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THE EU'S FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS THE WESTERN BALKANS DURING
THE JUNCKER COMMISSION. THE CASES OF BOSNIA HERZEGOVINA AND
SERBIA.

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*Di tutto restano tre cose:
la certezza
che stiamo sempre iniziando,
la certezza
che abbiamo bisogno di continuare,
la certezza
che saremo interrotti prima di finire.
Pertanto, dobbiamo fare:
dell'interruzione,
un nuovo cammino,
della caduta,
un passo di danza,
della paura,
una scala,
del sogno,
un ponte,
del bisogno,
un incontro.*

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List of abbreviations

AIDA-Asylum Information Database
BIH-Bosnia Herzegovina
CFSP/CSDP-Common Foreign and Security Policy/Common Security and Defence Policy
EAEU/EEU-Eurasian Economic Union
EC-European Commission
EC-European Community
ECHR-European Convention on Human Rights
ECRE-European Council on Refugees and Exiles
EEC-European Economic Community
EEAS-European External Action Service
EPC-European Political Cooperation
ES-European Studies
EU-European Union
EUSRs-European Union Special Representatives
FBIH-Federation of Bosnia Herzegovina
FDI-Foreign Direct Investment/s
FPA-Foreign Policy Analysis
FPS-Foreign Policy Studies
FSRY-Federation of the Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia
HDZ- Democratic Front
HOSG-Heads of States or Government
HR/VP-High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy-Vice President of the European Commission
IPA II-Instrument for Pre-Accession Agreement II
IR-International Relations
PCA-Partnership and Cooperation Agreement

RS-Republika Srpska

SAA-Stabilisation and Association Agreement

SDA-Bosniak Social democrats

SNS- Serbian Progressive Party

SNSD-Alliance of Independence Social Democrats

SPS- Serbian Socialist Party

SRS-Serbian Radical Party

TUE-Treaty on the European Union

WB-Western Balkans/ Western Balkans countries

Abstract

In February 2018, four years after the President of the Commission Jean Claude Juncker explicitly deprioritised the enlargement dossier, the European Commission relaunched the enlargement strategy to the region of the Western Balkans. This occurred despite the persistent polarisation around the topic among the EU Member States and the still-present struggles, when not outright regression, of some of the countries in pursuing the demanded reforms.

This thesis carries out a multilevel foreign policy analysis of EU foreign policy toward the region of the Western Balkans during the period of the Juncker Commission, through the cases of Bosnia Herzegovina and Serbia. Drawing from Actorness theory (Bretherton and Vogler 2006), combined with perspectives from new institutional leadership (Smeets and Beach 2020), and new intergovernmentalism (Moravcsik 2018; Bickerton et al. 2015), this study seeks to explain the relaunch of enlargement by examining three dimensions: the international context and the role of non-EU actors such as China, Russia, and Turkey; the EU context, through the interaction of the significant EU Member States and Institutions; finally, the local context, through the analysis of the changes in the local perception of the EU and the considered non-EU actors.

This study posits two interconnected points: first, that the changes in the international context, specifically the increased presence of non-EU actors such as China, Russia, and Turkey in the region, acted as triggering factors for the relaunch of the strategy. In addition, it argues that this relaunch was successful due to the peculiar combination of Germany's interests and leadership within the Council, coupled with the Commission's priorities.

Introduction

On 6th February 2018, the European Commission issued a Communication entitled *A credible enlargement perspective for the enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans* (European Commission 2018). Only four years before, Commission's President Jean-Claude Juncker had announced the decision to take a 'break' from further enlargement, as "no country was ready to join the EU" (Juncker 2014a). Therefore, the choice to relaunch the enlargement perspective to the region one year before the end of his mandate, surprised: especially in the light of a persisting polarisation around the topic by some EU Member States, and of the struggle by some countries of the region- especially Bosnia Herzegovina and Serbia- to move forward with the demanded reforms.

This considered, the current study seeks to explain the shift in EU's foreign policy towards the Western Balkans from the proclaimed 'break' from enlargement to the relaunch of the European perspective of the region through the issuing of the new enlargement strategy, during the years of the Juncker Commission. It selects and analyses different dimensions- and within them, actors- which might have influenced such policy shift. It argues, on the one hand, that the international 'context' does matter in the shaping of EU foreign policy: as this study will show, during the years of the Juncker Commission, the EU observed an intensification of the relevance, presence, and local influence in the region of the Western Balkans of actors such as China, Russia, and Turkey, combined with the progressive deterioration and redefinition of

the EU bilateral relations with each of these actors. Therefore, the study argues that, within this evolving context, the relaunch of the strategy constituted a reaction to the evolutions occurring in a region identified as a top strategic priority for EU's foreign policy objectives. On the other hand, because of the complex system of EU foreign policy making, the study also posits that this shift occurred only thanks to the combination of the Commission's priorities, and German interests and leadership, which allowed to overcome the obstructions within the Council.

After introducing the research puzzle, the following sections articulate the research's relevance, the research question(s), the core argumentation, and the overall findings. Finally, the last section outlines the structure of the thesis and offers some limits and caveats.

1. *Problematique*

At the start of his 'political' Commission in 2014, the priorities listed by Jean-Claude Juncker for his envisioned administrative cycle did not include any further enlargement to the Western Balkans. In 2013, the entry of Croatia into the European Union virtually marked the end of a long enlargement process started in 2004¹. While this did not prevent crucial milestones for EU integration (such as the Treaty of Lisbon), EU governance was indeed impacted by the growing complexity of the integration project (Balfour, Stratulat 2012). From the mid-2000s onwards, the EU had in fact experienced what the literature calls the 'enlargement fatigue.'² Due to the increased complexity in EU governance, some scholarly analyses have stressed that "despite three-quarters of existing Member States are former 'enlargement' countries, the enlargement is not narrated anymore as a success story" (O'

¹ Between 2004 and 2013, thirteen countries gained EU membership, all of whom belonged to post-socialist societies.

² This term is often used to describe the decreasing enthusiasm that, since the mid-2000s, has started characterizing the enlargement process.

Brennan 2014, 44). On the other hand, various authors also pointed out that the notion of ‘enlargement fatigue’ is sometimes used as a “staple sentence to interpret the negative outcomes of the French and Dutch referenda on the Constitutional Treaty” and “a scapegoat for a range of deeper problems and stumbling blocks in the EU”, reinforcing the “widening versus deepening” debate which arose in 2007 EU internal debates (Balfour, Stratulat 2012, 1-2).³

Thus, until the publication by the European Commission of the Communication for a new credible enlargement towards the Western Balkans in 2018 (European Commission 2018), the enlargement process towards the region stalled. Further contributing to this delay were issues such as the prologued Eurozone crisis, the unresolved issues of contested statehood and domestic tensions, and Western Balkans countries’ slow progress in the implementation of the EU demanded reforms. Therefore, it was not a surprise when President Juncker stated that his Commission would take a ‘break’ from further enlargement, as “the Union [...] need[s] to digest the addition of thirteen Member States in the past ten years” (Juncker 2014, 11). Juncker made it clear from the outset that his ‘political Commission’ would have focused more on serious internal challenges, such as the consequences of the Eurozone economic and financial crisis; the record high level of youth unemployment (Ibidem, 3); the decreasing “trust in the European project” (Idem); and the crucial energy, environmental, and digitalisation challenges (Ibidem, 8-9). Within those guidelines, the region of the Western Balkans was addressed, with specific reference to enlargement, with the wish for countries of the

³ Among other features, the term ‘Enlargement fatigue,’ is also utilised to describe the increasing scepticism of public opinion towards enlargement. The most notable example is probably France, which approved a constitutional amendment in 2008 binding any governmental decisions on further enlargement to popular consultation (Wunsch 2017).

region “to keep a European perspective”, while no new entry was envisaged for the next five years (Ibidem, 12).

All this considered, why did the EU decide, in the space of four years, to move forward with the enlargement process? This study sets out to address this question by unpacking the different aspects and factors which, at multiple levels, may have contributed to the change of EU foreign policy towards the region during the last EU institutional cycle (2014-2019).

2. Research Objectives

This project aims to explain the shift in EU foreign policy towards the region of the so-called Western Balkan⁴ region during the last EU institutional cycle, also referred to in this work as the ‘Juncker Commission’ (2014-2019). Specifically, it investigates why the EU moved from a proclaimed “break” from enlargement (Juncker 2014) to the re-inclusion of the region among its top priorities, as suggested by the European Commission’s Communication on a credible enlargement in 2018 (European Commission 2018). This research considers the EU not as a unitary actor, but rather as a complex multi-layered system where the Member States and Brussels-based institutions interact and affect foreign policy outcomes (Baracani 2021, 2). Moreover, foreign policy is here broadly conceived as exceeding the boundaries of EU institutions and encompassing the framework of the Common Foreign Security Policy (CFSP) and Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), to include also informal frameworks through which member states and third countries cooperate, as well as of course enlargement policy (Keukeleire, Delreux 2014, 12).

⁴ The area delineated by the EU-administrative term of ‘Western Balkans’ refers to a specific group of countries in Southeast Europe: Albania, Bosnia Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. This study however focuses on two specific countries: Bosnia Herzegovina and Serbia.

3. *Research Questions*

The current study is informed by the following research question, which is subsequently unpacked into three sub-questions to systematically operationalise the research.

Research question(s): Why did the EU foreign policy towards the Western Balkans shift during the Juncker Commission, moving from the originally proclaimed ‘break’ from enlargement to the issuing of a new credible strategy towards the Western Balkans?

1. *The International context.* What features of the foreign policy of non-EU actors—such as China, Russia, and Turkey—influenced the EU foreign policy shift towards the Western Balkans?
2. *The regional/EU dimension.* How did the EU’s internal developments shape this policy outcome?
3. *The local dimension.* What changes in the local perception of the EU—and of the analysed non-EU actors— influenced this foreign policy outcome?

4. Research Relevance

The relevance of this work is found in three main aspects. First, it covers a significant timeline: the years of the Juncker Commission (2014-2019). During that institutional cycle, the EU witnessed several challenges, among which were: the progressive deterioration of its relations with other international actors in its neighbourhood; the so-called ‘migration crisis’; the referendum on EU membership in the UK; and the democratic backsliding in some EU Member States.⁵

Secondly, this work researches the EU’s foreign policy towards its so-called ‘geographic priority’: the region of the Western Balkans. The area is important for the EU foreign policy objectives for several reasons. First, it is currently surrounded by the EU Member States. More importantly, it was the area where the EU first exercised its role as an international actor during the 1990s and tested (mostly failing) its foreign policy resources. Thirdly, it is the only area of the world where the EU has so far deployed, across two decades, the most comprehensive set of foreign policy tools: from humanitarian aid to economic and financial assistance, civil and military missions, conflict resolution, institution building, border cooperation and, of course, the enlargement policy (Baracani 2019; Belloni 2019). Over time, that area grew so intertwined with the EU internal market that it is now extraordinarily dependent on EU equilibria, as proven by the severe hit it experienced during the Eurozone crisis (Tooze 2020; Belloni 2019; 2016). Moreover, the region has increasingly appeared in the EU’s strategic documents as a key area for the preservation of EU security and stability (EEAS 2016).

⁵ The UK referendum on EU membership and the followed ‘Brexit’ negotiations heavily impacted the internal equilibrium of the Union. Due to the firm support of the UK to the European perspective for the Western Balkans, Brexit has thus been interpreted as another factor that might further delay the reach of a concrete enlargement perspective (Belloni, Brunazzo 2017).

Last but not least, the region presents strong historical, cultural, political, and economic ties with some of the most relevant regional and international actors: China, Russia, and Turkey. To various extents, all these actors represent a significant ‘other’ to the EU (Morozov, Rumelili 2012). Furthermore, as mentioned in the previous paragraphs, all these actors experienced progressive deterioration in their relations with the EU during the considered timeline. For all these reasons, the analysis of the change in EU foreign policy towards the Western Balkans remains distinctively relevant: both for a more comprehensive understanding of the functioning of EU foreign policy; and of EU actorness in the international arena.

5. Core Argument and Overall Findings

This work makes two main interconnected points. The first is that external ‘context’ matters. Recent academic studies on EU actorness highlight the need to address the role of the external-structural environment in shaping EU foreign policy (Rhinard, Sjöstedt 2019; Drieskens 2017). In addition, but related to this first point, others also advocate for the inclusion and a deeper understanding of the local context of the countries at the receiving end of EU foreign policy decisions (Keukeleire, Lecoq 2018; Keukeleire 2015; Fisher Onar, Nicolaïdis 2013). By studying the relaunch of the enlargement strategy towards the Western Balkans, this study argues that the changes that occurred in the external context in which the EU acts - especially the increased significance of non-EU actors, such as China, Russia, Turkey in the region – played a role in shaping the EU’s foreign policy. The relaunch of the enlargement strategy then constituted a reaction to the growing influence of non-EU international actors in the area, especially as their agendas increasingly diverged from the EU’s standards and values.

The second argument of this study is connected to the EU’s internal context. As repeatedly underlined by the literature, the disunity of Member States, coupled with the post-Lisbon EU context, severely limits the

implementation of a coherent foreign policy at the European level (Rieker, Eriksdatter Giske 2021; Keukeleire, Delreux 2014; Reichwein 2015). This is also true for a sensitive issue like enlargement: a field of policy that experienced heavy politicization among the Member States from the mid-2000s onwards (Belloni 2019; Wunsch 2017). Diverging foreign policy priorities and visions of EU integration, added to the growing concerns among EU Member States for developments in the region, led to obstructions within the Council. The French and Dutch vetoes to the opening of negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia in October 2019 provide a notable example. So far, the trend has not been reversed, due also to the slow (and sometimes receding) progress made by target countries in some areas, such as political pluralism and freedom of expression (European Commission 2018; 2019; 2019d).

All this considered, this study argues that the relaunch of the enlargement strategy was possible thanks to the combination of Germany's leadership, strategic interests, and peculiar position in EU foreign affairs; and the European Commission's agenda for the region. The synergic cooperation between the two actors allowed the relaunch of the strategy, despite the obstruction from some Member States within the Council.

*6. Contributions to the Literature*⁶

The conceptual contribution of this research covers two main aspects. First, it provides a multilevel and comprehensive framework of analysis of EU foreign policy towards the region of the Western Balkans. It does so by addressing specific acknowledged gaps in the literature, such as the role of the 'geopolitical context' (that is, other actors' foreign policy actions) in constraining or enhancing EU foreign policy-making (Rhinard, Sjöstedt 2019; Drieskens 2017). Also related to this point, this study includes in the analysis the local perspectives of third countries, thus contributing to the theoretical

⁶ The literature review is presented in Chapter One.

debate on decentring the focus of EU foreign policy studies (Onar, Nicolaïdis 2013; Keukeleire 2014;2015;2016; Keukeleire, Lecocq 2018). Thus, the first aim is achieved by including the analysis of the foreign policy actions of three non-EU actors in the region, respectively China, Russia, and Turkey. The second is addressed by the analysis of the changes in the local perception of the EU, and of the considered non-EU international actors, in Bosnia Herzegovina and Serbia.

Secondly, the thesis further adds to European Foreign policy and EU integration Studies by integrating the Actorness framework's dimension of *capability* with recent contributions coming from (new) intergovernmentalism (Moravcsik 2018; Bickerton et al. 2015), and new institutional leadership (Smeets, Beach 2020).

7. Structure of the Thesis

This thesis has five chapters. The first provides an outline of the research. It presents a literature review on EU foreign policy studies and the state-of-the-art on Actorness theory, by examining the different conceptualisations and by justifying the choice of Bretherton and Vogler's model. It then illustrates the research design and methodology. In addition, the chapter presents a detailed operationalisation of each proposed dimension of the theoretical framework, namely, *opportunity*, *capability*, and *presence*. Finally, it explains the author's reasoning behind the choice of timeframe and case studies and subsequently presents the sources, limits, and caveats.

Chapter Two illustrates the EU's foreign policy toward the Western Balkans. It first portrays the historical evolution of the EU-Western Balkans relations: from the initial economic cooperation of the late 1960s to the dissolution of former Yugoslavia; and from the Thessaloniki Summit of 2003 to the substantial state-building measures deployed throughout the first years of the 21st century. The historical overview does not only highlight the continuous salience of the region for EU's objectives: it also underlines how the region contributed to EU integration, especially in terms of the institutionalisation of

EU foreign and security policy that occurred after the wars of the 1990s. Finally, the chapter presents the main changes that occurred in EU foreign policy towards the case studies during the last EU institutional cycle.

Chapters Three, Four, and Five constitute the empirical chapters of the thesis. They engage with the three respective levels of the analysis: the international level; the EU internal context; and the case studies countries level. Chapter Three analyses the foreign policy actions of non-EU actors in the countries under scrutiny. The chapter highlights the importance of the EU's external environment in shaping EU foreign policy. It emphasises how the changes occurred during the last EU institutional cycle in the EU's external context posed some unavoidable challenges to the EU's objectives. For each non-EU actor considered, a multilevel and multi-area analysis is conducted, moving from the international level to the case study level and exploring the political, economic; and cultural arena. Like Chapter Two, Chapter Three is divided into two distinct parts: the first covers the historical evolution of each actor's relations with the EU, the region, and the case studies. The second analyses the last EU institutional cycle and illustrates the increasing presence of each actor in the case studies in different spheres of influence: political/diplomatic, economic, and cultural.

Chapter Four focuses on the internal dimension of EU policymaking. It provides a detailed account of the foreign policy tools that the EU (and its Member States, like in the case of the Berlin Process) deployed in the region during the considered timeframe. Furthermore, it examines the positions of selected EU actors. Specifically, the chapter emphasises the rise of German leadership in EU foreign affairs and its implications for the enlargement dossier. It also portrays the evolution of selected actors' preferences (France, Germany, Hungary), and the interaction between Member States and EU institutions in the negotiations of the enlargement strategy.

Finally, Chapter Five engages with the Presence's dimension of actorness framework, providing insights on the local-third countries dimension and how it might contribute to shaping EU foreign policy. Specifically, it analyses the local context by focusing on the change in the perception of the EU, and to

some extents of the considered non-EU actors, by some key local actors: economic and political elites, and public opinion.

Finally, the conclusions present the main findings of the research, highlight the contribution of the thesis to the literature, and outline proposals for further research.

CHAPTER 1. Theory and research design

Introduction

This work understands the EU's foreign policy in its broadest terms. It directly takes from Keukeleire and Delreux's definition, thus defining it as encompassing the framework of the Common Foreign Security Policy (CFSP) and Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDF), to include also informal frameworks through which member states and third countries cooperate, as well as enlargement policy (Keukeleire, Delreux 2014,12).

The study carries out a foreign policy analysis (Beach 2012) of the EU's foreign policy towards the region of the Western Balkans during the last EU institutional cycle, also referred to as the Juncker Commission (2014-2019). It does so by applying the theoretical lens of Actorness theory, specifically through Bretherton and Vogler's social constructivist tripartite model, through the analysis of the dimensions of, respectively: the EU *opportunity*, *capability*, and *presence* (Bretherton, Vogler 2006).

To compensate for the potential limits of the Actorness theory and the chosen model-its wide scope, and unclear operationalisation (see Conceição-Heldt, Meunier 2014; Delreux 2014; Brattberg, Rhinard 2012)- this work combines and integrates Actorness conceptualisation and methodology in two ways. First, in terms of theory, and especially for the analysis of EU capabilities, it integrates actorness theory with inputs from European studies' theories, such as intergovernmentalism and new intergovernmentalism (Moravcsik, 1995, 2018; Bickerton et al 2015; Schimmelfennig 2018); new institutionalism; and new institutional leadership (Smeets, Beach 2020; Keukeleire, Delreux 2014). Furthermore, the analysis of Bretherton and Vogler's *presence* dimension is conceptualised-through the use of the notion of 'perception'-as extending the perspective of the local perception of the EU in the case study countries, to

include also the local perception of the considered non-EU actors: China, Russia, and Turkey. This is supported by literature on ‘decentring the agenda’ studies, which focus on the need to shift EU foreign policy studies from their Eurocentric bias, to include the perspective of the countries on the receiving end of EU foreign policy (Keukeleire 2015; Onar, Nicolaïdis 2013). In terms of methodology, this work carries out a foreign policy analysis (FPA) of EU foreign policy (Beach 2012). It proposes a systematic, multilevel, and multiactor operationalisation of Bretherton and Vogler’s model, supported and narrowed down by the use of case studies adding a specific focus on the region of the Western Balkans and the cases of Bosnia Herzegovina and Serbia.

This chapter is divided into two main parts: the first discusses the theory and provides a thorough review of literature on EU foreign policy studies. It then discusses the specificity of the Actorness theory, especially the model proposed by Bretherton and Vogler (2006), and highlights the reasons why it was chosen for the scope of this work. The second part of the chapter instead presents the research design and focuses on the methodology used: first, it justifies the choice of case study methodology to integrate Bretherton and Vogler’s model. Secondly, it provides a detailed explanation of the operationalisation of each section of the Actorness framework: Opportunity, Capabilities, and Presence. It then justifies the choice of timeframe and the case studies. Finally, it dedicates a specific section to sources and data collection, to end with some limits and caveats.

1. European Union's Foreign Policy studies: state of the art

Since the Treaty of Maastricht (1993), and then with the Treaty of Lisbon, foreign and security policy has become a formal part of the European Union policy structure. In the post-Lisbon era, the institutional architecture of EU foreign policy includes a multi-method approach, combining intergovernmental and supranational methods; and a multilevel dimension, going from Member States and EU institutions' interactions, which sometimes extend to informal actions undertaken by the Member States outside the formal procedures of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) (Keukeleire, Delreux 2014, 16). In addition, there is the external dimension of EU internal policies (e.g., on migration). It is thus a particularly overarching and complex structure. Scholarly analysis has often pointed out how thanks to the increased role of the European Council, the EU often struggles to formulate, express, and implement a coherent and unitary position on foreign policy issues (Rieker, Eriksdatter Giske, 2021, 2; Keukeleire, Delreux 2014, 16; Reichwein 2015). Precisely because of this, and arguably also due to the increased weight of Member States' diverging priorities on the decision-making process, other authors also affirm that the encompassing and multi-actor nature of EU foreign policy often defies precise conceptualisation (Rieker, Eriksdatter Giske 2021). Thus, despite being more than six decades old, the EU's multi-actor, multilevel, and often less-unitary-than-auspicious foreign policy decision-making still fascinates, confuses, and inspires different interpretations.

The following section retraces the history of EU foreign policy studies, highlighting the different interpretations that have been developed since the 1960s; then, it carries out a literature review of the theoretical framework utilised in this research: the Actorness theory.

1.2 Contributions from International Relations, European Studies, and Foreign Policy Studies.

In their handbook on European Union Foreign Policy, Jørgensen et al. (2015), situate the study of EU foreign policy at the intersection of three main research traditions: International Relations (IR), European Studies (ES), and Foreign Policy Studies (FPS). These traditions are described as not mutually exclusive, but rather as overlapping (Jørgensen et al 2015, 2). As the study of European Union Foreign Policy originated later than the (still quite recent) traditions of International Relations, European Studies, and Foreign Policy Studies, the study of European Union Foreign Policy necessarily draws from developments in those fields.

The very first question dominating EU foreign policy scholarship focused on the necessity to define similarities and differences between the EU's and a nation-state's behaviour in foreign policy matters. This mostly led to theoretical discussions around the topic of "what does it take" to be considered an actor in international affairs. Contributions from the field of IR (the oldest discipline of the three), have inspired both contributions coming from European Studies and Foreign Policy Studies. In International Relations, three main schools of thought, which have different interpretations of the international system, influenced the evolution of European Foreign Policy Studies: realism and its re-elaboration (see Morgenthau 1973; Mearsheimer 1994; Waltz 1979); liberalism and its derivative theories, such as institutionalism (see: Haas 1968,1990; Keohane 1990, 2012), and constructivism (see Wendt 1992,1995; Adler 1997). However, it is predominantly thanks to the liberal-institutionalist and constructivist approaches that both European Studies and then European Foreign Policy Studies thrived (Jørgensen et al. 2015, 4).

The realist school of thought mostly interprets international relations as relations among states, which act in a system of anarchy, where states either

compete for survival (Waltz 1979) or power (Morgenthau 1973). Therefore, in terms of realist contributions to EU foreign policy studies, realist and neo-realist mostly interpret the EU foreign policy as the sum of Member States' national foreign policies (Rieker, Eriksdatter Giske, 2021; Jørgensen et al 2015). The study of the EU and the EU integration is per se very challenging to realist scholars and became even more so after the entry into force of the Maastricht Treaty. This is due both to their interpretation of the international system as predominantly state-centred, and because realist and neo-realist approaches consider institutions as “basically a reflection of the balance of power in the world” (Mearsheimer 1994, 7), not as actors that might affect international stability in any remarkable way. Consequently, in the study of EU foreign policy and EU integration (as these domains are often intertwined), realists focused their analysis on researching the limits and shortcomings of EU integration (Jørgensen et al. 2015, 4; among others: Mearsheimer 1994; Wivel 2004, 2005; Hyde-Price 2006, 2008; Rosato 2011). It could then be assumed that the increasing integration of the EU, and especially important breakthroughs like the Treaty of Maastricht of 1993 and more recently the entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon in 2009, together with the growing complexity of shared institutions, led to several blind spots in neo-realist analyses. As a consequence, some concrete aspects of EU foreign policy have not been fully investigated by the field, though with significant exceptions (Grieco 1990; Posen 2004).

By contrast, the liberal-institutionalist and constructivist approaches helped reflections on the study of EU foreign policy to thrive with each further step of the European Integration. Unlike the perspective expressed by realist and neo-realist scholars, the main interpretations coming from the liberalist and constructivist fields greatly influenced European Studies. Both generally consider EU foreign policy as something more than “the sum of its parts” and believe that institutions are central to international cooperation. They focused their analysis on the functioning of the EU as a multilevel or differentiated

foreign actor or system (Rieker, Eriksdatter Giske 2021, 7; Drieskens 2017; Jørgensen et al 2015; Niemann, Bretherton 2013). Furthermore, both theoretical approaches perceive EU integration as a work in progress, especially as a response to cyclical crises or other external shocks (Riddervold et al 2021). In a way, liberal institutionalists and constructivists share the widely cited belief by Jean Monnet that the European Union would be ‘forged’ by crises and would be the result of the actions undertaken to face its challenges. However, one distinction between the neoliberal institutionalist and constructivist approaches is the pronounced role played in the constructivist approach by notions such as identity, ideas, perception, and how they interact and contribute to the shaping of internal, and foreign policymaking and the relational interaction between States (Wendt 1992). Social constructivism, the field from which originates the main theoretical framework used in this research, Actorhood, considers that ‘social relations make or construct people ourselves into the kinds of being that we are. Conversely, we make the world what it is, by doing what we do with each other and saying what we say to each other’ (Onuf 1998, 59, cited in Beach 2012, 24)

European Studies were instead born from the wide environment of the institutionalist school (originated from the liberalist tradition). Since the 1960s, three main theories have gained relevance, to then originate new and updated perspectives. The most researched field of analysis is, not unexpectedly, European Integration, which later evolved into ‘differentiated’ integration and European ‘disintegration’ studies (see among others: Webber 2019; Schimmelfennig 2018; 2014; Vollaard 2014; Balfour, Stratulat 2012; Noutcheva 2012; 2009; Schimmelfennig, Sedelmeier 2004). European Integration’s literature mostly researched the “drivers” of EU integration (Rieke 2021; Hooghe, Mark 2019). However, while originating from similar assumptions and core beliefs, these scholars approach the theme of EU foreign policy and (largely) of EU integration, with some important differences.

The first theory which took foot in the institutionalist tradition is neo-functionalism, which coined the notion of institutional *spillover* and institutional *path dependence* (Haas 1958; 1968). Secondly, and in some way respondent to neo-functionalism, the liberal and new intergovernmentalism theory, which originated in the 1990s with the work of Moravcsik on principal agents (1995), argues that core steps of European Integration are decided depending on Member States' priorities, preferences and respective bargaining power (see Moravcsik 1995; 2018; Bickerton et al., 2015; Fabbrini, Puetter 2016). Thanks to its two-level analysis of the interplay between the EU institutions and Member States with their relative domestic environment and national stakeholders (national bureaucracies, electorate, political parties, interest groups), this framework has lately been used to explain some trends in differentiated integration. Especially, it has been used to analyze the supposed predominance of Member States in the Council over community Institutions, such as the Commission, in reforms approved in times of crisis. However, lately, precisely because of this often one-direction analysis, commentators from new institutional leadership's theory argue that new intergovernmentalism somehow fails to account for the complex multi-level interinstitutional negotiations that occurred during the major crises experienced by the EU during the last decade (see Rieker, Eriksdatter Giske, 2021; Smeet, Beach 2020; Becker et al. 2016). Another theory that had its golden period between the 1990s and the first 2000s is Europeanisation (Schimmelfennig 2009; Schimmelfennig, Sedelmeier 2011; Juncos 2012; Onar, Nicolaidis 2013; Aspridis, Petrelli 2013; Keukeleire 2015) and Normative Power theory (Manners 2010), to then leave the scene to de-Europeanisation and differentiated integration contributions.

The field of EU's foreign policy study has been greatly influenced by European Studies. Furthermore, because of the complex institutional architecture of EU's foreign policy, there also has been, over the decades, a significant overlapping between theories of European Integration and studies

on EU's foreign policy.⁷

The scope and nature of EU (previously EEC/EC) foreign policy have long been a subject of inquiry through prolonged debates from the 1960s onwards on the EU nature and its international relevance, to which different research traditions provided different interpretations (Dijkstra, Vanhoonacker 2017; Jørgensen et al. 2015; Jørgensen 2015; Bretherton, Vogler 2013, 2006, 1999; Jupille, Caporaso 1998; Grieco 1990). Moreover, scholarly and professional discussions around the topic of EU foreign policy and its exceptional nature (with special reference, after Maastricht, to the Common Foreign and Security Policy-CFSP) are necessarily linked to the wider academic debate on EU's identity and its legitimacy in acting in the international arena. During the so-called period of "consolidation" of EU foreign policy (1970-1989) (Jorgensen 2015, 1102), but mainly from the post-WWII world, scholarly works focused on the nature of the EU itself, and on its capacity to act within the international arena (Sjöstedt 1977; Galtung 1973; Duchêne 1972). Was the EU (then EEC) an international actor? What defines an international actor, besides statehood? And finally, was the EU foreign Policy (then the European Political Coordination-EPC), to be considered as the sum of national foreign policies, or something more? And how do Member States' national foreign policies relate to the EU's (then EEC) foreign policy? This, as said, was due to the undoubted

⁷ This is visible for example in studies on the EU enlargement, that from the mid-2000s expanded the scope of European Integration to include reflections on Europeanisation and EU normative power (or lack of) in new Member States and in perspective candidate countries. While most of these studies focused on the challenges and success of the integration of the region of the so-called CEEC countries (Schimmelfenning, Sedelmeier 2004), some later extended their scope to the region of the Western Balkans and to the EU neighbourhood, thus bridging the field of foreign policy (Noutcheva 2021; 2018; 2012; 2009; Pomorska, Noutcheva 2013; Balfour, Stratulat 2012).

complexity of the EU as an actor, and to the role that the foreign policy preferences of EU Member States play in shaping the outcomes of the common foreign policy.

Along with the aforementioned theories and perspectives, the institutionalist and constructivist research traditions also gave birth to studies on EU “actorness”. The following section will thus review in detail the evolution of the actorness framework, by tracing the history of the concept of EU actorness: its origins in the 1970s, the academic breakthrough of the 1990s, and the newfound academic interest in post-Lisbon EU. By discussing its relevance within European and European Union Foreign Policy studies and its suitability for this research, the following paragraphs highlight the distinctive traits of actorness theory’s development-taking also into account the mentioned juxtaposition with EU integration studies and the significance it still has in the understanding of European foreign policy.

1.3 *Why Actorness? Literature review.*

Although aiming to study, explain and interpret the EU foreign policy, the Actorness theory developed alongside studies on European Integration and was for this reason also criticised for allowing a certain overlapping between the two fields.

The theory focuses on the making of EU foreign policy by asking specific questions related to the capacity of the EU to act legitimately in the international arena, given that:

In conventional International Relations the answer to the question ‘how do we recognize an actor?’ is essentially the same as that given by the lawyers: statehood. (Bretherton, Vogler 2006, 15).

The actorness framework mainly draws its most relevant theoretical contributions from the institutionalist and social constructivist interpretation of international affairs. The original model developed by Sjöstedt (1977), and later by Jupille and Caporaso (1998), predominantly focused on institutions and on how to define the EU’s ‘capacity’. Instead, the model proposed by Bretherton and Vogler (2006)⁸ and from which this work draws inspiration, provided a sound social constructivist interpretation of EU’s foreign policy and “conceptualizes global politics in terms of the processes of social interaction in which actors engage” (Bretherton, Vogler 2006, 12). According to Bretherton and Vogler, these processes, which might be formal or informal, “shape the evolution of actors’ identities and provide contexts within which action is constrained or enabled” (Ibidem). Thus, recalling the previous quote, the actorness theory attempts to answer questions such as: how do we define actorness? According to which criteria can a non-state entity such as the EU be said to *act* internationally? What specific internal and external factors shape

⁸ The models developed respectively by Jupille and Caporaso (1998), and by Bretherton and Vogler (2006) are the two most widely used in Actorness studies..

and/or constrain EU foreign policy in specific cases?

Over the years, the question of EU identity and its legitimacy as an international actor was and continues to be the topic that has engaged the most European Studies and EU foreign policy scholarship since the 1960s, as they researched an entity that was, “not quite a state yet more than an international organization”; and which bore some, but not all the resemblances of the nation-states (Rhinard, Sjöstedt, 2019, 1). Because of this, as mentioned, for a significant period the development of EU actorness theory walked together with developments in European Studies literature. Thanks in part to a new international equilibrium, and the relative decline of the importance of Europe in international affairs, European Studies prospered after WWII. In the words of Wight, ‘university curricula reflect their historical circumstances. The end of European hegemony made the concept of “European Studies” possible’ (Wight 1964, 100 in Jorgensen 2015, 5). For the first decades then, the two fields often crossed paths, as it happened between studies on EU foreign policy and EU integration.

Since the 1970s Actorness has become one of the most used conceptualisations to interpret the EU functioning in International Relations and global affairs (Noutcheva 2020; Baracani 2019; Rhinard, Sjöstedt 2019; Drieskens 2017; Niemann, Bretherton 2013). The very first ‘research question’ addressed by scholars of EU actorness regarded the definition of an actor's *capacity* (later capability) to act internationally. The first time the term ‘actorness’ was used to define the EU’s (then EC) capacity to act was in 1970, in a piece by Cosgrove and Twitchett. The authors focused on the EC (and the UN), analysing its capacity to operate in global affairs as a non-state actor (Cosgrove, Twitchett 1970). The key requirements identified in their study for an international organisation to be “capable” to act in global affairs were: autonomy in decision-making power; impact in international relations; and, most importantly, the significance attached to its actions by its members (Cosgrove, Twitchett 1970, 12–14).

However, despite the merit to have coined the term *actorness*, their study is

not generally considered the start of Actorness theory systematization (Drieskens 2017). It is rather Sjöstedt's *The External Role of the European Community* (1977), that is considered the cornerstone of the Actorness theory. In his work, Sjöstedt digs into the notion of an actor capacity and defines Actorness as the ability to function 'actively and deliberately in relation to other actors in the international system' (Sjöstedt 1977, 16). Furthermore, he identified three sets of conditions for actor 'capability'. While the main focus remained on what today would be considered "the internal dimension" of EU actorness, Sjöstedt's work already designed a model which conjugated not only the need to define EU's 'capability'-a concept that will be profusely expanded in later research; but that also pointed out the importance of the EU's relational dimension with other actors in the international system as a crucial factor enacting or constraining EU actorness, an aspect that would be later further theorized and by Bretherton and Vogler's conceptualisation of EU actorness in the mid-2000s (Bretherton, Vogler 2006). In a more recent re-elaboration of the actorness framework (Rhinard, Sjöstedt 2019), the inclusion of the 'geopolitical context' in the analysis of EU foreign policy has again been highlighted by Sjöstedt as a crucial dimension to understand the working of EU foreign policy. Sjöstedt's study of 1977 thus became the starting point for many analyses of EU external relations onward in different fields, with the consequence that all further work "either explicitly or implicitly relied or expanded upon this central work" (Koops 2011, 107).

In the subsequent decades, Actorness theory was further elaborated by two important contributions, which proposed two quite different models and provided the basis for all subsequent studies on actorness: Jupille's and Caporaso's *States, Agency and Rules: The European Union in Global Environment Politics* of 1998, which focused on a systematic conceptualisation and operationalisation of EU's capability (Jupille, Caporaso 1998); and Bretherton and Vogler's *The EU as a Global Actor* (2006). Published eight years apart, they focus on a different interpretation of EU actorness and propose rather different models.

Jupille and Caporaso focus on the determination of key criteria to identify

actorness, as they perceive a ‘weak spot’ in previous conceptualisation precisely in the lack of clear criteria for determining the status of the EU as an actor (Niemann, Bretherton 2013, 5). The criteria they propose (then further systematize and sub-divided) are *recognition*, *authority*, *cohesion*, and *autonomy* (Jupille, Caporaso 1998). In line with most of the literature-as recounted later in this section-they give great emphasis on addressing the internal structural conditions and characteristics which define EU actorness.

Bretherton and Vogler’s model instead, focused greatly on EU *capability*-the internal structural conditions-but also complemented the EU internal focus with two other dimensions which they found to shape, constrain or enhance the making and the implementation of EU foreign policy. Those are *opportunity*, as in the international context; and *presence*, as “the ability to exert influence externally; to shape the perceptions, expectations and behaviour of others [...]” (Bretherton, Vogler 2006, 25-26). As Jupille and Caporaso, Bretherton and Vogler also discuss the notion of presence, by giving it however more emphasis (Rhinard, Sjöstedt 2019).

Notwithstanding the important contribution from Bretherton and Vogler related to the dimension of Opportunity and Presence -that as this work posits, lately became even more crucial in the understanding of the making of EU foreign policy-during this period academic scholarship predominantly focused on the internal dimension of EU foreign policy. According to the systematisation proposed by Brattberg and Rhinard (2012), during the first decade of the 21st century, theoretical contributions overall interpreted the notion of EU actorness according to four criteria. The criteria of *cohesion* is predominantly explained in terms of internal coherence: be it of values, procedures, or outcomes (Jupille, Caporaso 1998; Bretherton, Vogler 2006; also, Thomas 2010); the characteristic of *consistency*, declined as a characteristic of EU actorness which implies the carrying out of policies in a “consistent fashion”, either in terms of horizontal dimension (actual carrying out of policies amongst EU institutions) and vertical (from Brussels to the field) (Rhinard, Sjöstedt, 2019, 8). *Capabilities*, meaning the instruments

available to the EU, either in the policy formulations, mechanisms, and resources open to deployment (Delreux 2014; Bretherton, Vogler 2006). Finally, the academic scholarship also included the criteria of *autonomy*, either in terms of recognition by other international actors (Allen, Smith 2010); and/or building on Sjöstedt's conceptualisation, as a distinction between the EU and its Member States (1977). It is thus evident that during this time, studies on EU actorness overlapped with studies on EU integration, which prominently re-engaged scholarly attention after the EU Enlargement to Eastern Europe (Webber 2019; Keukeleire, Delreux 2014; Saurugger 2014; Leuffen *et al.*, 2013; Schimmelfennig, Sedelmerier 2011; Schimmelfennig 2009). This explicit "in-ward looking" was widely criticised over time. Consequently, in post-Lisbon re-elaborations, some authors also included the external context in their conceptualisation of EU Actorness, stating that the previous focus on the EU internal dimension had left the study of EU external relations and the role played by the geopolitical context into a general background, for decades (Rhinard, Sjöstedt 2019; Drieskens 2017, 1540). As said, one remarkable exception from before Lisbon was the framework proposed by Bretherton and Vogler (2006, further re-elaborated in 2013): there, the authors clearly defined the international environment as a factor enabling or constraining the EU actorness and therefore included it into their tripartite model comprising of capability, opportunity, and presence (Bretherton, Vogler 2006).

Since the Lisbon Treaty, a new phase has opened in EU actorness studies. Once it became clear that Lisbon's reform had to some extent failed to strengthen the legitimacy and coherence of the EU as an international actor, the Actorness framework returned to academic attention (Bretherton, Vogler 2013; Conceição-Heldt, Meunier 2014; Niemann, Bretherton 2013). This coincided with the EU's attempt to increasingly assert its role in a world continuously shaken by crises, but where, after the end of the Cold War, it could find a renewed sphere of influence for itself (Rieker, Eriksdatter Giske 2021; Webber 2019; Drieskens 2017). Therefore, since the Lisbon Treaty, the actorness

framework was used several times as a theoretical lens to interpret and explain a variety of policy fields, such as foreign and security policy (Brattberg, Rhinard 2012; 2013); the EU's role within the UN (Drieskens 2008); and the EU's environmental policies (Delreux 2014).

However, the significant level of complexity, the wide scope and the generality of the theory, and the theoretical dispersion provided by the numerous empirical studies (Drieskens 2017), triggered an attempt of reconceptualisation of EU actorness. This was recently done, on the one hand, by working on the notion of effectiveness and EU performance; while also considering, as said, the geopolitical context (Rhinard, Sjöstedt 2019). In addition, recent studies highlight three main points which need to be addressed, to restore the efficacy of the framework: first, to further expand the focus beyond the EU by applying actorness theory to other cases (see Rhinard, Sjöstedt 2019; Drieskens 2017); second, to shift the focus from the EU to also include the perspective of the target countries of EU foreign policy, thus breaking the so-called current EU 'navel gazing' (Keukeleire 2015; Onar, Nicolaïdis 2013); and third, to include and expand the role of the external context in the analysis of those elements influencing the making and the implementation of the EU's foreign policy.

Within the above-mentioned framework, this research adds its contribution to the last two point: first, in line with the latest developments in the literature, it dedicates a wide space to the role of non-EU actors' foreign policy actions in the region of the Western Balkans, thus acknowledging the need to address the changing environment in which the EU acts. It does so by using the *opportunity* dimension of Bretherton and Vogler's model, operationalised through the analysis of the foreign policies actions of the considered non-EU actors to give a detailed account of the challenges they pose to the EU through multiple levels and arenas. Second, this research also partly addresses the need to include the perspective of target countries in the analysis of EU foreign policymaking. It does so by working with the dimension of *presence*-through the notion of 'perception', which is used not only to add insights about the changes that occurred in the EU local image during the analysed timeline, but

also insights on non-EU actors' local image, to acknowledge that countries at the end line of EU's and other actors' foreign policy actions -in this case, Bosnia Herzegovina and Serbia- are actors with proper agendas. This aims to be a contribution, though partial, to the “decentring the agenda” literature (see Keukeleire, 2015; Fisher Onar, Nicolaïdis, 2013). Finally, it tries to sharpen the general and overarching complexity of the model, by proposing a systematic and multilevel operationalisation of the different dimensions and categories the model engages with.⁹

This way adapted, the actorness theory results to be a comprehensive framework to interpret the changes in EU foreign policy during the last EU institutional cycle from a variety of interconnected levels: the international one, analysed through the opportunity dimension; the EU internal one, with the analysis of EU internal context; finally, the local one, through the analysis of the changes occurred in EU's and non EU actors' perception in the case study countries.

2. Research design

The general objective of this project is to interpret the shift that occurred in EU foreign policy towards the Western Balkans. The chosen timeframe is the last EU institutional cycle, which broadly coincided with Juncker's Commission: 2014-2019. This evident shift in the EU's foreign policy approach to the region generated the general research question: “Why did the EU foreign policy towards the Western Balkans shift during the Juncker Commission, moving from the originally proclaimed ‘break’ from the Enlargement to the issuing of a new credible strategy towards the Western Balkans?” To answer this question, the research draws inspiration from the

⁹ As it will be described in detail in the section dedicated to operationalisation: the first analysed dimension, opportunity, deals with the foreign policy actions of China, Russia, and Turkey; the second, capabilities, mostly focuses on internal dynamics, politics and policies; the third, presence, engages with the notion of perception.

Actorness theory (Sjodedt 1997; Jupille, Caporaso 1998; Bretherton, Vogler 2006). Specifically, it uses the social constructivist framework of Bretherton and Vogler¹⁰ (2006) to analyse three dimensions, here conceived as explanans, which contributed to shape the foreign policy's outcome of the relaunch of the enlargement strategy to the region from 2018¹¹.

Bretherton and Vogler's three dimensions of Opportunity, Capability, and Presence, are operationalised as followed: *opportunity* refers to the international context the EU acted in during the analysed timeline; specifically, this study considers the foreign policy actions of three non-EU actors: China, Russia, and Turkey; for *capability* is meant the EU's internal context, dwelling into the priorities and preferences of selected EU Member States and EU institutions; and the relevant policy tools; lastly, *presence* refers to the changes occurred at the local level in terms of local perception of the EU's image, and (partly) of the considered non-EU actors'.

The three analysed dimensions also respond to different research sub-questions, directly drawn from the main one. Each of them addresses a different level of analysis. The first asks: "What features of the foreign policy actions of non-EU actors such as Russia, Turkey, and China influenced the EU foreign policy in the Western Balkans?", thus focusing on the international factors shaping EU foreign policy. The dimension of Capabilities specifically addresses the EU internal dimension and answers the sub-question: "How did the EU's internal developments shape this policy outcome?" Finally, the dimension analysing the perception of the EU's presence in the case studies answers the sub-question: "What changes in the local perception of the EU and the analysed non-EU actors influenced this foreign policy outcome?"

In terms of methodology, the research employs a foreign policy analysis (Beach 2012) applied to the case study of Bosnia Herzegovina and Serbia. Data

¹⁰ A detailed operationalisation of the framework is presented later in the chapter.

¹¹ This work carries out a qualitative type of analysis. Therefore, the terms 'explanans' and 'factors', are interchangeably used instead of the more quantitative 'variable'.

are gathered through a plurality of sources, including EU official policy documents and statements; bilateral agreements; experts' interviews; press/media coverage; and secondary literature. The distinct sections of the research design could be summarised as in the following figure:

Figure.1.1. Research design

OBJECTIVE: to interpret the change of direction in EU's foreign policy to the Western Balkans

TIMEFRAME : the last EU institutional cycle/Juncker Commission : 2014-2019

RESEARCH QUESTIONS: Why did the EU foreign policy towards the Western Balkans shift during the Juncker Commission, moving from the originally proclaimed 'break' from the Enlargement to the issue a new credible strategy towards the Western Balkans? **Sub-questions:**

-*The International dimension.* What features of the foreign policy actions of non-EU actors such as China, Russia, and Turkey, did influence the EU foreign policy in the Western Balkans?

-*The regional/EU dimension.* How did the EU's internal developments shape this policy outcome?

-*The local dimension* What changes in the local perception of the EU and the analysed non-EU actors influenced this foreign policy outcome?

THEORY: Actorness (Bretherton and Vogler 2006). Supporting theories: de-centring the agenda (Keukeleire 2015; Fisher Onar & Nicolaïdis, 2013); intergovernmentalism (Moravcsik, 1995; Bickerton 2014); new institutionalism (Keukeleire & Delreux, 2014); new institutional leadership (Smeets & Beach 2020);

METHODOLOGY: Foreign Policy Analysis (Beach 2012); case study;

Explanandum: the shift in EU's foreign policy towards the Western Balkans

Explanans: the international context (China, Russia, and Turkey's FP actions); the regional EU-internal context (tools; member states and institutions' priorities); the local-third country context.

CASE STUDIES: Bosnia Herzegovina; Serbia

SOURCES: EU policy documents/official statements; bilateral agreements; experts' interviews; press/media coverage; secondary literature.

DATA COLLECTION: review of policy documents, official speeches, public statements from EU digital archive; realization of experts' interviews.

DATA ANALYSIS: cross-checking of documents; experts interviews' triangulation.

3. Methodology

3.1 Foreign Policy Analysis-FPA and case study methodology

As anticipated, this research carries out a foreign policy analysis (Beach 2012) combined with a case study methodology, to study the shift in the EU's foreign policy towards the region of the Western Balkans. The scope of foreign policy analysis-FPA is "to understand, describe and explain and predict events in the real world" (Beach 2012, 213). Specifically, following Beach's categorization of case-centered and theory-centred foreign policy analysis, this research follows a case-centric analysis, as its ambition is to achieve a plausible interpretation of why a particular outcome-the shift in EU's foreign policy to the Western Balkans through the relaunch of the EU enlargement strategy- occurred "by using theories as heuristic tools that can act as frameworks for analysis", "to describe, explain and understand an empirical foreign policy event" (Ibidem, 213; 219). Foreign policy analysis is then combined with case study methodology, which has long been used to explain states' reactions to events and paths leading to policy formulations, especially during the so-called 'second-generation' method of Foreign Policy Analysis (Potter 2017). The most famous example of a single case study that is at once descriptive and explanatory is probably still *Essence of Decision* by Allison and Zelikov (1999) on the 1962 Cuban missile crisis.

The case studies of this research are the countries of Bosnia Herzegovina and Serbia (within the regional Western Balkan context). The combination of Bretherton and Vogler's theoretical framework with the case study methodology allows to reach a comprehensive analysis of EU foreign policy: on the one hand, by examining the factors that might constrain, or enhance its elaboration; on the other hand, by complementing the analysis with contextual in-depth informative details. Furthermore, by presenting two cases, it is possible to reinforce the general argument by providing additional insights by leveraging the differences between the cases.

4. The operationalisation of the EU Actorness: Bretherton and Vogler's tripartite model

As previously mentioned, this research follows Bretherton and Vogler's Actorness model as a framework to interpret the EU foreign policy. It posits that this comprehensive model is particularly relevant for the operationalisation of EU actorness in the Western Balkans, as it allows to focus on three, interrelated, dimensions: opportunity-or the international context; capability-the EU internal context; and presence-the local dimension (Bretherton, Vogler 2006, 21). Particularly, in the context of this research, the model's inclusion of the dimension of Opportunity is of key importance, as opposed to other contributions to actorness theory-which predominantly considered the different elements defining capability dimension (e.g. Jupille, Caporaso 1998)-. It involves taking into consideration "the external environment of ideas and events—the context which frames and shapes EU action or inaction" (Bretherton, Vogler 2006, 11).

This work shares the argument that considers the international context (also referred to in the literature as geopolitical context) not as an "inert background", but rather as "a dynamic process where ideas are interpreted and events accorded meaning" (Jacobsen 2003, 56 in Bretherton, Vogler 2006, 11). Thus, this research considers the Opportunity dimension of the framework crucial to the analysis of EU foreign policy toward the target region. This is particularly evident, as this work posits, in scenarios that witnessed substantial changes in international equilibria, such as in the case of the last EU institutional cycle. At the same time, the dimension of Capability is essential to the analysis of EU actorness: it helps to identify not only the structural instruments available to the EU to formulate its foreign policy but also how coherence between Member States' priorities and EU institutions' priorities is built. Lastly, the Presence dimension allows to shift the focus from the EU to its local presence. While recent studies interpreted the notion of presence as "EU effectiveness" in the implementation of its objectives, this research focuses on the other mainstream interpretation of the term: EU local

perception. As anticipated, this last dimension is also integrated with the local perception of the considered non-EU actors.

The first step to operationalise the Actorness model consisted in dividing the research question into three sub-questions addressing specific dimensions of the model. The main, general research question aimed to ask *why* did the EU foreign policy change during the analysed timeline. Why, for example, it shifted from Juncker's proclaimed 'break' from further Enlargement in 2014, to the issuing of a new Enlargement strategy in 2019. Thus, the first move was to 'concretise' the question. By using the three dimensions of Bretherton and Vogler's model, three specific sub-questions were created, each addressing one dimension of the actorness model. Consequently, from the original research question:

“Why did the EU foreign policy towards the Western Balkans shift during the Juncker Commission, moving from the originally proclaimed 'break' from the Enlargement to the issuing of a new credible strategy towards the Western Balkans?”

the following sub-questions were created:

- 1) *Opportunity. The international dimension/external environment: What features of the foreign policy actions of non-EU actors such as China, Russia, and Turkey, influenced the EU foreign policy in the Western Balkans?*
- 2) *Capabilities. The regional/EU dimension. How did the EU's internal developments shape this policy outcome?*
- 3) *Presence. The local dimension. What changes in the local perception of the EU and the analysed non-EU actors influenced this foreign policy outcome?*

The following paragraphs outline the detailed operationalisation of each of these three dimensions, emphasising the relative significance of each of them in the framework of this research.

4.1 Opportunity: the international context.

The dimension of Opportunity refers to the actors, ideas, events, and the external environment, that shape and frame EU action (or lack thereof) (Bretherton, Vogler 2006). It examines the ‘context’, meaning the systemic variables, which might shape EU foreign policy (Drieskens 2017, 1536). While external structural conditions cannot alone be considered responsible for triggering foreign policy-making decisions, the international context should nonetheless be acknowledged as a significant part of foreign policy outputs “is inherently reactive”, and “depends on the positions taken by third parties” (Grevi *et al.* 2020, 2).

In the framework of this research, this dimension is particularly important because of the significant changes that occurred in international relations during the analysed timeline. To name a few, in chronological order: the inauguration of the One Belt One Road (OBOR) project, stretching through the area of the Western Balkans to the EU, and the consequent reconfiguration of EU-China relations to include the notion of “strategic rivalry” (2013); the assertive turn in Russia’s foreign policy, exemplified in the annexation of Crimea, the war in Ukraine and the followed deterioration of EU-Russia relations (2014); finally, the evolution of Turkey’s relationship with the EU, from prospective candidate to partner in the management of the migration crisis of 2015.

Arguably, these developments did not only affect the international equilibriums that had remained stable since the end of the Cold War. They also impacted the relations of these actors with the EU, internationally, and in the region of the Western Balkans. Furthermore, the influence of such actors also provides some leverage for the case study countries’ governments in their negotiations with the EU. Given the relevance of such developments, the international context is crucial to interpret what might have influenced the EU’s foreign policy to the region.

The operationalisation of the Opportunity dimension requires thus a further

elaboration from the original research question, to break down what Bretherton and Vogler (Bretherton, Vogler 2006) and previous literature such as Easton (1964) call 'context'. Hence, the first step was to identify the external factors, ideas, or events, which might have affected EU foreign policy in the region. Three non-EU actors were identified, thanks to their relevance to the foreign policy of the EU and to the target region. In alphabetical order, the selected actors are: China, Russia, and Turkey. Thus, the opportunity section wishes to answer the following sub-question:

What features of the foreign policy of non-EU actors such as Russia, Turkey, and China in the Western Balkans influenced the EU foreign policy?

The selected actors represent key countries for EU international relations, especially in the region of the Western Balkans. Russia and Turkey are undoubtedly the most historically present and long-term actors in the region and the case studies. China's relevance, instead, lies in its increased economic importance in the region, specifically since the inauguration of its OBOR plans.

Directly connected to the salience of these three actors for EU's foreign policy, the third key element behind the choice of these specific actors is related on the one hand to the change in each of these actors' relations with the EU during the last EU institutional cycle; on the other hand, in the alternative discourse that all three actors propose to the liberal democratic model promoted by the EU.

For a more systematic operationalisation of the international context, the foreign policy actions and priorities of each actor are analysed on multiple, interconnected levels. First, the analysis is conducted on different levels: the international level, considering their changing relations with the EU; the regional level, considering their respective relations with the Western Balkans region; finally, the local level, considering the respective foreign policy actions of chosen non-EU actors in the case studies of Bosnia Herzegovina and Serbia. Then, the analysis breaks down each actor's policies along with different

arenas: the political/narrative arena; the economic arena; and the cultural arena. This allows us to identify in which domain each actor is most influential in the region and the case studies. Furthermore, such multi-layered analysis allows a comprehensive mapping of non-EU actors' activism in the region and selected case study countries during the last EU institutional cycle (2014-2019) across different domains of influence. It connects the developments that occurred in the wider arena of international relations and their consequences (or lack thereof) on the case studies' dimension. Arguably, this would not only inform us about the concrete amount of influence of non-EU actors in the region: it would also trace the eventual influence they might have had on the EU's foreign policy and the re-organisation of its priorities.

Finally, the analysis is assisted by a thorough review of the literature, related to the evolution of each actor's relations with the EU (historically and during the analyzed timeline); each actor's foreign policy priorities; and the evolution of the foreign policy actions of these three actors at the local level. (See, among others: on Russia, Casier 2018; 2017; 2016; Bechev 2020; 2019; 2018; 2015; Morozov 2015; on Turkey: Baracani 2021, 2016; Baracani, Calimni 2019; Morozov, Rumelili 2012; on China: Brown 2019; 2016; Giusti, 2019; 2015; 2013). This is then combined with different sources: such as expert interviews, including academics and EU officials; official documentation on EU-third actors' relations; and official speeches.

4.2 Capability: the foreign policy tools; the EU Member States and the EU Institutions' priorities

The second dimension of the Actorness framework analysed in this research is the EU capability. Because of the predominant focus on EU internal aspects in Actorness studies, Capability is possibly the most theorised, operationalised, and researched dimension of the Actorness theory. Its theorising follows the developments in Actorness as a field of study, with questions surrounding the EU's (then EC) capacity being tightly connected to the ever-asked question "what does it make an international actor" and,

consequently, “can the EU be considered as a fully-fledged actor in international affairs?”.

Over the decades, different answers were given to such questions, and the notion of an actor’s (specifically the EU) capacity has been the subject of thriving academic studies (Galtung 1970; Sjöstedt 1977; Jupille, Caporaso 1998; Bretherton, Vogler 2006). As underlined in the literature review, *capability* “deals with the internal determinants of actor capacity” (Niemann, Bretherton 2013, 266) and is “a function of internal resources” (Sjöstedt 1977, 16). Among the two most famous models proposed at the turn of the 21st century, the studies which most theorised and systematised the notion of capability are the ones by Jupille and Caporaso (1998) and Bretherton and Vogler (2006). As mentioned in the literature review, they identify four capability qualities, necessary to discern whether an actor (in this case, the EU) has the capacity to act in international relations. Jupille and Caporaso’s work mostly focuses on the criteria to operationalise EU capability and identifies the requirements of *recognition*, *authority*, *autonomy*, and *cohesion*. In Bretherton and Vogler’s model instead, *capability* refers to the internal dimension of EU external action and accounts for “the availability of policy instruments and understandings about the Union’s ability to utilise these instruments, in response to opportunity and/or to capitalise on presence” (2006, 22). More specifically, capability refers to the internal context of the policy process, to “those aspects [...] which constrain or enable external action and hence govern the Union’s ability to capitalize on presence or respond to opportunity” (ivi, 28). This conceptualisation is thus crucial for the subject of study of the current research, because of its inherent but explicit intertwining with the other two analysed dimensions: presence and opportunity.

In their model, Bretherton and Vogler identify four aspects of capability, which range from a shared commitment to principles and values to the ability to identify priorities and formulate shared policies, to the availability and capacity to utilise policy instruments, to, finally, the domestic legitimation of processes (ivi, 28). As also affirmed by the authors, in the case of EU external

policies the most relevant and to some extent problematic are the “availability of, and capacity to utilize, policy instruments—diplomacy/ negotiation, economic tools, and military means”, and the domestic legitimation of processes (ivi, 28). While all four aspects are undeniably linked to each other, this work specifically builds on these last two aspects, considered particularly explanatory for the interpretation of the changes that occurred in the EU’s foreign policy towards the Western Balkans between 2014 and 2019¹².

The operationalisation of the *capability* dimension of the framework is thus realised as follows: first, from the original research question, a specific sub-question is formulated to help the operationalization. The research sub-question is the following:

How did the EU’s internal developments shape this policy outcome?

Building on the two above mentioned aspects of Bretherton and Vogler’s conceptualization of capability, the analysis is conducted in two ways: on the one hand, the work reviews the EU (Enlargement) and intergovernmental (Berlin Process) policy tools, plus the external dimension (e.g. Visa regulations; extra funding to help the management of migration flows) to highlight the changes that occurred during the Juncker Commission. On the other hand, it considers the positions and priorities of some key Member States and EU institutions towards the enlargement and the role they played during the considered timeframe.

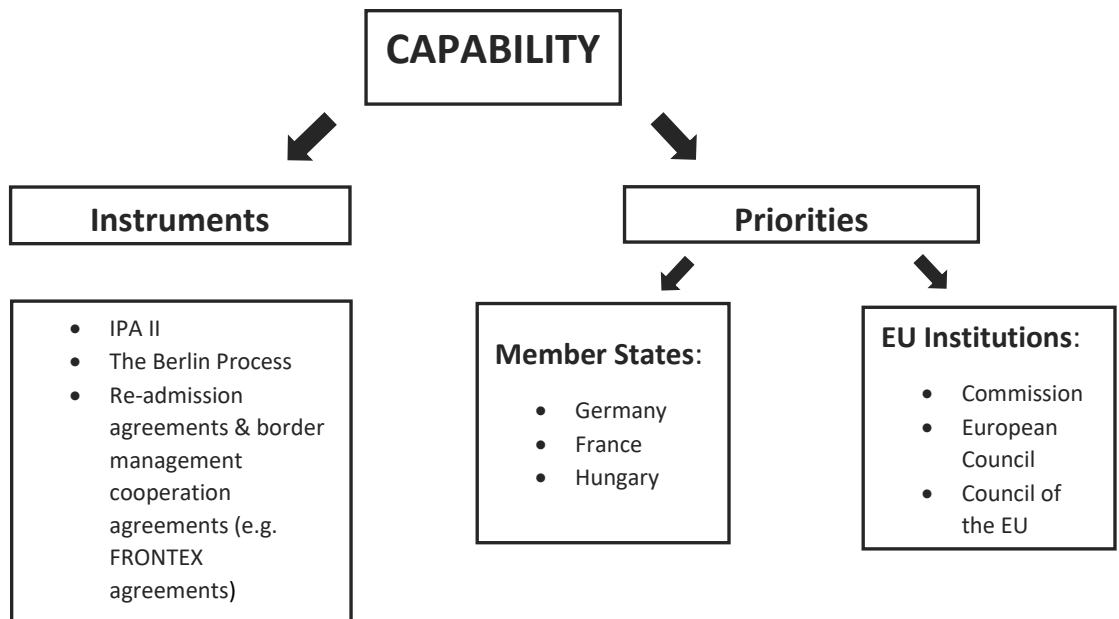
The second part of capability’s operationalisation also partially addresses the “domestic legitimation of EU processes”. The analysis of Member States’ priorities and their bargaining positions within the EU is probably the most

¹² The other two aspects of the model, respectively the shared commitment on an overarching set of shared principles and the ability to formulate shared policies are in this section taken for already acquired, as the biggest change in EU Foreign policy towards the Western Balkans during the analysed timeframe was constituted by the relaunch of the Enlargement Strategy, an already existing and shared policy.

problematic aspect of EU capability (Bretherton, Vogler 2006, 27). This is also true in the framework of the Enlargement policy. Since the Treaty of Lisbon, the topic of enlargement became increasingly politicised, with the Member States gradually re-appropriating ownership over the process: either by advocating for stricter conditionality and/or by applying national-level measures. One famous case is France, that in the mid-2000s approved Constitutional amendments that bound (though limitedly) the French position on further enlargement to popular vote (Wunsch 2017).

The Member States selected for this part of the analysis are Germany, France, and Hungary. These have been chosen due to their combined relevance in European Affairs and their specific convergent or divergent interests towards the region: historically, but specifically during the analysed timeframe. Arguably, they are the players in the position to most likely influence the negotiations on Enlargement policy. The covered EU institutions are instead the European Commission, because of its technical, supervisory role in the Enlargement process; the European Council, and the Council of the EU. As mentioned in the introduction to the chapter, besides the Actorness framework, this part of the analysis also benefits from inputs coming from the literature on new intergovernmentalism (Moravcsik 1995; Bickerton et al 2015); new institutionalism and new institutional leadership (Smeeth, Beach 2020; Keukeleire, Delreux 2014). On the one hand, this helps interpret the role of Germany and France in the negotiations for the relaunch of the Enlargement policy. On the other hand, the literature on new institutionalism allows a more comprehensive and relational framing of the dynamics that occurred between the Member States and Institutions. Here is a summary table for the operationalisation of the capability section:

Fig. 1.2. Operationalisation of EU Capability



4.3 Presence: the local perception of the EU in the region and case studies.

The last empirical chapter of the dissertation engages with the third dimension of Bretherton and Vogler's Actorness model (2006): *Presence*. To define their interpretation, Bretherton and Vogler build upon the precedent work by Allen and Smith, which conceptualised presence¹³ as the combination of "credentials and legitimacy; the capacity to act and mobilize resources; the place it occupies in the perceptions and expectations of policymakers". (Allen, Smith 1990, 21).

In their work *The EU as a Global Actor*, Bretherton and Vogler thus conceptualise presence as "the ability to exert influence externally; to shape the *perceptions*¹⁴, expectations and behaviour of others [...]. In particular, presence reflects two intimately interconnected sets of factors that determine the reputation and status accorded to the EU by external audiences" (Bretherton, Vogler 2006, 25-26). In the later study of 2013, *An Actor past its Peak?*, the authors further expand their conceptualisation defining presence as "an indication of structural power", which "combines understandings about the fundamental nature, or identity, of the EU and the (often unintended) consequences of the Union's internal priorities and policies"; and "the ability to shape the perceptions, expectations and behaviour of others" (Vogler, Bretherton 2013, 366-367).

Consequently, the authors link the notion of presence to the notion of *perception* and the EU foreign policy goals: in their interpretation, the perception of the EU as "a community of security and prosperity", or the perception of the EU's "purpose, unity and effectiveness" make the values and the model the EU proposes attractive, thus enhancing EU presence (ivi, 377). As might already appear, presence is the least operationalised and the widest

¹³ As in most contributions, Allen and Smith's conceptualisation of the notion of presence is specifically addressed to the case of Western Europe.

¹⁴ Italics inserted by the author.

dimension of the framework. It includes aspects such as: the exercise of influence; the ability to shape the perception of local actors; and, contrarily, the perception of the EU by local actors. To use the words of Bretherton and Vogler: "perceptions matter. The relative decline of the EU in the context of this changing structure also diminishes the Union's presence" (ivi, 379). Consequently, this research builds on the importance of *perception* within the conceptualisation of presence and uses it to analyse the local perception of the EU and the considered non-EU actors in the Western Balkans and the case studies. The chapter on EU Presence thus aims to answer the following sub-question:

What changes in the local perception of the EU and the analysed non-EU actors influenced this foreign policy outcome?

The inclusion in the analysis of the changes in the local perception of the EU and the considered non-EU actors adds some relevant insights. The analysis of the dimension of Presence, combined with Opportunity, which looks at the influence of non-EU actors in the international arena on the EU foreign policy, and Capability, which focuses on the EU's internal developments, complements the set of opportunities and constraints the EU faces in designing and implementing its foreign policy in its immediate neighbourhood. Therefore, it enriches the understanding of the context which provided the terrain for the EU's relaunch of the Enlargement strategy in 2019.

Thus, by (albeit limitedly) considering the role of the case study countries in the shaping of the EU's foreign policy, this research also contributes to one of the objectives of Actorness and European Foreign Policy's scholarship: to move beyond the Eurocentrism and EU's "navel-gazing" (Belloni 2019; Keukeleire, Lecocq 2018; Keukeleire 2016; 2015; 2014; Chaban, Holland 2014; Onar, Nicolaïdis 2013). Second, "to engage in a more consistent comparison of the EU with other entities" (Drieskens, 2017, 1543). Moreover, this also allows a conceptualisation of the EU's third countries not just as

recipients of EU's policies, but as proper actors. It is hardly deniable that certain areas of the world are, for geographical, energetic, and economic reasons, very much dependent on others: the consequences of the 2008 eurozone crisis on the Western Balkans' economies confirm this (Tooze 2020; Amadio-Viceré 2019; Pula 2014).

However, to consider those countries only as passive spectators of international developments would not make a satisfying understanding of regional developments. It would mean overlooking the strategic agenda that the governments of such countries pursue to build themselves a place in the regional and international arena: e.g. the difficulties the EU is having in interpreting Serbia's foreign policy complex equilibrium between Russia, China, and the EU are exemplificative of the issue (Bassuener, 2019; Bechev 2020); or the interconnection between Bosnian political parties' agendas and the considered non-EU actors (Vračić 2016; Popolari 2014). Finally, it would not account for the complexity of the world, in which events occur as a result of combinations of several factors: however constrained, the strategic decisions of the governments or élites at the receiving line of foreign policy measures do play a role in shaping other actors' foreign policy.

All this considered, this section is operationalised as follows. It focuses on two main actors: the elites (political and economic); and the public. Academic literature and policy analysts from different perspectives (ranging from rationalists, institutionalists, and constructivists to critical theorists) worked for decades on the significance of ideas, perceptions, self-perceptions, and perceived interests in determining policy outcomes in international relations (Jervis 1996; 2017; Krippendorff 2004; Allison, Zelikov 1999; Wendt 1992). While explanations and the significance given to a psychological approach to policymaking might differ, it is now quite commonly agreed that public opinion, actors' self-perception and élites' perceived interests, play a role in determining foreign policy outcomes. In international relations, *perception* has also become relevant when readdressing recent history, with interesting results, for example, in the field of EU-Russia relations (Casier, DeBardeleben 2018;

Bechev 2015; Morozov, Rumelili 2012; Haukkala 2015; 2008; 2007). In European Integration studies, the literature has focused greatly on how élites reacted either to EU conditionality measures (Delreux 2014; Elbasani 2013; Schimmelfennig 2004; Sedelmeier 2001) or how they complied with a perceived European identity through social learning and a continuous dialogue with the institutional structure (Jupille et al. 2003, 15). Europeanisation studies have also worked on the construction of collective identity among European nation-states, and overall agree that the more European political visions resonate with collective nation-state identities, the more likely that they will be incorporated into recipient societies (Börzel, et al. 2017; Elbasani 2013; Jano 2010; Matonytė, Morkevičius 2009; Schimmelfennig, Sedelmeier, 2005; Risse 2001).

While elites are considered the prominent actors if only because it is they who should guarantee the implementation of the demanded reforms in the framework of the Enlargement process, the chapter considers also public opinion. Several studies addressed, at various levels and contexts, the link between foreign policy decisions and the role of public opinion in influencing elites in the framing of national priorities (Jervis 2017; Kangas et al. 2014; Hucker 2012; Riss-Kappen 1991). Furthermore, the EU often remarks its support to third countries' civil societies, implemented through an extensive net of funded projects which specifically address cultural, social, and economic development. Consequently, to include also civil society in the picture helps to get a more comprehensive picture of the local perception of the EU.

Consequently, by analysing the eventual changes in the perception of the EU and non-EU actors by the public opinion and the economic and political élites in the case studies (2014-2019), the chapter aims to assess whether they contributed to shaping the EU foreign policy to the region, i.e. the relaunch of the Enlargement strategy. It does so by: looking at business data, as interpreted in RCC annual reports Balkan Barometer- *Business Opinion* (2014-2019), (and think tanks' reports addressing EU investments and Businesses' perception in

the case studies; analysing the main political parties' positions; and taking data from available public opinion surveys.

To carry out such an analysis, the notions of political and economic elites and public opinion is defined as follows.

Elites

Elites are identified as those actors that “largely define the field of socially thinkable and politically realisable options. [...]Elites (especially party leaders) are understood as crafty promoters of ideas (including identity constructions), driven by their willingness to gain power (remain in government) and promote values and perceptions that suit their perceived instrumental interests.” (Matonytė, Morkevičius 2009, 968).

Political elites: the leaders of the main political parties/relevant political actors in the case studies. The *perception* of political elites is analysed by: reviewing the position of the main political parties represented in national parliaments (per case study) regarding the topic of EU integration; conducting an analysis of significant speeches by relevant political actors addressing the topic; reviewing reports of think tanks per case study on the topic.

List of political parties/main political actors included in the analysis, per case study:

Table 1.1. *Considered Bosnia Herzegovina's political parties and leaders*

BOSNIA HERZEGOVINA ¹⁵	
SDA-Bosniak Social democrats.	Leader: Bakir Izetbegović
SNSD (Alliance of Independence Social Democrats).	Leader: Milorad Dodik
HDZ (Democratic Front).	Leader: Dragan Čović

Table 1.2 *Considered Serbian political parties and leaders*

SERBIA	
SNS-Serbian Progressive Party	Leader: Alexander Vučić
SPS-Serbian Socialist Party (in coalition with SNS)	Leader: Ivica Dačić
SRS-Serbian Radical Party	Leader: Vojislav Seselj

¹⁵ The selected parties have been chosen as they represented the vast majority of Bosnian voters, across the two main elections held between 2014 and 2019. They also distinguish in relevance in Post Dayton era, presenting evident religious and ethno-nationalist connotations (respectively standing for Muslim Bosnians, Orthodox Serbian, and Catholic Croats).

Economic/business elites: for business/economic elites is used the definition used by regional and European surveys such as EuroBarometers and Balkan Barometers. Converse to the political elites, analysed through specific leaders/political parties, the perception of the EU by the economic/business elites is analysed through data mainly collected from the Balkan Barometers (2014-2019) and Euro-barometers.

Specifically, the analysis addresses some specific questions, looking for stable or changing trends on positions on the EU and EU membership. Across the considered timeline, the selected questions are¹⁶:

¹⁶ Questions numbers might vary from year to year, with the integration of new questions in the surveys.

Table 1.3. Economic Elites. Relevant questions from the surveys by Balkan Barometers' Business Opinions (2015-2019)

10-Do you think that your economy's EU membership would be a good thing, a bad thing, or neither good nor bad for your company?
75- What percentage of your company's sales are made domestically, exported to the SEE region, to the EU or the third countries?
82- If your company exports to the SEE region, what are the main obstacles to your exports?
84- To what extent do you agree that your company is threatened by competition from the SEE region?
86- To what extent do you agree with the following statements - My company's products, goods, and services can compete well with products, goods, and services from EU countries?
87- To what extent do you think that you are informed about the regional free trade agreement (CEFTA 2006)?
88- To what extent do you agree with the statement - My company has benefited from the regional free trade agreement (CEFTA 2006)?
89- If your company is an exporter, can you tell us whether it is easier to export to the CEFTA region, or to the EU?

Public Opinion

As opposed to the Elites, the conceptualisation and operationalisation of Public opinion require more complex evaluations. If public opinion's effectiveness in influencing policy decisions and foreign policy decision-making processes has been assumed several times (Kangas et al., 2014; Hucker 2012; Risse-Kappen 1991), empirically measuring the changes in the public's perception of internal and external actors or events remains tricky. Consequently, for the scope of this study, 'public opinion' is intended as the reported orientation/opinion of the average public in the region of the Western Balkans and the case studies of Bosnia Herzegovina and Serbia as reported yearly in regional and European level surveys. Furthermore, news and press releases are cross-checked and interviews with the EU delegations in the case studies are triangulated.

Specifically, public opinion is operationalised by reviewing the expressed and reported average opinion gathered from the Eurobarometer (when available for both case studies) and the Balkan Barometer-Public Opinion, 2014-2019. It is then interpreted qualitatively. The analysed questions, whose number and order might vary year to year, but remain the same in content, pertain to the macro area of attitudes towards the EU integration and regional cooperation. The selected questions are (taken from the Balkan Barometer of 2015):

Table 1.4. Public Opinion. Relevant questions from the surveys by Balkan Barometers' Public Opinion (2015-2019)

20. Do you agree that regional cooperation can contribute to the political, economic or security situation of your place of living?
21. Do you think that EU membership would be (is – for Croatia) a good thing, a bad thing, or neither good nor bad?
22. What would EU membership mean to you personally?
23. In general, when do you expect the accession to EU to happen?

5 The time frame: 2014-2019

The chosen timeline covers the last EU institutional cycle (2014-2019), which broadly coincides with the Juncker Commission. This institutional cycle is peculiar for many reasons, both internal and external to the EU. On the EU's side, the last institutional cycle was exceptional, as it witnessed the first election of a President of the Commission through the praxis of the *Spitzenkandidaten*, - a "pan-European candidate nominated by the European political parties" (Müller Gómez, Wessels 2016, 2). For the first time, as stated by President Juncker himself, a president of the Commission was elected as a direct result of the Parliamentary elections of 2014.

Possibly due to both the turbulent years which preceded it, and in acknowledgement of the decreasing power of the European Commission in the post-Lisbon EU, the Juncker Commission strived from the beginning to be "very political" (Juncker 2015). However, despite this volitive beginning, this institutional cycle experienced succeeding crises of major impact. According to some commentators, this further increased the already-present leadership by EU Heads of States in steering politically sensitive reforms, sometimes at the expense of the role of supranational institutions (Webber 2019). Furthermore, besides the consequences of Russia's annexation of Crimea on international and EU-Russia relations, two major crises occurred during the analysed timeframe: the so-called migration crisis; and the British membership crisis. Finally, this timeline also witnessed the progressive deterioration of some Member States' standards in rule of law; and the relative straining of US-EU relations under the Trump presidency.

Some of these events and crises closely affected the region of the Western Balkans, and consequently the EU foreign policy's objectives in the region. First, the returned assertion of Russia in the Crimea crisis projected long shadows on EU-Russia relations in the EU's closest neighbourhood. Secondly, the migration crisis of 2015 soon involved Bosnia Herzegovina and Serbia via the so-called 'Balkan Route'. During this period, the EU strengthened its

border management cooperation with the countries of the Western Balkans, either through the approval of extra IPA II funds within the framework of the Enlargement Policy (European Commission 2019a; European Commission 2019b); or, towards the final years of the institutional cycle, through the signing of status agreements authorising actions carried out by the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (FRONTEX) on third countries' territory (Council of the European Union, 2019c). Lastly, the backlash on the rule of law and fundamental rights indirectly affected Enlargement negotiations as some Member States demanded stricter conditionality to access the EU Membership. This timeframe is consequently an interesting focus for the analysis of the changes taking place in EU foreign policy towards the region, which moved from being just one item on the Commission agenda to regain in a few years top priority through the relaunch of the Enlargement strategy to the region (European Commission 2018; Juncker 2018).

6. The case studies

Looking at the map of Europe, the six countries of the region, respectively Albania, Bosnia Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia, are now surrounded by the EU Member States. The Western Balkans region constitutes a geographic priority for the EU's foreign policy for several reasons. First of all, geography: it positions at the crossroads between Europe, the Mediterranean, and Asia. The second reason is related to history: in the late 1960s, the Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia-FSRY became the first communist country to develop institutional ties with the European Economic Community (Obadić 2014; Zaccaria 2014). More importantly, former Yugoslavia was the area where, during the wars in Bosnia Herzegovina and Kosovo, the EU engaged in its first substantial operation of conflict resolution.

Finally, politics and economy. The unsuccessful European response to stop the wars in former Yugoslavia prompted the EU Member States to reform and institutionalise the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy (Baracani 2019, 4) and take responsibility for the future of this area in the EU. For all these reasons, from the early 2000s, the EU devolved an incredible amount of its economic and political resources towards the region, by deploying an all-comprehensive set of foreign policy tools that no other non-EU country or region in the world has so far witnessed (Baracani 2019; Sekulić 2020; Belloni 2019). Finally, the regional economies are now greatly intertwined with the EU internal market, with the vast majority of regional exports travelling to the EU (Eurostat 2019). It is thus a region comprehensively tied to the EU by a shared history, culture, and economic and political ties.

6.1 A region important to many

However, because of its strategic location and history of the region, the EU is not the only international actor that claims a role in the area. Countries such

as China, Russia, and Turkey also account for important historical, cultural, political, and/or economic ties (Le Corre, Vuksanovic 2019; Stronski, Himes 2019; Vračić 2016). While differing in terms of the duration of their presence and the prevalent domains of influence, the weight of such actors in the region matters for the pursuit of the EU's objectives. It mattered during the dissolution of former Yugoslavia when Russia cooperated with NATO in the first years of the post-Cold War partnership (Casier 2017; Thorun 2009). It mattered also when the European Union first proposed at the Thessaloniki Summit of 2003 (European Council 2003), a "return to Europe" for the countries of the Western Balkans. Neither Russia nor Turkey had the means and/or the interests to oppose the EU perspective for the countries of the region¹⁷ (Amadio Viceré, 2019).

Thus, in the early 2000s, the broader picture of the international balance of power looked extremely favourable to EU foreign policy objectives: within the overarching framework of the US-led international liberal order, Russia and the EU had signed the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) in 1994; Turkey had filed its application for EU membership in 1987 and obtained the candidate status in 1999 (Casier 2016; Keukeleire et al. 2016). This context greatly favoured the EU in the display of its state-building and member-state building tools and did not pose conspicuous challenges to its aim to become the most relevant international actor in the region. For about two decades, the EU stood as an unchallenged democratisation promoter for the region¹⁸.

However, about twenty years later, the international environment shows different features. The considered non-EU external actors gained more influence on the scene (Bechev 2020; Bassuener 2019; Sidurdic et al 2016).

¹⁷ Russia signed a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) with the EU in 1994, while Turkey became EU candidate country in 1999.

¹⁸ 'Democracy' appears among the guiding principles of the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy-CFSP. (Art 21, Title V, TUE). Democracy is also listed among "vital interests underpinning [EU's] external action" (EEAS 2016, 14).

Events such as the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, the Ukraine crisis, and the followed Russian operations in the Middle East from 2015 (e.g. the Syrian crisis); the redefinition of EU-Turkey relations due to the migration crisis and the EU-Turkey statements of 2015-16 (European Council 2016); the ambitious Chinese investments' plan "One Belt One Road" (2013), and the evolution of EU-China relations from partnership to 'strategic competition'(European Commission 2019c), all signal an on-going effort to redefine the international balance of power, to the potential detriment of EU influence in the region. All this considered, while some countries of the region also show worrying trends in matters of rule of law, the foreign policy objectives of the EU in the region are less granted.

6.2 Why Bosnia Herzegovina and Serbia?

The reasons behind the selection of the area of the Western Balkans (specifically, former Yugoslavia) have been cleared. But why focus on Bosnia Herzegovina and Serbia? Their respective institutional architecture indeed differs. Serbia is a presidential Republic with a centralised state; Bosnia Herzegovina instead presents a far more complex power-sharing system. It composes of two federal entities, the Republika Srpska (RS) and the Federation of Bosnia Herzegovina (FbiH)¹⁹. It has a tripartite Presidency, which each Constituent People (Bosniaks, Croat, and Serbs), directly elects. Moreover, each entity elects its representatives to its national assembly, and the Federation of Bosnia Herzegovina is further divided into administrative cantons. On top of that, the two countries are currently at different stages on their path to EU integration: Serbia has been a candidate country since 2012; Bosnia, instead, officially applied for the EU membership only in 2016 (European Commission 2019d).

However, despite these crucial differences, both countries present some

¹⁹ The Brčko district, located in the North-East of the country, is an autonomous province under the jurisdiction of both entities.

relevant similarities to the scope of this research. First, they both present historically consolidated ties with all the considered non-EU international actors. Secondly, they both show a higher level of rising nationalist rhetoric and Euroscepticism, compared to the rest of the region (Balkan Barometers-RCC, 2015-2019). Third, they have both become a focal point of passage for migration flows since 2015. This led to increased cooperation with the EU and with the EU agency FRONTEX during the considered timeframe. Thus, despite their evident differences, Bosnia Herzegovina and Serbia provide two interesting cases of countries with a shared history, yet far distant in terms of accession negotiations, that nonetheless present similar challenges for the EU's foreign policy objectives in the region.

7. Sources and data collection

This research relies on a variety of sources: EU policy documents and leaders' official statements; surveys; and experts' interviews. Press and media coverage, and secondary literature were also used. Sources were cross-checked against each other, and interviews were triangulated. As mentioned, primary sources include (non-exhaustive list): EU official policy documents; transcripts of official speeches; public working documents, official texts of bilateral treaties with the considered non-EU actors; survey results. Secondary sources include press and media coverage; scholarly literature.

EU Policy documents.

The EU policy documents constitute a primary source for the identification and understanding of the trends that occurred within the EU institutions, and the EU member states' positions within the Council towards Bosnia Herzegovina and Serbia (and the region of the Western Balkans). To this scope were selected and analysed: the Enlargement Strategies released during the considered period (2015; 2018); the official documents, statements, and speeches from the EU-Western Balkans annual Summits; and the annual country reports on Bosnia Herzegovina and Serbia, up to 2019. On the other hand, the thorough and systematic qualitative content analysis of policy documents from the European Commission, the Council, and the European External Action Service (from 2012) serves two main objectives: to highlight, on the one hand, the trends that occurred in the evolutions of EU relations with the considered actors-China, Russia, and Turkey; and to highlight the eventual changes in the framing of such relations in the analysed period. For this purpose were systematically selected EU Commission's and EEAS' policy documents, bilateral agreements, and official statements, related to EU-China relations, EU-Russia relations, and EU-Turkey relations, as well as the EU strategic documents such as the EU Global Strategy (2016).

Surveys: Survey results constitute a significant source of data for the analysis of the local perception of the EU and the considered international actors, either conducted at the European (Eurobarometers) or at the regional (Western Balkans) level. Specifically, this study selected the RCC-Balkan Barometers' annual surveys, 2015-2019 related to Public and Business opinion; the Eurobarometers 2014-2019; and opinion polls conducted by international think tanks.

Experts' interviews. Informative in-depth experts' interviews allow to gather a more comprehensive portrayal of the trends and most impellent challenges of EU foreign policy objectives in the region. Interviews have been carried out with EU officials from the European Commission (EC); the European External Action Service-EEAS; the Delegation of the European Union to Bosnia Herzegovina; the Delegation of the European Union to Serbia. All selected interviewees had first-hand knowledge of the area of the Western Balkans. They were selected across different levels of the EU hierarchy, departments, and functions. As agreed with each of them, interviews are anonymised, non-registered, and mainly served the purpose to orienteer the research.

7.1 Data collection and data analysis.

The thesis performs a systematic qualitative content analysis of the above-presented sources. Data were collected using EU official tools such as the website, the repository, and the digital archives. The analysis of the policy documents, official speeches and public statements was conducted via a thorough content review of available policy documents; the interviews were conducted in person (before the lockdowns) and then remotely, through the use of applications such as Skype and Webex. They were not registered and the name and position details of the interviewees were anonymised.

The various sources were cross-checked against each other and interviews were

triangulated.

8. *Limits and caveats*

Complexity.

The theoretical framework selected to carry out this research, the Actorness' tripartite model proposed by Bretherton and Vogler (2006), does involve a high level of complexity. It divides the analysis of the EU's foreign policy along three interconnected dimensions: opportunity, meaning the international level; capability, the EU level; and presence, here interpreted as the local, case study countries' level. Therefore, its wide scope might give the impression that, if everything counts, then nothing does. This work seeks to avoid these potential pitfalls by claiming that, while the international and local contexts do provide crucial insights to understand the shaping of EU foreign policymaking, they remain, as argued in the last work of Rhinard and Sjöstedt (2019), part of the 'context'. However, because the EU is not an isolated system, international and local developments forcibly influence and shape the environment in which the EU is called to act. Therefore, they contribute to shaping the EU's foreign policy priorities. Not considering them when analysing policy shifts would lead to a less comprehensive understanding of the factors that led to the policy outcome and of the policy itself. A second limit (but arguably, also an opportunity) of the model is the significant malleability of the dimension of *presence*. This work conceptualises *presence* through the notion of 'local perception'.²⁰ This allows to partially take into consideration the perspective of the case study countries: however, as also suggested in the conclusions of this study, the role of the local perception, and especially about the considered non-EU actors, needs to be further strengthened and integrated, to successfully engage with the objective of de-centralising EU foreign policy

²⁰ The third point of this section further deals with the limitations encountered in the analysis of this specific dimension due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

studies.

Sources and languages.

The author's bachelor's degree is in foreign languages and cultures. Thus, it is impossible to avoid acknowledging the importance, whenever possible, of consulting relevant sources in their original language. However, this was not always possible throughout this research project, due to the plurality of actors it involves. While the major focus of the work rests on the foreign policy of the European Union, and thus relies mostly on original and secondary sources in English and/or French, translation was needed for some other sources, especially for political party manifestos and local news. The lack of first-hand linguistic knowledge naturally impacted data collection to some extent. This limit was partially addressed by the use of translation softwares.

The Covid-19 pandemic.

As for many colleagues, the Covid-19 pandemic impacted this research by significantly limiting the phase of data collection. Over three years of PhD programme, roughly half was conducted under pandemic restrictions. This had specific consequences on the design of the research and data collection: the initial draft dedicated more space to the analysis of EU presence in the case studies, following the recent trends in the literature which advocate for the need to include the perspective of the target countries of EU foreign policy (Onar, Nicolaïdis 2013; Keukeleire 2015). When the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic hit in 2020, de facto blocking the possibility to conduct fieldwork for months, the design had to be adjusted to fit new conditions. Even in 2021, the health situation prevented relevant fieldwork from taking place, due to the difficulty in travelling outside the EU. This also impacted the research methodology, which had counted on the possibility of the fieldwork to collect several interviews with journalists, academics, civil society associations and officials in the case studies. This would have surely enriched the work with details, data, and interesting perspectives. Therefore, the section of the thesis

which addresses the EU's *presence* was suitably modified, and the interviews remotely re-orientated towards EU officials at the EU delegations. While this still granted the opportunity to investigate the “institutional” side of the story, hopefully, future research will provide the opportunity to combine and enrich present results with in-person interviews and broader coverage of local developments during the analysed timeline.

CHAPTER 2. The EU foreign policy towards the Western Balkans

Introduction

In February 2018, the European Commission published a Communication on a Credible Enlargement Perspective for and Enhanced EU Engagement with the Western Balkans (European Commission, 2018). Already on its first page, the document clearly stated the European perspective of the region: “the Western Balkans are **part of Europe**, geographically surrounded by EU Member States. The peoples of the EU and the region have a common heritage and history and a future defined by shared opportunities and challenges”²¹ (ivi, 1).

This Communication re-opened the question of the EU accession for the countries of the Western Balkans, which had suffered, especially after the eurozone crisis, from heavy social and economic consequences and the long stall in the EU integration process (Belloni 2019; Pula 2014). Currently, “Western Balkans” is the term used by the EU institutions to identify the countries of Bosnia Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia, situated in the territory of the Former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, with the addition of Albania. The choice of this name was set up by the EU institutions in the late 1990s within the framework of their future European perspective: it was meant to absolve more a bureaucratic need than an identarian one²². While, according to some scholars, this decision reflects

²¹ The bold is from the original document.

²² Before gaining their respective EU Membership in 2007 and 2013, Slovenia and Croatia were also conceived as Western Balkans countries. In this regard, Maria Todorova, in *Imagining the Balkans*, remarked how the term “Balkan” itself brings along a negative connotation. Moreover, some scholars also highlighted how the term “Western Balkans” does not do justice to the geography of the region, which would be more suitably covered by the notion of “South-East Europe”. See Robert C. Hudson et al., *Europe and the Balkans*, Skopje, University American College Skopje, 2018.

the power structures underlining EU-Western Balkans countries' relations (Sekulić, 2020), this definition is also not generally liked by the countries it targets: some studies report how the association with the term 'Balkans' is often considered to bring the negative connotations of conflict and chaos. Others have also argued how, within the EU integration process, the term acquired an intrinsic exclusionary connotation, rather than inclusionary (Todorova, 2009; Kolstø, 2016).

The purpose of the chapter is to highlight the shift that occurred in EU foreign policy towards the region and the case study countries during the Juncker Commission. It divides into two main sections: the first recollects the most significant historical developments of EU foreign policy in the region from the last moments of the Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia to the start of the Juncker Commission. Specifically, it presents the evolution of EU actorness in the region from its initial position of (mainly) economic partner to that of (tentative) conflict resolution actor, to the final one of state (and Member State)-building actor.

The second part of the chapter instead underlines the shift that occurred in the EU foreign policy towards the case studies during the considered timeframe. It does so by presenting three key policies that the EU deploys in the region and the case studies: the Enlargement policy; the Common Foreign and Security Policy-CFSP; and the external dimension of the EU migration policy. All three policies were updated, renewed, or expanded during the considered timeline. This thus underlines two elements: first, that a shift indeed occurred; second, that it happened in light of the renewed strategic role of the region for the EU's foreign policy objectives.

2.1. *The EU foreign policy towards the Western Balkans and the case studies. From the 1990s to 2014.*

The EU's activism in the region of the Western Balkans dates to the break-up of Yugoslavia in the 1990s. However, the EU (then EC) and the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia developed, especially from the 1960s increasingly close relations and multiple trade agreements, respectively in 1967, 1970 and 1973, and lastly the Cooperation Agreement of 1980 (Zaccaria, Obadić 2019, 608). The literature stresses how FSRY became the first communist country to have institutional ties with the European Economic Community, notwithstanding the undoubted influence of the overarching framework of the Cold War and Yugoslavia being part of the Non-Aligned Movement on Yugoslavia-EC relations (Obadić 2014; Zaccaria 2014).

Furthermore, following the adoption by the SFRY Assembly of the *Declaration on European Integration*²³- the two actors had started considering a potential future EU membership for Yugoslavia (Obadić 2014, 329). In 1990, the outbreak of the conflict in the former SFRY posed the EU in the unforeseen and unprecedented position of testing its capabilities and acknowledging the limits of its existent foreign policy instruments (Baracani 2019; Belloni 2019; Kolstø 2016; Lucarelli 1999). Within the historical recollection of the different roles played by the EU from the 1990s to the start of the Juncker's Commission, two periods can be identified: the first one, characterised by the attempt, during the wars in Bosnia and Kosovo, to act as conflict resolution actor; and a second period from the 2000s onwards, characterised by a state-building (and later Member State-building) through conditionality approach. It is this second one that consecrated the EU as the most significant foreign actor in the region (Baracani 2019; Belloni 2019; Schneider 2009).

²³ "The Official Gazette of SFRY", no. 50, Belgrade, 26 January 1990, as cited in Jovan Bazić 2019, *Relations of Serbia and the European Union*, 290.

2.1.1 The 1990s: the EU as a tentative conflict resolution actor²⁴

The dissolution of Yugoslavia forced the EU to confront the most significant international conflict on the continent since WWII and the first major crisis after the Cold War (Messas 2019). After the rapid deterioration of relations among the republics, and the outbreak of the conflict following Slovenia's, Croatia's and Bosnia's declarations of independence respectively in 1991 and 1992, it quickly became clear that Yugoslavia would not have followed the same relatively peaceful transition as the former Soviet Republics after 1989 (Elbasani 2013, 3). During the very first years of conflict, the EU shifted from its initial support for the territorial integrity of Yugoslavia as stated in the EC *Declaration on Yugoslavia*: “in the view of the Twelve, a united and democratic Yugoslavia stands the best chance to integrate itself in the new Europe”²⁵, to formally recognise Slovenia and Croatia, following the decision of some key Member States like Germany and Italy (Ibidem). The first years of conflict also witnessed the EU efforts to mediate between conflicting parties, and the realization of the already described lack of coordination in EU foreign policy, which finally triggered the UN-led international intervention in the region.

In this context in 1991, the International Conference on Peace of Yugoslavia in the Hague was inaugurated, in the presence of the Presidents of the Six Republics of the Socialist Federation of Yugoslavia, the President of the

²⁴ An adapted and expanded version of this first part of the historical recollection appeared in the article: Mingardi, C. “From Yugoslavia to the Western Balkans: tracing the evolutions of relations between the EU Institutions and the region in the 1990s”, *Instituta*, Issue 1/2022

²⁵ ‘European Political Cooperation’s Press Release 1991: *Declaration on Yugoslavia* (informal ministerial meeting, Château de Senningen) 26 March, cited in Benedetto Zaccaria, Ivan Obadić, *The European Commission and the Yugoslav crises*, Vincent Dujardin et al. 2019, (a cura di) in *The European Commission 1986-2000. History and Memories of an Institution*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 607.

European Council Jacques Santer, and two representatives of the European Commission and the Member States²⁶. The outcome of that initiative-among others- was the creation of an Arbitration Commission, to which parties should submit respective differences (Craven 1995).

On the 16th of December of the same year, the European Community published its guidelines on the recognition of new states in Central Europe and the Soviet Union²⁷. A special paragraph was dedicated to Yugoslavia, where the EC indicated that it would recognise all Republics fulfilling certain conditions, among others: the acceptance of provisions included in Chapter II of the draft Convention on Human Rights and rights of national or ethnic groups under consideration by the Conference on Yugoslavia; the support of the Conference on Peace; the adoption, prior to recognition, of “constitutional and political guarantees it on having no territorial claims towards neighbouring state”²⁸. The European Parliament was also informed by the President of the Commission about the possibilities of responding to the crisis. These were, among others: to mobilise public opinion; to threaten to officially recognize Slovenia and Croatia; and the possibility to impose economic sanctions, based on the dependence of Yugoslavia from the EC. At the time, the EC accounted for almost fifty per cent of Yugoslavia’s trade (Salmon 1992, 248). The sanctions were later imposed, with the EU joining the decision of the UN (Lamotte 2012).

In June 1992, the European Council’s *Declaration on the Former Yugoslavia* expressed its full support for the Mission headed by the United Nations (European Council 1992, 22). In December 1993, the European Council discussed, under the objectives of Foreign and Security Policy, the

²⁶ Bulletin of the European Communities, 1991. “Commission-Intergovernmental cooperation Yugoslavia" s.1.4.25, n.7-8, p.115.

²⁷ European Community 1992, “Declaration on Yugoslavia and on the Guidelines on the recognition of New States”, *International Legal Materials*, (31) 6, 1485-1487.

²⁸ Ivi, 1486.

adoption of a declaration on Former Yugoslavia, acknowledging the “humanitarian disaster threatening Bosnia-Herzegovina” and reaffirming the EU commitment to see the war ending²⁹. The declaration continued with the assertion that “Serbs must realize that only real territorial concessions by them in Bosnia-Herzegovina and acceptance of the modus vivendi in Croatia will induce the European Union to work, as it promised to do in Geneva, for the progressive and conditional suspension of sanctions in line with implementation”³⁰.

With the end of the Bosnian conflict and the signature of the Dayton Agreements in 1996, the European Union inaugurated its perspective for the new republics of the region (at the time Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia Herzegovina), opening the floor to a possibility of future EU membership.

Slovenia was the first country to apply for EU membership. The *Opinion on Slovenia* by the European Commission of July 1997 made evident its European perspective for the region: “Slovenia’s accession is to be seen as part of a historic process, in which the countries of Central and Eastern Europe overcome the division of the continent which has lasted for 40 years, and join the area of peace, stability and prosperity created by the Union”³¹.

In 1998 the region was once again shaken by the outbreak of the Kosovo crisis. Kosovo was, at the time, an autonomous region of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.³² Like the conflicts in Croatia and Bosnia conflict, the war in

²⁹ Ibidem

³⁰ European Council 1993, “Presidency Conclusions- SN 373/93”, Brussels: European Council

³¹ Commission of the European Communities, *Opinion on Slovenia*, Brussels, 1997: 5, reported in: Tatjana Sekulić, *The European Union and the Paradox of EU Enlargement. The Complex Accession of the Western Balkans*. Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.

³² The Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was a federal state succeeding the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, established in 1992 and formed by Serbia and Montenegro, after the achieved independence of other former Yugoslav republics.

Kosovo was ended again by an international intervention: this time a US-led NATO campaign Operation Allied Force-OAF. While this confirmed, on the one hand, that: “the EU was still unable to prevent, contain or end violent conflict within in its own vicinity” (Shepherd 2009, 513); on the other hand, it also confirmed the need for the EU to enhance both its hard and soft power and opened again the crucial question of EU military power (514).

2.1.2 The European Union Foreign Policy towards the Western Balkans and the case studies. From 2000 to 2014.

The failure of the EU institutions and EU Member States to contain the escalation of the conflict in the territory of former Yugoslavia during the 1990s triggered a further evolution in EU foreign policy. This especially involved the design of the EU’s instruments for conflict management and peacekeeping, under the framework of the objectives of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (Baracani 2019, 4). At the same time, on 31 May 1999, the Council of the European Union defined the specific conditions for the Western Balkans’ “path to Europe” in the comprehensive framework of the Stabilisation and Association Process-SAP. The SAP constituted the new basis for relations with the Western Balkans. It included apart from the expected regional cooperation and cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), a new contractual basis for relations, channelled through different instruments and fields: the Stabilisation and Association Agreements-SAA (European Commission 2019d, 4); assistance for democratization and civil society; humanitarian aid for refugees, returnees and other persons of concerns; cooperation in justice and home affairs; autonomous trade measures and other economic and trade relations; economic and financial assistance; and the development of political dialogue (Council of the European Union, 1999).

The beginning of the 2000s marked the start of a decade that could be defined as the decade of the Enlargement. It witnessed the negotiations that led

After Montenegro voted for independence through the referendum of 2006, the federation was dissolved.

to the historic East Enlargement during the mid-2000s; and the launch of the European perspective for the Western Balkans (Elbasani 2013), in which through the Zagreb (2000) and then the Thessaloniki Summit (2003) the EU reiterated “its unequivocal support to the European perspective of the Western Balkan countries” and stated that “the future of the Balkans is within the European Union” (European Commission 2003, 1).

During the years that went from the launch of the European perspective of the Western Balkans to the Juncker Commission, the EU developed in the region some comprehensive programmes aimed at inducing the institution and capacity building of countries of the region. Besides the already mentioned SAP, the EU also introduced other specific programmes, such as CARDS-Community Assistance for Reconstruction, Development and Stabilisation. This was a programme of financial assistance targeting the region of the Western Balkans. Later, the TAIEX programme for technical assistance was extended to CARDS recipient countries. All these instruments were then replaced after 2006, by the Instrument for Pre-Accession-IPA I³³.

In the framework of the Enlargement process, between 2003 and 2013 five Western Balkans countries applied for EU Membership: Croatia, which acquired full membership in 2013; North Macedonia (ex FYROM) applied in 2004, was granted candidate status in 2005 and obtained the VISA-free travel to the Schengen area in 2009 (Delegation of the European Union to the Republic of Macedonia 2016); Montenegro, who became independent in 2006, was granted candidate status and signed the SAA in 2007 (Delegation of the European Union to Montenegro 2017); Serbia applied for EU membership in 2011, was granted candidate status in 2012, and opened accession negotiations in 2013 (Delegation of the European Union to Serbia, 2020).

During this period, the EU also carried out several civil and military operations within the framework of the Common Foreign and Security Policy-CFSP and Common Security and Defence Policy-CSDP: Bosnia Herzegovina, Operation EUFOR Althea, from 2003; North Macedonia (ex FYROM), 2003;

³³ For more information on the different financial assistance programmes.

and Kosovo, Operation EULEX³⁴, from 2008.

³⁴ EULEX is the largest civilian mission ever launched under the European Security and Defence Policy. Its mission is to assist the Kosovo authorities in establishing sustainable and independent rule of law institutions.

2.2 The EU Foreign Policy during the Juncker Commission: 2014-2019

The years of the Juncker Commission witnessed a relevant change in the EU's foreign policy towards the region of the Western Balkans and the case studies. Such a timeline also proved extremely challenging years for the Union: not only does the EU need to process crucial international developments, such as the war in Ukraine, the worsening of the Syrian and Libyan conflicts, the start of the Trump presidency and its consequences for transatlantic relations; and the migration crisis of 2015 (Baracani 2021; Webber 2019). It also had to confront internal challenges such as the rise of populist parties in the Member States; a set of terrorist attacks carried out in the territory of some Member States; the “democratic backsliding” in Hungary and Poland (Bakke, Sitter 2020); and Brexit. Finally, as it will be addressed in Chapter Five, during this timeline, some countries, especially the case studies, also experienced a wide range of domestic challenges: these were mostly at the level of political pluralism, democratic participation, and rising Euro-scepticism, and slow progress in socio-economic standards. Thus, during the Juncker Commission, on the one hand, the EU successfully increased its cooperation with the case studies, within the context of the migration crisis. At the same time, however, it was also reminded of the urgent need to offer concrete signs on the countries' EU membership to contain the rising Euro-scepticism.

Within this framework, the role of the Western Balkans region and both case studies for EU foreign policy objectives evolved: this is clearly visible in the EU documents covering the years from the “moratory” (Sekulić 2020) or “break” (Baracani 2021) from Enlargement in 2014 to the publication of the new Commission Communication in 2018 (European Commission 2018). Over those five years, enlargement to the Western Balkans moved from not being a top priority for the Juncker Commission to regain a central role in EU foreign policy. In 2015, the Enlargement strategy described the European perspective

of the Western Balkan countries as a “key asset” and an “investment in peace, security and stability in Europe” (European Commission 2015, 2). In 2016, the EU global strategy of 2016 for the EU and European stability and security also acknowledged the importance of the region, by stating: “A credible enlargement policy represents a strategic investment in Europe’s security and prosperity and has already contributed greatly to peace in formerly war-torn areas” (European Union Global Strategy 2016, 12).

In addition, other key EU documents underlining this shift were the signature of the Status Agreement on the carrying out of FRONTEX operation on the territory of Bosnia Herzegovina and Serbia (Council of the European Union 2019b, 2019d, 2019e). They show how the region regained its centrality with the outbreak of the migration crisis of 2015, leading to stronger EU-Western Balkans cooperation. Furthermore, they also show how despite the heavy pressure migration flows posed to such countries, the Western Balkans proved to be reliable partners, among other things, by successfully updating their legislation on migration and asylum to reach the EU standards (EU official, interview, 2020).

The following section reviews and analyses the most relevant developments in the EU’s foreign policy towards the region and the case studies during the timeline of the Juncker Commission. Specifically, it addresses the changes in three key policies: the enlargement policy; the Common foreign and security policy; and the external dimension of the EU migration policy.

The following table highlights the main developments that occurred in EU foreign policy towards the case studies during the Juncker Commission, divided per field of cooperation.

EUROPEAN UNION'S FOREIGN POLICY ACTIONS TOWARDS THE WESTERN BALKANS AND THE CASE STUDIES: THE JUNCKER'S COMMISSION			
	EU WESTERN BALKANS' REGION	CASE STUDY I: BIH	CASE STUDY II: SERBIA
POLITICAL	<p>Enlargement process: -2014: Juncker's "moratory" on Enlargement; the Berlin Process. -2015: New Enlargement Strategy (it includes Turkey) -2018-2019: New Enlargement Strategy -2019: French veto on opening accession to Albania and North Macedonia</p> <p>CFSP/CSDP operations -Althea, EULEX -EU-WB Status agreement on Frontex's operations in Bosnia Herzegovina; Montenegro; North Macedonia; Serbia.</p>	<p>Enlargement process: -2016: Submission of Membership Application; Pre-candidate status</p> <p>-2014-2019: Annual reports -2019: Commission Opinion on Bosnia Herzegovina application for the EU membership</p> <p>CFSP/CFDP: -Operation Althea -Cooperation with Frontex operations on BIH's territory.</p>	<p>Enlargement process: -Belgrade-Pristina dialogue -2014: formal start of accession negotiations -2014-2019: Annual reports</p> <p>CFSP/CFDP: -Cooperation in managing migration flows: 2019's EU aid package for managing mixed migration flows.</p>
ECONOMIC	<p>Enlargement: -IPA II</p>	<p>Enlargement: -IPA II</p>	<p>Enlargement: -IPA II</p>
CULTURAL/NARRATIVE	<p>Western Balkans as part of Europe (again) -ERASMUS+ -Horizon 2020</p>	<p>Focus on youth and civil society: -COSME; Creative Europe; Customs 2020; Europe for Citizens, Erasmus+; Fiscalis 2020; Horizon 2020</p>	<p>Focus on youth and civil society - Horizon 2020; COSME; Customs and Fiscalis 2020; Erasmus+ and Creative Europe; Europe for Citizens; Employment and Social Innovation.</p>

Table 2.1. European Union Foreign Policy Actions towards the Western Balkans and the case studies: The Juncker's Commission

2.2.1 The Enlargement policy and main developments in the case studies

Enlargement played an extremely relevant role in the history of European Integration. Keukeleire and Delreux explicitly mention that the Enlargement process for former communist countries, with its set of goals, turned the enlargement into “the most successful structural foreign policy of the EU” (Keukeleire, Delreux 2014, 56). Together with Trade and Cooperation Agreements, the Common Foreign and Security Policy-CFSP and Common Foreign and Defence Policy- CFDP, the Enlargement policy constitutes a solid pillar of EU foreign policy and has also been called “the most successful democracy promotion policy ever implemented by an external actor” (Vachudova 2014, 122).

At the same time, the effectiveness of the Enlargement policy is widely debated by academic literature (Khaze 2018; Biscop 2016; Elbasani 2013, 15; Juncos 2012; Jano 2010; Léonard 2010; Éthier 2006; Schimmelfennig, Sedelmeier 2005; Sedelmeier 2001). Critiques address not only the lack of effective Europeanization or EU ‘transformative power’ on Enlargement countries (Keukeleire 2015; Börzel 2013; Aspridis, Petrelli, 2013; Giandomenico 2013; Onar, Nicolaidis, 2013). Some studies also focused on the effects of Enlargement on EU integration (Leuffen, et al. 2013; Schimmelfennig, Sedelmeier, 2011; Schimmelfennig, 2009), and the EU institutions (Sekulić 2020). Furthermore, some authors compared the former CEE region and the Western Balkans region enlargements, underlining how the framework for Western Balkans’ integration ‘borrowed’ from mechanisms and contents from the CEE countries (Phinnemore 2013; Elbasani 2008; Friis, Murphy 2000). However, such studies warn against comparing the expected results: especially because of the EU internal context, which very much differed from the time of CEE’s enlargement negotiations (Phinnemore 2013, 29).

Access to the EU membership is regulated by article 49 of the V Title of the Treaty on the European Union (art.49, Title V, TEU). The Treaty gives the Council of the European Union the lead in admission negotiations. The Council is the institution that must be notified by applicant countries, and the institution responsible for the opening and the closure of negotiations chapters.

Furthermore, the Treaty gives the Commission the task of monitoring the pre-Accession process and updating the Council and the Parliament about the process. At the closing of the negotiations, the Council votes unanimously on the admission and asks for the consent of the Parliament.

The criteria for accession are the so-called Copenhagen Criteria, named after the European Council of 1993 (European Council 1993). They indicate that successful applicant countries must have: stable institutions guaranteeing democracy, rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities; a functioning market economy and the consequent capacity to cope with the EU market; and the ability to implement and adhere to the aims of political, economic, and monetary union. The enlargement procedure is then regulated by the EU enlargement strategy, which establishes the different fields of negotiations, as well as the conditions and the timing (European Commission 2015³⁵).

During the analysed timeframe, the enlargement strategy was updated twice. In 2015, the Commission issued a Communication on the enlargement strategy (European Commission 2015). This happened a few months after the signature of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement-SAA with Kosovo and the entry into force of the SAA with Bosnia Herzegovina. The document aimed at setting the medium-term strategy for the new cycle and reflected the strive for stricter conditionality expressed by the EU Member States in the

³⁵ The enlargement methodology was ultimately revised in 2020 to prospect “a more credible, dynamic, predictable and political EU accession process” for the Western Balkans countries.

post-Lisbon EU environment. It still targeted, besides the Western Balkans countries, also Turkey.

Despite its aim to define a medium-term strategy for the new institutional cycle, the document plainly stated that none of the targeted countries would be ready to join the EU during the cycle (ivi, 4). This was in line with Juncker's proclaimed 'break from enlargement' and with the timing of the target countries' progress in EU-demanded reforms. Furthermore, the document reaffirmed that "enlargement is a strict but fair process built on established criteria and lessons learned from the past", and that "ensuring future Member States are well prepared is crucial for the credibility of enlargement policy, as well as for public support in both current and future Member States" (ivi, 2). Moreover, the strategy illustrated the new regulations pursued by the Commission, the so-called 'fundamentals first' approach (ivi, 5). This involved paying closer attention to the field of rule of law and human rights, which became the first chapters (respectively chapters 23 and 24) to be opened, and the last to be closed, in enlargement negotiations.

The strategy of 2015 thus enacted and reflected a precise 'stricter' turn by the EU institutions to safeguard the process, by taking into account the increasing disillusionment of some EU Member States. The document clearly expressed the EU concerns about the slowness of reforms in the region, while re-affirming the European commitment to the Western Balkans integration. It thus focused on the major challenges experienced by receiving countries in the fields of rule of law and human rights, but also of governance; transparency of the public administration; democratic accountability and inclusiveness (3); and the difficulties caused by the migration crisis.

Recalling from the introduction, the second and most significant turn in the enlargement policy during the Juncker Commission occurred with the publication by the Commission of a new Communication *A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans* (European Commission 2018), the *Annex* with the Action Plan (European Commission 2018h), and the followed *Enlargement Strategy*

(European Commission 2018i). As stated in the name of the document, the new Communication and the new strategy acknowledged the necessity to provide a *credible* perspective to enlargement countries.

The second important element of these documents is their sole focus on the Western Balkans region. The exclusion of Turkey from the listed enlargement countries can be reconducted to the change that occurred in the EU-Turkey relations during the considered timeframe, but also to Turkey's internal developments. The Enlargement Strategy of 2018 acknowledges the role of Turkey as a "high-level" partner for the EU, especially in the context of the EU-Turkey partnership in the response to the migration crisis (European Commission 2018i, 1). However, the document stresses that, especially after the coup of 2016, Turkey moved away from the European Union, especially in matters such as respect for rule of law and fundamental rights and reaffirms the numerous calls from the EU to Turkey to redress such developments (2).

The clarification on the status of Turkey is crucial, especially as the document reaffirms its "fundamentals first" approach. Within this framework, the importance of carrying out the negotiations according to a "fair and rigorous conditionality" is also confirmed (European Commission 2018i, 2). The document then emphasises the existent shortcoming of Western Balkan countries on rule of law, the economy, the justice reform, fight against corruption and organised crime. At the same time, the annexe to the 2018's Communication, also illustrated an action plan covering five areas listed in the communication: support for to rule of law; reinforcement of the engagement on security and migration; support for socio-economic development; increasing connectivity (in line with intergovernmental initiatives like the Berlin Process); and the digital agenda for the Western Balkans (European Commission 2018h, 1-5).

In the case study countries

The enlargement policy constitutes both the main frame of the EU's involvement in the case study countries and the greatest source of EU economic and financial assistance to the region (in addition to the FDI coming from the single EU Member States). During the analysed timeline, according to the Commission's reports, the Western Balkans region underwent some relatively positive progress, despite the acknowledgement that crucial challenges remained to be addressed. Montenegro overcame a critical democratic and political setback after the 2016's election (European Commission 2018c; 2019h); North Macedonia and Greece settled their historic "name issue" through the Prespa Agreement (European Commission 2019j); Kosovo continued, despite the great domestic difficulty, in the establishment of functioning institutions and an independent judiciary (European Commission, 2018b, 2019g). These positive developments, and especially the achievement of the Prespa agreement, lie at the core of the Commission's unconditional recommendation on opening the negotiations with North Macedonia, further reiterated in 2019 (European Commission 2018e; 2019j). In economic terms, during the Juncker Commission, the EU accounted for 72% of exports and 58% of imports of the region. Comparatively, the trade among Western Balkan states themselves took second place (Eurostat 2018). At the time of writing, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia are official candidates; Bosnia Herzegovina acquired the status of potential candidate following its application for the EU membership in 2016; finally, Kosovo officially signed the Stabilisation and Cooperation Agreement which entered into force in April 2016.

In the case studies during the Juncker Commission, the most significant evolutions in the enlargement process were marked by: the entry into force of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement for Bosnia (2015) and its subsequent application for the EU membership (2016); and the rocky relaunch

of the Belgrade -Pristina dialogue, for Serbia. Differently from the rest of the region, in fact, Bosnia Herzegovina and Serbia present a more complex picture. The Commission's reports from 2014 to 2019 highlighted how Bosnia Herzegovina suffered from the fragility of its tripartite institutional architecture, and a clear increase in nationalist rhetoric. However, it also succeeded in making progress in the field of rule of law (European Commission, 2018a; 2019d). Serbia was indicated as the 'enlargement front-runner' for 2025: however, the Commission's reports pointed more than once attention to the rising authoritarianism of Aleksandar Vučić's government, and its growing impact on effective pluralism in the country and the stall in the Belgrade Pristina dialogue. In 2019, the Commission's report stressed an: "urgent need to create more space for genuine cross-party debate, to forge a broad pro-European consensus which is vital for the country's progress on its EU path" (European Commission 2019k, 3).

Bosnia Herzegovina: main developments in the Enlargement process

Together with Kosovo, Bosnia Herzegovina is the country of the region where the EU has been devolving most of its efforts to conflict management and State-building. It is also the first country in the region where the EU deployed CSDP operations and missions, starting in 2003 with Operation EUFOR Althea (EEAS, 2017). Over the years, the EU institutions played an increasing role in the stabilisation of the country, by supporting among other projects-financially and politically-the establishment of functioning institutions, the country's regional cooperation and the settlement of regional disputes, and the country's cooperation with the International Criminal Court for Former Yugoslavia³⁶. As recollected in the historical section, within the framework of the Stabilisation and Association Process, among the most important achievements of EU-BIH relations before 2015 stands out the UE-

³⁶ Currently *The International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals* (IRMCT-Mechanism).

BIH Structural Dialogue on Justice³⁷ (Delegation of the European Union to Bosnia Herzegovina 2015).

During the years of the Juncker Commission, Bosnia Herzegovina witnessed significant developments in its path to EU membership. One example was the entry into force on 1 June 2015 of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement-SAA, which replaced the Interim Agreement of 2008³⁸ (European Commission 2016, 4). This was an undoubted achievement, especially considering the stall which followed the difficult dialogue on the Constitutional reform of 2011. In 2016, Bosnia Herzegovina officially applied for the EU membership, which resulted in the reach status of potential candidate with the European Commission's Opinion in 2019.

However, especially during the first years of the cycle, the country experienced a significant outbreak of social protests. Protests mostly denounced the degradation of social-economic standards, the rise in unemployment rates and the perceived widespread corruption in the country (Belloni 2016). While the protests never directly targeted the EU perspective of the country, they expressed to a certain extent some criticism for the EU's support to BIH's political elites, considered responsible for the lack of reforms in the country (Belloni, Strazzari 2014)³⁹.

The European Commission Country reports on Bosnia Herzegovina

³⁷ The new structured mechanism-of which Bosnia Herzegovina is the first beneficiary among Enlargement countries-was launched in 2011 by the European Commission was aimed at supporting the Bosnia Herzegovina Institutions in their reform process of the justice system, one of the key requirements of the Enlargement negotiations. For more information on the most recent developments of the EU-BIH Structured Dialogue, visit: https://europa.ba/?page_id=553

³⁸ The SAA refers to the contractual relationship established between the EU and a third country, following achievements in the Stabilisation and Association Process, and takes the form of a comprehensive tool of mechanisms and timelines that work to bring the potential EU candidate country closer to EU Standards.

³⁹ The internal developments in both case studies during the Juncker Commission are addressed in detail in Chapter 5.

(European Commission 2018a; 2019d), highlight how, notwithstanding some significant progress in the Justice reform, the country remained in need of more reforms, especially in the area of regional cooperation. Specifically, the Commission report of 2019 referred to the lack of recognition of Kosovo (European Commission 2019, 28). The reports of the considered period also pointed out the need for the country to upgrade the election legislations, as electoral turnout was “characterised by segmentation along ethnic lines” (ivi, 14). This falls in line with a reported rise of nationalist and populist parties, in the electoral results of October 2018 (Belloni 2019; RCC-Regional Cooperation Council 2019).

Furthermore, the Commission’s reports also addressed the theme of transparency of the media, and of political and business influences on editorial boards; and the impact of Bosnia’s “complex system of executive power” on the proper functioning of such system as well as on the alignment of legislation with the EU *acquis* (European Commission Opinion on Bosnia Herzegovina 2019, 9), and the “implementation of a large number of chapters” (European Commission Analytical report on Bosnia Herzegovina 2019, 10). From the economic perspective, all the European Commission’s reports depict a rather grim-and yet slowly improving-situation, characterised by: slow reforms; weak rule of law influencing a poor business environment; an economic governance “impeded by a high degree of politicisation and a lack of cooperation among key stakeholders” (ivi, 81); poor skills match between higher education and businesses’ needs; substantial corruption, and a “worryingly high unemployment rate” particularly among young people and vulnerable groups (ivi, 81).

At the economic level, in line with the trends of the previous decades, the EU remained the most relevant foreign economic actor in the region. The EU’s economic footprint in the country was mainly represented by funding channelled through the Instrument for Pre-Accession Agreement-IPA II⁴⁰. From 2014 to 2020 the IPA II’s budget destined to Enlargement countries (thus

⁴⁰ A detailed review of IPA II as foreign policy tool is given in Chapter Four.

including Turkey), amounted to 11.7 billion euros (Delegation of the European Union to Bosnia Herzegovina & European Union Special Representative in Bosnia Herzegovina, 2019). IPA II funds are usually channelled to individual recipient countries through specific Action Plans.

In the case of Bosnia Herzegovina, following the European Commission's *Indicative Strategy Paper for Bosnia and Herzegovina for 2014 -2020*⁴¹, the Commission Actions Plans assisted in actions in specific sectors. These were: "democracy and governance"; "rule of law and fundamental rights"; other areas covered were "environment, climate action and energy"; "transport"; "education", "employment and social policy" (European Commission 2019b,2). Furthermore, the IPA II Indicative funding allocations for the period 2014-2020 amounted to around €552 million and included funds for the "Civil Society Facility" (€ 9.1 million); the "Regional Housing Programme" (€ 10 million) and "special measures following 2014 floods" (Directorate-General for the European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations-DG NEAR 2021). In addition, in 2018 and 2019, the Commission undertook some special measures to help and support Bosnia Herzegovina in its response to the migration crisis. Finally, in terms of international trade, the EU is also the first destination of Bosnia Herzegovina's exports, which reached in 2019 the share of 72.3 % (Eurostat, 2021). According to the same report, in 2019 around three-fifths of all imported goods that arrived in Bosnia and Herzegovina originated from the EU-27 (Ivi).

Finally, always in the framework of the enlargement policy, Bosnia Herzegovina actively participated in several EU-funded projects in different educational, cultural and creative and health fields, such as COSME; Creative Europe; Europe for Citizens; Erasmus+; Horizon 2020, and the Third Programme for the Union's action in the field of health.⁴²

⁴¹ European Commission, "Annex to the Commission Implementing Decision amending Commission Decision C(2014) 9495 of 15.12.2014 adopting the Indicative Strategy Paper for Bosnia and Herzegovina for the period 2014-2020", Brussels 3.8.2018, 11-54.

⁴² European Commission 2019, "Analytical report accompanying the document Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council

Serbia: main developments in the Enlargement process

Unlike the other considered countries of the region, which experienced several political, social, and economic turmoil in the first years of the Juncker Commission, Serbia went through the opposite path. Serbia achieved the status of candidate country in 2012 and opened negotiations with the EU in 2014.

By looking at the European Commission's analytical country reports from 2014 to 2019 it appears evident how, especially after the elections of 2017 which saw the Presidential victory of Aleksandar Vučić, the country shifted from the "2015's elections held in a generally calm atmosphere" to a "genuine pluralism context", however, "tilted by several factors" (European Commission 2018d, 4), to the "urgent needs to create space for a "genuine cross-party debate" (European Commission 2019, 4).

In addition, the reports assess a declining situation on political criteria, despite the ongoing constitutional reform, especially on the themes of the scope of political influence over the judiciary (European Commission 2016b, 2018d, 2019k); the concerns over political influence on senior managerial appointments (European Commission 2019k, p.6). On human rights, the lack of concrete progress on freedom of expression and the need to "fully implement the legal and institutional framework for the protection of the rights of minorities and the situation of most discriminated groups" (European Commission 2018d, 4). On regional cooperation, the slow pace of normalisation of relations with Kosovo, whose progress or lack of would determine the pace itself of accession negotiations (European Commission 2019k).

Despite or because of such developments, in 2018 in an act of support for the country's European perspective, Serbia was called by Commissioner Hahn "a front runner in the region" (The Delegation of the European Union to the Republic of Serbia 2018). The Commissioner had also previously stated that the country's foreseen EU membership could be set for 2025, a data

Commission Opinion on Bosnia and Herzegovina's application for membership of the European Union", 29.5 Brussels: European Commission, 7.

“realistic but very ambitious” in the effort to “finish the work of 1989” (Emmott 2018). Like in the case of Bosnia Herzegovina and North Macedonia, Serbia was heavily affected, at least until 2018, by the migration and refugee crisis. According to the Commission’s reports, Serbia managed to successfully upgrade its migration and asylum legislation to the EU standards and to provide shelter and humanitarian supplies, also with financial assistance from the EU through the IPA II programme (European Commission 2016b, 2018d, 2019k). Like Bosnia Herzegovina, by the end of 2018, Serbia also initiated negotiations with the EU on the stipulation of Status Agreements with the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (European Commission, 2019b).

At the economic level, the EU remained by far the most relevant foreign economic actor in the country (Eurostat 2021). Like for the other Enlargement countries, over the covered timeline the predominant financial instrument used was IPA II. From 2014 to 2020, in line with the *Indicative Strategy Paper for Serbia for 2014 -2020*⁴³, the indicative funding allocation 2014–20 amounted to €1.539 billion (European Commission 2021c). EU assistance was destined for the fields of: “democracy and governance”; “rule of law and fundamental rights”. Furthermore, the funding tackled the areas of “environment, climate action and energy” policy; “transport”; “competitiveness and innovation”; “agriculture and rural development”; “education, employment and social policies”; finally, the crucial aspect of “territorial and regional cooperation” (European Commission 2021). Finally, also in terms of international trade, the EU remained Serbia's most important partner (Eurostat 2021).

Finally, like Bosnia Herzegovina, Serbia also actively participated within the framework of IPA II funding, in several EU-funded projects in different

⁴³ European Commission 2018, “Annex to the Commission Implementing Decision amending Commission C(2014)5872 of 19.8.2018 adopting the Indicative Strategy Paper for Serbia for the period 2014-2020” 19.8 Brussels: European Commission 17-46.

educational, cultural and creative and health fields, including: Horizon 2020; COSME; Erasmus+ and Creative Europe; Europe for Citizens; Employment and Social Innovation (European Commission 2019k, 98).

2.2.2 The Common Foreign and Security Policy

The historical recollection of the EU actorness in the region highlighted how the area of former Yugoslavia was a determinant for the institutionalisation of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (Baracani 2019). From the 1990s, the operations under CFSP in the region (and globally) grew in number and scale⁴⁴. The entity which oversees the implementation of the objectives of the CFSP is the European External Action Service-EEAS, headed by the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy-Vice President of the European Commission (HR/VP)⁴⁵. Nowadays the CFSP has a wide budget, that covers, among others: the EU special representatives; civilian missions; and non-proliferation and disarmament projects⁴⁶.

In the case studies, the EU is present through its official delegations in both Serbia and Bosnia Herzegovina. Besides its representations, the EU has a stable Special Representative who supports the work of the High Representative for the Union (HR/VP). The key strategic document that delineated the EU's foreign policy objectives during the considered timeframe was indeed the Global Strategy for the European Union Foreign and Security Policy of 2016 (EEAS 2016). This document is relevant, among other reasons, because it was the first document of the analysed timeline that confirmed the importance of the EU-Western Balkans for EU security. It renewed the EU's commitment to "take responsibility" for the stability of the region, and repeatedly confirmed the relevance of the region for EU objectives (Amadio-Vicerè 2018). Furthermore, the document specifically mentioned the importance of the enlargement perspective for the region and affirmed that "the

⁴⁴ For more information related to numbers, scale, locations and projects of the different military and civil operations conducted globally under the CFSP.

⁴⁵ During the Juncker Commission, the role of the HR/VP was covered by Federica Mogherini.

⁴⁶ See the Service for Foreign Policy Instruments

challenges of migration, energy security, terrorism and organised crime are shared between the EU, the Western Balkans and Turkey” within the enlargement framework (EEAS 2016, 24). Remarkably, the document also mentioned the necessity to “communicate well” the EU’s projects and investments towards the region; finally, it insisted on the need to deliver “concrete” results (ivi, 25). This is in line with a trend already seen in the enlargement policy: the acknowledgement of the need to work towards a credible and concrete perspective for the region.

Specifically, during the Juncker Commission, the EU kept two dossiers in the case studies: first, it supported Bosnia Herzegovina’s Stabilisation and Association Agreement, which entered into force in 2015. Through the figure of the High Representative for Bosnia Herzegovina, the EU supported the view of “a stable, viable, peaceful and multi-ethnic and united BiH”. Furthermore, it engaged in supporting the country to ensure peaceful regional cooperation; and irreversibly on track towards membership of the Union” (EEAS 2021).

The second dossier the EU engaged in the case studies was the high-level diplomatic forum of the Belgrade Pristina dialogue, in which the EU exercises the role of the main facilitator since 2010⁴⁷. The EU facilitates the reconciliation among the two parties in the spirit to promote peace and regional stability and “achieve progress on the path to the European Union and improve the lives of the people” (UNGA 2010, 2). The success of the dialogue constitutes one of the key requirements for Serbia and Kosovo to gain EU membership. Its positive outcome is then of vital importance for the EU foreign policy objectives.

During the analysed timeline, the dialogue suffered severe challenges. When the chances to obtain the EU membership became more concrete, following the start of accession negotiations with Serbia in 2014 and the signature of the SAA with Kosovo in 2015, a successful outcome of diplomatic relations became even more urgent. However, within a context of increasing

⁴⁷ More information on the Belgrade Pristina Dialogue

tensions between the two countries, the dialogue suffered a severe halt in 2018 after a “unilateral 100% tariff imposed on all Serbian goods by Kosovo” (European Parliamentary Research Service-EPRS 2021, 2). These events only reinforced the importance of the case studies for the EU’s objectives, and in the view of the 2025 deadline for Serbia’s perspective entry into the EU the Belgrade, Pristina dialogue maintained its prominence also for the new Von Der Leyen Commission⁴⁸.

Finally, in 2018 the mandate of the EU-led civil mission EUFOR Althea in Bosnia Herzegovina was renewed. EUFOR Althea is a key EU military mission in Bosnia Herzegovina. It is mostly involved in the training of BiH armed forces and its key objectives are: to support Bosnia Herzegovina’s Armed Forces in combined training and their progression towards NATO standards; to support BiH to maintain a safe and secure environment (SASE). Moreover, it carries out tasks deriving from the General Framework Agreement for Peace (GFAP); and from the collective training with the Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina (AFBiH) (Council of the European Union 2021, 2). During the period of the Juncker Commission, the operation underwent two strategic revisions, respectively in 2017 and 2019 and was renewed in virtue of its key role in preserving stability in the country (Ivi).

⁴⁸ See the nomination of Miroslav Lajčák of the High Representative for the Belgrade Pristina dialogue and other Western Balkans regional issues of 2020

2.2.3 The external dimension of the EU migration policy

The migration crisis strongly impacted the cooperation between the EU and Western Balkans. In terms of the external dimension of EU migration policy⁴⁹, this translated into two main developments: the integration of the visa liberalisation with the visa suspension mechanism, whose progress would be monitored through annual reports by the Commission (e.g. European Commission 2018g, 1). Second, the strengthening of cooperation on border control carried out through the joint activities of the EU, involved the Member States, Western Balkans countries, and authorities such as FRONTEX (European Commission 2019b; 2019f). The cooperation between the EU and the Western Balkans increased constantly during the analysed timeline, marking the growing importance of the region for the EU's objectives.

The dialogue on VISA liberalisations generally includes four key areas: document security; border/boundary and migration management; public order and security; and fundamental rights related to the freedom of movement (European Commission 2018f). A system of visa suspension mechanism is also enforced. Almost all Western Balkans countries had already achieved visa liberalisation before the start of the Juncker Commission. The only exception was Kosovo, which started the dialogue on visa liberalisation in 2012. In 2016 the Commission reported its positive opinion on the lifting of visa requirements for Kosovo's citizens. This allowed the country to enter the visa-free list of

⁴⁹ With the term of 'external dimension' of the EU migration policy is commonly meant the integration of migration and asylum goals into the EU external dimension (see Boswell 2003). In the early 2000s a set of Council conclusions addressed the EU starting cooperation with the countries of origins and of 'passage' of migrants and refugees, to the scope of better managing migration flows and preventing human trafficking. See for examples: European Council 1999 'Presidency conclusions', 15-16.10 Tampere: European Council; European Council 2001, "Presidency conclusions", 14-15.12 Laeken: European Council.

countries whose citizens are allowed for short stays in the Schengen area (European Commission 2018f). Lastly, in 2018, the Commission's progress report on the implementation of the remaining benchmarks for VISA liberalisation highlighted general good progress in all areas (2).

During the analysed timeframe, the visa suspension mechanism also became an instrument to monitor not only the number of people of the respective Western Balkan country that had been re-admitted to their country of origin but also the third-country citizens officially re-admitted in the Western Balkans (European Commission 2018g, 2-7). This was possible because the Western Balkans countries had been enlisted by the EU as safe countries of origin (European Commission 2015a, 3). Furthermore, through these reports, the Commission also had the chance to 'express concerns' on Western Balkans' countries to grant visa-free regimes to third countries. This was the case for the concern expressed by the Commission in 2018's report towards Serbia and Iranian citizens (European Commission 2018g, 7).

Besides the visa liberalisation scheme, other types of measures were adopted to manage the increasing flows arriving in the EU through the so-called Balkan Route. In 2015, Juncker met with the Heads of States of the Western Balkans region to set up a plan of action for immediate implementation (European Commission 2015a)⁵⁰. The 17-points plan foresaw the strengthening of EU-Western Balkans cooperation in fields like information exchange (it established contact points among the government and the competent authorities among the Balkan Route)⁵¹; limitation of secondary movement (3); the capacity of involved countries of passage "to provide

⁵⁰ The meeting also involved the Heads of State of Bulgaria, Croatia, Germany, Greece, Romania, and Slovenia, as well as the President of the European Parliament, the President of the European Council, the then current and incoming presidents of the Council of the EU, and the UNHCR.

⁵¹ European Commission 2015a "Report on the follow-up to the Leaders' Meeting on refugees flow along the Western Balkans Route" 15.12 Strasbourg: European Commission, 2.

temporary shelter, rest, food, health, water and sanitation to all in need”⁵² (4); border management and tackling of trafficking and smuggling (8-9); finally, the setup of a Task Force on Communication to “to combat misconceptions and unrealistic expectations amongst refugees and migrants and “to convince them to avoid perilous journeys and not to rely on smugglers” (10).

In the case study countries

Over the years of the last EU institutional cycle, Bosnia Herzegovina and Serbia experienced severe pressure of irregular migration on their asylum systems. Within the framework of the strengthened border management cooperation with the EU, both countries successfully updated the respective legislation on migration and asylum policy (European Commission 2016b, 6; 2018a, 26; 2018d, 9; 2019d, 6; 2019k, 5). They also implemented the EU Integrated Border Management system (IBM) (ibidem). However, the peak-and turning point- of the EU cooperation with the case studies was indeed the signing of the cooperation agreements for the carry out of operations of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency in the territory of Bosnia Herzegovina and Serbia⁵³.

Moreover, the EU also increased its economic assistance to Bosnia Herzegovina and Serbia through the IPA II funding, in virtue of their struggle in managing the migration flows. Specifically, in 2018, special measures were undertaken “to provide assistance for actions in the sector of Rule of Law and

⁵² To this purpose, as seen in the enlargement policy section, the EU also increased its funding to Western Balkans countries through an update to the IPA II

⁵³ Council of the European Union, “Council Decision on the signing, on behalf of the Union, of the Status Agreement between the European Union and Bosnia and Herzegovina on actions carried out by the European Border and Coast Guard Agency in Bosnia and Herzegovina”, Brussels, 9.4.2019; Council of the European Union, “Council Decision on the signing, on behalf of the Union, of the Status Agreement between the European Union and the Republic of Serbia on actions carried out by the European Border and Coast Guard Agency in the Republic of Serbia”, Brussels, 15.1.2019.

Fundamental Rights”. They were justified by the European Commission “by the imperative urgency to improve the local authority’s response, until now insufficient, to the new situation”.⁵⁴In 2019, such a special measure was further destined for the establishment of “new reception facilities for the most vulnerable ones, including children and families, to face the emergency migration situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina”⁵⁵.

⁵⁴ European Commission 2019b, “Commission Implementing Decision of 10.8.2018 adopting a special measure on supporting Bosnia and Herzegovina in managing the migration flows”, 10.8 Brussels: European Commission 1.

⁵⁵ European Commission 2019a, “Commission Implementing Decision of 19.8.2019 Amending Commission Implementing Decision C(2019)3189 adopting a special measure on supporting Bosnia and Herzegovina in managing the migration flows for 2019” 19.8. Brussels: European Commission 1.

Conclusions

The years of the Juncker Commission experienced a significant shift in the EU's foreign policy in the Western Balkans and the case studies of Bosnia Herzegovina and Serbia. The most relevant changes covered the update, renewal and increasing cooperation in three key EU policies: the enlargement policy; the Common Foreign and Security Policy; and the external dimension of EU migration policy.

The enlargement policy of 2015 stated the Commission's will to insist on a stricter and fairer enlargement process. The document clearly considered the concerns of some EU Member States on further enlargement and prepared the path for a more 'credible' enlargement strategy, published in 2018. Furthermore, a key change between the two strategies was the exclusion of Turkey from the strategy of 2018, which focused only on the Western Balkans region. This reflected the evolution of EU-Turkey's relations during the migration crisis, mainly defined by the signature of the EU-Turkey Statements I-II. At the same time, the country reports illustrated general progress and overall positive results (e.g. the Prespa agreement between Greece and North Macedonia). The reports from the case studies instead showed a more complex picture.

The Common Foreign and Security Policy in the region mainly focused on the support for Bosnia Herzegovina's Stabilisation and Association Agreement and the difficult path of the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue. Due to its role in supporting and preserving the stability of the country, the EU-led operation EUFOR Althea was renewed in 2018.

Finally, the migration crisis of 2015 and the opening of the Balkan route reaffirmed the key strategic role of the region for the EU's foreign policy. During the considered period, the Western Balkans countries-especially Bosnia Herzegovina and Serbia-became increasingly involved in border management cooperation and border management control. At the same time, the region also proved to be on track with demanded reforms in migration-related fields. This

was visible by the successful upgrading of the countries' legislation on migration and asylum policies, on which the Commission reported positively throughout the whole institutional cycle.

Furthermore, the intensification of EU-Western Balkans relations in the field of migration was also remarked by the integration of the visa suspension mechanism; the cross-border cooperation in the fight against organised crimes and terrorism; and finally, the signing of cooperation agreements for the execution of operations of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency in the territory of such countries.

For what concerns the case studies, Bosnia Herzegovina experienced a significant upgrade in its accession path: in 2016, it submitted its application for the EU membership in 2016, after the entry into force of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement in 2015. The Commission country reports highlighted significant progress in the field of rule of law and the reform of the justice system, despite the increased popularity of nationalist and populist leaders experienced by the country towards the end of the considered period; and despite remaining slow in the reforms of important fields such as economic development and unemployment rates, transparency, media freedom and corruption.

Serbia, on the other hand, suffered a heavy setback on freedom of expression, political pluralism, and cross-party dialogue following Vučić's victory in the presidential elections of 2017. Moreover, the normalisation of relations with Kosovo halted in 2018, thus affecting the pace of accession negotiation. This notwithstanding, or perhaps to counterbalance these developments, the country was presented in 2018 as a "front runner" in the region and currently maintains the status of 'official' candidate country.

CHAPTER 3. Opportunity: the foreign policy actions of China, Russia, and Turkey.

Introduction

The importance of a strong EU in international affairs, and able to face, united, the changes in the international context was acknowledged by Jean Claude Juncker already in his last speech on the State of the Union (Juncker 2018). In September 2018, a few months after the relaunch of the enlargement strategy towards the Western Balkans, he expressively acknowledged that “the world [...] is more volatile than ever”, and that “the external challenges facing our continent are multiplying by the day”, this way relaunching the EU role as an agent of peace (ivi, 2) and stability (ivi,4). In the same speech, he connected the EU's role in global affairs to the EU's foreign policy objectives in the region of the Western Balkans, affirming that the EU needed to “find unity in the region” to avoid its neighbourhood being “shaped by others” (Juncker 2018, 4). The international environment was then recognised towards the end of the Juncker Commission as a crucial element to consider in the pursuit of the EU's strategic objectives in the region.

Therefore, the present chapter investigates the specific features of the international context which contributed to the shaping of the EU foreign policy towards the case studies during the Juncker Commission. Particularly, it examines the role of the foreign policy actions of three non-EU actors: China, Russia, and Turkey.

The choice to focus on China, Russia, and Turkey, is due mainly to three reasons: each of the considered actors (especially Russia and Turkey) presents

strong historical, cultural, political, and economic ties with the region and case studies; each of them represents, to different extents, a remarkable “Other” to the European Union, either for historical and cultural reasons (Morozov, Rumelili, 2012); finally, each of these actors experienced progressive deterioration of their relations with the EU during the considered period. All these reasons make them relevant actors to consider in the analysis of the change in the EU’s foreign policy towards the region in the case studies.

Therefore, recalling Chapter One, this chapter draws from the *opportunity* dimension of Bretherton and Vogler’s framework (2006), also referred to as the ‘international context’. *Opportunity* is defined as “the external environment of ideas and events—the context which frames and shapes EU action or inaction” (2006, 11). The work also draws from Easton’s definition of ‘environment’, where “environment’ is defined as the structural context of action and covers the most important developments – events and/or ideas – outside the black box in which political decisions are taken” (in Baracani 2021, 2). Thus, the study advocates for the relevance of the international context for the analysis of the EU’s foreign policy, in line with recent literature on EU actorness (Rhinard, Sjöstedt 2019). Therefore, it considers the international context not as an “inert background”, but rather as “a dynamic process where ideas are interpreted and events accorded meaning” (Jacobsen 2003, 56 in Bretherton, Vogler 2006, 11). The chapter aims to answer the following sub-research question:

“What features of the foreign policy of non-EU actors-such as China, Russia, and Turkey-did influence the EU foreign policy shift towards the Western Balkans?”

To do so, it maps their presence in the region and the case studies across different ‘arenas’: the political-diplomatic arena; the economic arena; and the cultural arena. Furthermore, the analysis is carried out on three levels: the level of bilateral relations with the EU; the regional level, which focuses on the relations of each actor with the Western Balkans region; finally, the local level, which addresses the foreign policy actions of each actor in the case studies.

Finally, before presenting the analysis of the last EU institutional cycle, the

chapter provides a review of the historical evolution of the considered actors' presence in the region and their relations with the EU⁵⁶. The first section thus starts with the historical evolution of China's, Russia's, and Turkey's relations with the EU and the Western Balkans region, from the 1990s to 2013. Finally, the chapter presents the analysis of the developments that occurred during the Juncker Commission.

⁵⁶ Because of China's presence in the region is more recent compared to the other considered actors, its historical recollection is sensibly shorter. Comparatively speaking instead, the section dedicated to Russia is relatively longer, to give prominence to my visiting period to the Brussels School of International Studies-BSIS University of Kent.

3.1. The foreign policy actions of China, Russia, and Turkey from the 1990s to the Juncker Commission: the international, regional and local levels

3.1.1 China's Foreign Policy Actions from the 1990s to 2008.

CHINA'S FOREIGN POLICY ACTIONS FROM 1990s TO 2008				
	CHINA-EU	CHINA-WESTERN BALKANS	CHINA-BOSNIA HERZGOVINA	CHINA-SERBIA
POLITICAL	<p>From recognition to the "honeymoon phase"</p> <p>-1995: Human Rights Dialogue</p> <p>-1998: EC Communication and starts of the EU-China Summits</p> <p>-2001: China enters the WTO</p> <p>-2003: Peaceful Rise doctrine.</p>	<p>First contacts:</p> <p>-Strong support to Serbia against NATO campaign - 2004: Kozjak power station in NM, built by China International Water and Electric Corporation.</p>	<p>First contacts:</p> <p>-1995: establishment of diplomatic relations</p>	<p>First contacts:</p> <p>-1990: support to Milosevic's regime during NATO bombing;</p> <p>-2008: Non-recognition of Kosovo declaration of independence</p>
ECONOMIC	<p>Institutional rather than significant economic relations</p> <p>-FDI</p> <p>-Trade agreements</p>	<p>First contacts:</p> <p>-1999: support to Serbia against sanctions</p> <p>-2004: Kozjak power station in North Macedonia</p>	N.D.	<p>Support against UN sanctions</p> <p>-1999: 300million \$ investments</p>
CULTURAL/DIPLOMATIC	<p>Cultural centres as key soft power tools</p> <p>-Confucius Institutes</p>	<p>Cultural centres as key soft power tools</p> <p>-Opening of Confucius Institutes in: Belgrade, Serbia;</p>	N.D.	<p>Cultural centres as key soft power tools</p> <p>-2007 Confucius Institute of Belgrade</p>

Table 3.1. China's Foreign Policy actions from the 1990s to 2008: the international, regional, and local levels per area.

Together with Russia and Turkey, China constitutes a significant Other to the EU, for cultural and historic reasons. The official diplomatic relations between China and the EU (then the ECC) were established in 1975 with the recognition by the EU of the “One China” policy (European External Action Service-EEAS 2017; European Parliament 2021). However, EU-China relations were always troubled by dissonance in values: first in China’s policy over Tibet, later towards Hong Kong (Council of the European Union 2020a). Over the years that go from the re-engagement of the People’s Republic of China with the international community to the start of the Eurozone crisis, China went through several transformations in its externally projected image (Brown 2017). The start of the EU-China Human Rights Dialogue in 1995 and the beginning of the EU-China summits in 1998 (European External Action Service-EEAS 2017) were the key events of the decade.

In 2003, under Jintao’s presidency, two years after China entered the WTO, the Peaceful Rise doctrine was inaugurated. This strategy marked the beginning of China’s growing role in international affairs (Brown 2017)⁵⁷. The Peaceful Rise doctrine advocated for the image of a “friendly China”, embracing economic globalization and improving relations with the outside world while focusing on socio-economic development for its people (ivi). The doctrine relied upon five pillars: mutual respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty; mutual non-aggression; mutual non-interference in each other’s internal affairs; equality and cooperation for mutual benefit; and peaceful coexistence (Ibidem,11).

Over these years, the role of China in the case study countries remained limited. However, in that period China cemented its bilateral relations with Serbia: first by supporting Serbia against UN sanctions in 1999; and later by supporting Serbia’s stand on the legal status of Kosovo (Le Corre, Vuksanovic 2019)⁵⁸.

⁵⁷ President Hu Jintao remained in charge from 2002 to 2013.

⁵⁸ Le Corre and Vuksanovic point how China’s position against the UN sanctions to Serbia was mainly due to the bombing of China’s embassy in Belgrade on May 7th of 1999 during the NATO campaign. According to the authors, this also provided extra

3.1.2 China's foreign policy actions from 2009 to 2013.

CHINA'S FOREIGN POLICY ACTIONS FROM THE EUROZONE CRISIS TO THE JUNCKER'S COMMISSION (2009-2013)				
	CHINA-EU	CHINA-WESTERN BALKANS	CHINA-BOSNIA HERZGOVINA	CHINA-SERBIA
POLITICAL/DIPLOMATIC	Structural changes -2008-2009: Eurozone crisis. China as reliable ally. -2013: XI Ping Presidency	China as soft power Actor -Policy of non-intervention in domestic affairs	China as soft power Actor -Policy of non-intervention in internal affairs	China as soft power Actor -Policy of non-intervention in domestic affairs yet -Non-recognition of Kosovo declaration of independence
ECONOMIC	China as "reliable ally"...looking for access to the EU Market -Trade: second trade partner (Germany biggest exporter) -2010: COSCO leases half of Pireus Port	Growth of trade and investments -Exports to China increased seven-fold between 2004 and 2014 -Bilateral agreements: paving the way for BRI	Growth of trade and investments -Exports' increase -Bilateral agreements: paving the way for the BRI.	Growth of trade and investments - Exports' increase -Bilateral agreements: paving the way for the BRI.
CULTURAL	Cultural toolkit of Soft power: -Confucius Institutes and classrooms -Cultural Centres	Cultural toolkit of Soft power: -Confucius institutes and classrooms -Cultural centres	Cultural toolkit of Soft power: -Confucius institutes and classrooms -Cultural centres	Cultural toolkit of Soft power: -Confucius institutes and classrooms -Cultural centres

Table 3.1.2 China's foreign policy actions from the Eurozone crisis to the Juncker Commission

The years that cover the period from the outbreak of the economic and basis for China's support to Serbia over the Kosovo's issue, and solid ground for future relations, which steadily increased over the next decade (Le Corre, Vuksanovic 2019).

financial crisis (2008) and the start of the Juncker's Commission (2014), mark the affirmation of China as a global power. Under the presidency of Hu Jintao, following the "China Go-Global" policy, China consolidated its economic ties worldwide, by shifting its previous FDI-inward focus towards an outward focus and expanding its market and business model reaching out to the African continent and South America. There, it invested predominantly in raw materials and infrastructures (Brown 2017).

In terms of EU-China relations, the Eurozone crisis marked a significant rapprochement between China and the EU. From 2009 to 2013, China incremented its FDI toward European countries, especially EU Member States of Central and South-East Europe (Amendolagine, Rabellotti 2017). According to the Centre for the Study of Democracy, during this period it started becoming apparent how China took specific advantage of the governance deficits in partner countries, such as lack of transparency, circumvention of public procurement law and lack of consistency with the EU standards, to design its investments (Centre for the Study on Democracy-CSD 2021, 2). Furthermore, research from the European Parliament underlined how during those years some countries that had shown an initial enthusiasm about China's investments, started reporting unfair treatment in terms of access to investments (European Parliamentary Research Service-EPRS 2018, 4).

The Western Balkans region is the one upon which China focused most of its investments in Central and Eastern Europe. Until 2013, in the Western Balkans, China invested predominantly in Serbia, Montenegro, and North Macedonia: Chinese investments grew from less than 100million dollars in 2009 to almost a 500million in 2013 (ivi). In a trend that continued also during the years of the Juncker's Commission, China predominantly focused its investments in Serbia, while in Bosnia Herzegovina it focused predominantly on Republika Srpska.

Finally, in the cultural arena, China proceeded with the trend established over the years worldwide trusting its cultural diplomacy actions to Confucius Institutes and Cultural Centres, which started opening in the region.

3.2 Russia's foreign policy actions from the 1990s to 2000.

RUSSIA'S FOREIGN POLICY ACTIONS FROM 1994 TO 2000				
	RUSSIA-EU	RUSSIA-WESTERN BALKANS	RUSSIA-BOSNIA HERZGOVINA	RUSSIA-SERBIA
POLITICAL/DIPLOMATIC	Rapprochement -1994: PCA and Annexed protocol to the PCA -2000: EU-Russia Energy Dialogue	Alignment with the West -1992: the vote for the UN resolution 857 imposing sanctions on Yugoslavia; - From 1996: Russia suffers sensible loss of influence	Preserving Russia's significance at the local and UN level - 1995: Permanent membership at the Peace Implementation Council (PIC) and of its Steering Committee -Keeping discussions on Yugoslavia within the UN Security Council	Political support -Russia joins NATO operations -Advocacy for Serbia's interests in the Kosovo's crisis
ECONOMIC	Asymmetry and Dependence -FDI: Russia highly dependent on the EU -Trade: EU largest trade partner, especially in the field of energy.	Displaying of soft power through the energy Sector -FDI -Trade	Energy Sector: quasi-dependence -FDI -Trade Target: Republika Srpska.	Energy Sector: complete dependence -FDI -Trade
CULTURAL	Rapprochement -Russia as part of Europe	Religious ties as instruments of soft power -the Orthodox Church as channel of soft power	Religious ties as instrument of soft power -Focus on Republika Srpska	Religious ties as instrument of soft power -the Orthodox Church as channel of cultural soft power

Table 3.3 Russia's foreign policy actions from the 1990s to the 2000s

3.2.1 Russian Foreign Policy over the 1990s: a period of transition

The 1990s were a decade of changes for Russia. Within a general context of heavy domestic political and economic transition, the country experienced a “rapprochement” trend in its diplomatic relations with the US-led international order. This also involved developing closer ties with the European Union (Casier 2017; Thorun 2009). Documents like the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with the EU (1994) Russian Federation National Security Concept (2000) underline how the achievement of good neighbourly relations with the EU (then EEC), was a key step for Russia’s objective to restore its image and maintain a strong presence in the neighbourhood. However, the literature stressed how the relationship developed between Russia and the EU within the framework of the PCA was profoundly asymmetric, exactly because of Russia’s internal political and economic turmoil and need for foreign investments (Casier, 2017, 2016, 2015; Morini 2020; Levitsky, Way 2010). Casier also defined it as a “pupil-teacher” relationship, whose asymmetry was displayed not only at the political level but also in the field of economic relations (Casier, T. in Casier and DeBardeleben 2018).

The key foreign policy documents regarding EU-Russia relations of this period are the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) and its Annexed Protocol (1994/1997), the Russia-EU Energy Dialogue (2000), and the Russian Federation Concept of National Security (2000). The PCA agreement constituted the legal basis and general framework of cooperation between Russia and the EU. However uneven and constrained this partnership might have been from Russia’s perspective, literature also highlights how, during this period, Russia and the European Union cooperated in the neighbourhood in crucial peacekeeping operations, like the Bosnia’ and Kosovo wars (M. Sidurdic, J. Teokarevic; J. Minic; D. Dukanovic, 2016). Furthermore, Viceré (2019) underlined how Russia's cooperation with the NATO campaign in the Balkans was constrained by multiple factors, including the will to maintain its influential role in the region.

At the economic level, during the 1990s, the EU quickly became Russia’s main economic partner for exports and foreign direct investments. Especially during the transition to a market economy, the FDI coming from the EU Member States constituted the most significant foreign investment in the country (Casier, 2011). The energy sector

was the one where the most significant steps were undertaken, within the general objective of “support Russian market’s development”, as explicated in the *Common Strategy of European Union on Russia* of 1999 (1999/414/CFSP). Studies, however, underline how at the time such relations were treated more from the commercial perspective, rather than a security one (Casier, 2016).

The regional level: Russia’s Foreign Policy towards the Western Balkans

The region of the Western Balkans played a strategic role in Russia’s foreign policy objectives because of its access to the Mediterranean and Adriatic seas. The region’s location between the Black and Mediterranean Seas is also crucial, as is its proximity to the Middle East (Stronski, Himes 2019). Moreover, the region provided strategic grounds “as a major transportation and infrastructure hub used for supplying gas and oil to European countries” (Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation 2013). Finally, during the 1990s Russia engaged alongside the “West” in peacekeeping operations during the Bosnian and Kosovo conflicts. While Russia’s activism was, to certain extents, constrained by internal political and economic struggle, Russia’s participation aimed to preserve its role in the neighbourhood (Vicerè 2019). In economic terms, Russia mostly focused on the energy sector, a trend that continued throughout the following decade. In the cultural arena, the main focus of Russia’s foreign policy in the region focused on its ties with the Orthodox Church, which became over the years one of the main channels of Russia’s news and narratives in the region (Šabanović et al. 2020).

Bosnia Herzegovina

Russia has been present in Bosnia Herzegovina throughout the whole period of the 1990s: during the civil war from 1992 to 1995 when it tried to preserve Yugoslavia’s (later Serbia) interests; then as a key actor in the joint peacekeeping operations the missions IFOR/SFOR; finally, Russia strongly opposed the NATO bombing of Serbia during Kosovo’s war. In the aftermath of the Dayton Agreement, Russia became, together with the US and the EU a permanent member of the Peace Implementation Council (PIC), as well as of its Steering Group⁵⁹ involved in the interpretation of the

⁵⁹ The High Representative is an ad hoc international institution responsible for overseeing

Dayton Peace Accords. While it might be affirmed that, with all due limitations, until the mid-2000s Russia did not act in severe opposition to the stabilisation of the country, the complicated and yet privileged-relationship that Russia created with Republika Srpska caused frictions with the rest of the Bosnia Herzegovina, as well as with other foreign actors like the EU and the US (Valasek, 2009).

As a trend that continued in the following decade, Russia's economic footprint in the country during the Ninety Nineties pivoted around two points: the centrality of energy and all connected fields in Russia's economic relation with Bosnia Herzegovina; and the choice to focus its economic presence in the Serbian-majority part of the country. This made Bosnia Herzegovina quasi-completely dependent on Russia in terms of energy supply.

Furthermore, in these years Republika Srpska (RS) developed its own foreign policy agenda towards Russia, distinct from and sometimes in collision with the federal one. Henceforth, by exploiting the above-mentioned alleged cultural and religious bond, the Russian administration openly supports RS leadership in its search for leverage (and initiatives of secession) against the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH)⁶⁰ and the NATO membership. All these aspects had concrete consequences on the stabilisation of the country, already stricken by ungovernability and the ever-present spectre of conflict. From a cultural perspective, in line with the trend shown in the rest of the region, during the 1990s Russia focused its cultural soft power mostly on the shared religious ties with the local population by especially targeting Republika Srpska, in a mirroring pattern to its economic and political support.

implementation of civilian aspects of the Peace Agreement ending the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The position of High Representative was created under the General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina, usually referred to as the Dayton Peace Agreement, that was negotiated in Dayton, Ohio, and signed in Paris on 14 December 1995.

⁶⁰ Following the Dayton Agreement of 1995, the Federal Republic of Bosnia Herzegovina officially constitutes of two separate entities: the Republika Srpska (RS) and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH), with roughly equal territories, and the Brcko District.

Serbia

The political ties between Russia and Serbia have historical roots which pre-date WWI, and Serbian governments have often underlined their close ties to Russia. This also had concrete consequences during the Bosnian war of 1992-1995, where Russia attempted to preserve Serbian (then Yugoslavia's) interests. Serbia's geographical position made it crucial for the country to balance its dependence on near great powers. It is thus often affirmed that its location as a "conduit between East and West, [...] has always made it reluctant during its period of post-Ottoman Empire independence (including in the 20th century) to fully commit to either Europe or its fellow Slavs in Russia" (Greene et al. 2020, 22).

Because of such geography and history, Serbia developed its own foreign policy with the key objective to ensure the maintenance of friendly relations with all foreign actors present in the country and the region: Russia and the United States, then the EU, but also Turkey. This approach to foreign relations relies on what the former Serbian president Boris Tadić called the "four pillars of diplomacy": the EU, Russia, the U.S, and China (p. 11) and has been defined also by the European Parliament as "non-committal". This being considered, during the 1990s Russia tried, whenever possible, to defend the country's interests: at the UN level, even when it voted in favour of the UN resolution 857 imposing sanctions on Yugoslavia; and later, with the Kosovo crisis, when Russia opposed the bombing of Serbia by NATO and managed to mediate among parties by offering its forces to peacekeeping operations, joining with 1200 peacekeepers in Bosnia Herzegovina as part of SFOR (Secrieru, 2019).

In terms of economic presence, as with the other cases presented, during those years Russia channelled its influence through the energy sector. As in the Bosnian case, Serbia developed a complete dependence on Russia's energy sources. In the cultural arena, as for the already mentioned case of Bosnia Herzegovina, the Orthodox Church became the main channel of Russia's soft power in Serbia.

3.2.2 Russia's foreign policy from 2001 to 2013

Table 3.4 Russia's foreign policy actions from 2001 to 2013

RUSSIA'S FOREIGN POLICY ACTIONS FROM 2001 TO 2013				
	RUSSIA-EU	RUSSIA-WESTERN BALKANS	RUSSIA-BOSNIA HERZGOVINA	RUSSIA-SERBIA
POLITICAL/DIPLOMATIC	<p>Stage of Competition: towards assertiveness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -2004/2007: EU and NATO Enlargement -2008: Georgia's war -2009: EU Eastern Partnership -2012: Russia enters the WTO (support of the EU) 	<p>Top Priority: prevent NATO Enlargement.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Support to secessionist and/or nationalist parties/leaders throughout the region; -Misinformation campaigns 	<p>Priority: obstacle NATO Membership</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Targeted support to Republika Srpska -Support to Dodik's political programme. -Misinformation campaigns. 	<p>Priority: prevent NATO Membership</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Political support Serbia's position over Kosovo -2005-2013: South Stream project;
ECONOMIC	<p>Main energy exporter to the EU market, but also main recipient of FDI</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -FDI: EU greatest investor. -Trade: EU biggest trade partner. 	<p>Economy as instrument for power politics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -FDI: significant increase in all WB countries' economies -Trade: dominant in the energy sector -Banking sector 	<p>Russia as fifth foreign investor</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -2008-2013: significant growth of FDI -Dominance of the energy sector -Banking sector 	<p>Towards a monopoly of the energy field</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> FDI: 4.5 % of total FDI to Serbia; -2008: Gazprom acquires controlling stakes of NIS (56%); Lukoil acquires Beopetrol
CULTURAL	<p>A New Narrative</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Russia as guardian of traditional values - Projection of identarian narrative in the shared neighbourhood 	<p>Religious ties as instrument of soft power</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -The Orthodox Church as channel of soft power 	<p>Religious ties as instrument of soft power</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Focus on Republika Srpska's orthodox population 	<p>Religious ties as instrument of soft power</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -the Orthodox Church as channel of cultural soft power

The arrival to power of Vladimir Putin signed a turning point in Russia's foreign policy. Domestically, Putin's administration re-shaped Russia's institutions and gradually moved toward what literature tentatively calls a hybrid, illiberal or competitive authoritarian regime (Morini, 2020, Levitsky & Way, 2010; Zakaria, 2007). In the aftermath of the conflicts in Bosnia and Kosovo in the 1990s, Russia's priorities in the neighbourhood became: to prevent further enlargement of NATO; and the fight against secessionist movements around its immediate neighbourhood.

In terms of relations with the EU, after the EU Enlargement of 2004, the geographical issue in EU-Russia relations became more crucial: Russia and the EU began to share about 2200 kilometres of borders, with two recent member states-Estonia and Latvia-harbours a significant presence of Russian minorities (Lynch 2004, 100). This proximity further increased with the followed EU enlargements of 2007 and 2013, as it increased the amount of trade Russia and the EU exchanged over time arriving in 2015 to consist of, respectively, about 45% of Russia's total foreign trade volume and the 6% of EU foreign trade⁶¹. Other key turning policy points in EU-Russia relations from this period were: the Strategic Partnership of 2003 and the creation of Four Spaces of Cooperation, later translated into Roadmaps; the launch of the EU European Neighbourhood Policy (2008) and the EU Eastern Partnership (2009) policies. Arguably, these last two policies contributed to reinforcing Russia's perception of marginalisation within the US-led international community, of which the EU is part of (Morini 2020; Casier and DeBardeleben 2018; Lynch 2004), thus increasing already present attributional bias on both sides (Casier T. in DeBardeleben 2018, 20).

Between these two moments, the Georgian war outbreak: about ten years since the entry into force of the *Partnership and Cooperation Agreement*, Russian aggression towards Georgia in 2008 underlined how significantly the balance had changed over ten years. Such events pushed the EU institutions to reconsider the nature of EU-Russia relations. The Extraordinary European Council held on September 1st of 2014, openly stated that Russia had "distanced itself from Europe, its government has built up its own

⁶¹ Source: Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the European Union. Overview of EU-Russia relations.

opposing ideology, based on Russian nationalism (with ethnic Russians providing the foundation) and conservative values” (European Council, 2014; cited in House of Lords, 2015). Later in 2009, the EU launched the *Eastern Partnership-EaP* opening bilateral relations with countries such as Georgia, Moldova, Belarus, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Ukraine. This added a layer of friction to EU-Russia relations (Pop, 2009). The shift in Russia-EU high-level politics did not prevent economic relations to continue: however, it marked a benchmark in the increasing tensions between the two actors, added to a lack of progress on the human rights agenda, the growing corruption, and the Russian elites’ rising detachment from European values by presenting them as alien to Russian identity (Bechev, 2020).

Economically, Russia experienced over the first years of the new century a progressive economic relaunch, which made exports more numerous, especially in the field of gas and oil (Casier, DeBardeleben 2018). Moreover, those years saw an increase in the amount of trade between Russia and the EU, especially in the field of energy⁶². As said, this was internally accompanied by an increasing move towards authoritarianism, marked by a gradual centralization of power, growing repression of dissent, the targeting of journalists and political opponents, and rising rhetoric that opposed Russian identity and values to the European ones (Morini 2020; Levitsky, Way, 2010).

In terms of economic relations, the energy sector remained central to Russia’s foreign policy strategy and started to be framed, also in Russia-EU relations, in geostrategic terms (Casier, 2016; Haukkala, 2015). While the EU’s dependence on Russian energy was debated, over this period the EU confirmed its position as Russia’s foreign greatest investor and biggest trade partner. This trend continued, notwithstanding the events in Georgia, until the Ukraine crisis: the progression in exchanges of goods reached the top in 2012 (Eurostat, 2020).

Another development of the years that go from the first Putin presidency to the Ukraine crisis is the reshaping of Russian national identity along the lines of religion and “traditions”. In its effort to differentiate itself from the EU and the US, Russia

⁶² The role of Russia as net exporter of energy and raw materials towards the EU member states however stabilized officially after the creation of the Four Spaces of Cooperation and especially after 2008, with the signature of the Memorandum on Early warning Mechanism of 2009, in the framework of the EU-Russia Energy Dialogue.

started projecting, internally and in the neighbourhood, an identarian narrative turning around traditional family values, the Orthodox Church and the “Slavic” ties. Such narrative converged history and cultural values, but especially also helped the growing repression of social dissent in the country (Morini, 2020; Foxall, 2019). This was conducted through an impressive use (and censorship), of national media and international channels of news agencies such as Russia Today and Sputnik, which helped frame and spread the narrative domestically and abroad.

The regional level: Russia’s foreign policy actions towards the Western Balkans

Literature underlines how during this period Russia became particularly active in slowing down the processes of national reconciliations in the Western Balkans region (Bechev 2019; Secrieru 2019). Indeed, since the mid-2000, the friction with the West, and specifically with the EU, became more evident also in the region (Valasek 2009). Furthermore, after the arrival to power of Vladimir Putin, Russia became the most significant non-EU investor in the region, specialising in the real estate and the energy sectors (Jaćimović et al. 2020; Secrieru 2019).

At the political level, with the later Enlargement of NATO and the EU towards the East, the overall priority for Russia’s foreign policy in the region became the prevention of a further NATO expansion. It could be said that over the decade of the 2000s Russia sought to build leverage and acquire political influence in the region. This is traceable also in Russian FDI investments in Serbia and Bosnia: their pattern shows that they increased constantly until 2013 (CEIC, 2020). The dominant fields were the energy and banking sectors. In terms of cultural soft power instead, the main channel for the spreading and diffusion of Russia’s identarian narrative remained the Orthodox Church, with the Serbian-Orthodox part of the population as its target.

The case study level: Russia's foreign policy actions towards Bosnia Herzegovina and Serbia

Bosnia Herzegovina

In Bosnia Herzegovina, Russia maintained as a key objective to prevent a further expansion of NATO. From the period that goes to the early 2000s to the Juncker's Commission, this took the shape of Russia's increasing support to Republika Srpska and especially to political parties that promoted secessionist pro-Russian or anti-NATO policies. The main example is Milorad Dodik's Alliance of Independent Social Democrats-SNSD. Economically, Russia's increased its investment in the Serbian part of the country, especially in the energy sector. One example is the acquisition by the Russian company Zarubezhneft of an oil refinery in 2007. Besides the traditional focus on the Orthodox Church in Republika Srpska, an interesting addition of Bechev's "Russia's soft power tools" (2020) run at the information level. As in other parts of the region, Russia's focus turned mainly around the objective of destabilizing the EU and Western powers in the country and fostering internal nationalist divisions.

Serbia

During this period, the most evident element of support in Russia-Serbia relations was Russia's lack of recognition of Kosovo's declaration of independence (2008) (Bechev, 2020): arguably, this later became the main pillar of Russia's political and diplomatic activism in the country. Economically, as in the case of Bosnia Herzegovina, but even more so, Russia's economic presence in Serbia focused predominantly on the energy sector. A turning point of the decade was the South Stream Project, planned since 2005 but then closed in 2013: the project which should have connected Russia to the rest of Europe through a network of pipelines, passing through the Serbian territory. However, Russia's political and economic presence in the country is also represented by the Russian state-owned *Gazprom*. Since 2008, the national company gained the monopoly of the Serbian oil industry by acquiring a controlling stake of the Serbian energy oil and gas giant Naftna Industrija Srbije (NIS) via a subsidiary and by the

acquisition of the Serbian Beopetrol by the Russian Lukoil (Bechev 2019). On this occasion, some critiques saw a political repayment for Russia's diplomatic support over Kosovo (ivi). At the cultural level, a leading role continued to be played by the Orthodox Church and by the persistent information campaigns, mostly aimed at undermining the EU image in the country.

3.3 Turkey's foreign policy actions from the 1990s to 2013

3.3.1 Turkey's foreign policy actions from the 1990s to 2003.

TURKEY'S FOREIGN POLICY ACTIONS FROM THE 1990S TO THE ARRIVAL TO POWER OF AKP IN 2002				
	TURKEY-EU	TURKEY -WESTERN BALKANS	TURKEY -BOSNIA HERZGOVINA	TURKEY -SERBIA
POLITICAL	<p>The end of bipolarity as opportunity to achieve regional significance.</p> <p>-1995: the EU-Turkey Customs Union</p> <p>-1999: Turkey acquires EU official candidate status</p>	<p>Balkans at the centre of Turkey's FP</p> <p>-Bosnia and Kosovo conflicts as turning points</p> <p>-Mediator role between North Macedonia and Greece for the name dispute</p>	<p>Special relation...with the Muslim population</p> <p>-Special focus on the Muslim population in the country after the war.</p> <p>-Humanitarian assistance</p> <p>-Cultural heritage and education.</p>	<p>From troubled relations to distension.</p> <p>-1992: Turkey pushes for a resolution clearly indicating Serbs as aggressors of Muslim population in BIH</p> <p>2000: change of path. Turkey as regional mediator</p>
ECONOMIC	<p>Rapprochement and expansion</p> <p>-1995: the EU-Turkey Customs Union</p> <p>-FDI</p>	<p>Regional focus...yet not predominant economic actor</p> <p>-Turkey as 4th actor in the region</p>	<p>Turkey is no top economic partner.</p> <p>-Investments in Ottoman cultural heritage and education</p> <p>-10TH foreign investor in BIH</p>	N.A.
CULTURAL	<p>Turkey as regional cultural soft power actor</p> <p>-Focus on religious and cultural ties with neighbouring countries</p>	<p>Turkey as regional cultural soft power actor</p> <p>-Focus on religious Schools, Universities, and cultural centres</p>	<p>Soft power actor</p> <p>- Focus on religious Schools, Universities, and cultural centres</p>	N.A.

Table 3.5. Turkey's foreign policy actions from the 1990s to 2003

Alongside China and Russia, Turkey is another extremely significant non-EU foreign actor present in the region of the Western Balkans and the case studies. Turkey has a long evolving and complex history with the EU and a nuanced and complex history in the Balkans, which originates from its Ottoman past. It consequently took the role, historically but also in the present day, of a key ‘Other’ in the definition of European identity (Morozov & Rumelili, 2012; Neumann and Welsh, 1991).

As for the other introduced foreign actors, Turkey underwent significant evolutions from the 1990s to the start of the Juncker Commission. A key turning point can be identified with the arrival to power of an influential leader, or party: in Turkey’s case, the arrival to power of Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2003.

Over the 1990s, Turkey took advantage of the geopolitical significance gained during the Cold War and its aftermath to redefine its strategic approach: the key objective, which remained the same over the next decades, was to become a regional hegemon. The necessity to exploit its geopolitical location was due to several events, like the dissolution of the Soviet Union and former Yugoslavia, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the following Gulf War. All these developments highlighted how determinant regional dynamics were for the country’s foreign policy (Baracani, Çalıklı 2019, 89). Under the leadership of the then-in-power “Motherland” party, Turkey pursued a more active foreign policy, characterised by more active engagement in the neighbourhood and by a progressive but decisive commitment to the West, especially in relations with the EU (ivi, p. 88)⁶³. In 1995, the EU and Turkey also signed the first EU-Turkey Custom Union.

At the regional level, and especially after the conflicts in former Yugoslavia, the region of the Western Balkans became of crucial importance for Turkey’s foreign policy. Turkey did participate in humanitarian operations within the framework of NATO during the Bosnia and Kosovo conflicts, with a special eye on the Muslim population of the region (Vračić, 2016). It also proposed itself as a mediator in regional bilateral and trilateral disputes, first in the case of Croatia, Serbia and Bosnia, later in the case of

⁶³ Turkey had sought the path of EU membership since 1987.

Macedonia (currently North Macedonia) and Greece (ivi). Furthermore, since the beginning of the 2000s, the Balkans became the fulcrum of Turkey's foreign policy, towards which the country started applying its "zero problems with neighbours" and "kin people" approach. This involved a strengthening of relations with the Muslim populations of the neighbourhood and, especially in the case of the Balkans, a revival of the shared Ottoman heritage (Cagaptay 2014).

The case study country level

Bosnia Herzegovina

Among the countries of the Western Balkans region, Bosnia Herzegovina was the main target of the Turkish foreign policy relaunch in the 1990s, which mostly built on Turkey's Ottoman heritage⁶⁴ (Populari 2014, 6). The shared Ottoman past became the elected tool of Turkey's foreign policy towards the country. During the 1990s, Turkey took advantage of the end of the Cold War and of its own geopolitical significance as a "pillow state" between East and West, to relaunch its regional image (Vračić, 2016; Populari 2014). The disintegration of Yugoslavia and the conflict in Bosnia Herzegovina witnessed the participation of Turkey in the international humanitarian intervention: Vračić reports the great sensitivity shown by the Turkish parliament during the 1992-1995 war on the necessity to assist Bosnian Muslims (2016, 17). However, the Turkish government chose nonetheless to intervene within the NATO framework, not willing to sever its ties with Serbia (Ibidem, 18).

After the conflict, in line with its foreign policy strategy, Turkey's involvement always targeted, politically and rhetorically, the "suffering Bosniaks" pursuing the objective of strengthening its ties with the "kin people (Populari 2014, 6). While this had a great echo among Muslim Bosnian citizens, all mentions of a 'golden Ottoman past' indeed had a different impact on Croatian and Serbian Bosnian citizens and further obstructed the appeasement of inter-ethnic relations.

At the economic level, besides said projects of humanitarian assistance like the after-Dayton Priority Reconstruction and Recovery Program (Vračić 2016, 18), Turkey focused its activism predominantly in the sector of culture and preservation of Ottoman cultural heritage, which had been heavily hit in the war. Despite this, however, according to the Bosnian Central Bank Turkey ranked tenth from 1994 to 2015 among foreign investors in the country (Central Bank of Bosnia Herzegovina 2016, in Vračić, 2016, 21).

⁶⁴ The Ottoman empire ruled the area of current Bosnia Herzegovina for around 500 years, from 1384 to 1879.

Serbia

Notwithstanding its predominant interest and focus on the Muslim population of the region, during the conflicts of the 1990s Turkey preserved its relations with Serbia. However, Turkey also pushed within the UN for a resolution indicating Serbs as the aggressors of Muslims in Bosnia Herzegovina (Vračić, 2016, 27). Things started to change after 2000 when Turkey launched its new regional strategy. Willing to act as a regional mediator, Turkey devolved significant efforts to the solution of regional disputes, by instituting bilateral and trilateral dialogue initiatives involving all actors in the region. However, as Serbia did not fall within the category of “kin” people, it did not constitute a privileged target for Turkey’s cultural diplomacy.

3.3.2. Turkey's foreign policy actions from 2003 to 2013.

TURKEY'S FOREIGN POLICY ACTIONS FROM THE ARRIVAL TO POWER OF AKP TO THE JUNCKER'S COMMISSION (2003-2013)				
	TURKEY-EU	TURKEY-WESTERN BALKANS	TURKEY -BOSNIA HERZGOVINA	TURKEY -SERBIA
POLITICAL/DIPLOMATIC	FM Ahmet Davutoglu and Turkey's strategic projection -Diplomatic activism oriented to resolution of regional disputes. -"Europeanisation" of foreign policy. "Ring of friends" strategy. -2005: accession talks start. -Stall in the integration process. -2011: Arab uprisings	Strategic dept and neo-Ottomanism -Focus on the Muslim population -Turkey as regional mediator	A Privileged relation? - 2009-2010: İstanbul declaration Trilateral consultation between Turkey, BiH and Serbia -Focus on the Muslim population -Alimentation of internal sectarian divisions.	Turkey as regional mediator - 2009-2010: İstanbul declaration trilateral consultation between Turkey, Bosnia Herzegovina and Serbia.
ECONOMIC	The rise of Turkey -economic expansion Turkey's role as an energy and transport hub (Cagaptay, 2014) - 2008-2009 : Euro-zone crisis: Turkey's economic bounces back	Mid-2000s: Balkans as center of Turkey's economic investments -Albania -Bosnia Herzegovina -Kosovo -North Macedonia	- 2010 : Bosnia and Herzegovina largest FDI-recipient country \$61 million FDI in 2009 -Turkish Airlines buys 49% percent of BH Airlines of Bosnia and Herzegovina. (The deal is cancelled soon afterwards)	N.A.
CULTURE/NARRATIVE	Turkey's projected image: from economic power to democracy promotion	Culture as tool of Soft power. -Opening of Cultural centres and financing of universities and schools; role of the media.	Cultural toolkit of Soft power: 2009: Yunus Emre Cultural Center of Sarajevo	N.A.

Table 3.6. Turkey's foreign policy actions from 2003 to 2013.

The arrival to power of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2003 and the start of Erdogan's presidency marked a turning point in Turkish contemporary foreign policy (Baracani, Çalıklı 2019; Cagaptay 2014). As with the Russian and the Chinese case, these turning points are marked by a domestic watershed: the arrival on the scene of game-changer leaders. In Turkey's case, Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Over this decade, Turkey faced several international challenges, among which were the stall in the EU integration process; the international and European economic crisis; and, ultimately, the Arab uprisings. All these international developments influenced and shaped Turkey's foreign policy, which turned from a commercially oriented approach (Aydıntaşbaş 2019) to a strive for regional power (Baracani, Çalıklı 2019), to democracy promotion (Baracani, Çalıklı 2019, 98).

Literature also agrees that since Erdogan's presidential career, the re-orientation of Turkey's foreign policy was predominantly shaped by the figure of the minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmet Davutoglu, who started his mandate in 2009. He is notoriously recognised as the creator of the "Strategic depth" 's doctrine (Davutoğlu 2001) ⁶⁵, and as the mind behind Turkey's strategic outreach to the neighbourhood. Under his leadership, from 2003 to 2013 Turkish foreign policy was characterized by fervent diplomatic activism, oriented to the resolution of regional disputes and the reach of economic interdependence. Along these lines, Cagaptay defines Erdogan's first presidency's goal as "to make Turkey great as a *stand-alone* power. First, in the Middle East and then globally" (Cagaptay, 2019, xvii).

In terms of Turkey-EU relations, Turkey continued the path of reforms required to satisfy the standard for EU accession: however, in the mid2000s the enlargement process suffered a halt. This was due to several reasons, among which were the growing nationalisation of the enlargement policy by EU Member states after the enlargement of 2004 and 2007; and the entry of Cyprus, despite its unsolved conflict with Turkey (Baracani, Çalıklı 2019, 92)

At the economic level, Turkey experienced a significant economic expansion (at

⁶⁵ The theory originates from Ahmet Davutoğlu's book, *Strategic depth: Turkish International Position* 2001, Küre: Istanbul

least until 2008). The EU remained its main economic partner, despite the financial crisis. However, the crisis considerably decreased EU attractiveness. Therefore, Turkey diversified its economic relations, looking especially toward the Mediterranean and the Middle East (Ibidem, 94). Turkey remained however a key partner for the EU as an “energy and transportation hub”, allowing the EU to be less reliant on partners such as Russia (Tocci 2011, 53). In 2010, Turkey’s economy showed positive signs of recovering from the global economic crisis, reaching a 9% growth (Vračić 2016, 12). This was also reflected in its foreign relations, providing positive leverage for Turkey’s international image and foreign policy objectives. At the cultural and narrative level, those were also the years when Turkey reshaped its international image: in contrast with the secular outlook of the Republic, the Justice and Development Party reshaped Turkey’s image domestically and abroad, taking Islam and Ottoman heritage as predominant traits in the narrative of the country.

The regional level: the Western Balkans

Over this decade, the relations between Turkey and the region of the Western Balkans strengthened. This was mainly materialised through the signature of bilateral agreements in commercial, economic, cultural, educational, industrial, and technical matters, including free trade and visa exemption (Ekinc 2014, 107). As already introduced, this new trend in Turkey's foreign policy took the shape of a revival of Turkey's historic roots in the region. Also, at the political level, the years 2009-2010 provided an important stage for Turkey's objective to become a key regional mediator: taking advantage of its presidency of the South-East European Cooperation process in 2009, Turkey mediated in regional disputes: one example was the trilateral consultation between Turkey, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia (ivi, 108).

In economic terms, Turkey's relation to the region flourished, by taking advantage of the "incredible bouncing back" of the country's economy from the economic crisis by 2010, marked by a 9% growth. Turkey's FDI towards the region increased over the analysed decade to reach around 10% of total FDI to the region. Most of the country's investments targeted Bosnia Herzegovina, North Macedonia (then FYROM), and Kosovo (Vračić 2016, 12). While this indeed marks a significant development compared to the previous decade, nonetheless Turkey's economic footprint in the region did not reach above 2%⁶⁶.

⁶⁶ However, this is not particularly relevant, especially if compared with other foreign actors like the EU and Russia (Holzner, Schwarzappel 2018, 15).

The case study countries-level: Turkey's activism in Bosnia Herzegovina and Serbia.

Bosnia Herzegovina

The years that run from 2003 to 2013 saw a significant increase in Turkey's activism in Bosnia Herzegovina. The country became the centre of Turkish activism in the region in the aftermath of the dissolution of Yugoslavia, and the relations between the two countries were declined especially in cultural terms, highlighting not only Ottoman heritage in Bosnia but also the significant presence of Bosnian migrants in Turkey (Populari, 2014). Furthermore, in line with regional trends, Turkey undertook a strong mediating role in regional disputes: in the case of Bosnia Herzegovina, the most relevant achievement of the decade was indeed the signature of the Istanbul Declaration, signed on the 24th of April 2010. This document was the output of the already mentioned trilateral negotiations among Turkish, Bosnian and Serbian Heads of State, and addressed the difficult relations between Bosnia Herzegovina and Serbia in the aftermath of the Dayton Agreement in 1995, especially on the matter of Bosnia's territorial sovereignty. The Istanbul declaration was seen as a sign of commitment from both sides not to hinder each other's prospects on EU membership, as well as to settle urgent issues regarding borders and debt (Balkan Insight 2010).

At the economic level, in line with regional trends, Bosnia experienced an increase in Turkish foreign direct investments in the country, which reached in 2009 a record level of 61 million dollars, also due to the acquisition by Turkish Airlines of 49% of quotes of BIH Airlines (Vračić 2016, 12). However, in line with regional tendencies and despite this increase, data show that compared to other foreign actors, Turkey's investments did not match previous political expectations (Vračić, 2016). Somehow specular to Russia's activism in the country, notwithstanding the holistic rhetoric of Turkey's policies privileging Bosnia as a whole, Turkey's economic investments targeted predominantly the Muslim population and businesses located in the Federation of Bosnia Herzegovina. especially in the cultural sector, which, as already affirmed is the One example could be the case of *Yunus Emre Cultural Center*: the famous Turkish cultural youth centre, which opened in Sarajevo in 2009. Active in the field of education, culture, art, history, and youth field, it aims to "create awareness and get the

formation of cultural cohesion and consensus culture and to improve the socio-cultural relations between young people”⁶⁷, the Yunus Centre is one of the key Turkish socio-cultural activities in the country: none of its centres is located in Republika Srpska. Another key agency is TIKA, The Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency: like the Yunus Emre centre, it is predominantly located in Muslim contexts and mostly focuses on the restoration of Ottoman cultural heritage (Vračić 2016, 13).

Serbia

During the decade going from 2003 to 2013, Turkey’s approach to Serbia gradually changed. Even if the country did not fulfil the criteria for Davutoglu’s Strategic depth doctrine, Turkey nonetheless engaged with Serbia on different levels. This included as mentioned in the paragraph regarding Bosnia Herzegovina the settlement of territorial disputes and future cooperation between the two countries. The Istanbul Declaration of April 2010 was described at the time by the Serbian Delegation as a “new beginning”: Serbia, represented by President Tadić, committed to a full “respect of the territorial sovereignty of Bosnia Herzegovina” and to “not undertake any steps that would destabilize Bosnia-Herzegovina”, nor to “challenge its borders and its integrity, which would endanger the stability in the region”⁶⁸. At the economic and cultural-narrative level instead, the most remarkable development would be seen during the years of the Juncker Commission.

⁶⁷ The Yunus Emre Cultural Centre also belongs to the network of organizations constituting the *European Solidarity Corps* Network. More information can be found on the European Union’s website.

⁶⁸ Delegation of Serbia, “Statement by the Delegation of Serbia on the Summit of the Heads of State of Turkey, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia in Istanbul, 24 April 2010, on the occasion of the 808th meeting of the OSCE Permanent Council”, PC.DEL/370/10 7, May 2010

3.4 The foreign policy actions of China, Russia, and Turkey during the Juncker Commission. A multilevel analysis.

This final but crucial part of the chapter maps the foreign policy actions of China, Russia, and Turkey, during the period of the last EU institutional cycle. Each actor is analysed across three levels: the international level, analysing the main events and developments in each actor's foreign policy, and its relations with the EU; the regional level, reviewing the developments of each actor's foreign policy in the region of the Western Balkans; finally, the chapter analyses the role of each actor in the case studies. Furthermore, the analysis divides the foreign policy actions of China, Russia, and Turkey across different arenas: the political-diplomatic; the economic; and the cultural. This allows us to better identify: the areas where each actor predominates; where they juxtapose, if they do; and what implications their presence might have on the EU's foreign policy objectives, in the region and the case studies.

Table 3.6 illustrates the operation. The first analysed actor is China, followed by Russia and Turkey.

JUNCKER'S COMMISSION	NON-EU ACTORS' FOREIGN POLICY ACTIVISM IN THE WESTERN BALKANS AND THE CASE STUDIES OF BOSNIA HERZEGOVINA AND SERBIA					
	CHINA		RUSSIA		TURKEY	
	Regional level	Case study level	Regional level	Case study level	Regional level	Case study level
POLITICAL ARENA	<p>China as a soft power Actor</p> <p>-Belt and Road Initiative (BRI-OBOR) as a grand project</p> <p>-17+ 1 Platform.</p>	<p>BIH: Investments predominantly in infrastructures, in RS.</p> <p>Serbia: Non-recognition of Kosovo's declaration of independence</p> <p>-Joint military exercitations</p>	<p>Disturbing/disruptive role</p> <p>-Support to nationalist parties/leaders: e.g. Montenegro, North Macedonia</p>	<p>BIH: political support for Dodik's presidency.</p> <p>Serbia: non-recognition of Kosovo; Joint military exercitations</p>	<p>- Reviving historical and cultural links with the region</p> <p>-general support for the WB-EU integration process</p> <p>-From 2016: no new strategy.</p>	<p>BIH: support to cultural and religious institutes.</p> <p>Serbia: Strategic partnership</p> <p>-2017: Erdogan visits Serbia and is "warmly welcomed".</p>
ECONOMIC ARENA	<p>BRI: corruption allegations</p> <p>-2014-2017: Kicevo-Ohrid highway Scandal (North Macedonia)-</p> <p>2016: Highway Serbia-Montenegro's scandal</p>	<p>BIH: BRI specifics: lignite and thermal power plants</p> <p>Serbia: BRI specifics: highways, railways, and power plants;</p> <p>-17+1 or 16+1+1: towards a special relationship?</p>	<p>General decline</p> <p>FDI:5ft foreign investor in the region.</p> <p>Trade: Russia makes less than 5% of the total trade of the region (but second after the EU).</p>	<p>BIH: declining trends. Revenues of State-owned Russian companies are up to 42% of the total revenue of all foreign companies.</p> <p>Serbia: declining trends</p>	<p>ODA: BIH and NM.</p> <p>-Infrastructures</p> <p>-Restoration of cultural heritage</p>	<p>BIH: 2019 free trade agreement.</p> <p>Serbia:Infrastructures: Belgrade-Montenegro highway 445km</p>
CULTURAL ARENA	<p>Culture as a tool of soft power</p> <p>-Opening of Confucius institutes in Serbia; Bosnia</p>	<p>BIH: Opening of Confucius Institute of Sarajevo (2015) and Banja Luka (2017).</p> <p>Serbia: opening of Confucius Institute at the</p>	<p>- Misinformation campaigns</p>	<p>- Misinformation campaigns</p>	<p>Culture and religion as a tool of soft power</p> <p>-Role of TK's state-owned media and soap operas</p> <p>-Yunus Emre Cultural centres</p>	<p>BIH: 2019 opening of Yunus Emre Institute in Tuzla.</p> <p>Serbia: 2019, the opening of Yunus Emre Institute¹⁴⁴ in Belgrade</p>

Table 3.7. Non-EU actors' foreign policy activism towards the Western Balkan region and the case studies of Bosnia Herzegovina and Serbia between 2014 and 2019

3.4.1 China

CHINA'S FOREIGN POLICY ACTIONS FROM 2014 TO 2019 (Juncker's Commission)				
	CHINA-EU	CHINA-WESTERN BALKANS	CHINA-BOSNIA HERZGOVINA	CHINA-SERBIA
POLITICAL/DIPLOMATIC	Multi-level relations -Int. dossiers: cooperation -Trade: competition -System of government: rivalry	China as Soft power Actor -Belt and Road Initiative as grand project -17+ 1 Platform	Politics of non-intervention in internal affairs -Investments target predominantly the infrastructure sector in RS	Overtaking Russia as Serbia's "big ally" -Non-recognition of Kosovo declaration of independence -Joint military exercitations
ECONOMIC	Strategic Rivalry -The EU as biggest China's trading partner - BRI as grand project -17+1 Platform: divide and conquest? -2016: Cosco acquires majority of the Piraeus port	BRI: corruption allegations and lack of transparency -2014-2017: Kicevo-Ohrid highway Scandal (North Macedonia) -2016: Highway Serbia-Montenegro's scandal	Focus on infrastructures -FDI -Trade agreements -BRI specifics: lignite and thermal power plants	A privileged relation? -BRI specifics: highways, railways, and power plants up to 5.5 billion euros investments -17+1 or 16+1+1: towards a special relation?
CULTURAL	Culture as strategic tool of soft power -Confucius Institutes -Cultural centres	Culture as tool of soft power -Opening of Confucius institutes in: Serbia; Bosnia.	Culture as tool of soft power -Opening of Confucius Institute of Sarajevo (2015) and Banja Luka (2017)	Culture as tool of soft power -Opening of Confucius Institute at the universities of Novi Sad (2014)

Table. 3.8. China's foreign policy actions during the Juncker Commission (2014-2019)

The International level: China's foreign policy actions towards the EU

The years of the Juncker Commission (2014-2019) cover the most significant developments in China's foreign policy actions: internationally and towards the EU. Those are the years that witnessed the affirmation of China at the international level, which began much before the turn of the century. Among the most significant developments and events can be found the strengthening of China's position in Asia; the start of the ambitious Belt and Road (BRI) Initiative; the fierce repression of the protests in Hong Kong and the allegedly massive human rights violations against the Uighurs citizen in Xinyang⁶⁹; China's increased interest in the Arctic⁷⁰; finally, the dramatic increase of the tensions with the Trump administration. The relevance of China as a foreign policy actor is confirmed by the growing academic research and policy reports, which now address the phenomenon with one key question in mind: is China rising to rule within the framework of liberal values, or is it proposing a valid alternative to the liberal model? (Brown 2017; Buzan 2010; Ikenberry 2008; Glaser, Medeiros 2007). Furthermore, China's rise and its consequences for the future of a liberal multilateral system also constitute a point of academic debate (Dian 2021; De Graaf, Van Apeldoorn 2018; Brown 2017).

Within this framework, China's foreign policy strategy towards the EU

⁶⁹ The issue of Uighurs imprisonment camps in the province of Xinyang was first exposed by the New York Times and The International Consortium for Investigative Journalism in 2019. The ICIJ's report is available here

⁷⁰ For a detailed analysis of China's strategy and interest in the Arctic region, see Marc Lanteigne, *China's Emerging Arctic Strategies: Economics and Institutions*, Institute of International Affairs-IIA Centre for Arctic Policy Studies, University of Iceland, 2014; Fengshi Wu (2016) "China's Ascent in Global Governance and the Arctic," *Vestnik of Saint-Petersburg University. Ser. 6. Political science. International relations*, 2016 (2): 118–126.

changed: the launch of ambitious projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013 and the 17+1 Platform (now 16+1) in 2014, together with a general lack of reciprocity in access to China's internal market, affected China's relations with the EU, which consequently modified its partnership's framework with China. In terms of EU official documents, the most significant and explicative documents are the Joint Communication Elements for a New EU Strategy on China (European Commission 2016); the Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy (EEAS 2016); and the Joint Communication EU-China, Strategic Outlook (European Commission 2019c). All these documents consider China as a crucial partner at the international level but do nonetheless acknowledge the shift in China's global position from a developing country to a "key global actor and leading technological power" (European Commission, 2019c, 1).

The Political arena

During the years of the Eurozone crisis, China had strived and succeeded to be considered a reliable partner by the EU. However, during the considered period EU-China relations remarkably shifted: the launch of ambitious projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013 and the 17+1 Platform in 2014, added to a general lack of reciprocity in the access to China's internal market significantly affected bilateral relations. Consequently, during the considered period, the EU modified the framework of its partnership with China to take into account all these different nuances. The most significant and explicative documents of this period are the 2016 Joint Communication Elements for a New EU Strategy on China; the EU Global Strategy (2016); and the Joint Communication EU-China, Strategic Outlook of March 2019. From these documents can be evinced the EU's urgency to multi-face its cooperation with China at different levels: by considering China as a crucial partner at the international level, thus cooperating on global dossiers like climate change. However, the documents also acknowledge the occurred shift in China's position in the world and its uneven and contradictory business model: therefore, this makes China a 'rival' of the EU in matters of the economy and

political system (European Commission, 2019c, 1).

The EU Strategic Outlook of 2016 was the first document that recognised the complexity of the multi-level reality that China and the EU engage with (European Commission 2016)⁷¹. There the EU declined its relations with China on different levels and adopted a more realist approach to bilateral relations. China was identified as a crucial partner on international dossiers such as the Paris Agreement on Climate Change; as a competitor in international trade; and as a strategic rival in the neighbourhood and values (ibidem)⁷².

Furthermore, the increase in the economic linkages between China, some EU Member States, and some EU candidate countries impacted the already hobbling unity and consistency of the EU. As mentioned, during the years of the Juncker Commission, the Chinese initiatives that most influenced China-EU relations in the European continent were undoubtedly the massive infrastructure project *Belt and Road Initiative* (2013) and the creation of the *17+1* (originally 16+1) *Platform* in 2012. Inaugurated before the analysed timeline, they became fully operative during the considered years. Both initiatives target countries belonging to Central, Southern and South-Eastern Europe and involves both EU member states, EU candidate countries and prospective candidate countries.

When looking at EU official documents, this concern appears evident: the above-mentioned EC Communication on EU-China Relations of 2019 (European Commission 2019c) provides clear hints. The stress on the need to provide a ‘unified front’, albeit necessary, gave the impression that the growing bilateral relations between China and the Member States might turn problematic for the EU. Whereas a significant part of concerns, even coming from involved EU Member States, remains of economic nature⁷³, the consequences of unequal economic relations, market access, and China’s

⁷¹ Also, see Council Conclusions on EU Strategy on China of 18 July 2016

⁷² This has also been confirmed in interviews with EU officials.

⁷³ European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS), ‘China, the 16+1 Platform and the EU’, September 2018.

opaque business' standards might also prove problematic in several aspects. First, for the legitimacy of the EU model and EU's normative influence on CEEC countries and south-east Europe; and for the EU's unity and cohesion (European Parliamentary Research Service-EPRS 2018; Pavličević 2018). Finally, the European Commission affirmed on page four of its Strategic Outlook of 2019 that given China's increasing presence in the world this "should be accompanied by greater responsibilities for upholding the rules-based international order, as well as greater reciprocity, non-discrimination, and openness of its system" (European Commission, 2019, pg.4). At the same time, the Commission plainly stated its worries about the Member States' individualistic behaviour. As affirmed on the following page: "in cooperating with China, all Member States, individually and within sub-regional cooperation frameworks, such as the 16+1 format⁵, have a responsibility to ensure consistency with EU law, rules and policies" (pg.5).

The Economic arena

During the Juncker's Commission, China's presence experienced growth around the globe, becoming the second world's largest economy-the first trader in exports-covering 16.1% of the global share of international exports, and the third country for imports, covering 13.1% of the global share of international imports (Eurostat 2021). The investments in infrastructures and raw materials in the African continent continued, as well as those in Latin America and South-Eastern and Central Europe. Moreover, its partnership with Russia strengthened, as Russia started relying heavily on exports of gas and weapons to China in reaction to the imposition of economic sanctions after 2014. While this partnership did not constitute a source of worry for the EU at the time of its signature in 2008, as the volume of trade remained limited and both actors privileged their relations with the EU and US (Giusti 2013), the developments of the last EU institutional cycle might have provided more solid ground for the future of Sino-Russian relations (Morini 2020).

In terms of relations with Europe and the EU, China featured over the

analysed timeline as the third actor in the amount of foreign trade and investments. For China, the EU continues to be the largest trading partner. China exports to and imports from the EU predominantly machines, vehicles, and manufactured products (Eurostat 2021). According to Eurostat Statistics, by breaking down the trade volume per EU Member State, it appears that the EU's top exporter to China is, in line with the Russian case, Germany, followed by the Netherlands (Ibidem). In terms of Chinese FDI toward Europe and the EU, the years of the Juncker Commission witnessed a decrease in investments if compared to the antecedent cycle, especially considering FDI towards CEEC countries (European Parliamentary Research Service-EPRS 2018, 4). Those countries are also the most involved in the two big projects of the Belt and Road Initiative, inaugurated in 2013; and the 16+1 (now 17+1) Platform. The two initiatives are connected inasmuch as the 16+1 forum would ideally increment China's political-economic influence in the region, paving the way for BRI. As reported by the European Parliamentary Research Service, while involved CEEC countries enthusiastically joined such projects in 2012 expecting a rise in Chinese FDI and reciprocity in access to the trade market, they quickly had to reevaluate their expectations (5).

Furthermore, the Sofia Summit of 2018 constituted a significant step in acknowledging the unbalance between China and concerned countries, as for the first time, "the summit guidelines contained indirect CEEC criticism of China's approach as regards the format's resource-intensive mode of cooperation and the lack of tangible economic results for CEECs" (Ibidem). This notably echoed already mentioned concerns on the potential political implications of Chinese's investments in the EU: to name a couple, the 2016's acquisition of the majority shares of the Piraeus Port by the Chinese state-owned company COSCO in Greece; and the negotiations with the other EU Member States like Italy, which in 2019 signed with China a Memorandum of Understanding amid strong internal, European and Transatlantic concerns (Sciorilli, Borrelli 2019).

Finally, both initiatives involve, among other key aspects, the realization

of key technological infrastructures. These last became over the years the main point of contention and competition among world powers because of the implication of such technologies for personal rights, privacy, and information safety. This element is very much present in EU-China negotiations, as among the crucial developments of the years of the Juncker Commission the role of technology giants such as Huawei, stood out, which become a hot topic not only within the fracture with the Trump administration but also within the EU, with the Member States reacting in a scattered and uncoordinated way to the power of China's tech infrastructures.

The Cultural arena

In the cultural diplomatic arena for the analysed timeline, China continued its activities as a soft power actor and projected its image and narrative through its cultural centres present in the EU Member States, as well as through its Confucius Institutes (Tonchev 2020).

The regional Level: China's foreign policy actions toward the Western Balkans

In the Western Balkans and generally in South-East Europe, China became one of the most significant foreign actors. Especially initiatives such as the Belt and Road (BRI) and the 17+1 platform give the idea of the extent of China's turn of intention in its foreign policy, striving to reach a global presence. In the Western Balkans, this was particularly felt due to the involvement of many countries of the region on the route of the BRI and their participation in the 17+1 forum. In line with its foreign policy strategy, China exercises its activism in the region through economic means.

In the region, China figures as the third non-EU foreign policy actor per FDI and trade relevance, after the EU and Russia, and in some instances (for example in Kosovo and Bosnia-Herzegovina), after Turkey. China also accounts for less than 3% of the total FDI to the region (Holzner, Schwarzhappel 2018). China's activism in the region concretizes mostly in the realization of highways and railways in grandiose projects that sometimes raised concerns about their economic viability: not only in the case studies, as it will be seen later in the section; but also in Montenegro and Macedonia, where the investments linked to infrastructural projects have been met with concerns and accusations of opaque procedures when they did not result in open debt scandals (Barkin, Vasovic 2018).

As confirmed by interviewed EU officials, Montenegro is the recurring example of China's unorthodox way of conducting business: the often-cited exemplary case is the Bar-Boljare motorway, part of a wider infrastructural project connecting Montenegro and Serbia. A grandiose project for which the Montenegrin government heavily indebted itself in 2016, to the extent that concerns were raised within the EU on whether helping the country would establish a dangerous precedent in China-EU relations, since, as reported by a Commission spokesperson, "the EU has concerns over the socioeconomic and financial effects some of China's investments can have. There is the risk of macro-economic imbalances and debt-dependency" (Strupczewski 2021). Another quite cited case is the Kicevo-Ohrid highway in North Macedonia,

which underwent a huge scandal exactly during the years of the Juncker's Commission. In addition, to shed light on the mismanagement of public money and on the networks of corruption in North Macedonia, such a scandal also highlighted the complexity of China's involvement in the country. The highway project started in 2013, with an agreement between the Skopje government and the Chinese Sinohydro Corporation LTD. As highlighted by Makocki and Nechev (2017), the project was financed for 85% of its value by a loan from the state-owned China Exim Bank and executed by Sinohydro Corporation LTD, one of the companies blacklisted by the World Bank (2). The greatest critique of China's business model in the Balkans is that, contrarily to the EU's good praxis for transparent public procurement, Chinese companies tend to be awarded contracts directly by the local governments, rather than going through a competitive bidding process. This would not only create setbacks on governance and the set of EU standards required from candidate countries (of which North Macedonia is a front runner) and prospective candidates to proceed along the route of EU integration but would also pose significant problems to the EU in case of Member States heavy indebted to third actors.

The case study countries-level: China's foreign policy actions towards Bosnia Herzegovina and Serbia

Bosnia Herzegovina

Compared to some of its neighbours, Bosnia Herzegovina is only limitedly affected by China's activism in the region. However, China's economic footprint on the country's GDP is still significant. In line with its general foreign policy approach, China does not take a formal political formal stand in the internal political affairs of Bosnia Herzegovina. However, like Russia, China focuses the vast majority of its investments on Republika Srpska.

According to the study of 2021 by the Centre for the Study of Democracy on the Chinese economic footprint in Central and Eastern Europe, China's FDI towards the country grew steadily since the start of Juncker's Commission. Especially from 2015, it raised above the 500million dollars per year (Centre for the Study of Democracy-CSD 2021, 3). As for Chinese investments in the rest of the region, those are focused on a few key sectors such as transportation, energy, manufacturing, and telecommunications.

In Bosnia Herzegovina, this takes the shape of lignite and thermal power plants, funded through intergovernmental loans within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative. According to the above-mentioned study, even if China's investments in the country are relatively smaller than the ones targeting Serbia, Macedonia or Montenegro, still Bosnia Herzegovina's debt to China as a share of GDP reaches circa 16% (Ivi, 5). In comparison, according to the study, Serbia's debt as a share of GDP reaches 6.5%. In the region, this makes Bosnia Herzegovina's level of exposure to China only second to Montenegro.

In terms of cultural soft power tools, Bosnia Herzegovina falls in line with neighbouring countries: however, the years of the Jucker's Commission witnessed the official opening of the first Confucius Institute in the country. The first opening was in Sarajevo, in 2015; the second was in Banja Luka, Republika Srpska, in 2017.

Serbia

Among the countries in the region, Serbia appears to be the one with the most effective political and economic ties to the Asian power. While the roots of such relations are to be found in China's support to Serbia over Kosovo's recognition (reciprocated by Serbia's support to China over the Taiwan and Hong Kong dossiers), during the last EU institutional cycle Serbia and China grew closer, politically, culturally, and economically.

This is evincible from several elements: from the increased importance China gained in Vučić's public speeches; to the warm welcome reserved for China's ambassador to Serbia, Li Manchang in 2018, on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the Progressive Party of Serbia (SNS). Moreover, in 2019 the two countries started a series of joint military training: in the same year, Serbia also purchased from China an FK-3 missile defence system (Vasovic, Heritage 2020). Because of this, Serbia has been described as "China's open door to the Balkans", while it was also remarked how the growing involvement of China in the country might constitute an apparent detriment to Serbia's historic alliance with Russia.

In economic terms, during the considered period China's presence in the country increased. International trade data for Serbia show that China was the country's fourth-largest trading partner in 2016 and the second-largest import originator (Centre for the Study of Democracy-CSD 2018). According to the study by the Centre for the Study of Democracy, China's FDI towards Serbia during the years of the analysed timeline grew significantly, reaching the top of 2 billion dollars in 2018 (CSD, 3). The main sources of economic agreements between the two countries were, again, the key projects of the Belt and Road Initiative and the 17+1 forum. Particularly, this last saw Serbia among the most proactive and China-oriented countries on the platform.

Within the BRI, Serbia was involved especially in the infrastructure field: highways, railways, and power plants being Belgrade a crucial logistic point within the Piraeus-Budapest trainline (Fardella, Prodi 2018). At the same time,

however, Serbia started experiencing the lack of reciprocity that characterizes China's business approach to the region. Data shows how China did not feature even in the top ten destinations for Serbian exports. In fact, the EU remained by far the largest investor and trade partner of the country (Rudic 2017).

Finally, in terms of China's cultural soft power activism towards Serbia, the picture does not differ much from other countries: most of China's efforts in this regard are concentrated in the Confucius Institutes, Chinese classrooms, and cultural centres (Tonchev 2020). During the analysed timeline, in addition to the first Confucius Institute of Belgrade, which opened in 2007, a new centre was opened in the city of Novi Sad, within the university.

3.4.2 Russia

RUSSIA'S FOREIGN POLICY ACTIONS FROM 2014 TO 2019 (Juncker's Commission)				
	INTERNATIONAL LEVEL: RUSSIA-EU	REGIONAL LEVEL: RUSSIA-WESTERN BALKANS	CASE STUDY I: RUSSIA-BOSNIA HERZGOVINA	CASE STUDY II: RUSSIA-SERBIA
POLITICAL/DIPLOMATIC	A Geopolitical drive? -2014: Crimea Annexation and Ukraine Crisis -2015: Military intervention in Syria -Intervention in the Libyan conflict	Disruptive role -Support to irrident and nationalist parties/leaders: e.g. Montenegro, North Macedonia	Priority: to obstacle NATO Enlargement; -Targeted support to Republika Srpska and Dodik's presidency	Priority: to obstacle NATO Enlargement; to slow down the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue -Support to Kosovo's issue. -2019: Free-trade agreement with the Euro-Asiatic Economic Union -Joint military exercitations
ECONOMIC	Rupture...yet cooperation -2014: EU Sanctions -FDI: 235.2 billion euros of EU FDI in 2018 -Trade: Russia exports up to the 50% of EU's total oil and gas need (Eurostat, 2019); 4th EU trading partner; 4th exports destination of EU goods (85.3 billion euros in 2018)	General decline -FDI: Russia is the 5th foreign investor in the region-perhaps 7th in the future -Trade: Russia makes less than 5% of the total trade of the region (but second after the EU)	Declining trends -Significant losses in oil refineries towards the end of the cycle -Trade: revenues of State-owned Russian companies up to 42% of total revenue of all foreign companies	Energy and bank monopoly stills stands...yet declining trends. -FDI: less than 5% of total FDI to the country; -Local companies' dependence on: raw materials import; gas-supply accumulated debt; on Russia-controlled banks loan
CULTURAL	- Misinformation campaigns	- Misinformation campaigns	-Misinformation campaigns	-Misinformation campaigns

Table 3.9. Russia's Foreign Policy actions during the Juncker's Commission (2014-2019)

The International Level. Russia's foreign policy actions toward the EU

The period of the Juncker Commission-2014-2019 witnessed the official turn of assertiveness in Russia's foreign policy. The literature identifies the Russian annexation of Crimea as a turning point. This happened in the wake of the decision by the former Ukrainian president Yanukovich to join the Euro-Asiatic Economic Union over the Association Agreement with the EU and the following outburst of protests in Maidan square in Kyiv (Morini 2020; Bechev 2020, 2019, 2015; Casier 2018, 2017, 2016). The annexation of Crimea and the consequent war in Eastern Ukraine was then followed by increased Russian presence in the Middle East and North Africa: first by the military intervention in the Syrian conflict in 2015 at the side of the long-time ally Syrian President Bashar al-Asad; then in the Libyan conflict. Russia's revendication for a prominent international role is also present in the speeches of Russian foreign affairs minister Lavrov, where he portrayed Russia's presence in the MENA region as an act of performing a mediating, 'guardian' of regional stability role. He also pointed out the inefficacy of the EU in preserving such stability and the need to "renounce the policy of containment, the faith in one's own infallibility, the practice of unilateral actions and "zero-sum" games" (Lavrov 2020). During the considered period, Russia reaffirmed its presence in the African continent, with growing interests in raw materials and energy (including civilian nuclear power) (Ramani 2020; Gerrit, Suchkov, 2015). Russia was also confirmed as a significant player, in the Arctic region. While there is an open debate about the consistency of Russia's economic weight, undoubtedly Russia inaugurated with the Ukraine crisis a new period of international presence in the hot spots of the world.

In terms of Russia's relations with the EU, Juncker's commission witnessed a rapid deterioration, while a "peak of mistrust" was confirmed by the EU officials (EU officials, 3,5 2020). The scholarly analysis openly discussed whether Putin's administration acted following a geopolitical-driven interpretation of international relations, or was more influenced by domestic

consensus needs. The analysis reached mixed results (Bechev 2020, 2019; Ramani 2020; Casier 2020; Krastev 2015). What was agreed however is that the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014 brought for the first time Russia and the EU close to the possibility of an open confrontation (Casier 2017).

Soon after the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis, the EU approved a set of economic sanctions and the Strategic Partnership with Russia was suspended. However, not all fields of cooperation were affected by the sanctions: as reported by Casier, from 2015 to 2017 the EU augmented the budget for Erasmus+ with Russia to almost 80 million EUR, and in the period going from 2015 to 2017, almost 11,000 Russian and EU students participated in Erasmus+ exchanges (Casier 2020, 532). Over the same period, 90 Jean Monnet projects were awarded to Russian institutions (European External Action Service 2017). Another significant element that took shape during the years of the Juncker Commission is the Sino-Russian partnership (Morini 2020).

The economic arena: rupture, yet cooperation

As mentioned, over the analysed timeline Russia consolidated its economic ties with rising powers such as China, as well as its presence in Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa. Especially the partnership with China captured the attention of most observers, as it occurred in the wake of souring relations between Russia, the EU, and the US. However, the relationship between China and Russia during that period grew very asymmetrically and was mostly based on Russia's need to balance its oil and gas exports, heavily affected by the economic sanctions, and China's position as the biggest oil importer in the world (Charap et al., 2017). According to the Directorate-General for Trade of the European Commission, in 2019 China became the second country after the EU27 to export to Russia (European Commission 2021).

In terms of relations with the EU, the biggest economic event affecting Russia's domestic and foreign policy were the sanctions of 2014, which continued for the whole duration of the analysed timeline. Framed in the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) to supposedly "bring about a change in policy or activity by the target country, entities or individual", economic sanctions fall within the tools of the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy, which aims is to promote: "peace, democracy and the respect for the rule of law, human rights and international law" (Council of the European Union 2014). EU sanctions were supposed to work as an incentive for the implementation of the Minsk Agreements and articulated on different levels, targeting several Russian economic sectors: energy, finance, defence, and dual-use goods (European Council 2014; Council of the European Union 2019). Furthermore, they also targeted individuals and entities through assets concerning "funds and economic resources owned or controlled by targeted individuals or entities" and visa bans (Council of the European Union 2014).

This notwithstanding, the efficacy of sanctions is widely debated. Some

literature raises the question of whether, beyond the high-level diplomacy stall, EU-Russia relations were continuing to follow an ambiguous business-as-usual approach, partially conflictual, and partially cooperative (Casier 2020). The sanctions indeed had an economic impact on the country, because of Russia's dependence on EU energy imports. However, when looking into statistics provided by Eurostat, it is possible to see that EU foreign direct investments in Russia reached the amount of 235.2 billion euros in 2018. In that year, Russia exported up to 50% of the total EU need for oil and gas and was the fourth exports destination of EU goods (€85.3 billion in 2018), the 3rd largest source of goods imports (€168.3 billion in 2018) and the fourth trading partner (Eurostat 2019). Furthermore, Eurostat statistics underline how this happened despite the share of EU investments in total Russia's FDI stock indeed did decrease because of the sanctions: respectively, from 73% in 2014 to 64% in 2018. Consequently, while diplomatic relations suffered from rapid deterioration, the same cannot be entirely said for EU-Russia economic cooperation. However, despite the continuation of economic relations in some form, ultimately this did not positively affect what Casier called the chance of "defrosting of EU-Russia relations" (Casier 2020, 529).

The cultural aspect: misinformation campaigns

The years of Juncker's Commission witnessed increased efforts by Russia to consolidate domestically the rhetoric of Russia's identity as contra posed to the West widely conceived. At the same time, internationally Russia focused on projecting such an image while undermining the legitimacy of the "West". Domestically, but also outside Russia's borders, this strategy took the shape of structured (mis-)information campaigns, adjuvanted by media agencies and multilingual channels such as Sputnik and Russia Today, as well as social networks. Some authors, like Morini (2020), also remark how the internationalisation of Russian channels through the multilingual versions of Russia Today-available in Arabic, English, German, Serbian, Spanish and Russian- revealed key tools in fostering Russia's soft power abroad and were also identified as key instruments of information warfare (Morini, 2020).

One interesting example of this communication strategy was the framing of the annexation of Crimea to the Russian (and international) public: the referendum in the peninsula, unlawful by international law, was presented by Putin in March 2014 as a "triumph of democracy and popular will" (Putin 2014). On that occasion, Putin drew strongly from the narrative strenuously built over the years of his presidency, focusing on the shared history of Russia and the neighbouring populations. The speech reaches its peak with the sentence: "In people's hearts and minds, Crimea has always been an inseparable part of Russia" (Putin 2014). Another important element of that speech was the justification of Crimea's annexation as a response to the supposed "betrayal" of the 'West' (Ibidem). In the same speech he also, we can find portrayed people protesting in Kyiv as "peaceful demonstrators demanding the end of corruption", to be manoeuvred by "neo-fascist and neo-Nazi forces" (Ibidem). This shift in the use of communication by the Russian administration further cemented a path under construction since the first years of Putin's presidency, whose efforts aimed to label the West, and consequently

the EU, as an unreliable actor, for the preservation of stability in the EU-Russia shared neighbourhood.

The regional level: Russia's foreign policy actions towards the Western Balkans

In line with the trends established at the international level, the period of the Juncker Commission witnessed the official turn of assertiveness in Russia's foreign policy also in the region of the Western Balkans. Whereas some trends, like the political support for nationalist parties and leaders and as seen, the opposition to NATO enlargement were already present, Russia's annexation of Crimea opened again the question of Russia's influence in the region (Weber, Bassuener, 2014). Also in the EU circles, the 'Russian question' started to be perceived as more impellent (EU official, 3,5, 2020).

Bechev codifies Russia's foreign policy "toolbox" along three main approaches: *coercion*, *co-optation*, and *subversion*. In line with presented historical developments, in the region during the considered timeframe Russia appeared to pursue mainly two: co-optation and subversion. *Co-optation* predominantly involved the strengthening of existing alliances with local power holders. In line with the established trends, this especially targeted the Serbian and/or Christian orthodox population. *Subversion* took instead the shape of (dis)information campaigns and the open or covert support for radical anti-Western actors, parties and civic associations (Bechev 2020). However, the statistics, the literature and interviewed EU policy officials seem to agree that during the considered timeframe Russia in the Western Balkans pursued "no grand strategy beyond obstructing the expansion of NATO and the EU" (Bechev 2018). This is evincible by the fact that it pursued its objectives more through political linkages than through economic or military presence.

One example of Russia's activism in the region during the considered timeframe was its supposed inference in Montenegro's elections of 2016.

Russia-Montenegro relations had started to deteriorate in the mid-2000s. Tensions reached a peak when the Montenegrin government joined the list of sanctioning countries after the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. However, a study of 2020 on foreign authoritarian influences in the region identified the level of the political influence of Russia in the country as ‘high’ (Šabanović et al. 2020). One of the examples reported by the study is 2016’s “coup d’état”, in which the Russian government assumedly supported the main Montenegrin opposition party “Democratic Front-DF” in its protests. The event ended up in the conviction of two party members and the later electoral victory of pro-EU forces. Two Russian officials were indicted by the Special Prosecutor's Office as organizers. The study identified such events as an outspoken attempt to prevent Montenegro from continuing with the pro-Atlantist and pro-EU political path (45).

Russia’s priority of preventing NATO Enlargement does not find evidence only in Montenegro, but also in Bosnia Herzegovina: not only through the persistent political obstruction of the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue; but also through the support for the agenda of the nationalist Bosnian Serb Milorad Dodik’s, whose programme for the 2018’s presidential elections included the opposition to Bosnia’s NATO membership.

At the economic level, in terms of FDI stock, Russia accounted in 2018 for 11% inward FDI towards Montenegro, and 6% both to Serbia and Bosnia Herzegovina, but effectively, no-where else (Holzner, Schwarzhappel 2018). Russia constituted the second trade partner in the region after the EU, with trade accounting for almost less than 5% of the total regional trade. According to the same report, features do not differ much when considering trade relations: only 1.7% of Western Balkans exports went to Russia, compared to the 60% exported to the EU Member States. In line with the previous decades, the investments continued to be focused predominantly on Serbia and Republika Srpska in Bosnia Herzegovina in the field of energy, and in private real estate in Montenegro. Moreover, in Montenegro, despite the deterioration of political relations above-described, Russia continues to be the leading

foreign investor after the EU, reaching, between 2015 and 2019, the total inflow of FDI around EUR 320.4 million, constituting circa 8.6% of the total FDI (Šabanović et al. 2020, 55).

In the rest of the region Russian economic investments declined, or were maintained only for political objectives. An example is North Macedonia, which presented a significant energy dependence on Russia's imports and where Russia took advantage of the peculiar political situation of the country: North Macedonia (then FYROM) had until 2018 an open contest with Greece. Its consequences appeared to open a breach to third countries (Šabanović et al. 2020). Nevertheless, the population always remained in strong favour of the Atlantic and EU perspective and foreign non-EU influence, including Russian, remained circumscribed.

Over the analysed timeline, the bolder approach undertaken by Russia in its foreign policy, especially in the information and communication field, could be witnessed also at the regional level. As in the previous decades, the main tool for Russia's cultural soft power in most of the Western Balkans remained the Christian Orthodox Church. However, Russia's news agencies such as *Russia Today* and *Sputnik Serbia*, and *Russia Beyond the Headlines* (RBTH), as well as online social media gained during the considered period an important role. According to his contribution to the European Union Institute for Security Studies, Jonsson found that these tools were used in misinformation campaigns and repeatedly employed to punish, disrupt and disinform (Jonsson 2018). Besides the mentioned media outlets *Sputnik* and *Russia Today*, which had their special stronghold in Serbia, in Montenegro Russia's disinformation campaigns also took the shape of proper cyber-attacks and cyber espionage, explicitly targeting civil servants (Jonsson 2018, 86). This led observers to believe the Western Balkans to be the next front of Russia's cyber engagement abroad. This would serve the Russian administration's priority to undermine the EU and NATO's image in the area while minimising its efforts and maximising its impact (Jonsson 2018).

*The case study level Russia's foreign policy actions toward Bosnia
Herzegovina and Serbia*

Bosnia Herzegovina.

Whereas Bosnia Herzegovina falls behind other countries in the region like Serbia or Montenegro in the significance of Russian presence, some relevant aspects are worth mentioning. In line with the previous decade, also during the years of the Juncker's Commission in Bosnia Herzegovina, Russia's economic focus layed predominantly in Republika Srpska (RS), the Serbian majority part of the country. This falls in line with the political support shown to Serbia on the legal status of Kosovo and with the discursive emphasis on the common religious bonds. Moreover, in line with the regional trend, during the period of the Juncker Commission, Russia's foreign policy to Bosnia Herzegovina maintained one priority: to obstacle the country in its path to joining NATO. This was pursued, as seen in other cases, by supporting specific candidates and nationalist parties which aligned more with Russia's interests.

In Bosnia Herzegovina, this took the shape of political support for the programme of Milorad Dodik, who was elected in 2018's to the tripartite presidency of the country as a representative of Republika Srpska. Dodik run in the elections with a programme specifically opposing the Bosnia NATO Action Plan, openly affirming his will to preserve his "friendship with Moscow as well as with Brussels" (Gotev 2020). Whilst it is true that for domestic reasons Russia does not look to separatist movements with benevolence (as proved by its stand over Kosovo), by supporting Dodik Russia still saw a means to also obstacle, the EU and NATO's interests in the country.

At the economic level, the *Centre for the Study of Democracy* identifies Russia as the most significant foreign investor in Republika Srpska (Centre for the Study of Democracy-CSD 2018). The study pointed out that from 2005 to 2016, Russia's FDI in the country accounted for around EUR 547 million, and that Russia's economic footprint increased from 2.6 % in 2006 to around 5.7 % in 2015, in an otherwise shrinking economy" (3). Moreover, the same think

tank positions the revenues of state-owned Russian companies in the entity as “up to the 42% of the total revenue of all foreign companies, while the combined turnover of EU-based firms is only 27 %” (2). After a peak in 2010, the level of investments remained more or less stable, then decreased in 2013-2014 and recovered in the following years.

Up to the last year of the past EU institutional cycle, Russia ranked as the fifth international investor in Bosnia Herzegovina, with investments especially in the oil and gas industry, all located in Republika Srpska (Lakic 2018). *Gazprom*, the Russian gas national company, figured to own the quasi-monopoly of the energy industry of the country through its two refineries, both located in Republika Srpska. Besides providing leverage to RS in the internal federal affairs of Bosnia Herzegovina, Russian enterprises’ ties to RS political leadership seem to be stained by alleged high-level corruption and money laundering activities (ibidem). Finally, the business connection between Russian and Republika Srpska’s enterprises was also used by political leadership as leverage against other actors, such as the IMF. This became evident around the beginning of the analysed EU institutional cycle when Milorad Dodik negotiated a loan with the Russian authorities for 300 million euros to replace the previous IMF investments (Jukic 2014)⁷⁴. After this move, the loan was then renegotiated and agreed for another four years in 2016.

However significant and unlike the investments of other non-EU actors in the country (e.g., China), during this timeline, Russia’s investments appear to be even more motivated by political and strategic motives than by economic ones. Evidence of this can be found in the significant loss suffered in 2017 and 2018 in Russia’s investments in the oil refineries in Northern Bosnia, which accounted for circa 52 million euros (Lakic 2018). Nevertheless, in 2019,

⁷⁴ In the same study, Jukic reports however that already in 2013 the IMF had informed both RS and FBiH that the loan risked not to be renewed the following year due for lack of completion of certain conditions, such as a number of law implementations (Jukic 2014).

Russian investments in the country amounted to 211 million KM (Bosnian Marks): moreover, according to the Central Bank of Bosnia Herzegovina (CBBH), out of 699 million KM, “in terms of geographical distribution, the largest inflow of investments during 2019” (Central Bank of Bosnia Herzegovina 2020).

Also in line with the rest of the region, in addition to the already mentioned and powerful channel of the Orthodox Church, during the years of the Juncker’s Commission, the misinformation campaigns promoted by Russian outlets became more common. While not as significant as in Serbia, where the Russian media network Sputnik Srbija has its strongest base, still the communication field worked as a space for contesting narratives. According to the study conducted by the Directorate-General for External Policies of the Union of the European Parliament (2020), in Bosnia Herzegovina, “news outlets in all three communities and their generally private owners tend to have close relationships with political leaders. [...] There is a conglomerate of interests, for whom media messaging is a flexible means to achieve mostly political ends.” (Ibidem, 23). This is also true for foreign actors such as Russia, whose misinformation campaigns also take advantage of their power connection to local elites and undermine unaligned candidates. One example reported by the study was the framing of centrist candidate Mladen Ivanić as a Western agent during the presidential campaign of 2018 by Sputnik; the allegation, during the spring and summer of 2017, of the EU’s intention to “re-draw” Western Balkans’ national borders; and the portrayals of EU values as incompatible with Western Balkans’ traditions (25). To conclude, by supporting at the political and communication level nationalist parties and candidates that promote divisive national policies, when not openly advocating for the dissolution of Post-Dayton Bosnia Herzegovina (Niksic 2020), the Russian administration contributed to the relenting of the Enlargement process, directly obstructed the EU’s objectives.

Serbia

If we look at Russia's presence in the region, Serbia has probably been for a long time the most used example to describe Russia's influence in the Western Balkans. Even more than Montenegro, where Russia was suspected of having mingled with elections in 2016; or North Macedonia, where it has been very active in fostering disagreement with Greece (European Parliament 2020). Serbia is the only country in the area which overtly calls Russia its "great ally"⁷⁵ (BBC 2014). In the wake of the Ukraine crisis, Serbia refused to adhere to the EU system of sanctions in condemnation of the illegal annexation of Crimea. The Serbian foreign affairs minister Ivica Dacic's words justifying this choice were also portrayed in the Russian media as a move to protect Serbia's special relations with Russia: "Serbia is one of a few or even the only, European country that did not join the sanctions against Russia. [...] This is neither a political, nor an economic issue for us, but a moral one. We have unique relations, and we will uphold this position in the future" (TASS 2017).

As seen, however, notwithstanding the rhetoric what reinforced the bond between the two countries was indeed the Putin administration's support for Serbia on the legal status of Kosovo in international fora. This, together with the consequent obstruction to the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue constituted, at least politically, the backbone of Russia-Serbia cooperation, upon which both countries' leaderships built powerful political rhetoric (Bechev 2019; Vuksanovic 2018). Unlike in Bosnia Herzegovina, during the Juncker Commission, Russia also maintained stable military relations with Serbia in the form of joint military training and preparations, running up to 2019 several joint military exercises (European Western Balkans 2019a).

⁷⁵ However, Serbia has undoubtedly increased its ties to China over the last EU Institutional cycle, so that some commentators even saw China replace Russia in the role of "Great ally" for the country.

In addition, Russia donated the same year tanks and armoured vehicles in the amount of about 30 million euros (European Western Balkans, 2019b). Serbian-Russian military cooperation, also relied on powerful rhetoric, as proved by President Putin's official speech in Belgrade on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the city from the Nazi occupation. Then he recalled the military cooperation among Russian and Serbian forces in WWII and called Serbia and Russia "brotherly nations" (Putin 2014a).

Notwithstanding Serbia's signature in October 2019 of a free trade deal with the Euro-Asiatic Economic Union-EAEU (Vuksanovic 2019a), some authors are starting to stress how the commonly perceived privileged relationship between the two countries might be gone beyond its golden age. Indeed, there might be signs from Alexander Vučić's government, which obtained during the elections of 2014 a vast majority with its pro-EU membership programme, of a weakening of relations between the two partners (Vuksanovic 2020; Galeotti 2018). This however might be due to different factors, including Russia's focus elsewhere in the Mediterranean; Russia's perception of Alexander Vučić being a pro-West leader; and the need and ambition, on the Serbian part, to reassure European partners, while at the same time continue to stress the importance of relations with other non-EU actors in the country to get the most from its multi-centred foreign policy.

At the economic level, Russia was in 2016 the second foreign actor by FDI present in the country after the EU. The difference between the two, however, was very significant: the EU accounted for circa 80% of FDI and Russia less than 5% of total FDI to the country (Eurostat 2021). However, as a study from the *Centre for the Study of Democracy* (CSD 2018) points out, to consider only FDI would not suffice to comprehensively portray the reality of Russia's presence in Serbia, which avails of both direct and indirect instruments (4). In addition, Russia also channelled aid and assistance measures, though consistently less than the EU or the United States (European Parliament 2017a).

Specular with the previously mentioned study on Russia's economic

footprint in Bosnia, a similar policy report from the *Center for the Study of Democracy-CSD* (2018) stated that the country imported circa 65% of natural gas and more than 70% of crude oil consumption's needs from Russia.

In 2014, the fall in energy prices decreased Serbia's oil and gas import costs from USD 2.06 billion in 2011 to just USD 812 million in 2016 (Center for the Study of Democracy-CSD 2018). However, over the years Serbia did not diversify its energy supply and remained anchored to its pro-Gazprom policy. Furthermore, the free trade deal with the Russian-led EuroAsiatic Economic Union of 2019 was evaluated by some commentators as not economically advantageous, but rather as one more instrument of leverage against the EU (Vuksanovic 2019b).

As for the case of Bosnia Herzegovina, during the considered period at the local level, Russia's cultural influence in Serbia was exercised mostly via the communication domain. As mentioned, the famous multi-lingual Russian magazine *Russia Today* has its regional headquarters in Belgrade. Also in Serbia, the information was among the preferred foreign policy tool in the country. According to some opinion polls, it also had a significant return on the local population (Bechev 2020; Vuksanovic 2019b; European Parliament 2017a)⁷⁶.

In conclusion, Russia's presence in Serbia used remained quite significant over the last EU Institutional cycle. Both economic and aid investments and political support, while not significant as the EU's, provided important inputs to the country's economy and political developments. From 2016 onwards, apart from the still very relevant energy sector, Russia's economic engagement in the country declined. However, the country remained extremely influential in both the communication and the political domains.

⁷⁶ The perception by the local public of non-EU across, including Russia, is discussed in detail in Chapter Five.

3.4.3. Turkey

TURKEY'S FOREIGN POLICY ACTIONS FROM 2014 TO 2019 (Juncker's Commission)				
	TURKEY-EU	TURKEY-WESTERN BALKANS	TURKEY-BOSNIA HERZGOVINA	TURKEY-SERBIA
POLITICAL/DIPLOMATIC	<p>From EU candidate country to strategic partner</p> <p>-2016: EU-Turkey deal on migration.</p> <p>-Drilling in Eastern Mediterranean.</p> <p>-Turkey's operations in North-East Syria and Libya</p>	<p>Strategic dept: Turkey as regional cultural power</p> <p>- Reviving historical and cultural links with the region</p> <p>-Support WB-EU integration process</p> <p>-From 2016: after the Davutoglu's era and the coup, no new strategy on the horizon</p>	<p>Strategic dept: Turkey as regional cultural power</p> <p>-support to cultural and religious institutes to increase historical ties with the Muslim population</p>	<p>Strategic partnership</p> <p>-2017: Erdogan visit's Serbia is "warmly welcomed"</p>
ECONOMIC	<p>Diversification—but the EU remains main partner</p> <p>-16th world's economy; 42% of exports go to EU Member States.</p> <p>-EU-Turkey deal on migration</p>	<p>Strategic dept</p> <p>-Infrastructures</p> <p>-Restoration of cultural heritage</p>	<p>Turkey's economic investments recede.</p> <p>-2019: free trade agreement</p>	<p>Focus on infrastructures:</p> <p>-Sarajevo-Belgrade highway</p>
CULTURAL	<p>Culture as strategic tool of soft power.</p>	<p>Culture and religion as tool of soft power</p>	<p>Culture and religion as tool of soft power</p>	<p>N.A.</p>

Table 3.10. Turkey's foreign policy actions during the Juncker Commission (2014-2019)

The international level: Turkey's foreign policy actions towards the EU

Political diplomatic arena:

The years of the Juncker Commission witnessed key developments, either in Turkish domestic politics and foreign policy approach. Erdogan's presidency survived several challenges and moved towards a more repressive and authoritarian rule. In addition, the demise of Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu in 2016 also signified a turn in Turkish foreign policy, which lost the person who had been its main ideator for a decade.

Particularly, the Commission report on Turkey of 2016 expressed concern about the consequences of the state of emergency proclaimed after the coup of 2016 on the protection of fundamental rights (European Commission 2016c). Furthermore, in the MENA region, Turkey strived for and achieved a crucial role in key scenarios such as the Libyan and Syrian conflicts. Besides North Africa (Libya) and the Mediterranean (Syria), Turkey also extended its ambitions to the African continent, especially to the Horn of Africa⁷⁷. The period of the Juncker Commission thus inserts itself as a time of consistent change in Turkey's foreign policy (2013-2018), characterized by a "major interventionist approach, even military, accompanied on the regional level by a strict Islamist third-worldly rhetoric, aimed at projecting the image of Turkey as a global actor" (Donelli 2019, 163).

In terms of Turkey-EU relations, the Juncker Commission started with a crucial challenge-the migration crisis-on which the two actors cooperated, but that evolved, over the last year of the analysed timeline, into progressive deterioration⁷⁸. The migration crisis brought to the shores of Europe only in

⁷⁷ For a comparative analysis of Turkey's and other Middle Eastern powers' role in the Horn of Africa, see Donelli, F., 2019, *Le Due Sponde del Mar Rosso. La politica estera degli Stati mediorientali nel Corno d'Africa*, Milano: Mondadori.

⁷⁸ While Turkey-EU relations deteriorated during the years of the Juncker Commission, the EU institutions never officially suspended accession negotiations with Turkey. The enlargement process is though under freeze and the European Parliament expressed the will to suspend the process multiple times, through the

2015 the largest inflow of incoming asylum seekers into the EU since the end of World War II (OECD 2018, 127-128). It deeply unsettled the European Asylum system. The same year the EU launched the European Agenda for Migration (European Commission 2015b), which focused, among other things, on the management of external borders. This was pursued through the help of the newly promoted EU Agency Frontex and the maritime military ‘EUNAVFOR MED Operation Sophia’; and via strengthening relations with third countries, like in the case of the two EU-Turkey Statements of March 2016 (European Council 2016a; European Commission 2017). On this note, Baracani remarks that agreements with third countries on matters of migration management were not new: they rather fall within the available instruments of EU Foreign Policy on the management of external borders (Baracani 2021, 18-19).

Undoubtedly, in terms of Turkey-EU relations, the main events of this period were: the signature of the EU-Turkey Statements in 2016 (European Council 2016a; European Commission 2017); the issue of the illegal drilling west of Cyprus in the Eastern Mediterranean (2018-2019); and the Turkish military operations in North-East Syria of 2019. All these events contributed to further stalling the Enlargement negotiations with Turkey due to the significant setbacks in matters of rule of law and fundamental rights (European Commission 2016c, 8-9). However, these developments also underlined the importance the two actors play in each other’s policies. Especially, the migration crisis of 2015 and the subsequent EU-Turkey Statement of March 2016 highlighted how connected the two actors are when facing a situation of crisis (Baracani, 2021).

The EU-Turkey statements cemented this tie in the framework EU-Turkey cooperation on migration. The ‘deal’ had the purpose to support Turkey in its efforts to relocate and provide assistance to Syrian asylum seekers returned

Resolutions of the 24 of November 2016 on EU-Turkey relations 2016/2993(RSP) (European Parliament 2016); and through the Resolution of 6 July 2017 on the Commission’s report on Turkey (European Parliament 2017).

from Greece (European Council 2016a), by funding targeted projects “addressing the needs of refugees and host communities with a focus on humanitarian assistance, education, health, municipal infrastructure and socio-economic support” (European Commission 2017, 3). Previously, the European Global Strategy for European Union’s Foreign and Security Policy of 2016 had also pointed at Turkey as a relevant actor for EU regional security: however, the document still insisted on the importance of enlargement negotiations, stating the EU will “anchor Turkish democracy in line with its accession criteria, including the normalisation of relations with Cyprus” (p.35).

A different point of view emerges, however, from the Council Conclusions regarding Turkish drillings in Eastern Mediterranean-west Cyprus later on the considered timeframe. During the last year of the Juncker Commission, following the increase of Turkish drilling activities, the European Council openly and repeatedly condemned the illegal activities taking place within Cypriot territorial waters and called on Turkey to refrain from continuing such operations in the spirit of good neighbourly relations (Council of the European Union, 2019). Indeed, such activities were directly aimed toward an EU Member State with a long history of conflict and controversies with Turkey⁷⁹. This, added to the heavy internal repression growing in the country after the attempted coup of 2016, contributed to draw Turkey and the EU further apart. Finally, the Turkish military operation in North-Eastern Syria in 2019 was the maximum point of straining in EU-Turkey relations during the considered timeframe. Through Council Conclusions, the EU firmly condemned the military operation, affirming it was causing “unacceptable human suffering”. The conclusions also stated that the operation was also “heavily threatened” EU security (European Council 2019b, 2). Moreover, the foreign ministers of EU Member States also agreed to halt arms export licences to Turkey.

⁷⁹ The peaceful resolution of the conflict between Cyprus and Turkey lies at the core of Turkey’s requirements for EU membership.

The Economic arena

At the economic level, compared to precedent decades, a remarkable change occurred in Turkey's foreign policy: while trade with the EU still accounts for over 42% of Turkey's share of exports, the country diversified its economic approach following its political ambitions, to include also focused investments in Middle Eastern and Muslim countries worldwide (Cagaptay 2014, 18). After the EU, the biggest export markets for Turkey were the UK, Iraq, and Israel (DG Trade-European Commission, 2021). Notwithstanding this, Eurostat statistics highlighted how during the Juncker Commission up to 2019 the EU member states continued to be Turkey's largest source of foreign direct investment, accounting for about two-thirds of FDI inflows (Eurostat 2021). Also, in 2019 Turkey was the 5th largest trader with the EU, albeit trade had receded conspicuously in 2018.

In addition to this, the most relevant investors in Turkey remain, consistently, EU Member states: in line with the cases of Russia and China, the top EU Member State for imports and exports with Turkey is Germany, followed by Italy and France (Eurostat, 2020). The EU accounted for 65.0% of FDI inflows to Turkey in 2017 and, on average, the EU attracted 52.8% of Turkey's FDI outflows annually between 2008 and 2017 and was the sixth-largest export partner of the EU, between Russia (EUR 79 billion, 4.1 %) (Ibidem). As for imports, Turkey (EUR 63 billion, 3.6 %) was the sixth largest partner of the EU, positioning itself between Russia and Japan.

The peculiar situation of Turkey as both an EU candidate country and a strategic partner was also evident in economic terms: like in the previous decade, most of the economic support from the EU comes to Turkey under the framework of the Instrument for Pre-Accession Agreement (IPA). For the analysed timeline (2014-2020), this amounted to €4.8 billion and covered, among others, priority sectors such as democracy and governance; rule of law; regional and territorial cooperation (Delegation of the European Union to Turkey 2018).

Besides the IPA agreement, the EU also funded specific sectors to support Turkish civil society: one example was the financial support for human rights

defenders, provided under the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR). Furthermore, given the progressive deterioration of the political and social situation of many human rights defenders in Turkey, the EU also allocated, for the period 2014-2020, around 37.5 million euros (Delegation of the European Union to Turkey, 2018).

The regional level: Turkey's foreign policy actions towards the Western Balkans

For the first years of the Juncker Commission, Turkey continued to invest in the region in its image of moderate and democratic Muslim power. However, as noted by Baracani and Çalimli (2019), this constructed image sometimes contrasted with Turkey's foreign policy position: one example could be the formal opposition to the Islamic State forces in Syria while siding at the same time with extremely conservative regimes such as Saudi Arabia (Baracani, Çalimli 2019).

As underlined in the historical recollection, Turkey acts in the Western Balkans mostly as a cultural soft power actor, building on its shared history and channelling its presence not only via infrastructural projects but also through investments in religious schools, tourism, cultural centres, and the restoration of the Ottoman cultural heritage (Vračić 2016). However, during the considered timeframe Turkey also participated in various international (and European) humanitarian missions, including EUPOL PROXIMA, EUFOR-Concordia in North Macedonia; EUPM, EUFOR Althea in Bosnia Herzegovina; and EULEX in Kosovo (Önsoy, Koç 2019, 349). During the considered period, Turkey never openly questioned its support for the Western Balkans countries' accession to the EU (and into NATO). However, it also took advantage of the stall in the Western Balkans-EU integration process to strengthen its role in the region (Ekínc 2014).

Turkey's domestic developments and its more assertive turn in international affairs after 2016, also influenced Turkey's activism in the Western Balkans: as mentioned, after the 2016's coup and the followed repression of civil liberties, the country opened to a period of estrangement from the EU. This also affected its presence in the Western Balkans region: because of its strong cultural and political leverage on the Muslim population, and local actors such as Bakir Izetbegović's Bosniak Social Democrats-SDA in Bosnia Herzegovina, commentators argued that Turkey's democratic

backsliding of the country could impact the preservation of democratic standards of the region (Vračić 2016, 6).

At the economic level, Turkey's presence in the region remained stable at least until 2015-when the country destined respectively 26.0 million USD and 25.06 million USD in ODA to Bosnia Herzegovina and North Macedonia (then FYROM). It then started declining⁸⁰: in 2015, Turkey invested €10.1 million in Montenegro, €10.1 million in the FYROM, and a record high €54.1 million in Kosovo (ivi, 13). However, in line with previous trends, Turkey's total FDI amounted to slightly less than 3 per cent of its total FDI to the country in 2015. According to the study by Önsoy & Koç, during the first two years of the Juncker's Commission, Turkey increased its export to North Macedonia by 40,3%; Montenegro by 117,7% and, for the first time, Serbia by 154,6% (Önsoy, Koç 2019, 352). While this remains distant from other foreign actors investing in the region, it is still worth considering given the economic crisis occurring in Turkey during such years.

Finally, in the cultural arena, Turkey incremented its presence in the region also at the level of national media. Be it the state-run TRT offering streaming and radio programmes, or Turkish soap operas being broadcasted through local channels, (especially in Bosnia Herzegovina), such instruments also contributed to define and reshape the image of Turkish society in the region.

⁸⁰ OECD (2017), "Profiles of other development co-operation providers", in *Development Co-operation Report 2017: Data for Development*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/dcr-2017-43-en>.

⁸¹ Even though, as said, it remained relatively little significant compared to investments from the EU, or even Russia.

The case study countries-level: Turkey's foreign policy actions towards Bosnia Herzegovina and Serbia

Bosnia Herzegovina

The last EU institutional cycle did not bring significant turning points in Turkey's strategy toward the country. In line with the previous decades, Turkey continued privileging, with words and facts, the Muslim part of the Bosnia population. One example among others was the powerful symbolism of the visit of Ahmet Davutoglu (then outcoming Turkish president) to Banja Luka in May 2016 for the reopening of the local Mosque following its complete reconstruction⁸². However, at the economic level, Turkey did not fulfil, the expectations of Bosnian citizens. This was visible in the trend of Turkish foreign direct investments in the country which amounted to €32.1 million in 2015 to then decrease; and in trade-which rose by 72,1% in 2015 to then decline (Vračić 2016)-

In terms of image and narrative, however, the cultural and civil society level remained the areas where the country's activism focused most of its efforts, with positive results. Cultural and religious centres continued to flourish across the country, as well as Turkish language courses at local universities (Anadolu Agency 2016). Moreover, as anticipated, local media and TV channels contributed to shape the image of Turkey as a modern country also through the entertainment sector.

Serbia

Serbia presents a rather different picture. The most remarkable change in Turkey-Serbia relations occurred during the years of the Juncker's Commission. Indeed, some commentators, like Vracic (2016) and Önsoy and

⁸² The most important Mosque of Banja Luka, the 16th century Ferhadija Mosque or Mosque of Ferhat Pasha, had been destroyed by Serbian Orthodox during the war of the 1992-1995 and was officially reopened in May 2016.

Koç (2019), underline that a significant success of Davutoğlu's strategy regarded the reshaping of the historical conflictual relations between Serbia and Turkey (Aydıntaşbaşı 2019, 12). As recalled, up to the mid-years of the Juncker's Commission, Turkey had already been recognised as a significant mediator (also because of some EU's shortcomings) in regional disputes, such as in the example of the Istanbul Declaration of 2010 (ibidem). However, Turkey, and especially its neo-Ottoman rhetoric, had hardly been welcomed in a country that remembered the Ottoman rule as a period of "slavery and oppression" (Vracic 2016, 13).

Nonetheless, in the economic field, over the years of the Juncker's Commission, Turkey's interests and economic footprint in Serbia soared: not only did the trade volume dramatically increase by more than 150% compared to previous years (Önsoy, Koç 2019, 352). Also in terms of FDI, Turkey invested the amount of 14.6 million in the country only in 2015 (Vracic 2016, 13). In this framework, Turkish investments in the Belgrade-Sarajevo highway in 2017⁸³, together with the possibility of a Turkish replacement for the failed Russian South Stream project, indeed played a relevant role. This was evident by the warm welcome received by President Erdogan during his official visit in 2017 and the increased dialogue between the two countries on security matters such as the migration and refugee crisis (Zivanovic 2017).

In the cultural arena, in line with regional development, the opening of several Turkish cultural centres among which the one in Sandzak constituted a significant turning point. A region located in the south of Serbia and confining with Montenegro, its significant share of the Muslim population already attracted Turkey's interest in 2010 (ibidem). This indeed constituted another indicator of the growing ties between the two countries.

⁸³ Official works were due to start at the end of 2019.

Conclusions

This chapter confirmed and highlighted several key points in the developments that occurred during the considered timeframe in the international environment. First, it confirmed that during the years of the last EU institutional cycle (2014-2019), all considered non-EU actors increased their political, economic, or cultural presence in the region of the Western Balkans and the case studies. This acquired even more significance considering the rapid deterioration of all these actors' relations with the EU.

Second, the analysis of the different areas highlighted that each actor predominated in one specific domain: China in the economic one; Russia in the political and communication field; and Turkey in the cultural arena. Third, the chapter highlighted the different geographic focus of each considered non-EU actor. Sometimes it matches, like in the case of China and Russia's focus on Serbia and the Republika Srpska-RS. Sometimes they are more specific, like the focus of Turkey on the Federation of Bosnia Herzegovina-FBIH.

China expanded its economic presence, in reflection of its growth at the global level, despite the rising tensions with the US administration, and the reshaping of the partnership with the EU. While the EU remained by far the most significant foreign actor in the region, politically, economically, and culturally, China gained in a relatively very short time a crucial position in the area. However, China's business model, considered at best opaque and at worst inductive of state capture, has concrete implications for the case studies. In this sense, Bosnia Herzegovina and Serbia present different risk scenarios. Bosnia Herzegovina attracted relatively small China's investments compared to the other countries of the region and only in part of the country-Republika Srpska. However, it presents a very high level of exposure to China in terms of debt share of GDP, reaching 16%. This may contribute to further destabilising the country and also prove problematic for BIH's path to EU integration.

On the other hand, Serbia is the country, within the region, which

successfully attracted most of China's investments to the area. The two countries not only did increase their economic ties but also their political connection.

Russia. When looking at Russia's activism in the Western Balkans and the case studies, it is possible to see some significant evolutions. The annexation of Crimea and the consequent crisis in Ukraine constituted a turning point in Russia's relations with the rest of the world. This affected also Russia's strategy toward the region of the Western Balkans and the presented case studies. While a certain approach of "business as usual" in trade relations was adopted and Russia remained among the most important trade partners of the EU, the high political dialogue went rapidly further in crisis. Among the consequences of this, the EU started addressing the need to reduce its reliance on Russia's raw materials and energy imports. This also appears among the objectives of "EU strategic autonomy": something Juncker wished to realize and that appears among the priorities of Von der Leyen's Commission (Von der Leyen 2020).

Moreover, during the years of the Juncker Commission, Russia expanded its activism in the Mediterranean and the Middle East. It also reactivated its economic partnership with sub-Saharan Africa (with important consequences at UN level alliances). As Russia's foreign policy priorities moved to the Mediterranean, the African Continent and the Middle East, in the case studies Russia's economic presence gradually declined. However, this was compensated by a sharp rise in the use of massive misinformation campaigns, which possibly project an overestimated Russia's presence in the region and case studies.

The case studies do present hints of how Russia's assertive turn affected local governments' decisions. Serbia for example, with its foreign policy voted for the preservation of friendly relations with multiple actors, refused to join sanctions on Russia, to preserve Russia's support over Kosovo's issue. In Bosnia Herzegovina, the confrontation between Russia and the EU took different shapes: from information campaigns tackling supposed incompatibility between local communities and EU values to overt political

support to nationalist politicians fostering national divisions. However, especially in the economic arena, the significance of Russia in the region appears to be re-dimensioned, especially if compared to other non-EU actors who recently set foot in the region, e.g. China. Consequently, constrained by higher priorities and limited resources, the Russian foreign policy objective mainly focused on the political domain.

Turkey. During the last EU institutional cycle, Turkey underwent significant domestic changes. These, added to crucial developments like the migration crisis of 2015, heavily influenced its foreign policy and its relations with the EU and its position in the Western Balkans. In the region, however, this set of events did not dramatically impact relations between the two actors. Turkey continued to support Western Balkans' EU integration path. Despite this, the redefinition of Turkey's role after the migration crisis, its authoritarian turn in domestic politics and the progressive deterioration of its relations with the EU in some way strengthened its position in the Western Balkans region. This opened the path to possible future implications. Finally, besides some neglected expectations like the failure of the promised economic growth through its economic investments, Turkey succeeded in deploying effective cultural diplomacy. This materialised through the funding of schools, universities, and cultural and youth centres. At the political level, Turkey also gained a key mediator role in regional disputes and built relatively smooth relations with Serbia.

In conclusion, all three considered actors present historic and or sound presence in the region and the case studies. However, the assertive turn undertaken by Russia and Turkey during the years of the Juncker's Commission, together with the problematic business model of China, significantly altered the context the EU had operated in since the end of the 1990s. This arguably forced the EU to consider the possible implications of such changes for its foreign policy objectives in the region.

CHAPTER 4. Capability. The tools, the Member States, and the EU institutions.

4.1 Introduction

The present chapter focuses on the dimension of EU capability. According to the framework proposed by Bretherton and Vogler, *EU capability* refers to the internal context of the EU policy process: precisely, to “those aspects [...] which constrain or enable external action and hence govern the Union’s ability to capitalize on the presence or respond to opportunity” (Bretherton, Vogler 2006, 28). It, therefore, attempts to answer the research subquestion:

“How did the EU’s internal developments shape this policy outcome?”

The chapter operationalises Bretherton and Vogler’s capability dimension by considering two aspects: the relevant foreign policy tools that the EU employed in the last institutional cycle in the Western Balkans and case studies; and the positions/priorities of some EU Member States and EU institutions on the enlargement process to the region. The tools considered are the IPA II & bilateral development assistance (enlargement policy); the Berlin Process (intergovernmental initiative); and the re-admission and cooperation agreement between the case studies and Frontex (external dimension of EU migration policy). These foreign policy tools are hence drawn from the policies reviewed in Chapter Two, specifically from the enlargement policy, and the external dimension of the EU migration policy. In addition, the chapter considers the Berlin Process. This is due to this work’s broad interpretation of the European Union’s foreign policy⁸⁴ and the relevance of the Berlin Process

⁸⁴ This last, recalling from the introduction, draws from Keukeleire and Delreux’s definition of EU foreign policy as exceeding the boundaries of EU institutions,

as an intergovernmental initiative that covered a crucial role in filling the gap caused by the prolonged stall in enlargement talks during the considered timeframe.

The second part of the chapter considers instead the position and interaction of specific Member States and EU institutions. Respectively of Germany, France, and Hungary; the European Commission, the European Council, and the Council of the EU. Such actors are selected for their specific relevance in European Affairs and/or in foreign policy objectives in the region during the analysed timeline. In particular, Germany presents significant historic and economic interest in the considered region (Mavromatidis, Leaman 2008), and developed during the analysed timeframe an increasingly predominant role in EU affairs (Aggestam, Hyde-Pri 2020; Webber 2019; Wright 2018). France, together with Germany, represents one of the leading Member States in EU affairs and is a pillar in the history of EU integration (Krotz, Schild 2013; Mammarella, Cacace 2013). However, while often working in cooperation with Germany (the so-called Franco-German tandem of EU integration)⁸⁵, the two countries often diverge in matters of EU foreign and security policy, including EU enlargement (Herszenhorn, D., Momtaz, R. 2019; Ker-Lindsay et al. 2017,519). Finally, Hungary also presents specific interests in the region and a positive attitude towards EU enlargement to the Western Balkans (Balogh 2021). However, the domestic developments in the matter of

encompassing the framework of the Common Foreign Security Policy (CFSP) and Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). Their conceptualisation includes also the informal frameworks through which member states and third countries cooperate, as well as enlargement policy (Keukeleire, Delreux 2014, 12). In addition to this, this study engages with the EU's foreign policy from the Lisbon Treaty (2009).

⁸⁵ See Gilbert, M., 2005. *Storia Politica dell'Integrazione Europea*. 9 ed. Roma: Laterza.

rule of law since 2014 following President Orbán's conceptualisation of 'illiberal democracy'⁸⁶, definitely add a further layer of complexity (Huszka 2017, 596).

The selected European Institutions have been chosen for the role they play in the shaping of EU foreign policy to the region and case studies: the European Commission technically monitors the enlargement process and relaunched through its Communication of 2018 the enlargement perspective of the region. The European Council, under Donald Tusk's Presidency, experienced the division of EU Member States on opening the negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia in 2019. Finally, the Council of the EU constitutes, at the legal and political level, the decision-making body in the EU on foreign policy (Keukeleire, Delreux 2014, 66). The perspectives of the trio presidencies' programmes covering the period of the Juncker Commission thus provide relevant highlights on the orientation of the Council of the EU towards the enlargement.

The analysis of the EU foreign policy tools and the priorities of Member States and EU institutions highlight different yet interconnected points: the recollection of the specific tools serves as a contextual framework to illustrate the EU foreign policy instruments deployed in the region. At the same time, however, it also underlines the progressive significance that the Western Balkans region acquired for the EU's foreign policy's objectives during the Juncker Commission. The second aspect (the priorities of the selected Member States and EU institutions), capitalises on such premises. The analysis of the strategies and preferences of the considered actors on enlargement is crucial for

⁸⁶ On 26 July 2014 Băile Tuşnad, the Hungarian President Viktor Orbán firstly illustrated his idea of "illiberal democracy" as a way forward for Hungary, which could in his view coexist with the EU membership. The text of the speech in English can be found in Csaba Tóth, "Full text of Viktor Orbán speech at Băile Tuşnad (Tusnádfürdő) of 26 July 2014", July 29, *The Budapest Beacon*.

a more comprehensive interpretation of the internal context that led to the relaunch of the enlargement strategy. Moreover, the analysis of both the foreign policy tools and the role of different Member States and institutions allows not only to draft patterns of cooperation among actors: it also traces the eventual influence of considered actors on the adoption of specific tools.

Like the other empirical chapters, which analyse respectively the influence of the international (Chapter 3) and case-study countries context (Chapter 5) on the relaunch of the EU enlargement strategy towards the Western Balkans, this chapter also plays an important role in the structure of this study. By analysing the EU internal context, this chapter sees a confirmation of a growing intergovernmental trend in post-Lisbon EU's foreign policymaking during the Juncker Commission. At the same time, however, the study of the interaction between key actors such as Germany and the European Commission allows to highlight the role that the combination of leadership, interests and priorities between Germany and the European Commission had in the successful relaunch of the enlargement strategy. Despite the confirmed significance of intergovernmental practices, as underlined by Smeets and Beach (2020), the reality of member states-EU institution interaction might be more complex than expected.

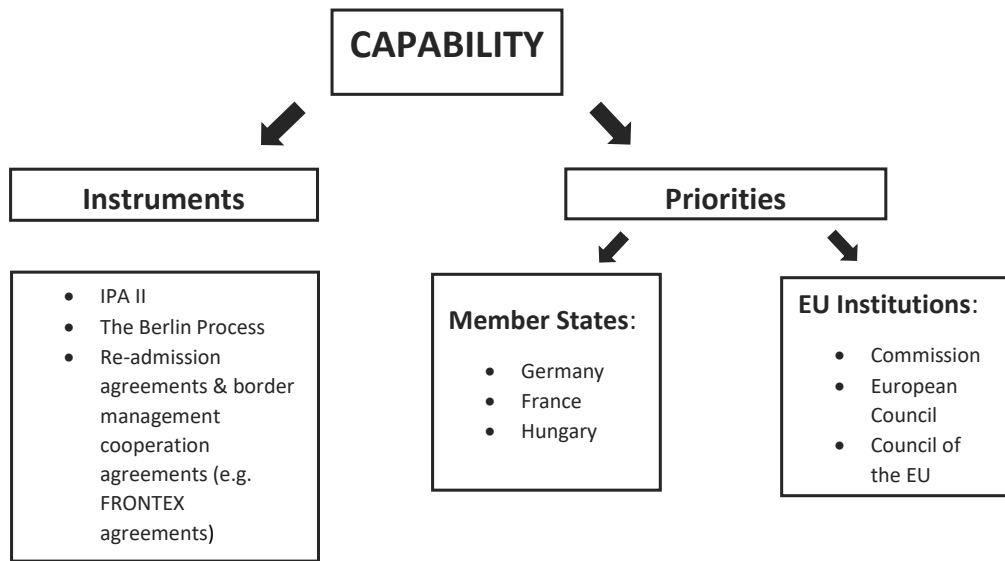


Figure 3. Operationalisation of EU Capability

4.2 The tools: the IPA II, the Berlin Process, and the FRONTEX-Western Balkans cooperation agreements

As recollected in Chapter two, within the overarching architecture of its foreign policy, the EU implements different policies towards the region of the Western Balkans: the enlargement policy and the external dimension of EU policies are part of them. Henceforth, besides their informative function, the recollection of the specific tools also reflects the complexity of the EU's foreign policy. While in fact the IPA II, a key tool of the enlargement policy, and the external dimension of migration policy (Frontex-target countries agreement) fall within the communitarian instruments, the Berlin Process is instead an intergovernmental initiative. As recalled, the review of such tools thus informs us of two key elements: the rising importance of the region for EU's security during the analysed timeline; and the increasing role of some Member States, especially Germany, in EU foreign policy and the steering the relaunch of Enlargement.

4.2.1 *The Instrument for Pre-Accession Agreement-IPA II*

The Instrument for Pre-Accession Agreement (IPA I, II) is a standard instrument utilised by the European Commission within the scope of the enlargement policy⁸⁷. It thus falls underneath the umbrella of EU common foreign policy instruments, is part of the multiannual financial framework, and usually covers seven years. Its scope is to provide enlargement countries with EU funds destined to support reform processes in the direction of EU membership with financial and technical assistance in several areas, covering (among others): strengthening of democracy, rule of law and minority rights and related fields in preparation of EU Membership; socio-economic and regional development; employment, social policy and policies related to human resources development and gender equality; regional cooperation; improvement of social dialogue; achievement of EU standards in the economy (Official Journal of the European Union 2014, 14).

The analysed timeline was covered by the IPA successor, IPA II. Adapted to the new necessities of an enlargement strategy based on “consolidation, conditionality and communication, combined with the Union’s capacity to integrate new members” (Ibidem, 11), IPA II was established through the already mentioned EU Regulation of March 2014. Compared to the original IPA, it targeted more narrowly reforms within the framework of pre-defined sectors closely linked to the enlargement strategy, such as democracy and governance, rule of law, growth, and competitiveness, “to strengthen democratic institutions and the rule of law, reform the judiciary and public administration, respect fundamental rights and promote gender equality, tolerance, social inclusion and non-discrimination” (12). IPA II constituted the main source of funding (added to individual EU Member States' foreign direct

⁸⁷ For more information on the previous IPA instrument (2007-2013), see the Commission page: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/enlargement-policy/overview-instrument-pre-accession-assistance_en

investment) for the countries of the region of the Western Balkans. As seen, for all the enlargement countries-thus still including Turkey-the IPA II Indicative funding allocations between 2014-2020 amounted to 11.7 billion euros (Delegation of the European Union to Bosnia Herzegovina and European Union Special Representative in Bosnia Herzegovina, 2019). Of these, around €550 million went to Bosnia and included: funds for the Civil Society Facility; housing programmes and special measures following the natural disasters caused by the floods after 2014 (Directorate-General for the European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations-DG NEAR 2021). For Serbia instead, the total amount over the covered timeline was around €1.539 billion (European Commission 2021). The funding targeted especially the areas of consolidation of democracy and rule of law. The increased amount of funds destined for the region confirms the commitment of the EU to accompany the countries in the implementation of the demanded reforms. However, it is the extra measures undertaken to support certain countries of the region (especially Bosnia Herzegovina and Serbia) in the management of migration flows (European Commission 2019a, 2019b) that remarked on the rising pressure of the migration crisis for the EU, and the growing relevance of the region for EU's objectives.

To the scope of managing the so-called 'Balkan Route', the instrument of IPA II was updated several times during the analysed timeline to support the region in the implementation of extra measures to shelter, welcome, and contain migration flows (European Commission 2019a; 2019b). Furthermore, cross-border cooperation in matters of security, fight against organized crime, and counter-terrorism was already a key element of the partnership between the EU and the Western Balkans countries, as recalled and re-stated in the *Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy* of 2016 (EAAS 2016, 24). The tightening of EU-WB cooperation in the management of irregular migration flows through the use of IPA II extra funds thus indicates a general upgrading of such strategic alliance; furthermore, it underlines the

strategic value of the region for the EU. Arguably, by using (also) an instrument of the enlargement policy to pursue closer cooperation between the EU and the region, the EU confirmed the relevance of the enlargement policy as a foreign policy instrument.

4.2.2 The Berlin Process

The Berlin Process (or Western Balkans Summit) is perhaps the most remarkable intergovernmental initiative undertaken by some EU member states, the Western Balkans region governments, and the EU institutions, during the analysed timeline. The Berlin Process is considered the intergovernmental response to the freezing of the enlargement during the Juncker Commission (Sekulić 2020; 2018). Its work of preserving the ties between the EU Member States and the region during the prolonged enlargement stall was so efficient that, even after the issue of the February 2018 Communication on a Credible Enlargement towards the Western Balkans (European Commission 2018), and the re-establishment of annual meetings between the EU institutions and HSOG and the Western Balkans, the Process the established suitable forum to host such international meetings⁸⁸.

Within the framework of this chapter, the Berlin Process is relevant for two main reasons: first because it is an entirely intergovernmental initiative that supplied the lack of EU deliverables on the front of the EU enlargement. Secondly because, as mainly a Germany-led process, it underlined the importance of Germany's role in steering the EU foreign policy under Merkel's chancellorship (Flessenkemper 2017, 25). Because of the intergovernmental nature of the initiative, the European Commission participates as a representative of the EU institutions. Instead, the EU Member States who participate in the process are, so far: Austria, Croatia, France, Germany, Italy,

⁸⁸ After the meeting in Sofia in 2018, which led to the Sofia declaration, the next international summit between the EU and the Western Balkans government of 2019 happened in Poznan, Poland, which also hosted the annual Western Balkans Summit of 2019. Because of the pandemic, the EU-WB Summit of 2020 was held through an online conference.

Slovenia, and the United Kingdom⁸⁹. The objective of the Berlin Process is to support and step up the cooperation between Western Balkans countries themselves and their integration into the European Union. Initiated in 2014 with the first Conference in Berlin, during the analysed timeline, the meetings proceeded through annual summits respectively in Vienna (2015), Paris (2016), Trieste (2017), London (2018) and Poznan (2019). Such forum brought together the Heads of State, the foreign affairs, and economic ministries of the Western Balkans countries, as well as representatives of the European Commission and some EU Member States. Over the years, this cooperation platform achieved important benchmarks, especially in terms of regional cooperation: the first important one was the firm commitment, signed in Vienna in 2015, not to obstruct the EU path of their respective neighbours (Western Balkans Foreign Ministers 2015). Later, the summits witnessed the establishment of the *Connectivity Agenda*, which yielded projects in the fields of transport and infrastructure, and economic connectivity, a sector which has been considered crucial for the “economic catch up” of the region (Holzner, Schwarzhappel 2018; Chair of the Paris Western Balkans Summit, 2016); the establishment of a Youth Cooperation Council (Western Balkans Governments 2016); and numerous initiatives in businesses, and civil society cooperation.⁹⁰

In 2018 in London, re-energized by the relaunch of the enlargement strategy and the Sofia declaration (HOSG-Western Balkans 2018), the summit further increased regional cooperation by committing to enhance connectivity widely understood: transport, energy, digital, economic, human (Ibidem, 2). Finally, the Western Balkans governments committed to “ensure partial and effective investigations into missing persons cases” and to “refrain from any politicisation of the missing persons issue”. This was an important breakthrough, as it directly addressed the still too present consequences of the

⁸⁹ As of 30 December 2020, the UK is not an EU Member State anymore.

⁹⁰ For more information on the several fields of cooperation covered by the initiative, visit: <https://berlinprocess.info/>

wars outbroken from the dissolution of Former Yugoslavia. Finally, almost twenty years after the end of the war in Kosovo, the Summit also reached important turning points on the topic of regional reconciliation, through the issue of a Joint Declaration on War Crimes in the framework of the Berlin Process (Annex, HOSG-Western Balkans 2018).

The Berlin Process shares some of the objectives of the enlargement policy: regional cooperation, civil society's empowerment, institution and infrastructure building, and support to the business environment. More than that, the initiative served as intergovernmental support for the enlargement policy, thus enhancing progress in the region while the enlargement procedure stalled. On the other hand, it also worked, over the years, as a central venue to test the moods of regional governments and the EU's local perception. In conclusion, the initiative is thus important for two main reasons: firstly, because it confirmed that intergovernmental measures were conspicuously adopted in EU foreign policy during the analysed timeline. Secondly, because it indicated how they might be used, as in this case, as a way to 'keep alive', to support and complement, and not to replace common EU foreign policy tools such as the enlargement policy. If the use of the IPA II framework to strengthen security and border cooperation confirmed the suitability of institutional procedures like the enlargement policy despite growing enlargement scepticism, the Berlin Process proves the growing shift of the EU foreign policy towards intergovernmental methods. However, this also shows how the two instruments, the IPA II-Enlargement policy and the Berlin Process, can work complementarily to preserve EU objectives and status in the region. Finally, the role of Germany in promoting, hosting, and constantly supporting either instrument shed light on the importance gained by Germany in European foreign policy during the analysed timeline as well as the shifted predilection of German chancellorship towards the complementarity of intergovernmental and community methods.

4.2.3 Western Balkans-Frontex cooperation agreements

Finally, the extra-ordinary cooperation agreements for the carrying out of operation by Frontex in their territories⁹¹ were other instruments deployed by the EU in the Western Balkans during the analysed timeline (see, for Bosnia Herzegovina and Serbia, Council of the European Union 2019a; 2019b). Their relevance is further increased by their exceptionalism: originated in the framework of the migration crisis, these agreements marked the peak of an unprecedented extension of Frontex's mandate, which occurred since the start of the Juncker's Commission⁹². They can be considered as an extra tool of the external dimension of EU migration policy, which normally includes norms and decisions defining VISA requirements and freedom of movement between the EU and third countries.

The migration crisis was the first 'big issue' (in his own words) mentioned in Juncker's first State of the Union speech in 2015 (Juncker 2015). In an inspiring speech that somehow strides with the reality experienced during the last years of its Commission, Juncker recalled European contemporary history and stated that the migration and refugee crisis was the "first priority to be addressed" and was a matter of "historical fairness" (Juncker 2015, 7). In that speech, he proposed the Commission's relocation scheme, which foresaw an equal repartition among member states of forty thousand asylum seekers to relieve the straining of the most involved member states such as Greece, Italy,

⁹¹ So far, the Western Balkans countries involved by such agreements are Albania, Montenegro, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia.

⁹² During the analysed timeline, Frontex's mandate was updated twice: first in 2015, with the Regulation (EU) 2016/1624 on the European Border and Coast Guard (OJ L 251, 16.09.2016, p.1); then in 2019, through the Regulation (EU) 2019/1896 (OJ L 295, 14.11.2019, p. 1).

and Hungary, later wrecked in the Council (ivi).

From this speech was already evident how the Commission looked for a suitable response to the migration crisis through a double lens: the internal one, which focused on the reform of the asylum policy (the so-called Dublin II Regulation); and the external one, which involved a strengthening of EU's external border by extending the mandate of Frontex among other measures. It is in this second dimension that the Western Balkans were involved. Hence, the agreements signed with some Western Balkans countries under the 2016's EU Regulation on Frontex, allowed the agency to carry out joint operations and rapid intervention on the states' borders that neighbour the Schengen States, as the preservation of the Schengen space from irregular migration flows became of utmost concern for EU member states (Kilpatrick 2021). Later, the further update on the Frontex regulation of 2019 expanded the competencies of the agency, granting it the mandate to also operate in third countries which do not confine with EU Members (Official Journal of the European Union 2019, 1)⁹³.

These agreements are thus relevant to this work for two reasons: first, like for IPA II, their signatures underline the increased strategic importance of the region for the EU during the period of the Juncker Commission. Secondly, and closely connected to the first point, they suggest that security concerns-in this case the migration crisis- played a crucial role in the strengthening of the ties between the EU and the region⁹⁴. Third, as with the general EU's response to

⁹³ The establishment of such a specific cooperation framework was facilitated by the perspective integration of the Western Balkans' countries into the EU, which prescribes among the conditions for EU membership the protection of fundamental rights.

⁹⁴ The importance of the security dimension in EU-WB partnership was already reaffirmed in the *Global Strategy for European Union's Foreign and Security Policy of 2016* (EEAS 2016)

the migration crisis, they inform us about the priorities and bargaining power of the single EU Member States. As remarked by some commentators, the increased cooperation between the EU and the Western Balkans on border management made the region a “buffer” zone between Greece and other Schengen states. According to some commentators, these agreements between the EU and the Western Balkan countries reflected the European Union’s will to outsource migration management “at all costs” (Bisiaux, Naegeli 2021), this way giving in to the demands of certain EU Member States-e.g. Hungary-for a stronger on EU borders’ control (Kilpatrick 2021).

All this considered, the signing of such cooperation agreements presents further elements of concern: as an internal agency of the EU, Frontex is bound by its mentioned Regulation of 2019 to “uphold, protect and promote fundamental rights” (Official Journal of the European Union 2019, 26), “guarantee the protection of fundamental rights under EU law and international law and to ensure the principle of *non-refoulement*” (Ibidem,p.73). Despite these requirements, the Council of Europe (Council of Europe 2021), international NGOs, among which Human Rights Watch-HRW (2018; 2019a), Amnesty International (2019), and renowned umbrella NGOs such as the European Council for Refugees and Exiles (ECRE 2021), denounced multiple times alleged systematic violation by Frontex of its international obligations. Among them, the respect for the principle of *nonrefoulement*, and the general protection of human rights on the Balkan Route⁹⁵.

⁹⁵ Especially, some reports stressed how illegal pushbacks occur on daily basis at the frontier between Croatia and Bosnia Herzegovina, and between Slovenia, Croatia, and Serbia (ECRE 2019; Council of Europe, 2021; Amnesty International 2019). At the time of writing, Frontex itself is under investigation for suspected occurred violating of the rights of migrants carried out through illegal pushbacks at the Greek-Turkish maritime border, following revelations from the investigative journalists N. Waters, E. Freudenthal and L. Williams in October 2020 (see European Parliament 2021; Waters,

In conclusion, these agreements add a relevant layer-the prism of security-to the understanding of the several factors which led to the relaunch of the enlargement strategy towards the Western Balkans.

et al., 2020). Finally, following an internal inquiry from a working group of the Agency's Management Board, an investigation from the Ombudsman (2020) and from the European Anti-Fraud Office-OLAF (J. Barigazzi 2020), also the LIBE Committee of the European Parliament (Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs) established a scrutiny group to assess Frontex's activities (European Parliament 2021a).

4.3 Member states and EU institutions' priorities

The previous section recollected some of the most relevant foreign policy tools deployed by the EU in the region of the Western Balkans during the analysed timeline. While most of them drew from a specific policy used by the EU in its foreign policy strategy to the region (enlargement, the external dimension of the EU migration policy), each of them told something about the importance of the region, the respective role and 'weight' of EU Member States, and about the general evolution of EU foreign policy.

The following section proposes instead the analysis of the priorities of selected EU Member States⁹⁶-France, Germany, Hungary-and EU institutions (Commission, Presidency of the Council, Council of the EU). On the one hand, it traces the historical positions of considered actors towards the Enlargement policy (table 4.1). On the other hand, it tries to unbox some insights on the interaction among the considered actors, especially Germany, with EU institutions. Therefore, this part of the chapter contributes to the objectives of the research by shedding light on challenges and dynamics internal to the EU in the formulation of foreign policy outputs (Bretherton, Vogler 2006, 27). This is mostly symbolized by the diverging agendas of some specific Member States, which notoriously contribute to the lack of cohesion in the EU foreign policy approach (Rieker, Eriksdatter Giske 2021). The complex interaction of Member States' priorities, as well as the forms of cooperation, and new patterns of leadership are all relevant elements to study the negotiations that led to the relaunch of the Enlargement policy in 2019.

⁹⁶ In this chapter, the denomination of Member States and Heads of State and Government-HOSG is used interchangeably as it mostly deals with strategic priorities expressed in the Council by EU leaders.

The EU Member States' positions on enlargement towards the Western Balkans.

The Member States, the EU integration, and nationalisation of the Enlargement policy: a literature review.

When analysing the internal context of the EU's foreign policymaking, the thoughts immediately run toward the different priorities of Member States. This is even truer after the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty, which, as various times recalled, further increased the power of the Council in matters of foreign policy.

The gradual delegation of sovereignty by the Member States to supranational institutions has been the object of study for theorists, ranging from the principal agents model (Moravcsik 1998) to supranationalism and new institutionalism (Delreux 2014). These last posed stress on the growing capacity of EU institutions to shape Member States' interests and on the role of EU bureaucracy in policymaking. Recalling Chapter One, from the Maastricht Treaty onwards, European Studies have focused predominantly on European Integration and Europeanisation (Webber 2019; Keukeleire, Delreux 2014; Saurugger 2014; Leuffen et al. 2013; Schimmelfennig, Sedelmerier 2011; Schimmelfennig 2009). In view of post-Lisbon, but especially post-East enlargement and post-Eurozone crisis, as EU governance grew more complex, the scholarly analysis started investigating the 'Enlargement fatigue', and the EU's 'integration capacity' (Börzel et al. 2017).

Later, European studies also focused on the EU's differentiated integration (Schimmelfennig 2015; Leuffen et al. 2013), following endorsements for a 'multispeed Europe' from EU leaders, either through institutional channels such as Juncker Commission's *White Paper on the future of Europe* (Juncker

2017); or by official declarations at HOSG meetings, where for the first time even Chancellor Merkel openly sided with the possibility of differentiated integration (Marhold 2019; BBC 2017). Finally, especially after the Brexit referendum, dis-integration theory (Webber 2019; 2013; Vollaard 2018;2014) and external differentiated integration also became a theory implemented in the analysis of EU foreign policy, especially in the analysis of EU-Turkey relations (Baracani 2021; Cianciara, Szymański 2019; Turhan 2019; Müftüler-Baç 2017).

Recent literature underlines how in the post-Lisbon EU, the role of Member States, and consequently of Heads of States or Governments-HOSG, has increased to the detriment of the space of manoeuvre by supranational institutions such as the European Commission (Bickerton et al 2014). Such studies highlight how in times of crisis (be it the Eurozone, the Ukraine', or the migration crisis), the HOSG regained a steering role, thus remarking a relative loss of influence of the European Commission since the Lisbon Treaty (Webber 2019; Dinan 2016). Other studies focused on the cooperation between the reinforced Member States leadership and the EU supranational institutions on the complex internal institutional dynamics underpinning the EU policy decision-making process, on multiple levels (Baracani 2021; Smeets, Beach 2020). This literature highlights how in key foreign policy decisions, while the trend follows a stronger intergovernmentalism, still compromises might not be reached and policy outcomes not implemented as quickly and smoothly without relying on a consolidated functioning institutional support, which also owns an agenda (Smeets, Beach 2020, 133-134). Finally, especially since the watershed of the Ukraine crises and the return of Russia's assertiveness in international relations, recent studies have underlined the rise of new forms of leadership in EU post-Lisbon foreign policymaking: especially, they investigate the turn in Germany's approach to foreign policy, and its implication for EU's internal balance of power (Aggestam, Hyde-Pri 2020; Wright 2018).

All this considered, this part of the chapter considers the preferences of some key actors-Member States and Institutions-on the topic of the Enlargement toward the Western Balkans. By considering theoretical contributions from new intergovernmentalism (Bickerton, et al., 2015), new institutionalism (Delreux, Keukeleire 2014), hegemonic leadership (Bulmer, Paterson, 2019;2010), and new institutional leadership (Smeets, Beach 2020), the chapter adds further elements to the argument that sees European Union's foreign policy outcomes [in matters of enlargement] as the result of a complex interplay between Member States and EU institutions.

The following section has a threefold aim: first, it addresses the themes of nationalisation and the growing polarization of the enlargement topic. It thus considers the aspect of "domestic legitimation", which is among the most problematic aspects of EU *capability* indicated by Bretherton and Vogler (Bretherton, Vogler 2006, 27). Secondly, it gives a comprehensive account of the multi-actor nature of the EU. To quote Ker-Lindsay, Armakolas, Balfour, and Stratulat in their study on national preferences and the Enlargement: "just as it would be wrong to view the Western Balkans as a single entity in terms of enlargement, it would be equally wrong to view the position of the European Union in monolithic terms" (Ker-Lindsay et al. 2017, 515). Finally, it endorses the argument that highlights the return of Member States (especially Germany and France) to the steering seat in times of crisis, of which the Juncker Commission experienced a fair share (Webber 2019). It does so however by also acknowledging the role of EU institutions in supporting the adoption and implementation of key foreign policy decisions (Smeets, Beach 2020, 1138).

As anticipated, for the scope of this dissertation the analysis of the role of Member States in Enlargement negotiations with the Western Balkans will be limited to the Member States who actively engaged in the debate, historically and over the analysed timeframe, and had significant influence either in suspending or in promoting the Enlargement process. More than just stating who supported and who obstructed the relaunch of the enlargement strategy,

the purpose of this section is to highlight which positions and strategies contributed to the shift of the EU's foreign policy towards the region. The identified Member States are Germany, for the exceptional growth in foreign policy affairs' leadership during the analysed timeline, added to the historical and significant involvement in the region, besides the known relevance in general EU affairs. France, for its leading role in EU politics, its 'special relationship' with Germany (renewed at the end of the analysed cycle with the Treaty of Aquisgrane). France and Germany are also presented for their relevance in orienteering or obstructing the Enlargement dossier in virtue of their divergent perspectives on the topic (Amadio Viceré 2019; Ker-Lindsay et al. 2017; Mammarella, Cacace 2013; Gilbert 2005; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2005 Ker-Lindsay et al., 2017). Finally, Hungary was chosen for the strategic relevance of the Western Balkans region for its national foreign policy and for the role Oran's government played in the analysed timeline.

Table 4.1 Member States positions on the enlargement to the Western Balkans

EU Member States	Historical position	Juncker Commission (2014-2019)-actions
France	<p>Opposition. Foreign policy interests lie in Sub Saharan Africa. Preference for deepening existing integration</p>	<p>Proposal for an external differentiated integration for the region (Macron 2017)</p> <p>Veto to the opening negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia (October 2019)</p> <p>French <i>non-paper</i> on the reform of the enlargement policy (2019)</p>
Germany	<p>Endorsement. Strong historical economic ties. First EU member to recognise Slovenian independence in 1991.</p>	<p>Initiator of the Berlin Process (2014).</p> <p>Main EU investor in the region (2014-2019)</p>
Hungary	<p>Endorsement. Convergence of national foreign policy interests.</p>	<p>Open support to nationalist leaders such as Vučić (Serbia), and Dodik (RS in BIH).</p>

4.3.1 Germany⁹⁷

Since the Treaty of Rome, but especially since the German re-unification of the 1990s, academic scholarship has investigated German foreign policy and its European commitment. Contributions mostly focused on the notion of the ‘German power’ (Crawford, Olsen 2017), or German ‘hegemony’. Especially over the last decade, Germany has thus been seen as the European ‘unwilling’ or ‘reluctant’ hegemon (Bulmer, Paterson, 2010; 2013; Paterson 2011). In line with this evolution at the national level (Behnke 2013), also its role in the post-Lisbon European foreign policy was described as shifting, moving from a ‘leadership avoidance reflex’ to finally accepting the exercise of power (Matthijs, 2020; Webber 2019; Barber 2019; Bulmer, Paterson, 2010; 2013; 2019; Paterson 2011). Furthermore, some authors underline how this shift occurred also in fields such as EU defence and asylum: specifically, Bulmer and Paterson highlight a change in Germany’s approach from a position of ‘tamed power’ to one of increasing ‘assertiveness’ in that field (Bulmer, Paterson, 2013).

Finally, other studies at the intersection between the notions of German power and German hegemony, assess the German leadership in the post-Lisbon EU: especially, they investigate how the rising importance of Germany in EU foreign policy interconnects with the reform of EU Common Foreign and Security Policy (Aggestam, Hyde-Price 2020, 10). Together with other contributions, they conceive Germany’s leadership in EU foreign policy as a new learning process triggered by the external ‘catalyst’ of the Ukraine crisis, and thus “manifests itself in an increased [German] willingness to assume a leadership role in European foreign, security and defence cooperation – without necessarily aspiring to a dominant position in the CFSP” (ivi). Drawing mainly from Keohane’s notion of leadership, they see Germany’s leadership in EU foreign policy as a process where an actor guides and

⁹⁷ More space is dedicated to Germany, compared to other actors, in virtue of Germany’s relevance in EU affairs and close ties to the region.

influences the activities of a group by ‘providing solutions to common problems or offering ideas about how to accomplish collective purposes and mobilizing the energies of others to follow these courses of action’ (Keohane 2012, 19). The same ‘quiet lead’ can be found in Merkel’s handling of Germany’s mediating role in the Libyan war (Megerisi, Wildangel 2019) and in the preference of German decision-makers to call the Berlin Process with its technical name of ‘Western Balkans Conference’, thus enlarging the ‘ownership’ of the process to match its ambitions, notwithstanding the significant role of Germany in its promotion (Toeglhofner, Aldebahr 2017, 3).

Thus, literature agrees that Germany developed, especially during the analysed timeline, a more explicit willingness to lead in foreign policy affairs. During the analysed timeline the increasing relevance of Germany’s leadership in matters of EU foreign policy was visible in various of the most crucial international events which directly or indirectly involved the EU. Those which had a definite link and or impact on the region of the Western Balkans were: the mediation with Russia during the first years of the Ukraine crisis and the consequent persuasion efforts on the EU Member States to adhere to international sanctions (Webber 2019; Wright 2018); the setting up of the so-called ‘Berlin Process’, almost in contradiction with Juncker’s Commission declaration of a ‘break from the enlargement’; finally, the steering role performed during the first years of the migration and refugee crisis⁹⁸. Other important events which witnessed the rising leadership of Germany are Brexit negotiations; and the mediating role in the Libyan war. According to some commentators, such achievements, such as the one in the Libyan conflict,

⁹⁸ As it will be shown later in the section, the welcoming position assumed by Merkel’s administration during the first years of the migration and refugee crisis- especially towards Syrians- influenced other actors’ choices also in the region of the Western Balkans. One remarkable example was Serbia, which in virtue of its tie with Germany professed until 2016 a quite open and welcoming approach to asylum seekers passing through its territory to reach the EU.

greatly benefited Germany's image of "the perfect arbiter in the conflict, given its neutrality, its good relationships with all involved, its status [...] and its prominence in European politics" (Mejerisi, Wildangel 2019). In the case of the Ukraine crisis, however, it was precisely because of Germany's strong economic ties with Russia that Angela Merkel rapidly gained the most prominent negotiating role (Webber 2019).

Some of the mentioned events, like the Ukraine crisis and the migration crisis, strengthened Germany's understanding of the importance of the Western Balkans region for the stability of the European continent. After all, as argued by Toeglhofer and Adebahr (2017) Germany's involvement in the Western Balkans is not (only) limited to the interests it has for the region but is rather 'contingent on current affairs' (1). Indeed, the enlargement process towards the region of the Western Balkans covers strategic importance for Germany: Germany is one of the most active and involved the EU Member States, for historical and contingent interests (Toeglhofer, Adebahr 2017; Stratulat, Balfour 2015; Mavromatidis, Leaman 2008). However, while the economic ties indeed increase the leverage Germany has on the region (like in the case of some countries of Eastern Europe), the always present support for the European perspective of the region, despite the evident stall in the Enlargement process, is also due to the potential consequences of the changing external and regional environment on EU stability and the EU perspective of such countries.

What is relevant from all these contributions to the scope of this work, however, is not only the confirmation of an occurred shift in Germany's role in EU foreign policy affairs. This is indeed crucial as it corroborates the growing weight of the Member States and intergovernmental solutions in the EU's foreign policy. However, an interesting point raised by some scholarship is the apparent 'cooperative' form of leading chosen by Merkel's Germany, be it with other Member States (generally with France, or in the unofficial representation

impersonated by Angela Merkel in mediation over the Ukraine crisis⁹⁹), or with the European Commission and the Council (Smeets and Beach 2020).

This section then uses three main occasions that acted as a turning point in the development of German leadership in EU foreign policy during the considered time frame, which had direct and indirect consequences on Germany's approach to enlargement to the region of the Western Balkans. These are the Berlin Process and its support to the regional and Western Balkans-EU integration; the mediation role Germany played over the Ukraine crisis in 2014; the opening of safe corridors to Syrian refugees in 2015 and the influence it had on Serbian migration policies. Recalling these three events/processes, allows, on the one hand, to mark the progressive centrality of Germany's role within the Council. On the other hand, it also shows the understanding of Germany's decision-makers of the key strategic role of the Western Balkans for the EU. Finally, the analysis of Germany's role in the Berlin Process also allows to emphasise the historical and economic ties of the country with the region and case studies.

⁹⁹ Webber 2019, Kundnani and Pond, 2015

The Berlin Process and Germany's position on enlargement toward the Western Balkans

Germany has always been a firm supporter of EU enlargement. It was so during the so-called Enlargement to the East of the mid-2000s, and it continued to be a keen supporter of the process towards the region of the Western Balkans since its initial perspective in the 2000s. Therefore, it is not surprising that during the last EU institutional cycle Chancellor Merkel and the German foreign affairs minister Heike Maas multiple times expressed a positive attitude toward the European perspective of the Western Balkans countries (EuroActiv 2014; Merkel, 2018; Maas, 2019).

The country's economic ties to the region of the Western Balkans go way back to the nineteenth century: Germany particularly invested in its presence in the fields of rail networks and infrastructures¹⁰⁰. Furthermore, Germany was the first EU member state—shortly followed by Italy—to officially recognise Slovenia and Croatia after they declared independence in 1990-1991 (Craven 1995). As seen in Chapter Three, however, this position did not help the EU (then EC) to project a coherent united image¹⁰¹. During the last EU institutional cycle, Germany's support for the enlargement towards the region was then built on a convergence of national strategic interests and the acquired predominant role in EU affairs (Toegelhofer, Adebahr 2017; Stratulat, Balfour 2015; Mavromatidis, Leaman 2008). The increased significance of Germany—its relative weight and bargaining power—in supporting the relaunch of the Enlargement process to the Western Balkans inscribes itself into the evolution

¹⁰⁰ For a detailed account of Germany's historical involvement with the region, see Mavromatidis, Leaman 2008.

¹⁰¹ 'European Political Cooperation's Press Release: *Declaration on Yugoslavia* (informal ministerial meeting, Château de Senningen), cited in Benedetto Zaccaria, Ivan Obadić, *The European Commission and the Yugoslav crises*, Vincent Dujardin et al., (a cura di) in *The European Commission 1986-2000. History and Memories of an Institution*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, p. 607. 26 March 1991

of its role in EU politics during the analysed timeline (Aggestam, Hyde-Pri 2020; Webber 2019; Wright 2018). As it will be seen, since the outbreak of the Eurozone crisis and going through the last two EU institutional cycles (2009-2014; 2014-2019), Germany's role in EU internal politics experienced significant development, arriving to achieve a more defined leadership role.

In regards to the Enlargement process towards the region of the Western Balkans, Germany's commitment always involved strong advocacy for stricter conditionality and the importance of reforms in rule of law and fundamental rights (Toeglhofer, Adebahr 2017, 2). This "strict but fair conditionality" approach probably comes as a result of several domestic constraints such as the growing Euroscepticism in the electorate-and part of political elites- and the consequences of the Enlargement fatigue (2017. 5). Also, like in the case of France, in Germany, domestic politics and EU enlargement are closely linked, as "the Parliament has extensive powers to shape the process [...] thus making enlargement truly political in a way that has rarely been the case elsewhere. (Ker-Lindsay et al. 2017, 515). Germany's relevance for the region is also evincible by the degree of involvement in the region in terms of trade and FDI.

During the analysed timeline Germany always figured among the first top trade EU partners and the biggest foreign investors in the countries of the region, and the main trading partner of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia, and Serbia (Eurostat 2021; Toeglhofer, Adebahr, 2017, 2). Even at the end of the Juncker Commission in 2019, Germany also confirmed its position as the first trade partner of the region, exporting goods for a total amount of 5.4 billion euros, followed by Italy with 4.4 billion euros (Eurostat, 2019, 6). As suggested, like on other occasions, its economic dominance constituted the backbone of Germany's leverage on regional actors in crucial turning points of the analysed timeline, like in the case of the migration crisis. However, this did not prevent Germany (and the EU) to support a growing autocracy for the sake of stability (Eror 2018). Despite a certain scepticism towards the enlargement occurred also in German domestic debate, especially in view of raising illiberal tendencies in some countries of the region and progressive democratic backsliding the German approach to the region and to the enlargement process

itself is then shaped by all these events. Like in other actors considered in this chapter, during the considered timeline ‘stability’ became a keyword also in German political debate. As in other cases, this turned into an even firmer commitment to support policy and institutional reforms in the region, as “there is a shared perception among decision-makers and foreign policy experts that any new conflict situation would have clear repercussions on Germany. Therefore, neglecting these states would, in the long run, be more cost-intensive than engaging with them under the current Stabilisation and Association Process” (Toeglhofer Adebahr 2017, 4).

In terms of political support, German endorsement for the enlargement to the region was clearly visible since the start of the Juncker’s Commission through the launch of the Berlin Process, which nurtured enlargement during the “break” taken by Juncker’s Commission (Sekulić 2018). Set up to last for four years, the launch and support to the Berlin Process is where German national interests found correspondence also at the European level, more than in the Ukraine crisis and the migration crisis. German politicians, starting from Chancellor Angela Merkel, repeatedly reaffirmed the country’s commitment to EU enlargement internationally. When the first Western Balkans conference was held in Berlin, the German government expressively underlined “its support for the prospect of European integration for the countries of the Western Balkans” and declared its willingness to “carry out further measures within the framework of existing programmes on economic cooperation and development”, “to support the region’s countries in making the most effective use of European measures for bringing them closer to the EU via the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA)”. (Federal Government 2014, 1-4). The link between such intergovernmental initiative and the EU enlargement policy was many times repeated in the closing statement of the Berlin conference. During the following years, Germany often backed and recalled the importance of the European perspective for the region, reaffirming the “clear prospects of these countries of accession to the European Union” (Merkel 2018), adding that such accession had to be ‘rule based’. The foreign affairs

minister Heike Maas applauded the progress made in crucial bilateral disputes such as the Prespa Agreement between North Macedonia and Greece during the meeting with North Macedonia prime minister Zoran Zaev in 2018 (Federal Government 2018); and finally, through a very vocal statement by Heiko Maas- Federal Foreign Minister- on the strategic urgency for the EU not to obstacle the EU path of the Western Balkans region of the European Council of October 2019 (Maas 2019). Commenting shortly after Emmanuel Macron's veto on opening negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia, Maas reaffirmed Germany's "support[s] Albania and North Macedonia on their path to EU membership" (Maas 2019), in line with the Council Conclusions of June 2019 on Enlargement and Stabilisation and Association Process, which "reaffirmed its commitment to Enlargement [...]" as the "failure to reward objective progress by moving to the next stage of the European path would damage the EU's credibility throughout the region and beyond" (European Council 2019).

The Ukraine crisis

The annexation of the Crimean Peninsula by Russia and the following war in the East of Ukraine was described by the then president of the European Council van Rompuy as "perhaps the most serious challenge to security on our continent since the Balkan Wars" (Van Rompuy 2014). The Ukraine crisis was important for this analysis of the EU foreign policy and the forming German leadership in two ways: on the one hand, it showed how in times of high-level international crisis, the EU institutions were forced to recede, and leave once again space to national leadership, this case the one of Germany, France and the UK (Webber 2019; Wright 2018). On the other hand, it highlighted the mediating role of Germany, and especially of Angela Merkel-who had recently been re-elected- between Russia and Ukraine. While Germany's leadership was distinguished during the first years of the crisis for its mediation role, as reported by Webber, Angela Merkel "talked 65 times with the Russian president, including 35 one-to-one conversations" between February 2014 and November 2015 (Webber 2019, 125). Germany was among the first supporters

of the EU's economic sanctions against Russia despite its strong economic ties with the country. Furthermore, it reiterated multiple times the need to maintain pressure on Russia through economic sanctions on individuals and companies, despite the growing uncertainty shown by some Member States like Hungary and Italy and the growing concern expressed by German companies towards the end of the Juncker Commission (Reuters 2014; Baczynska 2017)¹⁰².

From another perspective, the Ukraine crisis posed a long shadow on the perspective integration of the Western Balkans into the EU. As seen in the previous chapter, the annexation of Crimea and the increasing Russian assertiveness posed the question of the consequences of regional instability on an already less than stable region (Bechev 2018).

The migration crisis

Another example of how the position of Germany was able to exercise influence on other actors in the Western Balkans was the migration crisis. Chancellor Merkel expressed multiple times her concern about the migration flows resulting from the Syrian conflict: in 2015, Germany opted for an open policy toward Syrian asylum seekers and promoted the adoption of safe corridors from their arrival in Greece to Western Europe (Oruc et al. 2020). The country welcomed over a million Syrian asylum seekers only in 2015, a decision that Merkel always defended, affirming that she based her decision on what she “thought was right from a political and humanitarian standpoint”, and that she’d make all the important decisions of 2015 the same way again” (de la Baume 2017). Although the German approach shifted after some months to look for a common European plan-which was then reached by the EU-Turkey statement (Froscione 2018)-the openness demonstrated during the first period of the refugee crisis influenced important actors of the Western Balkan region

¹⁰² Despite the support to US sanctions against Russia, Germany has often been criticized by the US and Ukraine for its Nord Stream 2 energy infrastructure project, a gas pipeline stretching under the Baltic Sea that would deliver gas from Russia to Germany (Reuters 2021).

such as Serbia. Serbia was and continues to be a crucial country of passage for migrants and asylum seekers aiming to reach the EU. As seen before in the section regarding the Frontex-WB cooperation agreements, Serbia is a focal point of the so-called Balkan Route. In 2015, the country's first reception centre in Preševo reported: "over 10,000 crossings in the most frequent days, making this centre the most important point of registration along the route" (Santic et al 2016). Contrarily to what could be expected from Vučić's government given its scores on fundamental rights (Commission 2017; 2018; 2019), Serbia became the most important hub along the route after Greece and adopted a more humanitarian response to the crisis (also with the help of extra EU funds for sheltering activities), contrarily to the policies implemented by other countries (e.g. Hungary, Croatia) (Oruc et al. 2020, 10). Some commentators advanced the hypothesis that this was influenced by Germany's conspicuous investments in the country: indeed Germany has been acknowledged as Serbia's largest foreign trade partner by the Serbian government more than once (Vučić 2015; 2021), furthermore, Angela Merkel also acknowledged Serbian role in the management of migration crisis (Merkel 2015; 2017).

In conclusion, during the analysed timeline, Germany indeed confirmed its leadership in EU affairs. At the same time, from the Ukraine crisis onwards, Germany also affirmed its lead in matters of EU foreign policy, trying to combine its domestic interests with what is considered the interests of the EU. Even when this meant, as it will be seen in the section dedicated to France, to diverge from historic EU allies. In the specific case of the Western Balkans region, the convergence between German interests and the objectives Germany pursued to orient the EU foreign policy was visible in some of the most crucial junctures of the last EU institutional cycle: the Ukraine crisis, the migration crisis, and the start of the Berlin Process. All these events/initiatives showed how Germany was able to understand the strategic importance of the region for the EU's objectives. This allowed the country, under the leadership of Angel Merkel, to provide firm support to the future EU integration of the Western

Balkans region and to actively influence European politics according to the country's perceived national and European interests.

4.3.2 *France*

Together with Germany and the UK, France is commonly conceived as one of the most relevant member states shaping EU politics. In particular, France's role and leverage on EU politics were often analysed through and by its evolving relations with Germany, as testified by the amount of scholarship studying the "Franco-German tandem" and its influence on EU integration (Krotz, Schild 2013; Mammarella, Cacace 2013; Gilbert 2008; Olivi, Santaniello 2005; Olivi 2001). In line with its leading position in the history of EU integration, France also played a relevant role in the Enlargement process, generally adopting the approach that, "a larger, more powerful Europe means a more powerful France" (Ker-Lindsay et al. 2017,519).

However, especially from the enlargement to Eastern Europe in the mid-2000s, France started embracing a more conservative position. This was linked, among other things, to specific domestic interests like the dossier of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP): the CAP always played great importance for French economic stability and would have potentially suffered deeply at each new addition to the European project (Gilbert 2008). Consequently, from the mid2000s France started advocating for a re-nationalisation of the Enlargement policy. At the national level, this was achieved by introducing instruments of control at the national level such as the constitutional amendment of 2008, which submits to referendum by the President of the Republic "any government bill authorizing the ratification of a treaty pertaining to the accession of a state to the European Union" (Wunsch, 2017).

Thus, while Germany historically advocated for widening the EU integration project, France's position, also due to its strategic interests in different areas of the world, is more complex. It does not openly contrast with Germany's, as it also pursues a stricter conditionality and a more 'merit-based' reform of the accession procedure. However, indeed France historically showed a certain weariness of 'diluting' the coherence and consistency of the European project due to progressive EU widening (Grunberg, Lequesne, 2004).

Furthermore, France was also historically keen on proposing intergovernmental approaches as an alternative to enlargement. This is much more in line with what today would be called ‘external differentiated integration’, an idea also relaunched by Emmanuel Macron in 2019 (Wemer 2019) ¹⁰³.

As mentioned, in terms of foreign policy interests, France never had the specific focus on East and South-eastern Europe that Germany has. Rather, due to historic reasons linked to its colonial past, France’s national foreign policy was more oriented towards the Mediterranean, North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa. However, France still maintains significant bilateral relations with the countries of the region, especially with Serbia, with which France relevantly increased its trade relations to become “Serbia’s 12th-largest supplier and 10th-largest customer” (French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs 2019).

During the analysed timeline, France did not actively engage in the enlargement to the Western Balkans’ dossier until the mid of Juncker’s Commission in 2016 (Ker-Lindsay et al. 2017, 519). Things started to change after the election of Emmanuel Macron in 2017. Since then, the country significantly increased its involvement in the region, starting its role within the Berlin Process. At the EU-Western Balkan Summit of 2018, France further stepped up its engagement through the establishment of strong cooperation between the French National Agency for Development (AFD) and the region, to show its support “to a durable stabilisation of the region, its social and economic development and to the strengthening of rule of law” (French Embassy in Serbia 2019). Later in April 2019, within the overarching framework of the relaunch of the Franco-German partnership, French President

¹⁰³ During the negotiations with CEE countries in the 1990s, French President Mitterand proposed the creation of an intergovernmental forum for sectoral cooperation with the EU, as an alternative to the EU membership. Wunsch N. (2017), ‘Between Indifference and Hesitation: France and the EU Enlargement towards the Western Balkans’, *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 2017, 17: 4, 544.

Macron acknowledged that “even if France was engaged in the region in the 1990s, with more than a hundred soldiers losing their lives there, there has been a retreat after 2000s and the return of the peace” (French Embassy in Serbia 2019a). Hence, on the same occasion, France reaffirmed its will to work jointly with Germany for the European perspective of the region and presented its Strategy for the Western Balkans (Presidency of the French Republic 2019). This last included, besides the mentioned cooperation in aid and development, among others: a joint Franco-German initiative on the fight against the illegal traffic of small arms; the fight against radicalisation and terrorism; and the support for the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (Presidency of the French Republic 2019, 2-3)

Within the traced context and despite the clear agreement on the European perspective of the region, the Enlargement dossier is among the topics France and Germany diverge on (Guérot 2006). During the considered timeframe, this became visible mostly in the discussions held on the occasion of the opening of negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia in October 2019 and the followed French proposal for a reform of the enlargement methodology (The Economist 2019; Politico 2019). Within the wider EU reforms proposed by Emmanuel Macron, France restarted actively campaigning for a reform of the Enlargement strategy within the European Council, which also resulted in voting against the opening of negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania in 2019. While this position was defined by the former president of the Commission Juncker a ‘historic error’ that “weakens Europe and undermines its aspirations to become a geopolitical power” (Financial Times 2019), Macron justified France’s position by openly demanding a reform of the Enlargement strategy before proceeding with any new entrance (The Economist 2019; Rettman 2019). To corroborate such a proposal, in November 2019 France released the non-paper ‘Reforming the European Union accession process’ (Politico 2019). This document, while reaffirming that “closer ties with the European Union are the only way for these countries [Western Balkan *ndr*] to build or consolidate States based on the rule of law and open and

pluralistic societies” (Politico 2019, 1), also stated that “a renewed approach to the accession process is therefore necessary” (ivi). Among other suggestions, the document proposed a seven-step process, and the introduction of the principle of *reversibility*, “to address situations whereby the candidate country, in whole or in part, no longer meets certain criteria or ceases to fulfil the commitments it has undertaken” (Herszenhorn, D., Momtaz, R. 2019).

In line with the already established trend of ‘retaking control of foreign policy’ by the Member States, this proposal aimed to further strengthen Member States’ control over the Enlargement process in the Council, clearing the way for more political obstructions. Moreover, Emmanuel Macron also proposed an alternative strategy to the enlargement to regulate the EU relations with the Western Balkans region, which would be “not to consider[...] the only relationship we must have with our neighbourhood a relationship of expansion or expansion” (Wemer 2019). Even if some commentators interpret the French position as “the result of two and a half years of frustration after many proposals [...] have been left unanswered and ignored” (Haddad 2019), it does not come as a surprise that others perceived French proposal as a late justification for the blockade of the opening negotiations, despite some elements of innovation (Rexha 2020). In the region of the Western Balkans, this caused an immediate reaction. Prime Minister of North Macedonia Zoran Zaev immediately commented that such an attitude would “strengthen third parties in our region that would fill in the vacuum”, thus directly addressing the growing role of non-EU actors in the region (Brzozowsky 2019).

It has to be said that the position expressed by France towards the end of the Juncker Commission was perfectly in line with its historical approach to enlargement¹⁰⁴. At the same time, however, leaving aside the most significant

¹⁰⁴ In the first months of the Von der Leyen Commission the enlargement methodology was updated and included some of the elements proposed by the French non-paper. Particularly, Member States obtained more control over the process and could “decide that negotiations can be put on hold in certain areas, or in the most serious cases, suspended overall. Already closed chapters could be re-opened or reset if issues need

elements such as thematic clusters/policy blocks (Politico 2019, 1) and the ‘reversibility’ clause (2), some elements of the French proposal were already present in the previous enlargement methodology¹⁰⁵. Therefore, the motives behind French obstructionism might not limit to France’s specific opinion on enlargement, but could also be interpreted as a political move aimed at reassessing its weight within the Council and rebalancing its role within the partnership with Germany (Euobserver 2019) ¹⁰⁶.

to be reassessed”. See European Commission 2020a, *Enhancing the accession process-a credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans*, Brussels: European Commission, p.6

¹⁰⁵ EU officials, interviews 1,2 2020.

¹⁰⁶ Ivi.

4.3.3 Hungary

The relevance of Hungary's position to the scope of this dissertation is based on two strains of reasons: the first is linked to the developments of EU-Hungary relations over the analysed timeline and Orbán's government setback on the rule of law and fundamental rights. Under this perspective, Hungary's positive attitude towards the region might support observers' worries about the country's aim "to gain like-minded allies that might share its ideology of "illiberal populism underpinned by nationalism", (Huszka 2017, 596). On the other hand, the relevance of Hungary's position towards the Enlargement depends on concrete geographic and historic reasons. Like Germany, the country also appears within the first top ten trade partners of the Western Balkans region (Eurostat 2021). Since it joined the EU in 2004, the country followed a foreign policy mostly focused on Euro-Atlantic integration, good neighbourly relations, and support for the Hungarian minorities abroad (Bottoni 2020; Huszka 2017). This approach was consequently extended to the Western Balkans region, especially given the presence of Hungarian minorities in some of its countries, particularly Serbia (Bottoni 2020). The region is also 'eyed' as a possible sphere for Hungarian economic and political expansion (Balogh 2021). It follows that, for strategic interests, Hungary always was a strong advocate for the EU's expansion to the South-Eastern border.

While all these points remain true, Hungary's position towards the Enlargement acquired during the considered period further complexity. Since 2014 its pro-Enlargement position clashed with the increasing Euro-scepticism demonstrated by Orbán's government during the last EU institutional cycle. Not only did the country often advocate for strengthening Member States' sovereignty: it also proved to be against further devolution of competencies to the EU institutions and the expansion of the scope of the qualified majority voting within the Council (Martonyi 2014, 362).

As underlined by Huszka, Hungary's domestic and foreign policy was strongly shaped and influenced by the migration crisis and the opening of the first Balkan route between Serbia and the country (Huszka 2017, 596). As for other actors considered in this chapter, the security dimension became quite dominant in Hungary's domestic and EU debate: while initially, Hungary built a concrete barrier on its border with Serbia, the migration crisis however further strengthened Hungary's the in 2016 the Hungarian foreign ministry to urge for enlargement to the Western Balkans' region and the use of IPA II funds in the context of border management (ibidem) and advocate for an "immediate" enlargement to the Western Balkans, as "the quickest route to strengthening these countries is to offer them accession to the EU" (Politico 2016).

Consequently, Hungary's complex and to some extent contradictory position within the EU, coupled with its strategic objectives in the region, the potential alliances it could create with the new Member States on key decisions within the European Council, but also the late nomination in 2019 of Olivér Várhelyi¹⁰⁷, former Hungarian ambassador to the European Union, to Commissioner for the Enlargement makes Hungary's orientation towards the Enlargement to the Western Balkans relevant and worth following in the near future.

¹⁰⁷ Olivér Várhelyi was appointed Commissioner for Enlargement in November 2019 for to take seat in the Von der Leyen Commission. Its nomination was welcomed, among others, by Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić and the Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik. Despite his commitment to act independently by the lead of the Hungarian president Viktor Orbán, experts and commentators on EU enlargement and rule of law expressed concern. See: Huszka B., (2017), 'Eurosceptic yet pro-enlargement: the paradoxes of Hungary's EU policy', *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 17:4, and Balogh E., (2021), 'Hungarian Meddling in The Western Balkans?' *Hungarian Spectrum*, May 14.

4.4 The EU Institutions

As introduced at the beginning of the chapter, EU foreign policymaking is balanced through a complex architecture of competencies and responsibility which bridges the communitarian and the intergovernmental methods. Especially after the Treaty of Lisbon, EU foreign policy grew even more complex, despite the aims to further institutionalise the foreign policy domain. Crucial activities such as agenda-setting were delegated to the High Representative-HR and the rotating EU presidency: however, literature addressed how at the same time, especially in times of crisis, the decision-making remained intergovernmental and mostly consensus-based (Aggestam, Hyde-Pri 2020; Wright 2018).

While the only supranational institution here analysed is the European Commission, responsible for the monitoring of the Enlargement process, the European Council and the Council of the European Union also play a crucial role, either as steering body and theatre of obstructions and campaigning for the Enlargement (European Council); or as decision-making, executive and preparatory body as in the Council. This section is therefore relevant as it allows, on the one hand, to see the different roles played by each analysed institution in orienteering decisions around the Enlargement policy, during the analysed timeline. On the other hand, it also allows us to see their orientation towards the enlargement policy and its reform, and towards the enlargement to the Western Balkans more specifically.

4.4.1 The European Commission

The Treaty on the European Union-TUE trusts the European Commission with the duty of monitoring the progress of the Enlargement Process (art 49, TUE). In virtue of this role, the Commission reports to the Parliament and the Council every year about the state of the affairs in relation to the accession process for each Candidate and potential candidate country. While the Commission- the Commissioners and the President of the Commission-refer to the Parliament and the Council about the progress made in the field of the enlargement process, the concrete work on the enlargement dossier is carried out by the officials and the bureaucracy of the Directorate-General for European Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations-DG NEAR. It's the bureaucratic machine of DG NEAR which produces the annual reports, on the individual candidates and potential candidate countries' progress in the field of demanded reforms necessary to the acquisition of EU membership. The chapters cover a variety of fields, among others rule of law, market competition, social-economic standards, and fundamental rights, thus encompassing the competencies of different directorates general within the Commission. The chief directorate-general responsible for the monitoring of progress made by candidates and potential candidates remains DG NEAR, which closely works with other bureaucratic bodies such as the European External Action Service-EEAS (also through the EU delegations in this countries); other DGs; the Member States and other EU institutions (DG NEAR 2016, 6).

Since the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009, academic literature highlights a loss of terrain of the Commission compared to the Council. This development was also reflected in the updates of the Enlargement policy. Following the "big enlargement" to the East, in 2006 the enlargement methodology was updated and redefined around the notions of "benchmarks".

Furthermore, some changes were made in the application procedures, taking into consideration Member States' concerns about the EU's absorption capacity (Hillion 2010, 17). Undoubtedly, this trend continued during the Juncker Commission, which tried to adapt to the increasing complexity of EU governance and EU integration through different strategies: the *White Paper on the Future of Europe* of 2017 being just one, but very revealing, of them.

In terms of political priorities, the Juncker Commission attempted from the start to remedy the Commission's re-dimensioned role in the Post-Lisbon EU. Jean Claude Juncker, the first President of the Commission elected in 2014 through the praxis of the *Spitzenkandidaten*,- a "pan-European candidate nominated by the European political parties" (Müller Gómez, Wessels 2016, 2)- declared in his very first State of the Union in 2015 that his would have been a "very political commission", as "the immense challenges Europe is currently facing – both internally and externally – leave us no choice but to address them from a very political perspective, in a very political manner and having the political consequences of our decisions very much in mind" (Juncker 2015). Nevertheless, this intention of restoring the Commission's agenda-setting powers was not alone sufficient to achieve the desired outcome: external constraints (such as the Ukraine and migration crisis) and divergent preferences of member states frustrated such intentions (Dawson 2019, 2).

This notwithstanding, it must be noticed that the Juncker Commission attempted to cope, in its own way, with the increasing intergovernmentalism and the growing complexity of EU governance. After the results of the Brexit referendum in 2016, in an internal context already proved by an increasing democratic backsliding in Hungary and Poland, the Commission published Jean-Claude Juncker's *White Paper on the Future of Europe. Reflections and Scenarios for the EU27 by 2025* (European Commission 2017). This was the first EU text of the analysed timeline which specifically addressed the option of differentiated integration or 'multi-speed' Europe. Published in March 2017 with an eye for the Integration project's 60th anniversary, the paper presented

five scenarios: in addition to the more traditional going forward (more integration) and going back (only economic integration) the paper presented for the first time, the *Those who want more do more's* section, which proposed enhanced cooperation in certain policy areas, such as “defence, internal security, social and taxation matters” modelling on the Schengen agreement on internal mobility (European Commission 2017 22).

The document proposed, in the year of the 60th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome, a reflection on the road travelled by the EU and the different paths leading in front of the Institutions. The *White Paper* also reflected the already announced ‘in-ward looking’ by the European Commission, which at least until 2018 devolved most of its efforts to the management of internal challenges and the bursting migration crisis. However, the migration crisis proved to be, as the Ukraine crisis before it, an example of how the attempts by the Commission to act ‘politically’ often had to measure up, to then recede but maintain strong technical support, in front of the stronger role of Member States. Other examples were the attempt to enforce redistribution quotas for asylum seekers across the Member States, an effort which ended up blocked at the European Council level; and the EU-Turkey Statement when the Commission had to cede its lead to more intergovernmental approaches, while still providing technical and administrative support (Dawson 2019, 5). However, despite the decreasing margin of manoeuvre, it could be said that the *White Paper* was an attempt by the Commission to take a stand and govern the evolution of the EU’s foreign policy, which was admittedly growing more complex, and more intergovernmental.

Headed by Johannes Hahn during the analysed timeline, DG NEAR expressed its view on the enlargement multiple times, always expressing the need to keep the process alive and professing the need to go beyond the policy surface, because the enlargement “will not be successful if our efforts are not translated into concrete actions on the local and regional level” (Hahn 2018). The priorities of the DG’s agenda were predominantly focused on the Western Balkans and association countries. This thus confirmed that despite the so-

called 'break' from the Enlargement, the region was nonetheless the area towards which the DG NEAR and Commissioner Hahn focused most of their efforts.

According to the strategic plan of the DG 2016-2020 (DG NEAR 2016), the role of the department for the analysed timeline was to support the preparation of the enlargement countries for accession to the European Union, with the overall objective of "promoting stability and prosperity in Europe" (2016, 4). Furthermore, the strategy identified four main areas of convergence between the work of the DG for that specific institutional cycle and President Juncker's priorities, among which are found two of the recurring areas analysed in this work: the will to make the EU a strong global actor, thus empowering its foreign policy, and to contribute to a European agenda on migration (6). As in the case of the already mentioned Global Strategy of 2016 and in line with the emerged trend of progressive securitization of the EU approach to the region (mainly through the lens of the migration crisis and border management), the enlargement policy is perceived as a key instrument to "make Europe more prosperous", and "increase its weight on the international scene", while at the same time contributing to make Europe "safer" (ibidem, 6-7). The DG always expressed general positive remarks on regional developments, though never forgetting to point out problematic tendencies rising in specific cases, such as in the worrying decrease of party pluralism and freedom of expression in Serbia (European Commission, 2019), or in the opinion expressed on Bosnia Herzegovina's application for the EU membership (European Commission 2019d).

Thus, as seen for the role of Germany, it is at the interconnection with these aspects, the urgency of the refugee crisis, and the constrained intent to lead by the Juncker Commission, that the strategic role of the region of the Western Balkans found again its way in EU's priorities. This is evincible in the already mentioned EU Global Strategy, where the Western Balkans region is mentioned as a key partner for the security of the European continent; as a crucial partner in counter-terrorism operations; and in the reaffirmation of the EU commitment to the Enlargement to confront common challenges such as

“migration, energy security, terrorism and organised crime” (EEAS 2016, 22-24.). Finally, the region of the Western Balkans and the significance of the Enlargement for the common security of the European Continent was also highlighted by Juncker in his State of the Union in 2018, where he addressed not only the role of the region within the framework of the migration crisis, but also the strategic need to complete the EU integration of the countries of the region to react to the growing presence of other non-EU actors in the area (Juncker 2018).

The Commission’s position was further stressed by Commissioner Johannes Hahn’s multiple remarks on the strategic importance of the Enlargement for the EU: besides defining Serbia and Montenegro as the “front runners of the EU enlargement” (Hahn 2018), in the wake of the failed attempt to open negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia he also underlined that EU membership still represented the “greatest incentive for the Western Balkans” in pursuing required reforms; that the region should not be seen as “a suburb of Europe, but a part of Europe”, to not “undermine societal development and security in these countries” (European Western Balkans 2019). He further added a comment on EU credibility in the region, which he saw as deeply ‘hit’ by the vote in the Council.

Consequently, if indeed the ambitious programme of Juncker’s ‘political’ Commission had to come to terms with the expansive leadership of Member States, it could be affirmed that it nevertheless continued the pursuit of its agenda priorities. This was carried out mostly by DG NEAR, which never ceased to advocate for the importance of the Western Balkan region for EU objectives, by pointing out progress, stalls, and backsliding. Furthermore, the Commission understood the strategic relevance of the region to the achievement of Juncker’s priorities in terms of migration and security. Finally, its role as representative of the EU institutions within the Berlin Process further helped to compensate for the initial de-prioritization of the enlargement policy towards the region.

4.4.2 The European Council

The European Council is the EU institution formally in charge of EU foreign policymaking. According to art 15 of the Treaty of the European Union, the European Council “defines the general political directions and priorities thereof [of the EU]” (Art. 15, TUE); it also identifies “the Union’s Strategic Interests”, the ‘general guidelines’ and ‘strategic lines’ (art.26, TUE). The European Council is considered, politically and symbolically the ‘locus of power’ of the European Union and brings together the President of the European Commission and the heads of state and government of the Member States (Delreux, Keukeleire 2014, 63). It is chaired by two years and a half elected presidency. It has, upon proposal of the Commission, full legislative powers, and unanimously adopts its decisions.¹⁰⁸ However, given the ‘directive’ nature of its decisions, most of them require further interpretation, legal translations, and follow-up to be then practically operationalized: this is carried out by other EU institutions, such as (in the field of foreign policy), the Commission, EEAS, Member States and the Council (ivi 68).

As for the majority of developments in the field of EU foreign policy, the Treaty of Lisbon heavily influenced also the role of the European Council. The first Van Rompuy presidency-the first permanent one-precisely set the steering role of the European Council as the body that “sets strategic orientations in advance of key events, in particular, to define key messages on our objectives and on the means to achieve them” (European Council 2010 2). As mentioned, notwithstanding the creation of the European External Action Service and the appointment of the first EU High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/ Vice-President of the Commission, after the

¹⁰⁸ Differently from the Council of the European Union, which adopts its resolutions by qualified majority, the European Council votes in unanimity: this is why it is the Institution that mostly witness veto playing.

Lisbon Treaty EU foreign policy became more intergovernmental (Amadio Vicerè 2016; Bickerton et al 2014). In Van Rompuy's "guidelines" for his Presidency then, the role of the European Council was clearly defined as a steering one, while the High Representative and the Commission would cover a preparatory and executive role. Through this development, Member States acted on their desire for more 'ownership' in foreign policy (Vogel 2010). However, some authors also stress how this did not always lead to less policy integration, but rather as a catalyst, without however consequent empowerment of supranational actors (Smeets, Beach 2020; Amadio Viceré 2016; Fabbrini, Putter 2016).

Within the above-described framework, the Enlargement policy also finds its share. Already in the mid2000s, after the enlargement towards the East, some Member States had opted for regaining control of the Enlargement process: in France, the possible EU Membership for Turkey was (improperly) used in 2005 to influence voters against the approval of the EU Constitutional Treaty (Ivaldi 2006, 56); later, France also inserted a referendum requirement in its Constitutional amendments for any enlargement succeeding Croatia's one (Wunsch 2017, 545). Other countries, such as Denmark and the Netherlands-but to some extent also Germany, advocated for a reform of the Enlargement process and a stricter conditionality (Zweers, Van Loon 2020, 4; Rrustemi, Jovetic, 2019). Finally as seen, in 2006 the Enlargement policy was substantially reviewed.

This trend further deepened during the analysed timeline, marked by several internal and external challenges. The last EU Institutional cycle witnessed the succession of the Presidency of Herman Van Rompuy, who chaired the Council during the first year of the Ukraine crisis, by Donald Tusk's presidency, which lasted from 2014 to 2019¹⁰⁹. During his first speech as the new permanent president of the European Council on December 1st 2014, Tusk clearly delineated the internal and external challenges he identified

¹⁰⁹ Tusk was reconfirmed on May 2017 until the end of the legislature.

and advanced his general priorities: “[..]Today, not only are Eurosceptics questioning the EU's value, the Union even has enemies. Politics has returned to Europe, history is back, and such times need leadership and political unity. [...] protecting our fundamental values: solidarity, freedom, unity against the threats to the Union and its unity coming from both inside and outside. Second, we need ruthless determination to end the economic crisis. [...] complete the genuine Economic Monetary Union. [...] Third, the European Union must be strong internationally. Europe has to secure its borders and support those in the neighbourhood who share our values”.

While some of this content might directly relate to the developments of EU-Russia relations, Tusk also underlined the urge to securitize EU borders and maintain stability in the neighbourhood: a trend that would be confirmed by the content of the EU Global Strategy of 2016, specifically addressing the internal and external EU security threats as well as the need to cooperate with the neighbourhood. Including, thus, the Western Balkans.

In line with the EU Global Strategy and EU response to challenges such as international terrorism and radicalisation, the role of the Western Balkan for the stability of the European region and their European perspective also resonates in the agenda and official speeches of the Tusk presidency. In 2015, on the occasion of the third Brdo-Brijuni Process¹¹⁰ summit in Zagreb, Donald Tusk visited the region, starting from Serbia and Albania and North Macedonia; he later declared in his official speech that “there is no doubt that the future of the Western Balkans is with the European Union” and that “the EU remains firmly committed to the enlargement policy for this region. [...] It is crucial for peace, democracy and stability throughout the whole region”. However, he also underlined the role of the Western Balkans in promoting regional security: “The recent events in Paris, Ankara, Baghdad, Beirut, Bamako and in the Sinai

¹¹⁰ The Brdo-Brijuni Process is a multilateral summit initiated in 2013 by Slovenia and Croatia. It focuses on the Enlargement perspective of the Western Balkans countries and includes the two Member States (Slovenia and Croatia), plus the countries of the region.

or in Tunisia brutally demonstrated the growing security challenges posed by violent extremism. The Western Balkans remains a key region also in this context. [...] These challenges can only be solved through common efforts. The European Union will continue to work closely with southeast Europe and the United States on this” (European Council 2015a). Later in 2016 on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of Montenegro's independence in 2016, Tusk stressed how the country remarkably handled its post-independence challenges and “nurtured good relations with [your] immediate neighbours in a most mature way [which] has paved [your] way to NATO and the European Union” (European Council 2016a).

In April 2018, a few months after the release of the Commission Communication on a *Credible Enlargement towards the Western Balkans*, he visited again the region for the annual EU-Western Balkans Summit. A few days before, he reported to the European Parliament specifically addressing the Enlargement by affirming that “The message to our friends is clear: the European Union is and will continue to be the most reliable partner for the entire region. As the biggest investor, the biggest donor, the biggest trading market and the best promise for a better future for citizens. Our summit should reaffirm the European perspective of the region. And more importantly, it should improve, in concrete terms, connections with and within the region.” (European Council 2018a).

The last strong position of Tusk’s Presidency of the Council, however, was the one released at the end of the European Council on the 18-19 of October 2019. The meeting had on the agenda, among other items, the opening of accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia, following the opinion expressed in the Council Conclusions of 2018 on enlargement and stabilisation and association process (Council of the European Union 2018a) and the clear recommendation by the European Commission to proceed (European Commission 2018m). Despite the overwhelming majority of Member States being favourable to opening negotiations, the Danish, Dutch and French vetoes obstructed the reach of required unanimity. The move was

publicly addressed by Tusk as a “mistake” in his last speech as President of the Council, with the suggestion for European leaders to review their judgement before the EU-Western Balkans Summit of the following year (European Council 2019a). In conclusion, while indeed the analysed timeline experienced a further “re-owning” of the Enlargement process by the Member States, it is important to remark on the coincidence between Tusk’s Presidency priorities and the European Commission’s.

4.4.3. The Council of the European Union

Differently from the European Council, the Council of the European Union (or ‘the Council’) is considered, legally and politically, the decision-making body in the EU on foreign policy (Keukeleire, Delreux 2014, 66). It meets in ten configurations depending on the policy area and is attended by ministers or high national officials. It legislates through Council Conclusions. The main configuration-body for foreign policy is the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC), embodied by Member States’ foreign affairs ministers and the High Representative; among other topics such as humanitarian aid, development cooperation, and external trade, the Foreign Affairs Council also include CFSP and CSDP (ivi). Except for the FAC, each Council configuration is chaired by six months rotating presidencies.

The Enlargement towards the Western Balkans figured among the top priorities of the Austrian presidency of the Council and of the programme of the ‘Trio Presidency’, composed also by Estonia and Bulgaria, which stressed and re-affirmed the European perspective for the region (Council of the European Union 2017, 9). However, during the last EU institutional cycle, the Council’s approach to the region of the Western Balkans was mostly defined in terms of security concerns: such interests were influenced by urgent agenda setting such as the migration crisis and by the assessment of the implementation of EU Global Strategy of 2016 which specifically focused on cooperation with the Western Balkans in the field of security (Council Conclusions 2017).

Later on, as seen in the previous paragraph, in 2018 the Council also

expressed, through its conclusions, its support for enlargement as “it continues to represent a strategic investment in peace, democracy, prosperity, security and stability in Europe” (Council Conclusions 2018, 1). In the Annex of the same document the Council also expressed a positive opinion on the opening of negotiations with North Macedonia (then FYROM), and Albania (Council Conclusions 2018, 16-19).

The Enlargement also appears among the priorities of the following Trio Presidency running from 1 January 2019 to July 2020 and that included in 2020, besides Romania and Finland, also Croatia (Council of the European Union 2018, 10). The documents approved by the Council during the analysed timeline mostly reaffirmed the commitment of the EU to the Enlargement, but also very much emphasized the need to cooperate in the field of security: this was further enforced in the approval of Frontex operations on the territory of Bosnia Herzegovina and Serbia, (Council of the European Union 2019a; 2019b). Consequently, while the Enlargement continued to appear among the top priorities of the rotating presidencies, besides the approval of the Commission’s annual reports, cooperation with the Western Balkans was mostly enforced by the Council either through the seeking of partnership and cooperation on security and the extensions outside the EU of border management’s operations.

Conclusions

The last EU institutional cycle was characterized by several significant challenges that, from inside and outside the EU, put the EU's governance under further pressure. The EU institutions and Member States reacted to such challenges in different ways: on the one hand, the EU experienced an increase of control by the Member States on foreign policy topics and a growing preference for intergovernmental solutions, especially from the Ukraine crisis onwards (Aggestam, Hyde-Pri 2020; Webber 2019; Wright 2018). On the other hand, the Commission still tried to orienteer EU governance on more than one occasion, trying to follow its own agenda and providing technical guidance and political support.

This chapter analysed the dimension of the EU's *capability* during the last institutional cycle, meaning "those aspects [...] which constrain or enable external action and hence govern the Union's ability to capitalize on presence or respond to opportunity" (Bretherton, Vogler 2006, 28). It wished to assess the priorities, strategies, and instruments which influenced the occurred shift in the EU's foreign policy towards the Western Balkans region. It first reviewed and analysed the most important instruments, be they intergovernmental (Berlin Process), or drawn from EU policies (external dimension of EU migration policy; the IPA II). In doing so, it presented their function not only in confirming the rising importance of the Western Balkans region: it also highlighted what these instruments might tell about the shifting priorities of Member States and EU institutions, how they relate to each other, and generally about the evolution of EU foreign policy during the analysed timeline.

The second section instead was dedicated to the analysis of the priorities of some key Member States and EU institutions. Starting from the literature, it then analysed the rising bargaining power of Germany through some key

turning points of the institutional cycle; it then went through the declining importance of France compared to Germany, to then stress the change of track after Emmanuel Macron's election and the divergent positions France and Germany have on the enlargement. Finally, it presented the regional strategy of Hungary and what this might imply for the future EU integration of the Western Balkans countries. The last part of the chapter was instead dedicated to the analysis of the actions and role of the European Commission: the section went through the two main layers of the Commission machine, composed of the Presidency and college of Commissioners and their priorities, to then analyse the quiet work of DG NEAR bureaucracy in advocating for a firm but fair commitment to the enlargement. It later completed the analysis of the institutional side of the story with a review of developments within the European Council and the Council of the European Union.

There are three main takeaways from this chapter. The growing 'intergovernmental' trend in EU foreign policy was confirmed: this might be represented, in the case of the Enlargement, by the increasing German leadership; and by the success of the German-led Berlin Process, which acted as Member states-led 'filler' for the Enlargement in the years of the 'Enlargement break'. Furthermore, another example of the growing margin of manoeuvre of Member States was shown by the increased role played the focus by the Presidency of the European Council over the analysed timeline. Its priorities focused on the need for strategic cooperation with the Western Balkans, mainly to respond to common challenges such as migration flows and international terrorism and were linked, because of the progressive securitization of migration policies, to the acknowledgement of the increased strategic importance of the Western Balkans. Such priorities were also reflected in the work of the Council: while in each rotating Presidency's programme a specific paragraph was dedicated to reaffirming the EU commitment to the Enlargement, the implementation of the EU Global Strategy and the security concerns which characterized the years of the Juncker's Commission witnessed a special focus on the region in terms of security cooperation.

Another finding was the confirmation of the return of the ‘politicisation’ of enlargement negotiations. This became evident during the European Council of October 2019, on the occasion of the French veto on opening accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia. Furthermore, the strategic importance of the region for Hungary’s foreign policy, Hungary’s contradictory position within the EU regarding its rule of law’s standards, and its open support to the Enlargement also add another layer of complexity. At the same time, however, the French position managed to be included by the Commission in the new Enlargement strategy towards the Western Balkans, which included not only the possibility to reopen already closed chapters of the *acquis* in case of necessity, but also the reversibility of the process (European Commission 2019).

This showed effective cooperation between the Member States and Institutions and the will of the European Commission to nonetheless pursue the enlargement agenda. A third takeaway, thus, is linked to the interaction between the Member States and institutions, mainly expressed by the peculiar leadership of Merkel’s Germany within the Council and its coincidence of interests and priorities with the Commission’s. The predominance of a “German perspective” towards the region of the Western Balkans was confirmed. On the other hand, the Commission alone would have had a very difficult time in achieving the relaunch of the enlargement strategy. Therefore, it was the cooperation between German leadership and the Commission and the coincidence of interests between the two actors that were crucial for the positive outcome of the policy process.

CHAPTER 5. Presence. The local perception of the EU in the region and case studies

5.1 Introduction

The last EU institutional cycle was a challenging period for the region of the Western Balkans. The effects of the eurozone crisis persisted, continuing to unmask the cons of their heavy market dependence on the EU (Pula 2014; Bechev 2012). The low economic performance massively impacted the social well-being: the unemployment levels reached very high rates, touching in Bosnia, Serbia and Kosovo around 30% of the general population, and 50% among young people, with an average rate between 15-20% in EU28 (Ibidem, 18). The most affected economies were the most fragile: Bosnia Herzegovina and Serbia (Regional Cooperation Council-RCC, 2015, 17).

Among other factors, such as the perceived widespread corruption of the political elites and institutions, this resulted in political instability. Bosnia Herzegovina witnessed a powerful social upheaval in the winter of 2014 (Majstorović et al. 2016); Montenegro experienced an attempted electoral coup in 2016; finally, Serbia saw a rise in antigovernmental protests in 2017 (Bjeloš 2017). In addition, the sense of frustration towards the EU was reinforced by the “downgrade” of the enlargement from the Commission’s political priorities in 2014; and by the difficulty to provide a common solution to the migration crisis (Damjanovski et al. 2020; Belloni 2016, 532). The EU’s support to ruling elites was equally criticised, especially as the elites claimed to espouse EU integration while relying on clientelist structures, control of the media, and the regular production of crises to undermine the rule of law. Literature calls this type of regime *stabilitocracies*¹¹¹. (Belloni 2019; Bieber 2018). Finally, some

¹¹¹ The term *Stabilitocracy* was first used by Srđa Pavlović in her work on Montenegro in late 2016, to describe a situation when “the West has [...] turned a blind eye to this while simultaneously preaching the virtues of democracy and the rule of law”

countries-especially Bosnia Herzegovina and Serbia-witnessed the rise of power of nationalist and/or separatist political parties endorsing the spread of sectarian and EU-critical rhetoric (Lakic 2018a; Zaba, Zivanovic 2017).

All of this impacted the local perception of the EU, which experienced the first reversal of positive attitude since the early 2000s. The trend gradually increased during the Juncker Commission and reached its peak in 2017. Although it experienced a slight reverse after the publication of the 2018 EC Communication, its eventual lasting effects remain to be seen (Regional Cooperation Council-RCC 2019; 2020). Within this context, the cases of Bosnia Herzegovina and Serbia, for all their differences, are relevant for several reasons. Both countries experienced a growth in nationalist and euro-sceptic rhetoric during the considered period¹¹², despite starting from opposite directions (in 2014, BIH experienced heavy internal protests; in the same year, the former nationalist Aleksander Vučić was elected in Serbia with a pro-EU programme). Furthermore, both countries experienced a significant increase in the political relevance of nationalist and/or sectarianist parties during two general elections during the considered timeline. Finally, according to the Balkan Barometers (2015-2019) and National Democratic Institute for International Affairs opinion polls (2014; 2017), the two countries showed the highest percentage of euro-sceptic respondents in the region.

(Pavlović 2016). It subsequently became widely used by academics to describe those governments who claim to secure stability and to espouse EU integration, to then rely on clientelist structures, control of the media, and regular production of crises to undermine democracy and the rule of law (Belloni 2019; Bieber 2018).

¹¹² Different nuances of the term Euroscepticism are investigated in academic literature (see for example Taggart and Szczerbiak 2008; Kopecky and Mudde 2002). Considering this background, this chapter also takes on euro-realism interpretation as in “the rational calculation of the advantages of EU-membership, as well as a simultaneous attempt to minimize shortcomings”, to better frame the political elites’ orientation in the case studies (Petsilis 2020, 142; Samardzija 2016).

5.2 Aim and structure of the chapter

Within this framework, this chapter analyses the change in the local perception of the EU in the case studies. It aims to answer the research subquestion:

“What changes in the local perception of the EU-and of the analysed non-EU actors- influenced this foreign policy outcome?”

It does so by studying the perspective of three important domestic actors: political elites (party leaders, parties' positions); economic elites (business opinion); and public opinion. By working with the *presence* dimension of the actorness framework (Bretherton, Vogler 2006), this chapter does not aim to evaluate the EU's action in the case studies nor the effect of its action- the so-called Europeanisation effect.

Rather, it contributes to the framework by addressing a specific aspect of the EU's *presence* in the case studies: the local perception of the EU, and therefore, EU membership. It also aims to contribute, at the theoretical level, to the existing literature on 'de-centring the agenda' (Keukeleire 2015), which highlights the importance of the context and agendas of third countries for efficient and effective EU policies. A further layer of complexity is finally added by the analysis of the case studies' perception of China, Russia, and Turkey from a comparative perspective.

While this does not aim to be an exhaustive account of EU perception in the case study countries, it still provides input to better understand the internal evolutions that occurred during the analysed timeline and the potential influence they could have had on the relaunch of EU strategy for the region. In the case of the Western Balkans region, the research emphasises domestic adoption costs and domestic actors as key factors for the implementation of EU reforms (Dimitrova 2010). The respective positions of these actors also reveal

interesting insights on the local development of the EU image: first, because of the mutual influence between political elites and public opinion; secondly, because public opinion is often known to project its views of national government onto the EU (Belloni 2016; Anderson 1998). This might lead voters to express support for open pro-EU agenda, like in Serbia's 2014 elections (NDI-National Democratic Institute for International Affairs 2014a, 2); or to implicate the EU for its support to ruling elites for the sake of stability, in moments of social dissatisfaction towards authorities (Belloni 2016).

In terms of structure, conversely to other chapters, this one delves directly into the case studies. After discussing the methods of analysis, the chapter divides into two main sections, each one dedicated to a case study.

5.3 The Analysis

The chapter analyses three local actors: political elites; economic elites; and public opinion. For Bosnia Herzegovina, the analysis focuses on the main three parties in the Bosnian parliament and their respective leaders: the SDA- Bosniak Social Democrats, led by Bakir Izetbegović; SNSD- Alliance of Independent Social Democrats; headed by Milorad Dodik; HDZ- Democratic Front, headed by Dragan Čović. These parties represented the vast majority of Bosnian voters between 2014 and 2019. They have been chosen for their political historical relevance in party politics in Post Dayton era: they have evident religious and ethno-nationalist connotations (respectively standing for Muslim Bosnians, orthodox Serbian, and catholic Croats); and they dive into distinct electoral basins, which broadly reflect the three ‘constituent’ people of the country, Bosniaks; Bosnian Serbs nationalists; and Croatians.

For the case of Serbia instead, the analysis focuses on the Serbian Progressive Party-SNS and Alexander Vučić, the most relevant political party in the Serbian assembly; the Serbian Socialist Party-SPS led by Ivica Dačić, the second most voted party in both elections occurred over the considered timeline and part of the SNS’ governing coalition; finally, the chapter considers the Serbian Radical Party-SRS led by Vojislav Seselj, the most relevant openly anti-EU party in the Serbian parliament. Party manifestoes, public speeches, newspaper articles and literature are used to portray political elites’ perception of the EU and EU membership across the analysed timeline.

In both case studies, business elites’ perspective on the EU and EU membership is analysed by revising the results of all Business Opinion surveys conducted by the Regional Cooperation Council-RCC between 2014 and 2019; finally, the public opinion’s perception is analysed with the support of the RCC Balkan Barometers for public opinion issued between 2014 and 2019. They are then cross-checked against the polls of NDI-National Democratic Institute for

Foreign Affairs, Standard Euro-barometers (for Serbia), newspaper articles and think tanks analyses. Sources are retrieved from secondary literature, experts' interviews (EU officials), RCC regional surveys (2014-2019), Eurobarometer Standards and Public Opinion (2015-2019); NDI-National Democratic Institute electoral analysis and opinion polls (2014; 2014a; 2017), OSCE electoral reports (2014, 2018; 2014a, 2016); and reports from think tanks.

5.4 Case study I: Bosnia Herzegovina

In the winter of 2014, protests broke out in Tuzla, an industrial city in the North-East of Bosnia Herzegovina, featuring marches and uprisings against the widespread institutional corruption and the decade long privatisations, as well as demands for greater job security in the follow-up of the severe economic backlash from the Eurozone crisis (Belloni 2016; Kurtović 2016; Majstorović et al. 2016). Along with these protests and demands, the limits of the post-Dayton ethnic division system were also suggested as contributors to political corruption (Belloni, 2016; Majstorović, et al., 2016; Belloni-Strazzari 2014). This brought questions related to the unintended legacies of the Dayton Agreement and about the role of the international community (EU included) in overseeing their implementation to the surface again. Whereas it is commonly agreed that the Dayton system was necessary to end the war (and protests organisers were also very careful not to brand these protests as ‘anti-Dayton’), some authors argue that (due to their specific architecture) the Dayton agreements indeed contributed to institutionalise ethno-nationalistic drives, which constitute the basis of Bosnia Herzegovina’s post-Dayton politics¹¹³ (Majstorović et al. 2016; Belloni, Strazzari 2014). In other words, the Dayton Agreement and its consequences are presumed to be partly responsible for the social and political instabilities in Bosnia, “blocking its EU integration and aggravating the lives of citizens in general.” (Majstorović et al 2016, 662).

Within this framework, other authors argue that the externally driven transition “from war to peace, from communist to democracy”-therefore including the involvement of the international community and the EU-also helped to create the conditions for the spread of corruption (Belloni, Strazzari 2014, 856). These developments affect the path of Bosnia Herzegovina to EU integration: the ethno-nationalisation and growing sectarianism of Bosnian politics, the increasing separatist claims from Republika Srpska’s leader

¹¹³ The Dayton Agreements formally divided the country into two entities, the Republic of Srpska (RS) and the Federation of BiH (FBiH), as well as the autonomous Brčko District. The Bosnian Constitution, drawn from Annex IV of the Agreement, also established Serbs, Croats and Bosniaks as ‘constitutive peoples’.

Milorad Dodik, as well as rising mistrust for elected elites and national institutions by the Bosnian public all have direct consequences on Bosnia's path towards EU integration. While progress has been made in the field of rule of law, the country continues to lag on demanded reforms on transparency (European Commission 2018a; 2019d).

In the winter of 2014, social discontent was predominantly aimed at national authorities and generally did not target the EU: however, the EU's show of solidarity with the local authorities following the protests, in addition to the misreading of the nature of such protests as "sectarianists", did not contribute to a positive image of the EU in the country (Belloni 2016). However, following such developments, in November 2014 the relaunch of its policy to the country through different instruments such as the Compact for Growth and Development ' (the Compact); and bilateral international initiatives such as the British–German Initiative, signalled "an attempt to jump-start the stalled EU accession process by avoiding talk of constitutional change in favour of economic reform" (Majstorović et al. 2016, 663). More importantly, they already indicated an indirect acknowledgement of the decreasing popularity of the EU in the country, and the need to address it.

	Political cleavage	Parliamentary mandates 2014/2018 (CoE 2014, 2018; Central election commission of Bosnia Herzegovina 2014; 2018)	EU Membership	Nato Membership (yes/no)
SDA-Party of Democratic Action. President: Bakir Izetbegović (FBiH)	Centre right-right wing; Nationalist; Islamism	2014: 27.87%, 9 seats 2018: 25.5 % 9 seats	Yes	Yes
HDZ (and coalition)-Democratic Front. President: Dragan Čović (FBiH)	Centre right-right Christian Croatian nationalism	2014: 12.15%. 4 seats 2018: 14.5%, 5 seats	Yes	Yes
SNSD-Alliance of Independence Social Democrats. President: Milorad Dodik (RS)	Fiscal: centre-left Social: centre right Serbian nationalism Euro scepticism	2014: 38.46%, 6 seats 2018: 39%,6 seats	Yes, but growingly Euro sceptic	No

5.1 Table of party cleavage and EU orientations, with number of seats across national elections

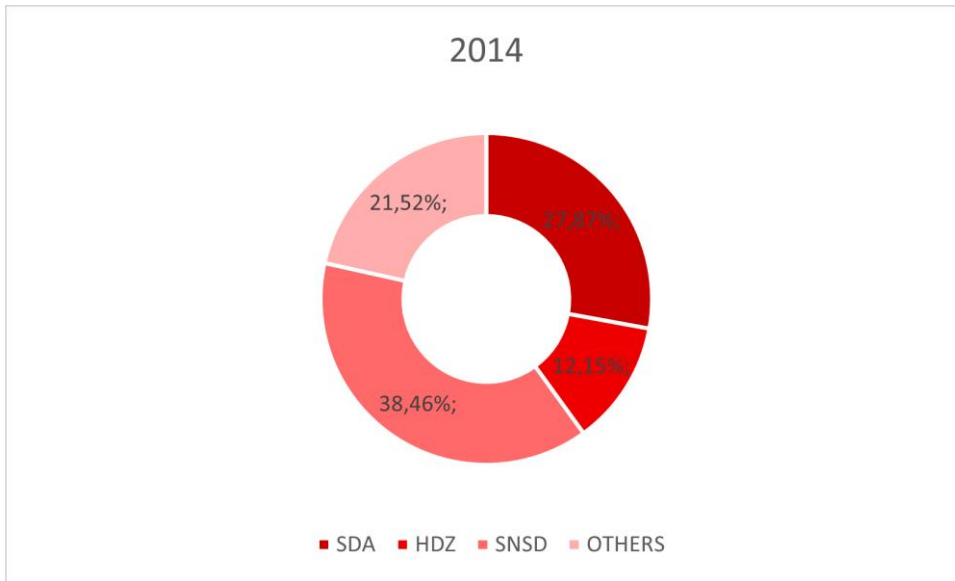


Figure 5.1 Bosnia Herzegovina 2014's election results- by political party.

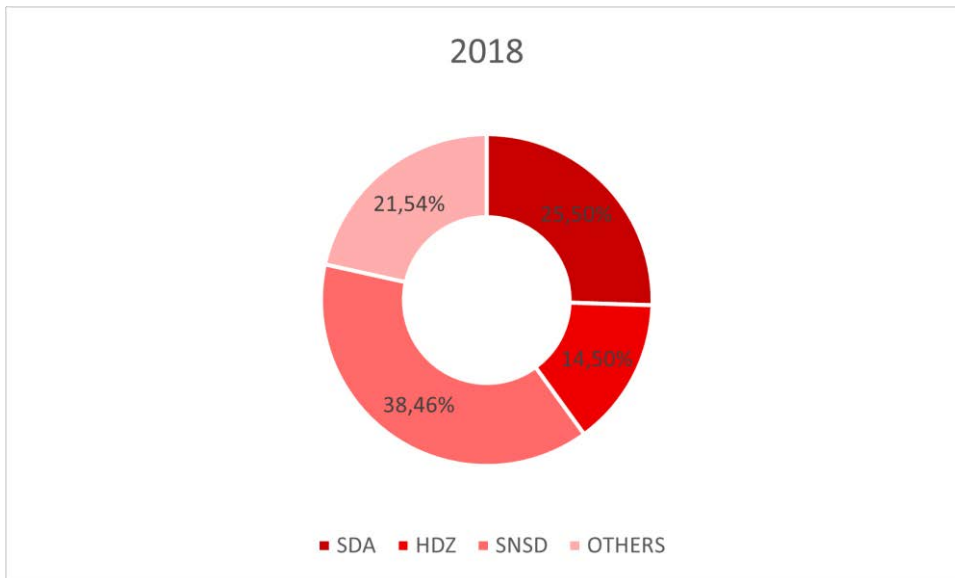


Figure 5.2. Bosnia Herzegovina 2018's elections results- by political party.

5.4.1 Political elites

The role of political elites as mediators and primary interlocutors with the EU institutions is crucial in two ways to analyse the change in the perception of the EU in Bosnia Herzegovina. Party ideology is often regarded in the literature as a key driver of party responses to the EU, as it might have an impact on party policy on the EU (Stojić 2017; Taggart, Szczerbiak 2013; 2008); and as it might influence the public opinion around the subject. Consequently, a party's or party leaders' positions on the theme of the EU and EU membership are important to draw the trajectory of the EU's perception after 2014.

As in other cases in Europe, the topic of the EU and EU membership is often used by political elites to forward their agenda, irrespectively of their responsibilities in successfully carrying out demanded reforms (Damjanovski et al. 2020). This is true also in Bosnia Herzegovina: after the eurozone crisis and especially after 2013, it became clear that this support acted more at a formal than normative level, with a perceived lack of “political will to carry out necessary reforms”¹¹⁴.

The political parties listed in Table 5.1, constitute the main political forces of Bosnian national politics. They gather, since the 2014 elections-subsequently confirmed in the 2018 elections-the highest share of voters. Respectively, SDA maintained nine seats across the elections; HDZ gained one more seat, achieving a total of five in 2018; and SNSD maintained its six seats; (Central Election Commission Bosnia Herzegovina 2018; Council of Europe-General Assembly 2018). The 2014 elections, therefore, constitute a significant rupture, as “people decided to vote for the known ethnonational politicians rather than to “risk” and choose smaller or new political parties” (Osce 2014; ISPI 2014). The results of the main only secular and non-nationalist party

¹¹⁴ EU official, online interview, 2021

running in the 2014 elections¹¹⁵, SDP, which only slightly increased in 2018, speak for themselves¹¹⁶. The winning parties all share the characteristic of expressing representations for each specific “constituent people” of Bosnia Herzegovina, building their political identity on ethnonational and religious lines. In terms of direct consequences for the local perception of EU membership, as consensus is needed at the presidential level for all foreign policy matters, the commitment to EU membership was never formally placed under discussion (EU official, 2021). In line with the trend exposed by the growing literature on so-called *Stabilitocracies*, all the parties listed above, (especially those belonging to the FBiH entity,) always showed support for EU integration, despite thriving on a network of informal clientelism, media control, and sometimes outstate corruption, which inevitably impact abundance to principles of rule of law and transparency (Belloni 2019; Bieber 2018; Pavlović 2016).

Milorad Dodik and SNSD

In terms of official party positions and rhetoric, overall, all Bosnian national parties developed some contradictory positions during the analysed timeline. The first and most evident example is the position of the Bosnian-Serbian nationalist party SNSD and its leader, the long-term president of Republika Srpska Milorad Dodik, elected to the tripartite Presidency of BiH in 2018 (OSCE 2018)¹¹⁷. SNSD is not formally against EU integration: in terms

¹¹⁵ Nasa Stranka only gained its first parliamentary seats in the 2018 elections.

¹¹⁶ However, results of SDP are also due to protests vote against the management of the floods and to accusations of corruption of party elites.

¹¹⁷ Milorad Dodik, started his political career in 1998 as a moderate politician committed to unity and reconciliation of Bosnia Herzegovina. In the early 2000s, he underwent a political evolution and emerged in the mid2000s as the main player of Bosnian Serb nationalist politics. He declared various times not to consider himself a

of BIH joining international organisations, its only professed opposition lies with the Bosnian Action Plan to join NATO (Gotev 2020). However, during the analysed timeline, Dodik was the leader who distinguished himself for his outspoken, increasing Eurosceptic views, especially during the election campaign. Although he had been advocating for a separatist referendum of Republika Srpska, (the majority-Serbian entity of Bosnia Herzegovina) since 2013, during Juncker's Commission his rhetoric became increasingly outspoken in his separatist, anti-NATO and utilitarian use of EU membership (Damjanovski et al., 2020). In 2015, he actively campaigned for a referendum against the BIH judiciary; in 2016, he was probed for hate speech, and contingently accused the EU of being "unable to support the EU membership process", and called the prospect of EU integration a "farce" (Fenaneews 2021; BalkanInsight 2017). Besides his growing Eurosceptic rhetoric, Milorad Dodik is also the Bosnian leader with the strongest pro-Russia attitudes. While Bosnia Herzegovina adhered to international sanctions against Russia after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, during the considered timeframe Dodik pursued ever closer connections between Republika Srpska and the Russian Federation, by saying that "the Russian influence is much more requested here" (Sarajevo Times 2018).

The nationalist turn taken by SNSD under Dodik's presidency obtained wide support among the electorate in Republika Srpska, where the majority of Eurosceptic opinions are focused (Regional Cooperation Council-RCC 2015; 2016; 2017; 2018). Once arrived at the tripartite Presidency after the 2018 elections, Dodik's separatism further increased, as he openly claimed: "to work above all and only for the interests of Serbs" (Lakic 2018a). However, despite his clear euro-critic rhetoric and anti-NATO programme, when elected Dodik swore (together with the other BIH leaders, Zeljko Komsic and Sefik

Bosnian, but a Serb, and is the main campaigner for a formal and peaceful separation of Republika Srpska from Bosnia Herzegovina (Beglerović 2020, 116; Maksic 2009).

Dzaferovic)¹¹⁸, to work jointly for BiH's membership of the EU and NATO, affirming that he would "ask the EU to give BiH a candidate status as soon as possible" (Sarajevo Times 2018a). His euro-sceptic view therefore appears to be motivated more by domestic political objectives than by a true opposition to the EU membership.

Bakir Izetbegović and SDA

The leaders of the other two main Bosnian parties showed some different trends. Bakir Izetbegović, leader of the most voted party in Bosnia Herzegovina, the conservative SDA, always affirmed its commitment to both the EU and NATO integration. He is the principal political opponent of Milorad Dodik, as the SDA and SNSD both are (to some extent) nationalist parties drawing from ethnoreligious lines. Furthermore, similarly to Dodik's relation with Russia, Izetbegović is the Bosnian leader with the strongest ties with another non-EU actor considered in this study: Turkey. This relationship is particularly used by Izetbegović to consolidate his position within BiH political environment, as his party aims to represent Bosnian Muslims¹¹⁹.

The relationship between Izetbegović and Erdogan's Turkey precedes the considered timeframe: previously in 2013, during an official visit to Ankara, the Bosniak leader thanked Turkey's efforts as a mediator in the Turkey-Serbia-Bosnia and Herzegovina Trilateral Summit Process, and for

¹¹⁸ In November 2018 at the tripartite Presidency of BiH Sefik Dzaferovic succeeded the previous Bosniak leader Bakir Izetbegović, who held the seat from 2010 to 2018. The study however considers the role of Bakir Izetbegović for two main reasons: first, his presidency covered most of the analysed timeline. Secondly, he is the leader who developed the strongest ties with Erdogan's Turkey.

¹¹⁹ Bakir Izetbegović is also the son of the late Alija Izetbegovic, leader of the "Bosniak" during the 1990s war.

Turkey's loans, which financed projects related to the return of minorities in Bosnia Herzegovina and for the restoration of cultural sites in Bosnia Herzegovina such as the House of Culture of Trebinje (Sarajevo Times 2018b; 2013).

As in the case of Dodik's SNSD, the Izetbegović party's support for EU integration often expresses motives of power-consolidation, united to a lack of tangible delivery on the EU-demanded reforms. In an interview in 2017, Vedran Džihic, Senior Researcher at the Austrian Institute for International Affairs and member of the Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG), framed the political antagonism between Dodik and Izetbegović on the theme of EU membership as a partnership needed for "political survival". Specifically, he affirmed that "both of them (Dodik and Izetbegović *ndr*) have lost faith in the EU – they simply do not see any political gains from the anyhow stalled process of EU integration in Bosnia. This loss of focus and serious attitude towards the EU makes it easier for them to play their "blame-the-other-games", which is diverting attention from their weak reform performance" (Burazer, 2017).

Dragan Čović, Željko Komšić and HDZ

Less controversial, especially compared to Milorad Dodik's SNSD, is the trajectory of HDZ, representative of the Croatian constituency at the tripartite Presidency. The party is strongly characterised, like the SNSD and SDA, by ethnonationalism and mostly draws its consensus from Bosnian Croats. Compared to the previously analysed actors, the biggest changes occurred at the level of leadership. In the 2018 presidential elections, Željko Komšić from HDZ BIH gained the presidential seat over the former representative for the Croatian constituency, Dragan Čović, also a former chairman of the Bosnian Presidency. However, the controversy arising from this change of representative gives the idea of the strong sectarian power and yet fragile equilibrium of Bosnian domestic politics: Komšić assumedly won

the elections thanks to the votes of Bosniaks- Bosnian Muslims-who have the right to vote for either Bosniak or Croat member of the Presidency and significantly outnumber Croats (Ivković 2018).

This review of the preferences and priorities of Bosnia's political elites on the theme of the EU, EU membership, and the considered non-EU actors allows us to draw two important points. First, the perception of the EU by the elites, and the consequent rhetoric these last used during the period of the Juncker Commission, is more subjected to gambles of domestic politics than an expression of real criticism or distrust towards the EU institutions or the EU perspective for Bosnia Herzegovina. As the nationalist trends intensified throughout all main parties, the considered political elites, while formally adhering to EU integration, actively used the topic of the EU and EU membership for their political agenda, sometimes endorsing anti-EU or EU-critical rhetoric to further cement their political power. Secondly and similarly, the most predominant parties, respectively Izetbegović's SDA and Dodik's SNSD use their consistent ties with Turkey and Russia to consolidate their position among the electorate and to send signals to the EU (Bieber 2018).

To conclude, Republika Srpska's threat of separatism pursued by Milorad Dodik is undoubtedly a significant cause of concern for BIH's stability and its prospective EU membership. However, considering the orientations of the main Bosnian political parties, the major causes of instability in the country are the agendas of the Bosnian elites, causing direct implications for the country's path toward EU integration

5.4.2 Public opinion

The findings of the Balkan Barometer's survey of 2015 still reflected the shadow of heavy social and economic protests in Bosnia Herzegovina at the start of the Juncker Commission. They pictured a strained economy and a general sentiment of discontent, rooted in high rates of general and youth unemployment (Regional Cooperation Council-RCC 2015): in Bosnia Herzegovina, respectively 65% and 55% of respondents identified unemployment and the economic situation as the two most important issues (Regional Cooperation Council-RCC 2015, 29). This trend continued across the time of the Juncker Commission, with the significant addition of corruption rapidly ranking third among the most pressing perceived issues, reaching a peak of more than 30%.

As previously stated, Bosnia Herzegovina belongs (alongside Serbia), to the cohort of the most sceptical countries in the region about EU integration, as opposed to Albania and Kosovo, which showed the highest rate of enthusiasm (Regional Cooperation Council-RCC 2015, 49). During the considered timeframe, the RCC reports find general support for regional and EU integration, although this is not exempt from scepticism. The latter appeared due to "the belief that the EU is not supplying or supplementing the supply of the public goods that the economies in the region are deficient in security, stability, justice and, most of all, welfare" (Regional Cooperation Council-RCC 2015, 13). While this shows the average sentiment of the region, it was also confirmed in Bosnia Herzegovina: in 2015, 38% of respondents believed Bosnia Herzegovina would never get the EU membership and only 19% believed that could be reached by 2020.

The public opinion poll conducted by the National Democratic Institute-NDI in 2017 further confirms these trends. They highlighted how both at the federal level and in the singular entities (FBiH and RS), respondents expressed pessimism towards the future, predominantly because of economic conditions (unemployment exceeding 50% in both entities) and the widespread corruption

-respectively 11% in FBiH and 9% in RS- (NDI- National Democratic Institute 2017, 7). In terms of EU membership, 53% of respondents believed that BiH would not have achieved EU membership within five years from the survey (Ibidem, 19). Furthermore, when asked about support for EU membership, respondents show a deep cleavage around ethnic lines, with Bosniaks and Croats generally showing significant levels of support, and Serbs being evenly split (Ibidem, 18). Over the years of the Juncker Commission, this sentiment only slightly improved, moving hand in hand with the amelioration of socio-economic conditions and the important milestone of BIH's submission of EU membership application in 2016: this latter was, however, filed against the technical opinion of the EU delegation for Bosnia Herzegovina on the country's readiness for application (Online interview, 2021). Despite these landmark developments, public opinion on EU membership still showed a raising scepticism, especially in Republika Srpska (ivi).

Another element of concern regarded the rising importance of the issue of corruption. In 2016, the economy and unemployment remained the top issues reported by respondents in the country, respectively 72% and 45%, with corruption appearing in third place with 29% of respondents (Regional Cooperation Council-RCC, 2016, 42). Euro-scepticism continued to rise, especially when compared with countries such as Albania and Kosovo. Specifically, 42 % of Bosnia Herzegovina's respondents remained neutral on the positive or negative aspects of EU membership, 33% considered it a good thing, and a significant amount, circa 21%, considered it to be a bad thing. In Republika Srpska, a poll conducted in 2017 underlined how positive and negative views on EU membership were evenly split (NDI-National Democratic Institute 2017). In addition, the percentage of respondents believing that the country would never reach EU membership remained stable at 33% (with a significant difference between the younger respondents, generally more pro-EU) (Ibidem, 51). However, in 2016, the general support for EU integration remained stable, if not for enthusiasm, then for lack of credible alternatives (Regional Cooperation Council-RCC 2016, 22).

After the submission of the EU membership application, which constituted a landmark in Bosnia Herzegovina's path to EU integration, the perception of EU integration did not change considerably. However, it could be perceived as some deteriorating enthusiasm for the EU's perspective of the country. This was not an indication of whether the public believed the EU membership to be good or not (Regional Cooperation Council-RCC 2017, fig. 19). Rather, a growing share of respondents believed that the membership would never happen (33%), while a reduced percentage of respondents 24%, believed that it would happen by 2025 (Ibidem, fig.20). These data remained stable notwithstanding the slight economic recovery.

The ethnic and religious sense of belonging influenced respondents' preferences also terms of the public's perception of non-EU actors. In line with trends shown by political elites and with their historical presence in the country, among the most appreciated non-EU actors were Russia and Turkey. According to a poll released by the International Republican Institute in 2018, Turkey ranked first in respondents' preferences, with 21% of interviewees affirming that they evaluated Turkey's presence in Bosnia positively. Russia came in second place, with 20% of the respondents seeing the country's influence in a positive way (Balkan Insight 2018). However, the poll also showed that appreciation was neatly divided per ethnicity: 52% of responding Bosnian Serbs valued mostly negatively Turkey's presence in the country while showing 77% of appreciation for Russia. On the contrary, Bosnian Muslims made up 76% of positive attitudes toward Turkey's influence on the country, compared to 60% of negative attitudes toward Russia. Finally, Bosnian Croats showed a more balanced opinion, respectively showing 41% and 43% of positive responses to Turkey's and Russia's influence in the country (International Republican Institute-IRI 2018, 29-30).

With the publication of the Commission Communication in 2018, the perception of the EU and EU membership in Bosnia Herzegovina experienced a positive change. This was significantly perceived also at the regional level where the positive response was an average of more than 50% for the first time

since 2014, to almost touching 60% in 2020 (Regional Cooperation Council-RCC 2020, Fig. 29, 40). Specifically, in Bosnia Herzegovina, the rate of respondents seeing EU membership as something good increased to 47% in 2019 and 56% in 2020, while the share of neutral respondents decreased respectively to 31% and 28% against the 36% in previous years (Regional Cooperation Council-RCC 2019, 2020). At the same time, all reports from 2018 reports and adjustment of expectations towards the foreseen date of accession: while the share of respondents believing that BIH will never enter the EU remained significant with a share of around 30%, more than 35% of respondents believed that this would happen by 2030. (Regional Cooperation Council-RCC 2019; 2020, fig. 23; 25; 29; 31).

5.4.3 Business Opinion

While generally more optimistic than the Public Opinion Survey, the Balkan Barometers on *Business* perception towards the EU showed a similar trend. The match between the domestic political situation and the perception of having poor future economic prospects was also shown in Business opinion. In 2015, around 68% of surveyed businesses in Bosnia Herzegovina believed the EU membership to be a good thing for their prospects, as against the respective 33% among the general public (Regional Cooperation Council-RCC 2015a). Furthermore, the report underlined a widespread perception that businesses that engaged more in regional cooperation showed more positive attitudes towards the EU (Ibidem, 21).

However, a 2016 report was already showing a link between Bosnia's political situation and rising Euroscepticism (Regional Cooperation Council-RCC 2016a, 22). Furthermore, in line with results from the same year's *Public Opinion Survey*, corruption acquired a relevant role among the enlisted concerns, together with complaints about unfair competition, legal uncertainty and macroeconomic instability (ivi). Interestingly, the report mentioned the Berlin Process as an instrument with a proven positive impact on the economy of the region¹²⁰ (Regional Cooperation Council-RCC 2016a, 33); and also highlighted how political authorities (e.g. the government, at least in BIH, but also in the case of Serbia and Kosovo), "tended not to be responsive to the business community" (ibidem, 23).

In terms of exports, around 64% of BIH businesses agreed that their goods and services might compete with the EU market (Ibidem fig. 57; 87), against

¹²⁰ One of the critiques to the Enlargement policy to the region of the Western Balkans is its national, rather than regional focus. While each country holds specific characteristics, the regional approach endorsed by the Berlin Process, which focus on interconnectivity and regional cooperation is sometimes believed to be most effective.

only 32% of respondents believed that it was easier to trade with the EU than with CEFTA economies (Ibidem fig. 60; 89).

In line with the Public Opinion survey, the most significant change is perceived after the 2017 report. Businesses' opinions on EU accessions and EU generally increased, due partially to the slight economic recovery and the relaunch of the European Commission Communication on a credible enlargement in February 2018. If the companies' confidence in their potential for competitiveness with EU countries was already reaching relatively high rates (59% in BIH and 46% in Serbia), more than half of respondents viewed EU accession as more favourable after 2018 (Regional Cooperation Council-RCC 2019a). Specifically, 28% of business respondents in BIH viewed the EU market as more approachable for exports than the CEFTA region, a sharp rise from its 19% in 2017 (Ibidem, 118).

5.5 Case Study II: Serbia

Serbia is considered among the frontrunners of EU Enlargement. In 2014, two years after the achievement of candidate status (2012) and one year after the reopening of the dialogue with Pristine (2013), Aleksander Vučić became the Prime Minister of Serbia, running in the elections with an explicit pro-EU agenda (NDI-National Democratic Institute for International Affairs 2014a). Serbia was also the first country visited by the Commissioner for the European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations Johannes Hahn, after the publication of the Commission's Communication on the Credible Enlargement to the Western Balkans in 2018 (EU Delegation to the Republic of Serbia, 2018).

However, according to the Commission's annual reports, during the years of the Juncker Commission, the country experienced a worrying decline in freedom of speech, party pluralism and freedom of the press (European Commission 2016e; 2017e; 2019e). In 2019, Freedom House downgraded Serbia in its annual report from a "free" to a "partly free" country (Freedom House 2019). Consequently, notwithstanding the EU-oriented reforms remained part of all government programmes since 2014, Serbia is among the countries in the region where the reforms demanded by the EU are still lagging (European Commission 2016e; 2017e; 2019e). Finally, it is the country whose public opinion showed the most striking level of mistrust towards the EU and EU membership, according to European and regional surveys (Eurobarometer 2015, 3; 2019, 3; Regional Cooperation Council-RCC 2015, 2016, 2017).

Serbian political elites always maintained a formal pro-EU reforms attitude, confirmed by the recurring insertion of EU reforms in government programmes (NDI-National Democratic Institute for International Affairs 2016) and official interviews released to EU media (Euronews 2018). However, over the years Aleksandar Vučić's Serbian Progressive Party-SNS recurred to increasing euro-critical rhetoric, often highlighting feelings of: "exhaustion" for the long wait to join the EU; and of rising intolerance towards

the “loyalty” question between the EU, China and Russia (ivi). Especially after the declaration of independence of Kosovo in 2008, the topic of EU membership followed oscillatory trends and gained wide centrality in Serbian Eurosceptic parties’ discourse (Antonić 2012, 67; Subotić 2011, 325; 2010). Furthermore, academic analyses highlight how the instrumentalisation of the EU and EU membership for domestic purposes is part of a well-rooted strategy used by successive Serbian governments to balance the allegiance to the EU and the partnership with other actors such as Russia, Turkey and China (Vuksanovic 2019; Simurdic 2016). Consequently, the political elites and the party’s positioning are crucial to the understanding of the evolution of the EU’s perception in Serbia (Canveren, Aknur, 2020).

The rising euro-critical trend is also found in public opinion. The profound syncretism between the country and the EU in terms of diplomatic, political, and economic interaction since the early 2000s led EU-Serbia relations to be more subjected to political instrumentalisation and more closely scrutinised by the public¹²¹. Moreover, because of the non-conditional requirement of appeasement of relations with Kosovo and cooperation with the Hague Tribunal, EU membership remained a central sensitive topic in Serbian public opinion (Bjeloš et al. 2020, 10; Vuksanovic 2020).

¹²¹ At the same time, some authors argue that surveys showing attitudes towards the EU are often biased by citizens having limited knowledge about the EU and may follow the ups and downs of the integration process, or project their views of the national government onto the EU. See Belloni 2016, *The European Union Blowback? Euroscepticism and its Consequences in the Western Balkans*, *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*; and Anderson 1998. *When in Doubt, Use Proxies: Attitudes Towards Domestic Politics and Support for European Integration*. *Comparative Political Studies* 31 (5): 569–601.

5.5.1 Political elites

Table 5.2 Party cleavage and EU orientations, with the number of seats across national elections.

	Political cleavages	Parliamentary mandates 2014/2018 (Osce 2014, 2018; NDI 2014; 2018)	EU Membership	NATO Membership
SNS-Serbian Progressive Party Leader: Alexander Vučić	Serbian Nationalist	2014: 48%; 158 seats 2016: 48.25%; 131 seats.	YES	Neutral
SPS-Serbian Socialist Party (in coalition with SNS) Leader: Ivica Dačić	Social Democratic Nationalist	2014: 13.5%; 44 seats 2016: 10.95%; 29 seats	YES	YES
SRS-Serbian Radical Party Leader: Vojislav Seselj	Nationalist Anti-EU	2014: N/A 2016: 8.10; 22 seats	NO	NO

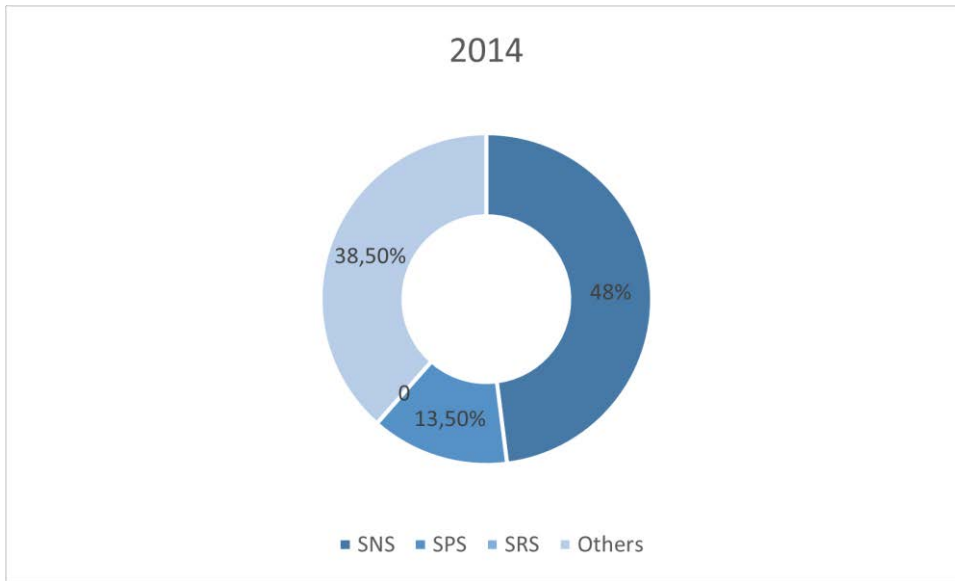


Figure 5.3 Serbia 2014 Parliamentary election results- by political party.

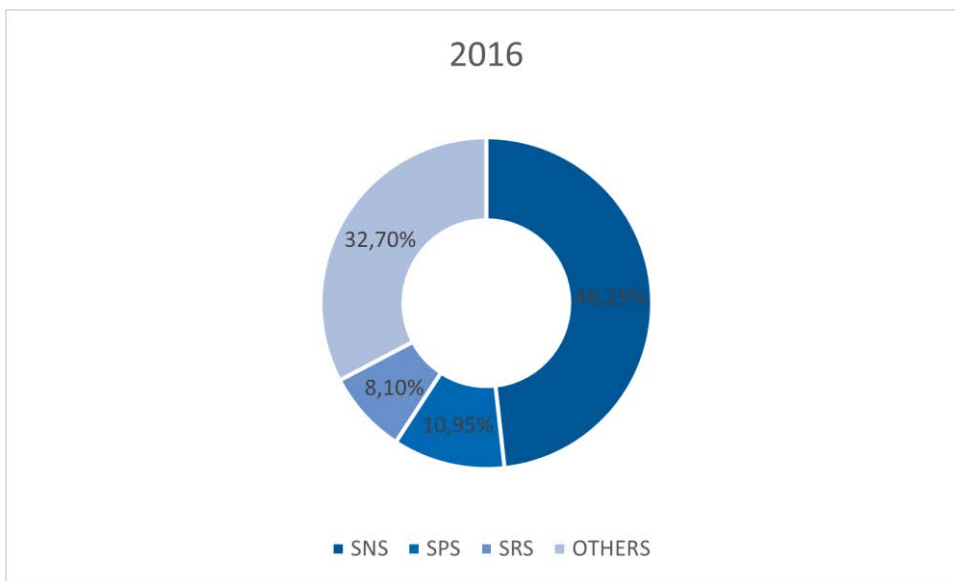


Figure 5.4. Serbia 2016 Parliamentary election results- by political party

The Juncker Commission started during a significant political change in Serbia: the early parliamentary elections of March 2014 saw Vučić's party (the Serbian Progressive Party SNS) gain a vast number of votes, taking advantage of the Serbian Democratic Party's struggle in fighting economic problems, stubborn unemployment rates and corruption allegations (NDI-National Democratic Institute for International Affairs 2014a, 13). By channelling the votes of the disillusioned and pro-European formerly DS electorate, the Serbian Progressive Party gained 48% of the votes in the 2014 early parliamentary elections, resulting in 158 seats in the Assembly (NDI-National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, 2014a).

The pro-EU turn taken by Vučić's party-which was in the government coalition with SPS until 2014, might be interpreted as a good rupture from the growing Eurosceptic spell that characterised political debates from 2011 when it became clear that EU membership could never happen without Serbian cooperation with the Hague Tribunal and the resolution of the dispute with Pristine (Antonić 2012; Subotić 2011)¹²². Even though the topic of Kosovo was hardly mentioned during the campaign, the SNS's pro-European turn was confirmed by the elevation of the dialogue with Pristine among the top priorities of the new government, as SNS's leadership understood that Serbian economic survival depended on a successful EU integration. In turn, this necessitated the reach of accommodation with Kosovo (NDI-National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, 2014a, 3)¹²³. Similarly to the case of Bosnia Herzegovina, during Juncker's commission leading parties in

¹²² The pro-EU direction undertaken by the party however appeared already evident during the signature of the deal between Belgrade and Pristine in 2013, when Vučić's party formed the government coalition (OSCE-ODIHR 2014).

¹²³ It must be stressed, however, that according to the *OSCE/ODIHR Limited Election Observation Mission Final Report on Serbia Early Parliamentary Elections of March 2014*, the majority of electoral contestants declared their commitment to European values and EU integration (OSCE- ODIHR 2014, 11).

Serbia (this case, predominantly Vučić's SNS) also showed positive attitudes and commitment toward European integration: in fact, SNS subscribes to Serbia's EU accession process as "a trajectory which is expected to enhance the country's democratic institutions, accelerate economic growth, and modernize the state's infrastructure" (Petsinis 2019).

However, it soon became evident that this support was declined along with a complex set of interconnected domestic and foreign policy interests. Geopolitics in Serbia "makes up the main component of Euroscepticism" and is closely tied to the desire to preserve the country's 'neutrality' between East and West (Petsinis, 2020, 144; 2019). The (scarce) implementation of EU demanded reforms in the dialogue with Kosovo, the state of freedom of expression, party pluralism and rule of law (European Commission, 2015e; 2016e; 2017e;2019e) do not depend on the need to nurture networks of corruption like in the Bosnian case. Rather, it has very much to do with a precise foreign policy strategy. This is the reason why, contrarily to the strong pro-EU turn taken by leading parties in Serbia, during the years of the Juncker Commission, political elites also enacted contradictory reforms and enabled and/or tolerated increasing anti-EU rhetoric (Petsinis 2020).

Furthermore, although the theme of Kosovo was barely present in the SNS's 2014 political campaign, it remained the key object of dispute utilised by Serbian leadership to preserve its consensus. During the last EU institutional cycle, the Serbian prime minister Alexander Vučić took every opportunity to discredit and accuse the Institutions on several matters, especially of "lacking courage", to say "who was undermining the Kosovo-Serbia agreements" face to spiralling tensions in North-East Kosovo (Zaba & Zivanovic 2017). Moreover, he openly accused the EU of paying local organisations to campaign against the government (BIRN 2015); and of enacting double standards against Serbia (Pantovic 2016).

As mentioned, timing is important: the 2016 parliamentary elections (called two years earlier midway through a four-year mandate by Prime

Minister Vucic himself) awarded the SNS with 50% of the votes despite a deep-felt disappointment over the lack of economic recovery (NDI-National Democratic Institute 2016); the same elections, however, witnessed the re-emergence of nationalist and anti-EU parties (SRS, Dveri-DSS) in the Assembly, headed at the opposition by Vojislav Seselj¹²⁴, leader of the Serbian Radical Party (SRS). Together, they gained around 13% of the votes (Ibidem, 2). While this allowed the Serbian government to take advantage of such Euro-critic views to exercise leverage towards the EU, the recourse to increasing euro-critical rhetoric could also be due to the need to channel the increasing share of votes for nationalist anti-EU parties. It has been noted that, especially when Vučić accused the EU of “not having clear ideas about the Belgrade-Pristine dialogue”, he mostly let his most radical minister talk, while not directly joining the critiques if not to channel the popular moods on Kosovo for pure electoral gain (Zivanovic 2018). In spring 2017, the Serbian public was again called to the polls to renew the presidential mandate: in line with most recent trends, and amid concerns of heavy pressure on the media, the SNS won with around 50% of the votes (OSCE-ODIHR 2017).

¹²⁴ Serbian ultranationalist Vojislav Seselj, founder of the SRS Party, was able to enter the Serbian Parliament in 2016 after the ICTY acquitted him from the accusations of war crimes. However, in 2018 the succeeding entity to ICTY, the Mechanism for International Criminals Tribunals, overthrew the antecedent sentenced and condemned him in absentia to ten years of prison for inciting war crimes. However, because he had already spent years in custody awaiting the trial, he did not have to serve the sentence. Milica Stovanovic, “War Criminal Seselj Fails to Enter Serbian Parliament”, 2020.

In line with this trend, before the 2018 elections, in an interview with the European media channel Euronews, Vučić purportedly questioned the incoming EU's remarks on Serbia's lack of recognition of Kosovo. He then highlighted the existing double standards on that topic, recalling that five EU Member States do not recognise the independence of Kosovo. Finally, he asked whether the EU's Member States' recognition of Kosovo's independence was not “a huge provocation”, seeing that he thought that “Kosovo is Serbia”. He then concluded that he was “ready to reach a compromise, but not to humiliate Serbian people and their interests” (Euronews 2018). The increasing anti-EU rhetoric caused concerns among commentators, worried that rising anti-EU stands within government ministries would have impacted the EU accession process (ivi).

In line with Serbia's multifaceted foreign policy strategy, and contrary to the rising euro-sceptic or euro-critic rhetoric by Serbian political elites and Aleksandar Vučić, during the Juncker Commission the conveyed image by the elites of China, Russia, and (limitedly) Turkey experienced a positive trend. As recalled, Serbia maintains a multi-faceted foreign policy balanced around four main foreign actors: China, the EU, Russia, and the United States. Chapter Three highlighted how, at the political level, Serbia's ties with both China and Russia pivot around the support they give to Serbia's government on the legal status of Kosovo. On the other hand, Serbia reciprocated such support by siding with China and Russia in international fora: among other things, by not imposing sanctions on topics such as the annexation of Crimea¹²⁵; and by refraining from voting EU resolutions against China's policies in the province of Xinjiang, despite the grave and documented human rights violations (Bjeloš et al. 2020,6; Džananović 2020).

¹²⁵ However, Serbian government condemned the Russian violation of Ukraine's territorial integrity.

At the domestic level, all Serbian governments maintained since 2008 a “balancing act between Russia and the West”, to win the votes of both pro-Western and pro-Russia voters (Vuksanovic 2019a). During the considered period, this trend persisted and not only in relation to Russia: the ties with non-EU actors were explicitly used by the elites to project a “narrative that is most likely to benefit them domestically” (Bjeloš et al. 2020,3). Together with Serbia’s long path toward the EU membership, often portrayed by Vučić to European media as “exhausting”, the topic of Serbia’s relations with non-EU actors was met by the Serbian president with expressions of tiredness towards EU requests on foreign policy alignment: “Can you imagine us imposing sanctions against Russia and Russia is the only country together with China that is supporting us in the United Nations Security Council about the issue of the territorial integrity of Serbia? What do you expect from us?” (Euronews 2018).

5.5.2 Public Opinion

The Balkan Barometer of 2015 highlighted that in that year 27% of Serbian respondents expressed a negative view of EU accession, while 44% expressed a neutral view (Regional Cooperation Council-RCC 2015, 50). This attitude was also reflected in Serbia’s factsheet of Standard Eurobarometer in 2015, which reported that around 50% of Serbian respondents showed a “tendence not to trust the EU” (Eurobarometer 84 2015, 3)¹²⁶. It was the lowest score in the region and reflects the trend illustrated in the previous paragraph, as well as the link between foreign policy concerns (Kosovo), domestic challenges (unemployment rate and general economic situation), and perception of EU membership. Furthermore, in the same year, 33% of respondents believed that Serbia would have never entered the EU, against 20% who believed the

¹²⁶ The trend showed by Eurobarometer n°84 of 2015 however was in line with the average E28 responses, which showed that around 55% of respondents “tended not to trust the EU” (3)

accession would have taken place by 2020 (Ibidem, 51). Again, in 2016, in line with regional and country-specific trends, respondents identified respectively the economy, unemployment and corruption as the first three issues of concern. The favour for EU integration also did not increase. Again, 41% of respondents believed the EU accession to be “neither good nor bad”, while 31% had a negative opinion on the subject and only 21% had a good opinion of EU integration (Regional Cooperation Council-RCC 2016, 51). In 2017, the trend got worse: as Euroscepticism rampantly grew in the region, corroborated by a widespread distrust about the ability of regional and European arrangements to address pressing economic and political problems, and a pressing pessimism towards the date and prospects of EU accession.

This was even more true in Serbia, where, in 2016, anti-EU parties leading the opposition entered again the Parliament: the country preserved its place as the most Eurosceptic country in the region (Regional Cooperation Council-RCC 2017, 18). While the share of respondents believing the prospect of EU accession was bad remained around 30%, the share of respondents believing that EU accession would never take place rose to 38% (Regional Cooperation Council-RCC 2017, fig.20). As with the case of Bosnia Herzegovina, the real change happened after the release of the Commission Communication in February 2018, in both remarkable ways: the first being the share of respondents believing that EU accession was something good, which rose to 29% against a corresponding decrease of negative opinions, which lowered to 22% (Regional Cooperation Council-RCC 2018, fig. 19). This positive trend also continued in 2019, which marked the highest share of respondents believing the EU membership to bring something positive to the country (32%), and the decrease of the share believing it might just never happen (Regional Cooperation Council-RCC 2019, fig.23; 25; 37-39).

For what concerns the perception of non-EU actors by Serbian public opinion, Russia remained the most appreciated country. (Gledić et al. 2021; IRI 2015). In the same period when attitudes towards the EU and EU membership experienced a radical decrease, according to the Washington-based Gallup poll,

around 54% of respondents to the poll showed positive attitudes toward Russian leadership (Gallup 2016). In 2015, the vast majority of respondents surveyed regarding the countries Serbia should maintain the strongest ties with indicated Russia (94%), while the EU positioned at 71% (IRI 2015, 20)¹²⁷. This attitude was later confirmed by surveys conducted by the Belgrade Center for Security Studies, which highlighted how, according to public opinion, during the considered period Russia remained Serbia's "eternal big brother" (Bjeloš et al. 2020, 10). Moreover, Jonsson highlighted that opinion polls in Serbia show that "42% of Serbians see Russia as their most supportive partner, while only 14% indicate the EU. Similarly, 64% of Serbs see NATO as a threat, even though military cooperation is significantly closer with NATO than with Russia" (Jonsson 2018, 89). Henceforth, Russia appeared to be quite successful in strengthening its image during the Juncker Commission.

Serbia also experienced an increasing presence of China in national media, coupled with rising positive attitudes by the public toward Serbia's trade relations with China, and China more generally (Vladisavljev 2020; IRI 2015). According to IRI's survey of 2015, 89% of respondents believed that Serbia's interests were mainly served by maintaining strong relations with China, which was also positioned before Germany and the European Union (IRI 2015, 20). Moreover, China also appeared among the top three countries that respondents believed to invest more in aid to Serbia (Ibidem, 23). Finally, despite being a consistently less present actor in the country, Turkey's perception among the Serbian public also showed a relatively positive trend (Ibidem, 20).

5.5.3 Business Elites

As in the case of Bosnia Herzegovina, in Serbia Business perception of the EU and EU membership was deeply influenced by the domestic economic

¹²⁷ Interestingly, the IRI report shows an increase of up to ten points (%) from the lowest it had reached in 2014 (81%), the year of the Russian annexation of Crimea (IRI 2015, 21).

situation and political instability. Consequently, the first years of the Juncker Commission also coincided in Serbia with rising Euroscepticism, which was a main feature of all the economies where it had become a political issue (Balkan Barometer-RCC 2016a, 22). However, as in the Bosnian case, business opinion generally regarded EU membership more positively than the average public (ivi). While the perception of benefits coming from EU membership was not high at the start of the analysed timeline, Serbia's business elites also showed fair confidence that their goods and services could compete with the EU market (53% of respondents): however, they also indicated that exporting to CEFTA economies was easier than trading with the EU (38%) (Regional Cooperation Council 2016a, fig.60, 89). These findings remained generally stable up to 2018: afterwards, the Eurosceptic trend was slightly reversed thanks on the one hand to the amelioration of domestic economic conditions, and on the other hand as a direct consequence of the relaunch of the Enlargement strategy.

Conclusions

The years of the Juncker Commission were particularly challenging for the region of the Western Balkans, which still suffered from a slow economic recovery and re-emerging cyclical political and social instability. Among the detected sensitive issues overall in the region, can be found: the unemployment rate; the economic situation; and the widespread corruption among the political elites and the institutions. As a consequence of such domestic issues, and of the prolonged stall in the Enlargement negotiations, the favour for EU membership across the region experienced a severe drop. This was however geographically localised in the most suffering economies: Bosnia Herzegovina and Serbia. Bosnia Herzegovina and Serbia present significant differences: not only in matters of domestic politics and different degrees of ethnonationalism. They also started the last EU institutional cycle from very different positions. From Bosnia Herzegovina's internal protests to the winning of a pro-EU integration SNS in Serbia, the two case studies present, in terms of public opinion, three very similar trends: growing disillusion towards the EU perspective, slightly reversed only towards the end of the EU institutional cycle; formal adherence, but practical lack of compliance to EU integration by political elites; the affirmation of nationalist anti-EU or EU critical parties in national parliaments.

The public: the ups and downs of domestic politics, socio-economic wellbeing, and growing nationalist rhetoric affects the perception of EU membership.

While Bosnia Herzegovina never reached the Serbian public's level of disillusion towards the EU membership, both public opinions still experienced a dramatic drop in their support for the EU across the whole analysed timeline (Regional Cooperation Council-RCC 2015; 2016; 2017; 2018). The trend slightly reversed in both cases after the publication of the European Commission's Communication "A credible enlargement towards the Western Balkans" in February 2018 and the subsequent relaunch of the Enlargement

Strategy in 2019. However, as the stall in enlargement negotiations proceeded and the economic recovery moved slowly, both the Bosnian and Serbian public showed sensitivity to growing disillusion towards the EU and the perspective of the EU membership. In line with rising anti-EU or EU-critical rhetoric growing in both case studies and the increasingly significant of nationalist and/or openly anti-EU parties in national parliament, 2017 was the year with the highest level of Euro-scepticism registered by the Balkan Barometer (Regional Cooperation Council-RCC 2017). As said, 2018 was a turning point, in the region and the case studies: interestingly, however, while the share of respondents showing positive attitudes towards EU membership increased, the share of respondents showing more realistic expectations towards the probable accession date also went up (Regional Cooperation Council-RCC 2017; 2018; 2019).

1) Political elites: formal adherence, practical lack of compliance

Another commonality among the case studies-keeping into consideration the significant difference in terms of institutional architecture- is the ambivalent behaviour of ruling elites: in both cases, political elites never openly withdrew their support to EU integration, despite the open expression of criticism. However, they both tended to instrumentalise EU membership for personal political gain. In Bosnia Herzegovina, this is exemplified in a generalised formal adherence to EU membership support and practical disinterest in forwarding demanding reforms across all main parties, from the SDA to the SNSD, to the HDZ. The power-sharing system of the country, structured since the Dayton agreement along ethnonational lines contributed to reinforcing ethnocentric drives and to widespread networks of corruption. In this situation, political elites maintain a formal commitment to EU integration, yet take advantage of the EU's demand for stability to further enhance tribal and clientelist networks. This, in turn, affects profoundly the health and reliability of national institutions, and consequently the integration process. In Serbia, Vucic's government always inserted EU reforms as a high priority of

governmental programmes, and to some extent supported, especially at the regional level, the integration process. At the same time, Serbian elites take advantage of the highly political sensitivity of Kosovo's status and regional cooperation to forward its foreign policy agenda-the maintenance of good relations with Russia and China-and use such relations as leverage against the EU, despite the political leadership's weak reforms performance. As a consequence, critical and sceptical rhetoric concerning the EU's ability to maintain its promises flourished in Serbian political discourse: not only among the openly declared anti-EU parties such as Seselj's Serbian Radical Party (SRS); but also among prominent figures of the Serbian government, such as the minister for foreign affairs Nikola Selaković and president Vučić himself.

2) *Nationalist and separatist parties (re?)emerge.*

In Bosnia Herzegovina, the years of the Juncker Commission witnessed the increasing polarisation of national politics and the strengthening of the ethnonationalist power-sharing system. This was also evident in the results of the two general elections held between 2014 and 2019, where voters expressed their preferences tendentially along with ethnonationalist lines (Council of Europe-Parliamentary Assembly 2014,2018; NDI-National Democratic Institute 2014, 2017; ISPI 2014). Especially in Republika Srpska, separatist views increased their favour among the population as the lead candidate of the Serbian nationalist party-SNSD Milorad Dodik actively campaigned for the separation of Republika Srpska and a referendum against the Bosnian judiciary. He also supported quite critical and discrediting views of the EU and its role in Bosnia, while never formally withdrawing his support to EU integration, not even after the 2018 presidential election. In Serbia, the 2016 elections witnessed the return to parliament of the extreme right and anti-EU parties which in the 2014 general elections had not managed to pass the 3% threshold. Together, they reached 13% of the votes and formally constituted the opposition to the SNS and SDP coalition government. Conversely from the Bosnian case, the implications of the increased significance of such parties

directly affected the perception of the EU, also due to the political juncture between domestic and foreign politics embodied by the requirement of settling the dispute with Kosovo.

3) Business elites show superior support for EU integration and EU membership

During the analysed timeline the local perception of the EU and EU membership did indeed experience a serious backdrop: not only at the level of public opinion but also in average political discourse from the elites. The only actor that seemingly maintained an average good perception of EU membership was the business elites. While presenting concerns related to the lack of a genuine competitive business environment in both case studies, in both countries business elites not only perceived their goods as ready for the EU market competition but also saw regional cooperation and EU membership as a positive step forward for their business (Regional Cooperation Council- RCC 2015a; 2016a;2017a; 2019a). At the level of business opinion, Serbia however also showed a pronounced preference for the regional respective over the EU, which might fall in line with the expressed leadership shown by Serbia at the regional level during the analysed timeline (Ibidem).

CONCLUSIONS AND PROSPECTS

This study aimed to explain the shift in the EU foreign policy towards the Western Balkans during the Juncker Commission. In February 2018, the EU relaunched the European perspective of the region via a Commission's Communication and then reformed the enlargement strategy and its methodology (European Commission 2019; 2020). This occurred despite Juncker's proclaimed 'break' from enlargement in 2014 and towards the end of an institutional cycle marked by recurring crises: the war in Ukraine in 2014 after the annexation of Crimea by Russia and its aftermath; the largest refugee crisis reaching Europe since the end of World War II in 2015 (Webber 2019); the British Membership crisis after the 'Brexit' referendum in 2016; and the increasing concerns about rule of law within the EU.

In addition, the enduring scepticism towards the enlargement process by some EU Member States perdured, especially in view of the already mentioned rule of law issues, which involved not only some EU countries but also the case studies considered in this thesis. All these elements might have led the EU to continue the inward focus announced by Juncker's 'political' Commission (Juncker 2014). However, enlargement to the Western Balkans was indeed relaunched and most of the above-mentioned concerns were directly addressed in February 2018's Communication and its follow-up documents. Since 2018, the keywords of EU enlargement documents increasingly became: "credible"; "fair"; and "rigorous" (European Commission 2018; 2020), while President Juncker also addressed the need for the EU to "find unity" when coming to the Western Balkans, to prevent the EU's neighbourhood to be "shaped by others" (Juncker 2018, 4).

Therefore, this thesis posed the question of why the EU moved from the originally proclaimed 'break' from enlargement to the issuing of a new credible strategy towards the Western Balkans (European Commission 2018). Supporting the argument that the EU internal dynamics, though crucial, cannot

be the only factors considered when analysing EU foreign policy shifts (Rhinard, Sjöstedt 2019; Keukeleire 2015; Fisher Onar, Nicolaïdis 2013), the study conducted a comprehensive and multilevel analysis of EU foreign policy towards the Western Balkans using the case studies of Bosnia Herzegovina and Serbia. Drawing from Actorness theory, especially from Bretherton and Vogler's model (2006), it considered three different dimensions/sets of actors influencing the EU foreign policy to the region and broke down the original research question into three sub-questions. Each of them corresponded to a different dimension of Bretherton and Vogler's framework: one for the dimension of *opportunity*, which analysed the changes in the international context and how they might have shaped EU foreign policy; one for *capability*, which instead worked on the regional-internal EU context, highlighting, in particular, the priorities of relevant Member States and EU institutions and their interaction; finally, one for *presence*, researching the influence on EU foreign policy of local developments.

This conclusive chapter presents the main findings of the research for each level of analysis. It then discusses its conceptual contributions; finally, it opens the floor to future research prospects.

1. Main findings

1.1 Opportunity: the international level

Chapter Three analysed the opportunity dimension of the Actorness framework. It researched the relevance of the international context and its potential influence in the shaping of EU foreign policy towards the Western Balkans during the considered period. In line with recent literature on EU actorness (Rhinard, Sjöstedt 2019; Drieskens 2017), the chapter posed the sub-question: “What features of the foreign policy actions of non-EU actors – such as China, Russia, Turkey – influenced the EU foreign policy shift towards the Western Balkans?”.

The analysis spanned across three dimensions, carrying out a multilevel analysis of the foreign policy actions of China, Russia, and Turkey during the period of the Juncker Commission. The first dimension covered the developments in the relations of each non-EU actor with the EU; the second analysed the relations of non-EU actors with the region. Finally, the third analysed the role of non-EU actors in the single case studies. Moreover, to make the analysis even more specific, the chapter identified three key arenas to map and compare the respective presence of such actors in the case studies. The arenas were: political; economic; and cultural. The following paragraphs summarise the main findings from the chapter.

The chapter highlighted that, within a common trend of rapid deterioration of relations between each actor and the EU, the foreign policy actions of China, Russia, and Turkey influenced the shift in EU foreign policy toward the region of the Western Balkans, and specifically toward Bosnia Herzegovina and Serbia. The findings thus support the first argument of this study: during the considered timeframe, the EU acknowledged the increased presence of such actors in the region and the case study countries and reacted to the consequent

need to find a counterbalance, and to preserve its role as the most significant foreign actor in the region. The progressive deterioration of EU relations with each considered foreign actor added further urgency to this shift of policy: President Juncker's encouragement to "find unity in the Western Balkans to avoid the EU immediate neighbourhood to be shaped by others" after underlining that "the external challenges" facing Europe were "multiplying by the day" at the State of the Union's speech in 2018 is exemplificative of this (Juncker 2018, 4).

Secondly, the analysis confirmed the increased influence of all considered actors in the two case study countries. In some instances, like in the case of China, it increased dramatically¹²⁸. Another interesting finding is related to the EU's perception of the role of non-EU actors in the region. The study highlighted how the growing detachment of these actors from the EU's norms and standards weighted heavily on the EU policymakers' perception of the actors' role in the region. This in turn contributed to reinforcing the precarity of their bilateral relations.

The following paragraph reports the main findings from each specific arena.

1.1.1 The arenas:

The analysis of the different arenas highlighted that each considered non-EU actor dominated one specific domain, in line with their respective foreign policy strategies. Specifically, China confirmed its predominance in the economic area, by carrying out practices that, especially in the field of public procurement, appear in open contrast with EU standards.

Russia dominated the political and communication field: while most of its military and economic attention moved respectively to the Middle East, the African continent and the Arctic, in the case studies Russia pursued its primary objective of opposing NATO enlargement by preserving its ties and supporting

¹²⁸ Despite the growing evidence of a stand-by situation within the 16+1 forum after the peak in investments of 2018, China's presence in the case studies significantly increased compared to previous decades.

the political parties and leaders in line with its aims.

Finally, notwithstanding an unexpected and significant rise in its economic investments in Serbia and the strategic void created after Prime Minister Davutoğlu stepped down from power in 2016, Turkey continued to convey most of its foreign policy actions through the cultural arena.

The following paragraphs illustrate the findings for each arena, by indicating: the predominant non-EU actor; the potential impact of such actor's actions on the case studies; and the potential effect on the EU's foreign policy objectives.

Political-diplomatic arena.

Russia is the non-EU actor that was most influential in the political arena. In the case studies, Russia pursued its foreign policy objectives by investing heavily in the political support of nationalist anti-NATO leaders and political parties: Dodik's Alliance of Independent Democrats-SNSD for Bosnia Herzegovina; and Vučić's Serbian Progressive Party-SNS in Serbia. Russia's soft power was further channelled through the growing use of communication and misinformation campaigns, carried out by media agencies and multilingual news channels. In addition, Russia continued to significantly rely on its ties to the Orthodox church.

All this makes Russia a highly relevant actor in the region, notwithstanding the tangible decrease in its economic investments (a decrease that did not however include the energy sphere). This is visible on two levels: on the one hand, Russia's support for the nationalist and separationist agenda of Milorad Dodik in Bosnia Herzegovina contributes to the country's instability, slowing down the country's path to the EU. Similarly, Russia's support for Aleksander Vučić's government in Serbia contributes to the further detachment of the country from EU standards, as the Vučić Government is largely responsible for the worsening of standards of party pluralism and freedom of expression in the country. On the other hand, Russia's investment in soft power through the use of media and communication channels in the case studies, allowed it to take advantage of the growing exhaustion with the EU accession process. This further contributed to the delegitimisation of the EU's image, with a

consequent impact on the EU's strategic objectives.

Economic arena

China focused most of its foreign policy actions on the economic domain. In line with its foreign policy strategy, during the Juncker Commission, China conveyed its actions through the Belt and Road Initiative project and the 16+1 platform, inaugurated respectively in 2013 and 2016.

The analysis of China's foreign policy actions in the case studies pointed out that the rapid rise of China's presence in the region has two potential major consequences on the case studies. On the one hand, China's opaque and untransparent investments in public procurement expose the considered countries to the concrete danger of state capture and debt traps. The case of Montenegro's indebtedness is exemplary (Barkin, Vasovic 2018). Serbia is indeed the country that benefited most from China's investments, especially due to the key strategic importance of the country along the Piraeus-Budapest trainline. However, during the Juncker Commission, the two countries also strengthened their ties at the political and military level: not only did China (alongside Russia), remain Serbia's supporter in international fora on the issue of the legal status of Kosovo. During the analysed timeline, the two countries further cemented their ties through the carrying out of joint military exercises and the purchase by Serbia of a Chinese FK-3 missile defence system during 2019 (Vasovic, Heritage 2020).

Bosnia Herzegovina is also an interesting case, though for a different reason: during the Juncker Commission, China rapidly increased its economic presence in the country. However, despite China's investments being not as significant as in Serbia, China owns a significant debt share of Bosnia Herzegovina. This potentially exposes a country that already suffers from a weak socio-economic equilibrium to further instability. Similarly to the case of Russia and Turkey, China's influence has concrete implications for the country's path to EU integration. Finally, the deterioration of EU-China relations during the considered timeframe from partnership to strategic rivalry further complicates the picture.

Cultural arena

Turkey is indeed the actor that has capitalised the most on its historical, cultural, and religious ties with the region in its foreign policy strategy. This was part of the “strategic depth” doctrine inaugurated in 2008 by the then Minister of Foreign Affairs (subsequently Prime Minister) Ahmet Davutoğlu, investing in Turkey’s soft power to develop and maintain friendly relations with its neighbours.

Among the case studies, during the considered timeframe Turkey focused particularly on Bosnia Herzegovina, notwithstanding the worth mentioning and significant rise in its economic investments in Serbia. In particular, Turkey pursued its objectives by supporting and conspicuously funding religious schools, tourism, and the restoration of Ottoman cultural heritage in Bosnia Herzegovina. As with other considered actors, the impact of Turkey’s presence in the case studies for the EU’s objectives must be understood through the lens of its changing relations with the EU. Indeed, after Davutoğlu’s demise as Prime Minister, the attempted coup of 2016, and especially due to the role that Turkey played in the migration crisis, the significance of Turkey’s role in the region changed. During the period considered, Turkey became a strategic partner for the EU in the management of the migration crisis: a turning point in EU-Turkey relations that was marked by the two EU-Turkey Statements of 2016. This, added to the virtual freeze of the enlargement talks, further increased the potential leverage of Turkey in enhancing or obstructing the EU’s objectives in the region. Furthermore, Turkey’s tailored support to the Muslim population and religious political parties, coupled with the democratic backsliding of the country, contributed to the exacerbation of sectarian tendencies that were already present in Bosnia Herzegovina, with similar implications for the country’s path toward the EU of China’s and Russia’s activism.

1.1.2 The geographic focus: overlapping, but general lack of conflict

A final finding from Chapter Three is related to the geographic areas on which each non-EU actor focused its foreign policy actions. The analysis indicates that both China and Russia focus most of their actions on Serbia and the Republika Srpska. Turkey, instead, is mostly present in the Federation of Bosnia Herzegovina, where the vast majority of the population is Muslim. Remarkably, Serbia became China's strongest non-EU ally in the region. Through the increase in China's involvement, Serbia was able to further diversify its foreign policy strategy by adding another pillar to the tripod constituted by the EU, Russia, and the United States. Moreover, as in the case of Russia, the strengthening of relations between China and Serbia turned into useful leverage for the Serbian government towards the EU.

Russia, in line with its deep historical ties with the region, also favoured Serbia and the Republika Srpska. They both constitute Russia's crucial bases for its foreign media and communication channels. However, a correlated finding is that despite this juxtaposition, there seems to be no significant rivalry between Russia and China. This may be due to various reasons, including the strengthening of ties between China and Russia at the international level; the late shift in Russian foreign policy interests towards the Mediterranean and the Middle East; and the different arenas that each actor dominates.

1.2 The 'regional level': the internal EU dimension.

Chapter Four focused on the EU's internal context. By working on the capability dimension of the Actorship framework, it sought to explain how EU dynamics, specifically the priorities of the Member States and the EU institutions and their interaction, contributed to the foreign policy outcome of the relaunch of the Enlargement strategy towards the Western Balkans.

The chapter set out to answer the sub-question: "How did the EU's internal developments shape this policy outcome?". To do so, it combined the dimension of EU capability (Bretherton, Vogler 2006) with theories in the EU foreign policy and EU integration studies: (new) intergovernmentalism (Moravcsik 1995; 2018); and new democratic leadership (Smeets, Beach 2020). This allowed not only a review of the foreign policy instruments deployed by the EU in the region, and their role in supporting the EU's foreign policy objectives. It also helped to better delineate the role of the Member States and institutions in the support or obstruction of the relaunch of the enlargement strategy.

The chapter first reviewed the foreign policy instruments deployed by the EU in the case studies and then analysed the priorities of three Member States: France, Germany, and Hungary; and three EU institutions: the Commission, the Council, and the Council of the EU.

The review of the foreign policy tools highlighted two main elements: first, it confirmed the increased use of intergovernmental initiatives and the leading role adopted by Germany within the Council. This was most visible in the role played by the Berlin Process – an initial German-led initiative – in supporting the regional and EU integration of the Western Balkans countries, despite the institutional stall in the enlargement process. Secondly, it confirmed the increased strategic importance of the region during the considered period, especially within the framework of the EU-Western Balkans' joint response to the migration crisis (e.g., the WB-Frontex cooperation agreements). Therefore,

the following paragraph dives into the specific findings from Chapter Four.

1.2.1 Member States and the EU institutions

The analysis of the preferences of the EU Member States and the EU institutions confirmed the growing importance of intergovernmentalism in EU foreign policymaking and the relative loss of power of the Commission, a trend that started after the Lisbon Treaty. This was most visible in the politicisation and the re-appropriation of the enlargement process by Member States (Ker-Lindsay et al. 2017; Wunsch 2017), which appeared through the divergent positions of France and Germany within the Council. France, especially, exercised its veto power by obstructing the opening of the enlargement negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia and attempted to influence the enlargement dossier through the issue of the “Non-paper reforming the European Union Accession Process” (2019). Correlated to this, the analysis also confirmed the significant restriction of the Commission’s margin of manoeuvre, despite the ‘will to lead’ initially shown by Juncker’s “political commission” (Juncker 2014).

Second, the analysis highlighted the rising leadership of Germany in the field of EU foreign affairs. This emerged in the mediation role that the country exercised under the leadership of Angela Merkel during the Ukraine crisis and was further developed during the migration crisis. On these two occasions, Germany managed to become the unofficial representative of the EU (see Webber 2019). Moreover, Germany succeeded in projecting its foreign policy interests (relations with Russia; the importance of the migration crisis for the German public) onto the EU’s priorities and influencing the EU’s responses on both matters.

Third, this chapter highlighted the close cooperation between Germany and the Commission in the achievement of the relaunch of the enlargement strategy. While the study confirmed that Germany’s leadership was crucial for the successful relaunch of the strategy, it also emphasised how the outcome

was reached through a combination of Germany's predominance in European affairs, and its shared interests with the European Commission. Therefore, despite its limited space of manoeuvre, the Commission actively pursued its agenda by providing the Council with its technical expertise on the enlargement dossier. This indeed showed its desire not to renounce the leading role that the Treaties gave to the Commission on the enlargement; and, as evidence from President Juncker's last speeches on the State of the Union suggest (Juncker 2018), the Commission's acknowledgement of the changing international environment.

Therefore, the findings of this chapter show indeed that the last EU institutional cycle witnessed the confirmation of some existing trends, such as the increase in the use of intergovernmental solutions. At the same time, however, it also showed the emergence of a new trend: the coordination between a leading country (in this case, Germany) with the Commission, to reach a foreign policy outcome and react to the changes in the EU's external environment. A form of 'cooperative leadership' between a dominant member state with high persuasion power over the Council, and the technical competent advising of the Commission.

1.3 The local level: the case studies' dimension.

Chapter Five aimed to answer the question: 'What changes in the local perception of the EU-and of the analysed non-EU actors-influenced this foreign policy outcome? By addressing the need to decentre the study of EU foreign policy (Fisher Onar, Nicolaïdis 2013), it analysed the change of perceptions of the EU and EU membership in the countries studied, also in light of the eventual changes in the local perception of the considered non-EU actors. To do so, the chapter considered the perspectives of three key local actors: political elites (political parties and party leaders); business elites; and public opinion.

The analysis first highlighted that the EU's popularity decreased among public opinion during the considered timeframe. This trend only started reversing

after the publication of the new enlargement strategy (Regional Cooperation Council-RCC 2020). At the same time, the local perception of non-EU actors became more relevant, with either the political elites and the public opinion showing growing appreciation for China, Russia, and Turkey, with Russia leading the way. Therefore, the analysis confirmed that the image of the EU is linked to its ability to project a credible perspective for the target countries.

A second finding regards the political elites of the case studies. The chapter highlighted how they often pursue nationalist, sectarian, and populist agendas, even when they affirm their commitment to European integration. The literature calls this type of regime (which also receives EU support) ‘Stabilitocracies’ (Bieber 2018). The chapter remarked how the same elites nurture pre-existing clientelist relations in their societies and are sometimes actively involved in the spread of anti-EU and pro-non-EU actors’ rhetoric. In terms of implications for the EU’s foreign policy objectives, the chapter highlighted how these factors directly undermine the future European perspective of the case studies by slowing down the implementation of necessary reforms and by reinforcing the already present Euroscepticism, further impacting the local image of the EU.

2. Conceptual contribution

The main conceptual contribution of this work lies in its attempt to provide a comprehensive and multilevel framework of analysis of the EU foreign policy. By directly engaging with the recent developments in the literature on EU foreign policy and EU actorness, this thesis proposes a framework that includes not only the internal EU perspective (the Member States and Institutions) but also the international context and the perspective of third countries. In doing so, it addresses the need – clearly expressed by academic scholarship – to expand the framework of analysis in EU foreign policy studies beyond the EU itself (Rhinard, Sjöstedt 2019; Drieskens 2017; Keukeleire 2015; 2016).

In the specific case of the relaunch of enlargement towards the Western

Balkans, the work used Bretherton and Vogler's original framework (2006): it analysed the dimension of *opportunity* – the international context, here represented by the role of non-EU actors (China, Russia, and Turkey); and the dimension of EU's *presence*, here interpreted through the analysis of the 'EU's local perception' in the case studies of Bosnia Herzegovina and Serbia, combined with an overview of the changes in the local perception of China, Russia, and Turkey ¹²⁹. The research argued that both these dimensions, the international and the 'local' ones, contribute to the understanding of the challenges the EU faces when (re)orienting its foreign policy and should therefore be included in the analysis. Moreover, this thesis emphasized that the agendas of international non-EU actors and the countries at the receiving end of EU foreign policy do play a role in shaping EU foreign policy.

In terms of the analysis of the EU internal dynamics, the contribution of this research lies in its proposed integration of the actorness framework with the theoretical perspectives coming from new intergovernmentalism (Moravcsik 2018; Bickerton et al. 2015), and new institutional leadership (Smeets, Beach 2020). This allowed a better interpretation of the role played by the Member States, especially France and Germany, and their interactions with the EU institutions (especially, the Commission), in formulating EU foreign policy in the post-Lisbon EU. Furthermore, the studies on new intergovernmentalism and German leadership (Aggestam, Hyde-Pri 2020; Wright 2018) helped to frame Germany's influence on the relaunch of the enlargement strategy: they spelt out how Germany combined national interests (e.g. economic interests in the Western Balkans region; the migration crisis) with the EU's priorities. The studies on new institutional leadership, instead,

¹²⁹ This part aimed at providing an in-depth contribution to the ongoing debate on decentring EU foreign policy studies by including the perspectives of Bosnia Herzegovina and Serbia, who find themselves at the receiving end of EU external policies (Onar, Nicolaidis 2013; Keukeleire 2014; 2015; 2016; Keukeleire, Lecocq 2018). Due to the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused (among other things) the cancellation of fieldwork, the contribution so far remains limited. It will hopefully be expanded in future research.

helped with the interpretation of the role of the European Commission and its cooperation with Germany in the pursuit of its agenda. This sheds light, if only superficially, on a form of “cooperative leadership” adopted by Germany during the last EU institutional cycle in the making of EU foreign policy. The latter could be described as Germany’s consistent effort to lead, while also involving the rest of the EU Member States (e.g. the German mediation in the Ukraine crisis), while also acknowledging the importance of the Commission’s technical expertise for the achievement of a successful relaunch of the enlargement strategy.

The answer to the initial research question would therefore be: the relaunch of the enlargement strategy to the Western Balkans happened in reaction to the changing international and local contexts. During the considered timeframe, the EU realised that the increasing influence of non-EU actors in the region could lead to a loss of influence in its immediate neighbourhood. However, this achievement only came to fruition due to the successful cooperation between Germany’s leadership and its shared interests with the European Commission, which was able to overcome the divergent positions and obstruction coming from some Member States.

3. Proposals for further research

All this considered, three final considerations/suggestions are open for future research on EU ‘actorness’ in international affairs, the making of EU foreign policy, and more specifically the EU foreign policy towards the Western Balkans.

Following the scheme of the thesis, the first suggestion concerns the role of the international context in EU foreign policy analysis. The objective of strengthening the EU’s role in international affairs in view of the changes that occurred in the international environment was already present in Juncker’s last State of the Union address. In September 2018, he affirmed: “the world has not stopped turning. [...] The external challenges facing our continent are

multiplying by the day” (Juncker 2018, 4), before expressing the need for the EU to “find unity when it comes to the Western Balkans” (Ibidem). After Juncker’s mandate ended and the Von der Leyen Commission began, the role of the EU as a global player was also stated among the objectives of the next institutional cycle, while its internationalist strive was further stressed by Ursula von der Leyen in one of her first speeches in front of the European Parliament, when she named hers as a ‘geopolitical Commission’ (Von der Leyen 2019, 7; Council of the European Union 2020). This indicates that the EU is developing a more defined sense of its role as an international player, as, in the words of the current President of the European Council Charles Michel: “the globalised world has changed radically since the end of the Cold War”, and “an arc of instability has emerged around us”. Thus, according to the presidency of the European Council, the EU’s global role needs to build on, but should also aim to go beyond the strength of its common market (Michel 2020).

Considering this trend, the study of the influence on the EU foreign policy of the EU relations with China, Russia, and Turkey, all significant actors that the EU engages with for geographical, economic or historic reasons should gain more centrality: especially as these countries progressively detach from the EU’s normative values and standards. In particular, the focus of the analysis could go beyond the level of the single EU-China, EU-Russia, and/or EU-Turkey bilateral relations to include the implications of eventual patterns of cooperation (or lack thereof) among such actors on the EU foreign policy objectives at multiple levels: within the international fora and in the EU’s neighbourhood. In the specific case of the EU’s foreign policy towards the Western Balkans, the potential schemes of cooperation/competition in the region and case studies could be assessed and compared, in light of existing alignment/misalignment between the considered actors in international affairs. This would maintain the connection, already drafted in this thesis, between the international, regional and local dimensions, thus tracing the potential implications of the foreign policy actions of selected non-EU actors for the EU’s foreign policy objectives.

The second consideration is related to the EU's internal context. This study argued that within a trend of general decrease of the power of supranational institutions like the Commission, the relaunch of the enlargement strategy towards the Western Balkans was possible thanks to the peculiar position Germany has achieved since the Eurozone crisis, successfully coupled with the European Commission's interests. Considering this, future research would benefit from further investigating the influence of Germany's leadership within the European Council during Merkel's chancellorship, and Germany's 'cooperative leadership' with the Commission on other matters of foreign policy, which this thesis only drafted. This would lead to a more comprehensive understanding of the EU leadership dynamics and their effects on EU foreign policymaking, especially during the period of the Juncker Commission¹³⁰.

Related to this first point, a second theme to expand in the analysis of EU internal dynamics during the Juncker Commission could be the role of France and its relations with Germany in leading EU foreign politics after Emmanuel Macron's election in 2017. As highlighted in this thesis, since 2014 Germany had been gaining an undoubted predominant position in matters of foreign policy. This was visible in its increasing interventions in the most crucial international crisis of the institutional cycle (Ukraine; the migration crisis; Libya). The election of Emmanuel Macron in 2017 after a strong pro-EU campaign indeed strengthened France's weight within the Council. The Franco-German partnership, (which has always been a key element of EU developments), was relaunched with the Treaty of Aquisgrane in 2019. However, during the Juncker Commission France and Germany presented rather different views on important foreign policy topics such as the EU defence and its relation to NATO; its relations with Russia; and, as proved by

¹³⁰ Germany's evolution in the considered period cannot be analysed separately from the trajectory of Angela Merkel as EU leader.

the French veto to the opening of negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia, on EU enlargement. The influence of Franco-German relations on EU foreign policy outcomes, towards the Western Balkans or other regions, would indeed improve the understanding of EU foreign policy-making during the considered timeline.

Finally, a consideration on the case study countries. The limits encountered during this PhD programme weighed significantly on the collection of the data. The COVID-19 pandemic caused, among other things, the impossibility to carry out fieldwork in the case study countries. This greatly impacted the data collection, which was originally planned to be informed by a wider set of interviews, including local academics, local officials, journalists, experts on the relations of Bosnia and Serbia with the considered non-EU actors, and civil society associations.

However, the role of third countries and their respective foreign policy agendas in influencing EU foreign policy is a promising field of study and constitutes an important element to the understanding of the evolution of EU actorhood in the region. Furthermore, as highlighted by the literature, the attention to the local context for a more fruitful EU foreign policy-making is long overdue (Onar, Nicolaïdis 2013; Keukeleire; 2015; 2016; Keukeleire, Lecocq 2018). This gains even more relevance, as the elements examined in this thesis (growing nationalism, increasing separatist tendencies in Bosnia Herzegovina, degradation of freedom of expression in Serbia, use of political connection with non-EU actors as leverage) appear to be growing in intensity, despite the renewed commitment of the EU to the region. To do this consistently, the *presence* dimension of Bretherton and Vogler's model could be strengthened, and/or expanded: one way is to include, as this thesis partially does, a systematic analysis of the local perception of non-EU actors, alongside the analysis of the local perception of the EU. Another way could be to expand the presented conceptualisation of EU presence, which limited the analysis to the notion of *perception*, to also include the study of the discursive use by the local elites of their political connections with non-EU actors in the enlargement

negotiations and their relations with the EU. If the growing appreciation for the considered non-EU actors, added to the decreasing appreciation for the EU, does constitute a clear element influencing the EU policy shift towards the region, a complementary study of how the local elites use such relations to their advantage could further enrich the analysis. This would, on the one hand, strongly complement the analysis of the influence of non-EU actors' foreign policy actions presented in the *opportunity* section; on the other hand, it would also allow a further and more solid de-centralisation of EU foreign policy studies.

In conclusion, notwithstanding the positive step of the opening of negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia on 25 March 2020 (Council of the European Union 2020), the prospects for the EU foreign policy towards the Western Balkans remain challenging. This was visible in the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic when Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić openly accused the EU of a 'lack of solidarity and publicly asked China to send medical equipment, calling the nation a "brother of the country" (Vladislavljev 2020).¹³¹ Furthermore, the separationist tensions in Bosnia Herzegovina, carried out mainly by the party of Milorad Dodik, continue to lead Bosnia Herzegovina towards more uncertainty. In the Council Conclusions of October 2021, the EU reiterated its "unequivocal commitment" to Bosnia Herzegovina's EU perspective as a single, united and sovereign country" (Council of the European Union 2021, 2). The same conclusions also expressed 'regrets' for Bosnia's political crisis and condemned "the blockage of State institutions" and urged all political leaders to "to renounce provocative and divisive rhetoric and action, including questioning the territorial integrity of the

¹³¹ In response, the EU inserted Serbia (and the other countries of the Western Balkan region) among the non-EU recipients of the RescEU stockpile plan of medical equipment. (European Union Delegation to Serbia 2020). Later, the EU also approved a comprehensive COVID-19 relief package destined for the region (European Commission 2021a).

country” (Ibidem, 2). Later in the summer of 2022, and within the broader context of the war in Ukraine following Russia’s aggression in late February, tensions between Serbia and Kosovo further reignited and caused heavy disruptions at the borders between the two countries (Hajdari 2022). Despite the prompt commitment by the EU and its High Representative Joseph Borrel in easing the tensions (EEAS 2022), some commentators underlined the persisting limits of the EU approach to the region, also in light of the international developments (Bechev 2022). It is thus evident that, notwithstanding the positive steps taken and its predominance at the economic and political level, the EU’s position in the region is still subject to risks. Due to its geographic location, recent history, local and international developments, the region remains an unstable and contested area that won’t cease to play a crucial role for European security. Therefore, especially as the EU moves forward with strengthening its role as an international player, a credible integration for the region that saw the first steps of EU foreign policy in the 1990s, remains crucial for the EU’s objectives, the EU international image, and the stability of the European continent; thus remaining in strong need, also, of scholarly attention.

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Appendix. Interviews

Date	Affiliation	Place
13/2/2020	DG NEAR	Brussels, Belgium
23/2/2020	DG NEAR	Brussels, Belgium
03/03/2020	European External Action Service-EEAS	Brussels, Belgium
09/03/2020	DG NEAR	Brussels, Belgium
07/04/2020	European External Action Service-EEAS	Online interview
15/05/2020	European External Action Service-EEAS	Online interview
30/08/2021	Delegation of the European Union to Bosnia Herzegovina	Online interview
18/10/2021	Delegation of the European Union to Serbia	Online interview

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