

**GMAP CAPSTONE**

**RUSSIAN HUMANITARIAN AND CULTURAL PRESENCE IN THE WESTERN  
BALKANS IN THE LAST DECADE: CASES OF SLOVENIA, CROATIA, AND SERBIA**

**SUBMITTED TO PROFESSOR Jeffrey W. Taliaferro**

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## 1. Introduction

In the last decade, Russia's humanitarian and cultural presence has increased in the Western Balkans region. Since 2010, the number of Russian cultural and language centers, representative offices of Russian foundations and media in the region has increased significantly. The Russian public, state and academic institutions have intensified contacts with their counterparts in the countries of the region, organizing exchanges, conferences and joint projects. At the same time, all countries in the region have strong strategic, economic and political ties with Western institutions, namely NATO and the EU. While Slovenia and Croatia are the EU members, the rest are official candidates for membership, and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) is a potential candidate. Moreover, all of them, with the exception of BiH and Serbia, which, however, engaged with NATO in accordance with the signed Action Plans, are NATO members. The question is what goals Russia is pursuing by investing in humanitarian and cultural programs in countries aimed at deeper integration into Western structures.

According to Hugo Meijer and Stephen Brooks' study on the threats assessment in Europe<sup>1</sup>, some of the Western Balkan countries, such as Slovenia, Serbia, and Croatia, do not consider Russia to be dominant or even significant threat, and therefore, they are more susceptible to Russia's humanitarian and cultural influence. Thus, the second question is why some Balkan states engaged with NATO and the EU are so receptive to Russia's humanitarian activities.

Thus, the puzzle has two parts: why Russia is investing in cultural and humanitarian programs in Slovenia, Croatia and Serbia, and why these states are receptive to such activities, despite the fact that their partnership with NATO and the EU is growing.

The cases of Slovenia, Croatia, and Serbia were chosen due to their different status and level of integration within the EU and NATO, as well as their rather high receptivity to the instruments of Russian influence and readiness to develop partnership with Russia.

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<sup>1</sup> Meijer, Hugo, and Stephen G. Brooks, Illusions of Autonomy: Why Europe Cannot Provide for Its Security If the United States Pulls Back, *International Security* 45, no. 4, 2021.

To answer the first part of the research question we will assume that Russia seeks to maintain its influence and *status quo* in the Western Balkans, trying to constrain other influential actors in the region, both traditional ones such as the EU, the US, Turkey, and new global players such as China. Moreover, Russia-EU relations dynamic impact both the EU-Balkans and Russia-Balkans cooperation. To answer why some Western Balkan states are receptive to Russia's influence, we will argue that the domestic political situation of Slovenia, Croatia, and Serbia, namely the rise of Euroscepticism and nationalistic sentiment, generates a request for closer ties with Russia in all areas, including humanitarian and cultural domains.

The paper will be organized as follows. First, we will provide an overview of the historical, linguistic and religious ties between Russia and the Western Balkans, as well as the variations in cultural and humanitarian ties that Russia has maintained with Slovenia, Croatia and Serbia since 2010. Second, we will introduce Russia as an external actor seeking to maintain and expand its influence in the Western Balkans. In this regard, two aspects will be analyzed: (1) by strengthening the economic, military and political integration of the target states with Russia, the latter intends to prevent them from further rapprochement with the EU and NATO or, in the case of Slovenia and Croatia, “step in the doorway” and use existing connections to gain leverage in the EU; (2) Russia's growing humanitarian presence can be seen as a response to the increasing activity of great and regional rivals such as China, Turkey and the US in the region. Third, we will examine, how the demands of various political and social groups skeptical about further integration into structures led by the West make Slovenia, Croatia, and Serbia more receptive to Russia's humanitarian and cultural programs. Finally, several conclusions will be drawn from the study.

The study is based on extensive data from official open sources, academic research, and press, as well as interviews with Russian diplomats and experts in the region.

The capstone will add to the bulk of the literature on geopolitical rivalry in the Western Balkans and can be used as a guidelines to formulate policy recommendations both for Russia on

how to build a more coherent and effective foreign policy in the region to achieve its goals, and for the EU and others actors on their further policy towards the Balkan states and the prospects for their integration into the EU and NATO.

## **2. Background**

Russian traditional ties with the Balkans lie in the areas of shared history, linguistic and cultural affinities and religion bonds. In many countries of the region, primarily Serbia, “two brotherhoods overlap: the Slavic and the Orthodox, both of which are still cultivated and invoked today”<sup>2</sup>.

In this regard Slovenia stands aside: it is not a part of Orthodox brotherhood: 73.8% Slovenian residents were Catholics in 2014<sup>3</sup>, and while geographically and historically Slovenia was a part of Balkan region, it identifies itself with the Central Europe and priorities its ties with Višegrad group (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia), Austria and Poland.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, meaningful factor that unites Russia and Slovenia is the memory of two World Wars, immortalized in 83 memorials installed in different places in Slovenia<sup>5</sup>, the biggest of those was opened in 2016 by President Vladimir Putin and President Borut Pahor in the center of Ljubljana. The monument dedicated to the "Sons of Russia and the Soviet Union who died on Slovenian soil during the First and Second World Wars" was the only one on the territory of the former Soviet European states, whose attitude to the common historical heritage can be characterized as negative. In the second largest city of Maribor the Memorial Museum to Soviet Prisoners of War was opened in 2014 on the place of the former Nazi camp Stalag XVIII-D, and three year later in 2017 the World War II International Research Center (MIC) was launched with the active participation of the Russian Embassy in Slovenia, the Russian Military Historical

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<sup>2</sup> Erler, G. 2019. “The Western Balkans and Its Big Brother: On Russia’s Policy in Southeast Europe.” In *Southeast Europe in Focus*, edited by J. Deimel. External Actor Series: Russia. Sudosteuroopa Gessellschaft No. 1. Munich, cited on Ritsa Panagiotou, *The Western Balkans between Russia and the European Union : perceptions, reality, and impact on enlargement*, *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, Vol. 29, No.2, 2021, p. 224.

<sup>3</sup> Number of Slovenian Catholics decreasing, *The Slovenia Times*, Jan.6 2016, <https://sloveniatimes.com/number-of-slovenian-catholics-decreasing/>.

<sup>4</sup> Slovenija: varna, uspešna in v svetu spoštovana, Ministerstvo za zunanje zadeve, 2015, [https://www.gov.si/assets/ministrstva/MZZ/Dokumenti/strateski-in-programski-dokumenti/strategija\\_ZP.pdf](https://www.gov.si/assets/ministrstva/MZZ/Dokumenti/strateski-in-programski-dokumenti/strategija_ZP.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> Братъя-словене, *Kommersant*, May 30, 2019, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3984015>.

Society, and the Russian Historical Society. Every year MIC hosted several international conferences on the history of the World War II and established partnership with the Russian Museum of the Great Patriotic War at Poklonnaya Gora. In the light of contemporary Russian narrative of “countering falsification of history” and self-perception as a successor of the victory over Nazism, Slovenia’s respect to common history is highly regarded by the Kremlin and seen as an opportunity to assert its global leadership ambitions. As President Putin underlined in his speech: “So that we not only remember the horrors of war, but work together to strengthen mutual understanding, trust, security in Europe and in the world”.<sup>6</sup>

The intensification of Russian-Slovenian humanitarian cooperation also affects the spheres of education, the study of the Russian language, literature and technology. In 2011 the Russian Centre for Culture and Science (RCCS, Russian House), the representative office of the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States Affairs, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation (Rossotrudnichestvo)<sup>7</sup> under the MFA of Russia was opened in the city center of Ljubljana. The main goals of the RCCS are the promotion of Russian language and culture, development of two countries cooperation in education, science, culture, student and academic exchanges, and people-to-people contacts. Among others Russian humanitarian institutions opened in Slovenia since 2011 are the branch of “Russkiy Myr” foundation in Maribor (opened in 2011)<sup>8</sup>, the first European branch of the Moscow State University M.V.Lomonosov in Koper (2017)<sup>9</sup>, the Russian-Slovenian Centre Davorin Hostnik in Šmartno pri Litiji (2019), and the International Center for High Technologies named after Yuri Gagarin, which is planned to open in the nearest future at the Herman Potocnik-Noordung Center for European Space Technologies in Vitanje for building up Russian-

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<sup>6</sup> Путин заявил о готовности России работать ради укрепления доверия в мире, RBC, July 2016, <https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/579cc2bf9a794774d8a32b32>.

<sup>7</sup> Official web-site: <https://rs.gov.ru/en>.

<sup>8</sup> Official web-site <https://russkiymir.ru/news/204256/>.

<sup>9</sup> Official web-site <https://www.msu-lomonosov.eu/about>.

Slovenian scientific and technological ties<sup>10</sup>. Russia is co-founder and one of the major sponsors of the international NGO the Forum of Slavic Cultures headquartered in Ljubljana, which unites 13 Slavic countries and is aimed at promotion and connection of Slavic cultures and giving “them presence in today’s global social arena”.<sup>11</sup>

As regards to Croatia, its humanitarian ties with Russia were less developed until the mid-2010s, which can be explained by the “frozen state” of Russian-Croatian diplomatic and political contacts after Croatia joined NATO in 2009 and was politically oriented towards Brussels and Washington<sup>12</sup>. A new stage in Russian-Croatian cultural ties began after 2016, when a new Russian Ambassador, Anvar Azimov, was appointed to Zagreb, and in 2017, President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović paid a high-level visit to Moscow. The same year the representative office of the Federal Agency Rossotrudnichestvo was opened in Zagreb and negotiations about the establishment of the Russian Cultural Centre in Croatia started. Taking into account the historical past of Croatia and its role in the World War II, Russia's activities in the field of preserving the memory of the fight against Nazism and celebrating the Victory are limited by public demand. Nevertheless, every year, starting in 2018, on Victory Day, the Immortal Regiment procession initiated by the Russian side is held in the center of Zagreb, and five out of ten monuments and graves dedicated to Soviet soldiers in the eastern part of the country, have been renovated since 2016. In 2018, for the first time in 20 years, Russia reopened its literature, cinema and education to the Croatian public by participating as the main guest at the Interliber International Book Festival, Sajam Stipendija International Scholarship and Education Fair and the First Russian Film Festival Filmushka. Large-scale events representing Russian culture have become regular; one of the striking examples is the first and only exhibition

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<sup>10</sup> Russian Embassy in Slovenia [https://rus-slo.mid.ru/ru/press-centre/news/o\\_mezhdunarodnoy\\_nauchno\\_prakticheskoy\\_konferentsii\\_vysokie\\_tekhnologii\\_na\\_sluzhbe\\_obshchestva\\_i\\_tor/](https://rus-slo.mid.ru/ru/press-centre/news/o_mezhdunarodnoy_nauchno_prakticheskoy_konferentsii_vysokie_tekhnologii_na_sluzhbe_obshchestva_i_tor/).

<sup>11</sup> Official web-site <https://www.fsk.si/about-us/>.

<sup>12</sup> Хорватия поворачивается лицом к России, Kommersant, Oct. 18, 2017, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3441596>.

of the State Hermitage in the Balkans "Catherine the Great" in 2018.<sup>13</sup> The growth in the number of cultural contacts has led to an increase in the intensity of interagency cooperation and people-to-people interaction between the two countries: in the period from 2016 to 2020, more than 20 delegations of Russian cultural, educational and humanitarian institutions visited Croatia, contacts were resumed through twin cities between Zagreb and Moscow and St. Petersburg, and cooperation agreements were initiated between the Croatian and Russian State theaters, Academies of Science, universities and museums<sup>14</sup>.

Apropos Serbia, the Russian humanitarian and cultural presence there has always been strong with the support of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and the influence of the Russian "white emigration" in 1919-1920 after the Great October Revolution and the Civil War.<sup>15</sup> Russian House (now representative office of Rossotrudnichestvo) was opened in Belgrade in 1933 and has never stopped working. However, in the last decade the network of dedicated Russian institutions has been expanded to provide support and organizational assistance to NGOs and groups promoting Russian language, culture, historical heritage, science and education. Three centers of the "Russkyi Myr" foundation were opened in Novi Sad, Bjela Cerква and Belgrade University<sup>16</sup> since 2009. The Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Center (RSHC) - intergovernmental humanitarian non-profit organization - was established in Niš in 2012, which is seen in the future as a full-fledged international structure that provides aid and assistance in emergency humanitarian response to all the countries of the Balkan region"<sup>17</sup>. In 2016 two Russian NGOs: the Russian Humanitarian Mission, aimed at implementing educational, emergency assistance and medical programs,<sup>18</sup> and the Russian Geographical

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<sup>13</sup> Official site [https://www.hermitagemuseum.org/wps/portal/hermitage/news/news-item/news/2018/news\\_82\\_18?lng=en](https://www.hermitagemuseum.org/wps/portal/hermitage/news/news-item/news/2018/news_82_18?lng=en).

<sup>14</sup> Russian Embassy in Croatia official web-site <https://zagreb.mid.ru/ru/countries/bilateral-relations/cultural-connections/>.

<sup>15</sup> Руска бела емиграција у Србији: Пет најзначајнијих личности, Aug. 1, 2017, <https://www.in4s.net/ruska-bela-emigracija-u-srbiji-pet-najznacajnijih-licnosti/>.

<sup>16</sup> Official web-site: <http://www.ruskicentar.rs/>.

<sup>17</sup> From the official web-site: <http://ru.ihc.rs/en/about-us/>.

<sup>18</sup> Official web-site: <https://rhm.agency/>.



Society - opened their centers in Serbia<sup>19</sup>. One of the latest Russian initiatives in the area of public diplomacy was the Russian Balkan Center in Belgrade recently opened in April 2021 which “will work to bring the scientific community and the public of the two countries closer together”<sup>20</sup>. Interestingly, the Center was co-founded by the Russian Institute of Diaspora and Integration, whose sphere of interest is the CIS countries, under the leadership of the Deputy of the State Duma of Russia Konstantin Zatulin.

Russia-based foundations and institutions affiliated with the governmental structures, such as the Gorchakov Fund, the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies (RISI), the Diplomatic Academy of the Russian Foreign Ministry, work at the “track-two” diplomacy, sponsoring frequent conferences, round-table discussions and programs for young leaders from Serbia and other Balkan countries.

The number of Russian-sponsored organizations and NGOs in Serbia is greater than in Slovenia and Croatia, but the main difference is the high level of presence of Russia-affiliated media in the Serbian-speaking space. In 2015 Russian media agency Sputnik (international radio broadcasting within the framework of the Russia Today holding) launched its Serbian version, *Sputnik Srbija*<sup>21</sup>, focused on promoting favorable for Russia version of international situation and historical events, as well as ideas that the EU and the USA are imperialist powers seeking to destroy Serbian autonomy and identity and Russia is its natural ally<sup>22</sup>. Since 2012, for five years, two popular Serbian newspapers: daily *Politika* and monthly *Geopolitika* had supplements *Ruska Reč* and *Rusija i Srbija*, published by *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*. In 2017, *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* came under the control of Russia Today, together with the project Russia Beyond the Headlines and its Serbian-language web-site<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> Official web-site: <https://www.geografija.org/home.php>.

<sup>20</sup> В Белграде открылся Русский балканский центр, Russia Today, April 29, 2021, <https://russian.rt.com/world/news/857939-russkii-balkanskii-centr-belgrad>.

<sup>21</sup> Official web-site: <https://rs.sputniknews.com/>

<sup>22</sup> Ritsa Panagiotou, The Western Balkans between Russia and the European Union : perceptions, reality, and impact on enlargement, *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, Vol. 29, No.2, 2021, p. 224.

<sup>23</sup> Official web-site: <https://rs.rbth.com/>.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Serbia became one of the first countries to receive humanitarian aid from Russia, which sent on eleven military flights, specialists and equipment to fight the coronavirus.<sup>24</sup> Moscow's "vaccine diplomacy" introduced a new element of humanitarian influence: as of July 1, Belgrade ordered 2 million doses of Sputnik V<sup>25</sup> and signed an agreement with the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF) to produce the vaccine in Serbia<sup>26</sup>.

Thus, although the presence of Russia in the humanitarian, cultural and media spheres of Slovenia, Croatia and Serbia differs in level and scope, since 2010 there has been a clear trend for its increasing.

### **3. Russia as an external actor seeks to spread and preserve its influence in Slovenia, Croatia, and Serbia.**

#### **3.1. Russia hinders further enlargement of the EU and NATO in Slovenia, Croatia and Serbia and strengthens the politico-military integration of target states with Russia.**

The process of European integration, or "return to Europe"<sup>27</sup>, started in the Western Balkans since 2000s, when Slovenia, the most developed country among the former Yugoslavia joined NATO and the EU with the first wave in 2004. European integration of the Western Balkans went hand-in-hand with NATO membership. Croatia joined NATO in 2009 and became the EU member four years later, in 2013, after the ten years of border disputes with Slovenia, tensions with Serbia over Serb minority and legislative, political and economic adaptation. While Slovenia has been part of the Schengen and Euro zone since 2007, which means full integration into European economic and political system, Croatia's accession to the Schengen and Euro area

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<sup>24</sup> Россия 11 военными рейсами перебросит в Сербию специалистов и технику, *Interfax*, April 3, 2020, <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/702375>.

<sup>25</sup> Number of doses of the COVID-19 vaccine Sputnik V ordered from Russia or agreed to be produced abroad as of July 1, 2021, by country, *Statista*, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1123927/sputnik-v-exports-from-russia-by-country/>.

<sup>26</sup> Radomir Ralev, Serbia signs agreement with Russia to start producing Sputnik V vaccine, *SeeNews*, March 25, 2021, <https://seenews.com/news/serbia-signs-agreement-with-russia-to-start-producing-sputnik-v-vaccine-735794>.

<sup>27</sup> Dimitar Bechev, *Rival Power: Russia in Southeast Europe*, Yale University Press New Haven and London, 2017, p. 54.

has been postponed until 2024 due to its inhospitable migration policy and despite its adoption in 2020 of the European Exchange Rate Mechanism, one of the key conditions for entering the Euro area.<sup>28</sup>

The situation with Serbia's integration into the EU is more complex, since it has some exceptional characteristics compared with other Western Balkan states, which saw NATO membership as a first step to join the EU. After the NATO bombing campaign in 1999 Serbia was in open confrontation with the Alliance and the EU and the process of Serbia's "socialization" is still going on<sup>29</sup>. While Belgrade after 2000 claimed to join the EU, it never proclaimed its goal of integration into NATO in the foreseeable future, moreover, the "Resolution on the Protection of Sovereignty, Territorial Integrity and Constitutional Order of the Republic of Serbia" adopted by the Serbian Parliament in December 2007, attempted to remove the issue of NATO membership from the Serbian political discourse for a longer period of time.<sup>30</sup> "While Serbia is pursuing European Union (EU) membership, unlike other Western Balkan partners, it does not aspire to join the Alliance"<sup>31</sup>, nonetheless, Serbia-NATO dialogue started in 2006, when the country joined the Partnership for Peace (PfP) program and the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC). The next significant step was two-year Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP), adopted by Serbia in 2015, which in fact gave the maximum integration opportunities without formal joining the Alliance. In 2017 alone Serbia participated in 18 joint exercises with NATO and the US troops.<sup>32</sup>

Serbia-EU integration process can be dated up to 2005 when Negotiations for a Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) started. In 2009 Serbia officially applied for the EU membership, and since 2013 when the SAA entered into force, the European Council has

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<sup>28</sup> Croatia's PM: Croatia to Join Schengen Zone by Second Half of 2024, March 16, 2021, <https://www.schengenvisainfo.com/news/croatias-pm-croatia-to-join-schengen-zone-by-second-half-of-2024/>.

<sup>29</sup> Jelena Radoman, Serbia and NATO: From enemies to (almost) partners, Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, April 2012, [https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/144512/nato\\_and\\_serbia\\_\(2\).pdf](https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/144512/nato_and_serbia_(2).pdf).

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p.13.

<sup>31</sup> Relations with Serbia, North Atlantic Treaty Organization official web-site, April 6 2021, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_50100.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_50100.htm)

<sup>32</sup> V.Samokhvalov, Russia in the Balkans: Great Power Politics and Local Response, *Insight Turkey*, Vol.21, No.2, 2019, p. 198.

monitored Serbia's performance in the SAA ratification process. One of the major obstacles for Serbia joining the EU was Kosovo status, which was not recognized by Serbia. A compromise was found through the Brussels Agreement in 2013, which opened up Serbia for further negotiations on EU accession. In the Communication from the European Commission "A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans" from 2018 Serbia, along with Montenegro, was named "the current front-runner in the process", which "will have the chance to move forward on [its] respective European paths" by the clear date of 2025.<sup>33</sup> So far, Serbia has opened eighteen chapters of its accession negotiations and provisionally closed two of them<sup>34</sup>.

Considering the different level of Slovenia, Croatia and Serbia integration into the EU and NATO structures, Russia's methods of pursuing its goal of counter Western influence in three Balkan states are divers, but usually cover, in addition to culture and humanitarian presence, areas of energy, economic, military and politico-diplomatic cooperation.

As a member of NATO and the EU, Slovenia, like Croatia, has little room for maneuver in cooperation with Russia in the political, diplomatic and military spheres. However, Slovenia took a pragmatic stance towards Russia fostering bilateral economic ties. Russia is Slovenia's most important non-EU trading partner<sup>35</sup>, in 2019 the total turnover counted \$1.51 billion, two third of which was Slovenia's export. Ljubljana's joining the anti-Russia sanctions caused the turnover fall by \$500 million in 2015, but it has risen steadily since then<sup>36</sup>. Slovenia was one of the most consistent supporters of lifting the sanctions against Russia which harmed

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<sup>33</sup> Communication from the Commission for the Western Balkans, *European Commission*, Feb. 6, 2018, p. 7, [https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/communication-credible-enlargement-perspective-western-balkans\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/communication-credible-enlargement-perspective-western-balkans_en.pdf).

<sup>34</sup> Serbia membership status, *European Commission*, [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/countries/detailed-country-information/serbia\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/countries/detailed-country-information/serbia_en)

<sup>35</sup> Slovenia Partner, *Spirit*, <https://www.sloveniapartner.eu/business-environment/trade/trading-partners-and-products>.

<sup>36</sup> Russia-Slovenia turnover, *Russian Federal Statistics*, official web-site, <https://ru-stat.com/date-Y2013-2020/RU/trade/SI>.

the country's economy<sup>37</sup>. Russian "Gazprom" provides 70% of the country's needs in natural gas, and Slovenes see energy cooperation as one of the possibilities to increase trade turnover and economic ties. "South Stream" project, aimed at diversification of European gas suppliers and surpassing Ukraine was announced in 2007 and planned to include Slovenia, Croatia and Serbia. All three agreed to join the project with 50% national financial participation, and its cancellation in 2014 due to Brussels decision was disappointing for Slovenia, as President Borut Pahor pointed out<sup>38</sup>.

Slovenia always demonstrated its cordial ties with Russia despite Russia-EU political tension, and rather considers itself as a mediator of Russia-EU relations. In the Foreign Policy Concept of the Republic of Slovenia from 2015 was stated "Within the European Union, the Republic of Slovenia will strive in the long term to attract the Russian Federation to the circle of common European values and thus to the long-term partnership of the Russian Federation with the EU, which will strengthen Europe's weight in the global world"<sup>39</sup>. Minister Anže Logar during his visit to Moscow in May 2021 reaffirmed Slovenia's readiness to advocate a decrease in tensions between Russia and the EU during its presidency of the EU Council on a number of hot issues, including Alexey Navalny case, situation in Belarus and eastern Ukraine: "Mr Anže Logar briefed [Russia] on Slovenia's priorities for its EU presidency in the second half of 2021"<sup>40</sup>.

Given the degree of Slovenia's integration into European structures and adherence to European values, Russia does not pursue the goal of driving a stake between Slovenia and the EU or tearing it away from NATO, but rather is trying to build constructive and pragmatic

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<sup>37</sup> Е.Штукина, Премьер: Словения выступает за уход от санкций между Россией и ЕС, *RIA News*, July 27, 2015, <https://ria.ru/20150727/1149585136.html>.

<sup>38</sup> Д.Ярославцев, Борут Пахор: отмена санкций и нормализация отношений с РФ приветствуются в Европе, *TASS*, Feb.8, 2017, <https://tass.ru/interviews/4005170>.

<sup>39</sup> Slovenija: varna, uspešna in v svetu spoštovana, Ministerstvo za Zunanje Zadeve, 2015, p. 14, [https://www.gov.si/assets/ministrstva/MZZ/Dokumenti/strateski-in-programski-dokumenti/strategija\\_ZP.pdf](https://www.gov.si/assets/ministrstva/MZZ/Dokumenti/strateski-in-programski-dokumenti/strategija_ZP.pdf).

<sup>40</sup> Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's statement at a joint news conference following talks with Foreign Minister of the Republic of Slovenia Anze Logar, Moscow, May 28, 2021, *MFA Russia*, [https://www.mid.ru/en/foto\\_posledniye\\_dobavlenniye/-/asset\\_publisher/7gVir6Z7EIX8/content/id/4754976?novelty-display-dynamic=novelty](https://www.mid.ru/en/foto_posledniye_dobavlenniye/-/asset_publisher/7gVir6Z7EIX8/content/id/4754976?novelty-display-dynamic=novelty).

bilateral relations with a focus on energy and trade that will enable Russia to stabilize relations with the EU, or at least have a stable partner within Europe in the person of Slovenia.

Croatia, which positions itself as a US and NATO outpost in the Balkans, has nevertheless strengthened its ties with Russia since the early 2000s through cooperation in the fields of energy, economy and tourism. Both Presidents Mesić and Josipović sought to deepen economic relations with Russia and attract investment in outdated since Yugoslav time infrastructure. Russian energy companies such as Gazprom, Rosneft, and Lukoil came to the Croatian market before it joined the EU<sup>41</sup>, and Croatia did not change its position after 2013 viewing Russia as a source of opportunities rather than a hostile power<sup>42</sup>. The situation has changed after the Crimea conflict, where Croatia took pro-EU position. In 2014 then Croatian Prime Minister Milanović stated “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”<sup>43</sup>.

Although Croatia joined the anti-Russian sanctions, the pragmatic position prevailed, and ties at the level of the political and business elite remained strong. Russian Sberbank (operates in Croatia since 2013) and VTB bank were the major creditors of Croatian Agrokor, the biggest retail company in the country, announced the bankruptcy in 2017. Given the importance of maintaining good relations with Croatia and under political pressure, Sberbank and VTB agreed on a restructuring plan for a loan worth more than 1.3 billion euros and became the largest owner of Agrokor with 39% of the shares.<sup>44</sup> Kolinda Grabar-Kitarovic, President of Croatia in 2015-2020, met with Vladimir Putin several times, including at the final match of the

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<sup>41</sup> Croatia officially joined the South Stream project in 2010, Lukoil opened its branch and developed a network of filling stations in 2008, Rosneft was rumoured as a possible holder of national oil company INA in 2009.

<sup>42</sup> Dimitar Bechev, *Rival Power: Russia in Southeast Europe*, Yale University Press New Haven and London, 2017, p. 77.

<sup>43</sup> Bojana Zorić, *Assessing Russian Impact on the Western Balkan countries' EU accession: cases of Croatia and Serbia*, *Journal of Liberty and International Affairs*, Vol.3, No 2, 2017, p. 14.

<sup>44</sup> Банки РФ спасли от банкротства ритейлера Хорватии перед матчем сборных на ЧМ, ZNAK, July 5, 2018, [https://www.znak.com/2018-07-05/banki\\_rf\\_spasli\\_ot\\_bankrotstva\\_riteйлера\\_horvatii\\_pered\\_matchem\\_sbornyh\\_na\\_chm](https://www.znak.com/2018-07-05/banki_rf_spasli_ot_bankrotstva_riteйлера_horvatii_pered_matchem_sbornyh_na_chm).

2018 World Cup in Moscow, and spoke out against Russia's isolation in the international arena<sup>45</sup>. Croatian politician and Mayor of Zagreb Milan Bandić (mandate 2000-2002 and 2005-2021), who openly demonstrated its sympathy and deep relations with the Russian Ambassador Anvar Azimov and his Moscow counterpart Sergei Sobianin<sup>46</sup>, received the Pushkin Medal from the hands of President Putin in 2018. Russia even tried to develop military cooperation with Croatia, as “Russian Helicopters” company despite the resistance of Croatia's NATO partners signed a contract to repair ten Russian MI171 helicopters and discussed the possibility of selling new helicopters to the Croatian Army.

The membership of Croatia in NATO and the EU limits the possibilities to develop independent cooperation with Russia in a number of areas, including political realm, but at the same time, Zagreb seems to want to expand political and economic relations with Moscow<sup>47</sup>, considering its ties with Russia as a capital in building relations with the EU.

Serbia from the first glance seems to take unequivocal pro-Russian position, as its closest ally in the region. Belgrade did not support anti-Russian sanctions and for some time remained the only European capital to host Russian high officials. The country's energy sector is almost totally controlled by Gazprom, which privatized energy company NIS having 78% share of the Serbian market in oil products<sup>48</sup>. Other Russian economic giants Sberbank and Lukoil have a large presence in the country. In 2013, the Russian state-owned railway company agreed to modernize the Serbian rail network and provided a loan of \$ 800 million.<sup>49</sup> As stated earlier, Russian “vaccine diplomacy” created a new element of dependency, as the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF) signed an agreement with Torlak Institute to produce the Sputnik V

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<sup>45</sup> Алексей Дружинин, Президент Хорватии рассказала о результатах встреч с Путиным, RIA Novosti, July 227, 2018, <https://ria.ru/20180727/1525449935.html>.

<sup>46</sup> Azimov: Glavni motor razvoja odnosa Hrvatske i Rusije je Milan Bandić, *Direktno*, Sept. 30, 2019, <https://direktno.hr/domovina/azimov-glavni-motor-razvoja-odnosa-hrvatske-i-rusije-milan-bandic-168468/>.

<sup>47</sup> Even Mediu, NATO and Russia in the Balkans, power struggle for influence between two security zones. Case studies of Albania, Montenegro, and Croatia, Webster Vienna Private University, Master thesis, October 2020, p. 54.

<sup>48</sup> David Clark and Dr Andrew Foxall, Russia's Role in the Balkans – Cause for Concern?, *The Henry Jackson Society*, June 2014, p. 7.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p.9.

vaccine in Serbia, which “opened new perspectives for the distribution of this vaccine in the region of Southern Europe”<sup>50</sup>.

Notwithstanding the sufficient investment in key economic sectors such as energy, infrastructure, and banking, Russia’s economic influence in Serbia should not be overestimated. Russia was only the fifth Serbia’s export trading partner in 2018, lagging behind the leading Italy and Germany by more than 2 times<sup>51</sup>. In 2016 a majority of Serbs believed Russia to be the biggest investor in their country, although Austria alone invested four times more than Russia. Thanks to the resource of “soft power” and active media presence Russia achieved “maximum returns with minimal costs” and has been able to “play a weak hand well”<sup>52</sup>.

Besides establishment of Russian Humanitarian Centre in Niš in 2012, Russia-Serbia military cooperation only in 2015-2017 included the purchase of Russian Mi-17B helicopters, MiG fighters, tanks and armored vehicles worth \$600 million<sup>53</sup>, and a 15-year Bilateral Defence Treaty with provisions for training operations, joint exercises, arms sales, and intelligence sharing<sup>54</sup>. The latter however did not stop Belgrade from holding joint exercises with NATO.

The focal point of Russia-Serbia bilateral relations is the Declaration on strategic partnership between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Serbia signed in May 2013 and established cooperation across the range of fields including international affairs, security policy, economic and trade, culture, science, technology and education, as well as foreign-policy coordination in international bodies such as the UN, OSCE, and the Council of Europe<sup>55</sup>. Serbia became the only country outside the CIS area to sign the “strategic partnership” document. Permanent contacts at the highest level, meetings of presidents and foreign ministers speak of the

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<sup>50</sup> Radomir Ralev, Serbia signs agreement with Russia to start producing Sputnik V vaccine, SeeNews, March 25, 2021, <https://seenews.com/news/serbia-signs-agreement-with-russia-to-start-producing-sputnik-v-vaccine-735794>.

<sup>51</sup> Ritsa Panagiotou, The Western Balkans between Russia and the European Union : perceptions, reality, and impact on enlargement, *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 2021, p. 229.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p.227.

<sup>53</sup> Вадим Савицкий, Российско-сербские экономические отношения. Досье, TASS, December 18, 2017, <https://tass.ru/info/4822331>.

<sup>54</sup> David Clark and Dr Andrew Foxall, Russia’s Role in the Balkans – Cause for Concern?, The Henry Jackson Society, June 2014, p. 13.

<sup>55</sup> Kremlin official web-site: <http://www.kremlin.ru/supplement/1461>.



ongoing development of bilateral relations in all areas. During the Lavrov-Vučić meeting in 2019, the most extensive package of thirty agreements was signed, including the Intergovernmental Agreement on the Peaceful Atom, the Memorandum of Cooperation in Technology, and a number of agreements in the fields of business, innovation, and academic cooperation.

Another strategy hindering the EU and NATO enlargement in the Western Balkans, in particular in Serbia, is the “integration of integrations” project - involving the states of Southeastern Europe, including the Balkans, in cooperation with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), a single integrated market, which is seen as a “powerful supranational union” of sovereign states like the European Union, uniting economies, legal systems, customs services and military capabilities to form a bridge between Europe and Asia and rival the EU, the US and China”<sup>56</sup>. Serbia signed the Free Trade Agreement with the EAEU in October 2019, which harmonized the trade terms and opened the markets with Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Russia. Moreover, Serbia took observer status in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in 2013, a military security structure on the territory of the CIS. However, this did not prevent Belgrade from refusing to participate in the joint CSTO exercises “Slavic Brotherhood” in 2020, allegedly under pressure from the EU<sup>57</sup>.

Nevertheless, extensive contacts with Moscow do not stop Belgrade from continuing its cooperation with NATO and its political course towards EU accession. President Vučić pursues a twofold policy towards Russia: to have a strategic partner and leverage over Europe, but at the same time maintain room for maneuver. As he said “We have good relations with the United States but, unlike most of the Western nations, we have good relations with Russia and with President Putin. Unlike others, I am not embarrassed to say that I have good relations with

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<sup>56</sup> Jon Henley, A brief primer on Vladimir Putin's Eurasian dream, *The Guardian*, Feb 18, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/shortcuts/2014/feb/18/brief-primer-vladimir-putin-eurasian-union-trade>.

<sup>57</sup> Алексей Ерешко, Сербия отказалась от совместных военных учений в Беларуси из-за давления ЕС, RTVi, Sept 10, 2020, <https://rtvi.com/news/serbiya-otkazalas-ot-sovmestnykh-voennykh-ucheniy-v-belarusi/>.

President Putin.”<sup>58</sup>. Based on the Serbian leaders’ rhetoric and real actions, Dimitar Bechev reasonably concluded, that Belgrade “have pursued a policy of balance between Russia and the West in order to clench the best deal either might offer”<sup>59</sup>.

Russia-affiliated media broadcasting in Serbia, Croatia and Serbian-speaking countries became the powerful resources of anti-EU and anti-NATO propaganda. According to the analysis of Sputnik Srbija in 2018-2019, the most popular narratives were: “EU is weak and not united; EU is hegemonic; NATO is aggressive; NATO is not beneficial; NATO is weak and not united”<sup>60</sup>. These efforts to discredit the Western cooperation structures by influencing public opinion found out to be quite successful. Polls from 2018 to 2020 demonstrated that from 68% to 78% of Serbian citizens are against joining NATO<sup>61</sup> and 89% think that the support of Russia is relevant in international relations (67% think of the US’ support being relevant).<sup>62</sup> More salient example is the perception of Russia’s level of the investment and development aid: 47% of Serbs believed Russia to be the largest supplier of development aid to Serbia, but in fact 89.49% of funds come from the US and the EU<sup>63</sup>.

Thus, Russia is using a “wedging strategy”<sup>64</sup> in parallel with the development of bilateral economic, military-political and humanitarian ties with the three respective countries in order to undermine the authority of Western integration structures, create the illusion of instability in the region and prevent further NATO expansion in the Balkans. Moscow considers its relations with Slovenia and Croatia as a “door opener” and possible way of leverage inside

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<sup>58</sup> Serbian President Vucic says has good relations with Russian president, *TASS*, March 23, 2021, <https://tass.com/world/1269407>.

<sup>59</sup> Dimitar Bechev, *Rival Power: Russia in Southeast Europe*, Yale University Press New Haven and London, 2017, p. 55.

<sup>60</sup> Russia’s footprint in the Western Balkan information environment, Report, *NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence*, 2019, p.5.

<sup>61</sup> Serbia and West: this is us, *Center for Free Elections and Democracy (CeSID) and Center for Euro-Atlantic Studies studije (CEAS)*, Belgrade, July 2020, [https://www.ceas-serbia.org/images/publikacije/2020\\_July\\_Presentation\\_CeSID\\_CEAS.pdf](https://www.ceas-serbia.org/images/publikacije/2020_July_Presentation_CeSID_CEAS.pdf).

<sup>62</sup> Public Opinion Poll: Euro-Atlantic integration and dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina, *Center for Free Elections and Democracy (CeSID) and Center for Euro-Atlantic Studies studije (CEAS)*, Belgrade, Nov.8, 2018, [https://www.ceas-serbia.org/images/2018/Presentation\\_CeSID\\_CEAS\\_08\\_11\\_2018\\_ZA\\_SAJT.pdf](https://www.ceas-serbia.org/images/2018/Presentation_CeSID_CEAS_08_11_2018_ZA_SAJT.pdf).

<sup>63</sup> Marta Szpala, Russia in Serbia- soft power and hard interests, *Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW) Commentary*, No.150, Oct. 2014, p.3.

<sup>64</sup> Daniel H.Nexon, *International Order and Power Politics*, in Anders Wivel and T.V.Paul “International Institutions and Power Politics: Bridging the Divide”, Georgetown University Press, 2019.

the EU and Eurozone. Russia's integration into the energy, banking, infrastructure and military spheres may complicate the processes of European integration for Serbia and accession to the eurozone for Croatia. However, despite the visible loyalty of the three Balkan states towards Russia, their political vector is directed towards deepening European integration and strengthening stability in the region through its inclusion in the North Atlantic security zone. Even Serbia, proclaimed a natural and close ally of Russia, “managed to find an ideal mix of pro-Russian rhetoric and effective pro-Western policies”<sup>65</sup>.

Looking at the Russian-Western Balkans cooperation dynamics, it cannot be denied that the EU-Russia relations are an important external factor affecting both the relations of the Western Balkans, namely Slovenia, Croatia and Serbia, with the EU, and the process of Europeanization, as well as their bilateral ties with Russia. In the first part of 2000s Russia looked at the EU as successful and partner-minded integrational structure, and as a result, did not hamper Slovenia's, Croatia's, and even Serbia's accession negotiations, hoping to have them as allies in the EU <sup>66</sup>. 2008-2012 was a period of warming in relations between Russia and the EU, which ended in 2014, and in the mid-2010s, in the midst of hostilities, the Balkans again became an arena of geopolitical confrontation. For Slovenia, Croatia and Serbia, ties with Russia, in turn, are a political asset and leverage in building their relationship with the EU.

Vsevolod Samokhvalov went further and argued that “as a broader generalization, Russia's relationship with the Balkans was rather a function of the primary goals of Russian foreign policy – imperial expansion and great power politics in Europe”<sup>67</sup>. He sees Russian politics on the Balkans as a way to “socialize the West” and create instability and illusion of active Russian presence in the region. Although Russian investment and economic presence in these three countries is less significant than that of the EU or the US, and their vectors of

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<sup>65</sup> Vsevolod Samokhvalov, Russia in the Balkans: Great Power Politics and Local Response, *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 21, No. 2, 2019, p. 205.

<sup>66</sup> Ekaterina Entina, Features and limits of the integration policy of the European Union in South-Eastern Europe (on the example of the states of the Post-Yugoslav space), PhD thesis, Moscow, 2020.

<sup>67</sup> Vsevolod Samokhvalov, Russia in the Balkans: Great Power Politics and Local Response, *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 21, No. 2, 2019, p. 191.

political, diplomatic and military cooperation are more oriented towards the West, Russia has incentives to maintain its role in the Balkans and impede the future expansion of NATO, which could undermine Russia's role in the region and cause a serious identity crisis<sup>68</sup>.

### **3.2. Russia counters the growing cultural and humanitarian activities of great and regional power rivals, namely, the US, China, and Turkey**

The growing cultural and humanitarian presence of global and regional actors in the Western Balkans is another incentive for Russia to increase its activity in the region. Along with traditional players such as the EU and Russia itself, in the last decade, rival powers such as China and Turkey have become more active in a number of Balkan countries. The multi-factor nature of the Balkan external arena turns out to be a logical result of historical processes and the current growing tensions in international relations. The US, China and Turkey pursue different goals in the region and therefore use different strategies to expand their influence: Turkey, as the successor to the Ottoman Empire, dreams of restoring the former levers of influence in the Balkans, considering the peninsula as its own strategic periphery, for China the Balkan states act as an important link in their trade and economic network and an important part of the ambitious Silk Road project, and, finally, the US as a great power seeks to expand NATO and its security zone into the Balkans and limit the activities of its geopolitical rivals in the region, China and Russia.

China's active involvement in the region began in the early 2010s with the launch of One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative and the 16 + 1 format. Cooperation between China and 16 Central and Eastern European Countries (China-CEEC), or 16+1 format (17+1 before May 2021 when Lithuania left the project), which goal is to expand investment and trade, as well as the development of large infrastructure projects associated with One Belt One Road initiative (OBOR), has existed since 2012 and includes, among others, Slovenia, Croatia, and Serbia<sup>69</sup>. It

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p.206.

<sup>69</sup> Official website: <http://www.china-ceec.org/eng/>

is reasonable to argue that all of Beijing's activities in the Western Balkans - from investment to education and culture – pivots around its OBOR initiative and the CEEC project.

China's trade balance and direct investment in the three countries have grown significantly over the past decade, especially in infrastructure projects, that are crucial for OBOR project. Trade between China and Slovenia in 2020 amounted to about 1.7 million euros, making China Slovenia's most important economic partner in Asia, prompting US concerns and a joint statement on the security of the 5G network that effectively blocked Huawei's access to the Slovenian market.<sup>70</sup> FDI from China to Croatia has increased 11-fold since 2012, reaching nearly \$ 99 million in 2019<sup>71</sup>. Serbia has attracted the largest amount of Chinese financing in a wide range of industries - mining, steelmaking, automotive, electronics, railways, infrastructure, banking, which is estimated at 10 billion euros.<sup>72</sup>

Beijing incorporated its soft power related activities into the 16+1 platform in parallel with developing bilateral ties with Ljubljana, Zagreb, and Belgrade. All three countries host or about to host one of the collective CEEC institutions: Serbia - China-CEEC Secretariat of the Higher Education Institutions Consortium, Slovenia - China-CEEC Forestry Cooperation Union, and Croatia - China-CEEC Information and Communication Technology Coordination Mechanism.<sup>73</sup>

In 2015, the Silk Road University Alliance was launched as part of the infrastructure of the Silk Road project for the development of inter-university cooperation, of which the University of Novi Sad (Serbia) and the University of Zagreb (Croatia) became members.<sup>74</sup> There is a long list of bilateral agreements on cooperation between universities and research

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<sup>70</sup> Valentina Vengust, Slovenia's dance with the superpowers, *MERICCS*, December 2, 2020, <https://mericcs.org/en/opinion/slovenias-dance-superpowers>.

<sup>71</sup> Total stock of foreign direct investments from China to Croatia between 2009 and 2019, *Statista*, April 19, 2021, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/865584/china-total-outward-fdi-stock-to-croatia/>.

<sup>72</sup> Павел Бушуев, Россия и Китай на Балканах, *TASS*, May 5, 2021, <https://tass.ru/opinions/11310283>.

<sup>73</sup> Plamen Tonchev, China's Soft Power in Southeast Europe, *Friedrich Ebert Stiftung*, Sarajevo, 2020, p.6, file:///C:/Users/User/Desktop/Tufts/capstone/books/Chinese%20soft%20power.pdf.

<sup>74</sup> Official website: [http://uasr.xjtu.edu.cn/About\\_UASR/Members.htm](http://uasr.xjtu.edu.cn/About_UASR/Members.htm).

institutions of the respective countries, but in many cases there are no visible academic results from such exchanges, which mainly boil down to "academic tourism".<sup>75</sup>

The key tool of the current Chinese humanitarian policy is the Confucius Institutes NGO network, financed from the budget of the PRC Ministry of Education, which main goals are to promote Chinese language, culture and positive image of People's Republic abroad. Their branches were opened on the campus of the largest universities: Serbia - University of Belgrade and University of Novi Sad, Croatia - University of Zagreb, Slovenia- University of Ljubljana.<sup>76</sup> Chinese is gaining popularity among students due to increased tourist traffic and business connections, and has been introduced as a third language in high school in Slovenia and Croatia and as a second optional language in Serbia<sup>77</sup>. Construction of the China Cultural Center in Belgrade, which stands on the same site as the Chinese embassy, which was bombed during NATO's operation in Yugoslavia in 1999, began in 2017 and is expected to be completed in 2021<sup>78</sup>.

China has also strengthened its media policy, with the Kina Danas website and China Radio International being the most active Chinese media outlets broadcasting in Serbo-Croatian. Positive news about China was actively disseminated by the Serbian weekly *Nedeljnik* and the newspaper *Politika*. As BalkanInsight argued, "China has increased its direct outreach and is attempting to expand its soft power through the media landscape, but the biggest contributor to China's image are Serbian media outlets and their [passive-positive] way of reporting on Sino-Serbian cooperation"<sup>79</sup>.

Perhaps the most striking success of China's soft power in the region has been the COVID-19 vaccine campaign. Thanks to this, Serbia has become one of the European leaders in

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<sup>75</sup> Plamen Tonchev, *China's Soft Power in Southeast Europe*, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Sarajevo, 2020, p.7, <file:///C:/Users/User/Desktop/Tufts/capstone/books/Chinese%20soft%20power.pdf>.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>77</sup> Bojana Barlovac, *Serbian Schools Get to Grips With Chinese*, *BalkanInsight*, March 20, 2012, <https://balkaninsight.com/2012/03/20/serbs-start-learning-chinese/>.

<sup>78</sup> Igor Conic, *Pogledajte kako će izgledati Kineski kulturni centar u Beogradu*. 2017, <https://www.gradnja.rs/kineski-kulturni-centar-beograd>.

<sup>79</sup> Stefan Vladislavljev, *Big Brother: Serbia's Media Are Creating Nation of China Lovers*, *BalkanInsight*, March 26, 2021, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/03/26/big-brother-serbias-media-are-creating-nation-of-china-lovers/>.

terms of the number of vaccinated. In total, as of May 2021, the country received about 4.2 million doses of the Chinese Sinopharm vaccine.<sup>80</sup>

While China has emerged as a new player in the region, Turkey is the historical successor to the Ottoman Empire, which dominated the peninsula for centuries. Due to its historical heritage, Turkey must work to overcome mistrust, but at the same time to build new relationships and support the Muslim community in the region.

Turkey is pursuing an active humanitarian policy on the Balkans through the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) under the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, which undertakes projects in the fields of education, health, restoration, agricultural development, finance, tourism, and industry<sup>81</sup>. TIKa opened its offices in Zagreb in 2016 and in Belgrade in 2017. Since 2016 TIKa completed more than 44 projects, mostly in education field, agricultural development, home health care, equipment support, and renovation.<sup>82</sup> In Serbia TIKa supports Muslim communities in Sandjak province by funding mosques and schools. The Agency also provides financial support to families in need and is actively involved in social projects.

20% of the Turkish Cultural Centers, the Yunus Emre Institute, are concentrated on the Western Balkans, including one in Zagreb, opened in 2016, and one in Belgrade, opened in 2015.<sup>83</sup> Institute promotes Turkish culture and language, which according to Fahri Akdogan, director of Yunus Emre Institute in Belgrade, is becoming popular with Serbian students: “nearly a thousand students have benefitted from Turkish language courses in Belgrade”<sup>84</sup>. Some experts believe that the increase in the number of cultural centers of Yunus Emre and the growing

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<sup>80</sup> 4.2 million Sinopharm vaccines delivered to Serbia to date, *Serbia Government*, May 27, 2021, <https://www.srbija.gov.rs/vest/en/173298/42-million-sinopharm-vaccines-delivered-to-serbia-to-date.php>.

<sup>81</sup> Official website: [http://www.tika.gov.tr/en/page/about\\_us-14650](http://www.tika.gov.tr/en/page/about_us-14650)

<sup>82</sup> Lejla Biogradlija, Turkish aid agency completes 44 projects in Croatia, *Anadolu Agency*, Jan.26, 2019, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/turkish-aid-agency-completes-44-projects-in-croatia/1375885>.

<sup>83</sup> Official website: <https://www.yee.org.tr/en/map>.

<sup>84</sup> Turkish language courses draw interest in Balkans, *Anadolu Agency*, Sept.26, 2018, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/culture-and-art/turkish-language-courses-draw-interest-in-balkans/1265593>.

popularity of the Turkish language make it the *lingua franca* in the Balkans<sup>85</sup>. The Turkish language can become the language of communication of Muslims from different countries of the region, as it was before the interwar period of the 20th century.

The Turkish media agency *Anadolu*, headquartered in Belgrade, broadcasts in three local languages: Serbian, Croatian and Bosnian, and in addition to news reports on the situation in Turkey and regions of the world, it provides analytical reviews on topical issues<sup>86</sup>.

Although Turkey is less active in Slovenia due to weak ethnic and historical ties, its increased interaction with the Muslim communities of Serbia and Croatia in the last decade is evidence of the implementation of the Neo-Ottomanism policy towards the Western Balkans<sup>87</sup>.

The US “soft power” influence is quite strong in EU and NATO members Slovenia and Croatia, but is controversial in Serbia. After the NATO military operation against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia during the Kosovo war and Belgrade aerial bombing campaign in 1999, the US does not have the most favorable reputation among the Serbs. According to Gallup report, only 20% of Serbs approved the US leadership position, while 57% expressed their disapproval.<sup>88</sup>

The US uses its traditional tools of humanitarian influence in the region: academic and student exchanges, information campaign, film industry, and international development programs. In 2019, USAID invested \$ 7 million and \$ 3.6 million in Slovenia and Croatia, respectively, mainly in government and civil society, as well as in the conflict, peace and security sector, and over \$ 44 million in Serbia, mainly in government, civil society and business sectors.<sup>89</sup> The disproportionate support and investment in Serbia confirms the fact that the US is seeking to build trust among the Serbian population and facilitate country’s integration into

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<sup>85</sup> Demirtaş B., *Turkey and the Balkans: Overcoming Prejudices, Building Bridges and Constructing a Common Future*, 2013, p. 177, [http://sam.gov.tr/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Birgul\\_Demirtas.pdf](http://sam.gov.tr/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Birgul_Demirtas.pdf).

<sup>86</sup> Official website: <https://www.aa.com.tr/ba>.

<sup>87</sup> Dimitar Bechev, *Turkey’s Policy in the Balkans: More than Neo-Ottomanism*, *Italian Institute for International Political Studies*, April 12, 2019, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/turkeys-policy-balkans-more-neo-ottomanism-22835>.

<sup>88</sup> The US.-Global leadership project, Gallup, 2013, [file:///C:/Users/User/Downloads/US\\_Global\\_Leadership\\_Report\\_03-13\\_mh2.pdf](file:///C:/Users/User/Downloads/US_Global_Leadership_Report_03-13_mh2.pdf).

<sup>89</sup> U.S. Foreign Aid by Country, *USAID*, [https://explorer.usaid.gov/cd/SRB?fiscal\\_year=2019&measure=Obligations](https://explorer.usaid.gov/cd/SRB?fiscal_year=2019&measure=Obligations).



NATO. The National Endowment for Democracy (NED) funded by the US Congress under the budget of USAID allocated more than \$ 650,000 in 2018 to various NGOs working in Serbia. The money was spent on working with the media, supporting independent journalists and young activists, as well as promoting Euro-Atlantic integration<sup>90</sup>. In 2020 the US International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) opened an office in Belgrade intending to invest \$ 4 billion in infrastructure projects in the country.<sup>91</sup>

In the past five to seven years, there has been a clear trend towards US control over the information sector in the region through media support programs and investment. USAID is considering the possibility of creating an investment fund in Serbia to support the media. The idea of creating the fund is being developed in close cooperation with the already operating USAID program to strengthen the Serbian media, designed for four years: from 2017 to 2021. Within its framework, it is planned to bring the Serbian media to the standards of the European Union. In total, almost \$ 6.5 million has been allocated for the program.<sup>92</sup> Since 2014, the cable TV channel N1 has been launched, the official distributor of CNN in the Balkans, with headquarters in Belgrade, Sarajevo and Zagreb, as well as a broadcasting network in all the Western Balkans, including Slovenia, Croatia and Serbia.

Thus, in the last decade, we can witness an increase in competition for a positive image in the Balkan arena between great and regional powers such as the United States, China, Turkey and Russia. With a small presence in the region a decade ago, China has emerged as a key player, increasing its financial investments through humanitarian and cultural ventures. While China does not have long-term traditional cooperation with Slovenia, Croatia and Serbia like Turkey or Russia, its humanitarian and cultural presence has grown significantly over the past decade, in parallel with financial injections and the strategic Silk Road initiative. The pro-

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<sup>90</sup> Гуреева Ю. Румянцева А., Евро-атлантический путь: США намерены создать в Сербии фонд для развития СМИ, *RT*, Dec.10, 2019, <https://russian.rt.com/world/article/695239-ssha-serbiya-smi>.

<sup>91</sup> Борщев К., Американцы инвестируют в Сербию 4 млрд долларов, *EurAsiaDaily*, Sept. 21, 2020, <https://eadaily.com/ru/news/2020/09/21/amerikancy-investiruyut-v-serbiyu-4-mlrd-dollarov>.

<sup>92</sup> Гуреева Ю. Румянцева А., Евро-атлантический путь: США намерены создать в Сербии фонд для развития СМИ, *RT*, Dec.10, 2019, <https://russian.rt.com/world/article/695239-ssha-serbiya-smi>.

Western orientation of Slovenia and Croatia does not require significant investments in the humanitarian sphere from the US, while infusion in the media sector, infrastructure and educational projects in Serbia should soften its position on integration into NATO and pro-Western structures. As for Russia, on the one hand, it is trying to oppose other actors in the region in the cultural and humanitarian sphere, and on the other, it may try to use China and Turkey as leverage in suppressing attempts to turn the Balkans into a sphere of exclusively Western interests.

#### **4. Eurosceptic and nationalist sentiments as driving forces of expansion of the Russian humanitarian and cultural presence.**

In general, the process of European integration in the Western Balkans can be described as inconsistent and slow. Since EU-Western Balkans Thessaloniki Summit in 2003 only Slovenia and Croatia has joined the EU that indicates that the great expectations created by the Summit have not been fulfilled<sup>93</sup>. Europe's involvement in solving its own political and economic problems and divisions within the EU between Paris and Berlin over EU enlargement<sup>94</sup> created a political vacuum and discontent in the Western Balkans.

In order to consolidate and maintain the dynamic of the EU integration process in light of increased Euroscepticism and to improve regional cooperation in the Western Balkans on the issues of infrastructure and economic development, the Berlin Process was initiated in 2014, which included among other states Slovenia and Croatia as the EU members, and Serbia as a candidate for EU membership. Despite some success of the Berlin Process conferences, the problem of the Western Balkans' "deep disappointment" with the EU remained. As was stated in the working paper of the EU foreign minister Josep Borrell, "We need to acknowledge that despite the steadfast commitment to EU integration, and the unprecedented levels of EU financial and economic support – including facing the COVID-19 pandemic – the people in the

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<sup>93</sup> Ritsa Panagiotou, The Western Balkans between Russia and the European Union: perceptions, reality, and impact on enlargement, *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 2021, p. 230.

<sup>94</sup> Пётр Искендеров, Балканы раскалывают ЕС, *The International Affairs*, Nov. 19, 2019, <https://interaffairs.ru/news/show/24204>.

region are experiencing a sense of deep disappointment in the enlargement process”.<sup>95</sup> Such a split on the upper floors of the EU and “regions’ citizen’s disillusionment with the slow, stop-go enlargement process”<sup>96</sup> force them to make adjustments to their own foreign policy priorities, including turning towards Russia and the integration mechanisms it leads.

Slovenia is probably the least divided among the three countries under consideration in terms of the political spectrum. Both right-wing and left-wing parties, with a few exceptions, try to avoid ultra-nationalist and pro-Russian rhetoric. Since 2020, key posts in the Slovenian government have been held by representatives of the right-wing conservative Slovenian Democratic Party (SDP), which won the 2018 parliamentary elections with nearly 25% of the vote<sup>97</sup> and formed a coalition with Modern Centre Party, New Slovenia, and Democratic Party of Pensioners of Slovenia. Even the opposition Social Democrats, long headed by incumbent President Borut Pahor, do not directly raise the “Russian theme” in their program, but advocate deepening ties with Russia, despite the sanctions.<sup>98</sup>

However there are political forces in Slovenia that are in deep opposition to the country's current course and its Euro-Atlantic foundations. These include, in particular, the Left Party (*Levica*), which critically evaluates the West's strategy in the world, and in particular its anti-Russian line, and has the support of more than 9% of voters.<sup>99</sup> The Slovenian National Party (SNS), which is considered to be the extreme right, is also calling for a radical revision of Slovenia's foreign policy, which received just over 4% of the vote.<sup>100</sup> “ The Party will defend a policy free from political and other pressures and ultimatums from the EU and NATO, - SNS’s

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<sup>95</sup> Alexandra Brzozowski and Vlagyislav Makszimov, EU faced with ‘deep disappointment’ in Western Balkans, *Euroactiv*, May 10, 2021, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/eu-faced-with-deep-disappointment-in-western-balkans/>.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Zoya Sheftalovich, Anti-immigration SDS party wins Slovenian election, *POLITICO*, June 4, 2018, <https://www.politico.eu/article/anti-immigration-sds-party-wins-slovenian-election-janez-jansa-miro-cerar/>.

<sup>98</sup> Matjaž Han: izvoz na ruski trg mora ostati med prvimi gospodarskimi prioritetaми Slovenije, *Socialni demokrati*. Feb.10.2017, <https://socialnidemokrati.si/matjaz-han-izvoz-na-ruski-trg-mora-ostati-med-prvimi-gospodarskimi-prioritetami-slovenije/>.

<sup>99</sup> Corinne Deloy, Janez Jansa’s Democratic Party takes the lead in the general elections in Slovenia but will find it difficult to form a government coalition, *Fondation Robert Shuman*, June 3, 2018.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

program says - We are in favour of leaving the European Union and NATO [...] We will do our best to restore Slovenia's ties with Russia, which we consider to be the driving force of [...] a new international order”.<sup>101</sup>

Thus, in Slovenia, as in other Western Balkan countries, there are political forces advocating withdrawal from the EU and NATO and a fundamental revision of relations with Russia. In 2018, they were supported by a total of about 13.5% of voters. However, as is the case with their political antipodes, the conservatives, the Slovenian extreme left and extreme right are less radical in their statements. Due to the higher level of EU integration and rather successful economic policies, Slovenia's intention to develop cooperation with Russia is more driven by pragmatic moderate left politicians than by radical political forces opposing NATO and the EU.

Anti-European sentiment is stronger in Croatia, which joined the EU in 2013 with 33% of the vote against accession in a referendum.<sup>102</sup> As E. Entina pointed out, one of the main tasks of the EU in Croatia until 2013 was the formation of loyal political elites and the ousting of Eurosceptics and nationalists from the political field.<sup>103</sup> The steady growth of mistrust towards the EU among the population is proof that European integration has almost always remained a project of national political elites without proper communication with the population, and over time, this problem has not disappeared.

Croatia's GDP has not shown significant growth since 2013, from 43.8 billion euros in 2013 to 49.2 billion in 2020,<sup>104</sup> the unemployment rate has declined, but remains higher than in the EU, and the economic gap between Croatia and the EU was still significant five years after the accession.<sup>105</sup> Poor economic performance and strong Euroscepticism affect Croatia's

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<sup>101</sup> Program SNS, *Slovenska nacionalna stranka*, May 7, 2016, [https://sns.si/wp-content/uploads/Program-SNS-2016\\_FINAL.pdf](https://sns.si/wp-content/uploads/Program-SNS-2016_FINAL.pdf).

<sup>102</sup> Croatia EU referendum: Voters back membership, *BBC*, Jan.22, 2012, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-16670298>.

<sup>103</sup> Екатерина Энтина. Особенности и пределы интеграционной политики Европейского Союза в Юго-Восточной Европе (на примере государств Постъюгославского пространства), PhD thesis, Moscow, 2020.

<sup>104</sup> Eurostat, July 20, 2021,

[https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/nama\\_10\\_gdp/default/table?lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/nama_10_gdp/default/table?lang=en).

<sup>105</sup> Giovanni Vale, Croatia, 5 years in the EU: economy, *Observatorio*, June 29, 2018, <https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Dossiers/Cinque-anni-di-Croazia-nell-Ue>.

aspirations to join the Eurozone, scheduled for the second half of 2024: “The Croatian public has always had a very suspicious view of the entry of the country into the formerly deeply troubled Eurozone, but it seems that although it's only very slight, that opinion is beginning to alter. Skepticism, however, remains as strong as it was when the country's very EU referendum took place.”<sup>106</sup>

Lack of economic success, external migration, corruption, the rise of nationalism, and intolerance are being used by the Croatian far-right and Eurosceptics to advance their agenda. According to 2018 polls, the anti-European populist party Human Wall (Živi Zid) was the second political force in Croatia with 14.9% support.<sup>107</sup> The Human Wall's leadership calls for Croatia's exit from both the Union and NATO and agitates against the introduction of the euro in the country.<sup>108</sup> It is also considered pro-Russian, as its leaders, Ivan Vilibor Sinčić and Ivan Pernar visited Russia several times and were accused of “secret ties with Russia”.<sup>109</sup>

With the example of Serbia successfully maneuvering between Russia and the West and benefiting from both, and fueled by a high level of Euroscepticism, Croatia is encouraging Russian investment and cultural and humanitarian presence in the hope of leveraging this in the EU for obtaining funds and other privileges.

As explained above, anti-EU and NATO sentiment has always been high in Serbia, and the 2012 election of the nationalist-minded Tomislav Nikolić as president further contributed to the rise of populism and nationalism in Serbia. Both Nikolić and elected in 2017 Aleksandar Vučić are representatives of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), formally pro-EU, but in fact advocated closer ties with Russia. The most visible manifestation of the alliance of Serbia's leading party with Russia is the inter-party agreements signed in 2011, 2016 and 2019 with the

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<sup>106</sup> Lauren Simmonds, Croatian Public's Opinion on Eurozone More Positive But Skepticism Remains, *Total Croatia News*, May 5, 2021, <https://www.total-croatia-news.com/politics/52670-croatian-public>.

<sup>107</sup> Crobarometer: HDZ najjači, Živi zid za dlaku ispred SDP-a, *tportal.hr*, Dec.24, 2018, <https://www.tportal.hr/biznis/clanak/crobarometer-hdz-najjaci-zivi-zid-za-dlaku-ispred-sdp-20181224>.

<sup>108</sup> Robin-Ivan Capar, Wall in: The Eurosceptic challenge in Croatia, *European Council on Foreign Relations*, Jan.16, 2019, [https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_wall\\_in\\_the\\_eurosceptic\\_challenge\\_in\\_croatia/](https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_wall_in_the_eurosceptic_challenge_in_croatia/).

<sup>109</sup> Fredrik Wesslau, Putin's friends in Europe, *European Council on Foreign Relations*, October 19, 2016, [https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_putins\\_friends\\_in\\_europe7153/](https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_putins_friends_in_europe7153/).

ruling United Russia party.<sup>110</sup> Interestingly, in 2016, the agreement was signed two days before the parliamentary elections in Belgrade and was accompanied by a final pre-election rally of progressives, who saw in such a demonstration of solidarity with their Russian counterparts leverage for gaining support in the elections. SNS, as United Russia, emphasis social conservatism, hostility to NATO, support for the principles of non-interference (by the West) and the defense of national sovereignty.<sup>111</sup>

The broader circle of anti-EU and anti-NATO parties aligned with Moscow includes Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS, 22 seats in the 2020 parliamentary elections), Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS), Movement of Socialists (3 seats in the 2020 parliamentary elections), Serbian Radical Party, Serbian Peoples' Party (3 seats in the 2020 parliamentary elections), Communist Party, Dveri movement.

As we can see, Russia has an appeal that spans the political spectrum, from radical anti-Westerners to moderate and formally pro-EU. As Dimitar Bechev argued, “reformers” and “pro-Europeans”, like Vučić, can use and speculate on “hard” anti-EU movements to disassociate themselves from radicals and to gain support in the EU. “The tactic of using the threat posed by Russia to rally support in the West has been widespread across the Balkans”.<sup>112</sup>

Thus, there is a demand for Russia stemming from different political forces and people's disillusionment with European integration and Western institutions in all three countries, which makes them more receptive to Russian cultural and humanitarian activities. Euroscepticism, which is rather weak in Slovenia, is gaining strength in Croatia due to weaker economic performance and lack of visible benefits from EU accession, and is strongest in Serbia, where the ruling party uses anti-NATO and anti-European sentiments to gain popular support. Here we share the opinion of Maxim Samorukov that “most of the work to create Russia's image

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<sup>110</sup> Дмитрий Астахов, ЕР и Сербская прогрессивная партия подписали документ о сотрудничестве, RIA News, April 22, 2016, <https://ria.ru/20160422/1416776709.html>.

<sup>111</sup> David Clark and Dr Andrew Foxall, Russia's Role in the Balkans – Cause for Concern?, The Henry Jackson Society, June 2014, p. 10.

<sup>112</sup> Dimitar Bechev, Rival Power: Russia in Southeast Europe, Yale University Press New Haven and London, 2017, p.83.

of a powerful and influential state is done for Moscow by Balkan politicians, pursuing their own interests.”<sup>113</sup> Some of them, like Croatian HDZ party, portray Russian omnipotence in negative tones in order to reduce the demands of the West and accelerate the integration of their countries into Euro-Atlantic structures. Others, such as Serbian SNS, seek to present themselves to voters as true patriots and nationalists and, conversely, positively describe the benefits of cooperation with Russia.

## **5. Conclusion**

This study was intended to solve the puzzle of why Russia is investing in cultural and humanitarian programs in the Western Balkans, and why they are receptive to such activities, despite the fact that their partnerships with NATO and the EU are growing. We focused on the three Balkans countries: Slovenia, Croatia, and Serbia, and overviewed their level of integration into the EU and NATO, as well as their cooperation with Russia in economic, political, military, humanitarian and cultural areas.

To answer the first part of the puzzle we tried the assumption, that Russia seeks to preserve its influence in the Western Balkans, namely in Serbia, Slovenia, and Croatia, through hampering their further integration into the EU and NATO, and countering the growing cultural activities of great and regional power rivals (the US, China, and Turkey). To answer the second part, we assumed that the requests of various social groups skeptical about further integration into the EU and structures led by the West make the respective states more receptive to the Russian humanitarian and cultural presence.

As a result of our research, we came to several conclusions.

First, although Russia has invested in strengthening the multifaceted integration of target states with Russia, forcing Slovenia or Croatia to withdraw from NATO or refrain from future integration into the EU structures is an unattainable goal, therefore, Moscow rather

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<sup>113</sup> Максим Саморуков, Влияние близости: амбиции и возможности России на Западных Балканах, *Moscow Carnegie Centre*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2017, p.40.

considers these states as possible allies within the EU and “negotiation card” with Brussels.<sup>114</sup> As for Serbia, it hedges its options by keeping EU membership as its primary destination and engaging with NATO, while maintaining close ties with Russia.

Second, constrained in the development of political and military cooperation by the membership of Slovenia and Croatia in the EU and NATO, as well as in the development of economic cooperation by sanctions and its own economic problems, Russia relies heavily on humanitarian and cultural instruments, including mass media campaign and “track two diplomacy”.

Third, Russia's investment in the cultural and humanitarian activities of the three respective countries is aimed at countering the increased presence of other players in the region over the past decade, such as China, Turkey and the United States.

Fourth, growing frustration with the implications of European integration and the rise of Euroscepticism are evidences of the marginal success of EU policy in the Western Balkans over the past twenty years.<sup>115</sup> Radicals, nationalists, Eurosceptics and other political forces in Slovenia, Croatia and Serbia use these sentiments to advocate a pivot towards Russia and leverage on pro-Russian rhetoric both domestically and in Brussels.

Fifth, the Russia-EU-Balkans triangle is important for understanding the internal relations among them. Russia maintained a pragmatic and low-profile stance on cooperation between the EU and the Balkans until the early 2010s, and its revitalization in the region paralleled its growing claims to great power status. Its strengthening in the region is a way to “socialize Europe”<sup>116</sup> and challenge NATO to maintain the status as a great player in the Western Balkans.

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<sup>114</sup> Ritsa Panagiotou, *The Western Balkans between Russia and the European Union : perceptions, reality, and impact on enlargement*, *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, Vol. 29, No.2, 2021.

<sup>115</sup> Екатерина Энтина. *Особенности и пределы интеграционной политики Европейского Союза в Юго-Восточной Европе (на примере государств Постъюгославского пространства)*, PhD thesis, Moscow, 2020.

<sup>116</sup> Vsevolod Samokhvalov, *Russia in the Balkans: Great Power Politics and Local Response*, *Insight Turkey* , Vol. 21, No. 2, 2019.



Thus, we can conclude that our two assumptions have been proven valid. Russia's desire to consolidate its superiority in the Western Balkans and resist NATO expansion and strengthening of European institutions, as well as growing domestic dissatisfaction with the EU policies, dictating demand for Russia, contribute to the increase of Russian humanitarian and cultural activity in the region, particularly, in Slovenia, Croatia, and Serbia.

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