

CHARLES UNIVERSITY
FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

Institute of International Studies
Department of European Studies



Master's Thesis

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Mgr. Jiří Culka

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**The influence of external actors in the Western Balkans:
the influence of China and Russia in Serbia**

Master's Thesis

Author of the Thesis: Mgr. Jiří Culka

Study programme: Balkan, Eurasian and Central European Studies

Supervisor: prof. Mgr. Tomáš Weiss, M.A., Ph.D.

Year of the defence: 2024

Declaration

- 1 I hereby declare that I have compiled this thesis using the listed literature and resources only.
- 2 I hereby declare that my thesis has not been used to gain any other academic title.
- 3 I fully agree to my work being used for study and scientific purposes.

In Vienna (AT) on 30/04/2024

Jiří Culka

References

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Abstract

This thesis aims to examine the influence of external actors in the Western Balkans, first in general terms, and then the influence of two important power actors, Russia and China, on Serbia as an important target actor. The thesis first offers a general discussion of the influence of external actors on policymaking of third countries in the first chapter, presenting its essential characteristics in selected substantive characteristics. It then introduces the external actors in the Western Balkans themselves, including the EU, and their influence in the region. The second chapter then presents the thesis's own theoretical framework for analysing the influence of external actors and introduces the tools used in each area of influence. It also discusses the operationalisation of the thesis, the narrowing of the thesis topic, the research question itself and the rationale for its selection. Finally, the third chapter presents the thesis's own comparative case study of the influence of Russia and China as external power actors on Serbia as the target actor, based on the theoretical framework presented in the previous chapter. Finally, it then reaches a synthesizing conclusion, presents key findings regarding the influence of the choice of goals/interests of power actors on the choice of instruments of external influence on the target actor, and also offers further reflections on the topic. Thus, the thesis seeks to offer not only an overview of the issue progressing from the general to the more specific, but also an original theoretical framework of external actors' influence applicable to other potential case studies, as well as the actual results found within the specific case study.

Abstrakt

Tato diplomová práce si klade za cíl prozkoumat vliv vnějších aktérů na Západním Balkáně, nejprve v obecné rovině, následně pak vliv dvou důležitých mocenských aktérů, Ruska a Číny, na Srbsko coby důležitého cílového aktéra. Práce nabízí v rámci první kapitoly nejprve obecné výklady o vlivu vnějších aktérů na politiku třetích zemí, kdy představuje ve vybraných rysech jeho podstatné charakteristiky. Následně představuje samotné vnější aktéry na západním Balkáně, včetně EU, a jejich vliv v regionu. Ve druhé kapitole práce poté představuje vlastní teoretický rámeček analýzy vlivu vnějších aktérů a představuje nástroje používané v jednotlivých oblastech vlivu. Rozebírá také operacionalizaci práce a vzápětí také zúžení jejího tématu, samotnou výzkumnou otázku a odůvodnění jejího výběru. Konečně ve třetí kapitole práce představuje vlastní

komparativní případovou studii vlivu Ruska a Číny coby vnějších mocenských aktérů na Srbsko coby cílového aktéra, a to na základě teoretického rámce představeného v předcházející kapitole. Konečně pak dochází k syntetizujícímu závěru, prezentuje klíčová zjištění ohledně vlivu volby cílů/zájmů mocenských aktérů na volbu nástrojů vnějšího vlivu na cílového aktéra a nabízí rovněž další úvahy nad tématem. Práce se tak snaží nabídnout nejen přehled problematiky postupující od obecného ke konkrétnějšímu, ale i originální teoretický rámec vlivu vnějších aktérů použitelný i na jiné potenciální případové studie a rovněž vlastní výsledky zjištěné v rámci konkrétní případové studie.

Keywords

China, European Union, Europeanisation, External Actors, External Influence, Russia, Serbia, Western Balkans

Klíčová slova

Čína, Evropská unie, europeizace, vnější aktéři, vnější vliv, Rusko, Srbsko, západní Balkán

Title

The influence of external actors in the Western Balkans: the influence of China and Russia in Serbia

Název práce

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Table of Contents

List of Abbreviations.....	8
Introduction.....	8
1. The Debate on Influence of External Actors (not only) in the Western Balkans – Introductory Notes and Literature Review.....	11
1.1 Introduction.....	11
1.2 Influence of External Actors on the Policy of Sovereign States.....	12
1.3 Role and Influence of the EU in Third Countries.....	15
1.3.1 The EU as a Global Actor.....	16
1.3.2 Objectives and Attitude of the EU in its Policy towards Third Countries.....	18
1.4 Influence of the External Actors in the Western Balkans.....	20
1.4.1 Essentials of the Debate.....	21
1.4.2 Europeanisation of the Western Balkans and the EU’s Role in the Region.....	22
1.4.3 Russia and China in the Western Balkans.....	27
1.4.4 Other External Actors in the Western Balkans.....	29
2. Research Design, Methodology and Theoretical Framework.....	31
2.1 Instruments Used by External Actors to Influence the Policy of Sovereign States...	31
2.2 Narrowing the Topic and Defining the Research Question.....	38
2.3 Research Methodology.....	41
2.5 Sources.....	43
3. Case Study: Russia’s and China’s Influence in Serbia.....	44
3.1 Goals and Instruments of Russia in Serbia.....	45
3.1.1 Political Influence of Russia in Serbia.....	46
3.1.2 Economic Influence of Russia in Serbia.....	50
3.1.3 Information and Cultural Influence of Russia in Serbia.....	52

3.1.4 Military and Security Influence of Russia in Serbia.....	54
3.1.5 Overall Assessment of the Influence of Russia in Serbia.....	56
3.2 Goals and Instruments of China in Serbia.....	57
3.2.1 Political Influence of China in Serbia.....	59
3.2.2 Economic Influence of China in Serbia.....	62
3.2.3 Information and Cultural Influence of China in Serbia.....	68
3.2.4 Military and Security Influence of China in Serbia.....	71
3.2.5 Overall Assessment of the Influence of China in Serbia.....	73
3.3 Comparative Evaluation – Difference in the Choice of Instruments.....	74
Conclusion.....	79
Summary.....	82
List of References.....	83

List of Abbreviations

BiH	Bosnia and Herzegovina
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CEE	Central and Eastern Europe
CEFTA	Central European Free Trade Agreement
CFSP	Common Foreign and Security Policy
CI	Confucius Institute
EBRD	European Bank for Reconstruction and Development
EIB	European Investment Bank
EU	European Union
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
IPA	Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance
IR	International Relations
MFF	Multiannual Financial Framework
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NDICI	Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument
PRC	People's Republic of China
ROC	Republic of China (Taiwan, Chinese Taipei)
SAA	Stabilisation and Association Agreement
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
WB6	Western Balkans Six

Introduction

The influence of external actors in the Western Balkans is a phenomenon that is of interest to many scholars, to the countries of the region, and to the European Union (EU) as it is a region of ongoing process of the EU enlargement. Currently, all the Western Balkan countries are either EU Member States, EU candidate countries or, in the case of Kosovo, EU potential candidate country. The significance of the region is great within the European context as it is an ethnically, religiously, and politically diverse region that lies on the periphery of the European continent and is a hub of external actors involvement.

The significance of such examination has many dimensions. For example, for the EU, its significance may lie in the fact that the accession of the Western Balkan countries into the EU is a top political priority for the EU's policymaker. The reason is that the success of this future accession is vital for the EU's integrity within its future borders and Member States base – and hence the EU is, among others, the key external actor in the region. This is why it makes sense to suppose that some other actors also have their more or less significant involvement in the region that may interfere with the EU's involvement. It is a well-known fact that, for example, Russia, China, Turkey and the Gulf States have their interests in the region and hence exert some influence in the particular Western Balkan countries. This is why it makes sense to me to examine this influence and try to determine which of the external actors are the other significant players exert influence in this part of Europe, which particular countries in the region they target, what are their interests/goals, which instruments they employ to exert such influence and why.

The potential contribution of this thesis could thus lie in the analysis and determination of some narrower segment of this external actors' influence (focused on particular influencing actors and particular influenced actors), its deeper analysis and possible findings.

First, I will analyse the influence of the external actors on third countries on general terms. Within the first chapter, I will introduce the discourse on this influence and then the specific influence of the external actors in the Western Balkans. I will briefly introduce the particular external actors, i.e. EU, China, Russia, U.S.A., Turkey or the Gulf States.

In the second chapter, I will describe the methodology of the thesis and introduce my own theoretical framework, consisting of my own analysis of instruments of influence of external actors and breakdown of these instruments into different categories. Furthermore,

I will also narrow down the topic of the thesis and introduce the research question and draw the reasoning of the differentiation lines according to which I will have narrowed it down.

The topic will be narrowed down to Russia and China, the most significant *power actors* in the Western Balkans whose interests might be competing in certain regards, or not competing, maybe even congruent, in another aspects, and their influence in Serbia, a significant geopolitical player in the region which balances between Russia, China, and the Western countries, as the *target actor*. The research question shall hence be: **How do the foreign policy objectives of Russia and China influence the choice of instruments of foreign influence in Serbia?**

In more concrete terms, the foreign policy objectives/goals refer mainly to business goals in the case of China and preventing the integration of Western Balkan countries into the Euro-Atlantic structures in the case of Russia. In other words, the research shall examine whether the difference in the goals of each of these two actors influence the choice of instruments these *power actors* use to exert external influence on the *target actor* (Serbia).

Thus a *comparative case study* shall be used as the main research method. Within this case study, the interests of external actors, Russia and China, more particularly their objectives/goals in relation to Serbia, shall be the *independent variable*. The choice of instruments by Russia and China, the *power actors*, to exert influence on Serbia, the *target actor*, shall be the *dependent variable*. In order to measure the *independent variable* (i.e. the goals of China and Russia in Serbia), the values that these variables can assume shall be examined. Such values would be the particular goals that the respective *power actor* desires to achieve in Serbia as the *target actor*.

In the third chapter, I will present the very case study where I will introduce the various goals/interests of Russia and China, the *power actors*, in Serbia, the *target actor*. I will analyse the goals of both *power actors* in different areas of policy, i.e. political, economic, information and cultural, military and security areas, and link them to the instruments these *power actors* use. After that, I will make a comparative analysis of the difference in instruments where I will draw the lines between the choice of instruments by both *power actors* and introduce some cases where the choice of goals has influence on the choice of instruments in particular policy areas and where such choice of goals does not have influence on the choice of instruments.

There are more partial findings within the case study. The key finding is that in most cases, the choice of goals by each of the both *power actors*, Russia and China, does not have any (significant) influence on the choice of instrument of influence in a particular area as such choice is rather driven by objective circumstances, i.e. the respective *power actor* chooses the particular instrument rather due to its objective availability (and hence suitability for exertion of influence) than due to the goal that drives that very *power actor* to exert an influence by means of such instrument. If the difference in goals has any impact on the choice of instruments by any of the *power actors*, it thus mainly given by the particularity of such goal – i.e. when the goal is specific enough, then the choice of instrument is also more likely to be specific.

1. The Debate on Influence of External Actors (not only) in the Western Balkans – Introductory Notes and Literature Review

1.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to introduce the debate in the field (*literature review*) as well as to provide some of my own analysis of the aspects discussed in the debate.

The aim of literature review is to describe and evaluate the state of research (the debate) concerning the influence of external actors in the Western Balkans. I shall hence introduce the state of research on this topic and identify some areas that are unexplored and therefore require further research. This chapter, therefore, aims to present, briefly and critically analyse and summarize what is known about the topic, and also what is not known about it and thus what needs further research.

To start on more general terms, it is necessary to introduce the debate on ways in which the external actors act, and the areas of policy in which they act. A reasonably detailed description accompanied by necessary analysis will be provided in order to make the reader acquainted with knowledge necessary to further elaborate upon more specific issues.

Next, it will be necessary to briefly outline the role of EU in third countries, i.e. on global scene, as the EU undoubtedly is a global actor and, in relation to the region of Western Balkans, it is also the key player.

Furthermore, some general description of the actual influence exerted by selected external actors in the Western Balkans will be provided in order to get the big picture and later be able to assess which actors in which Western Balkan country have a significant influence – and which actually have influence significant enough to be worth more detailed analysis to be able to narrow down the topic and propose a research question that would be followed by an appropriate discussion.

It is certain that the influence of external actors in the Western Balkans is an inherently complex matter. This chapter therefore examines the dynamics of these external actors, discussing briefly the main external actors – but addressing also some more general and common features thereof.

1.2 Influence of External Actors on the Policy of Sovereign States

It is certain that a policy of a sovereign state, be it either the internal or the external policy, is not inherently free from foreign influence(s), i.e. the influence(s) of other external actors, such as other sovereign states, international organisations, supranational non-governmental actors (e.g. business entities, non-state interest groups, non-governmental organisations) etc. That is why there is a significant academic debate on the topic of influence of external actors on other actors, i.e. chiefly, but not limited to, third states/countries.¹ Let me briefly introduce this debate.

The term “influence” in the context of international relations (IR) could be defined as “*a relation among human [or non-human] actors such that the wants, desires, preferences, or intentions of one or more actors affect the actions, or predispositions to act, of one or more other actors in a direction consistent with – and not contrary to – the wants, preferences, or intentions of the influence-wielders.*”² In the context of international relations,³ it could be said that it is frequently associated with the term “power”. The association between “power” and “influence” is so close that it could be used interchangeably.⁴ Therefore, for the purposes of this thesis, I would use the terms “influence” and “power” without any differentiation between them (although in some other contexts, some differentiation would be applied).

Hence the notion of *foreign influence on domestic policy* could be defined as influence exerted by an external actor (most frequently a *power actor*) to shape the policy or policies (if a differentiation is drawn between one area of policy and another, making it separate policies) and decisions of a target actor. From the definition it is clear that *foreign influence* inevitably includes at least two actors, i.e. the first actor who seeks to exert

¹ Although there is an obvious difference between “state” and “country”, I do not differentiate between these two terms in the text unless it is necessary. In the debate presented in this thesis, when referring to a “state” or a “country”, these terms are used interchangeably.

² DAHL, Robert and STINEBRICKNER, Bruce. *Modern Political Analysis*. 6. Prentice Hall, 2002, p. 17. ISBN 978-0130497024.

³ The context of international relations is here the one referred to, however, the area studies also work with influence as a concept. When a specific territory/area is studied, the inclusion of such area/territory into some IR context is unavoidable. Therefore, when I refer to an object or subject associated somehow with IR, I also do not exclude its association with area studies or a similar discipline.

⁴ MEIERDING, Emily and SIGMAN, Rachel. Understanding the Mechanisms of International Influence in an Era of Great Power Competition. Online. *Journal of Global Security Studies*. 2021, Vol. 6, No. 4, p. 5. ISSN 2057-3170.

influence (i.e. the foreign power, or *power actor*) on the second actor, i.e. the actor who is the object of such influence (i.e. the *target actor*, most frequently the target country).⁵ Neither the *power actor* nor the *target actor* necessarily have to be sovereign states – a group of states, an international organisation or a non-state actor (e.g. a supranational business entity, a non-governmental organization, a religious group) could also be referred to as *actors*.

In terms of assigning some characteristics to this notion, the *influence* could certainly be characterized by a number of attributes, among which a several most important ones could be named. One key characteristics of influence could be its *relatedness* – i.e. that an influence pertains to a sort of association of one actor to another and thus is not related to merely one actor. This means that influence is always associated with at least two actors and hence shall not be regarded as merely unilateral – it stems from one actor (most probably the stronger, powerful one) to the target actor (most probably the weaker one). Another characteristic element of influence could be its *causality* – i.e. existence of the causal link between the behaviour of all (at least two) actors participating at the relationship, meaning that the influencer (*power actor*) exerts an activity that causes a change in the behaviour of the *target actor*. A third characteristics of influence could be its *purposefulness* – i.e. being connected to the capacity or ability of the *power actor* to change the behaviour of the *target actor* in a way that the former one intends, regardless of the fact whether such change happens in a direction intended by the *power actor* or in a neutral direction (i.e. a direction that cannot be evaluated as either positive or negative for neither of the sides).⁶

A question of what the behaviour of an actor influenced by another one actually encompasses arises here for sure. A “behaviour” in the IR context could be defined quite broadly, i.e. including “*actions, beliefs, values, attitudes, feelings, and predispositions*” of a certain actor.⁷ Thus it encompasses changes of such actor’s behaviour which could then

⁵ AIDT, Toke S; ALBORNOZ, Facundo and HAUKE, Esther. Foreign influence and domestic policy. Online. *Journal of Economic Literature*. 2021, Vol. 59, No. 2, p. 8.

⁶ MEIERDING, Emily and SIGMAN, Rachel. Understanding the Mechanisms of International Influence in an Era of Great Power Competition. Online. *Journal of Global Security Studies*. 2021, Vol. 6, No. 4, p. 4. ISSN 2057-3170.

⁷ BALDWIN, David A. *Power and International Relations: A Conceptual Approach*. Princeton University Press, 2016, pp.42-43. ISBN 9780691170381.

be actual or (at least) potential.⁸

Foreign influence of a *power actor* on a *target actor* could also be perceived empirically as an actual change in the policymaking process taking place within such *target actor* (e.g. a state where probably most such cases could be observed). Foreign influence is associated with interests of the *power actor* which exerts it, although more motivations could sometimes be found. Any such course of action leading towards a change in policymaking of a particular *target actor* could be evaluated as influencing the policy choices of such *target actor*, thus the exertion of such influence is linked to some policy choices, i.e. is, in this context, associated with policymaking.⁹

Some authors suggest that the actual distance between the policymaking on a global scale on the one side and the sovereign state (and its own policymaking) on the other has been narrowing recently due to the existence of foreign influence.¹⁰ Traditional approaches usually favoured focusing on the nation-state as the (sole) policymaker, focusing hence primarily on the role national public authorities, domestic policymakers etc.¹¹ However, it must be taken into account that the states, their citizens, economic entities and their civil societies do not exist within a vacuum. Seeing interconnectedness between the *actors*, their policymaking and hence the existence of influence of one actor on another could be an obvious answer on what is the necessary element (and perhaps the bonding compound) within the intricate web of inter-state (or more generally, inter-actor) policies – it might be the *foreign influence*. As we undoubtedly live in a world that is interconnected, it must be acknowledged – in the very least – that political and economic interests and (eventual) course of action(s) resulting therefrom reach beyond the state borders.¹² Solely based on this allegation it could be said that it is certain that such overflowing of interests must happen among the actors.

⁸ MEIERDING, Emily and SIGMAN, Rachel. Understanding the Mechanisms of International Influence in an Era of Great Power Competition. Online. *Journal of Global Security Studies*. 2021, Vol. 6, No. 4, p. 4. ISSN 2057-3170.

⁹ NITOIU, Cristian. The Influence of External Actors on Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Space. Online. *Europe-Asia Studies*. 2018, Vol. 70, No. 5, p. 685. ISSN 0966-8136.

¹⁰ MOLONEY, Kim and STONE, Diane. Beyond the State: Global Policy and Transnational Administration. Online. *International Review of Public Policy*. 2019, Vol. 1, No. 1, p. 104. ISSN 2679-3873.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 105.

¹² AIDT, Toke S; ALBORNOZ, Facundo and HAUK, Esther. Foreign influence and domestic policy. Online. *Journal of Economic Literature*. 2021, Vol. 59, No. 2, p. 426.

On a broader notice, it should also be noted that those authors who examine influences between actors (states) and their interconnectedness even speak about a so-called “global governance”.¹³ They basically say that global governance, being a system composed of more than just formal institutions but also of various (and multiple) systems of rule, and also functioning at more levels of human activities, encompasses basically all governance processes at the international level. This system is characterized, among others, by flows of control, consequence and causation, but also by interdependence and proliferation, thus constituting political and governance flows between the particular actors (most often states).¹⁴ This thesis, however, deals merely with bilateral foreign influence.

1.3 Role and Influence of the EU in Third Countries

Apart from the debate on influence of external actors in third countries in general terms, there is also a significant debate on the role of the EU in third countries. This debate is very extensive, therefore, I would only briefly introduce some of the points significant for the purposes of this thesis.

The EU stands on the global scene as a unique, big, and influential actor. Its uniqueness is given, among other factors, by its *sui generis* nature (i.e. it cannot be subsumed under a specific category of a subject of international law such as state or international organisation) as well as by its multifaceted and perhaps multi-folded role both within the European continent and (well) beyond. Let me elaborate upon this EU’s role a little – rather in general, not specific terms.

The *role* of the EU in the third countries is multi-faceted and has many dimensions – e.g. political, security, economic, humanitarian etc. Similarly, its *influence* in the world is inevitably considerable one as it is the world’s largest economy¹⁵ and undoubtedly a significant political player too. This is true in more areas of foreign action and policy, e.g.

¹³ ZÜRN, Michael. Global Governance as Multi-Level Governance. In: *Handbook on Multi-level Governance*. Cheltenham, U.K.: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 2010, pp. 80-81. ISBN 978 1 84720 241 3.

¹⁴ ROSENAU, James N. Governance in the Twenty-First Century. Online. *Global Governance*. 1995, Vol. 1, No. 1, p. 47.

¹⁵ If the EU is considered a single economy, then it is first, then the U.S. is second and China is third. See *The world's largest economies*. Online. In: World Data. 2024. Available from: <https://www.worlddata.info/largest-economies.php>. [Accessed 2024-03-03].

international trade, international security or development cooperation/aid.¹⁶ To give one example, it is well known that the EU is the biggest donor of international aid in the world.¹⁷ In any case, it is important to understand the nature of the EU's international engagement as it is vital for comprehending the impact of the EU's activities in the third countries as well as on the global scale.

1.3.1 The EU as a Global Actor

The EU could be perceived as a significant actor of the international order; hence it is possible to speak about EU's international role. Given the size of the EU (in terms of population, GDP, trade balance and many more aspects) in the global context, it could be said that the EU is a global actor, meaning a (significant) actor on a global scale. The distinctiveness of the EU lies, compared to other, sovereign states, in its specific character (which makes it *sui generis*). In the sphere of foreign policy, the EU manages to blend both its supranational character which is manifested chiefly in its Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) but also the intergovernmental character which is manifested chiefly in the requirement of unanimity in the EU Council in the CFSP matters.¹⁸ This hybrid setup allows the EU to pursue common objectives on the global scene while preserving the particular interests of the EU Member States.

It is certain, however, that the EU's engagement does not have only global, but also e.g. European (i.e. continental¹⁹) dimension. Certainly, more dimensions, levels or scales of the EU's engagement with the outer (i.e. non-EU world) could be differentiated. The question is how to assess and possibly also differentiate EU's engagement on both the European as well as on the global scale.

Some authors differentiate e.g. three levels of the EU's engagement in the world, or EU's engagement with the international and/or global order: first, the "EU order", second, the

¹⁶ Although nowadays the term "development cooperation" is used more frequently in order to express a rather equal relationship between the actors (both the donor and the recipient of such aid/assistance).

¹⁷ Recipients and results of EU aid. *European Commission* [online]. Brussels: EC, 2024 [Accessed 2024-02-16]. Available from: https://commission.europa.eu/aid-development-cooperation-fundamental-rights/human-rights-non-eu-countries/recipients-and-results-eu-aid_en

¹⁸ GAREIS, Sven; HAUSER, Gunther a KERNIC, Franz. *The European Union - A Global Actor?* Budrich, 2013. ISBN 978-3-8474-0040-0, p. 32.

¹⁹ Here I refer to the whole European continent in a broader sense, i.e. including also islands, e.g. British Isles, not only the continent in the narrower sense.

EU in the European order, and third, the EU in the global order.²⁰ For the purposes of this chapter, the second and third levels of the EU's engagement are important.

The EU's engagement in the European order is, among others, a question of strategic importance for the EU – and strategy is (usually) deployed by *power actors* in the field. The question is what is the (true) nature of the EU's strategy for its engagement in the European order. Basically, it could be said that the EU is driven by strategic considerations which is aimed at the promotion of geopolitical stability, enhancement of prosperity and promotion of EU's values in Europe.²¹ It might go as far as the EU might be considered biased when promoting its values in third countries, both the European and non-European ones. The rationale behind this lies in the very fact that if other actors/countries want to cooperate with the EU (e.g. in trade matters), they must accommodate to the EU rules, standards (e.g. in the area of protection of competition, environmental protection, food safety etc.). This is called the “Brussels effect”.²² As most of the actors/states subordinate themselves to the EU rules when cooperating the Union or its Member States, the EU, as a result, might get biased in its policy as considering itself to be the only “true” one.

Hence a possible perspective on the complex web of interest and influences within the European continent, which could be called the “European order”, is that the EU has internalized the major components of the wider European order which consequently raises questions about its power in the territory of the European continent.²³ It is undoubted, though, that the EU is a major player on the European continent *per se* and this cannot be changed even by the Union itself.

²⁰ SMITH, Michael. The European Union and International Order: European and Global Dimensions. Online. *European Foreign Affairs Review*. 2007, Vol. 12, No. 4, p. 437. ISSN 1384-6299.

²¹ DIEZ, Thomas; MANNERS, Ian and WHITMAN, Richard G. The Changing Nature of International Institutions in Europe: the Challenge of the European Union. Online. *Journal of European Integration*. 2011, Vol. 33, No. 2, p. 117. ISSN 0703-6337.

²² LINDSETH, Peter L. The Brussels Effect: How the European Union Rules the World. Online. *The American Journal of Comparative Law*. 2022, Vol. 70, No. 3, p. 641. ISSN 0002-919X. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1093/ajcl/avad001>. [Accessed 2024-04-06].

²³ SMITH, Michael. The European Union and International Order: European and Global Dimensions. Online. *European Foreign Affairs Review*. 2007, Vol. 12, No. 4, p. 437. ISSN 1384-6299. or DIEZ, Thomas; MANNERS, Ian and WHITMAN, Richard G. The Changing Nature of International Institutions in Europe: the Challenge of the European Union. Online. *Journal of European Integration*. 2011, Vol. 33, No. 2, pp. 117-138. ISSN 0703-6337.

1.3.2 Objectives and Attitude of the EU in its Policy towards Third Countries

Let me take a closer (albeit brief) look at the role of the EU in the global order in more concrete terms – by examining its objectives in third countries and EU's attitude in this regard.²⁴ Some authors are of the opinion that the EU has been growingly confronted with the risks and also costs that are associated with the conduct of its own foreign policy that is independent (at least to some degree) from the foreign policy of its Member States. Therefore, this could be perceived as a key constraining factor for the EU's attitude towards the issues in the global context.²⁵ However, regarding the EU's role in the European context, the nature of the EU's external action, the very manifestation of EU's policy in third countries, is more multifaceted.

It is obvious that the EU plays a significant and, (at least) from the perspective of itself and the Western world, a constructive role in third countries. Beyond its borders, it has been increasingly engaged in the promotion of solution of international issues via multilateral structures, in the protection of climate and sustainable development, promotion of peace, justice, rule of law, respect for human rights and many more.²⁶ The wide scope of EU's engagement on the global scale is indisputable.

The question is how the EU behaves in its external relations, i.e. if it acts with (full) respect towards the other actors, helps them (e.g. within its development/humanitarian aid/cooperation) or whether it behaves more like an empire, i.e. uses its supranational nature and distinct common European identity to actually (forcibly) promote its values in third countries.²⁷ In this regard, there are opinions that the EU actually uses the concept of “ideal-self” in the process of influencing a *target state*. Such “ideal-self”, referring to an entity (i.e. most frequently a state in the context of third countries) with respect for democratic values, rule of law, liberal economic order etc. is then used by the EU as a benchmark for the definition of that particular target state's foreign policy strategies,

²⁴ By referring to “third countries”, I mean other countries than the EU Member States.

²⁵ SMITH, Michael. The European Union and International Order: European and Global Dimensions. Online. *European Foreign Affairs Review*. 2007, Vol. 12, No. 4, p. 437. ISSN 1384-6299.

²⁶ *Key European Union achievements and tangible benefits*. Online. In: European Commission. 2024. Available from: https://european-union.europa.eu/priorities-and-actions/eu-priorities/achievements_en. [Accessed 2024-03-02].

²⁷ PÄNKE, Julian. Liberal Empire, Geopolitics and EU Strategy: Norms and Interests in European Foreign Policy Making. Online. *Geopolitics*. 2017, Vol. 24, No. 1, p. 115. ISSN 1465-0045.

interests and hence also policymaking.²⁸ Regardless of whether this is true or not, it is quite probable that the EU holds a (significant) normative power in its external relations and uses it as an instrument to build (sometimes, from a certain perspective, even enforce) compromise and consensus between various actors. Therefore, one can say that via this attitude and resulting process(es), the EU externalizes its own (“common European”) norms and values. There are hence even opinions that the EU is a sort of “liberal empire”,²⁹ meaning that the pursuit of “liberal order”, encompassing fundamental EU values such as “*respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights*”,³⁰ exceeds just the EU’s primary intentions in a specific foreign policy case and makes wider impacts on the policymaking of other actors. However, the EU’s liberal democratic norms present, from the Western perspective, a more sound base for fair, democratic, liberal and inclusive societies rather than typically exclusive, nationalist and protective societies.³¹

The way the EU behaves in its external relations, i.e. when acting in third countries and (possibly) influencing their policies, manifests itself also in the instruments that the EU chooses and uses in these third countries (that are subjects of its interest). The range of these instruments is rather narrower, as the EU places its external action under a scrutiny (legal, ethical, humanitarian ...), compared to totalitarian powers such as Russia.³² This could therefore result into situations that some other, less democratic states (e.g. those in the post-Soviet space) tend to align themselves with the EU in its foreign policy actions, however, rather in situations that are in line with their own pragmatic interests.³³ The role of the EU in third countries, especially the countries falling within the area of European

²⁸ NITOIU, Cristian. The Influence of External Actors on Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Space. Online. *Europe-Asia Studies*. 2018, Vol. 70, No. 5, p. 687. ISSN 0966-8136.

²⁹ PÄNKE, Julian. Liberal Empire, Geopolitics and EU Strategy: Norms and Interests in European Foreign Policy Making. Online. *Geopolitics*. 2017, Vol. 24, No. 1, p. 116. ISSN 1465-0045.

³⁰ These key EU values are listed in Art. 2 of the Treaty on European Union, see *Consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union*. Online. In: EUR-LEX. 2016. Available from: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:12016M/TXT>. [Accessed 2024-03-03].

³¹ PÄNKE, Julian. Liberal Empire, Geopolitics and EU Strategy: Norms and Interests in European Foreign Policy Making. Online. *Geopolitics*. 2017, Vol. 24, No. 1, p. 116. ISSN 1465-0045.

³² NITOIU, Cristian. The Influence of External Actors on Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Space. Online. *Europe-Asia Studies*. 2018, Vol. 70, No. 5, p. 686. ISSN 0966-8136.

³³ *Ibid*, p. 687.

Neighbourhood,³⁴ is driven, apart from the EU's more general values such as promotion of rule of law, human rights etc., by some pragmatism for sure³⁵ – although, as stated above, it is more likely the EU that influences the other actors in terms of indirectly imposing its own norms to them – having therefore “normative power”. It also implies that when foreign policy actions of the EU in third countries are analysed, this notion should be born in mind.

1.4 Influence of the External Actors in the Western Balkans

Finally, let me take a look at the influence of the external actors in the Western Balkans. This phenomenon is not a novelty – it has been a subject of academic study for many years. It is certain that this question is also a point of interest to the EU (or, more widely, to the whole Western world) as there is an opinion that this region has become a “geostrategic chessboard”, meaning that major external actors such as Russia, China, Turkey or Gulf States are targeting their efforts towards the countries in the region, while investing some significant resources into it.³⁶ The (not only potential) clash with the vital interest of the EU to engage with the region and ultimately reach the long-term goal of its enlargement into (most of) this region is quite obvious. Let me now take a look at this phenomenon, firstly at some more general characteristics, possibly those which are common to these *power actors*.

In terms of the region of Western Balkans, there are six countries that are not EU Member States yet: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Kosovo,³⁷ Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia. All of them currently enjoy the status of EU candidate countries or, in the case of Kosovo, the status of EU potential candidate country. These six countries of the

³⁴ These include: Algeria, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Egypt, Georgia, Israel, Jordan, Kyrgyz Republic, Lebanon, Libya, Moldova, Morocco, North Macedonia, Palestine, Syria, Tunisia, Ukraine. The full list of countries available here: *Neighbouring countries of the EU*. Online. In: European Commission. 2024. Available from: https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/international-economic-relations/candidate-and-neighbouring-countries/neighbouring-countries-eu_en. [Accessed 2024-03-03].

³⁵ RESLOW, Natasja. The Role of Third Countries in EU Migration Policy: The Mobility Partnerships. Online. *European Journal of Migration and Law*. 2012, Vol. 14, No. 4, p. 393. ISSN 1388-364X.

³⁶ FEYERABEND, Florian C. *The influence of external actors in the Western Balkans*. Online, p. 4. In: <https://www.kas.de/en/single-title/-/content/der-einfluss-externer-akteure-auf-dem-westbalkan1> [Accessed 2024-02-14].

³⁷ In spite of the fact that not all EU Member States recognize Kosovo as a sovereign, independent state (i.e. a subject of international law), most of the EU Member States do (22 out of 27). Overall, Kosovo is currently recognized by 96 sovereign states worldwide.

region are sometimes called “Western Balkan Six” or “WB6”.

1.4.1 Essentials of the Debate

First, it needs to be said that the debate of the involvement of external actors in the region in the recent years or decades has been revolving around mainly non-Western actors, i.e. Russia, China, Turkey, and some or all of the Gulf States. Despite the fact that involvement of Western actors in the region was quite strong in the 1990s, mainly due to the involvement of NATO in the Yugoslav war led chiefly by the U.S., the opinions that the focus of the Western actors had shifted out of the Western Balkans are quite frequent. For example, the U.S. is said to have been shifting its attention from the Western Balkans and Europe as a whole towards the Asia-Pacific region in the recent years.³⁸ Of course, this notion has changed as of 2022 with the beginning of the war in Ukraine; however, regarding the Western Balkans, little has changed in terms of the U.S. interest – it is still a region of lesser interest to the U.S. than it used to be e.g. in the 1990s.³⁹

It is, however, not only the U.S. which changed its stance regarding the Western Balkans in the past (approximately two) decades. Despite the official perseverance of the EU's officials in their allegations about the ongoing interest of the EU in the region, mainly, of course, as far as the EU enlargement is concerned, some academic authors claim that the EU's interest in the region has somehow diminished for some period of time (approximately one decade).⁴⁰ Accordingly, the interest and activities of the other, non-Western external actors, have increased. It is only quite recent that the focus of EU's policymaker shifted back towards the region.⁴¹ Also, the U.S., despite some backslide, still remains a significant political player in the region, in security, diplomatic and economic

³⁸ HUSKIĆ, Adnan. *A Comparative Overview of the External Actors' Influence in the Western Balkans and Croatia*. Online. In: Prague Security Studies Institute. 2023, p. 3. Available from: https://www.pssi.cz/download//docs/10582_a-comparative-overview-of-the-external-actors-influence-in-the-western-balkans-and-croatia.pdf. [Accessed 2024-02-14].

³⁹ BRAUN, Mats; METODIEVA, Asya; HALÁS, Matús; ŠITERA, Daniel and LARYŠ, Martin. *The Future of EU Enlargement in a Geopolitical Perspective*. Online. In: IIR. Praha: IIR, 2024, p. 3.

⁴⁰ KMEZIĆ, Marko. Recalibrating the EU's Approach to the Western Balkans. Online. *European View*. 2020, Vol. 19, No. I, pp. 55-56. Available from: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1781685820913655>. [Accessed 2024-02-14].

⁴¹ PETRITSCH, Wolfgang and FREUND, Philipp. External actors and European integration in the Western Balkans. Online. *Focus on European Economic Integration*. 2018, Vol. 18, No. Q3, p. 57. Available from: https://www.oenb.at/dam/jcr:e56c2804-135b-416f-a510-43d70eefd5ac/OENB_Geopolitics_Western_Balkans.pdf. [Accessed 2024-02-14].

terms.⁴²

There is also a particular question of why a (considerable) space for the influence of the external actors has turned up in the first place. In this regard, there are opinions that the region has witnessed a (noticeable) decline in the level of democracy (so-called *democratic backsliding*), weakening of rule of law, suppression of certain political freedoms, and, on the other hand, a rise of authoritarianism, populism, corruption, and nepotism. Weakening of the standards of democracy frequently leads to degrading of credibility of such actors from the perspective of Western actors, i.e. decrease of the democratic credentials of the particular Western Balkan countries.⁴³ Consequently, the interest of the West in the region has declined in recent years and hence opportunities for new players on the Western Balkans geopolitical chessboard has opened up.

1.4.2 Europeanisation of the Western Balkans and the EU's Role in the Region

A broader context should be added here: some authors are of the opinion that the countries in the region which aspire to become EU members are objects of geopolitical struggle for political, economic and cultural influence of the *power actors*. As the influence of the EU has been strong in the past decades (despite some ups and downs during that period), some authors speak about so-called *Europeanisation* of the Western Balkans.⁴⁴

This term has also been widely used also in other context than just geopolitics, area studies or international relations. For example, in the context of law, one speaks about Europeanisation of criminal law or Europeanisation of civil law. Hence it is obvious that experts in other areas of research than IR/area studies also perceive certain field of societal activities (which the particular areas of legal order are) as influenced by the process of European integration.

⁴² PETRITSCH, Wolfgang and FREUND, Philipp. External actors and European integration in the Western Balkans. Online. *Focus on European Economic Integration*. 2018, Vol. 18, No. Q3, p. 57. Available from: https://www.oenb.at/dam/jcr:e56c2804-135b-416f-a510-43d70eefd5ac/OENB_Geopolitics_Western_Balkans.pdf. [Accessed 2024-02-14].

⁴³ HUSKIĆ, Adnan. *A Comparative Overview of the External Actors' Influence in the Western Balkans and Croatia*. Online. In: Prague Security Studies Institute. 2023, p. 3. Available from: https://www.pssi.cz/download/docs/10582_a-comparative-overview-of-the-external-actors-influence-in-the-western-balkans-and-croatia.pdf. [Accessed 2024-02-14].

⁴⁴ PETRITSCH, Wolfgang and FREUND, Philipp. External actors and European integration in the Western Balkans. Online. *Focus on European Economic Integration*. 2018, Vol. 18, No. Q3, pp. 58-59.

The case of law is obvious: one of the criteria for the EU accession (Copenhagen criteria) is: “*the ability to take on the obligations of membership, including the capacity to effectively implement the rules, standards and policies that make up the body of EU law (the ‘acquis’), and adherence to the aims of political, economic and monetary union.*”⁴⁵ As a result, the process of Europeanisation of legal order of a particular country begins already with the beginning of accession talks. During this period, the particular EU candidate must make amendments to its existing valid laws in order to prepare for the fact that in the moment of its accession to the EU, the whole EU *acquis* becomes an integral part of such country’s legal order, including the primacy of EU law over the national law, i.e. in case of a conflict between a rule of the EU law and a rule of the national law, the EU law will prevail. As could be inferred from the text of the particular Copenhagen criterion above, it applies not only to legal rules but also to “standards and policies”, i.e. to a broader context of law. Therefore, *Europeanisation* could be understood as “*incorporation of European Union norms, practices and procedures into the domestic level*”.⁴⁶ Of course, the *Europeanisation* does not end with the day of accession of the particular country to the EU – it is an ongoing process as with the further adoption of EU legislation and policies, gradually more EU Member States’ lawmaking and policymaking shall be influenced by the process of *Europeanisation*.

Furthermore, there are two other Copenhagen criteria: the political one (“*stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities*”) and the economic one (“*a functioning market economy and the capacity to cope with competition and market forces*”).⁴⁷ As the process of fulfilling these criteria is closely watched by the EU institutions during the particular candidate country’s accession talks and adherence to the requirements raised by the EU institutions during

⁴⁵ *Accession criteria*. Online. In: European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR). 2024. Available from: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/glossary/accession-criteria_en [Accessed 2024-02-26] or *Accession criteria (Copenhagen criteria)*. Online. In: EUR-LEX. 2024. Available from: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/EN/legal-content/glossary/accession-criteria-copenhagen-criteria.html>. [Accessed 2024-02-26].

⁴⁶ MOUMOUTZIS, Kyriakos. Still Fashionable Yet Useless? Addressing Problems with Research on the Europeanization of Foreign Policy. Online. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*. 2011, Vol. 49, No. 3, p. 607. ISSN 00219886.

⁴⁷ *Accession criteria*. Online. In: European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR). 2024. Available from: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/glossary/accession-criteria_en [Accessed 2024-02-26].

negotiations is closely observed by the EU,⁴⁸ and also subsequently after the particular country becomes an EU Member State, it could be inferred that the *Europeanisation* is a phenomenon permanently relevant to law, policy and economy of the EU candidate countries (and subsequently Member States).

It is clear that the whole process of integration of the Western Balkans into both the EU as well as the NATO (i.e. Euro-Atlantic structures) is already well-advanced.⁴⁹ The meaning of this allegation lies within the interconnectedness between the Balkan states and the EU and its Member States – a fact that is evidenced e.g. by the volume of import/export exchange between the EU and the Western Balkan countries.⁵⁰ Another case of interconnectedness is the area of foreign policy/security – given the fact that three Western Balkan candidate countries (Albania, North Macedonia and Montenegro) are NATO members (plus also Slovenia and Croatia, which are already EU members), an interconnectedness could be seen here too. When speaking about interconnectedness, it could also be said that this does not go without interdependence and close ties within the actors (i.e. here states only) participating at such mechanisms.

A brief understanding of the process of *Europeanisation* is important to be able to concur that the external actor(s) can have a (very) strong influence and subsequently impact on a particular country when there is a mutual consent between such country and the *power actor* with such an influence, albeit this does not apply without reservations in the Western Balkans – there are some political forces against the EU accession in (most of) the Western Balkan candidate countries.

In economic terms, the Western Balkan countries are closely tied to one another and also with the EU via a series of (mostly economic) instruments such as Central European Free

⁴⁸ Reports regarding the progress in the accession talks is published every year; e.g. the report on Serbia for 2023: *Serbia 2023 Report: Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions -2023 Communication on EU Enlargement policy*. Online. In: European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiation. 2024. Available from: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/9198cd1a-c8c9-4973-90ac-b6ba6bd72b53_en?filename=SWD_2023_695_Serbia.pdf. [Accessed 2024-02-26].

⁴⁹ FEYERABEND, Florian C. *The influence of external actors in the Western Balkans*. Online, p. 5. In: <https://www.kas.de/en/single-title/-/content/der-einfluss-externer-akteure-auf-dem-westbalkan1> [Accessed 2024-02-14].

⁵⁰ *Enlargement countries - international trade in goods statistics*. Online. In: EUROSTAT. 2023. Available from: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Enlargement_countries_-_international_trade_in_goods_statistics&oldid=627517. [Accessed 2024-04-06].

Trade Agreement (CEFTA) or the Energy Union which facilitate a continuously deeper economic integration of the actors within the region.⁵¹ On another note, also European financial institutions such as the European Investment Bank (EIB) or European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) or financial instruments such as Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA) or Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) play a significant role in the reform efforts in the Western Balkan candidate countries. They not only allow for the much needed investments to be actually economically accessible for the countries of the region but also their disbursement is conditional upon the candidate countries' adherence to the EU rules and standards,⁵² which provides for further perseverance of the reform efforts in the countries of the region – and consequently further enhances the interconnectedness of the particular areas of the EU's influence in the region. This interconnectedness, which is so frequently referred to while discussing reasons for perseverance of the external actors' influence in a particular region (i.e. influence at or within a particular group of actors/states) is hence another reason why the EU could be regarded as the strongest (i.e. most influential) actor in the region.

Such strong influential role of the EU in the Western Balkans could also be perceived in political terms. The way the EU exerts its political influence in the region, i.e. its influence on political choices of the *target actors* (e.g. in terms of policymaking) which also have impact e.g. on the economic area of policymaking, is, among others, carried into effect by dedicated political initiatives, such as the *Berlin Process* launched in 2014, which aims for enhancement/revitalisation of the multilateral ties between the participating EU candidates, potential candidates and participating EU Member States, among others via promotion of settlement of conflicts or judicial and public service reform in the region.⁵³ This political initiative hence provides a good example of exertion of external political influence in the region – as the initiative and its continuity is largely dependent on the political will of the originator/creator of the initiative (which was predominantly the Juncker Commission) and the degree of cooperation of the participating countries. By means of such a process, an indirect influence is exerted by the EU in the region too. The readiness of the EU's

⁵¹ PETRITSCH, Wolfgang and FREUND, Philipp. External actors and European integration in the Western Balkans. Online. *Focus on European Economic Integration*. 2018, Vol. 18, No. Q3, p. 59.

⁵² Ibid, p. 60.

⁵³ Ibid, p. 59.

political representation to support the integration of the Western Balkans into the EU was confirmed by the President von der Leyen's declaration that "*the future of the Western Balkans is in our Union.*"⁵⁴

Overall, the EU as such as well as some of its Member States have been showing an increased interest in the Western Balkans in the recent years. The previously existing *power vacuum* (to a certain degree) which was "created" by the lesser interest of the EU in the region in some recent period, actually allowed for a greater engagement of other external actors. However, to be fair towards the EU and its Member States, one must not omit the fact the EU has gone through some significant crises in the past decade(s) such as the financial crisis that started in 2008, the migration crisis that started in 2015 or the Brexit crisis that started in 2016. The objective social and economic circumstances occupied the EU authorities well enough to divert their attention from the Western Balkans. On the part of the Western Balkan countries, one must also not omit that they were affected by these crises to a large extent too – and the necessity to fulfil the requirements of the EU integration process also added to the already heavy burden of all crises.

Critics also say that the fact that the EU has increased its attention to the Western Balkans in the recent years is largely due to the concerns of EU political representation and general public about the Russian influence in the region and, in addition to that, the increased Russian activity in its foreign policy marked by its invasion into Crimea in 2014 (and subsequently to Ukraine in 2022) and also due to increased engagement of China via investments in the region.⁵⁵ The pragmatism of the EU's engagement in the region could be inferred on more general terms also from the obvious intention to expand the European Single Market and hence gain access to a significant amount of workforce.

Any assessment regarding the topic of how the external actors are increasing their influence and the factors that play a vital role in this process is characterised (and, at least to some degree, biased) by ambivalence and heterogeneity.⁵⁶ Such characteristics could be

⁵⁴ 2023 *State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen*. Online. In: European Commission. 2023. Available from: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_23_4426. [Accessed 2024-02-29].

⁵⁵ PETRITSCH, Wolfgang and FREUND, Philipp. External actors and European integration in the Western Balkans. Online. *Focus on European Economic Integration*. 2018, Vol. 18, No. Q3, p. 65.

⁵⁶ FEYERABEND, Florian C. *The influence of external actors in the Western Balkans*. Online, p. 137. In:

inferred not only from the variety of sources of such influence and some fluctuations that could be perceived e.g. over the longer periods of time, but also from the motivation of *target actors* to pursue their own interests. This is also a factor that makes it hard to assess the role of the particular external actors, especially in terms of weighting their particular roles in the region.

1.4.3 Russia and China in the Western Balkans

Russia and China are two major geopolitical players in the region which is why they shall be mentioned right after the EU. This is given by various reasons – political, economic or cultural ones.

From the perspective of the Western world, Russia has been perceived as a negative power trying to destabilise the Western and EU's efforts to help the region and integrate it into the EU and Euro-Atlantic structures.⁵⁷ An obvious aim of Russia's activities in the region is its effort to undermine the European and Euro-Atlantic integration of the countries in the region. As an opposition of Russia towards both processes could be observed on more occasions, some authors are of an opinion that the possible future accession of most of the countries in the region is not a major issue for Russia; it is rather the (ongoing) NATO enlargement which Russia opposes.⁵⁸ Russia has been actively putting its efforts into eroding the process of integration of the Western Balkans into the EU and the NATO. For this purpose, Russia takes advantage of the existing historical and cultural ties to some Western Balkan countries, that are based on national, Slavic mutuality and also on religious, Orthodox mutuality. Russia, however, also takes advantage of its richness in natural resources, especially oil and gas, in order to provide these resources to some Western Balkan countries and hence exert influence on them.

China's role, on the other hand, is quite different – its efforts are focused more on the economic sphere which is performed via investments into infrastructure or natural

<https://www.kas.de/en/single-title/-/content/der-einfluss-externer-akteure-auf-dem-westbalkan1>.

[Accessed 2024-02-14].

⁵⁷ VULOVIĆ, Marina. *Western Balkan Foreign and Security Ties with External Actors*. Online. In: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik. 2023. Available from: <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2023C08/>. [Accessed 2024-02-14].

⁵⁸ PETRITSCH, Wolfgang and FREUND, Philipp. External actors and European integration in the Western Balkans. Online. *Focus on European Economic Integration*. 2018, Vol. 18, No. Q3, p. 60. Available from: https://www.oenb.at/dam/jcr:e56c2804-135b-416f-a510-43d70cefd5ac/OENB_Geopolitics_Western_Balkans.pdf. [Accessed 2024-02-14].

resources extraction projects.⁵⁹ This is not surprising as objectively China would be hardly able to build upon cultural or historical ties in cooperation with the Western Balkans countries.

The view of WB6's integration into the EU is perceived as not that deterrent to China as it could actually serve its own geostrategic interests. The main point here is that China can actually perceive it as a positive phenomenon, in view of the connection of Western Balkans to the EU, especially to its Central (and Eastern)⁶⁰ European (CEE) members. The reason is that China already has its own political and economic engagement in both the CEE region as well as the Western Balkans which is why China established e.g. two significant geopolitical initiatives: the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries (14+1 format) that are, among other means, used for exertion of its influence. The Chinese endeavours in the region are predominantly economic, as China has pursued some big infrastructure investment projects such as e.g. Sino-Serbian Friendship Bridge in Belgrade, Kostolac power station or Belgrade-Budapest railway.⁶¹ Chinese investments are usually performed under conditions favourable for the target countries – loans are provided with long maturities, at low interest rate and are not conditioned upon political and/or human rights obligations and limitations.⁶² It is obvious that China makes such investments while pursuing its own interests in the region.

The involvement of both Russia and China in the region is significant and hence I believe it is worth a proper examination as to what drives these two *power actors* to pursue their activities in the region.

⁵⁹ VULOVIĆ, Marina. *Western Balkan Foreign and Security Ties with External Actors*. Online. In: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik. 2023. Available from: <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2023C08/>. [Accessed 2024-02-14].

⁶⁰ The question of which EU Member States actually fall into the category of „Central“ and which rather into „Eastern“ Europe is a complicated and delicate one; suffice is to say that all post-Communist EU Member States could fall into one category. The differentiation between them is not important here.

⁶¹ PETRITSCH, Wolfgang and FREUND, Philipp. External actors and European integration in the Western Balkans. Online. *Focus on European Economic Integration*. 2018, Vol. 18, No. Q3, p. 62. Available from: https://www.oenb.at/dam/jcr:e56c2804-135b-416f-a510-43d70eefd5ac/OENB_Geopolitics_Western_Balkans.pdf. [Accessed 2024-02-14].

⁶² Ibid, pp. 62-63.

1.4.4 Other External Actors in the Western Balkans

Apart from the influence of the EU and the influence of Russia and China outlined above, it is also the U.S.A., Turkey and Gulf States which exert some considerable influence in the region. Its proper analysis is well beyond the scope of this thesis.

Suffice is to say that both Turkey as well as more Gulf States, chiefly Saudi Arabia, exert some influence in the Western Balkan countries, using various instruments. Their activities are predominantly associated with the existing historical and religious ties to the Muslim communities in various countries of the region, chiefly targeted at countries with major Muslim population, i.e. Albania, BiH and Kosovo.⁶³ Both Turkey and Saudi Arabia are also economically active in the region, providing some significant development aid or investing into renovation of mosques and generally supporting Muslim communities of the region.⁶⁴ Their influence in the region is not, however, usually assessed as that significant as the influence of China and Russia.

The United States are also a significant actor for which the Western Balkans is a region of interest for many reasons. These reasons are chiefly rooted in the involvement of the U.S. in the Yugoslav War in the 1990s as it was the U.S. which were the leader and the major contributor to the NATO's efforts of ensuring the security of the region in the 1990s.

The U.S. usually act in congruence with the EU in foreign policy, which is also true for the matters concerning the Western Balkans, although some examples in recent years show that this is not entirely true in all cases – e.g. the U.S. during the presidency of Donald Trump supported moving Serbian and Kosovan embassies to Jerusalem in 2020 which was not in congruence with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). In other cases, however, the U.S. and the EU act not only in congruence but also in complementarity – as has been e.g. their acting in the facilitation of the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue.⁶⁵

⁶³ PETRITSCH, Wolfgang and FREUND, Philipp. External actors and European integration in the Western Balkans. Online. *Focus on European Economic Integration*. 2018, Vol. 18, No. Q3, p. 64. Available from: https://www.oenb.at/dam/jcr:e56c2804-135b-416f-a510-43d70eefd5ac/OENB_Geopolitics_Western_Balkans.pdf. [Accessed 2024-02-14].

⁶⁴ BECHEV, Dimitar a ERDI ÖZTÜRK, Ahmet. *Competing over Islam: Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Iran in the Balkans*. Online. In: Middle East Institute. 2022. Available from: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/competing-over-islam-turkey-saudi-arabia-and-iran-balkans>. [Accessed 2024-02-28].

⁶⁵ VULOVIĆ, Marina. *Western Balkan Foreign and Security Ties with External Actors*. Online. In:

However, given the fact that the U.S. is not considered an actor which would be interested in undermining the process of the region's integration into Euro-Atlantic structures, I would not further focus on its role in the region.

Instead, I would like to focus on the role of major external actors who pursue their own interests that are not clearly discernible at first sight – which is the case of Russia and China.

2. Research Design, Methodology and Theoretical Framework

I consider explanation of research methodology, introduction of the research question, and resources to be appropriate now after the literature review. Therefore, the aim of this chapter is to describe the way in which the research within this thesis will be conducted. This implies that not only the substantial aspect of the matter, i.e. influence of external actors, must be explained but also some necessary context within which this phenomenon operates must be presented.

My intention is to progress from the general to the more specific, from larger to smaller (*a maiori ad minus*). That is why first the influence of external actors was explained in the previous chapter, and now the particular instruments used by these external actors to exert influence in third countries will be introduced. Based on overall assessment of the external actors' role, the topic will be narrowed down and the choice of research question will be substantiated. Furthermore, the choice of resources used to conduct the research shall be introduced. Finally, in the next chapter, a proper analysis of the research question will be conducted with the aim to arrive upon some synthesizing conclusion.

This chapter sets the theoretical framework for a detailed examination of how *power actors* exert influence (not only) in the Western Balkans. I will analyse the instruments these *power actors* use in *target actors* in general and will provide examples of their particular courses of action to influence the *target actors*.

2.1 Instruments Used by External Actors to Influence the Policy of Sovereign States

Allow me now to introduce the theoretical framework on which instruments are used by the external actors to exert influence on the other actors for this purpose.

Some authors identify more instruments or tools, while more ways to draw differentiation lines between various categories can be identified.⁶⁶ The instruments could e.g. be differentiated according to the areas of society's life they affect. These could hence include *political, economic, information and cultural* or *security and military instruments*.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ AIDT, Toke S; ALBORNOZ, Facundo and HAUK, Esther. Foreign influence and domestic policy. Online. *Journal of Economic Literature*. 2021, Vol. 59, No. 2, p. 426-487.

⁶⁷ E.g. JACOBY, Wade. Inspiration, Coalition, and Substitution: External Influences on Postcommunist Transformations. Online. *World Politics*. 2006, Vol. 58, No. 4, pp. 623-651. ISSN 0043-8871.

Therefore, a custom-made differentiation is listed below (vaguely inspired by existing sources⁶⁸). First, let me elaborate upon the instruments of influence sorted into categories according to the means of policy used.

In terms of *economic* instruments, these include e.g. trade deals (e.g. trade agreements), investments (e.g. foreign direct investments), sanctions, financial aid (both repayable and non-repayable) or debt (e.g. concessional loans).

As far as *political* instruments are concerned, rather *soft power* instruments are deployed, e.g. diplomacy, lobbying, direct or indirect financing of political parties (including e.g. campaign financing but also covert support).

To name a few *information and cultural* instruments, e.g. disinformation, hybrid threats, media manipulation or even propaganda and cyber operations are used.

There are also *military and security* instruments that could be deployed by some *actors*, referring to e.g. threats of using force or even direct military intervention.

Another aspect important to categorizing those instruments could be seen in the manner in which the instruments have impact on the *target actor*, more specifically on its foreign policy; quite obviously, such impact could be viewed in a “binary” perspective – as either positive or negative. Of course, the evaluation of whether an instrument is positive or negative is relative – it is, after all, similarly as other phenomena in the field of foreign policy, a matter of perspective. From the perspective of a *target actor*, certain course of action exerted by the influencing *power actor*, performed with use of an instrument, could be perceived as e.g. positive, therefore accepted (gladly) by the *target actor*. However, the same course of action, taken by the *power actor* and the *target actor* together, could be viewed differently by a third party (actor). Thus the differentiation of instruments below as

⁶⁸ E.g. ALI, Saleem H. and PINCUS, Rebecca. The role of the military in environmental peacebuilding. Online. *Routledge Handbook of Environmental Conflict and Peacebuilding*. 2018, pp. 306-314. ISBN 9781315473772; DAVISON, W. Phillips. Political Communication as an Instrument of Foreign Policy. Online. *Public Opinion Quarterly*. Vol. 27, No. 1. ISSN 0033362X; MISHALI-RAM, Meirav. Powerful Actors Make a Difference: Theorizing Power Attributes of Nonstate Actors. Online. *International Journal of Peace Studies*. 2009, Vol. 14, No. 2, pp. 61-66; or PEKSEN, Dursun. Does Foreign Military Intervention Help Human Rights? Online. *Political Research Quarterly*. 2012, Vol. 65, No. 3, p. 558. ISSN 1065-9129 and RUSTEMI, Arlinda; DE WIJK, Rob; DUNLOP, Connor; PEROVSKA, Jovana and PALUSHI, Lirije (ed.). *Geopolitical Influences of External Powers in the Western Balkans*. Online. The Hague: The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2019, pp. 111-128. Available from: https://hcss.nl/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Geopolitical-Influences-of-External-Powers-in-the-Western-Balkans_0.pdf. [Accessed 2024-02-24].

either positive or negative should be understood as a matter of perspective of both the *power actor* and the *target actor* – not as an absolute concept valid *erga omnes* (towards everyone).

Taking into account both the areas of society's life such instruments affect, as well as the nature of their impact viewed in the “binary” perspective, it is possible to categorize the instruments along both lines of differentiation.

The **positive economic instruments**, i.e. instruments of foreign influence having positive⁶⁹ economic impact on the *target actor*, could be e.g. ***development cooperation and aid*** which is usually directed to help reducing poverty, advance infrastructure development, increase education and do away with illiteracy. A special case in this regard is ***crisis relief assistance***, as provision of assistance during crisis could be vital for a *target actor*, for the protection and endurance of its economy, infrastructure or health of its population. This has manifested itself recently e.g. in the case of provision of significant help by one actor to another during the COVID-19 pandemic. Another example of a positive economic instrument are ***fair trade agreements*** which help to promote more responsible production and trade practices as well as more equitable conditions for producers and their workers. A significant instrument in this area are ***investments***, usually into infrastructure of a *target actor*, that are further instrumentalized e.g. by means of ***concessional loans***, these are used to provide necessary finances to a *target actor* on favourable conditions such as low interest rate or deferred maturity. Similarly, ***debt relief programmes*** through which a favourable debt restructuring or even forgiveness could be provided fall within this category, as well as ***technological transfer and knowledge sharing*** through which an access to and adoption of new technologies could be facilitated. Also, ***provision of natural resources*** is an important instrument within this category as basically all countries have an objective need for resources that are vital for their economies, e.g. oil and gas.

Per analogiam, a category of **positive political instruments** could also be determined; some examples would include ***diplomacy and dialogue*** which could be used to build trust and understanding between various *actors*, often instrumentalized e.g. in ***high-level political visits*** or in ***political support on multilateral fora***, e.g. the United Nations (UN), in more concrete terms. Further, ***capacity building*** is what provides a *target actor* with

⁶⁹ Notwithstanding the fact that an evaluation of what is positive or negative is a matter of a personal opinion, I dare to evaluate the instruments within this categorization using my own judgment.

support in terms of strengthening its government, political institutions, rule of law or the civil society, and also *election monitoring* which is aimed at promoting and improving free and fairly conducted elections, or *conflict resolution and peacebuilding* which refers to conflict mediation, dialogue facilitation or post-conflict reconstruction.⁷⁰

Also, some **positive information and cultural instruments** could be named, e.g. *educational and cultural cooperation* referring to e.g. financial aid for various programmes, including academic scholarships, and aimed at promoting mutual cultural understanding and fostering education exchange, sometimes even amounting to *cultural diplomacy* (alternatively called *public diplomacy*) if performed in a long-term and structured manner. Furthermore, another example would be *support for media independence* which aims at promoting freedom of expression, or *raising public awareness* regarding e.g. global challenges such as climate change via e.g. public campaigns etc. Moreover, in case of existing religious and/or cultural ties between a *power actor* and a *target actor*, some *power actors* take advantage of them to spread their influence on the *target actor*, building upon some shared religious and/or cultural values. Hence *using religious and/or cultural ties* also serves as an instrument.

Despite often having a rather negative connotation, some **military and security instruments** could also be regarded as **positive**. Examples would include *peacekeeping operations* which are conducted e.g. by the UN with the aim of ensuring and maintaining peace and stability in conflict zones, also *humanitarian aid/assistance* and *disaster relief* which are aimed to be applied in the aftermath of natural disasters, or *joint military trainings and capacity building* referring most frequently to consensual common enhancement of military defence capacities.⁷¹ Also, *police cooperation* is important for target actors and is closely related to this area. This is also closely related to *provision of military aid*, namely e.g. *weapons supplies* to a *target actor* as every country has a vital need to have a sufficient defence arsenal at its disposal.

In terms of **negative economic instruments**, *economic sanctions* are the most obvious example, referring to e.g. punitive instruments such as import embargoes, asset freezes or

⁷⁰ MISHALI-RAM, Meirav. Powerful Actors Make a Difference: Theorizing Power Attributes of Nonstate Actors. Online. *International Journal of Peace Studies*. 2009, Vol. 14, No. 2, pp. 61-66.

⁷¹ PEKSEN, Dursun. Does Foreign Military Intervention Help Human Rights? Online. *Political Research Quarterly*. 2012, Vol. 65, No. 3, p. 558. ISSN 1065-9129.

other financial transactions restrictions. Further examples would include **resource exploitation** meaning unethical extraction of natural or human resources disproportionately benefiting a *power actor* at the expense of a weaker *target actor*, **unfair (uneven) trade agreements** which take advantage of a *target actor*'s weaker position that could be used e.g. for resource extraction and gaining other unequal benefits, or **predatory debt-trapping** which refers to e.g. offering loans with disproportionately low interest rates in exchange for extraction of some other direct or indirect benefits, leading consequently to lowering of the *target actor*'s economic autonomy.

Negative political instruments refer to various means of foreign policy measures and would include e.g. **coercion and threatening** of use of military force or other sorts of violence, including political blackmailing to forcibly enforce changes in policymaking of a *target actor*, **support for undemocratic movements and forces** which is targeted at weakening the domestic democratic system and democratic political forces, even sometimes amounting to a facilitation of a **coup d'état**. Similarly, **propaganda and disinformation** is used to sow discord, discredit the domestic government of a *target actor* and/or promote specific interests of a *power actor*. Last but not least, various forms of **cyberattacks and espionage** are used in order to steal sensitive information (e.g. from the governmental IT systems), disrupt critical infrastructure or disable communication flows. The various **cyberattacks, intelligence activities, espionage, or propaganda and disinformation** fall also within the next category.

Furthermore, **negative information and cultural instruments** actually also constitute a distinct category, even though they partially overlap with the political instruments. **Media manipulation and spreading disinformation, propaganda, media censorship and surveillance** could be named among these. These all are used to restrict the access to information and also suppress the freedom of expression and to manipulate the public opinion. Such courses of action could be regarded as components of **information warfare**, a wider term that describes a *power actor*'s pursuit of gaining and spreading (dis)information in order to get a competitive advantage against other *actors* (both domestic and international) in a *target actor* and its society. This is loosely connected to imposing external cultural values in order to undermine the *target actor*'s cultural identity, i.e. so called **cultural imperialism**, that is also used by some aggressive *power actors*.⁷² As

⁷² GUDOVA, I V. Cultural Imperialism: A Concept and a Phenomenon. Online. *KnE Engineering*. 2018,

already stated above, also *cyberattacks*, *intelligence activities* or *espionage* fall within this category.

Negative military and security instruments are quite an obvious subcategory: they include *military intervention and occupation* via which a *power actor* invades and/or occupies a *target actor* – and with which human rights violations and attacks on civilians are associated. A related phenomena is *proxy war*, i.e. an armed conflict that is indirectly incited and supported (e.g. financially but also via arms supply) by a *power actor* (e.g. by supporting armed groups) in a *target actor*'s territory.⁷³

Let me include the instruments described above into a simple, clear table:

Table No. 1	Instruments of External Actors' Influence – examples	
category	positive	negative
Economic	<i>development cooperation and aid, crisis relief assistance, investments, fair trade agreements, debt relief programmes, concessional loans, technological transfer and knowledge sharing, provision of natural resources</i>	<i>economic sanctions, unfair (uneven) trade agreements, resource exploitation, resource exploitation, predatory debt-trapping</i>
Political	<i>diplomacy and dialogue, political support on multilateral fora, high-level political visits, capacity building, election monitoring, conflict resolution and peacebuilding</i>	<i>coercion and threatening, support for undemocratic movements and forces, propaganda and disinformation, cyberattacks and espionage, coup d'état</i>
Information and Cultural	<i>educational and cultural cooperation, cultural (public)</i>	<i>media manipulation, spreading disinformation, propaganda, media</i>

Vol. 3, No. 8, p. 27. ISSN 2518-6841.

⁷³ TOLSTRUP, Jakob. Studying a negative external actor: Russia's management of stability and instability in the 'Near Abroad'. Online. *Democratization*. 2009, Vol. 16, No. 5, pp. 922-944. ISSN 1351-0347.

	<i>diplomacy, support for media independence, raising public awareness, using religious and/or cultural ties</i>	<i>information warfare, cultural imperialism, cyberattacks, intelligence activities, espionage</i>
Military and Security	<i>peacekeeping operations, humanitarian aid/assistance, disaster relief, joint military trainings and capacity building, provision of military aid, weapons supplies, police cooperation</i>	<i>military intervention and occupation, proxy war</i>

Of course, the categorization presented above is just one way to differentiate between the various categories along the both lines of differentiation – and these lines are relative too. Some categories may blend, especially the *political* and *information and cultural instruments* could be regarded as falling into one category as both areas could be regarded as interlinked by their very nature.

For instance, the *instruments* in the *political* and *information and cultural* categories respectively could also be perceived as falling into both categories as the area of policy onto which they aim is either regarded as one area (e.g. spreading some (dis)information with political connotations) or two distinct areas – for example, spreading information throughout the society is one thing, as it might be led by a motive to influence the public opinion, i.e. it would be regarded as an *information instrument* whereas the same instrument could be used to (directly) influence the meaning of political elites of the *target actor* and, as a result, their political decisions. Also, the *instrument* as such could be materially the same, but it is possible to perceive it as having impact on both general areas of policy, i.e. the *political* and the *information* area. The example in this regard is the *spreading disinformation*.

Also, *economic instruments*, whose use is often driven by political motives, such as *trade agreements* or *technological transfer and knowledge sharing*, could be regarded as a part of economic diplomacy (or economic-scientific diplomacy), which is obviously related to

political diplomacy, i.e. could be also regarded as a *political instrument*.

For the purposes of analysis within this thesis, I will stick to the differentiation as outlined in this chapter.

2.2 Narrowing the Topic and Defining the Research Question

In order to narrow the topic of the thesis down, it would be appropriate to choose on which parameters of the external influence in the Western Balkans to focus. As there are more aspects of external actors' influence, as described above, there are also more ways to advance in the discussion of the topic.

An option is to select more aspects (i.e. at least two or more if appropriate), analyse them briefly and then go along the respective line of each of these aspects in order to find the very aspect that would deserve to be analysed in more detail. One further step would hence be to combine the both aspects and thus arrive onto a selection of particular countries, actors and interests. Let me now look at more of these aspects.

One aspect is the *plurality of the target actors*, i.e. Western Balkan countries that are actually influenced by the external actors. From what was stated above, it is certain that all Western Balkan countries are influenced at least to some degree by the external actors. For example, the EU basically has political influence on all those countries merely due to the fact that all the countries are EU (potential) candidate countries, which goes along with high level of intensity in trade relations between them and the EU as a *power actor*. *Per analogiam*, this notion could very well be valid also for other major external actors.

Another aspect is the *plurality of the power actors*. As listed above, there are at least five major actors apart from the EU (more precisely 4 sovereign states and 1 group of states that could be regarded as one actor) that have their particular interests in the region and actually pursue some, more or less intense, activities seeking to influence the policymaking in the target Western Balkan countries. The question here is which of the *power actors* actually plays the very significant role, i.e. perhaps a more significant role than some other *power actors*, in the region. As stated in the chapter 1.4 already, it is Russia and China that have rather significant influence compared to the other external actors.

One another aspect is the *plurality of interests of the target actors*. Some *target actors*

actually accept the influence of (some) *power actors* willingly and with consent as it helps them to pursue their own goals, e.g. improve their own position in the region but also get necessary natural resources or necessary infrastructure investments etc. Their interests could hence be plural.

Finally, one another aspect is the *plurality of interests of the power actors*. The obvious question that arises here is what kind of interest is actually the one that could be regarded as more significant, i.e. such which could hence e.g. prevail over other interests. This could refer to e.g. one *power actor* that might have primarily business interests in the region, however, simultaneously it could be regarded as having another interest, e.g. in increasing its international political credit (improving its image abroad). Another *power actor* could e.g. have primarily an interest to obstruct integration of the Western Balkans into the Western, i.e. Euro-Atlantic structures.

Of course, the options mentioned in the preceding paragraphs are not exhaustive. Many more aspects could be found in the complex web of *actors*, influences and resulting policymaking. It is certain, for example, that there is also plurality of instruments used by the *power actors* etc. These could have been also used to differentiate more lines of thought within the topic. However, I would refrain from further dilution of the topic and focus on more concrete terms.

The main point in the case of Russia is that its goals in the Western Balkans are political, i.e. driven by motivation of Russia as the *power actor* to keep and expand its political influence, with the primary goals to obstruct and possibly even prevent the integration of the Western Balkan countries into the Euro-Atlantic structures. It is quite obvious that the current state-of-play in the whole region does not favour Russia in this regard very much as most of the Western Balkan countries are already NATO members⁷⁴ and all of them are either already EU members, EU candidate countries or, in the case of Kosovo, an EU potential candidate country. Serbia is, however, a special case in the region: its special relationship with Russia based on historical and religious ties consequently allows for, at least, the endurance of this relationship that makes Serbia to stand out as a Russia's ally in the region. Russia will probably make its best effort to keep this relationship up as much as

⁷⁴ All except for Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Kosovo. See *NATO member countries*. Online. In: NATO. 2024. Available from: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_52044.htm. [Accessed 2024-03-03].

possible and also as long as possible. The utilitarianism could clearly be inferred behind it – Serbia is probably the only real ally of Russia in the region, albeit an ally with some reservations.

On the other hand, the main point in the case of China is that its main priority in the Western Balkans is, at first glance, chiefly economic, i.e. “doing business”, however, a deeper motivation could be found behind it – the effort to improve China’s credit in the eyes of the Western world, chiefly the other (potential) European partners. Therefore, China’s goals are, at least, double-folded. Of course, some more goals could have been found for sure.

Contrary to Russia, China does not seek to obstruct or prevent the accession of the Western Balkan countries to the EU.⁷⁵ This is hence a complete difference in goals – the EU enlargement is said to be politically accepted by China.⁷⁶ It could be inferred that this is due to the geographical and also geopolitical distance between the EU and China, but also due to the fact that China cooperates with the EU a great deal too, obviously perceiving it as a partner to some degree, not (openly) as an enemy. This is a completely different attitude than the Russian one.

In light of what was stated above regarding the both *power actors* and their interests, I would like to choose Russia and China as major external *power actors* in the region whose interests might be competing in certain regards, or not competing, maybe even congruent, in another aspects.

Furthermore, I would choose Serbia as the *target actor* due to the fact that it is considered to be a strategic partner in the region for various other countries – its balancing in geopolitical orientation regarding the various powers with which Serbia manages to sustain long-term relationships, powers that are (very) different in terms of international political credit, geopolitical affiliation or economic setup is, in my opinion, considerable.

⁷⁵ KARASTANOVIĆ, Azra. Serbia: Montenegro between the East and West: Who will prevail in the ‘land of seas and mountains’?. Online. In: *The Strategic Role of External Actors in the Western Balkans*. Brussels: Wilfried Martens Centre, 2020, p. 34. Available from: <https://www.aies.at/download/2021/AIES-Studie-WB.pdf>. [Accessed 2024-03-03].

⁷⁶ ZWEERS, Wouter; SHOPOV, Vladimir; VAN DER PUTTEN, Frans-Paul; PETKOVA, Mirela and LEMSTRA, Maarten. *China and the EU in the Western Balkans: A zero-sum game?* Online, p. 59. In: Clingendael. 2020. Available from: <https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2020-08/china-and-the-eu-in-the-western-balkans.pdf>. [Accessed 2024-03-24].

The research question would hence be: **How do the foreign policy objectives of Russia and China influence the choice of instruments of foreign influence in Serbia?**

In more concrete terms, the foreign policy objectives/goals refer mainly to business goals in the case of China and preventing the integration of Western Balkan countries into the Euro-Atlantic structures in the case of Russia. In other words, the research shall examine whether the difference in the goals of each of these two actors influence the choice of instruments these *power actors* use to exert external influence on the *target actor* (Serbia).

2.3 Research Methodology

This thesis shall be based exclusively upon qualitative research methods. Although some relevant quantitative data on e.g. financial investments of the selected external actors is publicly available, my opinion is that the very nature of external influence is rather hardly measurable “by numbers”; it shall be rather inferred from direct and indirect connections between some foreign policy phenomena etc. Hence the reason for choosing the qualitative research methods over the quantitative ones is the difficulty of choosing the right methodology to analyse quantitative data and come up with a solid conclusion based on them. Simply said, it would be difficult to imagine that measuring the volume of Chinese and Russian investments in Serbia would provide a complex and substantiated answer on the choice of instruments in relation to the *power actors*’ specific interests/goals.

I decided to choose *comparative case study* as the main research method in this thesis. As already described above in the chapter 2.2, the topic has been narrowed to the influence of China and Russia as the most significant external *power actors*, and Serbia as the *target actor*. Therefore, the interests of Russia and China, more particularly their objectives/goals in relation to Serbia, is the *independent variable* for the purpose of this comparative case study research. The choice of instruments by the external actors to exert influence on the target actor, is the *dependent variable*. As stated above, the instruments could be differentiated into several categories.

Although there is some difference in foreign policy “goals” and “interests” by definition, I would disregard the difference between them. Differentiation between these two terms would be quite complicated given the objective of the analysis. Suffice is to say that these two categories are closely related, as “interests” are linked, by their very nature, to the

“goals” in foreign policy context.

In order to measure the *independent variable* (i.e. the goals of China and Russia in Serbia), it will be necessary to examine what values can these variables assume. Such values would be the particular goals that the respective *power actor* desires to achieve in Serbia as the *target actor*. In the case of China, it could be the business interests in the region, and also a goal to increase its international political credit (improving its image abroad), especially in the eyes of the rest of Europe and the Western world. In the case of Russia, it could be the interest to obstruct integration of the Western Balkans into the Euro-Atlantic structures.

In order to distinguish the particular values of the *independent variable*, it will be necessary to examine their substance. After that, given the classification of the particular interests and goals of *power actors* and the instruments associated with them listed above, it will be necessary to determine under which category (*political, economic, information and cultural* or *military and security*) will the particular interest and hence also the particular goal subsumed. For this purpose, the merits of such an instrument will be briefly examined and subsequently hence subsumed under the respective category.

For the purpose of measurement (examination) of the values of the *independent variable*, concrete examples of behaviour of the particular *power actors*, and also concrete courses of action they undertake, will be introduced. In order to evidence the impact of the different goals of the particular *power actors* on their choice of instruments in a specific area, first, the use of a particular instrument shall be documented, and then the reason(s) that lead the particular *power actor* to choose its particular instrument(s) would be analysed if possible. Finally, a synthesising conclusion shall be made.

The values of the *independent variable* will be inferred from the publicly available written sources, both primary and secondary, as they provide a solid and credible knowledge base. More specific discussion of sources follows below.

2.5 Sources

This thesis draws much information from secondary sources, e.g. monographies, articles published in academic and expert journals, articles published in media, policy papers, policy briefs etc. The reason is that plenty of materials dealing with the matter of influence of external actors in the Western Balkans exist, many of them are very elaborated, published in notable academic journals or issued by reputable institutions, and thus credible. Hence they provide a lot of research material that could be referred to in order to substantiate the allegations, assumptions, analysis and conclusions within this thesis. The ideas contained in the secondary sources shall be supplemented by my own analysis.

However, primary sources are also used, mostly official materials of the EU institutions (e.g. official information sheets and press releases by the European Commission) or pieces of legislation (e.g. the sources of primary law of the EU). I chose these primary sources based on thorough online research, and selected the particular sources as needed for the discussion of particular topics. These materials provide valuable source of information, reflecting e.g. the official stances of politicians and institutions. Other primary sources, such as e.g. structured interviews, focus groups, or questionnaire surveys are not used. The reason is that given the topic and the research question, I believe that use of these methods would not bring much input into the research on the top of the primary sources available online and the secondary sources available online as well as in libraries.

3. Case Study: Russia's and China's Influence in Serbia

Unravelling the dynamics of Russia's and China's influence in Serbia is a challenge due to the complexity of the matter. Herewith, I would examine the topic within the research question stated in chapter 2.

The examination of influence of the both *power actors* will be limited in time to the period of approximately the last 20 years. The reason is that the 1990s were a period of very significant changes on the Balkan Peninsula, associated with the dissolution of federal Yugoslavia into the today's independent countries. As a result of the breakup of Yugoslavia, Serbia has become a sole state, initially as a part of a state union (*de facto* confederation) of Serbia and Montenegro, as of 4 February 2003. Later, it became a sole, independent state within the today's borders⁷⁷ as of 5 June 2006.⁷⁸ At about the same time, the process of EU enlargement in relation to Serbia begun as of 1 October 2005 by opening of negotiations for Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA), continued over Serbia's application for EU membership as of 22 December 2009, or granting the candidate status to the country as of 1 March 2012 – and is ongoing with accession negotiations until today.⁷⁹ Thus it suits to set the research of China's and Russia's influence in this time frame as their activities could be hence examined in regard of the period of Serbia's existence as a sole, independent state having its own geopolitical interests in the new geopolitical setting.

The goals and instruments of the both *power actors* described in the subchapters below are not an exhaustive list thereof; they are chosen rather in an exemplary, non-exhaustive manner. My intention is hence to draw examples of instruments used within the particular areas according to the framework introduced in chapter 2.1. There are many sources referring about the influence of both *power actors* in Serbia providing many examples in the respective regards. I am not about to try to confront the different opinions; I would rather like to introduce some essentials and provide my own analysis.

⁷⁷ I disregard the dispute over territorial integrity of Serbia with Kosovo here.

⁷⁸ *Serbia*. Online. In: CIA World Factbook. 2024. Available from: <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/serbia/>. [Accessed 2024-03-10].

⁷⁹ *Serbia: Membership status: candidate country*. Online. In: European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR). 2024. Available from: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/serbia_en. [Accessed 2024-03-10].

3.1 Goals and Instruments of Russia in Serbia

Russia's motivation for its activities in the Western Balkans is a matter of vivid political and academic discussion; however, its activities are most often described as chiefly political. The Russia's goal of preventing the Western Balkan countries from accession to both the EU and the NATO is very often mentioned by the experts.⁸⁰ However, does this primary goal also has some (direct or indirect) influence on the choice of instruments?

First, let me make a few general comments. From the perspective of the Western world, Russia has been perceived as a negative power trying to destabilise the Western and EU's efforts to help the region and integrate it into the EU and Euro-Atlantic structures.⁸¹ As an opposition of Russia towards both processes could be observed on more occasions, some authors are of an opinion that the possible future accession of most of the countries in the region to the EU is not a major issue for Russia; it is rather the (ongoing) NATO enlargement which Russia opposes.⁸² To determine which of these aims is more important to Russia, it would be necessary to look deeper into some historical context. For the purposes of this thesis, I would not examine this partial question in more detail; suffice is to say that both goals are important for Russia.

An obvious sphere of influence in which Russia influences not only Serbia, but also the other *target actors* in the region, is the social and cultural sphere – it is therefore an example of use of a *soft power*. The foundations upon which Russia builds in order to exert influence on Serbia as the *target actor* in the region are undoubtedly the historical Slavic as well as Orthodox-Christian ties between the two countries.⁸³ Apart from this, it is also

⁸⁰ E.g. RUSTEMI, Arlinda; DE WIJK, Rob; DUNLOP, Connor; PEROVSKA, Jovana and PALUSHI, Lirije (ed.). *Geopolitical Influences of External Powers in the Western Balkans*. Online. The Hague: The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2019, pp. 113-116. Available from: https://hcss.nl/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Geopolitical-Influences-of-External-Powers-in-the-Western-Balkans_0.pdf. [Accessed 2024-02-24]. or SUBOTIĆ, Strahinja. Serbia: The Hub for External Actor Involvement. Online. In: *The Strategic Role of External Actors in the Western Balkans*. Brussels: Wilfried Martens Centre, 2020, p. 75. Available from: <https://www.aies.at/download/2021/AIES-Studie-WB.pdf>. [Accessed 2024-03-03].

⁸¹ VULOVIĆ, Marina. *Western Balkan Foreign and Security Ties with External Actors*. Online. In: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik. 2023. Available from: <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2023C08/>. [Accessed 2024-02-14].

⁸² PETRITSCH, Wolfgang and FREUND, Philipp. External actors and European integration in the Western Balkans. Online. *Focus on European Economic Integration*. 2018, Vol. 18, No. Q3, p. 60.

⁸³ VULOVIĆ, Marina. *Western Balkan Foreign and Security Ties with External Actors*. Online. In: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik. 2023. Available from: <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2023C08/>. [Accessed 2024-02-14].

cooperation in economic, technical and energy fields.⁸⁴ It is quite understandable that the focal point of these Russian efforts are the two territorial areas in the region where there is a strong Slavic-Orthodox element: Montenegro, Serbia⁸⁵ and also Republika Srpska, a constituent part of BiH.⁸⁶

Russia uses a wide range of instruments, from e.g. influencing the Serbian politics (*political instruments*), military aid (*military and security instruments*), supply of energy resources (*economic instruments*) to media presence (*information and cultural instruments*).⁸⁷ Let me take a look at the instruments in these particular fields.

3.1.1 Political Influence of Russia in Serbia

Let me now discuss the political influence of Russia in Serbia and some political instruments that Russia uses for this purpose in this area of policy.

First a few overall comments. In terms of the political influence, Russia's effort to exert some (significant) influence was perceived on numerous occasions. In order to do so, Moscow takes advantage of the existing historically-conditioned background that results into a special relationship between Russia and Serbia. This relationship has its roots, among others, in the Slavic and Orthodox-Christian tradition and mutuality arising therefrom.⁸⁸ Serbia is a country with about 85 % population affiliated with Orthodox faith.⁸⁹ Although Russia has only about 15-20 % of its population claiming its affiliation with Orthodox faith, it is still the faith with highest percentage representation in the

⁸⁴ PETRITSCH, Wolfgang and FREUND, Philipp. External actors and European integration in the Western Balkans. Online. *Focus on European Economic Integration*. 2018, Vol. 18, No. Q3, p. 60.

⁸⁵ VULOVIĆ, Marina. *Western Balkan Foreign and Security Ties with External Actors*. Online. In: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik. 2023. Available from: <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2023C08/>. [Accessed 2024-02-14].

⁸⁶ PETRITSCH, Wolfgang and FREUND, Philipp. External actors and European integration in the Western Balkans. Online. *Focus on European Economic Integration*. 2018, Vol. 18, No. Q3, p. 60.

⁸⁷ KARASTANOVIĆ, Azra. Serbia: Montenegro between the East and West: Who will prevail in the 'land of seas and mountains'?. Online. In: *The Strategic Role of External Actors in the Western Balkans*. Brussels: Wilfried Martens Centre, 2020, p. 41. Available from: <https://www.aies.at/download/2021/AIES-Studie-WB.pdf>. [Accessed 2024-03-03].

⁸⁸ MCBRIDE, James. Russia's Influence in the Balkans. Online. In: Council on Foreign Relations. 2023. Available from: <https://www.cfr.org/background/russias-influence-balkans>. [Accessed 2024-03-11].

⁸⁹ *Serbia*. Online. In: CIA World Factbook. 2024. Available from: <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/serbia/>. [Accessed 2024-03-10].

Russian society.⁹⁰ Also, the emphasis of the current post-Soviet Russian regime on the Orthodox-Christian tradition could be found both in its own domestic as well as foreign policy.⁹¹

Let me now take a look at some particular political instruments used by Russia in its exertion of political influence in Serbia.

Firstly, some *positive political instruments* are used by Russia. In this regard, e.g. *diplomacy and dialogue*, and also *conflict resolution and peacebuilding*, are used. The issue of Kosovo is an example of a use of positive political instrument(s) (positive from the perspective of Serbia), meaning a (formal) effort of Russia to facilitate a diplomatic *dialogue* between Serbia and Kosovo.⁹² The most important feature for Serbia on the international scene is that Russia has not recognized Kosovo as an independent sovereign state since its declaration of independence in 2008.⁹³ This is, of course, welcomed by Serbia as it naturally seeks to find political support for its stance on non-recognition of Kosovo independence within the international community. This is even more true since it has become increasingly more apparent that a significant part of the international community would not stand with Serbia in its stance on Kosovo issue.⁹⁴ It is also, in my opinion, the strongest point upon which the political aspect of the special Russia-Serbia relationship, its strength and possibly also the long-term endurance, depends. As this issue is of utmost importance to Serbia,⁹⁵ it is understandable that this Russia's foreign policy stance considerably reinforces the Serbia's allegiance to Russia.

⁹⁰ *Russia*. Online. In: CIA World Factbook. 2024. Available from: <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/russia/>. [Accessed 2024-03-10].

⁹¹ KARASTANOVIĆ, Azra. Serbia: Montenegro between the East and West: Who will prevail in the 'land of seas and mountains'?. Online. In: *The Strategic Role of External Actors in the Western Balkans*. Brussels: Wilfried Martens Centre, 2020, p. 31. Available from: <https://www.aies.at/download/2021/AIES-Studie-WB.pdf>. [Accessed 2024-03-03].

⁹² SUBOTIĆ, Strahinja. Serbia: The Hub for External Actor Involvement. Online. In: *The Strategic Role of External Actors in the Western Balkans*. Brussels: Wilfried Martens Centre, 2020, pp. 75-76. Available from: <https://www.aies.at/download/2021/AIES-Studie-WB.pdf>. [Accessed 2024-03-03].

⁹³ *Which countries recognise Kosovo's statehood?* Online. In: Al-Jazeera. 2023. Available from: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/2/17/mapping-the-countries-that-recognise-kosovo-as-a-state-2>. [Accessed 2024-02-27].

⁹⁴ SUBOTIĆ, Strahinja. Serbia: The Hub for External Actor Involvement. Online. In: *The Strategic Role of External Actors in the Western Balkans*. Brussels: Wilfried Martens Centre, 2020, p. 80. Available from: <https://www.aies.at/download/2021/AIES-Studie-WB.pdf>. [Accessed 2024-03-03].

⁹⁵ PETRITSCH, Wolfgang and FREUND, Philipp. External actors and European integration in the Western Balkans. Online. *Focus on European Economic Integration*. 2018, Vol. 18, No. Q3, p. 61.

The choice of instrument in this regard is understandable: first, there is undoubtedly an objective bilateral common ground for this political stance, i.e. Serbia's interest of having political support for its stance on Kosovo issue (not to recognize nor to politically support Kosovo) and Russia's interest to gain credit in a geopolitically important country in a region that is a part of Europe and is of great importance to both the EU as well as the NATO. In this regard, Moscow's efforts has also been directed against the integration of Serbia into the NATO and the EU.⁹⁶ Such political support on the Kosovo issue is hence logical, being the obvious possibility to instrumentalize it in this line of *diplomacy*.

The support in the Kosovo issue is instrumentalized not only in *political support on multilateral fora* and widely on the international political scene but also, in order to reinforce the meaning of Russia's political support for Serbia, in some *high-level political visits* as e.g. the President Putin's visit to Belgrade that took place in 2019.⁹⁷ The choice of instrument in regard of more of the Russian goals is hence self-evident.

On the other hand, *negative political instruments* are used a great deal as well. Although Russian efforts in Serbia has not amounted into something so serious as e.g. the failed *coup d'état* in Montenegro in 2016 behind which Moscow's involvement was allegedly present,⁹⁸ however, some *coercion and threatening* and *support for undemocratic movements and forces* is present. For example, Russia is believed to be helping to fund and organize some of the Serbian paramilitary groups that often have nationalist background.⁹⁹ Also, Russia allegedly backed extremists who organized violent manifestations in Belgrade in 2020.¹⁰⁰ Given these allegations, some experts believe that Serbian government and public opinion, despite public proclamations, have tendencies, in the recent years, to shift their real allegiance from Russia to other partners, such as China or the EU, following a clear malign line of this Russian influence.¹⁰¹

⁹⁶ MCBRIDE, James. Russia's Influence in the Balkans. Online. In: Council on Foreign Relations. 2023. Available from: <https://www.cfr.org/background/russias-influence-balkans>. [Accessed 2024-03-11].

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ PETRITSCH, Wolfgang and FREUND, Philipp. External actors and European integration in the Western Balkans. Online. *Focus on European Economic Integration*. 2018, Vol. 18, No. Q3, p. 60.

⁹⁹ MCBRIDE, James. Russia's Influence in the Balkans. Online. In: Council on Foreign Relations. 2023. Available from: <https://www.cfr.org/background/russias-influence-balkans>. [Accessed 2024-03-11].

¹⁰⁰ SUBOTIĆ, Strahinja. Serbia: The Hub for External Actor Involvement. Online. In: *The Strategic Role of External Actors in the Western Balkans*. Brussels: Wilfried Martens Centre, 2020, p. 82. Available from: <https://www.aies.at/download/2021/AIES-Studie-WB.pdf>. [Accessed 2024-03-03].

¹⁰¹ Ibid p. 83.

Other political instruments that are, at least partially, connected to those already mentioned, are *propaganda and disinformation*. It is a Russia's evergreen to spread *propaganda and disinformation* as part of its influencing efforts in many countries – and Serbia is no exception. For this purpose, media such as Russian Today Balkan or Sputnik, which are based in Serbia, publish their content in Serbian language, spreading the pro-Kremlin views on the issues of international politics.¹⁰² This instrument hence falls both within the *political* as well as within the *information and cultural instruments* categories. Its purpose is obvious: spreading the information content in the local language helps to increase Russia's credit in Serbia as the *target actor*, seemingly serving (just) the purpose of informing the Serbia's public; however, the bottom lines of this information supply might be interpreted as spreading the Kremlin views on various issues and hence increasing its information influence in the country.

Russia has truly managed to blur the line between its official and unofficial engagement – for the latter one, Russia takes advantage of various *proxies*.¹⁰³ The factor that plays largely into Russia's favour in this regard is the fact that much of the Serbian political representation has some ties to Russia. It is the notoriously known Russia's support in the Kosovo issue, where Russia acts also from its position of the UNSC member, that fuels the Russia's exertion of influence in this area. Serbian top politicians, including President Aleksandar Vučić or former Internal Affairs Minister Aleksander Vulin, serve as the most visible and outspoken supporters of Russia on the political scene, even after the Russian invasion of Ukraine began. They not only engage in *high-level political visits* with Russia, but the latter is also suspected of delivering information on anti-Putin opposition meetings in Belgrade to the Russian authorities. In addition to these top politicians, it is also e.g. the Serbian Radical Party, a far-right extremist political party in Serbia, that is engaged in pro-Russian and anti-NATO rhetoric in the Serbian political discourse,¹⁰⁴ having undoubtedly some non-negligible influence in the Serbian domestic political scene. The radical political

¹⁰² ZWEERS, Wouter; DROST, Niels a HENRY, Baptiste. *Little substance, considerable impact: Russian influence in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro*. Online, p. 39. In: Clingendael. 2023. Available from: <https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2023/little-substance-considerable-impact/>. [Accessed 2024-03-11].

¹⁰³ MCBRIDE, James. Russia's Influence in the Balkans. Online. In: Council on Foreign Relations. 2023. Available from: <https://www.cfr.org/background/russias-influence-balkans>. [Accessed 2024-03-11].

¹⁰⁴ ZWEERS, Wouter; DROST, Niels a HENRY, Baptiste. *Little substance, considerable impact: Russian influence in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro*. Online, pp. 19-20. In: Clingendael. 2023. Available from: <https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2023/little-substance-considerable-impact/>. [Accessed 2024-03-11].

forces do not engage in merely one malign line of political discourse, as they e.g. not only openly oppose the NATO or the EU, but also e.g. call for reintegration of Kosovo into Serbia, calling hence upon another important line in Serbian politics. Therefore, it could be seen that Russia relies upon more political *proxies* in spreading its influence in Serbia and the region, taking advantage of various political lines and linkages to gain credit in the Serbian politics and general public.

Given this, it does not look like that Russia loses its political position in Serbia a great deal. The special Russia-Serbia relationship has endured so far as both sides are still carrying on with their cooperation in the field of political diplomacy. However, in my opinion, the use of *negative political instruments* is potentially encouraging the shift of direction of Serbia more towards China and the EU. The reason is that it is hardly imaginable that a political representation of any state would tolerate such intrusions from any *power actor* in a long-term perspective, if not recompensated adequately – preferably with something which is very valuable and indispensable, such as (indispensable) economic resources. I will show in the next chapter how can such a provision of economic resources can look like. However, it is probable that if the Serbian willingness to tolerate Russian intrusions into Serbia's internal affairs, exercised by means of *negative political instruments*, would decrease, Russia might consider changing the choice of its political instruments, most probably in favour of some *positive political instruments*. However, this is just a speculation.

3.1.2 Economic Influence of Russia in Serbia

As already stated above, Russia does not avoid the use of *economic instruments* in its influencing activities in relation to Serbia and the whole region. A few general comments in this regard to start with: the degree of Russia's economic involvement varied over the course of past decades. While approximately at the turn of the 1990s and 2000s, Russia used to be the largest trading partner of the WB6, as of 2017, the situation was very different as e.g. the import in goods was thirteen times larger from the EU than from Russia. It must be noted, however, that this significant change in trade was largely caused by the Western economic sanctions imposed upon Russia following its invasion into Crimea in 2014. An exception in this regard was Serbia as the trade between Russia and Serbia in 2017 grew by 14 % in nominal terms.¹⁰⁵ This is just another evidence of the

¹⁰⁵ PETRITSCH, Wolfgang and FREUND, Philipp. External actors and European integration in the Western

special relationship between these two countries. A further evidence is the fact that Serbia did not join the sanctions imposed on Russia by the EU and most of the Western countries after Russia's invasion of Crimea.¹⁰⁶

Last but not least, Serbia is also dependent on Russian gas and oil,¹⁰⁷ making it another category in which there is a considerable space for exertion of Russian influence in the economic area – and such influence actually is exerted. This dependence was deepened further by the sale of majority stakes in the originally Serbian state-owned oil and gas industry companies to Russia in 2007-2008.¹⁰⁸ However, the planned South Stream Pipeline which was seen as a chance for Serbia to benefit from transit fees for Russian gas to the rest of Europe, was aborted after the Russian invasion of Crimea in 2014.¹⁰⁹ Here it could be seen that even a dependency on vital energy resources might still not result into limitless submission to Russia's supply.

Given the described economic conditions, especially as far as the energy sector is concerned, the choice of *economic instruments* is quite obvious – it take advantage of objective opportunities that exist due to the given economic conditions. It is hence mainly *provision of natural resources* that plays a vital role here.

However, mainly due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Serbian government seeks energy diversification with the aim to gain independence from the Russian oil and gas supply. Therefore, Serbia seeks e.g. to build oil refineries that would allow for processing of crude oil from different sources. Serbia also made a deal with Azerbaijan for a supply of natural gas.¹¹⁰ Considering this, I believe it will probably be increasingly difficult for Russia to use *economic instruments* to influence Serbia in the (near) future.

Apart from the *provision of natural resources* to Serbia, the most important *economic instrument*, Russia also engages in *development cooperation and aid*. In this regard, some

Balkans. Online. *Focus on European Economic Integration*. 2018, Vol. 18, No. Q3, p. 60.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ MCBRIDE, James. Russia's Influence in the Balkans. Online. In: Council on Foreign Relations. 2023. Available from: <https://www.cfr.org/background/russias-influence-balkans>. [Accessed 2024-03-11].

¹⁰⁸ PETRITSCH, Wolfgang and FREUND, Philipp. External actors and European integration in the Western Balkans. Online. *Focus on European Economic Integration*. 2018, Vol. 18, No. Q3, p. 60.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ MCBRIDE, James. Russia's Influence in the Balkans. Online. In: Council on Foreign Relations. 2023. Available from: <https://www.cfr.org/background/russias-influence-balkans>. [Accessed 2024-03-11].

experts believe that a humanitarian centre in Niš – which is run by Russia – serves, in reality, to a facilitation of Russia's *intelligence and espionage activities* not only in Serbia, but also in the whole region of Western Balkans.¹¹¹ This is hence an example of a use of *economic instruments* to advance other than economic goals of Russia in Serbia.

3.1.3 Information and Cultural Influence of Russia in Serbia

As already mentioned in this chapter, Russia takes advantage of *information and cultural instruments* to advance its political influence in Serbia a great deal.

This sort of Russia's engagement in Serbia could be described as hybrid. It includes e.g. strategic communication used by Russia to spread its own narratives in Serbia as the *target actor*. Russian effort is hence channelled into *propaganda*,¹¹² which is operated through *spreading disinformation*, e.g. through Russia Today Balkan or Sputnik. These media are believed to use their outer appearance as conventional media as a guise for actual *spreading disinformation* and *propaganda*. This could be inferred not only from the content these media outlets publish, which has strong Kremlin propagandist narratives, but also from the fact that these media are actually financed by Russia.¹¹³

For this purpose, similarly as within the area of political influence, Russia takes advantage of *proxies*, i.e. political groups that have sympathy towards Russia.¹¹⁴ Examples of such *proxies* include e.g. sport teams, media, but also religious centres. Again, it is clearly visible that *using religious and/or cultural ties* is taken advantage of by Russia. This is also made easier for Moscow due to the lack of finances and underfunding of media as well as cultural establishments in Serbia in general. The aforementioned Russian-funded media

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² RUSTEMI, Arlinda; DE WIJK, Rob; DUNLOP, Connor; PEROVSKA, Jovana and PALUSHI, Lirije (ed.). *Geopolitical Influences of External Powers in the Western Balkans*. Online. The Hague: The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2019, p. 107. Available from: https://hcss.nl/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Geopolitical-Influences-of-External-Powers-in-the-Western-Balkans_0.pdf. [Accessed 2024-02-24].

¹¹³ ZWEERS, Wouter; DROST, Niels a HENRY, Baptiste. *Little substance, considerable impact: Russian influence in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro*. Online, p. 39. In: Clingendael. 2023. Available from: <https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2023/little-substance-considerable-impact/>. [Accessed 2024-03-11].

¹¹⁴ RUSTEMI, Arlinda; DE WIJK, Rob; DUNLOP, Connor; PEROVSKA, Jovana and PALUSHI, Lirije (ed.). *Geopolitical Influences of External Powers in the Western Balkans*. Online. The Hague: The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2019, p. 107. Available from: https://hcss.nl/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Geopolitical-Influences-of-External-Powers-in-the-Western-Balkans_0.pdf. [Accessed 2024-02-24].

outlets publish their content free of charge, hence available to other Serbian media which are then able to republish the content without additional costs – and thus, by these means, both Russia Today Balkan and Sputnik have wider impact than they would have just via their direct reach to the Serbian general public.¹¹⁵ Another aspect that plays in favour of the large reach of these Russian-backed media outlets and (potential) success of their narratives is, as some authors believe, a relatively low media literacy in Serbia.¹¹⁶ This is just another example how deftly is Moscow able to take advantage of various aspects of the specific setting of a particular sphere of Serbian society – and is hence a part of wider Russia's effort to exercise its influence in Serbia in an unofficial way.¹¹⁷

The above-described Russian activities could also be perceived as amounting into *cultural imperialism*, i.e. imposing external cultural values to undermine the national cultural identity. Although this allegation might be regarded as a little bit exaggerated, one shall not omit that Russia has been believed to impose its values while exerting its influence on other countries – and later try to annex them and/or make them its kin states. Some authors actually are of the opinion that Serbia is, to some (limited) degree, Russia's kin state in the Western Balkans.¹¹⁸

Overall, the media are strong means of *spreading of disinformation and propaganda* which constitute a major *information and cultural instrument* used by Russia in Serbia mostly via *proxies* within the Serbian state and society. It is clear that they represent a strong instrument that is connected to both political as well as information and cultural sphere of Russian influence in Serbia.

¹¹⁵ ZWEERS, Wouter; DROST, Niels a HENRY, Baptiste. *Little substance, considerable impact: Russian influence in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro*. Online, pp. 39-40. In: Clingendael. 2023. Available from: <https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2023/little-substance-considerable-impact/>. [Accessed 2024-03-11].

¹¹⁶ Ibid, p. 40.

¹¹⁷ MCBRIDE, James. *Russia's Influence in the Balkans*. Online. In: Council on Foreign Relations. 2023. Available from: <https://www.cfr.org/background/russias-influence-balkans>. [Accessed 2024-03-11].

¹¹⁸ KARČIĆ, Harun. *Russia's Influence in the Balkans: The Interplay of Religion, Politics, and History*. Online. In: Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs. 2022. Available from: <https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/posts/russia-s-influence-in-the-balkans-the-interplay-of-religion-politics-and-history>. [Accessed 2024-03-12].

3.1.4 Military and Security Influence of Russia in Serbia

As far as the military and security matters are concerned, Serbia is believed to be keeping its “neutral” stance in its foreign policy in a long-term perspective, balancing between its participation in the EU enlargement process (and all the financial and political aid that is connected to it), its cooperation with the NATO (chiefly via its participation in the NATO Partnership for Peace programme) and its cooperation with Russia.¹¹⁹ This “neutral” attitude has manifested itself, among others, in the Serbia’s refusal to join the sanctions imposed on Russia after its invasion of Crimea in 2014. This area of policy provides a lot of potential space for cooperation between the two countries.

Some particular military instruments are used by Russia in this regard, for example, *joint military trainings and capacity building*. This refers, among others, to joint military exercises of Serbia and Russia that have been realised since 2014 as well as to joint trilateral military exercises of Serbia, Russia and Belarus that have been realised since 2015.¹²⁰ These Russian activities received a strong political support by the Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić.¹²¹ This fulfils the idea of consensual common enhancement of military defence capacities, willingly performed by the both actors, despite it could be (and actually is) viewed negatively, mainly by the EU and the NATO.

Russia does not stick, however, just to the *joint military trainings and capacity building*. An actual long-term *military aid* provided by Russia to Serbia takes place, as Russia has been providing *weapons supplies* to Serbia.¹²² Until the outburst of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Serbia had been accepting the *weapons supplies* from Russia willingly and even with an appraisal of its political elites.¹²³ This long-term process has

¹¹⁹ PETRITSCH, Wolfgang and FREUND, Philipp. External actors and European integration in the Western Balkans. Online. *Focus on European Economic Integration*. 2018, Vol. 18, No. Q3, p. 60.

¹²⁰ SUBOTIĆ, Strahinja. Serbia: The Hub for External Actor Involvement. Online. In: *The Strategic Role of External Actors in the Western Balkans*. Brussels: Wilfried Martens Centre, 2020, p. 81. Available from: <https://www.aies.at/download/2021/AIES-Studie-WB.pdf>. [Accessed 2024-03-03].

¹²¹ STOJANOVIC, Dusan. *Serbia praises another arms shipment from Russia*. Online. In: DefenseNews. 2022. Available from: <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2022/01/03/serbia-praises-another-arms-shipment-from-russia/>. [Accessed 2024-03-18].

¹²² MCBRIDE, James. Russia’s Influence in the Balkans. Online. In: Council on Foreign Relations. 2023. Available from: <https://www.cfr.org/background/russias-influence-balkans>. [Accessed 2024-03-11].

¹²³ STOJANOVIC, Dusan. *Serbia praises another arms shipment from Russia*. Online. In: DefenseNews. 2022. Available from: <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2022/01/03/serbia-praises-another-arms-shipment-from-russia/>. [Accessed 2024-03-18].

been ongoing since the Russian invasion, however, as this Russian activity has not been praised by either the EU or the neighbouring countries such as BiH, Kosovo or Montenegro, it is perceived as perhaps one of the strongest destabilizing elements in the region.¹²⁴ For this reason, Serbia actually loses credit in the eyes of the Western world.

Some analysts believe that, as a result, since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Russian military and security involvement in Serbia as well as the whole region of Western Balkans has started to decrease, although it is not insignificant¹²⁵ (yet). An example in this regard could be the recent President Vučić's public statement of Serbia's plan to buy 12 military planes from France and 13 another from another Western country. This has been believed as a sign of turning of Serbia from Russia's long-term military supply towards the Western partners, including the EU ones.¹²⁶ This could mean that Serbia, within its traditional balancing between the West and the East, i.e. between the U.S., the EU on the one side and Russia and China on the other, seems to be actually looking for a more unambiguous direction – a direction that would probably be more legible for the Western partners as the Serbian motivation to join the EU seems to be very genuine in my opinion.

Overall, it is quite clear that Russia uses some *military and security instruments* within the framework of its activities in Serbia, although these are not very significant compared to the instruments in other areas. However, as Russia has no (official) military presence either in Serbia, or in the region of Western Balkans,¹²⁷ one can hence not speak about a use of *military intervention* or *occupation* in Serbia or in the region. In this regard, the preference for rather *positive military and security instruments*, more specifically *joint military trainings and capacity building*,¹²⁸ is rather plausible explanation of Russian activities

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ ZWEERS, Wouter; DROST, Niels a HENRY, Baptiste. *Little substance, considerable impact: Russian influence in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro*. Online, p. 30. In: Clingendael. 2023. Available from: <https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2023/little-substance-considerable-impact/>. [Accessed 2024-03-11].

¹²⁶ VASOVIC, Aleksandar and SEKULARAC, Ivana. *Serbia discusses price of French Rafale jets, in shift from ally Russia*. Online. In: Reuters. 2023. Available from: <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSL8N3812FT/>. [Accessed 2024-03-18].

¹²⁷ ZWEERS, Wouter; DROST, Niels a HENRY, Baptiste. *Little substance, considerable impact: Russian influence in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro*. Online, p. 30. In: Clingendael. 2023. Available from: <https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2023/little-substance-considerable-impact/>. [Accessed 2024-03-11].

¹²⁸ Hybrid warfare is a significant phenomenon in the domain of IR, however, its satisfactory explanation is beyond the scope of this thesis. Suffice would be to say that the term denotes a warfare that is led by the power actor in an alternative, non-linear manner, i.e. hybrid manner, meaning combining both

throughout the past two decades in Serbia.

3.1.5 Overall Assessment of the Influence of Russia in Serbia

The Russia's engagement in Serbia is of hybrid nature led by the main aim to subvert NATO's and EU's position in relation to Serbia, and also to weaken the pro-democratic, pro-EU and generally pro-Western tendencies in the country.¹²⁹ Overall, the region of Western Balkans is a region of rather secondary strategic importance to Russia. However, the historical ties between Russia and some countries in the region, especially Serbia, are indisputable, making the region a sphere of Russia's historic influence.¹³⁰ That is why mostly *political*, and also *information and cultural instruments* of influence are used. Russia uses *high-level political visits* but also *political support on multilateral fora* to instrumentalize its political support to Serbia but also *support for undemocratic movements and forces* to expand its influence. Russia engages in *spreading disinformation and propaganda* while using *religious and/or cultural ties* that exist in relation to Serbia and, in some instances, takes advantage of *proxies* to exert its influence. These instruments are the most important ones for the Russia's ability to exert influence in Serbia.

However, Russia does not avoid taking advantage of objective need of Serbia for oil and gas to use *provision of natural resources* as an economic instrument and engages also in the military and security area of cooperation where it collaborates with Serbia and Belarus to hold *joint military exercises and capacity building* and provision of *military aid* to Serbia, mainly by *weapons supplies* which are much needed by Serbia.

Russia's role in the region could be overall assessed as rather defensive: the political changes in the recent years helped to diminish the Kremlin's influence in the region. Serbia (and Republika Srpska) remain the only focal points where Moscow is realistically able to target its efforts efficiently – and also where any significant Moscow's influence could actually be found. In this regard, however, the recent unleashing of war in Ukraine led by

conventional as well as unconventional means of leading such warfare, while these means (shall) have synergic effect.

¹²⁹ RUSTEMI, Arlinda; DE WIJK, Rob; DUNLOP, Connor; PEROVSKA, Jovana and PALUSHI, Lirije (ed.). *Geopolitical Influences of External Powers in the Western Balkans*. Online. The Hague: The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2019, p. 107. Available from: https://hcss.nl/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Geopolitical-Influences-of-External-Powers-in-the-Western-Balkans_0.pdf. [Accessed 2024-02-24].

¹³⁰ PETRITSCH, Wolfgang and FREUND, Philipp. External actors and European integration in the Western Balkans. Online. *Focus on European Economic Integration*. 2018, Vol. 18, No. Q3, p. 60.

Russia is believed to be able to undermine Russia's position in relation to Serbia in a decisive manner.¹³¹

Some authors also confirm that Russia has been losing importance in Serbia, and that this is, in addition to Russia's decline in its international credit due to the invasion of Ukraine that started in 2022, due to the shift of Serbian policy in favour of China and the U.S.¹³²

3.2 Goals and Instruments of China in Serbia

As described above, Russia has been actively putting its efforts into eroding the process of integration of the Western Balkans into the EU and the NATO. China's role, on the other hand, is quite different – it could be said that its overall efforts are focused rather on the economic sphere and is performed via financial investments into infrastructure or natural resources extraction projects.¹³³

The whole region of Western Balkans, including Serbia, holds strategic significance for any *power actor* due to its geographical location on the verge of Europe and Asia. In the case of China, its geostrategic interests in the Western Balkans could be described as multi-faceted as it could be said that it serves as a gateway for China to Europe.¹³⁴

China has got multiple foreign policy goals in Serbia and the Western Balkans. The Chinese interest is believed to be related not primarily to the countries of the region as such, but rather to the fact of their proximity to the EU. The China's prime interest to get closer to the EU countries, especially the countries of CEE region, is deemed to be obvious by experts.¹³⁵ The reason is that the EU and its Member States provide a lot of potential

¹³¹ MCBRIDE, James. Russia's Influence in the Balkans. Online. In: Council on Foreign Relations. 2023. Available from: <https://www.cfr.org/background/russias-influence-balkans>. [Accessed 2024-03-11].

¹³² SUBOTIĆ, Strahinja. Serbia: The Hub for External Actor Involvement. Online. In: *The Strategic Role of External Actors in the Western Balkans*. Brussels: Wilfried Martens Centre, 2020, p. 75. Available from: <https://www.aies.at/download/2021/AIES-Studie-WB.pdf>. [Accessed 2024-03-03].

¹³³ VULOVIĆ, Marina. *Western Balkan Foreign and Security Ties with External Actors*. Online. In: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik. 2023. Available from: <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2023C08/>. [Accessed 2024-02-14].

¹³⁴ STANICEK, Branislav and TARPOVA, Simona. China's strategic interests in the Western Balkans. Online, p. 1. In: European Parliament. 2022. Available from: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/733558/EPRS_BRI\(2022\)733558_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/733558/EPRS_BRI(2022)733558_EN.pdf). [Accessed 2024-04-09].

¹³⁵ ZWEERS, Wouter; SHOPOV, Vladimir; VAN DER PUTTEN, Frans-Paul; PETKOVA, Mirela and LEMSTRA, Maarten. *China and the EU in the Western Balkans: A zero-sum game?* Online, p. 8. In: Clingendael. 2020. Available from: <https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2020-08/china-and-the-eu-in-the-western-balkans.pdf>. [Accessed 2024-03-24].

political gain for China if it would succeed in improving its relations with them and would potentially reach a more wider access to the European Single Market and to the important marine ports in the European seas (such as North, Black or Adriatic sea).¹³⁶

That is why China takes a lot of initiative to expand to Europe. Examples in this regard could be seen in two major Chinese geopolitical initiatives: the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Cooperation between China and CEE countries (14+1 format).¹³⁷ The former initiative seeks to ensure construction of trade, energy and transport infrastructure, the latter is aimed rather at coordinating the Chinese efforts in the CEE region and the EU. The Western Balkans naturally constitutes, in relation to these initiatives, a geographically important transit route. The Western Balkans provides Chinese business not only with key marine ports but also with an opportunity to develop its economic engagement in this region which is an integral part of Europe and is (most) probably going to become a part of the EU in the future.¹³⁸

The reason for the extensive Chinese involvement with the Western Balkans region could be perceived in its own political and economic interests as these could well be advanced by China in the Western Balkan countries rather than in the EU Member States. As the EU is constrained by many regulations regarding potential Chinese investments, this is not exactly the case of Western Balkan countries which do not have to comply with all the EU regulations (yet). This is hence seen as a suitable space for Chinese involvement which is able to offer many valuable investments and other material and also political help to its Western Balkans partners.

The reason for Serbia being in the centre of Chinese geopolitical focus is its geographical position as transport hub for the rest of the region and consequently also the rest of Europe.¹³⁹ For this purpose, China focuses on development of key infrastructure in Serbia,

¹³⁶ STANICEK, Branislav and TARPOVA, Simona. China's strategic interests in the Western Balkans. Online, p. 3. In: European Parliament. 2022. Available from: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/733558/EPRS_BRI\(2022\)733558_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/733558/EPRS_BRI(2022)733558_EN.pdf). [Accessed 2024-04-09].

¹³⁷ The number of countries participating at this initiative has changed over the recent years – it used to be 17+1 format from 2019 until 2021 and 16+1 format from 2021 until 2022. After the withdrawal of the Baltic states in 2022, it is known as 14+1 format.

¹³⁸ PETRITSCH, Wolfgang and FREUND, Philipp. External actors and European integration in the Western Balkans. Online. *Focus on European Economic Integration*. 2018, Vol. 18, No. Q3, p. 62.

¹³⁹ STANICEK, Branislav and TARPOVA, Simona. China's strategic interests in the Western Balkans. Online, p. 2. In: European Parliament. 2022. Available

in which it even overpassed Russia in the past decade.¹⁴⁰

The view of WB6's integration into the EU is perceived as not that deterrent to China (compared to Russia) as it could actually serve its own geostrategic interests. The main point here is that China can actually perceive it as a positive phenomenon, in view of the connection of Western Balkans to the EU, especially to its Central (and Eastern)¹⁴¹ European members.¹⁴² The reason is that China, as already mentioned, has its own political and economic engagement in both the CEE region as well as in the Western Balkans.

Let me now take a look at the particular areas of Chinese influence and the instruments China uses to advance it.

3.2.1 Political Influence of China in Serbia

In the political domain of influence, China officially emphasizes its interest in fostering bilateral relationship with Serbia that shall be, according to Chinese proclamations, equal and mutually beneficial.¹⁴³ Despite the China's accent on the economic domain of its bilateral relation with Serbia, the political domain plays an important role in the bilateral relation too as Serbia is widely seen as the prime diplomatic partner of China in the region.¹⁴⁴

As already stated earlier, the main political goal of the China is to improve its image in Serbia, where it is most notably present out of all Western Balkan countries,¹⁴⁵ in the

from: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/733558/EPRS_BRI\(2022\)733558_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/733558/EPRS_BRI(2022)733558_EN.pdf). [Accessed 2024-04-09].

¹⁴⁰ ZWEERS, Wouter; SHOPOV, Vladimir; VAN DER PUTTEN, Frans-Paul; PETKOVA, Mirela and LEMSTRA, Maarten. *China and the EU in the Western Balkans: A zero-sum game?* Online, p. 28. In: Clingendael. 2020. Available from: <https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2020-08/china-and-the-eu-in-the-western-balkans.pdf>. [Accessed 2024-03-24].

¹⁴¹ The question of which EU Member States actually fall into the category of "Central" and which rather into "Eastern" Europe is a complicated and delicate one; suffice is to say that all post-Communist EU Member States could fall into one category. The differentiation between them is not important here.

¹⁴² PETRITSCH, Wolfgang and FREUND, Philipp. External actors and European integration in the Western Balkans. Online. *Focus on European Economic Integration*. 2018, Vol. 18, No. Q3, p. 62.

¹⁴³ ZWEERS, Wouter; SHOPOV, Vladimir; VAN DER PUTTEN, Frans-Paul; PETKOVA, Mirela and LEMSTRA, Maarten. *China and the EU in the Western Balkans: A zero-sum game?* Online, p. 17. In: Clingendael. 2020. Available from: <https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2020-08/china-and-the-eu-in-the-western-balkans.pdf>. [Accessed 2024-03-24].

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 18.

¹⁴⁵ HUSKIĆ, Adnan. *A Comparative Overview of the External Actors' Influence in the Western Balkans and Croatia*. Online. In: Prague Security Studies Institute. 2023, p. 6. Available from: https://www.pssi.cz/download/docs/10582_a-comparative-overview-of-the-external-actors-

region of Western Balkans as well as in the eyes of the EU and the Western world. Therefore, some *diplomacy and dialogue* is conducted between the two countries which is most notably further instrumentalized in *high-level political visits*. For this purpose, Chinese president Xi Jinping paid an official visit to Serbia in 2016. The political importance of this visit was high and Serbia remains the only country of the Western Balkan region that hosted an official visit of the China's supreme political leader.¹⁴⁶

On the other hand, China invited the Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić for a bilateral visit in 2019. During this visit, Chinese political leaders, among others, expressed their support for Serbia in the Kosovo issue.¹⁴⁷ In this regard, China has always been supportive of Serbia as it supported the Serbian position on Kosovo already during the Kosovo War in 1998 – 1999 while also standing up against the NATO intervention.¹⁴⁸ This Chinese stance has remained unchanged until today as China remains one of the countries which do not recognize Kosovo, falling hence into the minority of the states in the world as far as the matter of Kosovo independence is concerned.¹⁴⁹ China supports Serbia on the Kosovo question also via its *political support on multilateral fora*, e.g. in the UN, where it has capacity to act as a permanent member of the UNSC a hence support Serbia's opposition to Kosovo independence through its veto power. China actually used its position in the UNSC when it abstained from voting on UNSC Resolution 1244 in 1999 which provided for a solution of the situation in Kosovo by deployment of civilian and military presence in it. China further opposed Kosovo's integration into multilateral structures by e.g. voting against Kosovo's application for membership in the United Nations Educational, Scientific

[influence-in-the-western-balkans-and-croatia.pdf](#). [Accessed 2024-02-14].

¹⁴⁶ ZWEERS, Wouter; SHOPOV, Vladimir; VAN DER PUTTEN, Frans-Paul; PETKOVA, Mirela and LEMSTRA, Maarten. *China and the EU in the Western Balkans: A zero-sum game?* Online, p. 17. In: Clingendael. 2020. Available from: <https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2020-08/china-and-the-eu-in-the-western-balkans.pdf>. [Accessed 2024-03-24].

¹⁴⁷ RUSTEMI, Arlinda; DE WIJK, Rob; DUNLOP, Connor; PEROVSKA, Jovana and PALUSHI, Lirije (ed.). *Geopolitical Influences of External Powers in the Western Balkans*. Online. The Hague: The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2019, p. 99. Available from: https://hcss.nl/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Geopolitical-Influences-of-External-Powers-in-the-Western-Balkans_0.pdf. [Accessed 2024-02-24].

¹⁴⁸ ZWEERS, Wouter; SHOPOV, Vladimir; VAN DER PUTTEN, Frans-Paul; PETKOVA, Mirela and LEMSTRA, Maarten. *China and the EU in the Western Balkans: A zero-sum game?* Online, p. 18. In: Clingendael. 2020. Available from: <https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2020-08/china-and-the-eu-in-the-western-balkans.pdf>. [Accessed 2024-03-24].

¹⁴⁹ *Which countries recognise Kosovo's statehood?* Online. In: Al-Jazeera. 2023. Available from: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/2/17/mapping-the-countries-that-recognise-kosovo-as-a-state-2>. [Accessed 2024-02-27].

and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).¹⁵⁰ Such Chinese stance is understandable in light of its concern about its own territorial integrity and political stability due to the existing problems with potentially separatist regions of Tibet and Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region or the PRC's vehement opposition towards recognition of Taiwan (officially Republic of China – ROC).

Although *diplomacy and dialogue* usually go hand in hand, meaning that *dialogue* is a common instrument of *diplomacy*, China has not engaged in any moderation of a *dialogue* between Serbia and Kosovo on the issue of its independence as the EU does via the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue. Similarly, China has taken rather passive stance on other problematic issues in the region such as the name dispute between Greece and North Macedonia.¹⁵¹

On the other hand, China does not hesitate to use also *negative political instruments*, such as *support for undemocratic movements and forces* to influence Serbian politics. China allegedly engages in supporting some of the Serbian political parties, including the anti-system parties, although it keeps low profile about that as its main publicly visible support goes to the ruling Serbian Progressive Party. China allegedly keeps its efforts to cooperate with more Serbian political parties in order to be able to influence the political decision-making process having connotation with the economic activities of Chinese companies in the country.¹⁵² Still the Serbian Progressive Party remains to be the key partner for party-to-party contacts with the Chinese Communist Party and China which manifests itself also in mutual visits of party delegations between Belgrade and Beijing.¹⁵³ It is thus not only

¹⁵⁰ STANICEK, Branislav and TARPOVA, Simona. China's strategic interests in the Western Balkans. Online, p. 6. In: European Parliament. 2022. Available from: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/733558/EPRS_BRI\(2022\)733558_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/733558/EPRS_BRI(2022)733558_EN.pdf). [Accessed 2024-04-09].

¹⁵¹ ZWEERS, Wouter; SHOPOV, Vladimir; VAN DER PUTTEN, Frans-Paul; PETKOVA, Mirela and LEMSTRA, Maarten. *China and the EU in the Western Balkans: A zero-sum game?* Online, pp. 18-19. In: Clingendael. 2020. Available from: <https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2020-08/china-and-the-eu-in-the-western-balkans.pdf>. [Accessed 2024-03-24].

¹⁵² STANICEK, Branislav and TARPOVA, Simona. China's strategic interests in the Western Balkans. Online, p. 6. In: European Parliament. 2022. Available from: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/733558/EPRS_BRI\(2022\)733558_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/733558/EPRS_BRI(2022)733558_EN.pdf). [Accessed 2024-04-09].

¹⁵³ ZWEERS, Wouter; SHOPOV, Vladimir; VAN DER PUTTEN, Frans-Paul; PETKOVA, Mirela and LEMSTRA, Maarten. *China and the EU in the Western Balkans: A zero-sum game?* Online, p. 29. In: Clingendael. 2020. Available from: <https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2020-08/china-and-the-eu-in-the-western-balkans.pdf>. [Accessed 2024-03-24].

high-level political visits but also political visits on lower, party level that take place and undoubtedly contribute to fostering of the bilateral relations of the both countries – being a *political instrument* of Chinese influence in Serbia too.

On a wider note, President Xi Jinping declared that the Sino-Serbian bilateral relations are a matter of “*strategic partnership and steel friendship*”¹⁵⁴ (which is a strong reference to the largest investment of China in Serbia – the Zelezara Smederevo steel company¹⁵⁵). This statement constitutes a strong and warm political gesture that definitely has an impact on the image of Sino-Serbian relations from the perspective of the international community.

It could also be said that from international political perspective, Serbia has been pressured by the Western countries to turn its back on Russia, chiefly due to the recent Russian invasion of Ukraine. As a country where European values are enshrined in the constitution, the EU accession negotiations open and progressing, it is quite understandable that Serbia is likely to turn away from Russia as an ally (and already is turning away to some extent) and hence more space for China for increasing its influence to the detriment of Russia opens.¹⁵⁶ The sort of influence and the related instruments that are likely to be used shall fall, however, chiefly to different categories than the political one. Let me take a further look in the next subchapters.

3.2.2 Economic Influence of China in Serbia

The economic influence of China in Serbia is related to the fact that Serbia stands in the centre of China’s focus in the region, both for its geographical position as a transport hub as well as for its political affection for big political powers. The Chinese economic endeavours in the country are quite generous – there were big infrastructure investment projects realized such as e.g. Sino-Serbian Friendship Bridge in Belgrade, Kostolac power

¹⁵⁴ HUSKIĆ, Adnan. *A Comparative Overview of the External Actors' Influence in the Western Balkans and Croatia*, p. 6. Online. In: Prague Security Studies Institute. 2023. Available from: https://www.pssi.cz/download//docs/10582_a-comparative-overview-of-the-external-actors-influence-in-the-western-balkans-and-croatia.pdf. [Accessed 2024-02-14].

¹⁵⁵ ZWEERS, Wouter; SHOPOV, Vladimir; VAN DER PUTTEN, Frans-Paul; PETKOVA, Mirela and LEMSTRA, Maarten. *China and the EU in the Western Balkans: A zero-sum game?* Online, p. 28. In: Clingendael. 2020. Available from: <https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2020-08/china-and-the-eu-in-the-western-balkans.pdf>. [Accessed 2024-03-24].

¹⁵⁶ MENSNIKOV, Makar. *Pressured by the West Over Russia, Serbia May Look To China*. Online. In: BalkanInsight. 2022. Available from: <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/04/28/pressured-by-the-west-over-russia-serbia-may-look-to-china/>. [Accessed 2024-03-11].

station or Belgrade-Budapest railway. These investments were without doubt needed and wanted by the countries in the region. Chinese investments are usually performed under conditions favourable for the *target actors* – loans are provided with long maturities, at low interest rate and are not conditioned upon political and/or human rights obligations and limitations.¹⁵⁷

Serbia has been showing a great need for and interest in economic investments into infrastructure from China, spreading over multiple sectors of Serbian national economy.¹⁵⁸ Hence the economic relationship between the two countries could be described as extensive but also durable and diversified. The reason is that China is seen in Serbia as a key economic investor who is very capable of delivering the much-needed investments into energy, natural resources or transport infrastructure.¹⁵⁹ It is hence obvious that quite a wide scope of *economic instruments* is being used by China in this regard. Most of the Chinese economic activities in the country are conducted within the framework of the BRI.¹⁶⁰

As a relatively new actor in the region, China's influence is instrumentalized by means of provision of *concessional loans* while investing into notable infrastructure projects. These investments into important infrastructures projects include, most notably, the acquisition of Zelezara Smederevo steel company, or Serbia Zijin Bor Copper (RTB Bor), both heavy industry facilities that are of utmost importance to Serbian economy. China also engages in upgrading the railway between Belgrade and Niš, a project of particular structural importance to Serbian economy.¹⁶¹

The choice of *economic instruments* by China is obvious at first sight. As the world's third

¹⁵⁷ PETRITSCH, Wolfgang and FREUND, Philipp. External actors and European integration in the Western Balkans. Online. *Focus on European Economic Integration*. 2018, Vol. 18, No. Q3, p. 62.

¹⁵⁸ STANICEK, Branislav and TARPOVA, Simona. China's strategic interests in the Western Balkans. Online, p. 4. In: European Parliament. 2022. Available from: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/733558/EPRS_BRI\(2022\)733558_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/733558/EPRS_BRI(2022)733558_EN.pdf). [Accessed 2024-04-09].

¹⁵⁹ ZWEERS, Wouter; SHOPOV, Vladimir; VAN DER PUTTEN, Frans-Paul; PETKOVA, Mirela and LEMSTRA, Maarten. *China and the EU in the Western Balkans: A zero-sum game?* Online, pp. 27-28. In: Clingendael. 2020. Available from: <https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2020-08/china-and-the-eu-in-the-western-balkans.pdf>. [Accessed 2024-03-24].

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, p. 11.

¹⁶¹ Ibid, p. 28.

largest economy by the GDP,¹⁶² it is understandable that China can take advantage of its financial resources easily – especially when there are hardly historic and/or cultural (e.g. religious) ties to build upon. The use of other *soft power* instruments, such as e.g. *cultural cooperation* via the Confucius Institute (CI) in Belgrade (as well as in other Western Balkans capitals), is rather supplementary to the economic cooperation.

Therefore, *positive economic instruments* are taken advantage of by China for sure, not limited only to *concessional loans* but also, in some instances, they go as far as a provision of *debt relief programmes*. There are opinions that China has been increasing its economic footprint in Serbia, by means of investing into mutual trade, energy projects, security, scientific and technical cooperation, hereby increasing its influence.¹⁶³ In this case, this is also allowed by the objective inability of Russia to provide a sufficient investment support to Serbia of a similar amount as China is.¹⁶⁴ It is obvious that such activities could be perceived as merely business ones, from one point of view. However, certain political background could be inferred from them in my opinion. As China provides, for example, financial loans at concessional rates, sometimes even interest-free, without (many) other conditions, accepting such loans is undoubtedly very advantageous for Serbia. However, there are two sides to each coin. If such an advantage is provided, it would not come without some price to be paid. Via provision of favourable conditions to Serbia and to the Serbian business entities, China can obligate them and ask for support in return, e.g. in important political moves in the area of international policy. Sometimes, this is referred to as the phenomenon of *predatory debt-trapping*.¹⁶⁵ That is why some authors are concerned that these “generous” *investments* are not altruistic in reality – China can easily build upon

¹⁶² If the EU is to be considered a single economy, then it is first, then the U.S. is second and China is third. See *The world's largest economies*. Online. In: World Data. 2024. Available from: <https://www.worlddata.info/largest-economies.php>. [Accessed 2024-03-03].

¹⁶³ HUSKIĆ, Adnan. *A Comparative Overview of the External Actors' Influence in the Western Balkans and Croatia*, p. 6. Online. In: Prague Security Studies Institute. 2023. Available from: https://www.pssi.cz/download//docs/10582_a-comparative-overview-of-the-external-actors-influence-in-the-western-balkans-and-croatia.pdf. [Accessed 2024-02-14].

¹⁶⁴ ZWEERS, Wouter; SHOPOV, Vladimir; VAN DER PUTTEN, Frans-Paul; PETKOVA, Mirela and LEMSTRA, Maarten. *China and the EU in the Western Balkans: A zero-sum game?* Online, p. 28. In: Clingendael. 2020. Available from: <https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2020-08/china-and-the-eu-in-the-western-balkans.pdf>. [Accessed 2024-03-24].

¹⁶⁵ KARASTANOVIĆ, Azra. Serbia: Montenegro between the East and West: Who will prevail in the ‘land of seas and mountains’?. Online. In: *The Strategic Role of External Actors in the Western Balkans*. Brussels: Wilfried Martens Centre, 2020, p. 34. Available from: <https://www.aies.at/download/2021/AIES-Studie-WB.pdf>. [Accessed 2024-03-03].

this “capital” by (albeit tacitly) requiring considerations in order to advance its own interests in the future. This is also without prejudice to the fact that as the investments were predominantly made directly by Chinese companies, employing Chinese workforce, using material imported free of tariffs, and thus the real impact on the Western Balkans economy was not as positive as it would have been if local workforce would have performed the work while using domestic materials.¹⁶⁶

Herewith, it is visible that China uses its *soft power*, chiefly economic means, to actually expand its influence in Serbia as well as in the region of Western Balkans, or, more broadly conceived, even in Europe. It could be supposed that increasing its credit in the eyes of other European and, more generally, Western (potential) partners is of a prime concern to China. However, one shall not omit the fact that the Serbian government mostly overlooks the fact that China ignores environmental concerns and human rights law in its economic activities.¹⁶⁷ As China provides concessional financing and contributes to the much-needed development of Serbian infrastructure, the Serbian government can forget about the (deliberate) failure of China to follow modern environmental protection standards, hereby reducing the expenses associated with such activities. This is quite an advantage playing in favour of objective feasibility of such investments compared to receiving funding under the strict EU rules. Critics are, however, rightfully concerned that the exercise of this “debt-trap diplomacy” could go as far as demanding (or even extracting) strategic concessions by China from Serbia.¹⁶⁸

Furthermore, China diversifies the areas of provision of “assistance” beyond mere economic sphere in a narrow sense. For example, China provided Serbia with some significant help during the COVID-19 pandemic which is an exemplary case of *crisis relief assistance*.¹⁶⁹ Following the outbreak of the pandemic, the EU declared its readiness to

¹⁶⁶ PETRITSCH, Wolfgang and FREUND, Philipp. External actors and European integration in the Western Balkans. Online. *Focus on European Economic Integration*. 2018, Vol. 18, No. Q3, p. 62.

¹⁶⁷ HUSKIĆ, Adnan. *A Comparative Overview of the External Actors' Influence in the Western Balkans and Croatia*, p. 6. Online. In: Prague Security Studies Institute. 2023. Available from: https://www.pssi.cz/download/docs/10582_a-comparative-overview-of-the-external-actors-influence-in-the-western-balkans-and-croatia.pdf. [Accessed 2024-02-14].

¹⁶⁸ KARASTANOVIĆ, Azra. Serbia: Montenegro between the East and West: Who will prevail in the ‘land of seas and mountains’?. Online. In: *The Strategic Role of External Actors in the Western Balkans*. Brussels: Wilfried Martens Centre, 2020, p. 34. Available from: <https://www.aies.at/download/2021/AIES-Studie-WB.pdf>. [Accessed 2024-03-03].

¹⁶⁹ MENSNIKOV, Makar. *Pressured by the West Over Russia, Serbia May Look To China*. Online. In: BalkanInsight. 2022. Available from: <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/04/28/pressured-by-the-west-over-russia-serbia-may-look-to-china/>.

provide large sums of money to Serbia, both for the purpose of an immediate aid for the Serbian public health system as well as for the purpose of the economic recovery after the pandemic.¹⁷⁰ Despite the overall generous and swift support provided by the EU, however, the Serbian government was disappointed by the initial ban on import of medical protective equipment by the EU.¹⁷¹ China, on the other hand, turned out to be ready to help Serbia as needed by providing not only medical protective equipment but also vaccines against COVID-19. Indeed, the pandemic turned out to be a great opportunity for China to engage in economic and also *public diplomacy* (in this case sometimes called “vaccine diplomacy” in narrower sense) in relation to Serbia.¹⁷² As any provision of help during the pandemic could be considered a sort of material help that undoubtedly helps to improve the health of population, this could be considered, from a certain point of view, to be a sort of Chinese “investment” into its relations with Serbia – an “investment” with economic connotations. This is hence an example of a situation where China was able to fill some gap in the needs of Serbia that the EU was not able to fill. However, the EU’s economic help as regards the economic recovery after COVID-19 is believed to be more overarching, i.e. having, apart from direct medical equipment provision, also the dimension of macro-economic support.¹⁷³ It remains to be seen if the EU’s help will be regarded by the Serbian political elites as having a better perspective in a long-term than the China’s assistance in the health matters.

Despite the overall amount of Chinese investments in Serbia is rather small or even negligible compared to the EU ones,¹⁷⁴ and China’s share of total trade with Serbia remains

[russia-serbia-may-look-to-china/](#). [Accessed 2024-03-11].

¹⁷⁰ COVID-19 EU RESPONSE IN SERBIA. Online. In: EU Za Tebe. 2024. Available from: <https://www.euzatebe.rs/en/covid>. [Accessed 2024-03-24].

¹⁷¹ ZWEERS, Wouter; SHOPOV, Vladimir; VAN DER PUTTEN, Frans-Paul; PETKOVA, Mirela and LEMSTRA, Maarten. *China and the EU in the Western Balkans: A zero-sum game?* Online, p. 29. In: Clingendael. 2020. Available from: <https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2020-08/china-and-the-eu-in-the-western-balkans.pdf>. [Accessed 2024-03-24].

¹⁷² STANICEK, Branislav and TARPOVA, Simona. China's strategic interests in the Western Balkans. Online, p. 6. In: European Parliament. 2022. Available from: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/733558/EPRS_BRI\(2022\)733558_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/733558/EPRS_BRI(2022)733558_EN.pdf). [Accessed 2024-04-09].

¹⁷³ ZWEERS, Wouter; SHOPOV, Vladimir; VAN DER PUTTEN, Frans-Paul; PETKOVA, Mirela and LEMSTRA, Maarten. *China and the EU in the Western Balkans: A zero-sum game?* Online, p. 42. In: Clingendael. 2020. Available from: <https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2020-08/china-and-the-eu-in-the-western-balkans.pdf>. [Accessed 2024-03-24].

¹⁷⁴ MENSNIKOV, Makar. *Pressured by the West Over Russia, Serbia May Look To China*. Online. In: BalkanInsight. 2022. Available from: <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/04/28/pressured-by-the-west-over-russia-serbia-may-look-to-china/>. [Accessed 2024-03-11].

under 10 %, ¹⁷⁵ the overall strategic importance of the region for China is big – yet the Chinese efforts, despite already having non-negligible positive economic impact on the region, do not come without serious worries about the genuineness of this economic “help”. The main reason for these concerns is the Chinese willingness to invest into rather controversial projects ¹⁷⁶ or the China’s approach to the financing of infrastructure projects where e.g. the emphasis on the rule of law or environmental issues is absent. However, it is undoubtedly important for Serbia’s economic transition to keep up to high transparency, accountability or market economy standards, or simply good governance, if EU funding shall be received by Serbia. Similarly as stated above regarding the *debt-relief*, receiving the “rule-free” funding from authoritarian countries does not help to increase Serbia’s own credit in the eyes of the EU and the Western world. ¹⁷⁷

Despite the economic investments are generally not in clash with the EU’s political and economic endeavour in the region, some experts are (rightfully) worried about their potential to tie the countries in the region to China, e.g. as far as the “advantageous” loans are concerned as these carry a risk of potential *predatory debt-trapping*. Yet, there is also potential for synergies between EU’s and China’s efforts in the region, ¹⁷⁸ e.g. in terms of possible coordination of both the EU’s and China’s efforts in building infrastructure as this is also a priority within the New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans (which also provides for advantageous long-term loans). ¹⁷⁹ The question (that still remains to be answered) is whether both entities are apt for such synergy.

¹⁷⁵ ZWEERS, Wouter; SHOPOV, Vladimir; VAN DER PUTTEN, Frans-Paul; PETKOVA, Mirela and LEMSTRA, Maarten. *China and the EU in the Western Balkans: A zero-sum game?* Online, p. 12. In: Clingendael. 2020. Available from: <https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2020-08/china-and-the-eu-in-the-western-balkans.pdf>. [Accessed 2024-03-24].

¹⁷⁶ MENSNIKOV, Makar. *Pressured by the West Over Russia, Serbia May Look To China*. Online. In: BalkanInsight. 2022. Available from: <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/04/28/pressured-by-the-west-over-russia-serbia-may-look-to-china/>. [Accessed 2024-03-11].

¹⁷⁷ ZWEERS, Wouter; SHOPOV, Vladimir; VAN DER PUTTEN, Frans-Paul; PETKOVA, Mirela and LEMSTRA, Maarten. *China and the EU in the Western Balkans: A zero-sum game?* Online, p. 43. In: Clingendael. 2020. Available from: <https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2020-08/china-and-the-eu-in-the-western-balkans.pdf>. [Accessed 2024-03-24].

¹⁷⁸ PETRITSCH, Wolfgang and FREUND, Philipp. External actors and European integration in the Western Balkans. Online. *Focus on European Economic Integration*. 2018, Vol. 18, No. Q3, p. 62.

¹⁷⁹ *New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans*. Online. In: European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR). 2024. Available from: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/new-growth-plan-western-balkans_en. [Accessed 2024-02-27].

It is thus chiefly Serbia which is the strategic and preferred partner of China in the region.¹⁸⁰ The rationale behind this probably is that China enjoys quite a great deal of goodwill among the general public in Serbia – hence this Western Balkan country is a relatively safe space for China to expand in various fields.¹⁸¹

Due to the relative openness of Serbia to Chinese activities, most of the bigger Chinese investments were vested in Serbia. Some investments, however, were not focused only on infrastructure or mining projects but also on arms trade.¹⁸² This is quite understandable given the Serbia's non-involvement foreign policy stance which is favourable for China's geopolitical efforts in the region, making space for increasing China's credit both in the region as well as in Europe as a whole.

3.2.3 Information and Cultural Influence of China in Serbia

As the Sino-Serbian relations are described as “comprehensive strategic partnership”, it is quite understandable that such partnership entails some information activities as well as some cultural cooperation between the two countries. Such activities are undoubtedly facilitated via mutual contacts of people from both countries, which are facilitated by the general support of travel and tourism between the two countries via visa liberalisation regime.¹⁸³

Therefore, some *information and cultural instruments* are used. The reason why China does this might be that China generally puts a lot of emphasis on communication towards its population, and this sort of approach hence also applies as the *power actor* in Serbia within the exertion of its activities. The Chinese political representation, which could be

¹⁸⁰ ZWEERS, Wouter; SHOPOV, Vladimir; VAN DER PUTTEN, Frans-Paul; PETKOVA, Mirela and LEMSTRA, Maarten. *China and the EU in the Western Balkans: A zero-sum game?* Online, p. 2. In: Clingendael. 2020. Available from: <https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2020-08/china-and-the-eu-in-the-western-balkans.pdf>. [Accessed 2024-03-24].

¹⁸¹ STANDISH, Reid; CVETKOVIC, Ljudmila a ZIVANOVIC, Maja. *China Deepens Its Balkans Ties Using Serbian Universities*. Online. In: Radio Free Europe. 2021. Available from: <https://www.rferl.org/a/china-balkans-ties-using-serbian-universities/31249503.html>. [Accessed 2024-03-01].

¹⁸² VULOVIĆ, Marina. *Western Balkan Foreign and Security Ties with External Actors*. Online. In: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik. 2023. Available from: <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2023C08/>. [Accessed 2024-02-14].

¹⁸³ ZWEERS, Wouter; SHOPOV, Vladimir; VAN DER PUTTEN, Frans-Paul; PETKOVA, Mirela and LEMSTRA, Maarten. *China and the EU in the Western Balkans: A zero-sum game?* Online, p. 29. In: Clingendael. 2020. Available from: <https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2020-08/china-and-the-eu-in-the-western-balkans.pdf>. [Accessed 2024-03-24].

basically narrowed to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), uses *information warfare* both towards its own citizens as well as towards *target actors*.¹⁸⁴ While China is reported to be slowly but gradually increasing its media activities in Serbia in recent years, the main object of extensive coverage by the pro-government media are the Chinese economic investments. As a result, China is seen as a key partner in the times of need – among others, in the times of COVID-19 pandemic, as already introduced above. In this case, Serbian politicians welcomed the help provided by China with a lot more accolades than the one provided by the EU.¹⁸⁵ This obviously had a significant impact on the public opinion in the country as according to a poll taken in 2022, about 40 % of the Serbian public wrongly considered China to be the largest donor in the country, and only about 18 % thought it was the EU.¹⁸⁶ This shows how the media are able to convey some significant messages to the general public and influence its opinion on selected issues. The indirect influence of China in this regard is hard to unravel, however, the impact of the *media manipulation* (despite this might sound as a rather harsh judgment) could be inferred here. Anyway, the positive reactions of the Serbian government on the help provided by China show that the government obviously aligns itself with the positive public opinion on China, which further reinforces this inference.

It is indeed strategic communication, a term that is on the rise in the modern globalized society in general, that is one of the Chinese priorities also in Serbia, apart from some other Western Balkan countries and other target actors in other parts of the world. The China's approach puts forward so-called *information warfare*, that is targeted against an "adversary",¹⁸⁷ a phenomenon that is typically present in totalitarian societies. Indeed, it

¹⁸⁴ RUSTEMI, Arlinda; DE WIJK, Rob; DUNLOP, Connor; PEROVSKA, Jovana and PALUSHI, Lirije (ed.). *Geopolitical Influences of External Powers in the Western Balkans*. Online. The Hague: The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2019, p. 89. Available from: https://hcss.nl/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Geopolitical-Influences-of-External-Powers-in-the-Western-Balkans_0.pdf. [Accessed 2024-02-24].

¹⁸⁵ ZWEERS, Wouter; SHOPOV, Vladimir; VAN DER PUTTEN, Frans-Paul; PETKOVA, Mirela and LEMSTRA, Maarten. *China and the EU in the Western Balkans: A zero-sum game?* Online, p. 43. In: Clingendael. 2020. Available from: <https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2020-08/china-and-the-eu-in-the-western-balkans.pdf>. [Accessed 2024-03-24].

¹⁸⁶ MENSHIKOV, Makar. *Pressured by the West Over Russia, Serbia May Look To China*. Online. In: BalkanInsight. 2022. Available from: <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/04/28/pressured-by-the-west-over-russia-serbia-may-look-to-china/>. [Accessed 2024-03-11].

¹⁸⁷ RUSTEMI, Arlinda; DE WIJK, Rob; DUNLOP, Connor; PEROVSKA, Jovana and PALUSHI, Lirije (ed.). *Geopolitical Influences of External Powers in the Western Balkans*. Online. The Hague: The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2019, p. 89. Available from: https://hcss.nl/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Geopolitical-Influences-of-External-Powers-in-the-Western-Balkans_0.pdf. [Accessed 2024-02-24].

might not be the adversary (e.g. capitalism, Western powers etc.) apparent at first glance that might be considered as targeted by the *information warfare* performed by China. The intention to fight some adversary might not be apparent in the media coverage of the Chinese investment projects, however, the wider intention to improve the image of China in Serbia might be inferred here, and, perhaps later, the China's intention to spread a positive image of China as an alternative to the EU as the main strategic partner of Serbia, may follow – as may do some other steps to draw a negative image of the EU and the other Western partners in Serbia. Again, it might be said that China keeps its efforts to diversify the information instruments it uses in Serbia to attain various goals – goals that might hardly be unravelled.

In addition to the media activities, some *educational and cultural cooperation* takes place – something that could, in the case of Serbia, even amount to *cultural diplomacy*. This is certainly another example of a *soft power* instrument in China's foreign policy towards Serbia. Probably the most significant example in this regard is the CI that has branches in all Western Balkan countries (except for Kosovo).¹⁸⁸ The CI provides education services in the field of Chinese language tutoring, organises events connected to Chinese culture etc.¹⁸⁹ The CI is, however, often criticized by Western experts to be actually serving for *disinformation spreading* or even to disseminate the *propaganda* of the CCP.¹⁹⁰ Many EU Member States have therefore closed these disreputable institutions down.¹⁹¹

The CI is not the only form of Chinese cultural cooperation engagement. China also does not hesitate to support and fund so-called “friendship associations” which further support

¹⁸⁸ ZWEERS, Wouter; SHOPOV, Vladimir; VAN DER PUTTEN, Frans-Paul; PETKOVA, Mirela and LEMSTRA, Maarten. *China and the EU in the Western Balkans: A zero-sum game?* Online, p. 51. In: Clingendael. 2020. Available from: <https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2020-08/china-and-the-eu-in-the-western-balkans.pdf>. [Accessed 2024-03-24].

¹⁸⁹ STANICEK, Branislav and TARPOVA, Simona. China's strategic interests in the Western Balkans. Online, p. 6. In: European Parliament. 2022. Available from: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/733558/EPRS_BRI\(2022\)733558_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/733558/EPRS_BRI(2022)733558_EN.pdf). [Accessed 2024-04-09].

¹⁹⁰ STANDISH, Reid; CVETKOVIC, Ljudmila a ZIVANOVIC, Maja. *China Deepens Its Balkans Ties Using Serbian Universities*. Online. In: Radio Free Europe. 2021. Available from: <https://www.rferl.org/a/china-balkans-ties-using-serbian-universities/31249503.html>. [Accessed 2024-03-01].

¹⁹¹ VULOVIĆ, Marina. *Western Balkan Foreign and Security Ties with External Actors*. Online. In: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik. 2023. Available from: <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2023C08/>. [Accessed 2024-02-14].

the contact of individuals from both countries, all being part of the BRI framework.¹⁹² Also, some Serbian universities started to cooperate with Chinese universities and companies based upon new formal agreements.¹⁹³ China also supports the tourism of its own citizens to Serbia which is facilitated by the aforementioned visa liberalisation. As a result, the number of Chinese tourists has been growing, making it the second largest group of tourists coming to Serbia in 2019.¹⁹⁴ This course of action is, among others, connected to the aforementioned goal of rising China's credit in the eyes of Serbia and also the other (potential) partners in the Western world. Here it could be perceived that one of the primary Chinese goal, i.e. improving its image in Europe and the Western world, is being fulfilled via various means described above.

3.2.4 Military and Security Influence of China in Serbia

The Chinese activities do not avoid the military and security sphere either, whereas they have been increasing in the last 15 years. It is Serbia that is the very country which is engaged in the most intense and extensive military cooperation with China out of all Western Balkan countries that ranges across more security and military sectors.¹⁹⁵

These activities include, for example, *weapons supplies* or *police cooperation*. For this purpose, China and Serbia concluded a plan on bilateral cooperation which entails both *joint military trainings and capacity building* as well as defence industry cooperation.¹⁹⁶ China e.g. supplied six military cargo planes in 2022 to Serbia,¹⁹⁷ adding to the Serbia's

¹⁹² ZWEERS, Wouter; SHOPOV, Vladimir; VAN DER PUTTEN, Frans-Paul; PETKOVA, Mirela and LEMSTRA, Maarten. *China and the EU in the Western Balkans: A zero-sum game?* Online, p. 51. In: Clingendael. 2020. Available from: <https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2020-08/china-and-the-eu-in-the-western-balkans.pdf>. [Accessed 2024-03-24].

¹⁹³ STANDISH, Reid; CVETKOVIC, Ljudmila a ZIVANOVIC, Maja. *China Deepens Its Balkans Ties Using Serbian Universities*. Online. In: Radio Free Europe. 2021. Available from: <https://www.rferl.org/a/china-balkans-ties-using-serbian-universities/31249503.html>. [Accessed 2024-03-01].

¹⁹⁴ RUSTEMI, Arlinda; DE WIJK, Rob; DUNLOP, Connor; PEROVSKA, Jovana and PALUSHI, Lirije (ed.). *Geopolitical Influences of External Powers in the Western Balkans*. Online. The Hague: The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2019, p. 104. Available from: https://hcss.nl/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Geopolitical-Influences-of-External-Powers-in-the-Western-Balkans_0.pdf. [Accessed 2024-02-24].

¹⁹⁵ ZWEERS, Wouter; SHOPOV, Vladimir; VAN DER PUTTEN, Frans-Paul; PETKOVA, Mirela and LEMSTRA, Maarten. *China and the EU in the Western Balkans: A zero-sum game?* Online, p. 20. In: Clingendael. 2020. Available from: <https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2020-08/china-and-the-eu-in-the-western-balkans.pdf>. [Accessed 2024-03-24].

¹⁹⁶ Ibid, p. 29.

¹⁹⁷ MENSHIKOV, Makar. *Pressured by the West Over Russia, Serbia May Look To China*. Online. In:

effort to expand its air military arsenal. China actually remains to be the largest supplier of weapons to Serbia, surpassing even Russia.¹⁹⁸ In this regard, China goes further than Russia or other, Western providers of *military aid* to Serbia – it e.g. sold unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) to Serbia in 2019. These UAVs could be used for various military and security purposes, e.g. for reconnaissance missions, but also to carry weapons.¹⁹⁹ Here, again, China takes advantage of its ability to construct these military vehicles at low cost to be able to sell them at low cost, enjoying hence a significant competitive advantage in comparison with the Western providers of such vehicles.

Police cooperation, being a significant contribution to the Serbian internal security, takes also place. For example, China and Serbia organised a joint Sino-Serbian police exercise in 2019 which was aimed at counter-terrorism combat. Furthermore, Chinese policemen were deployed to some Serbian cities such as Novi Sad or Smederevo, allegedly to ensure security to both Chinese tourists as well as the Chinese workers employed in the Chinese industrial facilities in the region.²⁰⁰ It is disputable, though, how sincere these allegations are and what hidden agendas are actually behind it.

This all could also be seen as an evidence of Chinese military and security reach to Europe that is increased in connection with other, also increasing, areas of Sino-Serbian cooperation. Here, another example of how China connects different spheres of its engagement, different areas of its influence, together in order to expand its overall influence in Serbia and the region, could be seen.

The Chinese efforts to support Serbia also militarily has been met, though, with criticism coming from both within Serbia as well as from the EU. Despite the President Vučić's defence of Serbia's acquisition of Chinese weapons,²⁰¹ Serbia at about same time entered

BalkanInsight. 2022. Available from: <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/04/28/pressured-by-the-west-over-russia-serbia-may-look-to-china/>. [Accessed 2024-03-11].

¹⁹⁸ NEZIRI, Xhelal. *Arms race in the Balkans: Serbia leads with weapons from China, Russia and Belarus*. Online. In: Support4Partnership. 2024. Available from: <https://support4partnership.org/en/news/arms-race-in-the-balkans-serbia-leads-with-weapons-from-china-russia-and-belarus>. [Accessed 2024-03-18].

¹⁹⁹ ZWEERS, Wouter; SHOPOV, Vladimir; VAN DER PUTTEN, Frans-Paul; PETKOVA, Mirela and LEMSTRA, Maarten. *China and the EU in the Western Balkans: A zero-sum game?* Online, p. 21. In: Clingendael. 2020. Available from: <https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2020-08/china-and-the-eu-in-the-western-balkans.pdf>. [Accessed 2024-03-24].

²⁰⁰ Ibid, p. 20.

²⁰¹ MENSNIKOV, Makar. *Pressured by the West Over Russia, Serbia May Look To China*. Online. In: BalkanInsight. 2022. Available from: <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/04/28/pressured-by-the-west-over-russia-serbia-may-look-to-china/>. [Accessed 2024-03-11].

into negotiations with France and other Western country to acquire 24 new military planes.²⁰² This could hence be considered another sign of Serbia's pulling away from Russia and maybe, with a little exaggeration, also from China and, from certain perspective, approaching to the EU. This was also confirmed by President Vučić in his public statement in 2023.²⁰³ It is hence clearly visible that China is also able and willing to use its economic power, in this case in the security and military area, to influence Serbia. The multi-folded nature of Chinese engagement manifests itself in this case again.

3.2.5 Overall Assessment of the Influence of China in Serbia

Given what was stated above, it is clear that China mainly seeks to take advantage of the quite recently established political and chiefly economic links to Serbia to further expand its influence in this country as a *target actor*, and, more widely, other Western Balkan countries. Via these links, China keeps its efforts to balance its influence against the EU and other Western players in the country and in the region. The area of economic cooperation is clearly the main area in which China targets its engagement – and hence provides Serbia with some much-needed *infrastructure investments* that Serbia needs not only for the purposes of its own economic development as such, but also in order to fulfil the Copenhagen criteria to enter the EU in the future. China does not hesitate to use *concessional loans* for this purpose, although they carry the risk of *predatory debt-trapping* for Serbia. Despite the fact that Chinese investments are not comparable to the EU ones on scale or on the level of institutionalisation of the EU-Serbia political and economic ties, the Chinese economic input remains significant for Serbia. The Serbia's willingness to accept this Chinese engagement plays into China's favour.

China also uses political instruments, such as *political support on multilateral fora* in the matter of Kosovo, and instrumentalize its bilateral political relation with Serbia via *high-level political visits*; however, it also does not hesitate to use *support for undemocratic movements and forces*. Such latent forms of influence are typical for Chinese foreign policy.

²⁰² VASOVIC, Aleksandar. *Serbia considers purchase of Rafale jets from France, president says*. Online. In: Reuters. 2022. Available from: <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/serbia-considers-purchase-rafale-jets-france-president-says-2022-04-11/>. [Accessed 2024-03-18].

²⁰³ VASOVIC, Aleksandar and SEKULARAC, Ivana. *Serbia discusses price of French Rafale jets, in shift from ally Russia*. Online. In: Reuters. 2023. Available from: <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSL8N3812FT/>. [Accessed 2024-03-18].

The sphere of *information and cultural instruments* is also taken advantage of, while China uses *information warfare* and *disinformation spreading* in this regard. Similarly to Russia, China engages in military and security sphere, organising *joint military trainings and capacity building*, supplemented by *police cooperation* and *weapons supplies* that Serbia needs.

One cannot omit, though, that certain factors do not tip the scale much onto the Chinese side. The Serbia's will to join the EU in the future is clear and seems to be hardly surmountable by China. Serbia clearly converges with the EU politically, economically and also on the security notion.

3.3 Comparative Evaluation – Difference in the Choice of Instruments

Let me now refer more about the choice of instruments by the both *power actors* as far as the choice of instruments related to some of the particular goals of the both *power actors* is concerned.

One area in which there is a significant similarity is the area of *political influence*. Both power actors have a shared common goal of keeping and expanding their *political influence* in Serbia (albeit to various degrees in each case) and both *power actors* hence use *diplomacy and dialogue*, that is instrumentalized, among others, by both *power actors* by means of realizing some *high-level political visits* between a particular *power actor* and Serbia. The choice of such instruments is obviously logical, as it signifies a political support for Serbia by both *power actors* on the international political scene. In this narrower area of *political influence* exercised by both *power actors*, any significant impact of the difference in their goals on the choice of instruments could hardly be inferred.

In addition to *diplomacy and dialogue*, both power actors engage in *conflict resolution and peacebuilding*, mainly via its support for Serbia in the Kosovo issue – which is further instrumentalized via *political support on multilateral fora* where both *power actors* take advantage of their position as permanent members of the UNSC. Russia engages in this matter more than China, by e.g. threatening the use its veto power in favour of Serbia against Kosovo. China politically supports Serbia in this regard too, however, the intensity of its engagement is lower than the Russia's one. Still, it could be said that the both *power*

actors use the same *political instrument* for the purposes of advancement of their political goals – which are slightly different in the political area, as was described above. However, a significant impact of the difference in goals on the choice of instruments could hardly be inferred here.

Both Russia and China use *support for undemocratic movements and forces*, as such forces are able to cooperate on exertion of influence of both *power actors*, whereas it is Russia which is able to *use religious and/or cultural ties* for this purpose while also using *proxies* who help to *spread disinformation* and *Kremlin propaganda* in the Serbian society. China generally does not take advantage of *proxies* (or at least this is generally not known by the experts as much as the use of *proxies* by Russia), however, it does not avoid *spreading (dis)information* that favour its view of various policy-related issues, amounting even to what could be called *information warfare*. This is a significant similarity between Russia and China: using rather *soft power* means than hard power means is topical for both *power actors*. Hence *information instruments* play a vital role for the activities of both *power actors* in Serbia, while slight differences are present regarding the choice of particular instruments. However, in this case, some difference in goals (i.e. Russia's goal to spread Kremlin views on selected issues and its another goal to increase its credit within the Serbian politics and society, but not the EU and the Western world, and the China's goal to increase its credit in the eyes of the Serbian society and consequently the EU and the whole Western world) does not have much impact on the choice of the main instrument, i.e. *spreading disinformation* (although the disinformation, of course, differ in its content); however, the different goal of Russia (i.e. its will to prevent the Serbia's EU and NATO accession) certainly has an impact not only on the content of the disinformation (and maybe also intensity, although this is hard to measure and beyond the scope of this thesis) but also has an impact on the choice of a particular instrument – *support for undemocratic movements and forces*. This instrument is quite specific and, among other features, requires more active and complex involvement of the *power actor* than “mere” *spreading disinformation* (where active and complex involvement is also required, but its nature is different). In this case, the difference in goals has (some) impact on the choice of instruments of political influence.

The area of *economic influence* is quite easily to be assessed as the choice of instruments by the both *power actors* is quite obvious. Russia does not have many business interests in

Serbia apart from one very significant area – the natural resources, i.e. oil and gas. Therefore, *supply of natural resources* as an *economic instrument* is quite an obvious choice given the abundance of these natural resources in Russia and their historically widespread sale via energetic networks to many countries in the Russia's vicinity. It is hence, similarly as in the area of *information and cultural influence*, a case when the choice of a particular instrument is a result of some concrete objective circumstances.

China, on the other hand, takes advantage of its objective economic power and financial resources it possesses and uses hence different *economic instruments* that, again, are connected to its objective abilities – *investments, debt relief programmes* or *concessional loans*. As Chinese primary goal in Serbia is to expand the Chinese business and improve its credit in Europe, such *investments* under favourable conditions undoubtedly help it. One can say that the China's goal has some impact on the choice of instrument as the choice is here induced by the objective need of Serbia to receive such investments (e.g. to improve its infrastructure) and the Chinese objective capability to deliver these investments both in terms of workforce, finances, materials etc.

In the sphere of information and cultural instruments, there are also some differences between Russia and China. Both *power actors* use *information warfare* and *disinformation spreading* in this regard. Russia, as opposed to China, uses also various *proxies* to spread its influence.

However, one great difference in the choice of instruments is the *educational and cultural cooperation*. Whereas Russia has a strong historical Slavic-Orthodox connection to Serbia, it *uses religious or cultural ties*, upon which it builds in its long-term relationship with Serbia, and hence also its activities could be perceived as even amounting into *cultural imperialism*. In the case of China, however, the religion is the area with the least potential to build any influence upon as the Chinese state is official atheist and the CCP does not promote religion neither in its domestic policy nor in its foreign policy in any country. Moreover, the traditional Chinese religions such as buddhism or taoism are basically not present in Serbia.²⁰⁴ China therefore rather focuses on other means of *educational and cultural cooperation*, such as running CI in Serbia or propagation of tourism to Serbia

²⁰⁴ RUSTEMI, Arlinda; DE WIJK, Rob; DUNLOP, Connor; PEROVSKA, Jovana and PALUSHI, Lirije (ed.). *Geopolitical Influences of External Powers in the Western Balkans*. Online. The Hague: The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2019, p. 105. Available from: https://hcss.nl/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Geopolitical-Influences-of-External-Powers-in-the-Western-Balkans_0.pdf. [Accessed 2024-02-24].

among its own citizens. This area of influence clearly shows how each of the power actors must make a choice of instruments according to the objective circumstances. Therefore, in this case, it is clearly visible that the goals of both *power actors* (i.e. the Russia's main goal to prevent the Serbia's accession into the EU and the NATO and the China's main goal to increase its credit in the eyes of the EU and the Western world) do not have a very significant influence on the choice of instruments in the area of *information and cultural* influence – it is rather the objective circumstances that have a major impact on the choice of particular instruments in this area.

The area of *military and security instruments* is also an example of an area where certain similarities between the two power actors could be found. Both countries organise *joint military trainings and capacity building* or, as a similar instrument, China uses *police cooperation* and hence both *power actors* could be deemed as pursuing the same particular security goal – helping Serbia in its military and police *capacity building*. However, given the fact that the primary goals of the both *power actors* are different, as described above, then one could say that in this area, the difference in goals does not have an impact on the choice of instruments – both *power actors* use basically the same instruments (*joint military or police trainings*), both more or less for the same goal (improving the security potential of Serbia in order to expand their influence in the country and the region).

Both *power actors* also engage in provision of direct *military aid* to Serbia, namely in *weapons supplies*. Again, both obviously want to improve the security potential of Serbia in order to expand its influence in the country and the region and use the same instrument for this purpose. The use of *weapons supplies* is, again, induced by the objective interest of Serbia for this kind of *military aid*. There is not much difference in the choice of instruments induced by the difference in goals of the both *power actors* that could have been inferred.

Broadly speaking, it must also be noted that often it is difficult to unambiguously distinguish between the *positive* and the *negative instruments*.²⁰⁵ As stated already in chapter 2.1, the question of this distinction relies mostly on the assessment of the nature of the impact on the *target actor*. However, even judging the impact could be rather relative:

²⁰⁵ RUSTEMI, Arlinda; DE WIJK, Rob; DUNLOP, Connor; PEROVSKA, Jovana and PALUSHI, Lirije (ed.). *Geopolitical Influences of External Powers in the Western Balkans*. Online. The Hague: The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2019, p. 93. Available from: https://hcss.nl/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Geopolitical-Influences-of-External-Powers-in-the-Western-Balkans_0.pdf. [Accessed 2024-02-24].

it might be a matter of perspective, e.g. in a shorter term perspective, the influence of the external actor exercised by means of a certain instrument could be regarded as rather falling into the category of *information and cultural* influence whereas in a longer perspective, it could be regarded e.g. as falling into the category of *political* influence.

Conclusion

By having examined the influence of both *power actors* in Serbia, it could be concluded that Serbia is rightfully considered to be a true hub for external actors involvement which is not a surprise as its geopolitical balancing between Beijing, Moscow, Washington and Brussels is well-known. Serbia is hence a key playing ground for competition between the external actors in the region, not only China and Russia.

In the area of political instruments, both actors use *diplomacy and dialogue* to some extent, that is instrumentalized via *high-level political visits* or *political support on multilateral fora*. However, the both *power actors* use the same political instruments for the purposes of advancement of their political goals while a significant impact of the difference in goals on the choice of instruments could hardly be inferred here.

However, in some cases, namely in the area of *economic instruments*, the choice of goals by the power actor can actually influence the choice of instruments, as described above. In the case of China, its goal of expanding its business interests as well as its influence in Serbia has influence on the choice of *investments, debt relief programmes* or *concessional loans* as the main economic instruments. This choice is induced by the objective need of Serbia to receive such investments that connects with the business interests of China. In the case of Russia, its main goal of preventing Serbia's accession to Euro-Atlantic structures has hardly an impact on the choice of economic instruments as the objective need of Serbia for *provision of natural resources* is probably induced by the objective need of Serbia for these resources, not primarily by the Russia's goal as such, although some experts can argue differently.

In the area of *information and cultural instruments*, there is an existing difference in the choice of instruments in the field of *educational and cultural cooperation*, where it is Russia which engages in *using religious and/or cultural ties*, whereas China does not engage in this field due to the lack of potential to build upon existing religious and/or cultural ties. China therefore rather focuses on other means of *educational and cultural cooperation*. This area of influence clearly shows how each of the *power actors* must make a choice of instruments according to the objective circumstances. In this case, it is clearly visible that the goals of both *power actors* do not have a very significant influence on the choice of instruments in the area of *information and cultural* influence – it is rather the objective circumstances that have a major impact on the choice of particular instruments in

this area.

The *military and security instruments* are used by both Russia and China, such as *military trainings and capacity building*; hence both *power actors* could be deemed as pursuing the same particular security goal – helping Serbia in its military and police *capacity building*. However, given the fact that the primary goals of the both *power actors* are different, as described above, the difference in goals does not have an impact on the choice of instruments – both powers use basically the same instruments, both more or less for the same goal (improving the security potential of Serbia in order to expand their influence in the country and the region). Both *power actors* also engage in provision of direct *military aid* to Serbia, namely in *weapons supplies*. The use of *weapons supplies* is, again, induced by the objective interest of Serbia for this kind of *military aid*. There is not much difference in the choice of instruments induced by the difference in goals of the both *power actors* that could have been inferred.

The key finding of this case study is that in most cases, the choice of goals by each of the both *power actors*, Russia and China, does not have any (significant) influence on the choice of instrument of influence in particular areas – such choice is rather driven by objective circumstances, i.e. the respective *power actor* chooses the particular instrument rather due to its objective availability (and hence suitability for exertion of influence) than due to the goal that drives that very *power actor* to exert an influence by means of such instrument. If the difference in goals has any impact on the choice of instruments by any of the *power actors*, it is thus mainly given by the particularity of such goal – i.e. when the goal is specific enough, then the choice of instrument is also more likely to be specific.

Anyway, to put a broader perspective on the case study, it must be noted that the research has been limited to reading some publicly available sources, both primary and secondary. As the primary sources usually do not include much of background information and deeper analysis of the context of the influence of external actors, the secondary sources were used to get data and shed light on the necessary context of the external actors' influence. However, it must be born in mind that the knowledge base accessible for the authors of the secondary sources is limited for sure. The actual influence exerted by external actors is hidden and the inferences contained in some academic articles reflect opinions of their authors.

The answers provided by the case study shall hence be taken with certain reservations. The scope of research is limited also with the scope of this thesis which has mainly introduced main characteristics of the issue and discussed the research question in an appropriate manner and to some reasonable extent. The discussion introduced above is thus not exhaustive.

Certainly, the research question stated in this thesis is not the only one around which the topic can revolve. Within the Russia's and China's influence in Serbia, more research questions could come into consideration. For example, the impact of the influencing activities on a specific sphere of policymaking of Serbia could be discussed, e.g. the influence of these two *power actors* on the process of ongoing accession negotiations with EU. The goal of Serbia to become an EU Member State is clear, however, its geopolitical balancing between various world's powers provides a considerable space for discussion on how the external actors' influence the process of EU enlargement to Serbia.

Apart from Russia and China as the power actors, the goals of different *power actors* could be determined as independent variable within a case study, e.g. those of Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Albeit their interests and hence also goals are more specific, and rather based on religious ties, it could be discussed how they choose instruments to exert their influence. Also, e.g. the instruments within the information and cultural sphere of influence could be elaborated in more detail in such a case study.

Anyway, the case study introduced within this thesis has clearly shown that the matter of differentiation between the interests/goals of *power actors* and the instruments they choose for this purposes is not easily inferable. As I deeply believe that Serbia would remain on its path to its integration into the EU and, perhaps, also the NATO in the future, I believe that the influence of Russia and China or other external actors would not be strong enough to foil the ultimate goal of Serbia to join the EU. I believe that joining the EU would benefit both Serbia, the Western Balkans region, the EU and the entire Europe.

Summary

V této diplomové práci jsem se zaměřil nejprve na analýzu vlivu vnějších aktérů na třetí země (aktéry) v obecné rovině. V rámci první kapitoly jsem představil diskurz o tomto vlivu a poté konkrétní vliv vnějších aktérů na západním Balkáně.

Ve druhé kapitole jsem popsal metodologii práce a představil svůj vlastní teoretický rámec, který se skládá z mé vlastní analýzy vlivu vnějších aktérů a rozdělení tohoto vlivu do jednotlivých kategorií. Dále jsem také zúžil téma práce a představil výzkumnou otázku a načrtl zdůvodnění diferenciacních linií, podle kterých jsem téma práce zúžil.

Ve třetí kapitole jsem představil samotnou případovou studii, kde jsem představil různé cíle/zájmy Ruska a Číny, tzn. mocenských aktérů, v Srbsku, cílovém aktérovi. Analyzoval jsem cíle obou mocenských aktérů v různých oblastech politiky a propojil je s nástroji, které tito mocnější aktéři používají. Poté jsem provedl komparativní analýzu rozdílů v nástrojích, kde jsem vytyčil hranice mezi vlivem rozdílů v cílech na volbu nástrojů a představil některé případy, kdy volba cílů má vliv na volbu nástrojů v jednotlivých oblastech politiky a kdy taková volba cílů nemá vliv na volbu nástrojů.

Klíčovým zjištěním případové studie provedené v rámci této práce je, že ve většině případů nemá volba cílů každého z obou mocenských aktérů žádný (významný) vliv na volbu nástroje vlivu v dané oblasti – tzn. že tato volba ze strany mocenského aktéra se řídí spíše objektivními okolnostmi, tj. mocenský aktér volí konkrétní nástroj spíše kvůli jeho objektivní dostupnosti než kvůli cíli, který by vedl právě tohoto mocenského aktéra k tomu, aby prostřednictvím tohoto nástroje uplatňoval svůj vliv.

V některých případech, zejména v oblasti informačního a kulturního vlivu nebo ekonomického vlivu, však volba cílů mocenského aktéra skutečně může do určité míry ovlivňovat volbu nástrojů. Je to dáno především konkrétností (jedinečností) takového cíle – tj. je-li cíl dostatečně konkrétní (jedinečný), pak je pravděpodobnější, že i volba nástroje bude konkrétní.

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