

THE IMPACT OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE ON THE WESTERN BALKANS REGION

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Abstract: Russia’s war on Ukraine has taken both the Western Balkans and the rest of the world by surprise. Stuck in its inability to make progress in its EU accession efforts, the region is now reliving memories of the ‘90s – refugees, bombed buildings, corpses in the streets. While the new geopolitical reality of the entire world from February 24, 2022, will continue to have economic and political implications, the continuation and even increase of military, political and economic commitments in the region of both the EU and the US are playing a crucial role in defining the future of the Western Balkan states. The main goal of this paper is to discuss the impact of the war in Ukraine on the Western Balkans countries (WB6), and to assess how these implications are influencing their EU accession path. While the research is focused on the analysis of the current situation, the aim is to highlight those critical points where EU strategic action is needed in order to mitigate the effects of the war in Ukraine on the WB6. The paper also addresses the idea that only through an increased resilience of the WB6 and a strong engagement in this region, EU will be able to counteract the subversive actions of the Kremlin. In this sense, the paper presents the dependencies of the WB6 on Russia and how its influence can drive the region into more instability, by analysing the reactions to the war in each of these countries. Ultimately, the paper focuses on the implications the war in Ukraine has on EU’s strategic autonomy, as well as on the priorities which need to be calibrated to the current needs and in the logic of an open strategic autonomy, in which the WB6 are an essential piece of the puzzle, helping the EU build a stronger profile in the global arena.

Keywords: war in Ukraine, Western Balkans, security, geopolitics, strategic autonomy



Rezumat: Războiul Rusiei împotriva Ucrainei a luat prin surprindere atât Balcanii de Vest, cât și restul lumii. Blocată în incapacitatea sa de a face progrese în eforturile de aderare la UE, regiunea re trăiește acum amintiri din anii ‘90 – refugiați, clădiri bombardate, cadavre pe străzi. În timp ce noua realitate geopolitică în care se află întregul mapamond începând cu 24 februarie 2022 va continua să aibă implicații economice și politice, continuarea și chiar creșterea angajamentelor militare, politice și economice în regiune, atât ale UE cât și ale SUA joacă un rol crucial în definirea viitorului statelor din Balcanii de Vest. Scopul principal al acestei lucrări este de a aborda impactul războiului din Ucraina asupra țărilor din Balcanii de Vest (WB6) și de a

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evalua modul în care implicațiile acestuia influențează demersul lor de aderare la UE. În timp ce cercetarea se concentrează pe analiza situației actuale, scopul este de a evidenția acele puncte critice în care este necesară o acțiune strategică a UE pentru a atenua efectele războiului din Ucraina asupra WB6. Lucrarea abordează, de asemenea, ideea că doar printr-o reziliență sporită a WB6 și printr-un angajament puternic în această regiune, UE va putea contracara acțiunile subversive ale Kremlinului. În acest sens, studiul prezintă dependențele WB6 față de Rusia și modul în care factorii săi de influență pot declanșa în regiune o și mai mare instabilitate, prin analizarea reacțiilor față de război din fiecare dintre aceste țări. În cele din urmă, studiul se concentrează pe implicațiile pe care le are războiul din Ucraina asupra autonomiei strategice a UE, precum și pe prioritățile care trebuie calibrate la nevoile actuale și în logica unei autonomii strategice deschise, în care WB6 sunt o piesă esențială a puzzle-ului, ajutând UE să-și construiască un profil mai puternic în arena globală.

Cuvinte cheie: războiul din Ucraina, Balcanii de Vest, securitate, geopolitică, autonomie strategică

I. Introduction

As the EU High Representative Josep Borrell said in a press conference, on 27 February 2022, the EU is concerned that the crisis in Ukraine could spread to the Western Balkans¹. Thus, regional security and the reactions of the Balkan states to the conflict in Ukraine have become the latest concern on the EU agenda. Given Moscow's strong connections in the Western Balkans region, as well as the region's vulnerability to Russian influence, the Western Balkans (WB6) could quickly become a new source of strategic concern for the European Union. With this conflict, which combines both old and new methods of warfare, a deep sense of concern is rising in the European capitals and Washington alike about the need to deepen stability and security in the region, and these considerations also apply to the WB6's accession to the Euro-Atlantic policy and security structures.

Although Moscow's attempts to destabilize the region did not begin in February 2022, the commitment of these states to their European path and the way they decide to contribute to diplomatic and economic pressure on Russia, is defining their future. As in the case of Ukraine, Russia sees the Western Balkans as a buffer zone in which it can maintain a sphere of influence, repeatedly demonstrating that it could easily destabilize the Balkans, thus undermining the

¹ Reuters, "EU's Borrell: 'We fear Russia is not going to stop in Ukraine'", 27 February 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/article/ukraine-crisis-eu-region-idINS8N2SV0BJ>, accessed on 4 March 2022.

West. The destabilization process is carried out not only through the economic investments of the Russian Federation in strategic sectors such as energy, or through structural weaknesses generated by the existence of corruption mechanisms, but also by exploiting the already existing fragility in the region.

The destabilization of the region is out in the open, including through the strengthening of military ties with states such as Serbia, to which Moscow has provided weapons, aircrafts, and air defence systems² combining these efforts with its strategic or conjectural ally – China³. The differences between pro-Western and pro-Russian voices in the Balkans over Russia’s invasion of Ukraine have also come as a reaffirmation of the reasons for which the Western Balkans region is locked in the European Union’s waiting room for decades. While NATO members, Albania, Croatia, Montenegro, and Northern Macedonia, as well as the aspirant Kosovo, have aligned themselves to the EU sanctions, Serbia, while remaining on the “European path”, continues to “prioritize” its strategic friendship with the Russian Federation and China.

Russia’s political influence in the region has an eminently pernicious purpose, fuelling nationalist tendencies, “anti-“sentiments, and horizontal disturbances throughout society. In 2019, Vladimir Putin’s adviser Vladislav Surkov presented this approach in short and direct words: “Russia interferes with your brains, we change your conscience, and there is nothing you can do about it”.⁴ The way in which each of the Balkan countries copes with and responds to Russia’s actions depends on both the institutional resilience of each of them and the set of cultural and societal norms they uphold.

The present paper assesses how the implications of the war in Ukraine on the Western Balkans countries are influencing their EU accession path while focusing on the actions needed to mitigate the war’s effects in the region. Considering that a full analysis of the impact of the war in Ukraine on the Western Balkans region can be made only years after the end of the Russian aggression, the present paper focuses on the immediate and most recent developments, followed by some considerations on the bigger picture and

² Dusan Stojanovic, “Serbia praises another arms shipment from Russia”, *Defense News*, 3 January 2022, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2022/01/03/serbia-praises-another-arms-shipment-from-russia/>, accessed on 4 March 2022.

³ Dusan Stojanovic, “China makes semi-secret delivery of missiles to Serbia”, *Associated Press News*, 10 April 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-europe-china-serbia-nato-682ab79c4239f14ecc1133ff5c7adde9>, accessed on 4 March 2022.

⁴ Cristina Maza, “Vladimir Putin’s Adviser Tells Americans: ‘Russia Interferes in Your Brains, We Change Your Conscience’”, *Newsweek*, 12 February 2019, <https://www.newsweek.com/russia-president-vladimir-putin-election-americans-1327793>, accessed on 4 March 2022.

possible evolutions. In this sense, the paper intends to highlight the critical points that the EU needs to consider as a driver of stability and resilience of the WB6 and the long-term implications of the war in Ukraine on the future of the region and ultimately on the role and future of the EU in the global arena.

At the methodological level, the paper is based on a content analysis approach, namely a combination of statistical and model-based approaches to text analysis, applied to support qualitative data analysis. Even though it is a fairly a new method, its relevance and utility are confirmed by its transdisciplinary character, being used more widely as technology advances. The chosen method is characterised by quantitative techniques, objectivity, and systematization, relies heavily on sampling, and is most effective when a software for computer assisted qualitative data analysis is used. However, it is not possible to utilize this research method without applying a sampling method and as specified in the relevant literature “The bigger the sample, the better. Larger samples, if chosen at random, are less at risk of being outliers”⁵. Together with sampling, the efficient organization and analysis of the data (from multiple sources) is key to drawing more objective conclusions, in comparison to the interpretation based solely on the human factor which may have numerous limitations, such as time and resources and may interpret the content more subjectively, with a direct and negative consequence on the final result. Considering these aspects, the preferred communication channel for this type of research is media-driven, and the analysed messages are those with a certain level of representativeness.

The scope of this research method is to produce inferences and add objectivity to the conclusions, in such a way that all those who research the same theme and apply the same methodology and sampling, would reach the same conclusions. This is why it was considered to be the most appropriate one for this study. Having an automatic taxonomy of the messages from the relevant texts is particularly useful in performing a differentiated analysis of the interpretations and conclusions and is particularly useful in the validation process of such conclusions. Applied to the present research, content analysis enables the extraction and analysis of the texts and identification of the most recurring information, allowing us to formulate projections regarding the evolution of the issues analysed in this study. Among the texts examined, we included the most recent evolutions and messages, while the interpretation was

⁵ Roger D. Wimmer, and Joseph R. Dominick, *Mass Media Research. An Introduction* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1987).

done in accordance with our research framework, which when combined, helped us arrive at a more comprehensive understanding of the topic.

While the advantages of content analysis highlight its systemic, objective, and quantifiable character, its disadvantages include the fact that it does not distinguish between the complexity of meanings in different contexts. Because of this, for the purpose of this paper, it was combined with a constructivist approach, which uses three dimensions: personal experience, active learning, and social interactions⁶. The constructivism theory⁷ states that knowledge is based on the connections with previous experiences and on an active learning environment, underpinned by critical thinking and interactions. In designing our research methodology, we considered that the combination of the above-mentioned research methods and instruments was the most suitable in addressing the scope of this paper.

II. Resilience in the Western Balkans

Although the tenth anniversary of the Thessaloniki Declaration coincided with Croatia's accession to the EU (1 July 2013), its success was timidly celebrated by the EU amid the Greek sovereign debt crisis and the aggregation of Russian troops, near the Crimean Peninsula, under the pretext of ensuring the security of the Sochi Winter Olympics⁸. At the same time, Ukraine was forming a strategic vector for rapprochement with the EU, and after lengthy negotiations, Ukraine's leadership initially agreed to sign the Association Agreement with the EU in November 2013 at the Vilnius Eastern Partnership Summit, which Russia strongly opposed. On the eve of the Vilnius Summit, President Viktor Yanukovich, who was seen to favor Moscow's strategic interests, unexpectedly announced to both his citizens and Brussels that he had

⁶ See: "Chapter 8: Constructivist Design Theory" in James D. Klein, Monica W. Tracey, and Rita Richey, *The Instructional Design Knowledge Base: Theory, Research and Practice. First Edition* (New York. NY: Routledge, 2011), 129-144.

⁷ Saul McLeod, *Constructivism as a theory for teaching and learning, Simply Psychology*, 2019 <https://www.simplypsychology.org/constructivism.html>, accessed on 24 November 2020.

⁸ Petr Kozlov, Olesya Volkova, and Oleg Karpayak, "Chronicle of the annexation: 'Crimean spring' in the memoirs of participants in the events", *BBC News*, 19 March 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-47609756>, accessed on 4 March 2022. The timely preparation on the war in Crimea is also proven by the introduction of the Medal "For the return of Crimea" in 21 January 2014.

changed his mind. Thus, during the Vilnius Eastern Partnership Summit, the Agreement was not signed.

In 2013, 12,000 Russian soldiers were recruited in the North Caucasus, for military exercises simulating a maritime and airspace blockade. These troops were further strengthened by units of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Federal Security Service, the Ministry of Emergency Situations, and other force structures of the Russian Federation, amounting in total 61,000 members⁹. Meanwhile, in January 2014, all structures of the Russian fleet from the Black Sea were consolidated. Only a year later, the political-military process by which the Crimean Peninsula came under Russian control and was illegally annexed in the form of two federal entities – the Republic of Crimea and the Federal City of Sevastopol – would take place. Following the adoption of the so-called constitutions of the Republic of Crimea and of the city with federal significance Sevastopol, on 11 April 2014, the new federal subjects were included in the Constitution of the Russian Federation and a new Russian state border between Crimea and Ukraine was established on 25 April 2014.

A comparative analysis of these two historical events shows the crucial importance of the Berlin Process in increasing the resilience of the Western Balkan states, as part of the EU enlargement process. Launched at the 2014 Berlin Conference, the beginnings of the Berlin Process coincided with the end of an institutional cycle at the level of EU institutions and the annexation of Crimea by Russia. While this intergovernmental cooperation initiative aimed to revitalize the multilateral ties between the Western Balkans and some EU Member States (Germany, Austria, France, Italy, Slovenia, Bulgaria, Greece, Poland, and Croatia)¹⁰, there was a strong emphasis on improving regional cooperation in the Western Balkans in the areas of infrastructure and economic development, and on increasing the resilience of the states from this region.

Initially expected to be finalized in 2018, the Process and its annual summits set a new framework for promoting regional cooperation, connectivity, as well as for addressing issues not covered by the negotiation chapters related to the enlargement process, such as youth cooperation. Through the three main pillars: (i) regional political cooperation, including the settlement of bilateral disputes;

⁹ Angelica Rudenko, Dmitri Evchin, and Alexandra Șevcenko, “10 Ukrainian military intelligence facts about the Russian occupation of Crimea in 2014”, *Crimea Realities*, 25 February 2021, https://ru-krymr-com.translate.google.com/a/ukrainskaya-razvedka-10-faktov-okkupatsii-kryma-russia/31118902.html?_x_tr_sl=auto&_x_tr_tl=ro&_x_tr_hl=ro&_x_tr_pto=wapp, accessed on 4 March 2022.

¹⁰ UK is also part of the Berlin Process and organized the 2018 Summit in London.

(ii) improving economic cooperation, with a particular focus on energy, transport, and digital connectivity; (iii) people-to-people cooperation, with a focus on cooperation between young people and civil society – the process, despite its limitations, allowed Member States to help prepare WB6 for accession to a changing Union¹¹, remaining at the same time the most important generator of resilience in the region.

While keeping the prospect of EU accession alive is vital for the region, the immediate challenge for the region’s resilience has been to integrate the initiatives of the Berlin Process into the 2021-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), as failing to seize this opportunity would exacerbate the vulnerabilities already existing in the Western Balkans. By increasing the resilience of the states and societies in WB6, the EU is not only targeting the region’s ability to meet multiple challenges, but also investing in area that would eventually become part of the EU. However, the factors of instability that formed the basis of the first meeting in Berlin in August 2014 have yet to be fully addressed. In this sense, the promotion of sensitive infrastructure projects in the energy and transport sectors, from the so-called Connectivity Agenda, the reconstruction of ports, the renovation of railway lines, to the construction of gas interconnections are still in development, designed to increase the region’s resilience and support the process of accession and economic integration of the Western Balkans.

It can also be noted that Croatia’s accession has not resulted in a new impetus for the enlargement process and the decision by EU Member States to move forward with the remaining six countries beset by various structural difficulties, exacerbated by the economic crisis, has dragged on for years. In light of this, the annexation of Crimea in 2014 highlighted the possibility that the EU would face even greater challenges in this region. Then and now, the fragility of the Western Balkans region is due to a combination of factors that form a complex system in which external and internal challenges interact¹². President Juncker’s 2014 announcement that there would be no further EU enlargement during his five-year term not only acknowledged the lack of significant progress in the accession process, but also raised serious doubts about the EU’s ability to

¹¹ Matteo Bonomi, “The Western Balkans in the European Union: Perspectives of a Region in Europe”, *Istituto Affari Internazionali* (IAI), Working Paper no. 13/2107, July 2017, <http://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iai1713.pdf>, accessed 4 March 2022.

¹² European Council, “European Council President Conclusions,” 9 March 2017, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/24104/09-conclusions-pec-cor-ro.pdf>, accessed on 4 March 2022.

act decisively at a time when the challenges to its security were increasing. In this context, the Western Balkans region has been subjected in recent years, in addition to the classic challenges and against the background of increased instability, to a new concept of soft power that Russia has exploited in the context of the region's tumultuous past.

The words of Leonid Brezhnev¹³ ironically presenting the imminent Russian threat in what is now the ex-Yugoslavia area, come to life now more than ever, if we look at the events in Ukraine in 2022. Although Moscow is often seen as a major causal factor for the instability of the Western Balkans, an external player aimed at undermining the region's development and the EU's and the US' efforts for stability and resilience, Moscow's decision to attack another state seemed unfathomable. Thus, in the light of recent events in Ukraine, it is impossible not to wonder whether the Western Balkans will somehow be the next arena of confrontation between the West and Russia.

Russia's attempts to gain influence and undermine the resilience of WB6 states cannot be underestimated but rather needs to be analyzed in terms of the evidence that demonstrates Russia's ability to act as a promoter of institutional fragility and as a likely saboteur of the resilience in the region. If in 1976 the Soviet Union was not economically or militarily capable of large-scale action in the Yugoslav space, we can certainly say that it would now be even less capable, given the successive waves of NATO and EU accessions in the extended region. Today's Russia should be even less likely to extend its influence in the region due to the string of NATO states that separate it from the Western Balkans. However, as long as the full Euro-Atlantic integration of the Western Balkans is stymied, Russia has a window of opportunity and can act disruptively in the region, causing instability through propaganda and subversive actions. Thus, regardless of the specificities of each country, if there is a reason, no matter how little, for friction with the *West* in the region, Moscow will exploit, feed, and exacerbate said tensions.

Through its rhetoric, Russia has blamed successively the *West* for either plotting “Color revolutions” such as the events in Ukraine (2004, 2014) and in

¹³ During a visit to Yugoslavia in 1976, Brezhnev commented that “Authors of such fairy tales try to present Yugoslavia as a helpless Little Red Ridinghood, whom the terrible and bloodthirsty wolf – the aggressive Soviet Union – is preparing to dismember and devour”. (See: Malcolm W. Browne, “Associated Press; Greeted in Belgrade: Leonid I. Brezhnev, the Soviet leader, being welcomed by President Tito; Brezhnev, in Belgrade, Mocks Talk of Soviet Peril”, *New York Times*, 16 November 1976, <https://www.nytimes.com/1976/11/16/archives/brezhnev-in-belgrade-mocks-talk-of-soviet-peril.html>, accessed on 4 March 2022).

Serbia (2000), or for undermining WB6, by “feeding” anti-Russian hysteria and polarizing the society in these countries, while claiming to bring stability to the region. However, all these attempts have so far remained at the level of propaganda rhetoric, used to build a social reality against “foreign interference”, because the Kremlin has neither the means to develop the region, nor the financial resources to substitute the EU in any way.

III. Three Main Factors of Russian Influence in the Western Balkans region

III.1. Orthodoxy

Although it is not possible to measure exactly the influence of religious factors, it is clear that none of the Western Balkan states are immune from the use of religious denominations to promote narratives that promote specific foreign interests. At the same time, there are documented cases of ethnic and religious minorities in the region who are at least indifferent to the region’s historical and religious ties with Russia. Although Serbs, Montenegrins, and Macedonians share Slavic roots and the Orthodox religion with Russia, ethnic tensions between Orthodox and Muslim majorities in Albania, Kosovo, and Bosnia and Herzegovina have major costs and implications both internally and, in terms of the countries’ accession process to the EU.

In this context, it is worth mentioning the specific case of Serbia. With a predominantly Orthodox population (84,6% of the population is orthodox)¹⁴, Serbia favors its alliances with Russia, resolutely rejects NATO membership, and its support for EU membership tends to fluctuate from one moment to the other. Thus, after the abolition of visa requirements in 2010, the EU membership support increased to 62%¹⁵, then dropped to 52%¹⁶ in 2018 (during

¹⁴ Aleksandra Đurić-Milovanović and Marko Veković, “Religion and Forced Displacement in Serbia”, *The Foreign Policy Centre*, 23 July 2020, <https://fpc.org.uk/religion-and-forced-displacement-in-serbia/>, accessed on 17 March 2022.

¹⁵ Bojana Barlovac, “Poll: Serbia Support for Joining EU, NATO Declines”, *Balkan Insight*, 11 February 2010, <https://balkaninsight.com/2010/02/11/poll-serbia-support-for-joining-eu-nato-declines/>, accessed on 17 March 2022.

¹⁶ Julija Simić, “Most Serbs support EU membership, cite job opportunities, in new poll”, *Euractiv*, 25 January 2018, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/most-serbs-support-eu-membership-cite-job-opportunities-in-new-poll/>, accessed on 17 March 2022.

the refugee crisis) and, then again, it further depreciated, falling to 35%¹⁷ in April 2022 (war in Ukraine). It should also be noted that, during the same period, Serbian attitudes that were explicitly against EU accession ranged from 15% in 2010, 24% in 2018 to 44% in 2022. In fact, if there is one aspect from which to draw conclusions on the contradictory and changing attitudes towards the EU in the region, this would have less to do with Orthodoxy, but rather with the difficult process of accession and the open space left for Russia to pursue its interests in the region. The mentioned statistical percentages show that daily events directly influence people's lives, going beyond the historical and religious links.

III.2. Energy

A second instrument showcasing Moscow's influence in the region, which extends beyond the Balkans, is the dependence on Russian gas. Historically, Russia has served as a major source of energy for Europe since the 1960s, when its rising production levels in the Urals and Siberia turned the Soviet Union into a major oil exporter. Growing demand on the European markets, combined with the fact that Russian resources were geographically convenient and therefore cheap, have contributed to Europe's growing dependence on Russian imports.

Currently, several Western Balkan states are entirely dependent on Russian gas (Serbia, Northern Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina)¹⁸. Also, many EU Member States, voting in the Council on the European future of the Western Balkans countries, are deeply dependent on Russian gas. For example, in 2020, Finland (94%), Latvia (93%), Estonia (79%), Bulgaria (77%), Slovakia (70%), Croatia (68%), and the Czech Republic (66%), Russian gas made up more than two-thirds of their gas consumption¹⁹. At the same time, other countries, such as Austria (64%), Greece (51%), Germany (49%), Italy (46%), Lithuania (41%), Poland (40%), and Hungary (40%), relied on imports from

¹⁷ Katy Dartford, "For first time, a majority of Serbs are against joining the EU – poll", *Euronews*, 22 April 2022, <https://www.euronews.com/2022/04/22/for-first-time-a-majority-of-serbs-are-against-joining-the-eu-poll>, accessed 2 May 2022.

¹⁸ European Union Agency for the Cooperation of the Energy Regulators, *ACER Market Monitoring Report 2020 – Gas Wholesale Market*, 14 July 2021, https://extranet.acer.europa.eu/Official_documents/Acts_of_the_Agency/Publication/ACER%20Market%20Monitoring%20Report%202020%20-%20Gas%20Wholesale%20Markets%20Volume.pdf, accessed on 2 May 2022.

¹⁹ Statista, "Share of gas supply from Russia in Europe in 2021, by selected country", 6 May 2022, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1201743/russian-gas-dependence-in-europe-by-country/>, accessed 2 May 2022.

Russia for more than 40% of their gas consumption, which they used not only to generate electricity and heat, but also to power their industrial production capacity. Natural gas from Russian deposits, transported to Central and Eastern European markets, remained cheap due to low transportation costs, while the terminals to import liquefied natural gas from Qatar, the United States, and other sources were few²⁰ and the transport costs to the beneficiary countries were considerably higher²¹. In what concerns Ukraine, Moldova, Serbia, Romania, and North Macedonia, they could benefit from the three LNG floating terminals of Greece²², which could supply them through a network of interconnecting pipelines. Through them, liquefied natural gas would be transported by sea to Alexandroupoli, enter the national distribution system of Greece and from there through the Gas Interconnector Greece-Bulgaria (IGB)²³ to Bulgaria. Member States' desire to move to cleaner energy sources, along with the growing “strategic discomfort” over gas dependence on Russia, have led to a structural process of rethinking energy sources and the transition to renewable energy²⁴, but, for the moment, Europe and the WB6 remain dependent on imported energy, and the cut off from Russian gas is not without risks on the short- and medium-term²⁵. In the light of the developments in the war in

²⁰ Nina Howell and Adam Quigley, “LNG in Europe 2021: Current Trends, the European LNG Landscape and Country Focus”, *The National Law Review*, 23 August 2021, <https://www.natlawreview.com/article/lng-europe-2021-current-trends-european-lng-landscape-and-country-focus>, accessed 2 May 2022.

²¹ European Commission, “Liquefied natural gas (LNG) diversifies EU gas supply sources, making countries more resourceful and resilient”, 11 February 2022, https://energy.ec.europa.eu/topics/oil-gas-and-coal/liquefied-natural-gas_en, accessed 2 May 2022.

²² Valentina Dimitrievska, “Construction of Alexandroupolis LNG terminal launched to help reduce Balkans' dependence on Russian gas”, *BNE IntelliNews*, 3 May 2022, <https://www.intellinews.com/construction-of-alexandroupolis-lng-terminal-launched-to-help-reduce-balkans-dependence-on-russian-gas-243261/?source=north-macedonia>, accessed 24 May 2022.

²³ International Energy Agency, “European Energy Programme for Recovery. Greece-Bulgaria IGB-Gas Interconnector project co-financed by the European Union's Energy Recovery Programme”, 24 August 2021, <https://www.iea.org/policies/11692-european-energy-programme-for-recovery>, accessed 24 May 2022.

²⁴ The share of renewable energy in total energy consumption in the EU has increased from about 8,5% in 2004 up to 17% in 2016. (See: Eurostat, “Statistics on energy from renewable resources”, 8 June 2018, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Archive:Statistici_privind_energia_din_surse_regenerabile&oldid=388641, accessed 24 May 2022).

²⁵ Eurostat, “EU imports of energy products – recent developments”, April 2022, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=EU_imports_of_energy_products_-_recent_developments&oldid=558719#Main_suppliers_of_natural_gas_and_petroleum_oils_to_the_EU, accessed 24 May 2022.

Ukraine, the EU had prepared several packages of sanctions against Russia for both oil and coal imports. However, while consensus remains difficult to reach²⁶, the indirect consequences of these new sanctions, which could send the EU into an unprecedented recession²⁷, must also be highlighted, as they would have a direct impact both on the “appetite” for an extension to WB6, and on the EU citizens, for whom the rising energy bills and job redundancies could generate social conflicts that could prove difficult to manage. At the same time, neither the US nor Qatar can make up for the gap left by the elimination of imports from Russia and in no case at the same prices. On the other hand, the Russian gas purchased at a “discount price” by China, while putting enormous pressure on the Russian economy, could offer new competitive advantages in China’s relationship with the US and the EU.

Beyond the hypotheticals, on a more practical level, the limitations of the current infrastructure make so the transit volume of the Russian gas to the Chinese market will likely remain low, at least on the short term, given that Russia started supplying gas to Asia only in 2009. Meanwhile, the European market is much larger and more profitable, especially when considering that in 2021, Russia sold about 33 billion cubic meters of gas to Asia, compared to its “norm” for the European market of 160-200 billion cubic meters. Through its largest pipeline to Asia, *Power of Siberia*, Russia has delivered only 10 billion cubic meters to China in 2021, and once this pipeline reaches its maximum capacity, the estimated deliveries should not surpass 60 billion cubic meters.

It should be underlined that the Western Balkans can play an important role in supporting Europe’s energy transition, as well as maximizing the impact of the European Green Deal. These countries have numerous attractive assets, including prospects for infrastructure that can also be used for solar energy, lower labour costs, and last but not least geographical proximity to energy-intensive industrial economies of the EU. WB6 also have a high capacity to develop renewable energy and a significantly developed hydropower capacity, and their energy systems are already partially integrated with those of the EU and have a high potential for expansion and interconnection. With investments

²⁶ Jorge Liboreiro, Efi Koutsokosta, and Shona Murray, “Hungary, Slovakia, Czech Republic and Bulgaria still resisting EU ban on Russian oil”, *Euronews*, 14 May 2022, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2022/05/09/hungary-slovakia-czech-republic-and-bulgaria-still-resisting-eu-ban-on-russian-oil>, accessed 24 May 2022.

²⁷ Martin Arnold et al., “Olaf Scholz warns immediate Russian energy ban would trigger recession in Europe”, *Financial Times*, 23 March 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/c95634ad-e01a-4af5-b7e8-4616618b7431>, accessed on 18 March 2022.

from the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans, European Investment Bank (EIB) support²⁸, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and the World Bank, the region has the potential to revive itself economically through the new wave of low-carbon industries and could make a significant contribution to achieving the goals of the European Green Deal, as well as further the EU's energy independence ambitions.

At the same time, it is worth mentioning that energy is not the only vector of influence expressed through dependence. As of 2020, Iceblick, with factories in Odessa and Moscow, supplies 65% of the world's neon production, as well as 15% of krypton and xenon²⁹. As global neon prices jumped by about 600% after the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea, turning the chipset producers towards Chinese suppliers, the 2022 war in Ukraine which led to the shut down of two main Ukrainian companies, LLC “Cryoengineering” (Ukrainian: ТОВ Кріоін Інжинірінг) and LLC “Ingaz” (Ukrainian: ТОВ ІНГАЗ) located in Odessa and Mariupol respectively, is likely to shift the neon production to China even more. Additionally, the Russian invasion is likely to lead to a shortage of industrial neon resources, as Ukraine is a major producer of neon gas, essential element for lasers used in the manufacture of chipsets and semiconductors. To put things in perspective, the country supplied more than 90% of the neon used by the USA for the production of semiconductors³⁰.

Considering the above mentioned and that changing the dependence on Russia with dependence on China is not an option for the West, the Western Balkans through their vast resources could represent part of the solutions needed to manage this crisis. For example, it is worth mentioning that for neon, a by-product of steel production, Serbia increased its production of crude steel by 39% in 2019. However, the Smederevo Steel Company (Železara Smederevo – Serbia's second biggest exporter) is owned by the Chinese HBIS group³¹.

²⁸ The European Investment Bank has called itself the “European Climate Bank” and has announced it will align all financing activities with the objectives of the Paris Agreement. (see: Iskander Erzini Vernoit et al., “The European Investment Bank: Becoming the EU climate bank”, E3G Report, July 2020, https://www.e3g.org/wp-content/uploads/09_07_20_E3G-EIB-Becoming-EU-Climate-Bank-report.pdf, accessed 24 May 2022.

²⁹ See: The European Times, “Rare Gasses Supplier Known for Innovation”, 22 February 2020, <https://the-european-times.com/iceblick/>, accessed 24 May 2022.

³⁰ See: Reuters, “Ukraine war flashes neon warning lights for chips”, 24 February 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/breakingviews/ukraine-war-flashes-neon-warning-lights-chips-2022-02-24/>, accessed 24 May 2022.

³¹ Vedran Obućina, “Incredible rise of Serbian steel industry”, *Observator Finansowy*, 19 March 2019, <https://www.observatorfinansowy.pl/in-english/business/incredible-rise-of-serbian-steel-industry/>, accessed 24 May 2022.

III.3. Serbia

Moscow's third instrument of influence in the region concerns Serbia and takes the form of Russia's veto power in the Security Council, which can be used for any resolution on Kosovo. But this critical and constant link between the two states³² is likely to expire at some point in the future. The inaction and the structural-institutional inability of the UN Security Council to act on Ukraine raises questions about the need to reform this body and its veto system³³. If Moscow is willing to draw Serbia as far from the West as possible, it is also because "Serbia offers the most permissive environment for Russian influence in the Balkans"³⁴, as reported by a US Department of Defence report from March 2022. For many Serbs, the memory of NATO bombing Belgrade to end the Balkan wars of the 1990s is still far too vivid, as is the memory of Russia condemning this action firmly in the UN Security Council.

On the other hand, Serbia is the country that "sets the pace" in the region, being the strongest state among the countries belonging to the former Yugoslavia, surpassing even Croatia and Slovenia³⁵ in terms of influence, as well as political, economic, and military power since Belgrade is also Europe's largest customer for the Russian military industry³⁶. Despite fears that a military consolidation of Serbia could lead to more tensions in the WB6 region and despite accusations that Serbia is working with Russia to destabilize Bosnia,

³² Milica Stojanovic, "Bid to Challenge UN Veto Use Raises Questions on Kosovo", *Balkan Insight*, 26 April 2022, <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/04/26/bid-to-challenge-un-veto-use-raises-questions-on-kosovo/>, accessed 24 May 2022.

³³ Nadine El-Bawab, "UN Security Council's inaction on Ukraine prompts questions on reform", *ABC News*, 26 April 2022, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/security-councils-inaction-ukraine-prompts-questions-reform/story?id=84222703>, accessed 24 May 2022.; Julia Crawford and Akiko Uehara, "Switzerland welcomes UN vote to scrutinise Security Council veto", *Swiss Info*, 27 April 2022, <https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/switzerland-welcomes-un-vote-to-scrutinise-security-council-veto/47548752>, accessed 24 May 2022..

³⁴ Jason Steinbaum, "Time for Serbia to Scale Back Military Ties with Russia", *German Marshal Fund*, 4 March 2022, <https://www.gmfus.org/news/time-serbia-scale-back-military-ties-russia>, accessed 24 May 2022.

³⁵ B92, "A list of the most powerful states in the world: Serbia overtook Croatia and Slovenia", 21 January 2020, https://www.b92.net/eng/news/world.php?yyyy=2020&mm=01&dd=21&nav_id=107829, accessed 24 May 2022.

³⁶ Strategic Umbrella [Ro. ver.: Umbrela Strategică], "By the end of the week, Serbia will receive the first Pantsir-S1 units, an anti-aircraft system used without much success in Syria" [original title in Romanian: „Serbia va primi până la finalul săptămânii primele unități Pantsir-S1, un sistem antiaerian folosit fără prea mare succes în Siria"], 19 February 2020, <https://umbrela-strategica.ro/serbia-va-primi-pana-la-finalul-saptamanii-primele-unitati-pantsir-s1-un-sistem-antiaerian-folosit-fara-prea-mare-succes-in-siria/>, accessed 24 May 2022.

Montenegro, Kosovo, and implicitly the entire region, between 2018 and February 2020, Russia delivered only 4 Mi-35M helicopters, 6 MiG-29 planes, 10 BRDM-2 armored vehicles, 3 Mi-17V-5 transport helicopters. More important is the fact that in 2019, Russia and Serbia organized 96 joint military exercises³⁷.

To all this, a transport of drones CH-92A from China was added in 2020, its first export of military aviation equipment to Europe; in 2021, a new transport of weapons from Russia was received³⁸, the latter delivering 30 tanks and 30 armored personnel carriers, along with air defense systems – Pantsir; finally, in April 2022 there was a new arms shipment from China³⁹. Once again, an apparent sign of the Dragonbear alliance at work⁴⁰.

Although Serbia has voted in favor of UN resolutions condemning the Russian attacks on Ukraine, it refused to join international sanctions against the Russian Federation⁴¹ and Belgrade even witnessed pro-Putin protests⁴², accompanied by anti-EU and pro-Russia speeches⁴³. Serbia's generally favorable attitude towards Russia since the beginning of the armed conflict in Ukraine has not gone unnoticed in the region, nor in the EU capitals.

³⁷ According to Serbian Defense Minister, Aleksandar Vulin, in 2019, Russia and Serbia organized 96 joint military exercises (see: Tass News Agency “Serbia to host Slavic Shield air defense drills in mid-October”, 27 September 2021, <https://tass.com/defense/1342977>, accessed 24 May 2022)

³⁸ S.I. Catalin, „Rusia continuă să înarmeze Armata Serbiei (Video) Moscova a făcut cadou 30 de tancuri T-72B1MS”, *Defense Romania*, 27 May 2021, https://www.defenseromania.ro/armata-sarba-primeste-30-de-tancuri-t-72b1ms-din-rusia_610732.html, accessed 24 May 2022.

³⁹ Vuk Vuksanovic, “Serbia's Arms Deals Show It's Tilting Away From Russia and Toward China”, *Foreign Policy*, 11 May 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/05/11/serbias-arms-deals-show-its-tilting-away-from-russia-and-toward-china/>, accessed 24 May 2022.

⁴⁰ Velina Tchakarova, “The Russia, China Alliance: What Does “The Dragonbear” Aim to Achieve in Global Affairs?”, *Medium*, 8 September 2015, <https://medium.com/@vtchakarova/the-russia-china-alliance-what-does-the-dragonbear-aim-to-achieve-in-global-affairs-e09b1add1c4a>, accessed 24 May 2022.

⁴¹ Marton Dunai, “Serbia's president Aleksandar Vucic rejects sanctions on Russia”, *Financial Times*, 20 April 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/0041d1a9-7fbd-4ea3-8176-e8b7d99e4a92>, accessed 24 May 2022.

⁴² About 4,000 people protested in central Belgrade, summoned by far-right groups to express support for Russian troops invading Ukraine, chanting “Serbs and Russians, brothers forever” and “Serbia, Russia, we don't need the EU”, flying the flag of Russia and Serbia, as well as signs of the far right. (see: Branko Filipovic, “Pro-Russia Serbs march in Belgrade as country treads ever finer line between East and West”, *Reuters*, 5 March 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/pro-russia-serbs-march-belgrade-country-treads-ever-finer-line-between-east-west-2022-03-04/>, accessed 24 May 2022).

⁴³ Mladen Obradovic, one of the protests' organizers, stated “Russia frees the world from NATO”. (see: TRT World, “Far-right Serbians hold pro-Russia rally amid Ukraine crisis”, 5 March 2022, <https://www.trtworld.com/europe/far-right-serbians-hold-pro-russia-rally-amid-ukraine-crisis-55284>, accessed 24 May 2022).

IV. Regional Reactions

Against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine, in an attempt to strengthen the defence of their countries against Russian interference⁴⁴ and stressing that by destabilizing the Western Balkans, Russia will seek to destabilize the whole of Europe, Western Balkan states have stepped up their efforts and hoping for a faster progress on their European path.⁴⁵ On the other hand, it is possible that the prolongation of the war in Ukraine, and implicitly the inability of the EU (and NATO) to help and protect Ukraine in more concrete terms against Russia, will lead to an even greater destabilization of the Western Balkans region, fuelling Russian rhetoric that “the West” does not present a viable alternative for these states. In fact, both in the EU and in the Western Balkans, there are fears that the war in Ukraine could lead to even more instability, and for some of these countries, such as Bosnia, this instability has already reached unprecedented levels since 1995.

The secession threats of Milorad Dodik⁴⁶, the Serb member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina between 2018-2022 and the future president of Republika Srpska, who did not hide his admiration and close ties with President Vladimir Putin, threaten to throw the country into deep instability by *de facto* annulling the practical aspects of enforcing the provisions of the Dayton Agreement⁴⁷ in terms of military, fiscal, and judicial issues. If before the war against Ukraine, Russia had portrayed itself for years as a major geopolitical player in Bosnia and Herzegovina, after the summer of 2021, with its direct support for Milorad Dodik and the attempts to diminish Western influence in Bosnia, Russia’s influence has surpassed its declarative phase. Thus,

⁴⁴ Kosovo Prime Minister, Albin Kurti, warned that it is in “it is in the interest of the Russian Federation to have new battlegrounds because they do not want to go back to peace”. (see: Kosovo Prime Minister Office, “Prime Minister Kurti for The Guardian: It is in the interest of the Russian Federation to have new battlegrounds”, 13 March 2022, <https://kryeministri.rks-gov.net/en/blog/prime-minister-kurti-for-the-guardian-it-is-in-the-interest-of-the-russian-federation-to-have-new-battlegrounds/>, accessed 24 May 2022).

⁴⁵ France 24, “Make membership easier, Kosovo PM tells NATO, EU”, 8 March 2022, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20220308-make-membership-easier-kosovo-pm-tells-nato-eu>, accessed 24 May 2022.

⁴⁶ Una Hajdari, “Secession threats and nationalist strife shock Bosnia as EU offers limited response”, *Politico*, 18 January 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/secession-threat-bosnia-milorad-dodik-eu-limited-options/>, accessed 24 May 2022.

⁴⁷ General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina, signed on 14 December 1995, concluding the 1991-1995 Bosnian war.

Russia has intensified its subversive actions in this country through various gestures, like the Russian ambassador being present at the unconstitutional celebration of “Republika Srpska Day” on January 9, 2022, and by its firm opposition to the new High Representative⁴⁸, the political instrument that supports the constitutional reform that Bosnia needs to make in order to progress towards NATO and EU accession.

At the same time, a possible veto in the UN Security Council on the renewal of the EUFOR mission in Bosnia, scheduled for November 2022, could be the culmination of its actions with regard to this country. The EUFOR Althea Mission, an EU military mission whose mandate is renewed annually by the UNSC, is responsible for maintaining peace and security, as well as discouraging attempts at secession in Republika Srpska. Given that EUFOR has been strengthened by 500 additional troops following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, a veto on the renewal of its mandate is to be expected, especially when considering Dodik’s pro-Russian positions and that his threats of secession have been enhanced by the Russian ambassador who warned that “If (Bosnia and Herzegovina) decides to be a member of any alliance, this is an internal matter. Our answer is another matter. Ukraine’s example shows what to expect”⁴⁹.

Dodik’s unsuccessful attempts to prevent Bosnia’s ambassador to the UN to vote in support of a resolution condemning Russian aggression⁵⁰, along with Russia’s presence in the decision-making processes regarding Bosnia’s future, from the closure of the Office of the High Representative (OHR) to the amendments to the electoral law before the parliamentary elections scheduled for October 2022, and Russia’s support for a nationalist and secessionist wave, shows once again that it was using Republika Srpska as a lever in its strategy to destabilize the Western Balkans. The pro-Putin protests in many cities in Republika Srpska, including Banja Luka, Trebinje, and Bratunac, which have been heavily publicized by the media aligned with the Kremlin, are further evidence of how Russia uses the entity.

⁴⁸ The Russian Embassy in Sarajevo said Schmidt’s appointment was a violation of the established practice of electing the High Representative in BiH by consensus. (see: Željko Trkanjec, “Russia says Bosnia’s new High Representative is illegitimate”, *Euractiv*, 28 May 2021, https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/russia-says-bosnias-new-high-representative-is-illegitimate/, accessed 24 May 2022).

⁴⁹ Željko Trkanjec, “Russian Ambassador says BiH can join NATO, but Moscow will react”, *Euractiv*, 17 March 2022, https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/russian-ambassador-says-bih-can-join-nato-but-moscow-will-react/, accessed 24 May 2022.

⁵⁰ Željko Trkanjec, “Dodik attempts to block UN vote with Russian help”, *Euractiv*, 4 March 2022, https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/dodik-attempts-to-block-un-vote-with-russian-help/, accessed 24 May 2022.

In a country where ethnic divisions remain entrenched, Republika Srpska's attempts at secession⁵¹, which the Kremlin has supported for years, are a challenge to peace and stability in the region. The increased military presence of EUFOR troops, the suspension of funding for EUR 100 million by Germany⁵² or failed attempts to impose sanctions on Milorad Dodik⁵³, following the European Parliament's resolutions do not seem to be enough to counter Russia's plans for political and economic destabilization. Thus, against the background of the events in Ukraine and reliving the memories from the 1990s, the feeling of uneasiness among the population is growing along with the fears of new conflicts in the region, distrust in the political system, and implicitly in the country's defence possibilities if faced with a situation similar to that in Ukraine.

Albania, a NATO member and EU candidate, has clearly condemned Russian aggression against Ukraine and has fully aligned itself with the EU sanctions against Russia. However, the impact of the war, especially in the economic sphere, with high inflation and prices on the rise, led to protests that threaten the society's cohesion and regional security in the long run. If in terms of energy security, Albania is less dependent on Russian gas than other WB6 countries, relying heavily on hydropower resources, the economic effects will be visible in tourism, which is expected to be severely affected, due to the high share in the recent years of Russian and Ukrainian tourists.

Further, having a multi-ethnic society, Albania is equally exposed to Russia's soft power influence tools, especially when considering its strategic partnership with Kosovo⁵⁴. Since Kosovo declared independence from Serbia in 2008, the

⁵¹ Deutsche Welle, "Bosnia: Serbs vote to leave key institutions in secession move", 11 December 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/bosnia-serbs-vote-to-leave-key-institutions-in-secession-move/a-60088061>, accessed 24 May 2022.

⁵² Željko Trkanjec, "Germany suspends project financing in RS over BiH obstruction by Serbia", *Euractiv*, 18 April 2022, https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/germany-suspends-project-financing-in-rs-over-bih-obstruction-by-serbia/, accessed 24 May 2022.

⁵³ "Such a destructive behaviour must not go unnoticed" said Anna Lührmann, Germany's Minister of State for Europe. In addition to Germany, only Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg and the Czech Republic have supported such sanctions. (see: Oliver Noyan, "Germany warns of spillover-effect of Ukraine war in Western Balkans", *Euractiv*, 7 April 2022. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/defence-and-security/news/germany-warns-of-spillover-effect-of-ukraine-war-in-western-balkans/>, accessed 24 May 2022).

⁵⁴ The governments of Albania and Kosovo signed on November 27, 2017, in Korça 12 agreements and memoranda of understanding between the two countries, reconfirming the continuation of the Strategic Partnership between the two countries (see: European Western Balkans, "Results of the joint meeting of Albania – Kosovo governments", 27 November 2017,

two nations have signed up to 140 bilateral agreements, and during the Kosovo war (28 February 1998 – 11 June 1999), Albania has opened its doors to hundreds of thousands of Kosovo refugees fleeing the violence. With the security of the two countries so closely interconnected, the rhetoric of Albanian leaders⁵⁵ on a possible union of Albania with Kosovo could easily be exploited to produce instability and exacerbate the political and economic crises in the Balkans⁵⁶.

The analogies between Ukraine and Kosovo used by Putin since 2014 have been revived in the wake of the 2022 conflict in Ukraine, alongside the evocation of the memories of NATO bombings in the region from the late 1990s. Undermining Kosovo's stability and independence is often accompanied by the rhetoric that NATO's stabilization success is only temporary, as it was the case in Afghanistan. While the war in Ukraine has heightened concerns about its own security and the government has been calling on its citizens to donate money to strengthen the country's security, Kosovo is in the process of building its own army. In parallel, fast-tracking the NATO membership and the establishment of a NATO base in its territory became important security priorities. In a resolution adopted with 94 out of a total of 120 votes, and amid the boycott of Serbian minority parliamentarians, the parliament called on the government to take all necessary measures to submit the application for NATO membership.

While other four NATO members⁵⁷ have not recognized Kosovo's independence, complicating its accession to the North Atlantic Alliance, Kosovo has been defended by NATO troops since 1999. More precisely by 3,770 troops, whose main goal has been to maintain peace in the north, where some 50,000 Serbs refuse to recognize Kosovo authorities and demand unification with Serbia. Russia's refusal to recognize Kosovo's independence, along with Belgrade's constant position that the separatist province is part of Serbia's territory have generated strong pro-Western and anti-Russian sentiments in Pristina. In a survey from April 2021, favorable opinions about

<https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2017/11/27/results-joint-meeting-albania-kosovo-governments/>, accessed 24 May 2022).

⁵⁵ Alice Taylor, "Albanian Prime Minister in favour of unifying Kosovo and Albania", *Euractiv*, 29 November 2021, https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/albanian-prime-minister-in-favour-of-unifying-kosovo-and-albania/, accessed 24 May 2022.

⁵⁶ Orlando Crowcroft, "How EU enlargement apathy could push Kosovo and Albania to join forces", *Euronews*, 15 April 2021, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2021/04/15/how-eu-enlargement-apaty-could-push-kosovo-and-albania-to-join-forces>, accessed 24 May 2022.

⁵⁷ These are: Romania, Spain, Greece, and Slovakia.

the US, NATO, and the EU were consistent with an upwards trend compared to previous years, while those regarding China and Russia were decreasing relative to 2019.⁵⁸

However, in the spirit of its historical interest in being the most influential foreign player in the Western Balkans, Russia has continued its efforts to destabilize, including in matters that concern the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue. As tensions continue to rise and current circumstances will lead to a stronger commitment from the West in the region, the results might not line up with the Kremlin's intended outcomes. Like all other WB6 states, Montenegro could not remain unaffected by the economic impact of the war in Ukraine, being a small, import-dependent economy. Russia is its largest foreign investor, accounting for 18.3% of all foreign direct investment in 2021, with significant financing mainly in metallurgy and real estate. Additionally, more than a third of tourists come from Russia which is significant when considering that the tourism sector accounts for 25% of the country's GDP. Given these circumstances, although Montenegro joined at the declarative level the sanctions against Russia, it has yet to implement them.

The war in Ukraine also has political implications for Montenegro, deepening the country's institutional crisis in early 2022. The expulsion of Russian diplomat Viktor Antipin following a meeting with Strahinja Bulajić (Democratic Front), the interim speaker of the Montenegrin Parliament, which later refused to convene a parliamentary session to vote on the proposed (pro-European) cabinet, and the Kremlin's addition of Montenegro to its list of "enemy states" has strained relations between the two states. The 4 February 2022 vote of no confidence that dismissed the pro-Russian government of Prime Minister Zdravko Krivokapić and the inauguration of a new pro-Western government on 28 April 2022, led by Dritan Abazovic, could block on the long run Russia's interference in Montenegro's domestic policy. It also has the added benefit of likely unblocking the country's European integration process⁵⁹. Although, according to the European Union Agency for the Cooperation of Energy

⁵⁸ USAID and NDI, "Kosovo public opinion survey", 21 April 2021, <https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Kosovo%20Public%20Opinion%20Poll%20-%20April%202021.pdf>, accessed 24 May 2022.

⁵⁹ RFE/RL's Balkan Service, "Montenegro Elects New Minority Government That Aims To Speed Up EU Membership Process", 28 April 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/montenegro-government-abazovic-serbia/31825954.html>, accessed 24 May 2022.

Regulators, 100% dependent on natural gas imports from Russia⁶⁰, the closure of its airspace for Russian aircrafts, the provision of military assistance to Ukraine and the rapid alignment with EU sanctions imposed on Russia showed North Macedonia's commitment towards the Western development model. Listing Russia among hostile countries also signalled the country's pro-Western position.

Russian President Vladimir Putin's statements that Ukraine is a nation invented by Lenin, similar to the ideas expressed by a number of representatives of the Bulgarian political class, who claim that Macedonia is a fictive nation, "invented" by the Yugoslav President Tito, also contributed to North Macedonia's realignment. However, for the oldest candidate country in the region, the lack of progress on accession leads to widespread feelings of disappointment among its citizens, and against this background it allows Russian active instruments to cultivate anti-EU sentiments. As such, the latest public opinion poll has registered a decline in the people's belief that the EU is the biggest ally of North Macedonia, dropping from 43.2% in 2019 to 13.1% in 2021⁶¹, despite the fact that 68% of the respondents continue to support the country's bid for a EU membership.

Beyond the careful monitoring of developments in all Western Balkan states since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, the West' focus has been mostly on Serbia, and this is because, as noted above, this country is regarded as Moscow's vector of influence in the region that can set the path to follow for others in the WB6 region. In the midst of the election campaign at the time of the outbreak of the conflict, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić sought to maintain a balance between Russia and the West. On the one hand, because the still-vivid memories of NATO bombings among the population make up an important part of the pro-Russian public opinion whose votes have an obvious electoral impact. On the other hand, there is also the fact to consider that the EU is by far the largest investor, largest trading partner, and largest donor in Serbia in the last 20 years. In the last 10 years alone, the EU's cumulative foreign direct investment (FDI) in Serbia amounted to EUR 15.4 billion, representing 67% of total FDI inflows, while the EU-Serbia trade accounts for 62% of Serbia's total

⁶⁰ BNE IntelliNews, "North Macedonia, Bosnia and Moldova most dependent on Russian gas", 8 February 2022, <https://bne.eu/north-macedonia-bosnia-and-moldova-most-dependent-on-russian-gas-234239/?source=serbia>, accessed 24 May 2022.

⁶¹ Sinisa Jakov Marusic, "North Macedonia's Faith in EU Influence Plummeting, Survey Shows", *Balkan Insight*, 25 February 2022, <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/02/25/north-macedonian-faith-in-eu-influence-plummeting-survey-shows/>, accessed 24 May 2022.

trade. At the same time, with more than € 3 billion in non-reimbursable assistance to Serbia through various projects since 2001, the EU is by far the largest donor in the country. Thus, in an attempt to ensure Serbia's stability, Vučić strongly affirmed his country's neutrality, voting in favor of condemning the Russian invasion of Ukraine at the UN General Assembly, but refusing to apply EU sanctions.

Both the ruling coalition parties, led by the Serbian Progressive Party (SPP) and most right-wing opposition parties, opposed imposing sanctions on Russia, in the name of “national interests”. One of the reasons is that Russia, as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, is seen as a guarantor of Serbia's interests in Kosovo. Another reason is that Serbia has become dependent on Russian gas imports and much of the Kremlin's investments in the country have focused on strategic sectors.

While part of the media⁶² has been fuelling for years nationalist and anti-EU sentiments, the real concern, as it is also captured by a Council of Europe report⁶³, refers to the long-term implications of disinformation campaigns created specifically to sow distrust and to accentuate divisions and polarization within society through ethnic, religious, and nationalist tensions. Against this background, rallies were held in Belgrade in support of Russia's actions, mainly by ultranationalist movements. Likely, the EU will respond to Serbia's ambivalent position by accelerating its accession process and by securing energy supplies, since only in this way will Serbia be able to avoid serious political, economic, and social consequences.

At a time when the EU seems more united than ever in the face of Russian aggression against Ukraine, being forced to choose a clear political path and make bold decisions, a pragmatic offer for the full accession of the Western Balkans to the EU, instead of the current decades-long process, would encourage progress on much-needed reforms and the rule of law, while also serving to resolve bilateral disputes between the states of this region. On the other hand, alignment with the goals of the dual green and digital transition will also entail alignment with the EU's foreign policy goals, and, in the process,

⁶² Thomas Brey, “Western Balkans: Sputnik distorts reality”, *Deutsche Welle*, 23 September 2021, <https://www.dw.com/ro/balcanii-de-vest-sputnik-distorsioneaz%C4%83-realitatea/a-59259274>, accessed 24 May 2022.

⁶³ Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan, “Information Disorder. Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policymaking”, *Council of Europe*, Report DGI(2017)09, 27 September 2017, <https://rm.coe.int/information-disorder-toward-an-interdisciplinary-framework-for-researc/168076277c>, accessed 24 May 2022.

provide the region with stability and long-awaited economic growth. The meeting of EU leaders at the Western Balkans Summit on 23 June 2022 has represented a new opportunity to discuss the future of the region, in the context of the war in Ukraine and in the light of the objectives underlined by President Emmanuel Macron, focused on “clarifying the European perspectives, reinvesting in the region and defining a true common ambition for decades to come”⁶⁴.

V. The War in Ukraine and the EU’s Strategic Autonomy

In March 2022, Russia’s war in Ukraine gave a new impetus to the idea of EU strategic autonomy and it coincided with the French Presidency of the EU Council, the strongest supporter of the idea of reducing the EU’s dependence on other states and the main promoter of the concept itself. Thus, a European Union dependent on Russian gas and various imports, from defense to semiconductors, was now being pushed to reduce *interdependence* and create European *independence*, according to Clément Beaune, the French Minister for EU Affairs, who stressed that “if this is the result of this crisis, it will be a success for Europe”.⁶⁵ In fact, other European leaders⁶⁶, who had been sceptical for some time, were now more supportive of the EU’s open strategic autonomy than ever, stressing that NATO and the US were vital to Europe’s protection and Germany, which abandoned decades-long policy of reluctance to commit to a substantial increase in military spending was the best example. Thus, through the Versailles Declaration⁶⁷ from 11 March 2022, EU leaders pledged to increase defense spending, eliminate dependency on Russian fossil fuels, and design a new growth and investment model for 2030, implicitly reducing the EU’s

⁶⁴ European Western Balkans, “Macron urges for “clarifying” EU perspective of the WB, announces conference in June”, 10 December 2021, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2021/12/10/macron-urges-for-clarifying-eu-perspective-of-the-wb-announces-conference-in-june/>, accessed 24 May 2022.

⁶⁵ Mardis du Grand Continent, “Événement spécial consacré à l’invasion de l’Ukraine”, 8 March 2022, <https://twitter.com/i/broadcasts/1djGXPZqOReGZ>, accessed 4 May 2022.

⁶⁶ Government of Netherlands, “Speech by Prime Minister Mark Rutte at the University Sciences Po in Paris about the current developments in Ukraine,” 9 March 2022, <https://www.government.nl/documents/speeches/2022/03/09/speech-by-prime-minister-mark-rutte-at-university-sciences-po-paris>, accessed 4 May 2022.

⁶⁷ European Council, “Informal Meeting of the Heads of State or Government Versailles Declaration,” 10 and 11 March 2022, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/54773/20220311-versailles-declaration-en.pdf>, accessed 4 May 2022.

strategic dependence (for critical raw materials, semiconductors, sanitary materials, digital technologies, agricultural products, and food) on third country imports.

In practice, both the coronavirus pandemic and especially the war in Ukraine have prompted the EU to take the necessary measures to strengthen its strategic autonomy beyond defense policy. For example, achieving “energy sovereignty” by removing most of the imported fossil fuels will also ensure the EU’s sovereignty in its foreign policy⁶⁸, as stated by the German Minister of Climate and Economy, Robert Habeck. Meanwhile, “food sovereignty” will reduce dependence on fertilizer imports from Russia and Belarus. Another goal will be to strengthen the security and resilience of EU digital systems, which are increasingly subjected to Russian cyber-attacks.

In view of all these issues, the statement of the Commissioner for Trade and Economic Policy, Valdis Dombrovskis, stating that “the more diversified the EU’s trade flows, the more resilient they will be (...) That is why I insist on this point of open strategic autonomy to diversify the supply chains that need to be opened” echoes the statement made the by European Council President, Charles Michel, who emphasized the need for stability and dissemination of EU standards in order to achieve “less dependence, more influence”⁶⁹. Nowhere in the world are these values and standards better circulated and implemented than in the Western Balkans, which have been preparing for this moment for several decades. Furthermore, nowhere in the world is the EU investing so much as it does in the Western Balkans in pursuing the socio-economic and environmental convergence of the region with the EU, with the aim to prioritize the region’s strategic autonomy.

The causal link between the stabilization, accession, and integration into the European Union of the states of the Western Balkans and the achievement of the EU’s strategic goal of becoming a global player was explicitly expressed by the former High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. Federica Mogherini, in her speech at the Oxford University from October 2019, stated that: “The European Union will only become a strong

⁶⁸ Xinhua, “Germany’s energy policy must become more independent: minister”, 2 March 2022., <https://english.news.cn/20220302/04a64a23c91c4201bb3f63a058c69bb6/c.html>, accessed 4 May 2022.

⁶⁹ Charles Michel, (@eucopresident), “Strategic autonomy means more resilience, less dependence...”, Twitter Post, 10 February 2021, <https://twitter.com/eucopresident/status/1359558856293175305?lang=en>, accessed 4 May 2022.

global player if it integrates the Western Balkans”⁷⁰. In the speech, entitled “The European Union as a global player”, the High Representative stressed that in order to achieve the goal of stabilizing the European continent and putting an end to the conflicts on it, the EU must unite Europe by integrating the states of the Western Balkans. This is one of the reasons why the funding for the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance – IPA III⁷¹ in the period 2021-2027, added to € 14.16 billion. Along with the € 9 billion from the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans, which was expected to mobilize an additional € 20 billion in investments, the funds sought to target long-term strategic investments in key sectors, such as energy, while also promoting several vital political objectives, like foster peace, stability, democracy, and the rule of law in the Western Balkans. Moreover, IPA III ensured close complementarity and coherence with other investment programmes in the region and with a wide range of EU internal policy programmes in order to maximize their impact on the priority sectors (security, migration, research and innovation, environment and climate action, transport, and energy connectivity).

VI. Conclusions

The war in Ukraine and the way in which it will end can prove decisive for the fate of the Western Balkans and the results of the content analysis show how tightly linked these two areas are. Jose Manuel Barroso, former President of the European Commission, stated in 2007 that the EU is one of the most important, if not the most important normative power in the world⁷². But in order to be fully a *smart power*⁷³, EU’s normative power had to combine elements of *soft power* and *smart power*, fully manifesting its role as an international actor, by

⁷⁰ Mogherini quoted in: Elena Lazarou et al., “Peace and Security in 2019 – Overview of EU action and outlook for the future”, *European Parliamentary Research Service*, Brussels, 15 May 2019, 23, https://normandiepourlapaix.fr/sites/default/files/2019-06/EPRS-Study-637894-Peace-and-Security-2019-FINAL%20for%20Caen_lowres.pdf, accessed 4 May 2022.

⁷¹ European Commission, “Overview – Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance”, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/enlargement-policy/overview-instrument-pre-accession-assistance_en, accessed 4 May 2022.

⁷² John Peterson, “José Manuel Barroso: Political Scientist, ECPR Member”, *European Political Science* 7 (2008): 64–77.

⁷³ Power is divided in three main categories, based on the means used: hard power (results obtain by constraint), soft power (results are obtained by persuasion and attraction) and smart power (results are obtained through the combination of the two) (see: Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *The Future of Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011)).

using all the economic and material resources at its disposal to get others to adhere to its values and standards, as well as to ensure its security and economic development. This *carrots & sticks* policy is intended to ensure both stability in the Western Balkans region and their preparation for accession, to prevent another “They came too soon, before they were ready”⁷⁴.

The role of the EU as a normative power has played and continues to play a central role, being the very essence of the European project. The set of common norms accepted and used by all EU states represents the essence of its power, as well as the expression of its potential power. The export of these norms, standards, and values beyond the borders of the EU, together with its economic power are the expression of its strategic ambitions, materialized through projects of institutional consolidation and sustainable development. By applying a content analysis methodology, both soft and hard power elements have been revealed and by using the elements of constructivism, these were contextualized with the aim of identifying the critical points where the EU strategic action is needed in order to mitigate the effects of the war in Ukraine on the WB6 and to discern what could be the medium- and long-term evolution of both the EU and of the WB6 states. Moreover, the number of texts analysed which addressed the topic of EU strategic autonomy in the context of its strategic objectives for the upcoming period, led us to establish direct links between the intensification of threats and the diversification of means for reaching this objective.

Thus, the complementarity between EU and NATO is regarded not only as a means to counteract the instability and threats in the Western Balkans but also as an element of force projection, strengthening the EU strategic autonomy. The results of the content analysis, on the backdrop of the constructivist principles applied, enable us to uncover the key factors influencing both the future of the EU and that of the Western Balkans. Thus, if US, through NATO, has long been responsible for the EU’s security, it is only through this cooperation and complementarity of actions that security and stability can be achieved and maintained in the WB6. Also, in a preliminary phase it can be concluded that the recurrence of the security issues in the public space has been unpinned by an intensification of the efforts in this field and also that the intensification of the efforts for the EU security, in all of its forms, will automatically lead to a spillover effect in the WB6.

⁷⁴ Heather Grabbe, “Six Lessons of Enlargement Ten Years On: The EU’s Transformative Power in Retrospect and Prospect”, *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 52, no. S1 (September 2014): 40-56.

Considering the current evolutions, two possible scenarios have been identified for the medium-term perspective. One scenario, if things continue to be unfavorable for Russia in Ukraine, the Kremlin could use the tactic of not letting a good crisis go to waste⁷⁵ and to “spread the front” to divert attention from what is happening on the Eastern Front, creating a new crisis, right in the “heart of Europe”⁷⁶. No other space would be more accessible to Kremlin than the Western Balkans, where for years they have been engaged in a vast process of destabilization and Moscow, with fewer and fewer options to keep even the appearance of a consolidated state, needs this option.

Such a move will not only divert the attention of the EU (and NATO) from Ukraine but will also dissipate the energy of their efforts on both “fronts”, with the potential to create new cracks in the cohesion of Western actors and dispel the enthusiasm of the new Revised Methodology for Enlargement, through a new crisis meant to throw the region into instability. Thus, any stable government with strong pro-European leadership in the Western Balkans region is a great loss to the Kremlin, in the pursuit of its interests, and a great gain for the EU. The West is historically obligated to find the fastest way to integrate the states of the region into the EU, the first step being the inclusion of the Balkans in a security zone in which Russia’s negative influence has little to no effect. This is all the more important since the Kremlin is in the need of favorable narratives to be disseminated to the internal public is growing and so it might attempt to ferment a crisis in a vulnerable region.

A second scenario ties into the idea that for its recurrent conflict with the West, the Balkans were a space in which Russia tried to divert and divide the energy of its rivals for its interests, namely the Eastern space. In essence, Russia has no direct interest in any of the Balkan countries except as markets for its energy sources, but there is enough room here to spread and maintain instability, planting distrust in Western structures, constantly working to maintain the tensions already existing in the Balkans. If things take a favorable turn for Russia in the war in Ukraine and the West fails to support Ukraine until the end, the Kremlin will have a chance to strengthen the rhetoric that the force

⁷⁵ Winston Churchill quoted in Guillaume Gruère, “Never let a good water crisis go to waste”, *OECD*, 21 March 2019, <https://www.oecd.org/agriculture/never-waste-a-good-water-crisis/>, accessed 4 May 2022.

⁷⁶ French President Emanuel Macron said that the Western Balkans are more than Europe’s neighbourhood because they are “in the heart of Europe”. (see: Sofija Popović, “Western Balkans and the EU in 2022: Resolution of problems or escalation of crises?”, *European Western Balkans*, 12 January 2022, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2022/01/12/western-balkans-and-the-eu-in-2022-resolution-of-problems-or-escalation-of-crises/>, accessed 4 May 2022).

is stronger than the arguments of public international law, and such an aftermath will likely have direct repercussions in the Western Balkan states.

As for the security spectrum, the West is at least aware of the danger of a new crisis in the Balkans. This has been shown by doubling the EU's stabilization force in Bosnia⁷⁷, as well as by setting up the new NATO Defence Capacity Building Package for Bosnia, announced in April 2022⁷⁸. The EU's deployment of additional police forces in Kosovo, announced in March 2022⁷⁹, to support local police as well as the NATO troops were intended for the same purposes. However, actions to strengthen the traditional security measures need to be doubled by strong support for the rule of law and additional measures to counter the Kremlin's disinformation campaigns. Russian disinformation remains very active in the EU Member States as well in order to manipulate and polarize the population, respectively to turn the public opinion against the war victims. While the invasion of Ukraine has the potential to generate the largest wave of refugees in Europe since World War II⁸⁰, the Russian propaganda has tried to manipulate the subject, as it did in 2016, during the Syrian immigrant crisis, when Dmitry Medvedev said that “among these people, there are many, maybe hundreds, or even thousands, of bandits who came to Europe in a countdown mission. Now they are waiting to be called and then they will act like robots against Europe”⁸¹. This time, Medvedev announced on 17 April 2022, that “Ukrainian refugees from Europe could unleash a wave of violent crime”, while on social media fake news⁸² and stories were distributed by Russian bot farms⁸³, as it, previously, happened in 2016.

⁷⁷ EUFOR ALTHEA increased its numbers from 600 to 1.100 in 2022. (see: Seamus Shannon, “EUFOR Reserve Activation 2022”, *European Union Force in BiH – Operation ALTHEA*, 23 February 2022, <https://euforbih.org/index.php/newsroom/2952-eufor-reserve-activation>, accessed 24 May 2022.

⁷⁸ N1 Sarajevo, “NATO chief announces steps towards providing support to Bosnia and Herzegovina”, 7 April 2022, <https://ba.n1info.com/english/news/nato-chief-announces-steps-towards-providing-support-to-bosnia-and-herzegovina/>, accessed 24 May 2022.

⁷⁹ Euractiv, “EU to nearly double its police force in Kosovo”, 15 March 2022, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/eu-to-nearly-double-its-police-force-in-kosovo/>, accessed 24 May 2022.

⁸⁰ Julian Vierlinger, “UN: Ukraine refugee crisis is Europe's biggest since WWII”, *Atlantic Council*, 20 April 2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/un-ukraine-refugee-crisis-is-europes-biggest-since-wwii/>, accessed 24 May 2022.

⁸¹ World Bulletin, “Medvedev warns of ‘World War’ if peace talks fail”, 2 February 2016, <https://worldbulletin.dunyahulteni.net/europe/medvedev-warns-of-world-war-if-peace-talks-fail-h169354.html>, accessed 4 May 2022.

⁸² “Lisa case” dominated the German media in January 2016. A 13-year-old girl had disappeared from her home and had been raped by Arab immigrants, according to Sputnik or RT Germany. Intensely distributed on social networks by far-right groups, even generating demonstrations, the

In terms of the economic spectrum, the EU needs to increase its financial assistance to support the European path of these states, including mitigating the effects of the shock wave felt by the region due to the war in Ukraine, and this support must be extended to the communication level, by supporting the independent press, which disseminates EU actions to the public. If the EU has previously invited WB6 states to join EU joint procurement of vaccine against COVID-19⁸⁴, EU Member States reached an agreement in March 2022 to allow Western Balkan countries to participate in joint gas purchases to limit the increase of energy costs⁸⁵. Similar actions are likely to follow in order to address the emerging global food crisis. All of these are additional measures to the investments supported through the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans, with a particular focus on infrastructure and energy diversification, as a way to reduce the region's dependence on Russia and China.

Finally, a crisis in the WB6 space can only be prevented by EU effectively supporting the region, by creating mechanisms and tools calibrated to the current needs and context, designed to stimulate the resilience of the institutional architecture in the region. At the same time, the enlargement process itself needs attention and revitalization, given that international involvement has been the basis for stabilizing and increasing the resilience of the Western Balkans after the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia and the declining interest, on the backdrop of various EU crises in recent years, has been a double source of instability and insecurity in the region.

story turned out to be completely false, the German police showing that the young woman had been unharmed. (see: Stefan Meister, “The ‘Lisa case’: Germany as a target of Russian disinformation”, *NATO Review*, 25 July 2016. <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2016/07/25/the-lisa-case-germany-as-a-target-of-russian-disinformation/index.html>, accessed 4 May 2022).

⁸³ Security Service of Ukraine, “Since war started, SSU shuts down 5 enemy’s bot farms with over 100,000 fake accounts”, 28 March 2022, <https://ssu.gov.ua/en/novyny/z-pochatku-viiny-sbu-likvidovala-5-vorozhykh-botoferm-potuzhnistiu-ponad-100-tys-feikovykh-akaunti>, accessed 4 May 2022.

⁸⁴ European Commission, “Signing ceremonies for Joint Procurement Agreement”, 28 April 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/health/health-security-and-infectious-diseases/preparedness-and-response/signing-ceremonies-joint-procurement-agreement_ro, accessed 4 May 2022.

⁸⁵ Mihajlo Vujasin, “EU to allow Western Balkans to take part in joint gas purchases”, *Balkan Green Energy News*, 29 March 2022, <https://balkangreenenergynews.com/eu-to-allow-western-balkans-to-take-part-in-joint-gas-purchases/>, accessed 4 May 2022.

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