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Indexing
Abstracting

ASSESSING RUSSIAN IMPACT ON THE WESTERN BALKAN COUNTRIES' EU ACCESSION: CASES OF CROATIA AND SERBIA

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Abstract

The matter of EU enlargement to the Western Balkans has become overshadowed by pressing issues such as Brexit, the rise of the radical right and international terrorism. Notwithstanding the pressure to address these issues accordingly, increasing tensions and ethnic outbursts across the Western Balkan region are reason enough for the European Union to devote significant attention to accession talks. This article addresses the Western Balkan countries' Europeanization process with consideration of Russia as an external actor. By assessing the candidate countries' progress amid EU negotiations, the article suggests that the countries' bilateral ties with Russia have an impact on the Europeanization process which is particularly visible in Chapter 31 Foreign, security, and defence policy of the acquis communautaire. The broader geopolitical framework that comprises the multifaceted relationship between the EU and Russia is crucial for understanding the dynamics of EU-Western Balkans-Russia triangle.

Keywords: Western Balkans, European Union, Europeanization process, Russia, EU-Russia relations, geopolitics

INTRODUCTION

There "will be no enlargement in the next five years, the EU needs to mark a pause in its enlargement process so that we can consolidate what has been done with 28", were the exact words of president of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, in 2014, when he reassured the public that no further enlargement would take place under his presidency. Although more than half his mandate has already passed, recent developments do not provide hope for a change after Juncker leaves his post. Global changes which brought about the (un)expected presidency of Donald J. Trump might alter the nature of US foreign policy in Transatlantic relations and affect further EU transformative power in its

neighbourhood. The presence of various external actors throughout the Western Balkan region might stifle countries' progress towards the EU due to their various security, economic, and political interests. Along these lines, this article sees its purpose in inspecting one of those external factors which have a sound possibility to impede the progress toward the EU.

This article proves that the Western Balkan region does not rely solely on the EU, but also on other external factors which have a real possibility to exert influence through various channels including, but not limited to, pragmatic and materialistic factors which relate to economic, security, and geopolitical benefits. By looking at i) visits and statements of high officials, ii) country's stance on sanctions against Russia, and iii) European Commission progress reports with a special emphasis on *Chapter 31 Foreign, security, and defence policy* (hereinafter *Chapter 31*), the article demonstrates that Russian leverage in countries which tend to nurture closer bilateral ties with Moscow comes at the expense of hindering the Europeanization process at times when EU-Russia relations are overly negative. The cases of Croatia and Serbia are subjected to in-depth scrutiny within a closely defined framework. The periods of positive (2008-2011) and negative EU-Russia relations (2012-2016) were chosen according to the work of Forsberg and Haukkala (2016). The article encourages two research questions: "How do country's close bilateral ties with Russia affect the Europeanization process?" and "How could the volatile nature of EU-Russia relations be the reason for stalling the Europeanization process in countries with closer ties to Russia?"

RATIONALE BEHIND THE WESTERN BALKANS' EU ASPIRATIONS

The basic equation underpinning the enlargement decision for eligible neighbouring states has not changed: the benefits of joining the EU (and the costs of being excluded from it) create incentives for governments to satisfy EU's extensive entry requirements (Vachudova 2014, 128). National governments have an incentive to co-operate where policy coordination increases their control over domestic policy outcomes, permitting them to achieve goals that would not otherwise be possible (Moravscik 1993, 485). The reasons for EU to support enlargement to the WB are the same as for earlier enlargements: fostering stable democratic regimes in the EU's backyard (or internal courtyard). There is the perception of abiding geopolitical risks: the EU will pay the price in myriad ways for ethnic conflict, economic collapse, lawlessness, instability and poor governance in the region if it does not pursue enlargement (Vachudova 2014, 126). The escalation of ethnic and political conflicts in a fragile WB region could cast doubt on the EU transformative power, effectiveness and credibility as a foreign policy actor. If the pace [of enlargement] does decelerate, overshadowed by the economic and political crises within the European Union, Europe might lose the Balkans once more to nationalism, violence and further breakdowns of agreed states and borders, or it might lose its leverage to other actors who may not share similar views and values with the EU (Balfour and Stratulat 2011, 2).

Academic works so far have sought to examine the EU strategy towards WB countries, as well as the ongoing democratization process (Türkes and Gökgöz 2006; Rupnik 2011; Veljanoska et al. 2014). Türkes and Gökgöz (2006) put forward an argument how the EU strategy as integrated and effective seem quite reasonable, particularly if one considers the quantity of post-Dayton EU initiatives. Blockmans (2007) argues how

mismanagement of the remaining ethnic-territorial and constitutional issues in the WB could have severe and destabilizing consequences, including a greater likelihood of political extremism, an increase in organized crime and other illegal economic activities, terrorism, armed conflict and further human displacement. Leaving WB countries to deal with the remaining ethnic-territorial and constitutional issues alone would have a damaging effect, which would eventually lead to a negative spillover onto neighbouring EU member states.

RUSSIA AS AN EXTERNAL (F)ACTOR

Russian interests in WB are driven by several factors. Firstly, Russia, being a permanent member of UN Security Council, has the right to veto every decision aimed at WB countries that does not match Russian interests. The Kremlin's actions in the region – including meddling in the domestic politics of Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, or Montenegro, and wielding its UN Security Council veto on Balkan matters, or threatening to – have only reinforced the notion that Russia "is back" in the region (Lasheras et al. 2016). It makes Russia present in the region not only via disinformation strategy but also by directly influencing political debates and interfering in countries' internal affairs, as it was the case in 2016 when Russia was accused of organising plot to assassinate Montenegrin Prime Minister (PM) (Forster 2016). Secondly, Ralchev (2012) argues how the WB region is of strategic importance as a transit route for Russian gas. Where gas is imported, Russia's Gazprom often enjoys exclusive rights with respect to access to infrastructure and other non-competitive privileges, such as a prohibition of re-sale or re-export (International Energy Agency 2008). Thirdly, Clark and Foxwall (2014) emphasize this ideational dimension of Russian foreign policy which manifests itself through Slavic roots and Orthodox religion in some countries in the Balkans. Common traditional and cultural values again after the Soviet collapse became the foundation for dialogue at a high political level between Russia and the Western Balkans leaders (Lo 2002).

Russia's impact on EU external governance is also detectable. The external governance is determined by the EU's power and its interdependence with regard to third countries as well as competing "governance providers" in its neighborhood and at the global level – mainly the US and Russia (Lavenex and Schimmelfenig 2010). The EU enlargement has indirectly bolstered an atmosphere of contestation between the EU and Russia not only in the shared neighborhood (Ukraine, Moldova, and South Caucasus) but also in WB region where Russia has its geopolitical interests. The European Union is not only the primary trading partner but also a source of identity for, and a challenge to, Russia's domestic and foreign policy choices (Forsberg and Haukkala 2016, 4).

By enlarging to the East, the EU had the leverage to influence the wider environment in which Russian economic interests were challenged. [M]any issues where the EU has tried to exercise its influence have been matters that have belonged to Moscow's own remit as a fully sovereign decision-maker (Forsberg and Haukkala 2016, 9). Moscow's strategic alliance with several WB countries provides a low-cost opportunity for Russia to undertake hybrid action to undermine European objectives in the Balkans (Weslau and Wilson 2016).

SCRUTINIZING COUNTRIES' TIES TO RUSSIA AMID EU NEGOTIATIONS

Croatian progress toward the EU was determined more by its neighbours, rather than other external factors. According to the 2008 progress report, regional disputes with Slovenia over borders and tensions with Serbia over Serb minority in Croatia, as well as unresolved war crimes and mutual file suits before International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), were to be strengthened in the future. In point of fact, the analysis of progress reports did not detect any proof of Russian impact on Croatian accession negotiations during the period 2008–2012 which also marked last years of negotiations. The only disagreement between Croatia and the EU over Russia was about visa facilitation regime, although the decision to grant a temporary free visa for Russian citizens was economically motivated, rather than showing any signs of purposefully countering EU regulations.

With respect to *Chapter 31,* between the 2008 and 2011, Croatia had already made a substantial progress and had reached a high level of alignment with the EU regulations. Positive expressions were used to describe Croatia's progress: "country remains committed", "continued to support", "reinforced its participation", "efforts are continuing", and "adopted the relevant decisions" (Croatia 2010, 2011 progress reports). The European Commission was fully satisfied with Croatia's cooperation, especially with the UN Security Council as a non-permanent member, OSCE, as well as with NATO, the member of which Croatia became in 2009. By 2011, Croatia was already a member of the UN, the OSCE, the Council of Europe and NATO, which enabled the country to actively take part in the decision-making process in these organisations. In 2012, a year prior to joining the EU, Croatia succeeded in meeting all the requirements concerning *Chapter 31* and was ready to implement the *acquis*.

Apropos of Serbia, during the period of positive EU-Russia relations (2008-2011), there were no statements which would indicate that the cooperation with Russia would, in any case, interfere with Serbian progress in EU negotiations. Moreover, European Commission placed a special emphasis on the process of privatisation and liquidation of socially and state-owned enterprises as one of the key priorities of the European Partnership for Serbia (Serbia 2010 progress report). A Memorandum of Understanding with Russia on energy comprised several agreements, including privatisation and modernisation of oil company NIS, completion of the construction of underground gas storage facility and the passing of the Northern branch of the South Stream pipeline through Serbia (Serbia 2008 progress report). Reports have assessed Serbia's foreign policy cooperation with four main pillars – the EU, the US, Russia, and China, as "good".

As regards to the *Chapter 31*, 2011 and 2012 progress reports show Serbia's positive advancement in alignment with the majority of EU declarations and Council decisions, as well as participations in CSDP missions. Judging by the use of positive expressions – "engage actively", "continued to implement", "improved its alignment", "agreed to participate", "preparations are well on track" – European Commission was satisfied with the overall advancement in *Chapter 31*. Unlike previous reports, the 2014 and 2015 progress reports brought more disagreements regarding CFSP. Although the 2014 report noted that Serbia supported the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine, the main problem was Serbia's absence at the vote of UN General Assembly Resolution on the

territorial integrity of Ukraine. Another major disappointment for the European Commission came in light of restrictive measures which were introduced in response to the illegal annexation of Crimea when Serbia refused to adopted Council's decision. At the end, overall assessment of Serbia's performance in *Chapter 31* lost its overly positive adjectives from the previous reports and was downgraded to an expression "preparations in this field are on track" (Serbia 2014 progress report). In the 2015 progress report, the Commission recognized the newly formed geopolitical context with respect to Ukraine and placed a special emphasis on "the improvement of alignment with EU declarations and Council decision" alluding to Serbia's refusal to align with the Council's decision a year prior to it. Also, conducting joint military drills was seen as the "continuation of high-level contacts with Russia".

COUNTRIES' FOREIGN POLICY OUTLOOK

Croatia's state visits and official talks with Russia were mostly held in the first period of the analysed time frame (2008-2011) and were based on economic talks and cooperation in technical, energy and tourism sectors, rather than being politically motivated. Both President Mesic and PM Kosor sought to deepen economic ties with Russia and further strengthen mutual relations. "There is a lot of space for progress in relations between Russian Federation and Croatia" and "Croatia, being the 28th EU member, will absolutely support cooperation between the EU and Russia", noted PM Kosor in Moscow in March 2010 (Government of the Republic of Croatia 2010). Close relations between Croatia and Russia continued in 2013 when President Josipovic held brief talks with MFA Lavrov on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference and stated that "Croatia will become a member of the EU in less than half a year, which will mark a new chapter for relations between Croatia and Russia. We hope that our governments will use our membership in the EU to contribute to the cooperation between our two countries" (Tportal 2013).

The example of how political tensions can result in the rupture of the economic relations came on the eve of Croatian-Russian Economic Forum which was supposed to take place in November 2016. Following PM Plenkovic's official visit to Ukraine, where he stated that "Croatia's experience in peaceful integration of occupied areas could be very useful to Donetsk, Luhansk, and Crimea" (Government of the Republic of Croatia 2016), the Forum was cancelled as Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs expressed concerns about Croatia meddling into Ukraine internal affairs.

Conversely, Serbia-Russia relations reached new heights with Russia becoming Serbian voice in the UN Security Council on matters of Kosovo and Metohija. In the period between 2008 and 2016, two Russian presidents, the PM and Minister of Foreign Affairs (MFA) visited Belgrade eight times, while Serbian officials were hosted in Moscow nine times in total. There was at least one official visit per year among the highest ranked officials of Serbia and Russia taking place either in Belgrade or Moscow, whereas Croatia never saw President Putin paying an official visit to Zagreb, neither had Russian MFA Lavrov been to Croatia. President Medvedev in 2009 and President Putin in 2011 (his first visit after ten years) marked their presence in Belgrade and granted Serbia the opportunity to combine two important foreign policy aspirations: EU membership and Russian partnership.

In 2014, when EU-Russia relations were on the brink of collapse due to the Russian annexation of Crimea, Medvedev and Putin once more visited Belgrade. By referring to the "common Slavic background, language, faith, traditions, and culture, but also the fact that Russia and Serbia have always been on the same side", the former President Nikolic emphasized how "invaluable Russian support for maintaining the territorial integrity and Serbian independence is, specifically regarding Kosovo and Metohija" (Kremlin 2014). In December 2016 during the official visit of MFA Lavrov to Belgrade, MFA Dacic praised Serbian relations with Russia. "Without Russia, it is impossible to protect our territorial sovereignty. When we talk about Russia, we talk about our future. Serbia will never be anti-Russian country. We will not join sanctions against Russia. And we certainly do not intend to become NATO members" (Telegraf 2016).

The divergence between Croatia and Serbia can also be observed in the matter of sanctions against Russia. Former Croatian PM Milanovic stated how "Ukraine is falling apart as a country, and Russia, who has gone beyond what is acceptable in Crimea, should be warned not to go further" (Novilist 2014). Going against the unanimous EU decision was, therefore, not even considered among Croatian political leadership, as political relations with Moscow were always of a more irresolute nature. Nonetheless, rather than halting all political tasks with Russia, Croatia decided to adopt a pragmatic stance and campaigned for a two-way communication and a political dialogue as the only way for resolving the unfolding crisis. On the contrary, Serbia justified the unequivocal support for Russia amidst Ukrainian crisis by economy loses that sanctions would bring to financial and energy sectors, in particular. This would leave Serbian economy even more vulnerable and unable of undertaking reforms which are necessary to keep the pace with the EU obligations under *acquis* (EurActiv 2016). When a new round of sanctions came on the EU agenda, Serbian MFA Dacic stated that "talks about imposing sanctions on Russia at this stage are out of questions since it goes against Serbian national interest" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Serbia 2016).

On top of that, the current Croatian government sits in contrast with coalition governments in Serbia throughout both periods. Whilst Croatian coalition government after joining the EU showed unilateral support for the EU integration and distanced itself from Russia, the Serbian coalition government under current President Vucic is not as unequivocal in foreign policy and tends to shift preferences to both Moscow and Brussels. The Serbian government did not play a major role in deterring relations with Russia, but it had caused additional tensions with the EU, especially after 2014 when Belgrade refused to align with EU sanctions. It thus seems that Serbia's foreign policy tends to be more straightforward toward Russia, while Croatian government stays prudent and follows the political climate in the EU.

CONCLUSION

The Western Balkan region carries geostrategic significance for the security of the Mediterranean and Southern Europe, which serves as an incentive to international actors that strive to include the Western Balkans countries into any sort of regional (EU) and or/global (NATO) security complex. This article pinpointed possible complexities in the EU policy toward the region that are being exploited by foreign actors other than the EU itself. In the sample of two cases, Serbia showed a higher level of cooperation with Russia

in a bilateral, economic and strategic sense, and offered less successful performance during accession talks with the EU. The evidence of a country stalling the Europeanization process throughout the period of negative EU-Russia relations (2012-2016) was observed in *Chapter 31*. It proved that the alternation in EU-Russia relations has an impact on the overall outcome of WB countries' attitudes toward the EU. In Croatia's case, stances on Russia throughout both periods shifted in accordance with the EU official foreign policy narrative which caused severance of ties with Russia during the negative period of EU-Russia relations (2012-2016).

To that end, given strong Russian presence in certain Western Balkan countries, Europeanization becomes more costly for these countries due to their inability to align with and commit to every EU ruling during the accession talks. At the initial stage of negotiations, the EU is unable to impose strong conditionality toward candidate countries which then grants a promising niche to Russia to act as a security, financial and/or political guarantor in those countries. Europeanization may be hindered as long as Russia imposes itself as a security provider in the region. By having Russia as an ally, political leadership in Western Balkan countries is prone to be influenced by the Kremlin while aligning with EU decisions that negatively affect Russia, as it was the case with sanctions in 2014. After the adoption of the first round of sanctions in 2014, both PM Medvedev and President Putin visited Belgrade in order to ensure the continuity of political and strategic cooperation with Serbia. In this respect, traditionally good relations with Russia affect the rapprochement towards the EU during the accession negotiations.

Notwithstanding strong Russian presence in the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries through military, security and economic mechanisms, this article revealed that the Kremlin's influence stretches to the Western Balkans as well. As a consequence, in the Western Balkans and former Soviet Space where Russia claims to have historical or privileged interests, countries experience strong Russian presence that is preventing them from committing completely to the horizontal institutionalization necessary for EU membership. Increasing tensions in the region across several Western Balkans countries urge for devotion and a clear strategy on behalf of the EU. For these reasons, although perceived as a peripheral question, the enlargement to the Western Balkans might be crucial at times when the capacity of the EU has been put to the test. 

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