RUSSIAN INFLUENCE ON THE EUROPEAN INTEGRATION PROCESS OF THE WESTERN BALKAN COUNTRIES: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Alfred Marleku¹, Dafina Aliu²
University for Business and Technology – UBT

Abstract:
This article explores the correlation between Russian influence and the European Union (EU) integration process in the Western Balkans. The focus is on analyzing the impact of Russian influence expressed through political, economic and cultural means on the region’s integration into the EU. The article argues that the Russian foreign policy toolkit inhibits the EU accession process for the six countries of the Western Balkans, as it interferes with the internal functioning of these countries, which, in turn, affects their ability to fulfill EU requirements. Using a comparative case approach this study has found evidence that Russian cultural, political and financial support negatively affects the Western Balkans’ European integration process, hindering progress towards accession. Additionally, the findings support the argument that Western Balkans countries with Slavic populations are more susceptible to Russian influence. The article highlights the significant impact of Russia on the EU integration process in the Western Balkans and underscores the need for EU policymakers to address this issue to ensure a smooth and successful accession process for the region.

Key Words: EU integration, Western Balkans, Russian influence, strategic threats, EU-Russia relations.

Titulo en Castellano: La influencia rusa en el proceso de integración europea de los países de los Balcanes Occidentales: Un análisis comparativo

Resumen:
Este artículo explora la correlación entre la influencia rusa y el proceso de integración en la Unión Europea (UE) en los Balcanes Occidentales. Se centra en analizar el impacto de la influencia rusa expresada a través de medios políticos, económicos y culturales en la integración de la región en la UE. El artículo sostiene que el conjunto de instrumentos de la política exterior rusa inhibe el proceso de adhesión a la UE de los seis países de los Balcanes Occidentales, ya que interfiere en el funcionamiento interno de estos países, lo que, a su vez, afecta a su capacidad para cumplir los requisitos de la UE. Utilizando un enfoque comparativo de casos, este estudio ha hallado pruebas de que el apoyo cultural, político y financiero ruso afecta negativamente al proceso de integración europea de los Balcanes Occidentales, obstaculizando el avance hacia la adhesión. Además, los resultados apoyan el argumento de que los países de los Balcanes Occidentales con poblaciones eslavas son más susceptibles a la influencia rusa. El artículo pone de relieve el importante impacto de Rusia en el proceso de integración europea de los Balcanes Occidentales y subraya la necesidad de que los responsables políticos de la UE aborden esta cuestión para garantizar un proceso de adhesión fluido y satisfactorio para la región.

Palabras Clave: Integración en la UE, Balcanes Occidentales, influencia rusa, amenazas estratégicas, relaciones UE-Rusia.
1. Introduction

When discussing Russia and its relations with Western Balkan (WB) countries, it is necessary to reflect on the past. Russia’s relations were closely tied to the Slavic population with whom they shared the same religion and historical memory. Russia has demonstrated pragmatism and flexibility in utilizing circumstantial alternatives. This characteristic highlights its ability to use historical and cultural connections in a pragmatic manner to advance its interests in the Balkans, even when confronted by other influential powers. Russia has been regarded as the primary advocate for Orthodoxy and Slavic populations in the Balkans. Although the level of support has fluctuated over the years depending on its interests, it has nonetheless managed to maintain a degree of sympathy and influence, particularly in Slavic countries such as Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and North Macedonia.

Previous scholarship has investigated Russia’s relationships with the Western Balkan countries. Our contribution to this discussion involves analyzing the relationship between Russian influence and the European Union (EU) integration process of the Western Balkan countries. We aim to investigate whether these relations have a negative impact on the integration process, and if so, identify the significant Russian instruments that affect the region’s European integration. This article seeks to answer these questions while examining new dynamics that are emerging in the region.

The remaining part of this article proceeds as follows. Firstly, we present an overview of established research that aims to demonstrate and explain Russian influence in the Western Balkan countries. Following this, we discuss our research design, including the data and operationalizations used to test the hypotheses derived from our theorization. We then present and discuss the results of our analyses before concluding with our findings and implications.

2. Literature Review

The Orthodox Church is one of Russia’s primary mechanisms for maintaining the idea of “brotherhood” and gaining support from Slavic populations in the region. When necessary, Russian leaders do not hesitate to make evident the linkage between political events and their perception of the West as deleterious towards the Orthodox Slavic people. In 2019 Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov stated that “Christians have suffered and continue to suffer from geopolitical experiments carried out by countries of the so-called historical West.” He also reminded his audience that two decades prior, “NATO committed an act of aggression against Yugoslavia, which resulted not only in the death of civilians, but also in an exodus of Orthodox Christians from Kosovo and the desecration and destruction of cathedrals and shrines in this

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Serbian land”.7 This rhetoric strengthens Russia’s ties to political elites, churches and other specific groups in Serbia, Bosnia, Montenegro, and Macedonia.8 In Montenegro, pro-Russian policies promoted through the Orthodox Church eventually interfered in the country’s politics. With the Church’s support, Russia initiated protests in 2020 that led to the installation of a pro-Russian leadership.9

Benefiting from tensions between Kosovo and Serbia the Russian Church does not hesitate to express concerns for the “Christian destiny” of the Serbian Orthodox churches in Kosovo.10 In Montenegro there is the “Moscow Bridge,” a gift from Moscow that serves as a symbol of brotherhood. Republika Srpska has also seen other symbolic religious activities organized with donations from Russia, such as the building of churches, clerical activities and visits from religious groups. A major project is the construction of a Russian monastery in northern Republika Srpska, which is sponsored by the Serb-Russian Friendship Association of all Orthodox Countries active in Serbia, BiH, and Montenegro.11 In North Macedonia, there has been resistance to maintaining independence from the Serbian Orthodox Church. In contrast, Russia’s Orthodox Church has tried to mediate this dispute, promoting the interests of the Serbian Orthodox Church.

In addition to historical and religious connections, geopolitical and economic interests also play a primary role in Russia’s actions towards the region.12 Russia is spreading its influence increasingly by offering new financial and economic opportunities, particularly in energy, infrastructure as well as through disinformation and disruption.13 Although Russia has been financially present in the past few years, it had not been considered a threat to the EU. However, this changed with the Ukraine crisis, specifically with the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Energy is one of Russia’s main economic tools in its foreign policy. Its dominance in the energy sector is particularly relevant. For instance, Russia covers 75% of Serbia’s gas needs.14 To date Russia has spent 1.4 billion dollars to expand Serbia’s gas infrastructure.15 Furthermore, Serbia is the most important market for Gazprom’s sales in the Western Balkans.16

Through its investments in NIS, a Serbian oil and gas company, Gazprom Neft has gained numerous other assets including gas stations, storage facilities, and more in other countries such as Bosnia, Croatia, Bulgaria, Hungary, and Romania.17 Under Republika Srpska the only oil refineries in Bosnia are controlled by Russian companies. As a result, Russia tries to impact the political course of the region, which can be observed through its close cooperation and relationships with leaders and political figures of Republika Srpska, such as Milorad Dodik. In Montenegro Russia is one of the most prominent foreign investors. In 2015, more than 30% of foreign companies in Montenegro were Russian-owned, and in 2019 and 2020 Russia

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10 Ibid.
12 Bechev, op. cit.
14 Bieri, op.cit.
16 Stronski and Himes, op.cit.
17 Ibid.
became the country’s biggest investor. These investments are primarily concentrated in tourism, real estate and business.\textsuperscript{18}

Despite Russia’s significant investments in the region, the EU remains the most important investor, accounting for almost 70% of the total regional trade.\textsuperscript{19} However, there is a tendency, especially in Serbia, for people to believe that Russia contributes more financially to the country than the EU. A 2015 survey showed that 47% of the participants believed that Russia offers more financial aid to Serbia than the EU, despite the fact that Russia’s financial contributions are far behind those of the EU.\textsuperscript{20} The proportion of Russia’s involvement in Serbia’s foreign trade went up from 4.7% to 6.1% in 2022, but it is still much smaller compared to the EU, which makes up 58.7% of Serbia’s foreign trade.\textsuperscript{21} Although not all Russian investments are implemented, they still manage to be productive as a soft power instrument.\textsuperscript{22}

Russia’s geopolitical interests in the Balkans are also related to its ambitions for access to key ports that facilitate connections with Africa and the Middle East. Because the region’s countries are not yet fully integrated into Western organizations they are subject to Russian influence which hinders their integration.\textsuperscript{23} Russia’s presence in the Balkans has become increasingly visible in recent years, especially in the context of a confused EU and a relatively absent US in the region.\textsuperscript{24} As the region is still in the process of consolidating its democratic system of government, it is an easy target for Russia to exploit ethnic, religious and economic tensions, particularly through corruption. During the 90s Russia was weaker than NATO and could not make significant military interventions in the region. However, with its increased economic and military strength, Russia now seeks to challenge NATO’s influence in the region.

Serbia is undoubtedly the most important partner for Russia in the Balkans.\textsuperscript{25} As a reward for Serbia’s loyalty, Russia has provided military support to the country. Since 2018 Serbia has been leading in the region having doubled its military budget. In spite of US threats to impose sanctions, Russia sent the S-400 missile system to Serbia in 2019 for a military drill. Additionally, Russia established a so-called “Humanitarian Center” that serves as an intelligence center.\textsuperscript{26} Political statements of support between leaders are not absent, either. Serbia is the only country in the Balkans that has refused to impose sanctions on Russia after its invasion of Ukraine. President Vucic has stated that Russia was the only country that did not impose sanctions against Serbia in the 1990s and supported its territorial integrity in the United Nations.\textsuperscript{27} Therefore, he underlined, Serbia will look after its interests.\textsuperscript{28} A similar situation

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\textsuperscript{19} Garčević, \textit{op.cit.}

\textsuperscript{20} Galeotti, \textit{op.cit.}


\textsuperscript{22} Stronski and Himes, \textit{op.cit.}

\textsuperscript{23} \textit{Ibid}

\textsuperscript{24} Morello, \textit{op.cit.}


\textsuperscript{26} \textit{Ibid.}


\textsuperscript{28} “Montenegro President’s Overtures Cautiously Welcomed in Moscow”, Balkan Insight (blog), 8 May 2018, at https://balkaninsight.com/2018/05/08/djukanovic-vows-to-seek-better-relations-with-russia-05-08-2018/.
arose after Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 when Serbia refused to impose sanctions on Russia. However, Serbia did not explicitly endorse the annexation as legal.\textsuperscript{29}

Russia has overtly menaced Balkan countries that endeavor to strengthen their security ties with the West. In 2016 Russia backed a coup in Montenegro following the nation’s successful bid to join NATO. Russia also sought to undermine a referendum in North Macedonia concerning its NATO membership. In a similar vein, Russia warned of reprisals if Bosnia and Herzegovina were to join NATO.\textsuperscript{30} Montenegro’s long-standing leader Milo Đukanović asserted that in 2016 Russia backed his adversaries with millions of euros in a bid to topple him, owing to his endeavors to bring Montenegro closer to NATO membership.\textsuperscript{31} This was not the first time that he accused Russia and Serbia of taking actions to destabilize Montenegro.\textsuperscript{32} However, Đukanović never excluded the importance of normalizing relations with Russia, as Montenegro and Russia have a traditional friendship.\textsuperscript{33} Nonetheless, it appears improbable that this normalization will transpire in the near future, particularly considering recent events. Montenegro has joined the international sanctions against Russia over its invasion of Ukraine.\textsuperscript{34} Montenegro’s new president, Jakov Milatović, who triumphed over the pro-Western incumbent Milo Đukanović, a leader with more than thirty years in power, has vowed to expedite the diminutive nation’s quest for European Union membership and uphold the bloc’s policy stance regarding Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Concurrently, Milatović expresses his intention to promote enhanced relations with Serbia and other neighboring Balkan countries.\textsuperscript{35}

Russia also takes advantage of the existing divisions in Bosnia triggering more and more conflicts that affect the country’s functionality. It supports Republika Srpska and its leader Milorad Dodik in implementing the idea of seceding from Bosnia further.\textsuperscript{36} Dodik tried to push Bosnia and Herzegovina towards a neutral stance on Russia by preventing the country from voting in the UN on the condemnation of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.\textsuperscript{37} Although the primary target for Russia in Bosnia is the Bosnian Serbs, Moscow has also been supporting Croatian nationalists, another entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina, on the same idea.\textsuperscript{38}

Regarding Kosovo and Albania, Russia’s political influence in these countries is limited. Kosovo has repeatedly emphasized its view of Russia as an actor seeking to destabilize the

\textsuperscript{30} Stradner, \textit{op.cit.}
\textsuperscript{33} Montenegro President’s Overtures Cautiously Welcomed in Moscow, \textit{op.cit.}
\textsuperscript{34} Serbia Will Not Impose Sanctions against Moscow, President Says, \textit{op. cit.}
\textsuperscript{36} Stradner, \textit{op.cit.}
\textsuperscript{38} Stradner, \textit{op.cit.}
Balkans. Prime Minister Kurti has stated that Kosovo has joined international sanctions against Russia and has accused Russia of spreading fake news in an attempt to destabilize the region. Additionally, the presence of NATO’s peacekeeping force KFOR in Kosovo helps to maintain security and stability. The Albanian Prime Minister, Edi Rama, has also condemned Russia’s recent actions and has joined the West in imposing sanctions against it. However, Rama has emphasized that Russia is not an enemy of Albania, while also acknowledging the clear division between the two countries. Kosovo has a strong inclination towards the West, as it aims to become a member of the European Union (EU) and NATO, while prioritizing internal unity towards achieving this goal. In terms of foreign policy, Albania places great emphasis on its objective of gaining EU membership. Albania has consistently demonstrated its sincere commitment to this goal by aligning its positions with those of the EU and actively engaging in other international organizations and initiatives.

North Macedonia has a clear determination to join the EU, as demonstrated by its willingness to make compromises including changing its name to resolve its long-standing historical dispute with Greece. However, its vulnerability to Russian influence is heightened by mixed signals from the EU over the years. Given Russia’s past operations targeting North Macedonia when its NATO membership was becoming a closer possibility, pressure to prevent its accession to the EU is expected by default.

Serbia has formally proclaimed European integration as a key priority of its foreign policy. However, its intensified relations with Russia and reluctance to impose sanctions raise concerns about its commitment to this goal. Serbia’s foreign policy alignment with the EU has significantly declined over the years. Its strategic approach can be described as opportunistic due to its attempts to maintain a balance between the EU and Russia. While it claims EU membership as a relevant priority of its foreign policy, its partnership and growing closeness with Russia in economic, political and military spheres raise concerns about its true intentions for European integration. The support and popularity of Russia among the Serbian public further complicate the situation.

The six countries in the Western Balkans have many similarities in social, economic, and political aspects, but their path to EU accession is not the same due to their different starting points and progress levels. Serbia, Albania, North Macedonia and Montenegro are candidate countries, while Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina remain potential candidates. Albania obtained candidate status in 2014 and the European Commission proposed to open accession negotiations in 2016. Despite the presentation of a negotiations framework draft by the

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42 Dzananovic Nedzm: Foreign Policies in Western Balkans: Allignment with the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy, Friederich Ebert Stiftung, 2022.
43 Ibid.
45 Dzananovic, op.cit.
47 Ibid.
Commission in 2020, the opening of accession negotiations with Albania is still pending.\textsuperscript{49} North Macedonia received candidate status in 2005 and in 2009 the European Commission proposed to open accession negotiations. However, North Macedonia faced significant obstacles as it clashed with Greece over its name, which was ultimately resolved in 2019. Despite the Council’s decision to open accession negotiations with North Macedonia in 2020, they have yet to be initiated due to a dispute with Bulgaria over historical, cultural and linguistic issues.\textsuperscript{50} In contrast, Montenegro obtained candidate status in 2010 and opened accession negotiations in 2012, with a focus on the main judicial chapters. Montenegrin authorities must demonstrate their practical commitment to addressing rule of law issues, including freedom of expression and media, as well as fighting against corruption and organized crime.\textsuperscript{51} Serbia obtained candidate country status in 2012 and negotiations formally began in 2014. As of 2022, 18 of the 35 negotiating chapters have been opened, with only two provisionally closed. No new chapter has been opened,\textsuperscript{52} and it is acknowledged that Serbia’s integration into the Union is closely linked to its relations with Kosovo and the ongoing dialogue.\textsuperscript{53}

Bosnia and Herzegovina is a potential candidate for which a Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) was reached and signed in 2008. However, due to internal issues with functioning, it was not enforced until 2015.\textsuperscript{54} Since the European Council’s decision in 2022, Bosnia and Herzegovina has been recognized by the EU as a “candidate country” for accession and is currently on the EU’s enlargement agenda for the future. However, there has been an increase in tensions between the country’s two territorial entities, namely the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska.\textsuperscript{55} Valentin Inzko, the UN High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina, stated in May 2021 that the political agenda of Milorad Dodik, the leader of Republika Srpska, was aimed at causing the country’s disintegration.\textsuperscript{56} Throughout his political career Dodik has pursued an approach that has had destabilizing effects on Bosnia and Herzegovina. In 2022, the US Treasury Department imposed sanctions on Dodik for deliberately and systematically obstructing the 1995 Dayton Accords.\textsuperscript{57} In addition, Dodik has been building increasingly closer ties with Russia. To pursue an alternative foreign policy to that of official Sarajevo, he established a Republika Srpska representative office in Moscow. He is known to have met with Russian President Vladimir Putin seven times since 2014.\textsuperscript{58} While Bosnia and Herzegovina’s other presidency members, Sefik Dzaferovic and Zeljko Komsic, condemned Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, Dodik stood

\textsuperscript{50} De Munter, op.cit.
\textsuperscript{51} European Commission, 2021, op.cit.
\textsuperscript{52} De Munter, op.cit.
\textsuperscript{53} European Commission, 2021, op.cit.
\textsuperscript{54} De Munter, op.cit.
\textsuperscript{57} Karcic Hamza: Putin’s Most Loyal Balkan Client, Foreign Policy (blog), 7 October 2022, at https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/10/07/bosnia-elections-milorad-dodik-putin-russia/.
by Putin and openly supported the invasion, calling it “justified” and supported the organization of referendums in the Russian-occupied parts of Ukraine.\textsuperscript{59}

Regarding Kosovo, it remains a potential candidate with several disadvantages as five EU member states (Spain, Greece, Romania, Cyprus, and Slovakia) still do not recognize it as a country. Additionally, Kosovo is the only country in the region that does not have visa liberalization, despite the Commission stating since 2018 that the criteria for visa liberalization have been met.\textsuperscript{60} In 2013, the Council decided to commence negotiations on the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA), which finally came into effect in 2016.\textsuperscript{61} The situation with Serbia plays a significant role in Kosovo’s integration process. Belgrade and Pristina have been engaged in EU-mediated talks since 2011, three years after Kosovo declared independence in 2008. However, Serbia still regards Kosovo as a breakaway province and tensions between the Balkan neighbors over the years, which intensified in 2022, raised fears of a return to conflict. After lengthy negotiations between Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, and EU officials, an agreement was reached on March 18, 2023. The agreement, which comprises 11 points, stipulates that Serbia and Kosovo are obligated to foster normal, amicable relations while respecting each other’s territorial integrity and independence. Although the agreement does not mention recognition explicitly, it requires both parties to establish permanent missions at each other’s government seats. The agreement also specifies that Belgrade must not oppose Kosovo’s accession to any international organizations. However, the EU expressed disappointment that no formal document was signed.\textsuperscript{62}

So far many scholars have analyzed Russian influence in the Western Balkans over the years, exploring the various means by which Russia maintains its areas of influence in the region. However, it is crucial to further investigate the correlation between this influence and European integration, particularly as the international system becomes increasingly unpredictable. Thus, this is the main aim of this article.

3. Research Design and Methodology

The primary research approach used in this article is the comparative method analysis. This method is suitable for analyzing similarities, differences and patterns in two or more cases that share the same goal or focus. It contributes to better understanding and explaining how features within a context may influence the success or failure of a specific process. This method may involve the use of qualitative and quantitative data generated from observations, interviews and document analysis.\textsuperscript{63} As case studies the six Western Balkan countries—Albania, Kosovo, Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia, and North Macedonia—have been selected. Despite significant differences among them they share considerable similarities in terms of their vulnerability to external influences and EU integration.

This article is structured around one fundamental research question and three hypotheses. These are designed based on a detailed theoretical consideration of the subject and the findings from the case studies. The primary research question of this article is: \textit{What factors does Russia utilize to extend its influence over the Western Balkan countries and impede their European integration process?} We contend that Russia can employ various tools and mechanisms to extend its influence in the Western Balkan countries. One of the oldest methods

\textsuperscript{59} Karcic, \textit{op.cit.}
\textsuperscript{60} European Commission 2021, \textit{op.cit.}
\textsuperscript{61} De Munter, \textit{op. cit.}
\textsuperscript{62} Joseph Edward P.: Kosovo Has a Deal—If the West Can Save It, Foreign Policy (blog), 22 March 2023, at https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/03/22/kosovo-serbia-deal-europe-united-states-ohrid/.
it uses in the region is through shared culture and religion with these countries. In this context, variables such as tradition, culture and religion play an indispensable role.

H1: Cultural and religious ties between the Western Balkan countries and Russia have an impact on these countries’ EU integration process.

One of the primary methods employed by Russia is providing direct financial support or achieving favorable trade agreements, particularly in the energy sector with some of the Western Balkan countries. Additionally, political support for Kremlin’s official policies toward certain politicians in these countries is also significant. This support is manifested through the provision of funds, favorable trade terms or statements and political positions of influential Russian politicians. Based on these variables, our second hypothesis posits that:

H2: Russia’s financial and political support for the Western Balkan countries impedes their EU integration process.

Another critical element that affects Russia’s influence in the Western Balkan countries is their international strategic orientation, as expressed in official documents, statements and speeches of politicians and the level of EU integration in these countries. Therefore, our third hypothesis is as follows:

H3: The strategic foreign policy objectives of the Western Balkan countries determine their progress in EU integration.

4. Analysis and Discussion

The cultural and religious ties between the Slavic populations of the Western Balkan countries and Russia are significant factors that increase sympathy and pro-Russian sentiments. The Russian Orthodox Church places particular emphasis on these connections cultivating close relationships with other Orthodox churches in the region, especially the Serbian Orthodox Church, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Bosnia & Herzegovina and the Serbian minority in Kosovo. Consequently, the Slavic populations in the Western Balkans feel a closer affinity to Eastern values which influences their attitudes towards European integration. Serbia, along with other countries that have significant Serbian minorities, is particularly vulnerable to Russian influence since its church is closely connected to state structures, similar to those in Russia.

Furthermore, these religious and cultural connections often translate into political activities that promote the Russian agenda in their respective countries. For instance, the Serbian Orthodox Church is closely linked to political leaders and is actively involved in political developments. It advocates for the defense of Serbian interests and emphasizes the Kosovo issue and its Orthodox heritage. Additionally, the SOC implements the Russian agenda in the Balkans by portraying Russia as a “bigger brother” and the guardian of culture and religion in the region.64 Public statements from religious leaders that promote the close relationship between Slavic populations and Russia are frequently identified in public discourse. In this regard, former Patriarch Irinej in 2012 suggested returning to values that have guided Serbian spirituality and history. According to him, “faith has oriented Serbs towards the East,” emphasizing the importance of the Eastern Orthodox Church in shaping Serbian identity. On several occasions he emphasized the pro-Russian sentiment of the Serbian people and the importance of strengthening ties with Russia even further.

In Kosovo, Russia’s influence is mainly focused on the Serbian minority. The ongoing dialogue between Serbia & Kosovo and the achievement of a comprehensive agreement acceptable to both parties is considered a necessary condition for accession to the EU. However, tensions between the two sides and public rhetoric from political and religious Serbian leaders,

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64 Stradner, op.cit.
which portray Russia as a warrantor of their people, heritage and the West as the main culprit of the situation in Kosovo, have a negative impact on the European integration process. The Serbian Orthodox Church has also used its influence beyond Serbia to undermine the Western orientation of other countries, such as Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina’s Republika Srpska in supporting Miroslav Dodik’s ambitions to separate from the state of BiH. In North Macedonia the Russian Orthodox Church has made attempts to increase the power of the Serbian Orthodox Church within the Macedonian Orthodox Church, but it has faced strong resistance.

From this perspective, cultural and religious connections with Russia negatively influence the European integration of these countries. This can be explained by the fact that these populations mainly relate their cultural and political aspirations to their proximity to Russian influence. Although there is support for EU membership, this is often based on a lack of feasible alternatives rather than a genuine endorsement of the EU’s values.65

The Slavic Orthodox populations often view themselves as culturally, politically and economically more distant and distinct from the West.66 This bipolar perception of the EU and Russia leaves room for political elites in the Western Balkans to leverage their political stances and maintain their power. However, there are exceptions to this dynamic, such as Albania and Kosovo67, where the populations have a clear Western orientation and do not share common elements with Russia regarding cultural and religious aspects. As a result, Russian cultural and religious tools have limited access and are not effective in these countries. Therefore, cultural and religious relationships between the Western Balkan countries and Russia negatively impact their EU integration process.

Russia’s economic statecraft aims to create dependence on its investments and financial aid in Western Balkans countries, providing leverage for political purposes when challenging Western dominance. The countries most vulnerable to this tool are Serbia, Bosnia & Herzegovina, and Montenegro. The energy sector is a primary focus of Russian investments, given these countries’ significant dependence on Russian oil and gas. Notably, some of the most prominent Russian companies have invested heavily in this sector, particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina through Republika Srpska and Serbia. NIS, a major oil corporation in Serbia, continues to be under the control of entities associated with Gazprom which also retains its monopoly on gas imports to the country. In May 2022 a new three-year agreement was inked, with Belgrade obtaining relatively advantageous conditions amid Moscow’s curtailment of gas exports to several EU member states due to their refusal to pay in Russian currency. Serbia, which did not participate in anti-Russian sanctions, was not subject to similar stipulations.68

In Montenegro, Russia dominates with investments in other sectors such as business, tourism and real estate. The Central Bank of Montenegro has reported that Russians are currently the primary purchasers of real estate in the country, having acquired properties worth 20 million euros between February and July of 2022. Moreover, this institution disclosed that Russians are also the leading investors in Montenegro, having invested a total of 41.6 million

68 Samorukov, op.cit.
euros in the country since the onset of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The year 2022 saw Russians comprising almost 2 million overnight stays in Montenegrin lodgings, establishing them as the primary cohort of foreign visitors after Serbs. Additionally, this represents a significant upsurge of 71% in comparison to the previous year.\textsuperscript{69} Montenegro has long been referred to as the “Russian VIP resort,” a favored destination for Russian oligarchs.\textsuperscript{70} As per certain surveys, over 40% of real estate in Montenegro is held by Russians, including several former politicians and billionaires.\textsuperscript{71}

Regarding Russia’s political support in the Western Balkans, it is primarily focused on elites in these countries who are pro-Russian and include the Russian agenda as part of their policies, not only in internal affairs but also in foreign affairs. One example of this is Serbia’s President Aleksandar Vucic who is known for his pro-Russian attitudes and enjoys support from the Kremlin. This political orientation was more evident when the EU and US requested Serbia to impose sanctions on Russia for violating international law, including the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014 and Russia’s latest invasion of Ukraine. Serbia refused to put sanctions on Russia. In every meeting with Vladimir Putin or any other Russian representative, Vucic and other Serbian politicians never hesitate to express their admiration for Russia and its leader. Meanwhile, President Putin never forgets to emphasize the importance of Serbia to Russian interests in the Balkans as its strategic partner.\textsuperscript{72} According to polls conducted in Serbia, Putin enjoyed significant popular support among the public.\textsuperscript{73} Moreover, at the onset of the conflict, a large number of Serbs demonstrated their admiration for Putin by parading through central Belgrade, waving Russian flags and displaying his pictures.\textsuperscript{74} Moreover, opinion polls reveal that approximately 70% of individuals in Serbia hold the West and Ukraine accountable for instigating the war.\textsuperscript{75} Serbia has developed a political tactic that attempts to maintain a similar, almost equal balance between the EU and Russia. However, with recent developments, Serbia finds itself in a complicated situation, as its failure to take concrete actions condemning the Russian invasion risks jeopardizing its progress towards European integration.

Russian political engagement in Western Balkan countries has taken a more aggressive turn, particularly when these countries move closer to EU and NATO integration and deepen their partnership with these actors. This was the case in Montenegro where Russia was involved in an organized \textit{coup} to overthrow Djukanovic as soon as Montenegro moved closer to NATO accession. As Montenegro advances further in European integration, Russia has engaged in an increasingly destabilizing political situation. Similarly, North Macedonia faced attempts to discourage and deteriorate the referendum for the name, which ended the long-standing dispute with Greece, and gave the green light for opening the negotiation process for European

\textsuperscript{69} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{74} “Inside the Country Backing Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine - BBC Newsnight Visits Serbia”, \textit{BBC News}, 17 February 2023, at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3VPSZoqJurU.
\textsuperscript{75} Samorukov, \textit{op.cit.}
integration, as well as accession to NATO. Despite these challenges, Montenegro and North Macedonia are committed to building immunity to this influence, as evidenced by their progress towards Western integration. However, Russia has still managed to slow down the EU integration processes in these countries by interfering in their internal functioning systems, even though it failed to prevent their NATO accession.

In Kosovo and Albania there is not enough space to spread and maintain political agendas through political elites as is the case in most other regions. However, in Kosovo’s case the Serbian minority is a significant factor. The EU accession process for Serbia and Kosovo is conditioned by reaching a long-term agreement acceptable to both sides, considering the tensions between the two. Russia takes advantage of this situation. For Russia, a possible settlement of this dispute is not convenient as it would bring Kosovo and Serbia closer to EU integration. Therefore, it is logical that Russia uses the Serbian minority in Kosovo by employing political rhetoric through Serbian leaders, highlighting Kosovo’s importance to Serbs and emphasizing that they should not and cannot give up on it.

Although Russia may not be able to altogether prevent the EU integration process of these countries, it does influence the delay of this process for the region, which eventually discourages people and makes them more pessimistic about their European ambitions. In the early stages of the accession processes, European integration was widely endorsed by public opinion and political elite in the six Balkan countries. There was no political party with Eurosceptic views. Although support is still high, it has declined compared to previous years, except in Kosovo and Albania.  

External and internal factors have had their implications on these attitudes. The interior complications within the EU, the framing of the EU enlargement policy and rising Euroscepticism are some of the external factors that directly or indirectly dim the enthusiasm of Western Balkan (WB) countries to join the EU. As for the internal factors, the lack of economic, social, political development and the limited capacity to fulfill the conditionalities imposed by the EU, are some of the leading indicators that create circumstances that make public opinion rethink their standpoints. However, both external and internal factors share one common indicator: euroscepticism.

Eurosceptic views in the Western Balkans became more visible after the European economic and financial crises in 2008. This crisis affected one of the primary purposes people saw as beneficial for European integration, such as economic development and prosperity. The most powerful factors that support this utilitarian vision are employment and income. Based on the European labor market, people assume that they will have more employment opportunities and better living standards. Nonetheless, other indicators build up the Eurosceptic view in WB. People’s perception is also related to how they perceive their countries’ national interests within the EU. This is usually combined with a lack of knowledge about the EU and its policies, leading to narrow perspectives regarding European integration. The accession process’s uncertainties, alterations and decelerations contribute to this skeptical view. Additionally, people in the Western Balkans may look for other and better alternatives

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79 Damjanovski et alia, op.cit.
80 Belloni and Brunazzo, op.cit.
and when they do, Russia may present itself as the best option available. As long as NATO keeps expanding in countries that Russia considers traditional spheres of interest, it feels threatened. Therefore, limiting the West’s ambitions is a priority for Russia.

All six Western Balkan (WB) countries have included European integration as their top foreign policy objective. However, the seriousness and efforts to achieve this goal differ from country to country. Serbia and Bosnia & Herzegovina listed EU integration as a top priority in their foreign policy objectives. However, merely stating this in a document is not sufficient.

Actions speak louder than words, and the efforts of these two countries often contradict what is stated in relevant documents. Serbia has made significant progress in its EU accession process, with European integration remaining officially a priority of its foreign policy. However, its hesitation to align with the West’s sanctions against Russia when necessary, as well as its admiration for its ties, partnership and friendship with Russia, raises questions about its true commitment to European integration.

Bosnia and Herzegovina faces severe internal issues that make the country vulnerable to external influences. While European integration is considered a top priority in theory, the reality leaves much to be desired. The Republika Srpska entity is the primary source of most of the problems, as it has expanded competencies and impacted the country’s structures. Its close ties with the Kremlin and Milorad Dodik’s open support and promotion of the Russian agenda in the country have hindered efforts towards European integration. Given the government structure and Russia’s direct impact on one of the leading entities, which eventually undertakes destabilizing actions, it is challenging for Bosnia and Herzegovina to achieve this foreign policy objective merely with the legal approval of legislation without actual implementation. Therefore, efforts must be made to address the internal issues and reduce the influence of external actors to advance Bosnia and Herzegovina's path towards European integration.

Montenegro’s progress towards European integration has been the result of constant practical efforts to move closer to the EU, despite continuous pressure from Russia. This progress would have been impossible if Montenegro had merely made European integration a priority in its foreign policy objectives without taking actual action. However, the delay in the EU accession process is not solely due to Montenegro’s capacity to fulfill the conditions, but also the EU’s internal issues and proceedings.

Similarly, North Macedonia has also shown commitment to fulfilling its foreign policy priority of EU accession. Despite these efforts, progress has not yet been translated into the opening of negotiation chapters. Albania and Kosovo also prioritize EU integration, with Albania making significant efforts to tackle corruption and enforce the rule of law, and Kosovo striving in its dialogue with Serbia. However, both countries have not experienced the progress they desire.

As we have briefly discussed each country’s perspective on European integration and Russia, it is evident that countries with a significant Slavic population are more susceptible to Russian propaganda and influence, with Serbia and Bosnia being the most vulnerable. While all six countries prioritize European integration in theory, it is clear that merely making it a foreign policy objective is insufficient to make substantial progress. The progress achieved by Montenegro and North Macedonia is the result of concrete efforts to move closer to European integration, despite pressure from Russia. Furthermore, internal structural issues and the field implementation of legislation significantly affect progress in the integration process, and the EU’s strict conditionality requires patience and compromise.

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81 De Munter, *op.cit.*
The recent developments in Ukraine can indeed serve as a wake-up call for the WB countries to accelerate their process towards EU accession. The region is vulnerable to external influences and tensions, and any destabilizing actions by Russia could exacerbate these issues. Bosnia and Herzegovina, in particular, is at risk of the Republika Srpska entity pursuing secession, which could undermine the Dayton Agreement that ended the war in the country. Kosovo also faces ongoing tensions related to the treatment of the Serbian minority and the dialogue with Serbia. Many EU countries have expressed their concerns about these issues and emphasized the need to facilitate accession for the WB countries, so that they can align themselves with the EU as soon as possible. The EU’s support and engagement in the region can be crucial in preventing any further destabilization and promoting a peaceful and stable future for the Western Balkans. Thus, in light of recent geopolitical changes in Europe, it is imperative for the EU and NATO to take measures to counteract Russian influence in regions such as the Western Balkans, which are particularly susceptible to instability during such times. Delaying decisive action increases the risk of the region succumbing to Russian propaganda and instability. Thus, it is crucial to engage in constructive discussions and devise innovative solutions for this region, given the implications for Europe’s security.

5. Conclusion
The Western Balkans region has had a tumultuous history marked by conflict and instability. Countries in this region are currently at different stages in their efforts towards European integration, but all have identified this as a top foreign policy priority. However, external and internal factors have led to declining enthusiasm for European integration and this has been exploited by Russia to further its interests. Russia has taken advantage of cultural and religious ties with the Slavic populations of the Western Balkans to promote pro-Russian sentiment and influence political activities that further its agenda. Russia has also used economic statecraft to create dependence on its investments and financial aid in Western Balkans countries, providing leverage for political purposes when challenging Western dominance.

The influence of Russia has had a negative impact on the European integration process in the Western Balkans, as it has delayed the process and discouraged people from pursuing their European ambitions. Although support for EU membership is still high in the region, it has declined compared to previous years. Euroscepticism has become more visible, particularly after the European economic and financial crises in 2008, and this has been compounded by the lack of economic, social and political development, as well as the limited capacity to fulfill the conditionalities imposed by the EU. Despite these challenges, WB countries remain committed to building immunity to external influence and progressing towards European integration. Montenegro and North Macedonia have made concrete efforts to move closer to the EU, despite pressure from Russia. Albania and Kosovo have also prioritized EU integration and have taken steps to tackle corruption, enforce the rule of law and improve their dialogue with Serbia. However, there is still a long way to go for these countries to achieve their foreign policy objectives.

In light of recent geopolitical transformations in Europe, it is imperative for the EU and NATO to take measures to counteract Russian influence in regions such as the Western Balkans, which are particularly susceptible to instability during such times. Delaying decisive action increases the risk of the region succumbing to Russian propaganda and instability.

Therefore, the EU’s support and engagement can be crucial in preventing any further destabilization and promoting a peaceful and stable future for the Western Balkans.

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