Bosnia and KFOR in Kosovo, as well as approving ex post Western operations in the UN Security Council. Ultimately, the 1990s Balkans seemed to represent post-Soviet Russia's declining standing in world affairs.¹³³

The West and Russia experienced a new romance when Putin moved into the Kremlin, first as prime minister in August 1999 and then as president the following year. His original policy was to forge close relations with Western states and politicians, despite the abundance of written material detailing the animosity that Putin and his entourage harboured towards the US, NATO, and Europe, accusing them of being responsible for the fall of the Soviet Union and the demeaning events of the 1990s, including the ensuing Kosovo war. Prioritising domestic unification and asserting Russian hegemony in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) were top priorities for the new Kremlin ruler. However, the decade was also characterised by growing commercial interconnectedness with the EU, a spike in foreign direct investment into Russia and an oil boom, as well as strategic collaboration with George W. Bush in the “war on terror” that followed 9/11¹³⁴. Putin even flirted with the notion of Russia entering NATO in the initial stages, mending the institutional rift that had been created during the Kosovo War. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that Russia withdrew from the Balkans in the beginning of the 2000s. With the pacification of the former Yugoslavia, historical commitments seemed more of a burden than an asset. When Romania and Bulgaria entered NATO in 2004, Moscow approved the EU's expansion and remained silent, withdrawing its forces from Kosovo and Bosnia¹³⁵. The Union was viewed mostly as an economic organisation with less influence over high politics and security matters, in contrast to NATO, a military bloc headed by the United States. Thus, from Moscow's point of view, the EU's 2007 admission of Bulgaria and Romania marked a significant advancement but not a revolution in the Balkans. In a same spirit, the SAP helped the former Yugoslavia and Albania - but not Slovenia, which had previously acceded to NATO and the EU - move closer to Brussels. In simpler terms, Russia mostly showed little concern about the Balkans being included into the Western orbit of influence. Its ties with the West became hostile during Putin's second term as president though (2004–2008)¹³⁶. In fact, the colour revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan were seen by the Kremlin as an existential danger to the Federation itself, as part of a bigger US effort to promote changes in

¹³³ Allison, 2013

¹³⁴ Tsygankov, 2016, pp. 135–177

¹³⁵ Trenin, 2011, pp. 105–106; Bechev, 2017, pp. 54–55

¹³⁶ Trenin, 2011, pp. 32–33; Tsygankov, 2016, pp. 177–209; Stent, 2019, pp. 125–133, 304–310

government. Putin chastised America's conceit and unilateralist tendencies in a widely mentioned address at the Munich Security Summit in 2007. He believed that American policy was fuelling unrest and turmoil around the world. Still, he saw the major European Union powers - most notably Germany and France - as allies rather than enemies since they had stood against the US invasion of Iraq.

A common misperception is that in the 2010s, Russia "came back" to Southeast Europe. Actually, during Putin's second term, its revival was already in motion. There were two distinct events happening. First, the state-building process for Kosovo. Second, plans to build a Russian gas export corridor that bypassed Ukraine¹³⁷. Moscow's goal in both situations was to use its connections in the area to rival and achieve parity with the West, which constituted the core of its Balkan strategy. With the United States and its partners, Russia transformed Kosovo into a front in combat. It was involved in the issue from the beginning in 2004 as a founding member of the Contact Group for the former Yugoslavia. Both Russia and the West found common ground with Martti Ahtisaari, the former president of neutral Finland who had led the discussions in 2006–2007¹³⁸. Nevertheless, after several detours, Moscow declined to recognise Ahtisaari's plan, which called for the area to become independent. The province was classified as a component of the residual Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro) by UN Security Council resolution 1244 (1999). This created a shared Serbia-Russia front, revitalising relations that had become stale following Milošević's overthrow¹³⁹. Following Kosovo's unilateral proclamation of independence in February 2008, which was backed by the United States and the majority of EU member states, the partnership quickly gained strength. Russia supported Serbia by advocating against the former's participation in international organisations and acknowledgment by third parties, such as the Arab world; by supplying remarks to the International Court of Justice claiming that the country's declaration of independence violated international law; and by denouncing the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia for what it claimed to be biased rulings¹⁴⁰. Given the elites' assertions that the integrity of the country's territory was in jeopardy, Russia's backing arrived at a highly advantageous time for Serbia and helped unite the majority of political parties, even those with pro-Western ideologies. More significantly, notwithstanding mounting opposition from the West, Serbia was able to maintain and successfully pursue its policy against acceptance of

¹³⁷ Simonov, 2009; Bechev, 2017, Chapter 7

¹³⁸ Ker-Lindsay, 2011

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ E.g., Džihic and Hamilton, 2012

Kosovo's sovereignty thanks in large part to the help provided by Russia. This assistance has had a variety of effects on how the policy context formed. On the home front, it has maintained political parties focused on the Kosovo status problem for more than ten years, which has made it easier for them to appeal to ethnic feelings and create a "lingering sense of international stigma and unfairness, which in turn causes difficulties for those politicians promoting compatibility between Serbia's political and historical past, and its potential EU future"¹⁴¹. Even while Russia has had no formal stake in Kosovo and still does not, it has benefited from its refusal to recognise it internationally and from Kosovo's independence. Kosovo, in any instance, is a small component of a larger jigsaw including Russian retaliation against what it perceives to be Western unilateralism. Russia keeps criticising NATO for occupying Kosovo without the UN Security Council's approval, and it uses this criticism as a pretext to defend its tough neighbour policy and the maintenance of frozen wars as a buffer against Western imperialism¹⁴². In this sense, Russia sees Kosovo as a battleground on which to oppose the Western countries' whole foreign policy paradigm¹⁴³.

¹⁴¹ Obradović and Howarth, 2018, p.31

¹⁴² KIPRED, 2016, p. 4

¹⁴³ Kallaba, 2017, p. 7

5.2 *Russia's strategy and objectives in Serbia and Kosovo*

Over the years, prominent personalities in the US and the EU have been ringing the alarm about how Russian intervention directly threatens Western interests. The Russians are kindly replying: “You should remember what happened around Yugoslavia”, Vladimir Putin told journalists in 2016, referring to the crisis in relations with the West. “Everything started back then”¹⁴⁴. Are these worries appropriate? What motivates Moscow’s policies and how do they affect regional politics?

Although Moscow may have certain interests in the area, these pale in comparison to the more important geopolitical factors influencing Moscow’s actions and perspectives in the Balkans. Moscow values the region because it might affect its place in the international framework as a whole or its place in the post-Soviet sphere. This implies that the territory is important when it provides Russia with a precedent (Kosovo, for example) to use in post-Soviet territorial conflicts or when it serves as evidence that the country has recovered its reputation as a major power following the atrocities of the 1990s. Moscow benefits from Russia’s presence in the Balkans in its dealings with the West, demonstrating that the area should be seen as a supporting role in the larger narrative of Russia-West ties.

Shared beliefs and values are the foundation of enduring partnerships. The similar worldview held by the ruling elites of contemporary Russia and Serbia effectively unites them. These similar entities carry deep-seated victimisation and grievances over lost civilizations. As a result, European and transatlantic institutions are viewed with suspicion and distrust. Their principal geopolitical goal in the Western Balkans is to establish Serbia as the dominant regional force, and this convergence of sociocultural values leads to the coordination of their efforts. The goal of Vučić’s revanchist programme is to shift the regional relations system such that Serbian hegemony is once again in place. Such a result would satisfy the “justice” that ultranationalist Serbs had in mind for Greater Serbia. As such, Belgrade’s positioning would provide Moscow with the dependable ally it needs to promote its geopolitical objectives throughout the Balkans. Placing Serbia at the top of the area would further impede and/or stop the further transatlantic integration of other Western Balkan republics.

Thus, Serbia and the Balkans are seen by Russia as another part of Europe where its footprint could undermine Western geopolitical goals. Russia shows that it has regained the position of global and European superpower that the West rejected it in the 1990s by using the Balkans as

¹⁴⁴ Samorukov, 2017b, p. 5

a staging area¹⁴⁵. Furthermore, Russia gets leverage and negotiating power with the West through preserving its presence in the area, which is crucial when rivalry starts to characterise relations between the two countries. Conflicts between Russia and the US over topics like the colour revolutions, missile defence, Georgia and Ukraine's possible NATO membership, and the Russo-Georgian War coincide with the era when Russia became increasingly engaged in the Balkans in the second half of the 2000s¹⁴⁶. In fact, Russia views Southeast Europe as a vulnerability on the Western periphery that it can exploit to its advantage by engaging with discretion, avoiding unwarranted commitments, and gaining strategic advantages¹⁴⁷. Paradoxically, its narrow goals enable Russia to bolster its power in the Balkans. As Strobe Talbott put it, Primakov's approach may actually "play a weak hand well" - that is, get the most out of limited assets in order to achieve the largest return, whether it be through financial advantages, PR coups against the West, diplomatic wins, or maintaining its standing as a key player in international affairs¹⁴⁸. Russia now also benefits from not being constrained by any one ideology or set of established norms, having leeway and interactions with a wide range of people in business, government, and civil society. That is how it is different from the Soviet Union, where policies were shaped by communist philosophy, and from the Tsarist Empire before to 1917, which was devoted to authoritarianism and Orthodoxy.

¹⁴⁵ Buzan & Wæver, p. 430

¹⁴⁶ Vuksanović, 2021, p. 105

¹⁴⁷ Krastev, 2015

¹⁴⁸ cf. Stent, 2019

5.3 Examination of Russia's energy interests, military presence, and cultural ties

Nowadays Russia has close and varied relations to both Kosovo and Serbia.

Due to Moscow's safeguarding within the UNSC and its veto power over Kosovo's potential membership, Serbia became politically dependent on Russia after Kosovo gained independence. However, reports of Russia's participation in the Kosovo problem frequently acts as a smokescreen, helping the Serbian ruling coalition preserve credibility and win electoral support since any compromise with Pristina is seen as political death¹⁴⁹. President Vučić is keen to increase Russia's prominence and power country, but he is also afraid of direct Russian meddling and the chance that Putin may undermine whatever agreements he could make on Kosovo.

Kosovo's Albanians and Serbs have different views on Russia: owing in particular to their endorsement of Serbia and obstruction of Kosovo's integration into the global community, 85 per cent of Kosovo Albanians view Russia's position towards Kosovo as extremely unfriendly¹⁵⁰, whilst 65 per cent of Serbs see Russia as "the most important partner when it comes to lobbying for the protection of interests of Serbs in Kosovo"¹⁵¹. Russia's principal gatekeepers are still Kosovo Serbs, especially those in the four towns in the North where the Serb majority resides. Russia is viewed as a natural companion and defender of their goals because of their animosity against the Pristina administration¹⁵². However, Russian influence over Kosovo's internal matters is restricted and confined because of the Serbs' recent exodus from local institutions. Due in large part to the persistent anti-Russian sentiment of Kosovo's Albanian majority, Russian involvement is met with strong social opposition and ethnic Albanians in Kosovo are "impenetrable" to Russian courting¹⁵³. While Moscow views Kosovo as a negotiating tool in its ties with Serbia, Russia itself has relatively limited stake in the region. For this reason, it might be argued that Serbia is the beneficiary of Russian involvement in Kosovo rather than Kosovo itself.

In the economy, Moscow's coercive influence is much more evident and has both official and informal components. Formally, it is shown in the different agreements that include public enterprises or governments, including national gas utilities and Gazprom. Informally, influence operates through private investors who are vulnerable to political pressure even if officially

¹⁴⁹ Bjeloš, 2022

¹⁵⁰ KCSS, 2018, p. 21

¹⁵¹ Jović et al., 2017, p. 4

¹⁵² NGO Aktiv, 2022

¹⁵³ Vllasi, 2020

independent of the Russian government. The Russian energy juggernaut Gazprom acquired Petroleum Industry of Serbia, Serbia's most significant strategic enterprise, in 2008, taking a controlling stake in the business. With the opening of the TurkStream pipeline in January 2020, Gazprom started transporting supplies to countries in the eastern Balkans through Turkey and the Black Sea¹⁵⁴. It retains controlling ownership of the business, which is run by the Swiss firm Gastrans, with the state monopoly Srbijagas as a minority shareholder (49 percent)¹⁵⁵. Not only does Gazprom supply the bulk of the natural gas to the country, but it also holds a 56.1 percent stake in the largest petroleum refinery in Serbia, Pančevo. Sixty percent of Serbia's oil needs are imported, with Russia in fact supplying the majority¹⁵⁶. All things considered, Moscow controls a significant portion of Belgrade's energy assets, leaving Serbia vulnerable politically. Despite being a small foreign investor (4.6 percent of total foreign direct investments)¹⁵⁷ and a minimal trading partner (3.9 per cent of imports and 2.7 per cent of exports)¹⁵⁸, Russia is able to exercise disproportionate political power due to its dominance over the energy industry. Overall, it is clear that Russian gas pipelines transport goods other than energy, and Russia's robust position in the Western Balkan nations is a prime illustration of how energy reliance can be transformed into political power. On the other hand, Russia does not presently have a substantial economic stake in Kosovo, but there are constant attempts to develop a market for Russian gas.

In line with these close economic ties, there have been a significant increase in the number of bilateral treaties and protocols signed between Russia and Serbia in recent years, rising from 32 (1994-2006) to 66 (2007-2016)¹⁵⁹. The substantial number of governmental trips made between 2008 and 2016 - eleven at the level of the president or prime minister, but no less than seventeen in total - is another indicator of this reconciliation. During the same time period, Croatia and Russia only made five formal high-level visits¹⁶⁰. Interstate relations have also become more significant as sources of political influence affecting policy frameworks; this is especially evident in the growth of inter-party relations between the two countries. For example, Vladimir Putin's "United Russia" party agreed upon collaboration agreements with the Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS) in 2009, with the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) in

¹⁵⁴ RadioFree Europe, 2018

¹⁵⁵ Elliott, 2020

¹⁵⁶ Worldometer, n.d.

¹⁵⁷ Sushkova and Koumpoti, 2020

¹⁵⁸ Eurostat, 2022

¹⁵⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Serbia, 2018

¹⁶⁰ Zorić, 2017, p. 35

September 2011¹⁶¹, and more recently, with three pro-Russian political parties in Serbia (the Dveri Movement, the DSS, and the Serb People's Party [SNP]), in support of the creation of a militarily neutral zone in the region¹⁶².

This leads to the last avenue of Russian leverage, i.e. soft power, from which Moscow has benefited greatly. In 2011, Vladimir Putin's trip to Belgrade as Russian Prime Minister was a significant demonstration of Russia's soft power appeal and a turning point for the country. In fact, he was given the greatest honour bestowed by the Serbian Orthodox Church on that particular day. Following the ceremony, he watched a friendly football game between Red Star Belgrade and Zenit St Petersburg, the team from his hometown, as Red Star supporters yelled, "Putin, you Serb, Serbia is with you"¹⁶³. From then on, it became evident that local elites routinely utilised relations with Russia as instruments for local marketing, indicating that Russian sway could also be shown in an open manner¹⁶⁴. Pro-government newspapers are Serbia's primary source of pro-Russian storylines; they exalt Russia in order for those in power to benefit domestically from Russian prominence and to use the Russian factor as a kind of leverage against the West¹⁶⁵. Vladimir Putin's 2019 tour to Belgrade, when he was received by a large crowd in front of the Orthodox Church of Saint Sava at a point when the Serbian government was dealing with widespread demonstrations, is another potent illustration of how local elites utilise connections with Russia to gain domestic credibility¹⁶⁶. As a result of this strategy, a recent survey found that 50.5 per cent of Serbians think Russia is their most significant ally, and 65.8 per cent agree it is Serbia's closest friend¹⁶⁷.

In terms of track-two diplomacy, Russia is fostering its image in Serbia through a variety of organisations: the Russian Centre at Belgrade University and the gymnasium in Novi Sad (a branch of the "Russkyi Myr" foundation led by MP and political adviser for "United Russia", Nikonov); "Russian House" (a branch of *Rosstrudnichestvo*, an MFA agency that maintains ties with compatriots abroad); and numerous NGOs in both countries that espouse the ideals of a Slavic world and brotherhood.

Additionally, the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) has a significant impact on national public life and politics. According to a public opinion survey, the SOC is the most effective

¹⁶¹ SNS, 2019

¹⁶² B92, 2016 June

¹⁶³ Bechev, 2019

¹⁶⁴ Vuksanović, 2021, pp. 147-48

¹⁶⁵ Vuksanović, Cvijić, & Samorukov, 2022, p. 10

¹⁶⁶ Vuksanović, 2019

¹⁶⁷ Vuksanović, Cvijić, & Samorukov, 2022, p. 8

organisation for “improving the life of family and friends”¹⁶⁸. Thus, bolstering popular enthusiasm for a strong SOC whose outlook is in complete alignment with the ROC is part of Moscow’s goal for Serbia and the Western Balkans. In light of this, the Russian government enlists the ROC in relation to Serbia. For instance, the Orthodox churches in Belgrade and Moscow are consulted extensively when planning official visits. Putin went to Serbia for three days shortly after Russia’s action against Ukraine in 2014. The Patriarch of Moscow and All Rus’ Kirill shortly afterward. Then-Prime Minister Vučić convened with Kirill to discuss potential avenues for further collaboration between the two nations and religions, among several other topics¹⁶⁹. Following that, Kirill dedicated a memorial in Belgrade honouring Russian Tsar Nicolas II while Serbian and Russian armed forces engaged in their first-ever combined military drill¹⁷⁰. The Church of St. Sava in Belgrade is another, more permanent illustration of the religious-political ties between Russia and Serbia. Over the past few years, the Kremlin and ROC collaborated closely to provide the funding and building supplies required to create what eventually evolved into one of the biggest sacred structures in Eastern Orthodoxy¹⁷¹. These and other instances of collaboration do not shield Moscow and Belgrade from conflict on their own¹⁷². Putin is aware that, in addition to the ROC, he can count on members of the SOC to support and uphold Russia’s stance among the Serbs in the area should sociopolitical issues arise. The reason the Kremlin maintains a careful distance from the SOC is due of its popular appeal and its relative autonomy from the state. In exchange, the SOC is able to retain some degree of authority and independence because of its powerful Russian allies.

Lastly, since April 2012 the Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Centre (RSHC) initiative started operating in Niš, southern Serbia, just 100 kilometres away from Camp Bondsteel, the largest NATO station in Kosovo. As evidenced by the 2014 floods, the Niš Centre is arguably the most well-known security cooperation initiative involving Russia in Southeast Europe. Officially, its goal is to support Serbia and other Western Balkan nations during emergencies and natural catastrophes, and it is recognised by Serbian private law as a legal entity. The centre defines itself as “an intergovernmental humanitarian non-profit organization” on its own website. However, even if the goal of creating a system of logistical centres was not accomplished, the

¹⁶⁸ International Republican Institute, 2015

¹⁶⁹ Barisic, 2016

¹⁷⁰ Glavonijc, 2014

¹⁷¹ Sputnik, 2015

¹⁷² This was the case in October 2020 when Putin and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov abruptly cancelled their planned attendance at the Church of St. Sava’s consecration purportedly due to COVID-19 related issues; however, some analysts opined that Putin chose to be demonstrably upset over Vučić’s then-recent overtures to Pristina in response to pressure from the Trump White House.

Niš center's success has mostly served as symbolic, and the centre is now a weapon of widespread power for the Russian government and for segments of the Serbian political class who reject or are sceptical about Euro-Atlantic membership¹⁷³. Since its establishment, it has truly sparked considerable scepticism in the West, raising concerns that it may be hiding an espionage station or setting up the stage for the establishment of a permanent Russian military facility¹⁷⁴. Further worries were expressed in the West in response to Russian President Vladimir Putin's proposal that the RSHC and its employees be accorded diplomatic immunity (on a par with NATO), which placed the burden on Serbia to comply.

In summary, Moscow's disruptive power rests on its capacity to win over hearts and minds. In Western Balkan cultures like Serbia where the majority religion is Orthodox Christianity, Russia and Vladimir Putin enjoy immense popularity. They work to project the image of a historical ally, standing up for its Balkan brothers and sisters against the combined threats of radical Islam and the haughty West. However, Russian "soft power" stems from an adverse impression of the West rather than from the real allure of Russian institutions, culture, or society. Moscow's efforts capitalise on internal grievances originating from the Yugoslav conflicts and the initial post-communist period of the 1990s. Targets have also included the EU, especially in recent years. It is held accountable for the region's economic disruption following the global economic downturn, the introduction of liberal ideals (particularly with regard to delicate issues like the rights of sexual and racial minorities), and the surge of migrants. Conversely, Russia positions itself as a defender of traditionalism and a wall against Western infiltration of inviolable national sovereignty principles. In the Balkans, Orthodox churches have shown to be a trustworthy companion in Russia's endeavours. Still, there is a caveat. Sociological statistics from Serbia show that young people are still focused on the West but are in favour of collaborating with Moscow. As a result, they are far more likely than Russians to travel, work, or pursue education in Western Europe¹⁷⁵. In actuality, the West outperforms Russia's tactical impact in the Balkans with regard to security and economy. However, Russia possesses three avenues of influence that it skilfully and efficiently capitalises on in the Balkans and Serbia, the region's pivotal country: energy, the unresolved Kosovo dispute, and soft power, which is defined as Russia's huge appeal among a broad segment of the local population.

¹⁷³ Vladimirov et al., 2018

¹⁷⁴ B92, 2017

¹⁷⁵ TNS Medium Gallup, 2014

Viewed as a whole, the impact of Russia in the Western Balkans is uneven as shown in Table 2. The biggest impact is displayed by three diamonds, and the least effect is indicated by one diamond.

Country	Disinformation	National Sentiment	Western Maltreatment	Cultural Religious	Political	Economic	Energy Dependence	Military Cooperation
SERBIA	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆
KOSOVO	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆	◆	◆◆

According to Vuk Vuksanović, a Serbian foreign policy analyst, “popularity of Russia [among] the Serbian public is not based on what Russia is, but what it isn’t – the West. It is perceived as a counterweight to the West”¹⁷⁶.

¹⁷⁶ Meeting at Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, 2022

5.4 How to “softly” exert influence: the Memory Diplomacy Policy

The discovery, cultivation, and maintenance of shared memories by political actors for geopolitical objectives and/or bilateral relationships is known as memory diplomacy. One peculiarity is that although the actors interact and sell positive historical accounts of a second nation, they additionally participate in and advocate their own narratives and memorial practices (memory exports) to foreign audiences, forming “memory alliances”¹⁷⁷. A nation’s image is enhanced, relationships are strengthened, and influence is gained thanks to both of these activities. Thus, memory diplomacy is a reciprocal two-way interaction in which both parties are engaged, if not equally so, rather than a one-way operation in which one party enforces its ideas or storylines. Thus, it may be said that memory diplomacy functions as “a strategic resource in the struggle for power”¹⁷⁸, a political and policy domain in which many players imbue history with their own unique meanings and goals¹⁷⁹.

Russia, in particular, has been acting more and more like a memory ambassador in recent times as it attempts to modify how it exploits history for political purposes both domestically and with regard to its fellow citizens in the post-Soviet sphere¹⁸⁰. Considering its receptiveness to Russian soft power, Serbia is a fruitful ally in this regard¹⁸¹. The foundation of Russo-Serbian memory diplomacy involves exchanging memory material, such as tales and imagery depicting the fight and triumph over fascism, but it also entails travel and the sharing of “modes of conveying knowledge about the past”¹⁸². “Transnational memory space” is exemplified by military ceremonies and other militarised memorial rituals like St. George’s Ribbons and the Immortal Regiment¹⁸³.

Nonetheless, the prevailing narratives in Serbia following the events of 2000 were consistent with the post-socialist Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe anti-communist remembrance politics framework. But after Kosovo declared independence in 2008, Russia became more and more significant, which prompted Serbian politicians to celebrate the triumph against fascism in a grandiose way in an attempt to win over Russian diplomats and state officials. Hegemonic historical accounts about the Serbian people’s fight against fascism emerged with this shift in official memory politics. In 2009, a major celebration known as “Belgrade Remembers: 65

¹⁷⁷ McGlynn, 2020

¹⁷⁸ Nguyen, 2016, p. 10

¹⁷⁹ Wolfrum, 1999, p. 25

¹⁸⁰ Becker, 2020

¹⁸¹ Davis and Slobodchikoff, 2019

¹⁸² Ertl, 2011, p. 13

¹⁸³ Wüstenberg, 2019, pp. 372–373

Years of Freedom” brought even more attention to the significance of Russia and the change in official memory politics. Prior to the anniversary, the Cemetery of Belgrade Liberators was expeditiously restored, and a number of Belgrade streets acquired the names of Red Army generals. The live national television show commemorated the shared battle and triumph of the Serbian and Russian people against Nazism, as well as the future collaboration between their two governments¹⁸⁴. Four thousand individuals came to the occasion, including Sergei Lavrov. Both presidents emphasised the need of keeping the memory of the combined struggle against fascism alive in their speeches, with Tadić referring to the fights for Belgrade and their triumph over fascism as the major Russo-Serbian achievement in history¹⁸⁵. As a result, Russia started to act as a memory and political ally.

Without considering the bigger picture of the diplomatic and economic ties between Russia and Serbia as well as the 2008 Kosovo declaration, which gave Russian backing significant weight in the eyes of Serbian political players, it is impossible to comprehend the development in memory politics. The bulk of Serbia’s gas monopoly was sold to Gazprom for an extremely affordable price on the eve of Kosovo’s announcement. Medvedev concluded five agreements for collaboration in various sectors during his 2009 visit, one of which was for the South Stream gas pipeline. He also reaffirmed Russian solidarity with Serbia over the Kosovo issue and talked about a possible \$1 billion loan to Serbia¹⁸⁶. Russia therefore began to assume the role of a political and mnemonic ally.

The significance of commemorative traditions to bilateral relations is highlighted by an examination of documents from the Presidential Administration and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. State and working visits have regularly provided emphasis to the value of historical connections and shared memories of those historical events to current and future interactions. Official visits, such as those by Sergei Lavrov in June 2014, May 2015, December 2016, February 2018, April 2019, and August 2020, or by Vladimir Putin in January 2016 and March 2019, all include memorial activities or speeches that strengthen the Russo-Serbian memory alliance. Particularly during these events, Serbia’s categorization as a Russian memory ally arises regularly, especially in light of the notion that common values are shown by a shared interpretation of the past¹⁸⁷.

¹⁸⁴ Politika, 2009

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Robinson, 2014

¹⁸⁷ MID, 2016a

Russian political players have portrayed the issue of historical memory preservation as pertinent to other areas of international relations and geopolitics, if not more so. Lavrov additionally related a favourable resolution in trade talks between Serbia and Russia to historical memory¹⁸⁸. The Foreign Minister was supporting the Russian government's domestic narrative that it is bringing Russia and other nations to a level of cultural awareness by doing this, in furtherance of trying to compensate Serbia for its memory alliance¹⁸⁹. Leading Russian politicians, in fact, portray their country as a nation that has reestablished its ties to history and the past, allowing it to offer the West a more advanced kind of civilization¹⁹⁰. In this regard, Russia may point to Serbia as another country that is following its lead, thereby defending the Russian government's growing messianic portrayal of its nation's place in the world¹⁹¹.

Overall, it can be concluded that Russia and Serbia have built a memory alliance as a shared transnational memory space through memory diplomacy, which benefits both Serbian and Russian political players. For the latter, it provides a chance to increase internal sentiments of patriotic pride while also enhancing their significance on the global stage. A key element of respectability for politicians in Serbia is the story of the two countries' everlasting fraternity based on their shared heroic and successful history, which is directed at local audiences. With their own goals, interests, and motivations, both nations have entered into a memory alliance: on the one hand, the opportunity to increase Serbia's stature in European and international politics and history, fortify ties with a potent ally, and acquire legitimacy; on the other, the prospect to bolster a messianic comprehension of its function in history and international affairs, which includes guarding historical truth against malicious mnemonic elements. Domestically, state media in Russia portray their nation as spearheading a counter-revolution against Western-imposed culture and history. It is crucial to demonstrate that Russia possesses allies in this struggle, and Serbia performs a significant role by participating in Victory Day parades and acting as an example of a nation that recollects history "correctly"¹⁹².

¹⁸⁸ MID, 2015

¹⁸⁹ McGlynn, 2020

¹⁹⁰ Putin, 2012, 2015; Uskov, 2013

¹⁹¹ MID, 2016b

¹⁹² Khrebtan-Hörhager, 2016

6. *The EU and Russia: Geopolitical Competitors?*

For a variety of reasons, the majority of Western Balkan governments have supported the greater involvement of outside players in the area. Russia's spoiler role in politics gives those who reject specific Western efforts and suggestions for peacebuilding and crisis management an exceptional source of support, which strengthens their negotiating position with the West. Development at the economic level is critically dependent on outside aid, fresh investments, and infrastructural initiatives. Furthermore, these investments frequently have no conditions associated with them, unlike EU subsidies. The majority of Western Balkan leaders, who are not ardent reformists, now feel that they can get other funding sources to support their continued rule, negating the necessity for them to implement EU-mandated changes¹⁹³.

When compared to the EU, however, Russian influence in the Balkans appears to be restricted from an economic and security standpoint. The EU is the primary trading partner, accounting for 81 per cent of exports and 57.9 per cent of imports¹⁹⁴. Following the December 2022 EU-Western Balkans Summit in Tirana, the EU announced an energy assist package of €1 billion. This was part of the €9 billion Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans, which aims to mobilise a total of €30 billion¹⁹⁵. In contrast, Russia is a modest partner in terms of imports (3.9 per cent) and exports (2.7 per cent), with the exception of energy¹⁹⁶.

Furthermore, Russia is vastly outmatched in terms of security. Notwithstanding military exercises and arms shipments, it is not militarily present in the Balkans, in contrast to the West. Early in the Putin administration, it withdrew its peacekeepers from Bosnia & Herzegovina and Kosovo¹⁹⁷. This 2003 decision continues to support the claim that Moscow has limited ability in a NATO-dominated environment and that it does not represent one of its priorities. In actuality, the majority of the nations in the area are either current NATO members or prospective members. On its side, Brussels has the ability to provide incentives like membership in the EU, NATO, or local investment.

That is to say, the Balkans are not only a politically significant area but also a vital economic corridor for Russia and the EU. In actuality, Russia and the West have long used the Western Balkans as a geopolitical "chessboard". Nowadays, Russia has a unique chance to increase its impact in the area due to the region's drawn-out EU membership process and present

¹⁹³ Makocki, 2017

¹⁹⁴ Eurostat, 2022

¹⁹⁵ Todorović, 2022

¹⁹⁶ Stanicek, 2022, p. 2

¹⁹⁷ Nikitin, 2004

enlargement weariness, which will ultimately undermine the goals of NATO and the EU. Although Russia's economic endeavours are unable to match the EU's investment and financing in the area, the two countries are still linked by their strong and long-standing cultural ties¹⁹⁸. However, the impact of Russia is perceived as a rhetorical pressure on European security and other narratives, rather than a response to the overt involvement of other major countries in the region¹⁹⁹. Yet, given that the EU and NATO have not adequately addressed open statehood and identity concerns, Russia continues to exert significant influence over Serbia's and Kosovo's future political and security decisions. The situation of ongoing fragility has grown increasingly plausible as a result of Brexit and the lack of desire for future expansion shown by a number of member states, which may further limit the EU's capacity to project its transformational security influence. In the meanwhile, Russia has strategically placed itself at the middle of the bilateral conflicts between Balkan nations, the EU and NATO over Kosovo recognition, and the region's oil and natural gas market.

Let us now take a closer look at the two Balkan states individually.

¹⁹⁸ Munis and Memovic, 2015

¹⁹⁹ Hoffmann and Makarychev, 2019

6.1 Serbia: looking East, moving West?

Russia and the EU have never been on the same ground in Serbia, and their distinct ties with Belgrade have evolved down rather different paths over time. Although relations between Russia and Belgrade have not altered much, those with the EU have greatly improved, making the EU an essential trading partner for Serbia today. Aleksandar Vučić's success has been largely attributed to an ambiguous foreign policy, or a "game of musical chairs". His nation is economically dependent on the EU while maintaining a special connection with Russia, mostly to preserve Moscow's backing over Kosovo²⁰⁰. The EU, for its part, has participated in Belgrade's game to some extent since, in recent years, its enlargement effort has lost credibility, which has given Russia the opportunity to gain credibility among Serbian residents. Additionally, for many years Brussels depended on Vučić's official positions for welcoming Serbia in the EU, but it ignored the country's slide towards authoritarianism, which utterly undermined the rule of law and reversed the post-Milosevic democratisation process. As he highlighted in his UNGA speech, Vučić uses the EU's backing to further position his purported rule as a factor of peace and stability in the region, even as he concurrently supports Serb leaders in former Yugoslav republics' attempts to secede within the framework of what Belgrade calls *Srpski svet* ("Serb world," a modern version of the nationalist "great Serbia" concept and which recalls the Russian idea of *Ruskiy mir*).

The choice between the EU and Russia is in fact mainly one between what matters most to Serbia: a strategic alliance that is focused on specific concerns or a stable system of political and economic connections. Although the European Union is by far its largest trading relationship and foreign investment source, Russia remains a crucial ally primarily for impeding Kosovo's recognition in international institutions.

Political ties to both external players are present in terms of elite and public support. All of Serbia's main political groups affirm that cordial ties with the EU and Russia are imperative, citing polls as one example among many. During the March 2014 elections all political parties resorted to pro-European rhetoric. But due to historical and cultural ties, Russia has greater popularity than the EU, particularly among adult and senior individuals who have not forgotten the wars of the 1990s and the 1999 NATO campaign. Furthermore, hardly a single significant political party dares to bring up the subject of Kosovo's independence. Since Russia is a permanent member of the UNSC and may veto any resolution that it deems detrimental to

²⁰⁰ Bechev, 2023

Serbia, having its backing on this issue is seen as crucial. Even if the EU supports the EULEX mission and serves as a crucial mediator in the discussions with Prishtina, it has less power to use political leverage in this situation. Lastly, there is an imbalance in the use of soft power tools and cultural ties. Although things are slowly levelling out for both parties, Russia is more noticeable in the EU. Politicians and other public figures often mention historical and cultural ties, which help Russia keep a favourable reputation with the Serbian people.

The fact that Serbia is the only nation in the Western Balkans to have not placed sanctions on Russia despite strong pressure from the US and Europe to do so in retribution for Russia's actions against Ukraine is noteworthy in comparison to the EU integration process. President Vucic refused²⁰¹, claiming that such actions were not beneficial to the nation. This resulted in a breakdown of the negotiating process, particularly in the area of the EU's foreign and security policy, where the success of this chapter depends on rigorous adherence to European choices. Actually, in 2022, Serbia was requested to impose the same sanctions as the EU by all European institutions.²⁰²

Serbia is thus more and more torn by two opposing realities. It is making every effort to balance. Particularly in the energy industry, it is the non-EU nation that gets the most European funding, and it has ratified agreements to boost its competitiveness within the EU. Access to EU research subsidies is made possible by the most current one, which is listed chronologically and places Serbian scientific research institutions on par with those of EU member states. However, the proximity of Russia is far from disappearing, and the increasing instability that has supported EU expansion over the last ten years provides a favourable environment for non-Western public diplomacy²⁰³. Serbia, for example, was among the first nations to announce that it was prepared for human trials after the Russian vaccine against COVID-19.

Serbian people, like their political leaders, seem to be in two minds about the world and their place in it. Opinion polls show that Serbs find the EU less and less attractive. According to Serbian authorities, in 2003 72 percent of Serbs declared that they would vote in favour of EU accession, against 47 percent in 2016 (Figure 3.4). According to the Regional Cooperation Council's Balkan Barometer, this decline is even stronger: in 2017, only 26 percent of Serbs declared that EU accession would be a "good thing" (21 per cent in 2016), whereas 30 percent said that it would be a "bad thing" (31 per cent in 2016)²⁰⁴. At the same time, Russia has steadily

²⁰¹ The Associated Press, 2023

²⁰² Rettman, 2022

²⁰³ Marciacq, 2017

²⁰⁴ Regional Cooperation Council, 2017

improved its image in Serbia. In 2005, a study showed that 34 percent of Serbs believed that their country’s foreign policy should rely more on Russia, and in 2007, 59percent declared that Serbia should develop closer ties with Russia²⁰⁵. By contrast, in 2016, 72 per cent of Serbs held a positive view of Russia (compared to 25per cent of the EU)²⁰⁶. As a matter of fact, 47 percent of them believed that Russia was the largest supplier of development aid to Serbia, whereas its contribution, in reality, is dwarfed by far by the EU, the U.S. and even Japan. In the same vein, in 2017, according to another study, 54 percent of Serbs declared that they approved of Russia’s leadership (against 51 per cent in 2012), while the EU was only granted a 28-percent approval rate²⁰⁷.

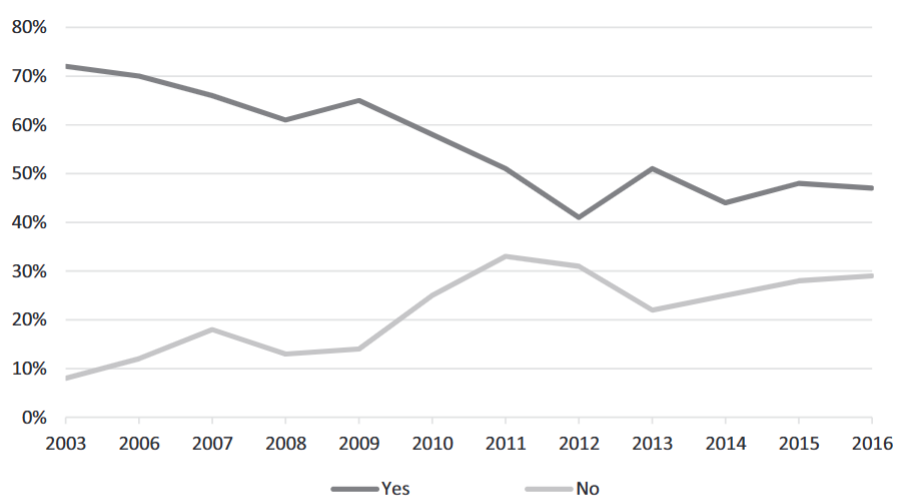


Figure 3.4 Opinion polls: if there was a referendum tomorrow with the question: “do you support the accession of our country to the European Union?”, what would you vote for?

Source: Ministry of European Integration of the Republic of Serbia (2017)

On the other hand, according to a poll in 2016, when asked where they would ideally like to live, 70 percent of those between 18 and 35 chose the United States or Europe. Clearly, there is some confusion here. Is it possible that the average young Serb sees the future of their country as a version of Vladimir Putin’s Russia, while at the same time dreaming about living in the West?

The poll, run by the Belgrade-based Center for Euro-Atlantic Studies (CEAS), concluded that the number of Serbian citizens who have a positive view of Russia is growing. As one Belgrade resident phrased it, “My mind is in Europe, but my heart and soul are in Moscow”. They want to be part of the EU while keeping good relations with Russia. On the other hand, former

²⁰⁵ Konitzer, 2010, pp. 18–19

²⁰⁶ B92, 2016 January

²⁰⁷ Gallup, 2017

Serbian Ambassador to Moscow Jelica Kurjak disagrees and doesn't think that Russian influence in Serbia is growing. "When you become disappointed in one option [the EU], it is normal for the other one to seem more attractive. Pro-Russian sympathies have never really waned - not even when a larger percentage of people favoured EU membership", Kurjak has said. He also stated that "there is a certain segment of the population, 35-50 percent according to various sources, or at least one-third and probably more who are always favourably inclined toward Russia and expect great things from it. This third or more of the population is just more prominent or vocal".

There are a few key aspects to consider when comparing the degree of leverage and connections between the EU and Russia with Serbia. Firstly, the EU has made substantial resource investments in the Western Balkans, and as such, the stability of the region is still a top concern. Even though Serbia is a historical and cultural ally, Moscow still views Serbia as a peripheral nation, or as "a sleeping resource", that may be utilised for a variety of foreign policy objectives, such as constructing a substitute pipeline or winning support for particular international political initiatives. Although Russia does not see its objectives in Serbia as exclusively geopolitical, it does anticipate some degree of Serbian assistance. But Russia cannot afford to commit significant financial and political resources to the Balkans, even if it actively uses a whole range of cultural linkages.

Comparing the EU and Russia and their policies towards Serbia is not an easy task given that the EU is frequently divided over its foreign policy choices while Russia makes more or less consolidated decisions. However, as the above analysis shows, Serbia maintains deep and diverse relations with both, and in this light, the statement by President Nikolic that he planned to follow Tito's orientation of both East and West, since "Nowadays, Tito's foreign policy concept is the only right choice"²⁰⁸ does not come as a surprise. According to the Serbian Ambassador in Russia Slavenko Terzic, who declined the possibility of Serbia's imposition of sanctions on Russia, "Our policy is determined clearly as a policy of military and political neutrality, we will insist on this"²⁰⁹. What is important, however, is to what extent can this policy be adhered to in the constantly changing international environment? The analysis shows that despite the fact that the EU has more leverage and linkages in Serbia, Russia represents an important counteragent. Even if these two parties are not openly antagonistic towards one another (given that on some issues like stabilization of the region they hold a common view),

²⁰⁸ Filipovic, 2014

²⁰⁹ Toskic, 2014

intensification of hostility in EU-Serbia and Russia-Serbia relations remains a possibility not to be ignored.

In summary, Serbia's strong links to the EU stem primarily from its ambition for EU membership. This cooperation is based on extensive institutional, political, and economic linkages that give the EU considerable influence. By using its influence, the EU encourages Serbia to adhere to EU norms for human rights, governance, and the rule of law. The prospect of membership and its attendant benefits provide Serbia strong incentives to conform to these requirements. On the other hand, Russia primarily exploits its historical and cultural ties, together with its strategic economic interests, which include its reliance on oil, to influence Serbia. By maintaining a sphere of influence, Russia counterbalances the power of the EU in the Balkans, backing Serbia's non-recognition of Kosovo, expressing national pride in Serbia and supporting it diplomatically at international fora. The influence of the EU may have been overestimated if one considers the mixed results yielded by the EU's approach in Serbia, for example, in terms of democracy consolidation, economic convergence and public diplomacy²¹⁰. But it remains overall more effective than non-Western powers' multifaceted engagement. The (re)engagement of Russia in Serbia came along with different opportunities, which Serbia, more often than not, has seized out of instrumental need rather than normative choice. This seemingly fence-sitting strategy may seem perfectly rational. Instead of pleading in Brussels for greater engagement and faster integration (a call that would not be heard in most EU capitals) or systematically opposing the reform agenda promoted by the EU for want of better incentives, Serbia tends to build tactical cooperation with non-Western powers, based on a series of issues which the EU may consider of strategic importance. In so doing, it allows its linkages with non-Western powers to act as a source of influence (rather than medium of influence) shaping Serbia's policy contexts (rather than conduct). However, by following this strategy, which recalls the "time-tested Titoist policy of balancing between the West and the East"²¹¹, Serbia may find it hard to avoid important pitfalls. Serbia, after all, is only a part of ex-Yugoslavia. That makes Serbia's policy contexts more amenable to be shaped simultaneously by multiple, not necessarily mutually supportive, foreign policy actors (both Western and non-Western), and possibly weakens Serbia's capacity to steer its position strategically among competing approaches. In the absence of a consistent strategy going beyond the tactical offsetting of one asymmetrical relationship with another, Serbia runs the risk of being trapped by the imperative of accommodating inconsistent expressions of influence rather than actually balancing them.

²¹⁰ Marciacq, 2017

²¹¹ Bechev, 2017, p. 53

More asymmetrical relationships, in other words, are no guarantee for better fence-sitting. Moreover, Serbia's linkages with non-Western powers, when driven by material incentives, offer new opportunities for Serbian actors opposed to the EU's liberal reform agenda to consolidate their informal structures. Russia's support on the issue of Kosovo's international recognition, for instance, has enabled the main political parties to keep their voters' attention on this issue for many years. However, the continued salience of the Kosovo dispute in Serbian politics and Russia's popularity in Serbia gives Russia the ability to disrupt the Serbian government if it ever negotiates a settlement of the Kosovo dispute that excludes Russia and denies it an opportunity to ask for something in return. This would be a political fiasco for the Serbian leadership, which cannot afford to be perceived by its population as softer on the issue of Kosovo than the Russian leadership. This is important in the context of the recent Franco-German proposal to resolve the Kosovo dispute. The proposal involves Serbia not actually recognising Kosovo but not objecting to its membership of international institutions, while Kosovo is expected to form an Association of Serbian Municipalities (ASM), an entity guaranteeing autonomy for Kosovo Serbs. There are signs that Russia, primarily through its diplomatic representatives in Belgrade, has expressed displeasure with the Franco-German proposal (Brzozowski). However, despite Western pressures, it remains uncertain whether Serbia and Kosovo can agree to Kosovo having a seat at the UN and to the formation of the ASM, respectively²¹². Russia can patiently wait and see whether the proposed deal will be accepted and, more importantly, implemented, hoping that just like many previous diplomatic efforts on Kosovo, this too will fail. Nevertheless, suppose the proposal reaches the point of final implementation. In that case, Russia may find a way to sabotage it in order to humiliate the West and prevent the loss of a useful leverage tool. This possibility will remain in play for both the Serbian leadership and the West. Meanwhile, in Serbia, the government in power will have to balance its ties with the EU and Russia for the sake of domestic political survival as Russia remains the most popular foreign country among the population, but the economic well-being of the country is still largely dependent on the EU²¹³.

²¹² Dragojlo, 2017

²¹³ Vuksanović, 2020

6.2 Kosovo: Trying to Play a Weak Hand Well

As far as Kosovo is concerned, its alignment with Western states can be best explained by its past relations, present dependencies, and future aspirations. First and foremost, its strong linkage with Western actors springs from their support in ending the ethnic conflict during the 1990s, supporting the state-building process, and, most importantly, recognizing its independence in 2008 and subsequently assisting the nascent state in its path towards consolidating domestic sovereignty and international integration²¹⁴. The extensive role of Western states in shaping the state-building process and the path to independent statehood not only served as a platform for shaping domestic and foreign policy but also had a direct role in governing Kosovo's political, economic, legal, and foreign affairs²¹⁵. Kosovo's dependency on Western states is also related to the fact that the country remains outside the United Nations, which is a key obstacle to independent foreign policy and socio-economic development at home. This context has forced Kosovo to prioritize strategic dependency on Western states as a bilateral diplomatic route to surviving as an independent state and seeking backdoor entry into the international system through Euro-Atlantic integration²¹⁶. The Government of Kosovo considers membership of the European Union to be "a national priority for the social, economic and political development and transformation of Kosovo" which will "enable the country to strengthen the international subjectivity, and to contribute to security, stability, and prosperity in this part of Europe, based on democratic principles and values"²¹⁷.

The increased rivalry between Kosovo's allies and its opponents has entangled the emerging state into complex processes, which can further hinder diplomatic recognition and membership of international bodies, also risking reversing achievements during the first decade of independent statehood. Although Kosovo was willing to establish ties with many countries, it maintained a distance from major non-Western powers, such as Russia. Germany remains its major European partner, being one of the first countries to recognize its independence and has been a solid supporter of the country's domestic state-building and economic reconstruction, European integration, and membership of international and regional bodies. Among all Western states, Germany has been the strongest supporter of regional peace and stability, including the EU-facilitated dialogue for the normalization of relations between Serbia and Kosovo. Since 2011, Berlin has been instrumental in pressing Serbia to dissolve most of its parallel structures

²¹⁴ Visoka, 2018

²¹⁵ see Phillips, 2012; Musliu and Orbie, 2016

²¹⁶ Newman and Visoka, 2018

²¹⁷ Government of Kosovo, 2015b, p. 43

in Kosovo and allow for Serbs' integration into Kosovo society, setting the condition that "the advancement of Serbia's EU accession negotiations will be... measured in particular against Serbia's continued engagement towards a visible and sustainable improvement in relations with Kosovo"²¹⁸. This has provided Kosovo with strong reassurance that the EU-facilitated dialogue is worth pursuing, with the possibility of resolving the historical conflict with a treaty that provides sustainable peace, full normalization, mutual recognition, and a seat at the UN. In 2014, when the European integration perspective for Western Balkan countries faded away, Germany took a leading role in initiating what has come to be known as the "Berlin Process": a series of high-level summits seeking to promote regional cooperation, strengthen good governance, and increase prosperity via sustainable economic growth²¹⁹, from which Kosovo benefitted by remaining part of regional initiatives and being part of economic cooperation and societal reconciliation initiatives.

On balance, it can be affirmed that the EU and Russia are both essential to the stability of the Western Balkans. While Russia's strategy might be interpreted as an attempt to retain its dominance and make sure that Western military and political alliances do not intrude on its interests, the EU's approach seeks to stabilise the area via integration and alignment with European principles. Thanks to the aspects of cooperation, engagement, link and leverages analysed in this chapter, the main tactics employed by the EU and Russia to exert influence, including their respective strengths and weaknesses, their effectiveness and consequences, have been identified and highlighted. Moreover, local perceptions were examined to gain insights into how external interventions are perceived by the local population, allowing to fully grasp the bigger picture of geopolitical competition and regional dynamics in Serbia and Kosovo.

²¹⁸ European Union, 2015, p. 2

²¹⁹ Kmezić and Bieber, 2017

7. Conclusion

This study sought to comprehend the influence as well as the level of participation of foreign actors. The chapters aimed to investigate, as stated in the introduction, how they interact with regional forces in order to achieve either compliance or consensus. External actors with strong religious or cultural links have frequently raised expectations among populations with similar bonds, but they have also instilled terror in adjacent communities. In fact, outsiders are rarely seen as merely impartial investors. Because of this, there have occasionally been more conflicts as a result of other actors' involvement, whether seen in its actual scope or exaggeratedly via a perspective of cultural affinity. Thus, it is crucial to pay attention to the increasing influence and meddling of strong international players and their goals, which may not always align with those of Kosovo and Serbia. Specifically, the chapters examine how such interactions are carried out through connections that act as points of influence, i.e. as mediums, or, more directly, through linkages that generate mostly asymmetric relationships and themselves represent sources of power. This allowed to evaluate the extent to which the analysed outside parties can impact regional developments and comprehend the kinds of connections that have formed. The region is characterised by being simultaneously enclosed and outside the EU. It seems to be strongly connected to Western Euro-Atlantic organisations because of their unifying power; however, EU and NATO's appeal and involvement have decreased as the transatlantic connection has grown more fragile, in part because of the internal issues. Meanwhile, other nations - including major ones like Russia - have stepped up their presence.

Although Russia is a major player in the Balkans, its significance is frequently overstated. It can play saboteur and yet project the image of a European superpower, but it does not have the might (or, one could argue, the desire) to become a regional hegemon. Obviously not in pole position in the region's power balance, it lags considerably behind the EU, which continues to handle the majority of investments and up to two thirds of commerce. Its long-term objective is to restore equilibrium by applying pressure on the EU and its allies using a variety of strategies, including as taking advantage of gaps in the Western orbit of influence and appealing to sympathetic audiences in the Balkans, who frequently harbour longstanding grievances against Western powers like Germany and the United States. More significantly, Moscow has a number of local allies. They typically engage in double-dealing, working with Russia while taking advantage of connections to the West. Russia benefits from this attitude as long as it weakens and obstructs EU measures. However, it is important to emphasise that the local ruling classes and ethnic groups are self-serving actors who use their connections to Moscow to further

their own agendas, and they are not Moscow's submissive proxies. Not even Serbia's government, one of the few in Europe that has not shut its doors to Russia, is wholly supportive of Russia. Rather, it strikes a balance and leverages the West against Russia to secure a better deal on matters like Kosovo and strengthen the nation's standing in the Western security framework. For example, in April 2022, pro-government Serbian newspapers called Putin a traitor for drawing parallels between Donbass and Kosovo.

All things considered, it is undeniable that the Western Balkans are now more exposed to outside influences and dangers due to unresolved causes of unrest. Internal weaknesses have affected the social landscape in recent years, such as the growth of nationalism, historical grudges, corruption, weaker governmental institutions and media, and unemployment. These shortcomings have fostered fragility and created an environment in which state and non-state actors may exert control. Due to transnational issues plaguing Western Europe, including migration, international terrorism, and a resurgent Russia, the West has pulled out of the Western Balkans, currently suffering from "Balkan fatigue". By using political, economic, military, and informational instruments, Russia has taken on a "spoiler role", purposefully projecting and changing aspects of power while undermining Western democratic institutions and foundations. As previously indicated, it also takes advantage of the sense of a vacuum in power caused by Europe, which has diminished the weight of the Western Balkans in its plans, to cast doubt on Western objectives and portray cooperation with Russia as an essential substitute. Furthermore, Putin is respected and seen as a capable leader in Serbia. It is unclear, though, if this is only a superficial adoration or a genuine desire to take Russia's example in terms of leadership, decision-making, and policymaking. Regarding Kosovo, Russia will continue to be realistic and politically opportunistic, but it will also keep trying to exercise soft power influence through its media, funded cultural institutions, Orthodox churches, and commercial investments. Actually, Moscow still views Kosovo as a tool for negotiating and advancing its own interests in the "near-abroad".

Through the use of several methodologies and approaches to examine the entire transformational processes, among which the regional security complex and the link and leverage theories, issues and tendencies were uncovered that point to the extremely complex nature of security in the region under analysis. They demonstrate that the Western Balkans continue to be a hotspot for regional and global stability because of the interactions and synergistic effects of multiple actors, which have the capacity to undermine not only a single nation's internal affairs but also those of the region, the surrounding area, and all of Europe.

Thus, the interdependence of the various elements that comprise multifaceted regional security within a larger European and global framework results in the underlying core of that complexity.

Small nations like those in the Balkans can be strategically important in today's multipolar world; if a major power fails to cooperate with them, these nations are prepared to turn to rival parties. In light of this, the EU, Russia, and other significant players - who were not included in this paper but are nonetheless crucial - aim to increase their local impact by implementing a new geopolitical agenda. The totality of their moves demonstrates that great powers view the Balkans as strategically, politically, and economically significant, the exact kind of location where the effects of tectonic geopolitical upheavals are most felt and where their currents are most powerful. Thus, the events in Kosovo and Serbia reflect both a microcosm of a world influenced by global power struggle and a wider fragility to European security.

In actuality, the nations and people of the Western Balkans are more than just the backdrop to international geopolitical disputes. In their capacity as intermediaries, local governments have been maximising their standing towards their own people and other external entities by taking advantage of third-country interests. Several aspects of connections and relationships are examined throughout the thesis' chapters, including sociological, political, military, and economic ones. What becomes apparent is that certain actors play a major role in the realm of economic interactions, while others frequently forge stronger sociological or political links while preserving tighter economic relationships. Therefore, no one player is fully involved in every element of the Western Balkans' reality. But most importantly, neither Kosovo nor Serbia are foreign states' puppets deprived of free will. They have their own agendas, and more or less successfully they make use of external interests to accomplish them. Searching for exterior examples and patrons and engaging multiple players off each other is a powerful and old trend in the area. In this way, local leaders are able to communicate to their partners that in the event that their nations' demands are not sufficiently accommodated, they may consider exploring other options for their foreign alignments. Balkan administrations may, in fact, benefit from economic accords, rescue packages, and political backing from several foreign countries thanks to this balance of power approach.

On a last note, the next steps in this line of research should be directed towards carrying out further investigation and analysis to have a deeper understanding of the environment and the activities of outside actors in the Western Balkans area, particularly in Serbia and Kosovo, in order to properly appraise the rivalry for influence in that region. Initially, by doing supplementary research in adjacent nations like Bosnia, Albania, Croatia, and Montenegro, it is

critical to assess the true extent of internal vulnerabilities in the region. Second, further analysis needs to concentrate on the foreign state impact of nations other than the EU and Russia, such as China, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the other Gulf States. In fact, only by comparing also these states' actions and policies in the region it will be possible to fully grasp how external actors can influence the national security complex of Western Balkan countries.

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