

# **RUSSIA'S RESURGENCE IN THE WESTERN BALKANS: EFFECTS ON THE POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT OF THE EU NEGOTIATIONS OF SERBIA AND BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA**

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## ABSTRACT

Pressing issues such as the global financial crisis of 2007, the European financial crisis, Brexit, the rise of the far right, and the large influx of refugees into Europe have shifted the EU's focus away from the integration of the Western Balkans into the bloc. At the same time, Russia has been trying to reassert its position in the international arena as a global actor and to present the Western Balkans states with an alternative to the Euro-Atlantic model of liberal democracy. Wanting to assess the influence of Russia's increasing involvement in the region on the political and social context of the EU negotiations of the Western Balkans states, this research looks at growing cooperation between Russia and Serbia and Russia and the Republic of Srpska, one of the two entities of Bosnia and Herzegovina. This thesis, unlike the majority of contemporary literature on the EU enlargement and on Russia's influence in the Western Balkans, addresses the processes of political, social, and cultural convergence of Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina towards the EU with a consideration of the Russian Federation as an external factor. By assessing political developments in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, changes in the public attitudes of citizens towards the EU and Russia, and the EU's changing position on the progress the two countries have made in their EU negotiations process, this thesis argues that Serbia's and the Republic of Srpska's intensifying cooperation with Russia has influenced a slowing down of the process of political, social, and cultural convergence of the two countries towards the EU. This slowdown could be expected to influence the EU negotiations of the two countries.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction and Literature Review

The Western Balkans, a term created by the European Union bureaucrats in the early 2000s, refers to the countries in Southeastern Europe that were not the members of the European Union at the time but could aspire to join the union in the future. Originally, the Western Balkans included seven countries - Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Croatia - since then, Croatia has joined the union.<sup>1</sup> In the 1990s, the region experienced political conflicts that had negative political and economic consequences that continue to be felt to the date.<sup>2</sup> In 2003, during the European Union - Western Balkans Summit in Thessaloniki, the Western Balkans countries were offered the prospect of eventually becoming member states of the European Union.<sup>3</sup> The prospect of the EU integration facilitated the economic revival and motivated economic and political reforms across the region. At that time, all of the Western Balkans countries showed willingness and determination for further political, cultural and social convergence towards the EU.

However, the global financial crisis which started in 2007 followed by the European financial crisis, slowed down the economic development in Europe and shifted the EU's focus away from the further expansion and towards the internal issues. Recently, additional issues have put the EU enlargement process of the Western Balkans on the back burner including Brexit, the rise of the far right, large influx of refugees and terrorism. Simultaneously, the number of internal issues in the countries of the Western Balkans including slowdown in the economic growth, territorial disputes, corruption, increasing tensions and ethnic outbursts, has

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<sup>1</sup> Marek Dabrowski and Yana Myachenkova, *The Western Balkans on the road to the European Union* (Bruegel, 2018). [http://bruegel.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/PC-04\\_2018.pdf](http://bruegel.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/PC-04_2018.pdf) (accessed May 08, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Krsto Lazarevic, *Western Balkans have a place in the European Union* (Deutsche Welle, 2018). <http://www.dw.com/en/opinion-western-balkans-have-a-place-in-the-european-union/a-42531422> (accessed May 08, 2018).

been increasing. Even though all of the countries in the Western Balkans remain, at least rhetorically, determined to stay on the path of the EU integration, the shift of the EU's attention away from the region together with the pressing internal issues of the each of the country in the Western Balkans, created the opportunity structure for third parties to expand their sphere of influence in the region and propose an alternative to the countries which for so long saw the EU path as their only direction. Thus far, the most involved non-EU actor in the region has been the Russian Federation.

In the past decade, Russia has been trying to reaffirm its position in the international arena as a global power and to present itself as an alternative to the Euro-Atlantic model of liberal democracy. The Western Balkans remains important for Russia firstly because of its geostrategic position as a territory of ongoing rivalry between Russia and other global and regional actors like the EU and the United States, and secondly, because of its key role as a major transportation and infrastructure hub used for supplying gas and oil to European countries and strengthening Russia's dominant position in the European energy sector.<sup>4</sup> Russia's activities in the region have been mainly focused on Serbia and the Serbian minorities living in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Montenegro. In other parts of the region, its influence has been significantly weaker primarily because there are no large economic dependencies on Russia and also because there is no much of a shared history and tradition between the populations which are often emphasized both by Russia and Serbians/Serbs as a source of good relations.

Russia has utilized a series of instruments in order to expand its sphere of influence in the Western Balkans. These tools include: soft power through different cultural, religious and media campaigns and creation of organizations, political pressure and economic leverage incorporating control and acquisition of critical energy and infrastructure assets and financing

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<sup>4</sup> Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation (February 18, 2013).

of political parties and the media.<sup>5</sup> As analyzed by Dimitar Bechev, these tools are underpinned by an intensive Kremlin narrative designed to counter Euro-Atlantic values in the region and propose an alternative to the Euro-Atlantic models of liberal democracy and a free market economy.<sup>6</sup> In the case of Serbia, this utilization is seen most evidently and it is ranging from growing dependence of Serbia on Russia's energy supplies to the support of Serbia's position on Kosovo Independence in the United Nations forum and support of Serbian minorities in the neighboring countries which have shown to be the most vulnerable to foreign (Russian) influence. While Russia's activities have been mostly focused on Belgrade as a primary mean of influencing the situation in the region, Russia has also been developing relations with Serbian minorities in order to have direct influence on the developments in the other countries of the region rather than using Belgrade as a bridge.

Earlier studies on the topic have focused on either understanding the EU's role and the EU integration process of one or more countries of the Western Balkans or understanding Russia's role and interests in the region. Taking into account reforms which must be undertaken on the path towards the EU, the existing literature mostly agrees that the EU integration is the most practical and efficient solution for the countries of the Western Balkans. Vesnic-Alujevic argues that the path towards the EU is the best way to resolve tensions and unresolved issues between the countries in the region, but also to facilitate individual development.<sup>7</sup> Abramovitz and Hurlburt use the same argument and contend that the EU path is the most effective way in developing the long-term stability in the region that can grow out of democracy and pluralism.<sup>8</sup> In his article *A Second Chance in the Balkans*, Bildt argues that the EU integration is the only viable opportunity for peace and stability in the Balkans and that not having the EU

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<sup>5</sup> Dimitar Bechev, *Rival Power: Russia in Southeast Europe*, (Yale: Yale Univ. Press, 2017).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Lucia Vesnic-Alujevic, *European Integration of Western Balkans From Reconciliation To European Future* (Centre for European Studies, 2012), 40.

<sup>8</sup> Morton Abramowitz and Heather Hurlburt, *Can the EU Hack the Balkans? A Proving Ground for Brussels* (Foreign Affairs, 2002).

membership as the Western Balkans countries' ultimate foreign policy goal could only lead to further instability and balkanization.<sup>9</sup>

With regards to the EU's approach to the Western Balkans, the scholars seem to have differing perspectives. Bieber suggests that the EU needs to rethink its approach to the region because the conditionality approach has shown to be largely ineffective in regards to state building in the Western Balkans.<sup>10</sup> What he recommends is combining regionalization approach with the individual approach in order to enable every state to make progress in its own pace but to, at the same time, ensure peace and stability of the region. Renner and Trauner share Bieber's perspective and also add that the EU should provide clear and tangible short-term incentives for convergence of Western Balkans states with the EU rules, norms and values. Sectoral integration, rather than the full EU membership, is what would motivate the states in the region to move closer to the EU with respect to rules, norms and European values.<sup>11</sup>

Most of the scholars seem to agree that the EU should pursue more assertive strategy in the region and share a concern that if the EU's interest in the region decreases, the Western Balkans would be exposed to third parties which would eventually lead to more division and instability between and inside of the countries. Galeotti suggests that the EU needs to, as soon as possible, recognize the severity of these challenges and needs to "get serious in the Balkans", which means both greater attention and greater rigour.<sup>12</sup> Conversely, Dabrowski and Myachenkova argue that the EU's more assertive strategy and political will on the part of the EU governing bodies would not be enough for moving the countries' EU negotiations processes forward.<sup>13</sup> They claim that it is necessary for candidate and potential candidate countries to

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<sup>9</sup> Carl Bildt, *A Second Chance in the Balkans* (Foreign Affairs, 2001).

<sup>10</sup> Florian Bieber, *Building Impossible States? State-Building Strategies and EU Membership in the Western Balkans* (Europe-Asia Studies, 2011).

<sup>11</sup> Stephan Renner and Florian Trauner, *Creeping EU Membership in South-east Europe: The Dynamics of EU Rule Transfer to the Western Balkans* (Journal of European Integration, 2009).

<sup>12</sup> Mark Galeotti, *Do the Western Balkans Face a Coming Russian Storm?* (European Council on Foreign Relations, 2018).

<sup>13</sup> Dabrowski and Myachenkova, *The Western Balkans* (2018).

intensify their reform homework as well, which would include addressing the most difficult issues of conflict legacies, human rights, guarantees for ethnic, religious and other minorities, respect for the rule of law, full normalization of relations with neighbors, the fight against corruption, state capture and organized crime, and the modernization of the public administration and judiciary.<sup>14</sup> If there is no domestic political will, claim Dabrowski and Myachenkova, all of the EU's efforts would be in vain. Reljic disagrees with them and argues that it was exactly the EU's lack of attention in the region which caused the decrease in domestic efforts to implement the necessary reforms and move the integration process forward.<sup>15</sup> If the EU's interest in the region continues to decrease and if it does not pursue more assertive strategy, Reljic argues, the Western Balkans states might remain outside of the EU indefinitely.<sup>16</sup> Fraenkel explores a possible scenario of the countries remaining outside of the block indeterminately. In that case, he argues, the countries in the region would end up trapped in downward economic and political spiral which would lead them to seek alternative to the EU in other powerful actors in the region, namely the Russian Federation and Turkey.<sup>17</sup>

There is considerably less scholarly literature on the Russia's involvement in the Western Balkans than there is on the topic of EU enlargement into the region. Scholars mostly agree that Russia's activities in the region, including interfering in the domestic affairs of some of the countries, have reinforced the notion that Russia has returned to the Balkans and that it only aims on gaining more influence in the years to come. Bozic-Miljkovic explores dependency, mainly economic but tackles other kinds as well, of the Western Balkans states on the Russian Federation and suggests that some of the states might be turning even more to

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 21

<sup>15</sup> Dusan Reljic, *The Russian Federation and the Western Balkans* (Berlin: German Institute for International Relations and Security, 2009) <https://www.isac-fund.org/download/Rusija%20i%20zapadni%20balkan.pdf> (accessed May 10, 2018).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Eran Fraenkel, *The EU and the Western Balkans: Do They Share a Future?* (Barcelona Center for International Affairs, 2016).

Russia in the future because there is no conditionality in this relationship that differs greatly from their own interests which is the case between the EU and some of the negotiating countries.<sup>18</sup> Milic goes even further to suggest that recent, as she calls it, "Putinization" of some parts of the Western Balkans region (primarily Serbia and the Republic of Srpska) aims at diverting the countries from their Europeanization process but also to exercise its renewed strength and show the West that it needs to be regarded as an equal in the international arena.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Galeotti refers to the Western Balkans as a battlefield in the "political war" between Russia and the European Union and argues that Russia's aim is not to assert its authority in the region but rather to magnify existing tensions.<sup>20</sup>

Most of the EU studies literature devoted to the Western Balkans enlargement does not deal with third parties competing with the EU for the sphere of influence in the Western Balkans. At the same time, the contemporary literature on the Russia's influence in the Western Balkans has so far not looked systematically at how this influence shapes the EU negotiations process of the Western Balkans countries. In the intersection of these two literatures, lies the gap that is yet to be addressed with a comprehensive study which would analyze the Western Balkans as an arena where the interests of the Russian Federation and the EU collide. With that in mind, this thesis aims to examine the impact of Russia's renewed involvement in the Western Balkans on the political, cultural and social context of the EU enlargement negotiations of the countries in the region. It is particularly focused on the influence of Russia's involvement in Serbia, since Serbia has developed closest links with Russia over the past decade, and in the Republic of Srpska entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina, since the largest Serbian minority lives in this entity. The question this study sets to answer is: "How does Russia's strengthening of bilateral cooperation with Serbia and the Republic of Srpska

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<sup>18</sup> Ivana Bozic-Miljkovic, *Foreign Trade Between Russia and the Balkans in the Context of Global Geostrategic Relations* (Socio Studies, 2014).

<sup>19</sup> Jelena Milic, *The Russification of Serbia* (New Eastern Europe Magazine, 2014).

<sup>20</sup> Galeotti, *Do the Western Balkans Face a Coming Russian Storm?* (2018).

influence the process of political, social and cultural convergence of Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina towards the EU?" This research could be a starting point for undertaking a more comprehensive research on the influence of Russia's involvement in the region on the EU negotiations process as a whole.

Having defined the existing literature, the research questions and goals, the roadmap to the rest of the study is the following. The second chapter will explore the recent shift in the Russian foreign policy and the ways in which Russia has intensified its involvement in Serbia and the Republic of Srpska by looking at economic and political relations and public diplomacy. The third chapter will set out to answer the research question by looking at the political developments in Serbia and the Republic of Srpska to see how Russia's intensified involvement influenced political decision making of Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina with regard to the EU. Additionally, it will explore the change in public attitudes of citizens in the two countries towards the EU and Russia in order to show how strengthening of relations with Russia influenced the shift in public preferences. Moreover, it will examine the European Commission's Progress Reports on Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina to see how the Commission's perspective on the two countries' EU paths has changed in the past decade. The final chapter will engage in the discussion on the possible influence of the slowdown of the process of political, social and cultural convergence of Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina towards the EU on the integration process of the two countries.

## Chapter 2: Russian Policy and Strategy in Serbia and the Republic of Srpska

The intensification of Russia's activities towards the Western Balkans dates back to 2008. Russia was becoming more determined to regain influence in the region which it lost after the fall of the USSR due to its weakness. The two critical events in this period were Kosovo declaring independence from Serbia (and Russia supporting Serbia's position in this respect) and also Russia gaining control over the Serbian fuel company Naftna Industrija Srbije (NIS). Simultaneously, there was strengthening of the Russian economy which enabled Russia to pursue more assertive foreign policy in the Western Balkans and other regions that are not in its immediate neighborhood. While Russia's choice of tools for expanding the sphere of influence has much more limitations than the EU's, it seems like Russia's actions are becoming ever more effective in the recent period in proposing the alternative to the West in the perceptions of Serbians in the region. This is due to several reasons. First, Russia's narrative and policies have landed on fertile ground in the region because of the unstable climate and high levels of systemic corruption combined with weak institutions of rule of law, media propaganda and different geopolitical pressures from various regional and global actors. Second, Russia's policy is becoming progressively effective due to the EU's states lessening interest and support for the European integration of the Western Balkans. Moreover, Russia's soft power measures have shown highly successful in winning popular support in the countries of the region.

After the Western Balkans' turn to the West in 2001, it seemed like the Euro-Atlantic integration is the only possible direction for the region. However, in the post-2008 period, with the continuing intensification of Russia's activities in the region, domestic political officials have an alternative and see an opportunity to work both sides of the fence. Western Europe is

no longer perceived as an only guide or a model for the Western Balkans.<sup>21</sup> This chapter seeks to explore the tools and strategy Russia has used to retain its influence in Serbia and the Republic of Srpska in the post-2008 period. Firstly, a shift in the Russian Federation's foreign policy will be looked at. Next, the chapter will explore the ways in which Russia has intensified its involvement in Serbia. Finally, Russia's intensification of relations with the Republic of Srpska (and therefore Bosnia and Herzegovina) will be investigated. This will help us set the ground for the following chapter which looks at the manifestations of the Russia's involvement in the two countries.

## 2.1 A Shift in Russia's Foreign Policy

Russia's foreign policy is based on a consensus which emerged from the collapse of the USSR and was further developed in the early 2000s.<sup>22</sup> While the policy shift began even before the dissolution of the Soviet Union, it was not until the year of 2000, when Vladimir Putin adopted a new Foreign Policy Concept, that it was crystallized. The Concept describes Russia as an active participant in the formation of the new world order. It denounces a growing trend towards the establishment of a unipolar structure of the world with the economic and power domination of the United States and weakening of the UN Security Council in favor of unilateral action.<sup>23</sup> It emphasizes Russia's determination to reestablish itself as a great power and a goal to achieve a multi-polar system of international relations that reflects the diversity of the modern world with great variety of interests.

According to Leon Aron, there are three geopolitical imperatives that have modeled

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<sup>21</sup> Enza R. Petrillo, *Russian foreign policy towards the Balkans: which perspective?* (Institute for International Political Studies, 2013), 1. [https://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/pubblicazioni/analysis\\_169\\_2013.pdf](https://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/pubblicazioni/analysis_169_2013.pdf) (accessed April 23, 2018).

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation (January 10, 2000) [http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/official\\_documents/-/asset\\_publisher/CptICk6BZ29/content/id/589768](http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptICk6BZ29/content/id/589768) (accessed April 23, 2018).

Russian foreign policy action: "that Russia must remain a nuclear superpower, a great power in all facets of international activity, and the hegemon – the political, military, and economic leader – of its region."<sup>24</sup> These imperatives are especially evident in the Foreign Policy Concept of 2008 which reads: "the ability of the West to dominate world economy and politics continues to diminish. The global power and development potential is now more dispersed and is shifting to the East, primarily to the Asia-Pacific region."<sup>25</sup> The document takes into account the Russian developments of the years between 2000 and 2008 with the emphasis on the success of the Russian economy and its role as a regional and global power. In contrast to the Concept of 2000, the Concept of 2008 no longer states that the Russian goal is reestablishment of Russia as a great power, but rather the focus is on its new strength and how it can be utilized to further improve its position in the world. The leitmotif is the argument that Russia has recovered and that it now plays vital role in the international arena. Furthermore, the New Foreign Policy Concept of 2017 also emphasizes the need to strengthen even more Russia's position as a major center of influence in the modern world.<sup>26</sup> Hence, Russian foreign policy strategists believe that in the future Moscow's interests and participation will be taken into account on every international political issue. In a context like this, relationship between Russia and other actors, such as the European Union and the Western Balkans is shifting.

The shift of the Russian foreign policy brought the shift of its approach towards the Western Balkans. Especially significant in this regard is the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation of 2013 because it is the first time when the Balkans was mentioned in the provisions of the document. Even though activities of the Russian Federation in the Western Balkans intensified in 2008, it was only in the Concept of this year that the region was mentioned as a region of geostrategic importance. Provision 66 states: "Russia aims to develop

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<sup>24</sup> Leon Aron, *The Putin Doctrine* (Foreign Affairs, 2013) <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/2013-03-08/putin-doctrine> (accessed April 23, 2018).

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation (2017).

comprehensive pragmatic and equitable cooperation with Southeast European countries. The Balkan region is of great strategic importance to Russia, including its role as a major transportation and infrastructure hub used for supplying gas and oil to European countries."<sup>27</sup> Based on Russia's foreign policy strategy, it is clear that Russia is implementing the multipolar approach in the region since it continues to refer to the Western Balkans as an arena in which different global and regional powers compete pragmatically and strategically to expand their sphere of influence.

As stated in all of the concepts, the Concept is the official document on foreign policy of the Russian Federation which serves as a basis for Moscow's foreign-policy strategy and activities. For that reason, having included Balkans as an area of geostrategic importance in this document proves Russia's growing interest in the region and explains the reason behind the intensification of involvement over the past decade. The following sections of this chapter explore this intensification.

## 2.2 Russia and Serbia

### 2.2.1 Economic Relations

Serbia and Russia have institutionalized their economic relations by signing several key agreements. The most significant one was the Free Trade Agreement signed in August 2000 allowing customs-free trade in exports and imports for a limited number of products.<sup>28</sup> The further trade liberalization was made possible by the Trade Agreement signed in 2009 which resulted in signing the Protocol for trade liberalization in 2011. This agreement stipulates that goods produced in Serbia (goods which have at least 51% value added in the country) are

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<sup>27</sup> Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation (2013)

<sup>28</sup> Development Agency of Serbia, *Free Trade Agreements* (2016) <http://ras.gov.rs/export-promotion/free-trade-agreements> (accessed April 23, 2018).

considered of Serbian origin and exported to the Russian Federation customs free.<sup>29</sup> The Agreement has created an attractive business environment in Serbia for foreign investors and producers, especially in the period after 2009 when the further trade liberalization between the two states was signed. Moreover, Serbia has also agreed on customs regime with the European Union in 2009 allowing almost all exports to enter the EU without customs. No other country could be praised of having such a widely open door to Eastern and Western markets.<sup>30</sup> This simultaneous development of economic relations with both Russia and the European Union is a good example of Serbia's foreign policy strategy which is to develop strong relations with Russia but to stay on the path of the EU integration rather than choosing one over another.

It was also in 2009 that an agreement on abolishing visas for citizens of Serbia and Russia was signed. According to the agreement, citizens of one country may enter the territory of the other and stay up to thirty days, whereas those holding diplomatic and official passports may stay up to ninety days.<sup>31</sup> As noted by the Government of Serbia, thirty days of visa-free travel is quite enough for business and cultural events and it will facilitate traveling for businessmen of the two countries which will result in the increased trade exchange.<sup>32</sup>

Despite the fact that the European Union remains by far Serbia's main trade partner and investor, Russian role in the economy of Serbia cannot be ignored. Since 2015, Russia has been the fifth biggest export trading partner of Serbia with an amount of \$794 million.<sup>33</sup> In 2013, Serbia and Russia signed a Declaration on Strategic Partnership with an aim to take their cooperation to the highest level possible.

Among the most important economic and trade agreements between the two countries

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Friedrich E. Stiftung, *Challenges of Serbian Foreign Policy* (Belgrade: European Movement Serbia, 2016), 35. <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/belgrad/12484.pdf> (accessed April 19, 2018).

<sup>31</sup> Government of the Republic of Serbia, *Serbia and Russia Signed Agreement on Visa-free Regime* (2017) [http://www.srbija.gov.rs/vesti/vest.php?id=53430&change\\_lang=en](http://www.srbija.gov.rs/vesti/vest.php?id=53430&change_lang=en) (accessed April 19, 2018).

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> The Observatory of Economic Complexity, "Serbia" (1989-2016) <https://atlas.media.mit.edu/en/profile/country/srb/> (accessed April 19, 2018).

is the one signed by the Government of the Republic of Serbia and the Government of the City of Moscow enabling broad cooperation in industry and traffic, trade, construction industry, opening of a common business information and trade center, banking, tourism, mutual relations between chambers of commerce, exhibition activities, health care and joint ventures of small- and medium-sized enterprises.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, during the official visit of the Russian President (then Prime Minister) Vladimir Putin to Belgrade in 2011, several other economic agreements were signed, namely an agreement on road traffic facilitating turnover of passengers and goods between Russia and Serbia, an agreement on cooperation between the City of Belgrade and the Russian energy and electricity holding company "Interrao" in order to improve heating sector of Belgrade, an agreement on founding a joint stock company between Russian pharmaceutical agency and Serbia pharmaceutical company "Galenika", an agreement on cooperation in the area of tourism.<sup>35</sup> All of these agreements created a legal framework for the development of cooperation between Serbia and Russia.

The deepest economic link between the two countries, though, rests in the sector of energy. In 2008, under an agreement on oil and natural gas, Serbia agreed to give Russian gas monopoly Gazprom a fifty one percent stake in the state-owned oil company Naftna Industrija Srbije (NIS) and an exclusive right to exploit natural resources in the country.<sup>36</sup> The Serbian government at the time rationalized the signed energy deal as a necessary step for Serbia in order to ensure energy stability in the country and the region, which would be accomplished by constructing the South Stream project. In the end of 2014, the South Stream project was cancelled by the Russian Federation following obstacles from the EU, but also the Crimea crisis

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<sup>34</sup> Jasminka Simic, *Economic Aspects of Strategic Partnership between Serbia and Russia* (The New Century: 2014), 24 [https://www.ceas-serbia.org/images/2015-i-pre/The\\_New\\_Century\\_No\\_06-J.Simic.pdf](https://www.ceas-serbia.org/images/2015-i-pre/The_New_Century_No_06-J.Simic.pdf) (accessed April 19, 2018).

<sup>35</sup> Serbian Chamber of Commerce, *Information on Foreign Trade Republic of Serbia - Russian Federation* (2014)

<sup>36</sup> Oleg Schedrov, *Serbia Signs Strategic Energy Deal with Russia* (Reuters: 2008) <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-russia-serbia-idUKL2515142420080125> (accessed April 19, 2018).

and the EU's sanctions on Russia.<sup>37</sup> With the cancellation of the South Stream project, Serbia failed to ensure what was often referred to by the Serbian government and the media as a "deal of the century".

### 2.2.2 Intensification of Political Relations and Security Cooperation

While meetings and visits of high officials of Serbia and Russia, such as Ministers of Foreign Affairs, have been held at least once a year since 2000, the number has increased to once a month in the post-2008 period. Furthermore, highest level visits of both Serbian and Russian officials have increased as well. Since 2008, there have been eight visits to Belgrade by two Russian presidents and the Prime Minister and nine visits to Moscow by Serbia's highest-level officials.<sup>38</sup> Even though of different kinds, most of the visits essentially served the intent of strengthening political and economic connections and creating a more fertile ground for cooperation between the two countries. Then President Dmitry Medvedev's visit in 2009 and President Putin's (his first after more than ten years) visit in 2011 were marked by the main objective of strengthening mutual relations. These visits created openings for Serbia to try to combine two significant foreign policy aspirations: membership in the EU and partnership with Russia.

While both Russia and Serbia often claim that their strong relationship is because of shared history and religious ties, their relationship initially intensified due to the question of independence of Kosovo province. In 2007, to prevent Kosovo's separation from Serbia, Russia threatened to apply its UN Security Council veto when a resolution supported by the US, the UK and France planned to grant Kosovo independence and sovereignty under international

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<sup>37</sup> "Putin: Russia Cannot Continue South Stream Construction in Current Situation" (Sputnik, 2014) <https://sputniknews.com/business/201412011015368062/> (accessed April 19, 2018).

<sup>38</sup> Meetings between Top Leaders and High-ranking Officials of Russia and Serbia (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Serbia, 2018) <http://www.mfa.gov.rs/sr/index.php> (accessed April 19, 2018).

control. On 17th February 2008, Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that Russia fully supports the reaction of the Serbian leadership to the events in Kosovo and its just demands to restore the territorial integrity of the country.<sup>39</sup> Putin described recognition of Kosovo's independence by several global powers as a "terrible precedent which will de facto blow apart the whole system of international relations and come back to hit the West in the face."<sup>40</sup> The Kremlin saw it as indirectly threatening the territorial integrity of Russia itself. During a meeting with newspaper journalists from G8 member states Putin declared: "It would be hard for us to explain to the different peoples of the North Caucasus why people in one part of Europe have this right, but they do not."<sup>41</sup> Even though the International Court of Justice legally recognized Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2010, Russia's position on the issue brought Russia a strong political and public support in Serbia.

Because of Russia's opposition to Kosovo's independence, Serbia's foreign policy has changed in multiple ways. Thanks to its military neutrality, Serbia enhanced its cooperation with Russia with regard to military. In addition, in 2013 Serbia acquired observer status in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) which is an intergovernmental military alliance between Russia, Kazakhstan, Belorussia, Armenia, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.<sup>42</sup> In the same year, the agreement on Strategic Partnership was signed by ministers of defense of Serbia and Russia which further increased their military cooperation. Since then, the two countries have conducted joint military exercises on a semiannual basis and Russia has made considerable military donations to Serbia.

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<sup>39</sup> Statement by Russia's Ministry on Foreign Affairs of Kosovo (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2008) [http://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign\\_policy/international\\_safety/conflicts/-/asset\\_publisher/xIEMTQ3OvzcA/content/id/348618](http://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/international_safety/conflicts/-/asset_publisher/xIEMTQ3OvzcA/content/id/348618) (accessed April 24, 2018).

<sup>40</sup> "Putin Calls Kosovo Independence 'Terrible Precedent'" (The Sydney Morning Herald, 2008) <https://www.smh.com.au/news/world/putin-calls-kosovo-independence-terrible-precedent/2008/02/23/1203467431503.html> (accessed April 24, 2018).

<sup>41</sup> Interview with Newspaper Journalists from G8 Member Countries (Kremlin, 2007) <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24313> (accessed April 24, 2018).

<sup>42</sup> "Collective Security Treaty Organization" (Global Security) <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/int/csto.htm> (accessed April 24, 2018).

### 2.2.3 Public Diplomacy

In the recent years, Russia has been increasingly deploying soft power tools to fulfill its foreign policy goals in the Western Balkans. The main methods that have been used in Serbia, besides already mentioned intensification of bilateral relations on the highest political level, are intensifying of cooperation between the Russian Orthodox Church (RPC) and the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC), expansion of Russian media outlets, establishment of structures for mobilization of compatriots, creation of citizens and students associations, political movements and popular culture.

#### *2.2.3.1 Russian Orthodox Church and Serbian Orthodox Church*

In Serbia, just as in almost every other state in the Western Balkans, national identity and religion are seen as indistinguishable. Thus, nation and religion are more often than not merged together by the highest officials and the general public. "Serbhood" and "Orthodoxy" are perceived as one and this is where the power of the intensification of cooperation between the Russian Orthodox Church (RPC) and the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) lies. While the state has greater influence on the SPC than vice versa, the impact of the SPC on the state and the general population should not be neglected. The church openly participates in politics and it is often receiving visits and given privileges by presidents of Serbia.<sup>43</sup> It has played a significant part concerning the issue of Kosovo, but it has also been outspoken about other issues of national matter.

In 2008, the SPC Patriarchate received a visit of the Delegation of the Russian

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<sup>43</sup> "His Holiness Serbian Patriarch Mr. Irinej received the President of the Republic of Serbia Mr. Tomislav Nikolic" (Serbian Orthodox Church, 2015)  
[http://www.spc.rs/sr/patrijarh\\_srpski\\_primio\\_predsednika\\_republike\\_srbije\\_tomislava\\_nikolitsha](http://www.spc.rs/sr/patrijarh_srpski_primio_predsednika_republike_srbije_tomislava_nikolitsha)

Federation. The aim of the visit was strengthening of relations between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Serbia. The Serbian Patriarch thanked the Russian Federation for not forgetting their "brothers" by faith in those difficult times for Serbia and for the efforts of the RPC and the Russian state to carry out the cancellation of the self-proclaimed independence of Kosovo.<sup>44</sup> In 2012, good relations between the SPC and the RPC were even further emphasized when Serbian and Russian church signed the protocol of cooperation. What is important here that the number of visits by Russian officials to the Serbian Orthodox Church has significantly increased in the period after 2008.<sup>45</sup> The SPC greatly supports Serbian and Russian organizations in the country which advocate for the strengthening of relations between the two countries. The SPC shares a lot of interests with these organizations including the same stance on the territorial integrity of the country, Euroscepticism but also glorification of war criminals.

### *2.2.3.2 Media*

According to a 2016 research by the Center for Euro-Atlantic Studies, there are 109 registered nongovernmental organizations, media outlets and associations with direct connection with Russia in Serbia today.<sup>46</sup> Among them, there are 16 openly pro-Russian media outlets and six Russian media outlets. Besides these, there are two other influential media sources, namely Pravda (Justice) and Fakti (Facts), which openly advocate pro-Russian views.

In 2014, Rossiya Segodnya, a news agency wholly owned and operated by the Russian

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<sup>44</sup> "Delegation of the Russian Federation in the Patriarchy" (Serbian Orthodox Church, 2008)

<sup>45</sup> Archive (Serbian Orthodox Church, 2018) <http://www.spc.rs/sr/arhiva> (accessed April 23, 2018).

<sup>46</sup> "Eyes Wide Shut - Strengthening Of Russian Soft Power In Serbia" (Center for Euro-Atlantic Studies, 2016) [https://www.ceas-serbia.org/images/publikacije/CEAS\\_Studija\\_-\\_Širom\\_zatvorenih\\_očiju\\_\\_ENG.pdf](https://www.ceas-serbia.org/images/publikacije/CEAS_Studija_-_Širom_zatvorenih_očiju__ENG.pdf) (accessed April 25, 2018).

government, launched its new media project for foreign publications called Sputnik.<sup>47</sup> Director General of Rossiya Segodnya said that the project's goal is "to present an alternative view of world events to the world public, not formed under the influence of Western mass-media."<sup>48</sup>

Less than a year after its launching, Sputnik started broadcasting daily in Serbia. Now, Sputnik is among the major instruments of creation of Russian soft power in Serbia. Besides Sputnik, there is also RT (formerly Russia today) that is increasingly popular among the population of Serbia. Both of them are considered by the Western states as Russian "propaganda tools" and Sputnik was even banned from operating in some countries in the EU.<sup>49</sup> In Serbia, Sputnik is very much focused on Kosovo and Montenegro and often publishes anti-EU and anti-NATO articles with sensationalist headlines. A large number of other Serbian media outlets reproduce content created by Sputnik and RT.

In addition to the already mentioned media outlets, it is important to mention the international news and information resource called Russia Beyond which operates in Serbia since 2008 with high popularity. The media outlet is often criticized and regarded as para-governmental Russian propaganda organization.<sup>50</sup>

### *2.2.3.3 Organizations of Compatriots*

According to the Migration Profile of the Republic of Serbia from 2013, there are 3,290 ethnic Russians living in Serbia.<sup>51</sup> Ten Russian compatriots organizations operate in Serbia and since 2009, a significant intensification of their engagement and activities was recorded

<sup>47</sup> Sputnik. <https://rs.sputniknews.com> (accessed April 29, 2018).

<sup>48</sup> "Sputnik - For the new perspective on the world." (Russia Beyond, 2014) [https://rs.rbth.com/politics/2014/11/17/sputnik\\_zn\\_novi\\_pogled\\_na\\_svet\\_35057.html](https://rs.rbth.com/politics/2014/11/17/sputnik_zn_novi_pogled_na_svet_35057.html) (accessed April 29, 2018).

<sup>49</sup> "Latvia Blocks Russian Sputnik Site As Kremlin 'Propaganda Tool'" (Radio Free Europe, 2016)

<sup>50</sup> "Telegraph to Continue Publishing Russian Propaganda Supplement" (The Guardian, 2014)

<sup>51</sup> "Migration Profile of the Republic of Serbia for 2013" (Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2013) [http://www.kirs.gov.rs/docs/migracije/Migracioni\\_profil\\_Republike\\_Srbije\\_za\\_2013.pdf](http://www.kirs.gov.rs/docs/migracije/Migracioni_profil_Republike_Srbije_za_2013.pdf) (accessed April 29, 2018).

ranging from opening of Russian centers across the country to creation of Russian political parties. Most of their activities are located in Vojvodina, where majority of Russians live, and by the Kosovo border.

Among the compatriots' organizations, especially controversial has been Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Center, intergovernmental nonprofit organization formed in Nis (a city near the Kosovo border) in 2012. While it is designed to provide humanitarian aid to people affected by emergencies and different trainings and skills development activities in the field of elimination of emergency situations, throughout the years it has engaged in many non-transparent activities which raised concerns among Western high officials.

#### *2.2.3.4 Students Associations and Citizens Organizations*

Of 109 pro-Russian organization in Serbia today, 51 present themselves as associations of citizens and organizations of students. Majority of them are openly Eurosceptic and nationalistic. They see Serbia as a country of Serbian nation without taking into account ethnic minorities which comprise around 20% of the population of the country. They advocate "traditional family values" and are often against abortion and LGBTQ+ rights. Some of the biggest organizations/associations are the Serbian Patriotic Movement Zavetnici, SNP Nasi, Serbian National Movement and Kosovo Front. These organizations were formed or became increasingly involved in the political and public life in Serbia in the post-2008 period.

The Serbian Patriotic Movement Zavetnici (Oath Keepers), an organization founded in 2012, has become one of the most visibly pro-Russian organizations in Serbia today. Quickly after the founding, the organization learned how to gain supporters with claims that Serbian nation is being confronted with "military occupation" of part of their territory, as well as with

forms of economic, media and cultural occupation by the West.<sup>52</sup> The main objectives of Zavetnici are return of Kosovo to Serbia, ending negotiations with the European Union and preservation of Serbian traditional family values. Most of the members and supporters of the movement are students. During his visit to Belgrade in 2016, the Foreign Minister of the Russian Federation Sergei Lavrov met with representatives from Zavetnici. During the meeting, Lavrov repeatedly argued that the EU membership is not all just privileges. It seems that interests of Zavetnici and the Russian Federation in the region coincide to a large extent since Zavetnici are outspokenly anti-NATO (they even organized anti-NATO protests on several instances) and they advocate against the European values and practices. Their political influence in Serbia is still minor, however, given the opportunities that emerge from growing pro-Russian structures in Serbia, it is expected that their activities will only intensify in the following period.

The Serbian National Movement Nasi (Ours) is another very influential and increasingly visible pro-Kremlin organization that operates in Serbia. Its main goals are establishing of cooperation with the Russian Federation and Eurasian integration of Serbia, ending negotiations with the European Union and negative attitude towards any cooperation between Serbia and NATO.<sup>53</sup> SNP Nasi was named after the Russian youth movement "Nasi" and it operates in a very similar way.

Moreover, many of these pro-Kremlin organizations and associations operate near the border of Kosovo. The support for all of these organizations has been rapidly growing, especially in the last three years. They have been increasingly involved in the political life in Serbia. They are supporting right-wing political parties which, among everything else,

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<sup>52</sup> "Serbian Ultrationalists Making Mark Despite Failure At The Ballot Box" (Radio Free Europe, 2018) <https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-zavetnici-oath-keepers-ultranationalism-russia-lavrov/29094995.html> (accessed April 29, 2018).

<sup>53</sup> "Right-wing Movement to Run in Serbian Polls" (Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, 2014) <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/serbia-right-wing-movement-to-run-in-snap-polls> (accessed April 29, 2018).

advocate against the EU and NATO membership. The great support they receive from the Russian Federation officials and organizations encourages them to step up their activities even more.

## 2.3 Russia and the Republic of Srpska

### 2.3.1 Economic Relations

While Russia's economic footprint is present in every part of Bosnia and Herzegovina, most of it is accumulated in the Republic of Srpska, the entity with the Serb majority. The Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the entity with the Bosniak and Croat majority, has only limited economic and financial ties to Russia. A significant element of this is leverage Russia has been able to exercise over the Republic of Srpska in the financial and economic realm.

Bosnia and Herzegovina's largest trading partners are the member states of the EU. However, in the recent years Russia has become among the largest contributors of foreign direct investment to the country. Since 2011, Russia has constantly been the largest contributor of FDI in the Republic of Srpska and the fourth largest in the whole country. 42% of the total revenue of all foreign companies in the Republic of Srpska comes from Russian enterprises, while all of the EU enterprises together make up 27%.<sup>54</sup> Since 2006, Russia's corporate footprint in Bosnia and Herzegovina grew twofold, from 2.6% in 2006 to around 5.7% in 2015.<sup>55</sup> This footprint is concentrated in only five companies in the energy, banking and pharmaceutical sectors.

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<sup>54</sup> Structural Business Statistics (Statistical Agency of the Republic of Srpska (2018) [https://www.rzs.rs.ba/front/category/28/?up\\_mi=12&le\\_mi=41&add=41](https://www.rzs.rs.ba/front/category/28/?up_mi=12&le_mi=41&add=41) (accessed April 29, 2018).

<sup>55</sup> "Russia's Economic Footprint in Bosnia and Herzegovina" (Center for the Study of Democracy, 2018) <https://www.esjnews.com/russia-economic-footprint-bosnia-and-herzegovina> (accessed April 29, 2018).

The deepest economic linkage between Russia and Bosnia and Herzegovina is concentrated in the oil and gas sectors. Russian enterprises control Bosnia and Herzegovina's two refineries which are both located in the Republic of Srpska.<sup>56</sup> In a 2007 deal, Russian owned Neftengazinkor, acquired two companies that were being privatized by the Republic of Srpska: the Rafinarija Nafta Brod oil refinery and the Modrica motor oil plant for a total of 125.8 million euros, far under the initial price of around 300 million. Both companies were privatized without a tender and without any public debate.<sup>57</sup> Attempts by the both entities in Bosnia and Herzegovina to privatize companies provide an opportunity for Russia to gain further traction in the country.

Furthermore, the Republic of Srpska has a trade office in Moscow which is separate from the embassy of Bosnia and Herzegovina and has received a significant number of timely loans from Moscow in the last decade.<sup>58</sup> In May 2014, after the devastating flooding in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Russia offered emergency assistance to the Republic of Srpska. By the end of the year, the entity's leader Milorad Dodik announced that the Republic of Srpska will be receiving Russian loan totaling between 500 and 700 million euros to help steady its finances after the flood.<sup>59</sup> To the date, there have been no reports confirming that Kremlin distributed these funds.

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Strategic Analysis: Russian Business Activity in Bosnia-Herzegovina (RWR Advisory Group, 2016) <https://www.rwradvisory.com/russian-activity-in-bosnia-herzegovina-abstract/> (accessed April 29, 2018).

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> "Bosnian Serb Leader Says Russia Will Loan Region 500-700 Million Euros" (Reuters, 2014) <https://www.reuters.com/article/bosnia-russia-loan/bosnian-serb-leader-says-russia-will-loan-region-500-700-mln-euros-idUSL6N0RK2XL20140919> (accessed April 29, 2018).

### 2.3.2 Political Relations

As Russia's foreign policy strategy changed in the post-2008 period, so did its involvement in the Republic of Srpska. For years, Russia had used Belgrade as its primary link to the Western Balkans and as an intermediary between Russia and the Serb minorities in the neighboring states. However, after 2008, Russia has made significant efforts with regard to intensifying direct cooperation with the Serb minorities in the other countries of the region in order to get an opportunity to influence the internal situation and stability of those countries. While there has been intensifying of Russia's influence in all of the Western Balkans states with large Serb minorities, Russia's influence is strongest in the Republic of Srpska. One example of these efforts is the invitation from the Russians to Milorad Dodik, the President of the Republic of Srpska, to travel to Serbia and join a meeting with Vladimir Putin during Putin's visit to Belgrade in 2014. This was a clear sign to Serbia suggesting that Serbia's role as an intermediary between the Republic of Srpska and Russia is weakening.

Since then, Russia has been cooperating closely with Dodik. In the last decade, Dodik has visited Moscow several times. Especially significant is the visit in September of 2016 which happened only three days before a referendum on the National Day of the Republic of Srpska was held. The referendum, despite being ruled unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina and condemned by the High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina for breaching the Dayton Peace Agreement, received a full support of the Russian Federation. Russia also condemned the introduction of sanctions against Dodik by the United States for breaching the Dayton Agreement. Sergey Lavrov, Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, urged the international community not to increase tensions in the Western Balkans with its condemnations and sanctions and said that the referendum would not represent a threat

to the territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina.<sup>60</sup> Nonetheless, leader of the Republic of Srpska continues to state that the entity's long-term goal is secession from "dysfunctional Bosnia" to join Serbia.<sup>61</sup>

In 2015, during his attendance to the Saint Petersburg International Economic Forum, Dodik asked Russia to use its veto to prevent adoption of the UN resolution on the Srebrenica genocide which was being drafted by the Great Britain. Russia gave the Republic of Srpska full support and blocked a UN Security Council draft resolution describing 1995 Srebrenica massacre as a genocide. Lavrov said that the resolution would lead to the further ethnic tensions in the Balkans since "is totally of anti-Serb nature" and "incorrectly interprets those events."<sup>62</sup> While the practical significance of Russia's move is not that big, Russia got a great deal of public support amongst nationalists and ethnic Serb separatists in Bosnia and Herzegovina.<sup>63</sup> In line with the ever closer cooperation between Moscow and Banja Luka, Dodik supported Crimea's secession from Ukraine and its decision to join Russia. He called it a "prime example of self-determination in action" which raised concerns among the Western leaders about his true intentions.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> "Lavrov's Message to Steinmeir: Do Not Rise Tensions Around the Republic of Srpska" (Novosti, 2016) [http://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/republika\\_srpska/aktuelno.655.html:627630-Лавров-поручио-Штајнмајеру-Не-дижите-тензије-око-РС](http://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/republika_srpska/aktuelno.655.html:627630-Лавров-поручио-Штајнмајеру-Не-дижите-тензије-око-РС) (accessed April 30, 2018).

<sup>61</sup> Zorana Suvakovic, *The Balkans, Crimea and the "Boomerang" Effect* (Aljazeera, 2014) <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/03/balkans-crimea-boomerang-effect-20143318373738630.html> (accessed April 30, 2018).

<sup>62</sup> "Russian Foreign Minister Condemns Draft UN Srebrenica Resolution" (Radio Free Europe, 2015) <https://www.rferl.org/a/russian-fm-condemns-draft-un-srebrenica-resolution/27081461.html> (accessed April 30, 2018).

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Gordana Katana, *With an Eye on Crimea, Bosnian Serb Leader Calls for Confederation* (Reuters, 2014) <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-bosniaherzegovina-serbs/with-an-eye-on-crimea-bosnian-serb-leader-calls-for-confederation-idUSBREA3017420140401> (accessed April 30, 2018).

### 2.3.3 Security

Russia's engagement with the Republic of Srpska's security sector has gradually increased since early 2010s. In 2015, security officials in the entity acknowledged cooperation with Russia in the security sector by stating that Moscow's special forces will be training police in the entity and the year later the cooperation was formalized with the agreement between the Republic of Srpska Ministry of Interior and the Moscow police.<sup>65</sup> This alarmed the European Parliament which stated: "[The European Parliament] is deeply concerned about statements made by the Interior Minister of the Republika Srpska about the future training of RS special police units in the Russian Federation, the deepening of cooperation, particularly regarding the exchange of information, and the intention to buy Russian military equipment."<sup>66</sup> It further called on the authorities in the Republic of Srpska not to pursue an independent foreign and security policy which might undermine state-level policy. Nonetheless, the RS-Russia security cooperation only intensified even further after the EU Parliament's resolution.

Moreover, groups engaged in paramilitary training in the entity have a full support of Russia. These groups are registered as nongovernmental organizations and of the 78 nationalist organizations in the Republic of Srpska, three groups are especially significant for Russian aspirations in the region: Srbska Cast (Serb Honor), Veterans of the Republic of Srpska, and the branch of the Night Wolves, the Russian motorcycle gang.<sup>67</sup> Activities of these organizations vary from military training, anti-EU and anti-NATO political activism to counterdemonstration violence against democratic activists and even paramilitary roles as it is

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<sup>65</sup> Erduan Katana, *Moscow specialists to train police in RS* (Radio Free Europe, 2016) <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/moskovs-ki-specijalci-ce-obucavati-policaice-u-rs/27656303.htm> (accessed April 30, 2018).

<sup>66</sup> European Parliament Resolution on the 2015 Report on Bosnia and Herzegovina (European Parliament, 2015) <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+MOTION+B8-2016-0441+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN> (accessed April 30, 2018).

<sup>67</sup> Reuf Bajrovic, Richard Kraemer and Emir Suljagic, *Bosnia on the Choppin Block: The Potential For Violence and Steps to Prevent it* (Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2018), 8.

the case with Russian motorcycle gang Night Wolves.<sup>68</sup> The main objective of these groups is to stop the integration of Western democratic institutions and values from deepening in the region.<sup>69</sup>

In addition, The Kremlin news agency Sputnik has been quite outspoken on the issues in the Republic of Srpska which resulted in the high popularity among the citizens in the entity. However, high officials in Bosnia and Herzegovina see this popularity as concerning since Sputnik has often shown support for war criminals in Hague and for separatist ideas of the Republic of Srpska leaders.

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid. 10

## Chapter 3: Effects of the Intensification of Russia's Involvement in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina

This chapter seeks to explore how Russia's intensified involvement in the region in the last decade has manifested itself with regard to political and social context of the EU negotiations of Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. In order to analyze whether Russia's increased cooperation with Serbia and the Republic of Srpska has influenced the process of political, social and cultural convergence of Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina towards the EU, it first explores the political developments in the two countries. The aim here is to explore whether political preferences, and thus the decision making, has changed as a result of strengthening relations with Russia. Then, the chapter looks at the preferences of citizens of the two countries in order to explore if the public attitudes towards the EU and Russia have changed in the past decade. Finally, it explores the European Commission's progress reports on Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina to see if the EU's perspective on the two countries' EU paths has changed in the past decade.

### 3.1 Analysis of the Political Developments in Serbia: 2000-2017

Serbia's political leaders currently face various complicated tasks including preserving the country's territorial integrity, improving trade relations with its major partners, attracting investment in the infrastructure and economy in general, developing relations with major international organizations and coping with the difficult security structure of the region.<sup>70</sup> Since since early 2000s, Serbia has mostly looked for solutions to these issues in the interests it has shared with the Western Europe. Recently however, Serbia has also begun to look for solutions

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<sup>70</sup> Andrew Konitzer, *Serbia Between East And West: Bratstvo, Balancing, And Business On Europe's Frontier* (The National Council for Euroasian and East European Research, 2010) [https://www.ucis.pitt.edu/nceer/2010\\_824-22t\\_Konitzer.pdf](https://www.ucis.pitt.edu/nceer/2010_824-22t_Konitzer.pdf) (accessed May 3, 2018).

to these problems in the interests it shares with the Russian Federation which are very different, often conflicting, with the interests of the EU in the Western Balkans region.<sup>71</sup> Given the situation Serbia currently finds itself in, long time period the EU accession process requires, unresolved status of Kosovo and potential NATO membership (even though the last has recently become very unlikely to happen anytime in the future), Serbian political leaders have had the opportunity to at the same time strengthen their relations with both the European Union and the Russian Federation.

Early 2000s have marked major socio-political and economic developments in both Serbia and the Russian Federation. In Serbia, The fall of the Slobodan Milosevic government in 2000 and the rise of more pro-Western regime to the power, opened the window of opportunity for the development of much deeper ties with the West, primarily the EU and the US.<sup>72</sup> The newly established government lead by Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic, expressively pro-European, focused highly on improving Serbia's relationship with the EU without even considering developing deeper ties with any other country, especially not the Russian Federation which at the time, besides not having completely recovered its economic strength, has been more and more perceived as anti-democratic and challenging to the European interests.<sup>73</sup> However, not long after, developments in the country provided an opportunity for the Russian Federation to reassert its influence in Serbia.

To begin with, Putin started to develop a more assertive foreign policy in the early 2000s. In addition, glaringly pro-Western Serbian government, was soon replaced because of the assassination of the Prime Minister Djindjic.<sup>74</sup> The new government, under the Democratic

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Membership Status: Serbia (European Commission, 2018)

<sup>73</sup> Dusan Reljic, *The Russian Federation and the Western Balkans*, (Berlin: German Institute for International Relations and Security, 2009), pp. 11 <https://www.isac-fund.org/download/Rusija%20i%20zapadni%20balkan.pdf> (accessed May 3, 2018).

<sup>74</sup> Dr Zoran Djindjic 1952-2003 (Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2018) <http://www.srbija.gov.rs/vesti/specijal.php?id=45567> (accessed May 3, 2018).

Party of Serbia (DSS) and Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica, was national conservative and while publicly supporting the EU membership of Serbia, its interests did not align with the EU's interests in Serbia to the extent those of the previous government did.<sup>75</sup> Kostunica's government made it clear that it is willing to explore other options as well including developing deeper ties with Serbia's historical ally, the Russian Federation. With that, Serbia's assertiveness in the EU negotiation process which came with Djindjic's government was lost. Furthermore, 2006 brought other challenges because the negotiations about the unresolved status of Kosovo province began and the DSS has positioned itself as a loyal defender of the premise that Kosovo should stay within Serbia and that any negotiations must ensure an outcome that would work for the both sides.<sup>76</sup> On the other side, many member states of the EU have been supportive of the independence of the Kosovo province. Since then, Kostunica often stated that if the EU member states end up supporting Kosovo independence, Serbia would no longer have the EU membership as its highest foreign policy objective.<sup>77</sup> Serbian vulnerability in this period represented a window of opportunity for the Russian Federation to strengthen its power in the country.

In 2007 and 2008, the issue of Kosovo's unresolved statehood became even more complex and Kostunica's rhetoric and actions have become increasingly uncompromising towards the West. Simultaneously, the Russian Federation was expanding its activities in the UN and with the respect to bilateral agreements with the aim to block initiative for the recognition of Kosovo's independence.<sup>78</sup> This is what brought a major shift to Serbia's foreign policy outlook. Kostunica, a democrat who at first opposed Milosevic's regime had now sided

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<sup>75</sup> Dusan Reljic, *Russia and the Western Balkans* (2009)

<sup>76</sup> "Serbia Will Not Give Up Its Territory" (Demokratska Stranka Srbije, 2007) <http://www.dss.rs/srbija-nece-dati-ni-pedalj-svoje-teritorije/> (accessed May 3, 2018).

<sup>77</sup> "Kostunica: European Union and Kosovo" (Tanjug, 2010) [https://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2010&mm=03&dd=20&nav\\_category=11&nav\\_id=419068](https://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2010&mm=03&dd=20&nav_category=11&nav_id=419068) (accessed May 3, 2018).

<sup>78</sup> Dusan Reljic, *Russia and the Western Balkans* (2009), pp. 16.

with the ultra-nationalist Radical Party and the socialists of former Milosevic's regime on the issue of Kosovo, but also on the premise that Serbia should shift its focus towards developing ties with Russia rather than "foolishly" follow the path towards the West "which keeps working against Serbia's interests".<sup>79</sup> In the period which followed, visits between the Russian highest officials and Kostunica became very frequent and by the end of Kostunica's mandate his position and rhetoric completely changed.<sup>80</sup> His support for the Russian Federation heavily increased, caused mostly by the Kremlin's veto on the proposed UN Security Council's resolution to grant Kosovo international independence and sovereignty under international law. His position towards the EU integration completely changed as well. Now, he criticized all of the EU's activities in Serbia for "exclusively producing negative effects" while glorifying every Russia's move in the country.<sup>81</sup>

The successors of Kostunica government followed quite similar pattern of behavior, only with milder rhetoric. The Democratic Party (DS), even though considered as the most pro-Western party in the 2008 elections, opted for playing on the both sides of the fence once in the office.<sup>82</sup> During his Presidential campaign, the DS's President Boris Tadic visited Moscow and emphasized that the good relations with the Russian Federation are one of the pillars of Serbian foreign policy. During his mandate, several deals with Moscow were made, including the energy deal which sold NIS to Russian Gazprom and marked a new era of Russia's economic involvement in Serbia. Not long after the deal was signed, Tadic stated that, "Russia has recently restored its economic and foreign policy potentials and has been a great friend in support of Serbia with regard to defense of the territorial integrity of our country in Kosovo

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<sup>79</sup> Daniel McLaughlin, "EU urges Serbs to Back Liberals as Kostunica Dissolves Government" (The Irish Times, 2008) <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/eu-urges-serbs-to-back-liberals-as-kostunica-dissolves-government-1.902010> (accessed May 16, 2018).

<sup>80</sup> "Russia Pledges Support to Serbia" (BBC News, 2008) <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7262134.stm> (accessed May 16, 2018).

<sup>81</sup> "Serbia: EU rejects Kostunica's criticism" (Euractiv, 2012) <https://www.euractiv.com/section/central-europe/news/serbia-eu-rejects-kostunica-s-criticism/> (accessed May 16, 2018).

<sup>82</sup> Dusan Reljic, *Russia and the Western Balkans* (2009) pp.18.

and Metohija. This, together with the historical friendship, has undoubtedly led us towards exceptionally friendly relations with Russia nowadays."<sup>83</sup> While he continued to proclaim the EU membership as Serbia's highest foreign policy goal, he emphasized the fact that this membership will not come at cost of the exceptionally good relations with the Russian Federation which Serbia has recently developed.

While the two strongest political options in Serbia for the long time had been the DS and the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), it can be argued that the biggest role in Serbia's positioning towards or away from the West was played by the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) and the SNS. The SPS has been the major factor in moving forward the process of the EU accession, especially in the early 2000s.<sup>84</sup> On the other side, the SNS, a populist conservative party established in 2008 after its break away from the Serbian Radical Party (SRS) and by far the strongest political option in Serbia today, while rhetorically supporting the EU membership, has further strengthened relations with the Russian Federation.<sup>85</sup> During its mandate which is still in action, the Russian involvement in the country has reached its highest peak.

The second strongest party in the National Assembly of Serbia today is the Serbian Radical Party (SRS), nationalist political party founded by Vojislav Seselj, a Serbian politician who was in 2016 acquitted of all counts of indictment at the International Criminal Tribunal in Hague. The SRS ideology is based on Serbian nationalism and the objective of creation of Greater Serbia.<sup>86</sup> The party is strongly opposing the EU membership of Serbia and advocating for closer ties with the Russian Federation. According to Seselj, the situation in Serbia will

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<sup>83</sup> "Four Pillars of Serbian Foreign Policy" (RTS, 2009)

<http://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/9/Srbija/123751/Četiri+stuba+srpske+spoljne+politike.html> (accessed May 16, 2018).

<sup>84</sup> Vjeran Pavlakovic, *Serbia Transformed? Political Dynamics in the Milošević Era and After: Serbia since 1989* (University of Washington Press, 2016), pp. 17

<sup>85</sup> Alekandar Vasovic and Ivana Sekularac, *Serbia on EU path seeks to improve ties with Moscow, PM says* (Reuters, 2017) <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-serbia-election-eu-idUSKBN16Y12A> (accessed May 16, 2018).

<sup>86</sup> Mark Mardel, *Europe Diary: Serbian Radicals* (BBC News, 2007) <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/6296601.stm> (accessed May 16, 2018).

change for the better “only when we (Serbia) give up on the process of EU integration, and, together with Bulgarians, Macedonians, and Greeks, turn to integration with the Russian Federation.”<sup>87</sup> Seselj maintains very close relations with the Russian highest officials who often meet even beyond state protocols.<sup>88</sup> All of the official reports of each of these meetings state that the SRS and the representatives of the Russian government agree on all important political questions including the premise that the future of Serbia is turned towards the East.<sup>89</sup> In addition to the SRS, other outspokenly anti-Western and pro-Kremlin parties which have been enjoying high popularity in the last five years and have earned significant seats in the National Assembly are Dveri, United Serbia and New Serbia. Their ideology is very similar, if not the same, with that of the SRS.

While the strongest political option in Serbia today, the SNS, still rhetorically supports Serbia's path towards the EU membership, its activities show some newly acquired conceit towards the West. The party's leader and President of Serbia Aleksandar Vucic made clear that Serbia does not plan to compromise its relations with the Russian Federation for the benefit of joining the EU and even stated that if Serbia is not greeted with understanding by the EU with respect to its relations with Russia then "Serbia is an independent and free country", indirectly implying that Serbia will have to abandon its EU integration process.<sup>90</sup> This newly acquired intransigence towards the EU is made possible by the intensified cooperation with Russia.

The situation becomes challenging when the Western interests and the Russian interests

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<sup>87</sup> "Seselj: Russia Returning to Balkans and Nobody Can Stop It" (InSerbia, 2017) <https://inserbia.info/today/2017/03/seselj-russia-returning-to-balkans-and-nobody-can-stop-it/> (accessed May 14, 2018).

<sup>88</sup> "Seselj and Rogozin: The Future of Serbia is Turned Towards the East" (Blic, 2016) <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/seselj-i-rogozin-buducnost-srbije-okrenuta-je-ka-istoku/ckjdn9m> (accessed May 14, 2018).

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Gordana Filipovic and Misha Savic, *EU Membership Won't Change Serbian-Russian Ties, Vucic Says* (Bloomberg, 2018) <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-02-21/eu-membership-won-t-change-serbia-s-ties-with-russia-vucic-says> (accessed May 14, 2018).

in Serbia clash and Serbia is forced to take sides. This was proved with Serbia's nonalignment with the EU sanctions against Russia. Despite the EU's repeated calls for Serbia to align its foreign policies with the block, Serbia did not. This nonalignment heavily influenced the political context of the EU negotiations since the EU's chapters 30 on External Relations and 31 on Common Foreign and Security Policy set out sanctions among the list of legally binding initiatives to join the European Union.<sup>91</sup>

### 3.2 Shift in the Public Perceptions of the European Union and the Russian Federation in Serbia

With regard to public preferences in Serbia, all opinion polls conducted in the recent period have identified an increase in general pro-Russian attitudes in Serbia. At the same time, the support for the EU membership has significantly decreased since 2002 when the first data on the EU integration was collected by the Ministry of European Integration. These public opinion polls show that since 2002 the support for the EU membership in Serbia has decreased for around 40%.<sup>92</sup> When discussing the public opinion of the EU in Serbia, the main question in all of the surveys on public opinion is how citizens in Serbia would vote in a referendum of EU membership, which is a good starting point in evaluating general attitudes towards the EU. Even though the Ministry started collecting official data in 2006, they had some earlier data that detect more than 78% support for the EU membership in 2002 and less than 10% of those who would vote against the EU membership in a referendum.<sup>93</sup> While there have been slight increases from time to time until 2009, there is a steady decrease from 2009 onward with a particularly sharp decrease since 2010.<sup>94</sup> Over this time, the gap between proponents and

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<sup>91</sup> Milivoje Pantovic, Serbia Arms Experts Query Value of Russia's 'Gifts' (Balkan Insight, 2016) <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/serbian-arms-deal-with-russia-may-be-too-expensive-12-22-2016> (accessed May 14, 2018).

<sup>92</sup> Public Opinion Polls (Ministry of European Integration, 2017) <http://www.mei.gov.rs/eng/documents/national-documents/public-opinion-poll/>

<sup>93</sup> Aleksandra Cavovski, *Perceptions of the European Union in Serbia* (Birmingham Law School, 2013)

<sup>94</sup> Public Opinion Polls (Ministry of European Integration 2017)

opponents of the EU membership has narrowed so much that in January 2017, there was only 41% of those who would vote for the EU membership in a referendum while there was 35% percent of those who would vote against.<sup>95</sup> Significant milestones in the EU accession process seem to have had little to no impact on the public perceptions for the EU membership. Even though Serbia has officially become a candidate country in 2012, the support for the EU membership of that year was much lower than that of 2011.<sup>96</sup> Moreover, research conducted by EURACTIV in 2016 shows that more than 50% of those surveyed had negative stance towards the EU, while only around 25% had positive perceptions of the EU.<sup>97</sup> This negative trend has only continued in 2017.

On the other side, Serbian citizens are increasingly supportive of the Russian Federation. According to the IPSOS Strategic Marketing Survey from 2015, more than 72% of citizens in Serbia have a positive stance towards Russia, while in 2008 this number was around 40%.<sup>98</sup> This shows the extent to which the country has become a fertile ground for even further intensification of Russia's involvement in the country. The research conducted by the European Council on Foreign Relations in 2015, shows that more than 63% of Serbian citizens believe that the relationship that best serves Serbian interests is that with Russia, while only 15% of citizens think that the relationship with the EU best serves Serbia's interests.<sup>99</sup> Moreover, despite the fact that the EU is the biggest trade partner of Serbia and that the United States and

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<sup>95</sup> Public Opinion Poll: European Orientation of Serbian Citizens 2017 (Ministry of European Integration, 2017)

<sup>96</sup> Public Opinion Poll: European Orientation of Serbia Citizens 2012 (Ministry of European Integration, 2012)

<sup>97</sup> Poll: Serbia's complex attitude towards the EU (EURACTIVE Serbia Reports, 2016)

<https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/poll-serbia-s-complex-attitude-towards-the-eu/> (accessed May 14, 2018).

<sup>98</sup> "Serbians 'increasingly pro-Russian; would rather live in EU'" (B92, 2016)

[https://www.b92.net/eng/news/society.php?yyyy=2016&mm=01&dd=12&nav\\_id=96676](https://www.b92.net/eng/news/society.php?yyyy=2016&mm=01&dd=12&nav_id=96676) (accessed May 14, 2018).

<sup>99</sup> Francisco de Borja Lasheras, *Return to Instability: How Migration and Great Power Politics Threaten the Western Balkans* (European Council on Foreign Relations, 2015) [http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR\\_163\\_RETURN\\_TO\\_INSTABILITY.pdf](http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR_163_RETURN_TO_INSTABILITY.pdf) (accessed May 14, 2018).

the EU are the biggest donors to the country, public opinion surveys show that majority of citizens (more than 60%) believe that Russia is leading greatly in both of these areas.<sup>100</sup>

What is interesting here is how similar the pace of the growth of the public support for the Russian Federation is to the pace of the decline of the support for the European Union. Indeed, there seems to be a negative correlation here - as the public perceptions of Russia are becoming more positive, so the public perceptions for the EU are becoming more negative. Even though correlation does not necessarily mean causation, the fact that the significant milestones with respect to Serbia's EU integration path do not play a role when it comes to public perceptions, leads one to conclude that Serbian citizens are increasingly seeing the Russian Federation as an alternative to the Western values. This seems to be especially evident if one looks at the responses to the survey's question "Why do you feel that Serbia's interests would be best served by maintaining strong relations with Russia?" where the most popular answer was "Russia is the only power that can confront the West".<sup>101</sup>

### 3.3 European Commission's Progress Reports on Serbia

Earlier European Commission reports on Serbia such as the one from 2008, were a reflection of Stabilization and Association Process which provided a framework for the EU-Serbia cooperation before Serbia received an official EU candidate status in 2011. Serbia's EU integration path has been very much concerned with issues related to the Kosovo independence and Serbia's unresolved statehood. The lack of cooperation between Serbia and Kosovo in regards to this issue has been identified by the European Commission as one of the pressing issues blocking Serbia from moving forward in its EU integration process.

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<sup>100</sup> "Research "Public Opinion: Perceptions of Serbian Citizens Towards the EU Integration" (Delegation of the European Union to Serbia, 2015) <http://europa.rs/istrazivanje-stavovi-gradana-srbije-prema-eu-integracijama/> (accessed May 14, 2018).

<sup>101</sup> Survey of Serbian Public Opinion (Center for Insights in Survey Research, 2015) [http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/serbia\\_november\\_2015\\_poll\\_public\\_release.pdf](http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/serbia_november_2015_poll_public_release.pdf) (accessed May 14, 2018).

Russia's involvement in Serbia was mentioned in every report since 2008 with regard to the energy sector. As stated in the 2008 report, Serbia and the Russian Federation signed a Memorandum of Understanding on energy which is a framework document for signing several deals in the energy fields including privatization and modernization of the Serbian Oil Company NIS, completion of the construction of an underground gas storage facility and the passing of the Northern branch of the South Stream pipeline through Serbia.<sup>102</sup> While the emphasis is on the recommendation that Serbia needs to ensure that the obligations of the Energy Community Treaty are respected, there were no statements indicating that these agreements with Russia would by any means interfere with Serbian EU integration progress.

Up until 2013, while Serbia was still a potential candidate of the EU and later in the early years of its candidate status, the advancement in the EU integration process depended primarily on internal reforms and agreements which had to enter into force between the EU and Serbia. Serbian relations with any third country were seen as positive for Serbia's progress and even welcomed. This is especially evident by looking at how the assessing of Serbia's energy cooperation with Russia progressed in these years. The EU welcomed the privatization of the Serbian Oil Company NIS and saw it as a necessary act for finalizing privatization of state-owned companies as one of the key objectives for the country in the negotiations.<sup>103</sup>

In the case of the Foreign, Security and Defense Policy, in the earlier years Progress Reports have shown a positive progress when it comes to alignment with the large majority (more than 90% alignment) of the EU Declarations and Council decisions, as well as participation in the Common Security and Defense Policy missions.<sup>104</sup> Judging from the expressions used, the European Commission seemed to have been satisfied with the progress

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<sup>102</sup> Serbia 2008 Progress Report (Commission of the European Communities, 2008)  
[http://www.mei.gov.rs/upload/documents/sporazumi\\_sa\\_eu/progress\\_report\\_2008.pdf](http://www.mei.gov.rs/upload/documents/sporazumi_sa_eu/progress_report_2008.pdf) (accessed May 5, 2018).

<sup>103</sup> Serbia 2010 Progress Report (Commission of the European Communities, 2010)  
[http://www.mei.gov.rs/upload/documents/Izvestaji/serbia\\_2010\\_progress\\_report.pdf](http://www.mei.gov.rs/upload/documents/Izvestaji/serbia_2010_progress_report.pdf) (accessed May 5, 2018).

<sup>104</sup> Serbia Progress Report (2008)

of Serbia with regard to the chapter on Foreign, Security and Defense Policy. However, in 2013 the alignment starts to decrease. In the most recent Progress Report (that from 2018), the alignment was 52% compared to more than 90% in 2008 and 2009.<sup>105</sup> Especially significant is decrease in 2014 when Serbia aligned itself, when invited, with 28 out of 45 EU declarations and Council decisions which is 62% alignment compared to 89% during the reference period of the 2013 Progress Report.<sup>106</sup> That year, Serbia marked absence at the vote of the UN General Assembly Resolution on the territorial integrity of Ukraine. This represented a major disappointment for the European Commission. Furthermore, Serbia did not align itself with Council decisions introducing restrictive measures in the context of Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and events in eastern Ukraine.<sup>107</sup> While the Serbian government gave reassurances that the country would not seek to take advantage of the situation arising from the sanctions imposed on Russia, the overly positive tone of the previous reports towards Serbia's progress was lost and downgraded to minimal expressions.

The 2015 Progress Report expressed even more negative progress of Serbia with regard to the convergence towards the EU than that of the previous year. For the first time, the Commission emphasized Serbia's need for the improvement of alignment with EU declarations and Council.<sup>108</sup> In addition, Serbia's cooperation with the Russian Federation was no longer seen as positive but rather as something to be concerned about. Visit by the Russia's President to Serbia and joint military drills by Serbian and Russian airborne forces were seen as a "continuation of high-level contacts with Russia."<sup>109</sup> While not being clearly stated in the

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<sup>105</sup> Serbia 2018 Progress Report (Commission of the European Communities, 2018)  
[http://www.mei.gov.rs/upload/documents/eu\\_dokumenta/godisnji\\_izvestaji\\_ek\\_o\\_napretku/ec\\_progress\\_report\\_18.pdf](http://www.mei.gov.rs/upload/documents/eu_dokumenta/godisnji_izvestaji_ek_o_napretku/ec_progress_report_18.pdf) (accessed May 5, 2018).

<sup>106</sup> Serbia 2014 Progress Report (Commission of the European Communities, 2014)  
[http://www.mei.gov.rs/upload/documents/eu\\_dokumenta/godisnji\\_izvestaji\\_ek\\_o\\_napretku/serbia-progress-report14.pdf](http://www.mei.gov.rs/upload/documents/eu_dokumenta/godisnji_izvestaji_ek_o_napretku/serbia-progress-report14.pdf) (accessed May 5, 2018).

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Serbia 2015 Progress Report (Commission of the European Communities, 2015)  
[http://www.mei.gov.rs/upload/documents/eu\\_dokumenta/godisnji\\_izvestaji\\_ek\\_o\\_napretku/report\\_serbia\\_15.pdf](http://www.mei.gov.rs/upload/documents/eu_dokumenta/godisnji_izvestaji_ek_o_napretku/report_serbia_15.pdf) (accessed May 5, 2018).

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

Progress Report, the EU Commission seen these joint military drills on Serbian territory as a provocation, especially because they were held near the border with Croatia, a NATO member state.<sup>110</sup>

Progress Reports of the following years show even greater concern and Serbia's nonalignment with the EU's Declarations and Council decisions. In addition to nonalignment with the EU Council decisions in regards to the EU restrictive measures related to Russia, the Report states that Serbia did not align with any other decision where Russia's interests are at stake.<sup>111</sup> The last report highlights the importance of establishing a database for monitoring the imposition and implementation of restrictive measures in accordance to Serbian law and shows further concern that agreements and high-level contacts with Russia might infringe on Serbia's obligations under EU accession negotiations.<sup>112</sup>

Judging from the European Commission Progress reports, the progress of Serbia's convergence towards the EU has been slowing down since 2008 with a significant decline marked starting in 2014. This slowdown, as this section demonstrated, represents an increasing concern for the EU to the extent that the Commission recognized that the EU needs to change its approach if it wants to stop greater divergence from the EU's values, practices and ways of doing things.

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<sup>110</sup> "Belgrade Plays Down Joint Military Exercise With Russia" (Radio Free Europe, 2014) <https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-plays-down-russia-military-exercise/26692231.html> (accessed May 5, 2018).

<sup>111</sup> Serbia 2016 Progress Report (Commission of the European Communities, 2016) [http://www.mei.gov.rs/upload/documents/eu\\_dokumenta/godisnji\\_izvestaji\\_ek\\_o\\_napretku/godisnji\\_izvestaj\\_16\\_eng\(1\).pdf](http://www.mei.gov.rs/upload/documents/eu_dokumenta/godisnji_izvestaji_ek_o_napretku/godisnji_izvestaj_16_eng(1).pdf) (accessed May 5, 2018).

<sup>112</sup> Serbia Progress Report (2018)

### 3.4 Analysis of the Political Developments in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Political elites in Bosnia and Herzegovina are deeply polarized, especially regarding the country's relations with the international community and what they perceive as external interferences and unacceptable political conditionality.<sup>113</sup> The major issue for the transformation of Bosnia and Herzegovina's politics into a Western-style representative democracy has been its complex ethnicized constitutional Dayton system.<sup>114</sup> The Dayton Peace Agreement, which ended the Bosnian war in 1995, created a highly decentralized system from which we have the two entities the Republic of Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The creation of these entities weakened the central state and installed wide-ranging ethnic vetoes at state and national level which aimed at protecting the so called vital national interests of the Constituent people, namely Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats. This decentralization combined with diverging interests makes it extremely difficult to implement any reforms needed to enhance the country's convergence towards the EU.

The conditionality which came out of signing of the Stability and Association Agreement between the EU and Bosnia and Herzegovina emphasized the importance of creation of central state structures in among others, the military, tax system and police, in order for Bosnia enhance its convergence towards the EU and therefore move forwards in its EU negotiations process. However, the Dayton system has shown to be utterly inefficient in this respect blocking any reforms aimed at restructuring the system of being made. What the European Union sees as functional way of political system does not line up with what Bosnian highest officials perceive as functional, even when they claim that it does. No consensus has been made in regards to reforming the political system in the country since the politicians have

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<sup>113</sup> Othon Anastasakis, *The EU's political conditionality in the Western Balkans: towards a more pragmatic approach*, (University of Oxford, 2008)

<sup>114</sup> Corina Stratulat, *EU integration and party politics in the Balkans* (European Policy Center, 2014), pp. 92. [http://www.epc.eu/documents/uploads/pub\\_4716\\_eu\\_integration\\_and\\_party\\_politics\\_in\\_the\\_balkans.pdf](http://www.epc.eu/documents/uploads/pub_4716_eu_integration_and_party_politics_in_the_balkans.pdf) (accessed May 2, 2018).

very diverging views. Bosniaks favor a reform that would move away from the entity division and towards a more centralized state, while the Serbs and Croats advocate for even more division along the ethnic lines. This is where intensified Russian involvement in the Republic of Srpska manifests itself in making possible the country's overall shift away from the EU path.

Since 2003, Bosnia and Herzegovina seemed to be doing well with concern to the EU negotiations. In 2006, not long before the general elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina took place, the leaders of the two strongest social democratic options in the country, Zlatko Lagumdžija, the President of the Social Democratic Party of Bosnia and Herzegovina (SDP) based in the Federation, and Milorad Dodik, President of the Alliance of the Social Democrats (SNSD) based in the Republic of Srpska, visited Germany as a part of a joint tour. During the visit, the two presented themselves as an alternative to the ethnic parties which dominated Bosnian political scene since the early 1990s. They were convinced that they will win in the upcoming elections and spoke enthusiastically about revolutionizing and democratizing the country and leading it strongly towards the EU membership once in power.<sup>115</sup> Dodik spoke confidently about his victory in the upcoming elections over the Serbian Democratic Party which was founded by Radovan Karadzic, a war criminal, which has been "harming" the country with its nationalistic populism.<sup>116</sup>

However, nothing of what was announced came to pass in the following years. Dodik won the 2006 elections and not long after the elections, he started to change his rhetoric and stance on the EU negotiations of Bosnia and Herzegovina. As the time passed, his rhetoric became more and more nationalistic, more anti-European and more pro-Russian. The SNSD even signed the agreement of cooperation with United Russia, a ruling party in the Russian Federation, and an agreement on military neutrality together with major Russian and Serbian

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid. 96

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

parties. Dodik began vetoing many proposals that aimed at reforming the country and moving it one step closer to the EU with a justification that they are designed to work "against the vital interests of the Serbs."<sup>117</sup> In this period, the Republic of Srpska's relations with the Russian Federation were highly intensifying and Dodik was openly receiving Kremlin's support in his endeavors.<sup>118</sup> The SNSD and Dodik, which have been in power ever since, have become the key political actors undermining Bosnia and Herzegovina's statehood and its EU integration process. Moreover, with every new election, anti-European and outspokenly pro-Kremlin political parties have been gaining more seats in the Parliamentary Assembly which then reflects itself in the policy outcomes. As their "alternative" is becoming stronger, namely the relationship with Russia, pro-Kremlin leaders in the Republic of Srpska seem to become more brave in blocking the potential reforms which could possibly set in motion Bosnia's EU negotiations process.

The referendum on the National Day of the Republic of Srpska is a great example of how Dodik and the SNSD are pushing boundaries when it comes to Bosnian national government, the European Union and the international community in general. Months before the referendum Dodik had several meetings with Russian highest officials which illustrated intensive cooperation between the entity and the Russian Federation. The meeting between him and Putin only three days before the referendum additionally indicated Kremlin's strong support for Dodik's referendum. Russia's support and the fact that there were no political consequences (except for the US sanctions against Dodik) after the unconstitutional referendum could serve only as a further encouragement for Dodik.

The referendum and Bosnia and Herzegovina's abstention from the EU economic

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<sup>117</sup> Dimitar Bechev, *A Bosnian Referendum Shows Russia's Influence in the Balkans—As Well As Its Limits* (Emerging Europe, 2016)

<sup>118</sup> Louis Charbonneau, *EU says Bosnian Serbs seek to undermine peace deal*, (Reuters, 2012) <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-bosnia-un/eu-says-bosnian-serbs-seek-to-undermine-peace-deal-idUSBRE8AC13F20121113> (accessed May 8, 2018).

sanctions on Russia due to the efforts made by the Serb leaders to block the decision are only some of the examples which show how the Russian Federation's recent involvement in the Republic of Srpska is slowing down the whole country's process of convergence towards the EU.

### 3.5 Shift in the Public Perceptions of the European Union and the Russian Federation in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Assessing how public perceptions on Russia and the European Union have changed in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the recent period is quite challenging because of the country's complicated political divisions and ethnically heterogeneous population. In Serbia, majority of the population, namely 80%, are ethnic Serbs so the public opinion polls were successful in reflecting the perceptions of the average citizen. In Bosnia and Herzegovina on the other side, according to the data from the 2013 census published by the Agency of Statistics of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bosniaks constitute 50.11% of population, Bosnian Serbs 30.78% of population, Croats 15.43% and others form around 3%.<sup>119</sup> This makes it challenging to assess public attitudes since opinions of different ethnic groups vary greatly. In order to make this analysis as credible as possible, we will first look into how the public perceptions of the average citizens have changed over the recent period and then we will look at the public perceptions of Bosnian Serbs since they constitute a great majority of population in the entity of the Republic of Srpska where much of the Russia's involvement in Bosnia and Herzegovina is concentrated.

According to the Gallup Poll from 2008, 66% of Bosnia citizens strongly believed that

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<sup>119</sup> Census of Population, Households and Dwellings in Bosnia And Herzegovina, 2013 Final Results (Agency for Statistics of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2016)  
<http://www.popis2013.ba/popis2013/doc/Popis2013prvoIzdanje.pdf> (accessed May 8, 2018).

Bosnia and Herzegovina's membership in the EU would be a positive thing, while only 8% saw it as a negative thing for the country.<sup>120</sup> However, in 2017, only 49% of citizens strongly supported the EU membership of Bosnia and Herzegovina and saw it as a positive thing, while 22% opposed to it.<sup>121</sup> What is more, 33% of Bosnian citizens believe that the EU enlargement of Bosnia and Herzegovina will never happen, while this percentage was significantly smaller only few years ago.<sup>122</sup> Still, majority of citizens (86%) think that maintaining strong relations with the European Union is in Bosnia and Herzegovina's national interest.<sup>123</sup> It is interesting that there seems not to be any change over the years regarding this last point. In general, Bosnian citizens' perceptions on the European Union have considerably changed since 2008 and this change is to a large extent caused by the shift in the perceptions of the citizens in the Republic of Srpska entity.

Even though the United States and the countries from the EU such as Germany are by far Bosnia and Herzegovina's biggest donors, Bosnian citizens believe that the Russian Federation is the third largest donor to the country. Bosnian Serbs are the ones who greatly impacted this positioning in the surveys since the majority of them believes that the Russian Federation is convincingly the largest donor to the country.<sup>124</sup> In addition, 89% of Serbs see the role of the Russian Federation in Bosnia and Herzegovina as positive, whereas perceptions of Bosnian Croats and Bosniaks differ largely since only 43% of Croats and 29% of Bosniaks see the role of Russia as positive.<sup>125</sup> Majority of Serbs see the Russian Federation as Bosnia and Herzegovina's greatest ally (47% of them whereas the second most popular answer is

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<sup>120</sup> Cynthia English, *Many in Bosnia and Herzegovina Support EU Membership* (Gallup, 2008) <http://news.gallup.com/poll/107284/many-bosnia-herzegovina-support-membership.aspx> (accessed May 8, 2018).

<sup>121</sup> Bosnia and Herzegovina: Attitudes on Violent Extremism and Foreign Influence (Center for Insights in Survey Research, 2017), pp. 36.

<sup>122</sup> Balkan Barometer 2017 (Sarajevo: Regional Cooperation Council, 2017), pp. 55 [https://www.rcc.int/seeds/files/RCC\\_BalkanBarometer\\_PublicOpinion\\_2017.pdf](https://www.rcc.int/seeds/files/RCC_BalkanBarometer_PublicOpinion_2017.pdf) (accessed May 8, 2018).

<sup>123</sup> Bosnia and Herzegovina: Attitudes on Violent Extremism and Foreign Influence (2017)

<sup>124</sup> Ibid. 25

<sup>125</sup> Ibid. 27

Turkey with only 10%).<sup>126</sup> It is undeniable that perceptions in the Republic of Srpska are extremely pro-Russian which seems not to be the case in the rest of the country. The support the Russian Federation gets from the Bosnian Serbs in 2017 is much greater than that of 2008 when there was not as much Russia's involvement in the entity as there is nowadays.<sup>127</sup>

At the same time, public attitudes of Bosnian Serbs towards the European Union have significantly decreased in this period which highly influenced decrease in the support of the EU of the average Bosnian citizen.<sup>128</sup> Only 18% of Bosnian Serbs strongly support Bosnia and Herzegovina's accession to the EU, whereas the support of Bosniaks and Croats is around 60% which is similar to the general population's support from 2006.<sup>129</sup> Besides, more than 93% of Bosnian Serbs have a very favorable opinion of Vladimir Putin and only 32% have favorable opinion of Angela Merkel. The opinions of Bosniaks and Croats, even though very different from those of Bosnian Serbs on all of the points discussed above, resemble each other with only slight variations. Judging from this, it is clear that the Russian involvement and influence in Bosnia and Herzegovina is exclusively concentrated in the Republic of Srpska entity, while its impact in the rest of the country is negligible and it stops on a small economic cooperation. However, the power of the Republic of Srpska's entity in the decision-making processes of the whole country, as seen in the previous section, makes this change extremely relevant in respect to the country's overall direction towards/away from Europe.

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid. 31

<sup>127</sup> Balkan Barometer (2017)

<sup>128</sup> Bosnia and Herzegovina: Attitudes on Violent Extremism and Foreign Influence (2017)

<sup>129</sup> Ibid. 37

### 3.6 European Commission's Progress Reports on Bosnia and Herzegovina

Unlike Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina still has not acquired the status of the EU "candidate country". It has been recognized by the EU as a "potential candidate country" for accession since 2003, but because of disagreements between domestic political leaders and country's inability to address key issues identified by the EU, the overall pace has been very limited. Already in the 2011 report (the first report the European Commission published for Bosnia and Herzegovina) the European Commission identified the need for a shared vision between the political representatives of the two entities in Bosnia and Herzegovina on the overall direction and future of the country in order for the country to be able to move forward in its EU accession path.<sup>130</sup> In addition, respect for democratic principles and the right to equal treatment without discrimination, as embodied in the European Convention on Human Rights, was identified as an essential issue.<sup>131</sup> The lack of the agreement between the political structures on this and other pressing issues disabled Bosnia and Herzegovina in implementing any reforms needed to facilitate the Europeanization process.

To such a degree, Bosnia and Herzegovina's progress towards the EU accession depended on the internal factors. As a matter of fact, in the 2011 Progress Report and other earlier reports, Russia is nowhere to be mentioned, which implies that the Bosnia and Herzegovina's EU path was not by any means connected with the external factors such as cooperation with "third countries", but solely on internal issues such as ensuring stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights, respect for and protection of minorities and regional cooperation. Still, it is important to note that the cooperation of the Republic of Srpska's political leaders with the Russian Federation had an impact on these

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<sup>130</sup> 2011 Progress Report for Bosnia and Herzegovina (European Commission, 2011)

<sup>131</sup> The Sejdic-Finci vs. Bosnia and Herzegovina case.

internal issues because of Russia's increasing support for nationalist and separatist political elites in the Republic of Srpska.

The EU Commission's 2014 and 2015 reports recognized the first challenges that are directly connected with Russian involvement in the Republic of Srpska in the area of energy and the Common Foreign and Security Policy. The proposed draft Intergovernmental Agreement between the Republic of Srpska and the Russian Federation on South Stream was assessed as not being in compliance with the Energy Community's *acquis communautaire* and therefore the Commission urged for it not to be concluded unless remedied.<sup>132</sup> The agreement was later concluded but due to abolishment of the South Stream project, it did not get implemented. While it was in breach of the *acquis*, it also falls under another critical area identified by the Commission as essential for Bosnia and Herzegovina's EU accession progress. According to the Constitution of the country, the Republic of Srpska must ask for the approval of the Bosnia and Herzegovina's central government and this agreement was agreed on without approval of the central government. Although Bosnian authorities have disagreements on many other instances which are indirectly related to Russia's cooperation with one part of the country, this one is especially significant since it is the first time the Commission recognized the event related to Russia as a concern for the country's negotiation process.

With respect to the Foreign, Security and Defense policy, there was a significant decline in alignment in 2014 comparing to previous years. In 2014, Bosnia and Herzegovina aligned itself with 52% of relevant EU declarations and Council decisions, while in 2013 the alignment was 66%.<sup>133</sup> Specifically mentioned here is that Bosnia and Herzegovina did not align itself with Council decisions introducing EU restrictive measures in the context of Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and events in eastern Ukraine.<sup>134</sup> Furthermore, Bosnia and Herzegovina

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<sup>132</sup> 2014 Progress Report for Bosnia and Herzegovina (European Commission, 2014)

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

was absent on the UN General Assembly Resolution on the territorial integrity of Ukraine. The reason behind the nonalignment and absence was the lack of consensus within the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Parliamentary Assembly where Serbian leaders voted against.<sup>135</sup>

Though the earlier progress reports characterized Bosnia and Herzegovina's convergence progress towards the EU as "slow", the 2014 Report shows that this progress has downgraded even more by describing the country as being at a "standstill" in the process. The main reason behind this stagnation, as noted by the Commission, is a lack of political will on the part of the political leaders to reach consensus on reforms necessary for progress in the EU path. Progress reports of the following years express similar concerns and little to no progress.<sup>136</sup>

While the lack of political will seems to be a theme in the European Commission's progress reports on Bosnia and Herzegovina, it cannot be argued that the Russia's impact on the EU integration process of the country lies solely in the concerns explicitly expressed in the reports. On the contrary, it highly effects the inability of the country's political elites to reach consensus which would facilitate the country's convergence towards the EU. This is especially evident in respect to reforms regarding restructuring the Dayton system where all of the proposals have been blocked by the leaders in the Republic of Srpska who have only become more uncompromising in the recent years as they developed closer cooperation with the Russian Federation and as they have been getting increasing support on their positions from Russian political elites.

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> 2018 Progress Report for Bosnia and Herzegovina (European Commission, 2018)

## Chapter 4: Discussion and Conclusion

### 4.1 Discussion

This chapter reveals how the research undertaken in this study relates to the aims set in the introductory chapter, as well as it explains the main findings. This study sought to shed a light on the influence of Russia's involvement in the Western Balkans on the process of political, social and cultural convergence of the states in the region towards the EU. The following findings leave space for different interpretations and future debate.

This thesis demonstrated that Russia has changed its strategic focus on Serbia and the Republic of Srpska in the past decade. Russia has pursued a more assertive foreign policy strategy in the region since 2008 and moved from being negligible actor in the early 2000s when all of the Western Balkans states showed remarkable determination to follow the path towards the EU, to a very significant actor today in shaping Serbia's and Bosnia and Herzegovina's domestic affairs but also political and social context of the EU negotiations of the two countries. Strengthening of Russia's power in the region proposed an alternative to the Western values and ideas of democracy in Serbia and the Republic of Srpska which then led to changes in the political decision making and in public preferences with regard to Russia and the EU.

In Serbia, Russia's power made considerable inroads because of Russia's strategic support for Serbia's position on Kosovo. Russia's continuous support for Serbia concerning Kosovo, combined with policies pushed by the EU member states which only have limited support in Serbia, brought a major shift to Serbia's foreign policy outlook. Serbia's highest officials and the general public felt let down by the EU member states for supporting the independence of Kosovo and creating a direct threat to Serbia's vital national interest - territorial integrity. On the other side, Russia's support was not only welcomed, but relied on

heavily, which gave Moscow leverage and enabled further strengthening of Russia's power in the country. In addition, numerous economic and military agreements between Serbia and Russia elevated bilateral cooperation to the highest level. These agreements gave Moscow even more leverage because Serbia became fully dependent on Russian exports of oil and gas.

Moreover, Russia has utilized various soft power tools to promote its interests among ordinary citizens of Serbia including creation and financing of various citizens' and students' organizations, religious institutions and the media outlets. The reason why these tools were so successful in strengthening the popularity of Russia among Serbian citizens is because they played the emotional card by reviving the image of Russia as a historical "savior of Serbian nation" and emphasizing cultural and religious ties. Most importantly, they advocated for no compromise when it comes to Serbia's territorial integrity which was very appealing to the ordinary citizens. To a large extent, their success lies in the absence of pro-western alternatives since pro-western civil society organizations in Serbia have showed to be very distant from the ordinary citizens.

In the Republic of Srpska, Russia made significant inroads because of the support for the referendum on the National Day of the Republic of Srpska and veto on the UN resolution on the Srebrenica genocide. These strategic moves brought Russia great popularity among the highest officials and the ordinary citizens. Russia's support for Serbia's position on the independence of Kosovo played a role as well since majority of Bosnian Serbs identify more with Serbia than with Bosnia and Herzegovina. In addition, strong activity of pro-Russian civil society and military organizations in the entity showed great success when it comes to promoting Russian interests among the Bosnian Serbs. While there has been some activity of the pro-western civil society organizations in the Republic of Srpska as well, this activity has been insignificant in making any impact comparing to that of pro-Russian organizations.

For both Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the EU enlargement fatigue and more

specifically, the decreasing interest of the EU to enlarge into the Western Balkans, has created an opening for domestic political forces to play on Euroscepticism, nationalism and frustration to score political points over their pro-European rivals. The opportunity structure which emerged from this context enabled Russia to expand its sphere of influence by further reinforcing these Eurosceptical and nationalist attitudes. The overall effect of these influence factors has been a slowing down of the convergence of Serbia and the Republic of Srpska towards the EU practices and ways of doing things and an issue specific divergence.

This divergence demonstrates itself in increasingly autocratic governments in Serbia and the Republic of Srpska who have been intentionally abusing the lack of adequate response from the West. As revealed in the third chapter, the governments have recently become increasingly pro-Russian and Eurosceptic. This is proved by nonalignment of Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina with the EU policies concerning Russia. In the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the nonalignment was brought about by vetoes of the Republic of Srpska's leaders. The divergence was also proved by broken promises made to the EU and, as it is the case in the Republic of Srpska, breaches of the domestic and international law regardless of multiple calls and warnings made by the EU states not to commit them. The European Commission Progress Reports on Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina further shed light on the influence of Russia in slowing down of the process of convergence towards the EU since they express increasing concern with regard to Serbia's and the Republic of Srpska's deepening cooperation with Russia and its impact on the EU negotiation process as a whole.

Along with political divergence, social divergence from the EU path has been revealed as well through analysis of the change in public preferences in Serbia and the Republic of Srpska. The significant shift of the public opinion with regard to the EU and Russia has been noticed which shows that citizens are increasingly seeing Russia as an alternative to the Western practices and values in the region. It is also interesting that citizens perceive Russia

as the most important economic partner for their countries even though the EU member states are by far the greatest contributors to Serbia's and Bosnia and Herzegovina's economies. On top of that, citizens increasingly perceive Russia as the most significant strategic partner for their country which much differs from the perceptions they had in the early 2000s. This demonstrates the influence of Russian soft power tools in displaying, and often exaggerating, Russia's power in the two countries.

These changes of the political, cultural and social context of the EU enlargement negotiations can be expected to influence the negotiations. Two scenarios appear possible: either the EU negotiations of Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina stall making future enlargement even less likely or they pick up as the EU becomes even more concerned about Serbia's and Bosnia and Herzegovina's shift away from the EU and thus it decides to put more effort and assertiveness into the negotiations.

It appears that the first scenario has already been set in motion since, even though the political decision makers remain rhetorically committed to the EU membership, this thesis showed that their devotion has significantly decreased and that they are no longer willing to make compromises in order to move forward with the EU negotiations. This is more evident in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina since the Republic of Srpska political leaders are not willing to compromise on any of the steps that the EU considers to be crucial for Bosnia and Herzegovina's integration process, primarily reforms of the Dayton system. In Serbia, the cooperation with Russia is still perceived by many as a way to increase the bargaining power with the EU because the ruling government still emphasizes the EU membership as Serbia's highest foreign policy objective. However, the rhetoric and actions have considerably changed and show no willingness from the Serbian side to make compromises on the issue of Kosovo and other policies crucial for moving the integration process forward. At the same time, Russia has gotten a lot of economic and political leverage in the country which poses a question if this

relationship is still something Serbia is able to control. In the future, Serbia could be forced to abolish the balanced approach it has been using so far and it could find itself in the position to have to choose side between the EU and Russia. Judging from the political and public preferences, if Serbia found itself in a situation like this, it would most probably make decisions which would negatively impact the EU negotiations process.

The second scenario would involve the EU pursuing an assertive approach to the region in order to show the countries that it is devoted to keeping its promises and that there is no need for them to look for alternatives in Russia, Turkey or China. Showing its devotion only to political elites in the countries and continuing to stay distant from the ordinary citizens would not be enough because the citizens would still be exposed to manipulation of Eurosceptic, nationalist and separatist political leaders who advocate for policies which would, if implemented, have direct negative impact on the EU negotiations process of the two countries. What the EU should do, if it still sees the Western Balkans states as its potential members, is to stop lowering standards and expectations when it comes to processes of integration and cooperation with the states in the region. The concessions it has been making recently in order to accommodate the interests of the decision makers in the region were not reciprocated and only further complicated the situation. The EU should remain committed to its principles and promises regarding the possibility of full membership in the EU and it should intensify its assistance in the implementation of these processes since leaving the implementation to domestic decision makers proved unsuccessful.

Finally, it should invest more resources in the region in order to prevent and reduce all potential negative effects of the third parties on the EU negotiation process of the Western Balkans states. This process would require some diplomatic harmonization with other powerful actors in the region, primarily with the Russian Federation.

## 4.2 Conclusion

This thesis sought to shed a light on the Russia's influence on the political and social context of the EU negotiations of the Western Balkans. In-depth analysis of the cases of Serbia and the Republic of Srpska entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina revealed the ways in which the two's intensifying cooperation with the Russian Federation effects Serbia's and Bosnia and Herzegovina's process of political, social and cultural convergence towards the EU. The overall effect of these influence factors has been slowing down of the process of convergence of the two countries towards the EU values and practices. The issue specific divergence from the EU has also been revealed. With that being said, the research question defined in the introductory part has been answered.

The extent to which this political, social and cultural shift away from the EU path could effect the broader process of the EU negotiations of the two countries was not systematically discussed, which in itself leaves space for further improvement. By proving that there is influence of Serbia's and the Republic of Srpska connections with the Russian Federation on the political and social context of the EU negotiations of the Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the main objective of this research has been met. Any other attempt at addressing this topic from a different angle would require further academic research.

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