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Master's Thesis

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**Assessing Russian impact on the Western Balkan countries' EU accession:
Cases of Croatia and Serbia**

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I have written this Master's thesis independently. All viewpoints of other authors, literary sources and data from elsewhere used for writing this paper have been referenced.

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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 Balkans are reason enough for the European Union to devote significant attention to accession talks. This thesis addresses the Western Balkan countries' Europeanization process with consideration of Russia as an external actor. The inclinations of Western Balkan countries toward the EU incite Moscow to increase its presence in the region with the aim of diverting countries from the path to European integration. Drawing on the theory of liberal intergovernmentalism and a rational approach to European integration, the research argues that the rational and pragmatic impetus behind the Europeanization dynamic brings to the forefront long-term economic, security and geopolitical benefits for the Western Balkan countries. By assessing the candidate countries' progress amid EU negotiations, the thesis suggests that the countries' bilateral ties with Russia have an impact on the Europeanization process. This tendency is particularly visible in *Chapter 31 Foreign, security, and defence policy* of the *acquis communautaire*. The broader geopolitical framework comprises the multifaceted relationship between the EU and Russia that is crucial for understanding the dynamics of EU-Western Balkans-Russia triangle.

Keywords: Western Balkans, European Union, Europeanization process, Russia, liberal intergovernmentalism, rational choice to European integration, EU-Russia relations, coalition government, geopolitics.

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1. 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. Russia's assertive foreign policy in the Eastern and Southern neighbourhood does not contribute to the overall improvement of EU-Russia relations. Ever since the president Trump's discussion regarding NATO's continued usefulness, the EU has started consolidating its own military and defensive forces to counter security threats looming over its borders. While president Trump's stance on NATO is ambiguous, the rhetoric he employs to address the EU is becoming increasingly anti-European. Not since the foundation of the EU has America's foreign policy been as antagonistic towards the EU as it is today under president Trump. This is probably the most challenging period for the EU to think about further deepening and widening due to many reasons – Brexit, external security threats, the rise of far-right populism, identity and political crises. The refugee crisis and the even more chaotic response which followed have shattered the EU's image. Brexit, being officially triggered in March 2017, with no historic precedent, has left the EU in a position to develop a completely new strategy for consolidating the 'Union of 27'.

Yet Western Balkan (WB) countries cling to the idea of possible membership to the EU. The European Union has embraced enlargement as its most effective foreign policy tool – and can credibly argue that the EU's enlargement has been the most successful democracy promotion policy ever implemented by an external actor (Vachudova 2014: 122). The enlargement process continues to have a 'democratizing effect', as WB candidates and proto-candidates respond to the incentives of EU membership: political parties have changed their agendas to make them EU-compatible, and governments have implemented policy changes to move forward in the pre-

accession process (Vachudova 2014: 122). Being torn by economic issues, corruption, institutional complexities with regard to the rule of law and good governance, it seems highly likely that the only alternative to overhauling economic performance and state administration is to join the privileged community. Given such economic problems and disparities among WB countries, it would be in countries' national interest to receive institutional guidance and policy recommendations from the EU. Not only do countries acquire long-term economic and geopolitical benefits, but also gain a unique possibility to influence decision-making at the supranational level.

Russia's impact on the accession process, which will be thoroughly examined in this thesis, comes somewhere in-between; on the one hand, the process of EU negotiations requires countries to delegate some of their competencies to the EU level and comply with rules and regulations already set-in-stone, whereas, on the other hand, it still gives countries enough space to tackle their internal and external policies independently. This *independence in making choices* is exactly where the 'Russian factor' fits nicely. This research shall, thus, focus on examining the extent of Russia's impact on the process of EU accession negotiations. Because stalling the Europeanization process can be traced to both internal and external factors of the countries in question, the internal factors, which in the WB countries' case are even more likely to hinder the EU negotiations, will be kept constant so that the assessment of the external impact can be done more accurately.

For the purpose of this research, it is paramount to understand the common history of WB countries which at some point became an excessive burden, and difficult to deal with. The process of integration of the WB has coincided with the dismemberment of Yugoslavia and social and ethnic fragmentation at the domestic level throughout the region (Türkes and Gökgöz 2006: 662). After the dissolution of Yugoslavia in 1991, the communist regime – once the main ideological foundation in the region – now ceased to exist. Starting from 1991, the Balkan wars provoked disarray in several countries (Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Serbia, and Croatia) leaving them with mistrust, war memory, remorse towards neighbours, minority complexity, and unresolved issues with missing and displaced people. Similar cultural and language traits, which can be traced across these countries, influenced heavily on the post-war identity construction in the war-torn region. The resurfacing of ethnic conflict and

subsequent war in Yugoslavia, coupled with difficulties of the 'double process of transition and integration', led to a redistribution of internal political and economic power and sparked the search for external integration (Türkes 2004 as cited in Türkes and Gökgöz 2006: 673).

In 2013, Croatia managed to transform its institutions in accordance with the *acquis* and joined the EU. Other WB countries are still far from meeting necessary economic and political criteria for the EU accession. The problems occur in the areas of judiciary, corruption, organized crime, minority protection, economic performance, the rule of law and good governance. Regardless of the fact that political elites have adopted strong Europeanization discourse and put EU integration high on their agendas, political layout and incumbent governments across official and potential EU candidates indicate more differences than similarities. Distrust in representative institutions and disengagement from political life runs dramatically high among the people of the Balkan countries, and this generalized sense of dissatisfaction is starting to breed cynicism towards the idea of a better future inside the Union (Stratulat, 2014: xi). Thusly, not only is Russia's factor driving apart these countries, but there are also internal factors present which are preventing countries from having a clear pro-European vision. That being said, the puzzle of this research revolves around divergence among WB countries and their EU accession process with respect to Russia. How come these countries, despite having a common historical background and clear pro-European vision, i.e. being either EU member states or EU candidates, can differ in regards to Russia's involvement in the region?

The idea for this topic arose from the lack of academic research in the comparative analysis of WB countries with respect to two actors – Russia and the EU. Most of the academic work on WB region entails either Russian presence within the country in question or EU accession negotiations with that country, but comprehensive study which would analyse the WB region as a common platform, where EU and Russian interests collide, is still needed. This research could be a starting point for undertaking more studies on the topic which would eventually deepen and broaden perspectives on the region and diagnose the most critical issues. It is believed that the matter of WB countries accession to the EU is topical and of importance for the future of the EU as a whole. The discontent which prevails across WB countries with regards

to politics, corruption, and other internal issues is dividing the population into pro-EU and anti-EU supporters. The WB region remains a time bomb which might have pernicious effects on neighbouring regions. Additionally, the presence of various external actors throughout the region might stifle countries' progress towards the EU due to their various security, economic, and political interests. Along these lines, this research sees its purpose in inspecting one of those external factors which have a sound possibility to impede the progress toward the EU.

While Russia's presence in the region dates back decades, the geopolitical landscape has changed and Russia has come forth as a worrisome factor to EU integration and not an EU partner, to say the least. It is, therefore, relevant to inspect the possibility of Russia having an upper hand in issues that are pertinent for EU negotiations. The EU faces an uphill struggle trying to reconcile countries' past with present challenges and future EU obligations. The primary aim is to assess the scope of Russian influence on EU negotiations of the WB countries. In light of the dynamic nature of EU-Russia relations, this research seeks to find answers to whether the countries' commitments to the EU are indisputable and to what extent Russia influences these countries' internal affairs. In this respect, two research questions are set accordingly:

RQ1 How do country's close bilateral ties with Russia affect the Europeanization process?

RQ2 How could the volatile nature of EU-Russia relations be the reason for stalling the Europeanization process in countries with closer ties to Russia?

The two hypotheses have been formulated with the aim of addressing the research questions in a concise and straightforward manner:

H1 Those WB countries with more historically, economically and geopolitically entrenched relations with Russia are more likely to stall the Europeanization process.

H2 All else being equal, those WB countries with closer ties to Russia are more likely to stall the Europeanization process during periods of increasingly strained EU-Russia relations.

This research looks into two case studies which serve as a representative sample of the WB region. These two cases have been selected according to criteria defined in the methodology chapter. Apart from the comparison of these cases, the study of each case consists of discourse analysis of EU official documents, as well as in-depth examination of countries' bilateral relations with Russia in fields which are believed to be of value for the research. In order to define the exact time frame needed for proceeding with the research, two defining moments in EU-Russia relations have been identified:

- 1) Positive EU-Russia relations (2008-2011) and
- 2) Strained EU-Russia relations (2012-2015).

Since all countries in the WB region have expressed a strong EU commitment and set themselves on European trajectory – some already being EU members and other EU candidate countries – no one is questioning Russia's role in influencing the outcome of EU negotiations. Nonetheless, if the EU keeps (un)intentionally neglecting WB countries, it is highly likely that Russia will try to exert its influence. The European Commission president has put the WB countries low on his agenda, which to a certain extent, speaks of the EU's willingness to bring these countries closer to the EU. In case hypotheses are verified and show that Russia does play a significant role in the region, it might suggest that in order to keep its influence, the EU should commit more and re-think the approach it applies in light of Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP). Considering WB countries' difficulties to meet political and economic criteria (Qorraj 2010), it remains to be seen what would happen if some countries fall short in meeting criteria and find themselves left out of the WB accession package. Is the EU willing to make a substantial effort in order to continue with the process of Europeanization and let these countries in eventually? Or, given the challenges facing the EU, is the WB accession even on the agenda? The answer to this dilemma would also clarify Russia's position in the WB region and give further insights into how strong Russian influence is across the region.

This thesis is divided into seven chapters. Chapter one gives a brief overview and sets the problem within the defined time framework. It also defines the research questions and hypotheses. The second chapter introduces the main theoretical principles on which the paper rests and discusses the most relevant academic works in the form of

a literature review. A short overview of countries' position vis-à-vis Russia and the EU is also given and two case studies are presented. The methodology is outlined in the third chapter with an in-depth explanation of variables used in the analysis. The following chapter analyses independent, dependent and intervening variables of two case studies and ends with case studies comparison presented in a form of a table. Findings and questions for future debate are discussed in the later chapter, where the author seeks to identify limitations and define issues for further research which go beyond the scope of this paper. The conclusions are drawn in the final chapter.

2. Theoretical framework

Intergovernmentalism, or at least a contemporary variant of it, continues to dominate much of the academic discourse on European integration at the start of the twenty-first century, even if many researchers into EU politics would rather this were not the case (Cini 2007: 100). Intergovernmentalist theory, in turn, drew largely from the soft rational choice tradition of realist theory, identifying the EU's member governments implicitly or explicitly as rational actors who were both aware of and capable of forestalling the transfer of authority to supranational institutions in Brussels (Hoffmann 1966 as cited in Pollack 2006: 36). As a conceptual approach, intergovernmentalism sees integration as a zero-sum game, claims that it is limited to policy areas that do not touch on fundamental issues of national sovereignty, and argues that 'European integration is driven by the interests and actions of nation states (Hix 1999 as cited in Cini 2007: 100). In various writings, and particularly in his book, *The Choice for Europe*, Moravcsik refined intergovernmentalism into an explicitly rationalist theory in which actors were clearly specified, and predictions about outcomes made, at various levels of analysis (Pollack 2006: 36).

The liberal intergovernmentalism theory as we know it today has its roots in the international political economy that was elaborated by Robert Keohane. The author elaborates on state's behaviour in the international politics in the book *Transnational Relations and World Politics* (1971) by explaining the correlation between state preferences and globalisation, whereas in the book *Power and Interdependence* (2001), Keohane seeks to introduce a new concept of interstate bargaining power which derives from asymmetrical interdependence. Following this line of thought, Moravcsik and Schimmelfennig (2009) explain how the concept of *asymmetrical interdependence* can be applied to the EU negotiation process since the EU has the leverage to impose conditionality on candidate countries due to their one-sided dependence on EU economy. It explains how interstate power stems not from the possession of coercive power resources, but from asymmetric in issue-specific interdependence. In other words, the more resources one country possesses (or the less it needs), the stronger it is; conversely, the less a country has of it (or the more it needs), the weaker it is (Milner & Moravcsik 2009: 249). This concept can be applied to EU negotiation practice during

which the EU – acting as a supranational institution with the support of the member states – has the leverage to impose strong conditionality on EU candidate countries and compel them to sacrifice more in order to acquire EU membership status and attached to it economic privileges. Taylor (2013), on the other hand, goes a step further and examines the feasibility of network governance in the context of the EU's potential expansion to the WB countries.

LI model nests three complementary middle-range theories: the assumption of rational state behaviour, a liberal theory of national preference formation, and an intergovernmentalist analysis of interstate negotiation (Moravscik 1993: 480). Inasmuch as this thesis seeks to examine applicants' enlargement preferences which are mainly connected with materialistic conditions, the assumption of rational state behaviour seems to be the most suitable theoretical framework. A rationalist approach to enlargement has identified various sources of enlargement preferences, among which are general systems conditions, such as changes in the world economy, in technology, or the security environment – for instance, the denationalization of the economy creates incentives for joining an international economic organization (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier 2006: 13). Unlike intergovernmentalism, Moravscik's liberal intergovernmentalism offers updated account of European integration where domestic politics affect the national interests' formulation. Domestic groups compete for political influence by pressurizing the government to adopt their policy alternatives as national interests. By treating states as independent actors which use supranational institutions for the sake of achieving their goals, LI touches upon the very nature of international bargaining. As a synthesis of existing theories of foreign economic policy, intergovernmental negotiation, and international regimes, LI rests on the assumption that state behaviour reflects the rational actions of governments constrained at home by domestic societal pressures and abroad by their strategic environment (Moravscik 1993: 473).

Nonetheless, it does not explain all the aspects of European integration, neither it takes into consideration other factors included in interstate bargaining and negotiations between the EU and prospective member states. While LI elaborates the mechanisms of decision-making process where the member states act as 'masters of the treaty' by tailoring EU politics according to their views and preferences, it does not

focus in depth on the behaviour of countries aspiring to join the EU, which lies at the core of rationalist approach to the European integration. Often perceived as a baseline theory, the success of LI lies not in its generality, ambition, parsimony or other formal attributes, but in the apparent accuracy of substantive assumptions and empirical predictions, it advances about European politics. It argues that one cannot explain integration with just one factor, but instead seeks to link together multiple theories and factors into a single coherent approach appropriate to explaining the trajectory of integration over time (Moravscik & Schimmelfenig 2009: 68). Although the theory was criticized for placing too much emphasis on states as the main actors, and by doing so, downplaying the importance of EU supranational institutions, precisely this kind of theory is needed in assessing the process of integration of WB countries to the EU. Given the main focus of the thesis is on WB countries which seek EU integration due to their interests and preferences, the thesis seeks to underline the states as the main drivers of EU negotiations process in order to understand rationale factors which lie behind this dynamic.

In view of this, the rationalist approach to European integration goes beyond LI theory and offers a wider framework for inspecting not only the dynamic of member states within the EU but also the nature of negotiations where a special emphasis is put on applicant countries' preferences. The assumption of rational state behaviour provides a general framework for analysis, within which the costs and benefits of economic interdependence are the primary determinants of national preferences, while the relative intensity of national preferences, the existence of alternative coalitions, and the opportunity for issue linkages provide the basis for an intergovernmental analysis of the resolution of distributional conflicts among governments (Moravscik 1993: 480-481). This rationality in the decision-making process, regardless of whether the decision is made by the member states of applicant countries, is what binds together LI theory and rationalist approach to European integration.

The rational approach to EU enlargement, as the main theoretical foundation of this thesis, has been widely discussed among political scientists and in many instances used to provide insights into the political system of the EU. Pollack (2006) claims that the approach did not originate in the study of the EU but rather should be understood as a broad approach to social theory, capable of generating an array of specific theories

and testable hypotheses about a range of human behaviour. In light of this, at the broadest level, rational choice, as Snidal (2002) sees it, is a methodological approach that explains both individual and collective (social) outcomes in terms of individual goal-seeking under constraints. Vachudova (2014) adopts a similar perspective of a rationalist approach to EU enlargement by putting forward an argument which identifies cost-benefit mechanism due to which WB countries want to join the EU. According to her, EU member states see enlargement as a matter of nationalist interest, bringing long-term economic and geopolitical benefits. Schimmelfenning and Sedelmeir (2005) also argue that the main theoretical foundation of rationalist hypotheses revolves around expected individual costs and benefits which then determine the applicants' and the member states' preferences. In this respect, authors explain how an applicant country seeks to expand its institutional ties with the organization – reaping positive net benefits from enlargement, and these benefits are greater than those that would be secured from an alternative form of horizontal institutionalization. Moravcsik (1993) complements the argument by describing how national governments have an incentive to co-operate where policy coordination increases their control over domestic policy outcomes, enabling them to achieve goals that would not otherwise be possible. Other authors, such as Aspinwall and Schneider (2000) adopt the same perspective and explain the 'strategic feature' in actors' behaviour which they use to adapt their strategies and beliefs to the assumed actions of other players.

Regardless of a broad array of specialists who recognize the importance of a rationalist approach to the EU enlargement, the theory has been subjected to various criticisms. Abbott and Sindall (2002) were one of the first to expose flaws in the approach. According to them, rationalist explanations are seriously incomplete since they do not take into account the significant role of values and value actors in most international issues. Although rational choice provides a flexible methodology capable of incorporating actors with widely disparate goals, it is inadequate simply to define values as another category of interests. In other words, authors argue that applying solely rationalist assumption without taking into consideration an ideational facet (which entails values and identity-related matters) is an incomplete approach (Fearon & Wendt 2002; Kratochvil & Tulmets 2010). Similarly, Christiansen et al. (1992) claim that European integration has a transformative power on the interests and identities of

individuals, but that this transformation will remain largely invisible in approaches that neglect process of identity formation and/or assume interests to be given exogenously. The rational choice approach assumes that actors behave in a strategic manner, adapting their strategies and beliefs to the assumed actions of other players (Aspinwall & Schenider 2000: 16).

LI, thus, similarly to rationalist approach to European integration, sees national interests as a crucial part of international negotiations and a key driver for governments when defining goals domestically. The economic interests, financial endorsements and geopolitical factors which account for security interdependence suggest that the government is empowered to influence international negotiations for the sake of achieving domestic goals and preserving national interests. The outcomes of intergovernmental negotiations are determined by the relative bargaining power of governments and the functional incentives for institutionalization created by high transaction costs and the desire to control domestic agendas (Moravscik 1993: 517).

Another area where LI theory and rationalist approach to European integration contemplate one another is with regard to the rationalist-constructivist axis. Ideological concerns and linkages to other concerns, such as geopolitics, are likely to play a stronger role when economic interests are weak and cause-effect relations are uncertain (Moravscik & Schimmelfennig 2009: 85). A community of basic political values and norms is at best a necessary condition of enlargement. In the absence of net economic or security benefits, having common values and norms is not a positive incentive for expanding the organisation (Schimmelfennig 2001: 61). The rationalist approach is still the dominant approach to the study of European integration in international relations theory, with constructivism being its primary rival, but less developed one (Pollack 2001: 221). Although aware that rationalism and constructivism are at the same time two complementary and competing approaches to EU enlargement, this thesis will shed light on materialist factors, being inextricably connected to the rationalist facet, rather than being grounded in constructivism. Thus, while conducting research and examining differences with respect to rationalist choice approach, all other factors which might derive from a constructivist approach shall not be taken into consideration.

For the above-mentioned reasons, the focus of this thesis shall be exclusively on rationalist assumption to European integration which will encompass economic,

geopolitical and security concerns related to Russian involvement in WB region and implications it might have on EU accession negotiations. These dimensions also serve as references for determining the variable system for the analysis. Further elaboration of the rationality in decision-making with respect to rationalist approach to European integration is presented in the chapter that follows.

2.1. 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). It is the same mechanism that prevents countries from curtailing relations with Russia during the accession negotiations. 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 (Moravcsik 1993: 485). The theoretical rationalist assumption seeks to capture underlying factors in WB countries' accession to the EU by placing an emphasis on candidate countries' preferences and their calculations with respect to the EU project. As rationalism would lead us to expect, countries reflect egoistic calculations of, and conflict about, national welfare and security benefits or national attitudes to integration, not a collective 'Community interests' (Schimmelfennig 2001: 53).

Even though the focus of the thesis will be exclusively on EU integration, the overall vision of WB countries centers on their long-term plans to join both the EU and NATO. Hence, useful insights into WB countries' relations with NATO are also worth taking into account and as such are elaborated by several authors (Antonenko 2007; Seroka 2007; Luša 2012; Begović 2014). Academic works so far have sought to examine the EU strategy towards WB countries, as well as the ongoing democratization process (Türkes & Gökgöz 2006; Veljanoska et al. 2014; Rupnik 2011). Given the main complexities in the WB region – ethnic cleansing, armed conflicts, secession and autocratic governance – the EU along with NATO and OSCE offered WB countries a possibility to work on building legitimacy, transparency, democracy and the rule of law. 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 destabilizing effect, which would eventually lead to a negative spillover onto neighbouring EU member states.

Given the opportunity that would enable WB countries to completely transform their political, economic, judiciary and institutional set-up, the literature, for the most part, suggests that the route to Europe is the most practical solution for these countries. Belloni (2009) argues how integration into European institutions is the best conflict management and development approach for WB countries. The same argument of regional approach Vesnic-Alujevic (2012) uses in her article *European Integration of Western Balkans: From Reconciliation to European Future*. In addition to that, Elbasani (2013) argues how European membership has emerged as the cornerstone of the region's future since all targeted countries advance up the institutional ladder envisaged by the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA). Zielonka (2006) argues how the process of negotiations opens WB societies to alternative worldviews and prospects, encouraging much-needed domestic debate. In her article, Delević (2007) writes on the subject of regional cooperation and confirms that eventual integration in the EU is the most cherished objective of WB countries.

When it comes to the EU approach to WB region, the opinion of scholars seems to differ. Schenker (2008) went as far as to question the SAP and the effect it has had on five WB countries so far. The main concern in his work is whether the SAP is a strong instrument for ensuring political and economic stability in the region. Fraenkel (2016) assesses the possible scenario of WB countries remaining outside of the Union indefinitely. In that case, the continuing status quo could, in turn, further countries' downward economic and political spiral, which – among other things – would boost the organized crime and out-migration. As Fraenkel explains, countries might seek their way out by aligning themselves with other powerful countries in the region, mainly naming Russia and Turkey as the alternatives. However, such alternative does not entail

an integration perspective as it is the case with the EU, but rather deeper economic cooperation and a security guarantee. Renner and Trauner (2009), on the other hand, have no doubts about the EU leverage in the WB countries and argue that it has remained high due to a dual strategy, first of which is the prospect of membership and additional short-term incentives at a more subordinated level, such as extra financial assistance for sectoral integration or the promise of visa liberalisation.

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). As a regional power, the EU cannot run the risk of reviving the 1990s conflicts, when it proved the incapability of maintaining order on its own borders. 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 2011:2).

2.1.1. 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 which does not match Russian interests. The Kremlin's actions in the region – including meddling in the domestic politics of Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (hereafter FYROM), BiH, 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 different disinformation strategies 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, Rachev (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 & 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).

Seeing the bigger picture, one can also examine Russia's impact on EU external governance. 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 & 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. 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 & Wilson 2016). Seen from the perspective of Moscow, 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 & 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 & Haukkala 2016: 9). The EU's engagement with Ukraine – a key transit nation and a major customer for Russian gas – threatened to limit Russian commercial leverage and imperiled energy trading schemes that were an important vehicle for the Putin regime's use of corruption as a tool of political influence (Greene 2012).

In addition, a lot of research has been conducted on how EaP countries affect EU-Russia relations and vice versa, how EaP countries became the ground for exporting neighborhood policies by the EU and Russia. In their article, Dimitreva and Dragneva

(2009) discuss that the effectiveness of the EU's external governance cannot be assessed without looking at the broader geopolitical and historical framework in which the Union extends its influence. Popescu (2014) explains the second alternative that EaP countries have in the form of Eurasian Union and goes into depth with implications on both EU and Russia's neighborhood policies. Charap and Troitskiy (2014) deal with 'two alternatives' for the EaP countries on the example of Ukraine. However, further academic research, which would cover both Russia's and EU policies in the region, is very much needed. There are only limited works dedicated to WB countries' position with respect to both Russia and the EU. So far academic research in this field focused either on Russia's influence in WB region or EU accession negotiations, but a comprehensive approach is still lacking. For instance, Vachudova (2014) in her article *EU leverage and National interests in the Balkans: The Puzzles of Enlargement Ten Years On*, discusses only WB position vis-à-vis the EU, while the article *Western Balkans between Europe and Russia* from the Centre for Security Studies (2015) tries to entail both dimensions.

2.2. EU foothold in the Western Balkans

Being both geographic and political, the concept of 'Western Balkans' was initially employed by US and European policymakers to describe the part of the Balkan Peninsula that remained outside of both the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the EU since the early 1990s (Bugajski 2014). Since then, different interpretations and understandings of the term have been brought to bear. One of such reading refers to the Western Balkans as a 'black hole' according to which WB countries, which remain outside the EU, simply continue to 'export' instability and uncertainty to the rest of Europe (Mylonas 2012). Milardović (2009) sees the term 'Western Balkans' as coined by the EU officials with no indications of any political significance and with the main aim of defining the EU strategy toward the region of ex-Yugoslavia, with the exception of Slovenia and the addition of Albania. Other authors focus more on explaining the concept 'Western Balkans' as a framework within which countries of ex-Yugoslavia function. Veljanoska (2014) defines following countries as part of Western Balkans: Albania, BiH, FYROM, Montenegro, Serbia, Kosovo, and Croatia. The same definition

is offered by the European Commission which sees this set of countries as being part of the WB.

During the last two decades, the EU has shown unequivocal support for the gradual integration of WB countries into the EU. The Royamount process launched in December 1996 was the first EU initiative aimed at stabilizing the WB and the child of the immediate post-Dayton context, aiming to support the implementation of the Dayton Peace Accord and thus the EU's engagement with the WB (Türkes & Gökgöz 2006: 674-675). In April 1997, the EU General Affairs Council adopted Regional Approach by establishing political and economic conditionality as a part of preparation for integration into European structures (Eur-Lex 2003) The manner in which conditionality was applied in the case of WB clarified the contours of a distinctly different mode of relations that the EU would maintain with the region: there was no prospect for rapid membership, but the countries meeting the conditions were to be rewarded with trade concessions, financial assistance, and economic cooperation on the part of the EU (Türkes & Gökgöz 2006: 676).

Furthermore, Kosovo crisis in 1999 gave a strong impetus to the EU to engage more within the WB region. Consequently, the initiative ended in launching Stability Pact (SP) for WB, which aimed at pursuing a clear stability and growth strategy in the region. The SP laid the foundation for SAP launched in 1999 and aimed at eventual EU membership by involving WB countries in a progressive partnership with a view of stabilizing the region and establishing a free-trade area. By launching the SAP, the WB have been – and still remain to be – a textbook example of the EU's comprehensive approach, able to invest in post-conflict stabilization, peace and security in the long term (Prifti 2013: 14). The Thessaloniki summit in 2003 between the Heads of State and Government of the EU and WB countries paved the way for a wide range of concrete steps and initiatives aiming at integrating the WB – Albania, BiH, Croatia, FYROM, Montenegro, Serbia and Kosovo – in the EU (Prifti 2013: 13). It can be seen as a pivotal moment whereby the EU approach towards the region shifted from post-conflict stabilization and reconstruction (security) to democratic consolidation and European integration (Prifti 2013: 15).

There are two ways of assessing the situation in the region. One is to adopt the perspective of the EU Commission in its progress reports and to establish, in true regatta

spirit, a ranking of the WB countries in their onwards march towards EU membership. The other is to combine a broader regional picture with the view from the Balkan states themselves, which shows the limits of individual, country-by-country approaches to the shared problems and remaining contentious issues and to EU integration (Rupnik 2011: 7). The countries are in disarray with each having its own issues to address within EU negotiation process. BiH is trying to preserve federal structure in a post-Dayton spirit; FYROM is in a search of identity; Serbia struggles with defining its statehood after losing Kosovo, whereas Kosovo copes with the recognition of its sovereignty. For the first time the EU, a project conceived in order to relativize states' sovereignty, has become involved in the formation of new nation-states that also aspire to become members of the Union (Rupnik 2011: 24).

2.2.1. Countries position vis-à-vis EU and Russia

The WB countries indeed have viable perspective for EU membership due to the geographical proximity to the EU, geostrategic importance of the region, its capacity as a potential future market, the potential of localized trouble spilling out over the region and into the EU, and the EU's assumed role as moral and intellectual leader (Türkes & Gökgöz 2006: 689). After the end of the Kosovo conflict in 1999, Albania, Serbia and Montenegro, Croatia, FYROM, and BiH were all granted the status of 'potential candidates' and subsumed under a new institutional framework (Renner & Traunner 2009: 8). Since then, Croatia joined the EU, Serbia and Montenegro have been recognized as candidate countries, Albania became the official candidate in 2014 and is waiting for the opening of negotiations along with FYROM, whereas BiH and Kosovo are yet to change their status from potential to official EU candidates. *Table 1* shows an overview of WB countries' status with regard to both the EU and Russia.

Table 1 Western Balkan countries' status with respect to the EU and Russia¹

		European Union				
		Formal recognition of EU commitment		De facto recognition of EU commitment		Aspiring recognition of EU commitment
		EU member state	Negotiations started	Negotiations not started	SAA ratified	SAA not yet ratified
Russia	Positive relations		Serbia		FYROM BiH	
	Neutral relations	Croatia				
	Negative relations		Montenegro	Albania		Kosovo

Comparatively, Montenegro holds the highest performance in the accession negotiations, with having provisionally closed 25 and 26 chapter, *Science and Research* and *Education and Culture*, respectively (European Commission 2015). Montenegrin government is determined to join both the EU and NATO and made it one of the country's priorities. Along with Montenegro, Serbia is the only country to have opened chapters within *acquis*. Even though negotiations on SAA started already in 2005, the EU had hampered the signing until Serbia did not demonstrate its cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), an issue which was on the Serbian agenda for many years. Another important obstacle on the path toward the EU is Kosovo, although Serbia continues to be committed to the normalisation of its relations with Kosovo (Serbia 2015 progress report).

As for the rest of ex-Yugoslav countries, BiH was recognized EU candidate country after the Thessaloniki summit in 2003. The main adversary to the BiH European integration is one of its two constitutional and legal entities – the Serb Republic, which is believed to be under direct influence of Russia. Under Dodik's leadership, the Serb Republic is showing an impressive level of independence compared

¹ The general assesment of countries' relations toward the EU was made in accordance with European Commission 2015 reports, whereas for Russia, the conclusions were made based on official governmental sources which indicate certain trends in political leadership's narrative toward Moscow

to any of the former parts of Yugoslavia which make him extremely popular in other parts of the Serbian ethnic realm (Serbia, Montenegro, and FYROM). This, in turn, means that Dodik is the only real reliable leader in the eyes of Kremlin, so the support he gets from there should not come as a surprise (Gajić 2015).

Similarly to BiH's Serb Republic, Macedonian government adheres to the same system of belief in which 'friendly relations with Russian Federation remain a special interest of Macedonia' (Gjorge Ivanov 2014). The deep attachment to Russia in the country spurs the negative stance toward Euro-Atlantic integration. The same as Serbians, Macedonians are divided between turning to a more liberal model which is embodied in the EU and keeping the nationalist Orthodox view manifested in Russia. Although FYROM became the first Balkan country to ratify the SAA, the opening of negotiations chapters has been postponed by the European Council due to country's name dispute with Greece.

Albania and Kosovo, on the other hand, are the most outspoken critics of Russian foreign policy. Similarly to Kosovo, the fact that Russia does not recognize the independence of Kosovo where mainly Albanians live, affected bilateral relations between Albania and Russia, which are additionally backed by the fact that Albania is a member of NATO since 2009. Contrarily, the EU is dealing with Kosovo under the UNSC 1244/99 and guided by the International Court of Justice's opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence. The country faces the problem of its partial-recognition by both EU member states and UN member countries (23 Member States and 110 UN member countries have recognized Kosovo as an independent state).

By contrast, Croatia is the only country within this sample to have joined the EU in 2013. The country has also been one of the most vocal supporters of both the EU and NATO membership in the past two decades. Given that the country is largely Catholic, ideational ties with Russia do not make a strong argument, as it might be the case with other Orthodox WB countries. Nonetheless, Croatia finds Russia attractive in economic terms and one of the most promising partners in areas such as education, culture, and business (Russia beyond the headlines 2015).

2.2.2. Case studies selection

The overall assessment of WB countries in the previous chapter has indicated both similarities and differences in countries' attitude toward the EU and Russia. A more systematic analysis, thus, offered a preview of general trends that are in line with country's stronger or looser commitment to the EU. Notwithstanding a certain degree of differences among countries which are not necessarily related to Russia, keeping all other internal and external factors constant, the broader analysis helps in detecting two cases which are illustrative enough to be a representative sample of the whole WB region. The method chosen for inspecting case selection criteria is *Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD)* based on Mill's method of difference (Mill, 1843). MSSD aims at assessing the casual effect a given X has on Y by comparing a case of low development with the case of high development, seeing if we find the hypothesized variation in Y (Beach, 2012). Due to the diversity of components which are important for this research and following the assessment of countries' features within MSSD, the cases of Croatia and Serbia are selected to be assessed in depth. The features taken from the *Table 2* remain mainly concerned with political matters and, thus, serve as main indicators of the extent to which Croatia and Serbia as independent countries differ.

Table 2 Most Similar Systems Design

Features	Croatia	Serbia
Political transition	✓	✓
Authoritarian leadership style	✓	✓
Political system	✓	✓
Strong nationalistic rhetoric	✓	✓
Resolution of disputes	✗	✗
EU commitment	✓	✓
Relations with Russia	✗	✓

When it comes to a) *political transition*, after the dissolution of Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), both countries underwent a transition to post-Communist rule and tried to move toward a more democracy-led ruling system. With respect to the second feature b) *authoritarian leadership style*, after SFRY fell apart, both countries were ruled by two leaders which showed authoritarian characteristics to greater or lesser extent. Croatia under Franjo Tuđman and Serbia under Slobodan Milošević have often been seen as regimes with competitive authoritarianism (Kearns 1998; Levitsky & Way 2002; Howard & Roessler 2006). In competitive authoritarianism regimes, formal democratic institutions are widely viewed as the principal means of obtaining and exercising political authority. Incumbents violate those rules so often and to such an extent, however, that the regime fails to meet conventional minimum standards for democracy (Levitsky & Way 2002: 52).

With regards to c) *political system* both countries have constituted parliamentary democracy system, according to which the party or the winning coalition has the right to form a government and elect the leader who becomes PM. In the parliamentary democratic system, parties which have not succeeded in winning the majority are left in the opposition and their primary task is to question and criticize the ruling party/coalition. After the consolidation of democratic rule in now independent republics, in the beginning of the 2000s, the countries experienced d) *strong nationalist rhetoric*. The principles of internationalism and multi-ethnicity that dominated Yugoslav politics (and the European international system during the Cold War in response to the radical nationalism of Second World War) were quickly abandoned and replaced by 'return to nationalism', following similar trends in Eastern Europe after the 1989 'revolutions' (Jović 2011: 4). Regarding the f) *EU commitment* both countries have shown a strong tendency toward the EU, with Croatia becoming a new member in 2013. The official rhetoric in Serbian government indicates that the country is fully dedicated to the EU.

In the matter of e) *resolution of mutual disputes*, not even 20 years after the Balkan wars broke out are two countries able to resolve mutual disputes. Although the EU tried to act as an interlocutor between the two sides, the disputes remain within the internal domain of affairs. The genocide lawsuits which countries filed against one another to International Court of Justice was rejected earlier in 2015 when the Court

ruled that both sides had committed war crimes but stopped short of qualifying them as genocide (International Court of Justice 2015). Put another way, Croatia and Serbia have undergone pretty much the same transition in building democracies and curtailing nationalist rhetoric with the aim of joining the EU. In the interest of this thesis, g) *relations with Russia* were identified as the external factor which makes these two countries not completely uniform. Other external factors, which might also show a divergence between two countries, are kept constant. The *Table 2*, therefore, shows that Croatia and Serbia are similar in several criteria stated above except their bilateral relations with Russia.

Given that the primary aim is to assess countries' ties with Russia, studying Croatia-Serbia relations in-depth go beyond the scope of this research. Nonetheless, one cannot disregard mutual tensions which seemed to be an important factor for EU aspirations of Croatia and Serbia. In 2016, Croatia vetoed Serbia EU talks in Chapter 23 and Chapter 26 on the basis of complaints regarding the treatment of Croatian minority, cooperation with the ICTY and the jurisdiction of Serbian courts over war crimes committed in the 1990s. Although being of great relevance for the EU negotiations, these obstacles also reflect the outstanding issues in bilateral matters. As most of the former Yugoslav Republics, mutual relations between Croatia and Serbia were heavily influenced by the 1990s Balkan wars. A different interpretation of war memories, inadequate prosecution of war criminals, mutual indictments for genocide, the matter of national minorities, missing persons, and demarcation of the joint border continue to spur tensions among conservative and nationalistic government in both countries. The ongoing diplomatic pressure coming from both sides makes the situation more fragile inasmuch as two countries are seen as regional factors of the democratization. It is mostly because of the EU accession talks that both countries seek out compromises on the most sensitive issues only to demonstrate the willingness for rapprochement.

3. Methodology

The choice has been made to engage with the case study as the main methodology method since the contextual conditions are pertinent to the phenomenon this thesis is seeking to examine. Stake (2000) explains case study as a common framework for conducting qualitative research, whereas Miles & Huberman (1994) depict a case study as a phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context. By virtue of this thesis, Yin's interpretation and understanding of the case study method shall be used. A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident (Yin 2003: 13). Along these lines, the phenomenon entails country's bilateral relations with Russia in the context of EU negotiations that are defined within the fixed framework. The case study, therefore, does a holistic inquiry by looking at the process or practice, the interaction within such a process and the meaning of such interaction for a more generic understanding of the case under study (Njie & Asimiran 2014: 37).

According to Yin (2003), a case study design should be considered when: a) the focus of the study is to answer 'how' and 'why' questions; b) you cannot manipulate the behaviour of those involved in the study; c) you want to cover contextual conditions because you believe are relevant to the phenomenon under study; d) the boundaries are not clear between the phenomenon and context. The cases within this thesis cover not only answers to 'how' and 'why' questions but also deal with contextual conditions, i.e. geopolitical setting which is elaborated through the dimension of EU-Russia relations. The two cases are bounded by the time period (2008-2011/2012-2015) and by activity (EU accession negotiations).

The preference was given to this timeline as the intervening variable (1) seeks to assess the periods in EU-Russia relations which are characterized as both positive and negative. The development of mutual relations between the EU and Russia is, thus, the main reason why this specific time frame was initially adopted. During the first period of analysis (2008-2011) both Serbia and Croatia were at one point in the process of negotiations with the EU, whereas during the second period of the analysis (2012-2015), Croatia became member of the EU, so the strong alignment with EU rules and regulations was much more visible than in Serbia's case.

For the purpose of this research, the cases of Croatia and Serbia are to be examined comprehensively. Drawing on the seven criteria discussed in the theoretical part, Croatia and Serbia are chosen as they resemble in many criteria related to their domestic political system and EU aspirations but diverge with respect to their stance on Russia – the main external factor identified in this research. The cases seek to explain the phenomenon of country's close relations with Russia that is being influenced by the context within which it is situated for the sake of gaining new insights and detecting challenges of EU integration with regard to competitive powers in the region. As the main method, the case study fits in this thesis insofar as it strives to explain 'how' and 'why' Russian influence on country's foreign policy might affect EU negotiations. Although aware of the fact that in order to make general conclusions, variables which are kept constant should be also included, the goal is to detect general trends among WB countries with respect to their relations to Russia. The fact that allows generalisation is the pattern of similarity among WB countries which prevails over their differences.

3.1. Independent variable

Independent variable will be assessed through primary sources, such as visits and official statements of presidents, foreign ministers (MFA) and/or PM of the respective countries accessible on the official website of Ministry of Foreign Affairs and of Government. The primary sources used for the analysis are retrieved based on (a) the status of high officials who are paying a visit or holding official talks (president, PM, MFA); (b) the topics discussed during the visits (foreign policy, security, economy, energy, and military); (c) the relevance with respect to country's relations with Russia. Most of the data were obtained during mutual visits and meetings between high officials of Russia and the respective country. Each time the country would hold official talks with Russia or make a visit of such nature, the materials that were available through the official channels were assessed.

In order to strengthen the outcome and define more closely countries' relations with Russia, several more indicators are examined: *trade relations*, *a visa-free regime with Russia* and *EU sanctions against Russia*. These three components, along with the foreign policy outlook, are selected as the core elements of the independent variable

since they directly relate to the rational choice approach – the main theoretical concept in the thesis. Trade relations and visa-free regime speak of the profit maximization and cost-benefit mechanism in trading with Russia, whereas foreign policy outlook and sanctions indicate the political and bilateral dimension of the mutual relationship.

Finally, since this research encompasses one country which is a member of the EU, that one being Croatia, one has to take into account that the country is bounded by the EU stance and national government cannot decide freely upon Russia-related issues, at least when it comes to the period after Croatia became a full-fledged member of the EU. The given period will be assessed in a different manner as the emphasis will be put on Croatia's foreign policy attitude toward the EU decisions. Such an approach is incontestable since EU members states differ to a large extent on their foreign policy vis-à-vis Russia. Even though all EU member states are bound to align with EU decisions, there are still divergences in countries' stances toward Russia, which are inextricably connected to their national foreign policies.

3.2. Dependent variable

The dependent variable, also defined as *stalling on the Europeanization process*, provides two main sources for the analysis, both of which are derived from the European Commission annual reports for the country in question. The EC document presents the detailed assessment of the state of play in each candidate country and potential candidate, what has been achieved over the last year, and set out guidelines on reform priorities (ENP and Enlargement Negotiations 2016). A progress report is presented and accepted as a neutral document which in a bureaucratic way assesses country's advancement. At the same time, the reports provide even cleared guidance for what the countries are expected to do in both the short and long term (European Commission 2015b).

Despite being neutral in nature, progress reports may be politically motivated and the overall assessment depends to a certain extent on country's current political activity with respect to issues that are of special importance to the EU. The report on country's general advancement toward the fulfillment of the *acquis* is needed because as soon as country closes chapters, it automatically increases its chances to be granted EU member status. The analysis of the Commission documents will be roughly divided into

two parts, the first one being a general assessment of the country progress with the emphasis on country's main challenges for the current year, and the second one is an in-depth analysis of *Chapter 31 Foreign, security, and defence policy*. Both parts will be thoroughly assessed using discourse analysis.

Chapter 31 is chosen to be further scrutinized as it concerns country's relations with 3rd countries. The given chapter assesses country's security and military dimension, which is of importance for relations with both the EU and Russia. When it comes to the EU, two dimensions should be fully compatible with the CSFP and CSDP in order for the chapter to be closed, whereas in regard to Russia, military and security sector is relevant insofar as it can further strengthen bilateral relations between countries.

3.3. *Intervening variable (1)*

The first intervening variable, *EU-Russia relations*, is defined based on the changing nature of the bilateral relationship between the EU and Russia. Owing to the gradual alteration of the positive and negative periods in EU-Russia relations, during which the relationship experienced 'ups and downs', the research is divided into two time periods. While determining the exact time frame, the most recent events which defined EU-Russia relations as they are today were the main guideline. In this respect, the most recent period corresponds to the negative period in EU-Russia relations, which began in 2012 with the third term of president Putin on power, while the most recent period which can be characterized as positive started with Medvedev presidency in 2008. In such a way, the analysis of intervening variable (1) seeks to explain the main challenges and successes in the EU-Russia relations in the past decade.

3.4. *Intervening variable (2)*

Rationalist choice approach, being the main theoretical concept of this thesis, emphasizes not only economic benefits of EU enlargement but also political economy of enlargement as such, which include constraints on governments and power of interest groups. In light of this, the second intervening variable is defined as *Coalition government*, which goes in line with the liberal intergovernmental approach according to which national interest emerge through domestic political conflict as societal groups

compete for political influence, national and transnational coalition form, and new policy alternatives are recognized by governments (Moravscik, 1993: 118). By examining differences and mainstream political discourse in respective countries, the results will show whether the coalition government can be disruptive in the case of WB countries accession to the EU. The political layout and the existence of cleavages among parties will reveal to what extent government coalitions influenced countries' negotiations with the EU.

Once the variables are measured, the following codes will be used to determine countries' final positions. The intervening variable (IN) (1) is defined by dichotomous values (positive/negative). The independent variable (IV) is further divided into four components: foreign policy outlook (FP), trade relations (TR), visa-free regime (VF), and sanctions (SA). Each of the components within IV has its own system of values: a) FP rests on ordinal variable with three categories (strong/stable/weak) with 'strong' being the most positive, and 'weak' the most negative; b) the values for TR are determined on the basis of ordinal variable with three categories (high/mid-low/low), with 'high' being the most positive and 'low' being the most negative; c) VF has dichotomous value (yes/no) as well as the fourth component d) SA (yes/no). The intervening variable (IN) (2) is determined based on dichotomous values (effective/ineffective) and the dependent variable (DV) has dichotomous values (yes/no) as well.

4. Analysis: Scrutinizing countries' ties to Russia amid EU negotiations

4.1. Foreign policy outlook (Croatia)

Table 3 Croatia-Russia bilateral relations

Timeline of Croatia-Russia official visits in the period of 2008-2016			
Date	Location	People	Topic
December 14, 2009	Moscow	President Mesić, president Medvedev, PM Putin	A lecture on 'Croatia between 2000-2010, a decade of changes' in MFA of Russian Federation
March 2, 2010	Moscow	PM Kosor, PM Putin	Agreement on the Construction and Exploitation of a Gas Pipeline on Croatian Territory
May 9, 2010	Moscow	President Josipović, ex-president Mesić, president Medvedev	Victory Day
June 16, 2010	Moscow	PM Jadranka Kosor, PM Putin	Agreements on economy and technical cooperation, energy, and visa facilitation
February 2, 2013	Munich	President Josipović, PM Lavrov	Military equipment and armament, economy and tourism

Throughout the year 2008, no official visits between the Governments of Croatia and Russia occurred, but the relations were strained due to Russia-Georgia five-day war in August 2008. Though back then Croatia was merely an observer to NATO, Croatian PM Jandrovkić saw the opportunity in a geopolitical unrest in South Caucasus to prove Croatia's loyalty to both NATO and the EU. After participating for the first time in NATO meeting on the Russo-Georgian war in Brussels headquarters, PM Jandrovkić aligned with NATO and stated that 'Russia is expected to withdraw its troops from Georgia and to respect the signed agreement proposed by the French presidency' (Nacional 2008). Albeit there was no doubt for Croatian right-wing government about whom to support on this matter, Croatian president Mesić distanced himself from statements made by his government. In his statement, though, the president noted how

'in this moment it is extremely important to avoid any moves which would lead to the escalations of tensions. Allegations and counter-allegations lead nowhere and instead of obstructing contacts, we should work on their intensification' (Jutarnji list 2008). Social democratic president, thus, confirmed what had been the leitmotif of his presidency – intensifying cooperation with both Russia and the EU. Perceived as a Russia-friendly president, Mesić maintained amicable relations with both president Medvedev and PM Putin. PM Jadranka Kosor, who served as a Croatian PM from 2009-2011 under his term, was the first ever Croatian PM to make an official visit to Russia.

In light of this, both president Mesić 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). The political willingness and efforts put in deepening Croatian-Russian partnership resulted in PM Kosor's third visit to Moscow in June 2010, where she and PM Putin discussed further areas of cooperation and the realisation of the South Stream pipeline project. During the visit, three agreements have been signed between Governments of Russia and Croatia; one was related to visa liberalisation, the second was on the construction and exploitation of gas pipeline on the territory of Croatia, and the last concerned economic and scientific research. By signing the 'Agreement on the Construction and Exploitation of a Gas Pipeline on Croatian Territory', Croatia joined a group of several countries in the Balkans who had already agreed to participate (Bulgaria, Hungary, Greece, Serbia, Slovenia, BiH), which enabled Russia to get an upper hand on engaging the countries to participate in Russian, rather than the EU and US initiated project 'Nabucco pipeline'. With numerous Balkan countries having signed the deal, it became clear that Russia will remain the most important supplier for increasingly demanding European market. The deal was seen as a win-win situation from a Croatian perspective, as new opportunities for Russian investments would come along the way.

During the presidency of Josipović, Croatia's relations with both EU and Russia were warm, which proves the president's official participation in Victory Day in Moscow in 2010. Not only has the Croatian president Josipović, accompanied by

former president Mesić, attended the ceremony, but other EU and NATO member states marked their presence in Moscow as well. It was an indicator of a positive change in EU-Russia relations under Medvedev presidency. For the first time since the parade was organized, NATO troops took part in the Victory Day. Armed forces from France, the US, Poland, and Great Britain marked their presence in the parade and, by doing so, opened a new chapter in West-EU relations. It was not a coincidence that at that time the EU and Russia agreed on Partnership for Modernisation (P4M) initiative which additionally boosted cooperation with Russia. In light of this positive progress, Croatian leadership responded accordingly and continued to strengthen Croatia-Russia relations.

Close relations between Croatia and Russia continued in 2013 when president Josipović 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). Josipović also insinuated the possibility of purchasing Russian military equipment and airplanes.

4.1.1. Trade relations

By joining the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2012, Russia accepted multilateral obligations and rules under which a common tariff was set and import duties eliminated in order to boost the trade between countries signatories of WTO. Being still an EU candidate country, Croatia experienced positive changes in trade with Russia due to the reduction of average customs duties from 10% to 7,8% (Advance 2012). After the financial crisis, the countries' economy started to experience a moderate recovery, which was reflected in foreign trade as well. A common WTO tariff in trading with Russia enabled Croatia to predict legal framework and service liberalisation, which resulted in increased exports to Russia. In 2011, the total exports to Russia amounted to €229.867 thousand, whereas in 2012 it rose by 36%, accounting for €331.159 thousand in 2012 (Croatian Bureau of Statistics 2013). It coincided with an increased trade exchange between the EU and Russia, reaching its peak in 2012. The main incentive for such an increased cooperation was in Partnership for Modernisation

initiative, signed in 2010 by the European Commission and Russian government (European Commission 2012).

Even after Croatia became the 28th member of the EU, Croatia-Russia relations have been constructive as Russia hoped for positioning itself better in the WB region. The long talks about visa regime also gave Russia additional incentive to think that Croatia can be one of the countries to push for opening the question of free visa regime between the EU and Russia. 'We see and highly appreciate the efforts of Croatian government to facilitate the procedure for obtaining a visa to Croatia. We hope that now Croatia, being a full-fledged member of the European Union, shall actively opt for final removal of obstacles for a visa-free regime with Russia', were the words of the Russian ambassador to Croatia (Dnevnik 2014).

Following Croatian membership to the EU, a gradual decrease in trade between Russia and Croatia was observed. Also, negative trends in trade exchange have been detected ever since Croatia along with other member states imposed sanctions on Russia. Due to sanctions and counter-sanctions by Russia, Croatia loses around €40 million annually, which is significant if taking into account that Russian investments in Croatia amount to €500 million (Republika 2016). Unlike many other EU countries, Croatia recognized the importance of trade continuity with Russia. 'The Russian market is extremely important for Croatian companies and should be considered within the broader Eurasian Union, as well other CIS states. We cannot just sit tight and wait until sanctions are lifted. We have to help Croatian companies which are doing business for years on this market and have invested a lot of efforts', stated Luka Burilović, the head of Croatian Chamber of Economy (Russia Beyond the Headlines 2015). To such a degree, regardless of trade revenues which were decreased in the past two years, Croatia kept its interest in cooperating with Russia. It also implied that there is the interest in shielding Russian-Croatian economic cooperation from a political crisis that started not long after Croatia joined the EU.

Even without sanctions in 2014, the trade exchange between Croatia and Russia declined. According to the Croatian Bureau of Statistics, in 2013 the downward trend started and trade exchange was reduced by 23% in comparison to the same period in 2012. Export to Russian Federation decreased by 10, 6%, whereas import dropped by 26, 5%. Regardless of that, Luka Burilović emphasized that 'Croatian Chamber of

Economy has recognized the importance of Russian market for Croatia, which resulted in continuity in our economic cooperation. Not only have Croatian construction companies been present in the Russian market for a number of years, but there has also been an increased interest in food and agricultural sector to cooperate with Russian partners' (Croatian Chamber of Economy 2015).

However, 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. Although the head of the Croatian Chamber of Economy informed the public that the main reason behind the cancellation of the Forum lies in the lack of interest on behalf of Russian companies, it soon became clear that the move was politically motivated. Following PM Plenković'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), Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs expressed concerns about Croatian meddling into Ukraine affairs. This political statement had consequences back home, where Russian ambassador Azimov explained that 'Russian entrepreneurs are very patriotic. They do not agree with the fact that Croatia supports these sanctions. That is why Russian entrepreneurs did not want to come to Croatia. And that is the reason why Croatian-Russian economic forum did not take place' (N1 2016).

4.1.2. Sanctions

During the period of strained EU-Russia relations, especially after Vilnius summit and the annexation of Crimea, Croatian government showed ambiguous stance toward Russia. On the one hand, the government stood firmly by the EU side when it came to the condemnation of Russian actions in Crimea and imposing sanctions, on the other hand, the government kept a pragmatic stance and strived to shield what was left of cooperation with Russia. The crisis in Ukraine coincided with Zoran Milanović's post as the PM. Croatian leadership gave a signal how it does support Ukraine and that Russian moves in Crimea from country's point of view are unacceptable. This was understandable as Croatia was a new member of the EU and the alignment with the EU resolutions was self-evident. In one of his interviews, PM Milanović 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). MFA Pusić also firmly supported Ukraine by noting how 'Croatia is absolutely in favour of recognizing the territorial integrity of Ukraine' (Vijesti HRT 2014). Going against the unanimous EU decision was, thus, not even considered among Croatian political leadership, as political relations with Moscow were always of a more irresolute nature.

In this respect, rather than halting all political tasks with Russia, Croatia decided to adopt a pragmatic stance and campaigned for a two-way communication as the only way for resolving the unfolding crisis. The reasons behind it lie, however, not simply in Croatian political solidarity and willingness to put an end to a crisis on European doorstep, but in a comfortable position that Croatia found itself in. The independence in the energy sector, as well as positive indicators of business with Russia prior to the crisis, gave Croatia enough liberty to advocate for a political dialogue. The PM offered a less assertive stance towards Russia and expressed the hope for cooperation: 'Croatia, luckily, does not necessarily need to take a radical political stance because it wants to work with Russia as much as it is possible' (Novilist 2014). Also, the news about canceling the South Stream project, of which Croatia was supposed to be a part, came later in 2014, so except business deals Croatia that had already concluded, energy deal was now at stake, too. Croatia took a more pragmatic attitude and tried to take its own interests into consideration. Croatia and several other member states advocated for the exemption in sanctions of those agreements which had been signed prior to the events in Ukraine, as well as they tried to limit financial sanctions since Croatian company 'Agrokor' had signed a loan agreement with Sberbank. These attempts, however, failed, and agreements with Russia were annulled.

4.2. Foreign policy outlook (Serbia)

Table 4 Serbia-Russia bilateral relations

Timeline of Serbia-Russia official visits in the period of 2008-2016			
Date	Location	People	Topic
February 25, 2008	Belgrade	PM Medvedev, MFA Lavrov, president Tadić	South Stream pipeline; political talks
July 17, 2008	Moscow	MFA Jeremić, MFA Lavrov	Economic and trade talks, Kosovo
October 5, 2009	Moscow	MFA Jeremić, MFA Lavrov	Bilateral relations
October 20, 2009	Belgrade	President Medvedev, president Tadić	Cooperation in energy, transport, culture, and education; Kosovo
May 9, 2010	Moscow	President Tadić, president Medvedev	Victory Day
March 23, 2011	Belgrade	President Putin, president Boris Tadić	Russia-Serbia economic talks
April 19, 2011	Belgrade	MFA Lavrov, MFA Jeremić, president Tadić	Bilateral relations, Kosovo, situation in the region
May 26, 2012	Moscow	President Nikolić, president Putin	South Stream pipeline, economic talks, Kosovo
August 23, 2012	Moscow	PM Vučić, Deputy PM Dmitry Rogozin	Military and defence talks
November 28, 2012	Belgrade	Deputy PM Dmitry Rogozin, president Nikolić	Bilateral talks
May 23, 2013	Moscow	PM Vučić, Minister of Defence Sergey Shoigu	Military and defence talks
October 16, 2014	Belgrade	President Putin, president Nikolić, PM Vučić	Belgrade military parade, trade talks, Kosovo
June 16, 2014	Belgrade	MFA Lavrov, MFA Dačić,	Bilateral talks

May 15, 2015	Belgrade	MFA Lavrov, MFA Dačić	Political, trade and energy talks
October 30, 2015	Moscow	PM Vučić, president Putin	Political, military and defence talks, Kosovo
May 26, 2016	Moscow	PM Vučić, president Putin	Informal visit
December 12, 2016	Belgrade	MFA Lavrov, MFA Dačić, PM Vučić, president Nikolić	Strategic partnership, trade talks, Kosovo

Serbia-Russia relations reached new heights with Russia becoming Serbian voice in the UN Security Council on matters of Kosovo and Metohija status. Kosovo issue was an impetus for deepening relations, especially after 2007 when Russia refused to recognize Kosovo as an independent state. Numerous official visits on both sides serve as an example of a mutual commitment in the interest of harnessing the full potential of their relationship.

In the period from 2008 to 2015, two Russian presidents, the PM and 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. Although different in nature, most of the visits served the purpose of strengthening political and economic ties for the sake of creating a more beneficial environment for cooperation. Throughout the period of 2008-2011 when EU-Russia relations were positive, there have been eight official visits of presidential staff. President Medvedev in 2009 and president Putin in 2011 (his first visit after ten years) marked their presence in Belgrade with the main aim of strengthening mutual relations. It was an opportunity for Serbia to combine two important foreign policy aspirations: EU membership and Russian partnership. Prior to president Medvedev's official visit to Belgrade in 2009, Vuk Jeremić during his visit to Moscow emphasized: 'although Serbia is in the process of European integration, which will end with Serbian full EU membership, Serbia and Russia will after that remain best friends. Russia is Serbian best friend and what we would like to is that Russia would feel the same way toward Russia' (Mondo portal 2009).

Before his inauguration in 2012, president-elect Nikolić visited Moscow and held official talks with Putin. Although informal in official terms, this visit opened numerous questions about the politics of alternatives and whether the new Serbian leadership, in a spirit contrary to that of the electoral campaign, was going to minimize its links with the West and move more towards the East (Radeljić 2014: 253). Nonetheless, president Nikolić during his visit made clear that 'Serbia's ultimate foreign policy goal is EU membership', although he did emphasize that 'Serbia will never join NATO' (RT news 2012). One of the purposes of the visit was also to attend the congress of Russia's ruling party – United Russia – which gave a solid foundation for an even higher level of cooperation between two countries, one which includes the harmony of two political regimes. Following his inauguration in June 2012, president Nikolić paid a visit to Brussels, making it his first official visit abroad as a president and sending a message about Serbia's commitment to the EU under his term. European Commission also recognized this move in president Juncker's statement: 'This is President Nikolić's first official visit abroad since taking office and I see his presence here in Brussels as a clear sign of the priority the President and Serbia attach to their European reform agenda' (European Commission 2012).

The year 2014 saw both Medvedev and Putin in Belgrade, where they strived to ensure the continuity of political and economic cooperation with Serbia. The presidential visit to Belgrade was seen as controversial as it was at times when EU-Russia relations were on the brink of collapse due to Russian annexation of Crimea. Putin arrived to attend the military parade, but also to hold talks on South Stream gas pipeline that was largely disputed by the EU. The visit was yet another chance to ensure Serbia's loyalty by emphasizing unconditional support for Kosovo. 'Russia has taken a principled stance based not only on our friendship and proximity but also on international law and justice. This is a principled position and it cannot be adjusted in any way. We have always supported Serbia and will continue to do so' (Kremlin 2014). Along the same lines, 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', president Nikolić emphasized how 'invaluable Russian support for maintaining the territorial integrity and Serbian independence is, specifically regarding Kosovo and Metohija' (Kremlin 2014).

The confirmation of such a stance came on the eve of Sergey Lavrov's official visit to Belgrade in December 2016. It was the opportunity to institutionalize cooperation within a 'Plan of Consultations' between the two foreign ministries for the period 2015-2016, according to which official meetings will take place twice a year, in Moscow and Belgrade (Telegraf 2016). During the conference, MFA Dačić used the opportunity to praise Serbian relations with Russia and to emphasize Serbian stance toward NATO. '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 2016b).

4.2.1. Trade relations

The Free Trade Agreement between the Socialist Federalist Republic of Yugoslavia and Russian Federation was signed in 2000 allowing customs-free trade in exports and imports on most of the Serbian and Russian products. The further trade liberalization between Russian Federation and Serbia was agreed in 2009 in Moscow which resulted in signing the Protocol for trade liberalization in 2011. The Agreement stipulates that goods produced in Serbia, i.e. which have at least 51% value added in the country, are considered of Serbian origin and exported to Russian Federation customs free (Development Agency of Serbia 2016). The Agreement makes Serbia the only country apart from Commonwealth of Independent States to agree on such a trade deal with Russian Federation and allows creating an attractive business environment for foreign investors and producers. Additionally, customs regime with the EU was agreed in 2008 allowing nearly all exports to enter the EU without customs duties on quantities. No other country than Serbia can boast of having such a widely open door to Eastern and Western integration markets, stretching from Vladivostok to Lisbon (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung 2015: 35).

It was also in 2009 when Serbian and Russian MFAs signed an agreement on abolishing visas for citizens of two countries. According to an agreement, citizens from one country may enter the territory of the other and stay up to one month, whereas persons with diplomatic and official passports may stay as long as 90 days (Government of the Republic of Serbia 2009). '30 days for a visa-free stay in Russia is quite enough

for cultural or business events, adding that the agreement will also help to increase the trade exchange between Serbia and Russia and facilitate traveling for businessmen from both countries' (Government of the Republic of Serbia 2009).

Furthermore, EU members states amount to 63,8% of total trade, whereas the second most important trading partners for Serbia are countries signatories of The Agreement on Free Trade in the Balkans (European Integration office of Serbia 2016). Regardless of the fact that the EU remains by far Serbia's main trade partner and investor, Russian foothold in Serbian economy is not to be neglected. In the year 2015 total Serbian exports to Russian Federation amounted to \$724,8 thousand, which makes Russia the fifth biggest export trading partner of Serbia in that year. In 2013 countries signed a 'Declaration on strategic partnership' aiming at alleviating their cooperation on the highest level possible, which came at a time when Serbia promised to commit to obligations under the *acquis*. Among the most important agreements is also the one signed between the Government of the Republic of Serbia and the Government of the city of Moscow, enabling broad cooperation in industry and traffic, trade, construction industry, opening of a common business information and trade centre, banking, tourism, mutual relations between chambers of commerce, exhibition activities, health care and joint ventures of small- and medium-sized enterprises (Simić 2016: 24).

According to Serbian Chamber of Commerce, total trade exchange with Russian Federation in the first six months in 2014 was worth \$1.64 billion and was higher by 21.6% in comparison with the same period in 2013. In the first six months of 2015, total Serbian exports were 33% lower than the same period in 2014 which accounts for a significant decrease in total trade in a one-year period. Although Serbia gave its reassurance to the EU how it will not take the advantage of EU sanctions regime imposed on Russia due to the annexation of Crimea, the data prove otherwise. Serbian exports to Russia rose up to 68% in comparison with the year 2013. Only in the first six months of 2014, total exports were worth \$117 million, whereas \$185 million were exports for the whole year 2013 (Serbian Chamber of Commerce). Even though Serbia seized on the opportunity in 2014 and boosted its trade with Russia due to EU sanctions, it was not sufficient to make Russia Serbian's first foreign trade partner, which it used to be in 2012.

The strongest economic linkage between Serbia and Russia, though, lies in the energy sector. In 2008, Serbia agreed to sell Gazprom the control over the state-owned oil company 'Naftna Industrija Srbije' (NIS) and an exclusive right to exploit natural resources in the country. The agreement was worth €400 million and stipulated modernisation of the whole technological complex as well as investing additional €500 million in it by 2012 (Lukoil 2009). Moscow made a strategic move by obtaining 51% stake in NIS under what was disputed to be at a below-market price and won the gas pipeline war against the EU. The pro-Russian government in Serbia at that time justified the closure of a strategic energy deal as a country's necessity to secure energy stability in the region, which would be accomplished by constructing the South Stream project and preserve Kosovo within Serbian territory. At the end of 2014, it became clear that the South Stream project is not happening due to Europe's refusal to grant it Trans-European Network status which would exempt it from Third Energy Package and enable Gazprom to reserve pipeline transportation for itself. Regardless of Putin's words how 'the project has not been canceled definitely' (EurActiv 2016a), Serbian government clearly failed to ensure what was claimed to be a 'deal of the century'.

4.2.2. Sanctions

Despite country's commitment to the EU, Serbian government continues to openly speak about the importance of preserving friendly and economically beneficial relations with Russian Federation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Serbia 2016). Only a decade ago this foreign policy narrative would not be read as something perplexing, but at times when EU-Russia relations remain shattered by the crisis in Ukraine, Serbia doubtlessly continues to challenge these relations.

One of such challenges came in light of the annexation of Crimea when Serbia went as far as to refuse to align with the EU on sanctions against Russia even though the country gave its full support to the territorial integrity of Ukraine (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine 2014). Back then Serbia was a full-fledged EU candidate member but had no legal obligations to align with sanctions. The main argument revolved around Serbian economy and damaging effect sanctions would have specifically in two areas. Firstly, energy sector would be severely affected since Russian Gazprom holds a majority stake in NIS, and, secondly, the financial sector would sharply fluctuate as

Serbian Sberbank VTB is a subsidiary of the Russian-owned bank. 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 2016b). When a new round of sanctions came on the EU agenda, Serbian FM Dačić stated how '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 2016a).

Even before Crimea happened, Serbia did not align with many hundreds of EU declarations in OSCE between 2007 and 2013 (Serbia 2013 progress report), but the non-alignment on sanctions was seen as controversial, mainly because it emphasized Serbia's close relations with Russia. It came as a reward for Russian resolute support on Kosovo before the UN Security Council. Moscow has lobbied against recognizing Kosovo as a sovereign state in the international community and vetoed any possibility of Kosovo being admitted to the United Nations. MFA Dačić noted the following: 'We will not join sanctions or any restrictive measures against Russia, as well as we do not have any intention of joining NATO. In this respect, we would like to repeat once again that our desire to become a member of the EU absolutely has nothing to do with our relations with Russia, neither will we let that this desire is turned into anti-Russian attitudes' (Telegraf 2016). This, hence, implies how Russia is embedded in Serbian national interest which makes it indispensable for conducting foreign policy. At this moment when Serbia is still not a full-fledged member of the EU, the country is not bound to respect EU regulations and, thus, has enough space to maneuver its foreign policy. However, once Serbia becomes the EU member, the country will not be in the position to negotiate such an outcome, especially if the other member states are to be taken into consideration.

4.3. Stalling on the Europeanization process

4.3.1. Croatia progress reports

Already in the 2008 report, the European Commission recognized Croatian efforts in maintaining neighbourly relations in the region, which had become an essential part of Croatian progress toward the EU. Apart from relations with Serbia and border issues with Slovenia, other relations in the region were graded as positive and developing. During the period between Commission 2008 and 2009 reports, Croatia succeeded in closing seven more chapters which accounted to 28/35 closed chapters in total. In 2009 report, one of the pressing issues was the border dispute with Slovenia which caused Slovenian veto and holding back the accession negotiations.

To such a degree, the Croatian progress toward the EU was caused more by its neighbours, rather than other external factors. In point of fact, in the 2008 progress report Russia is nowhere to be mentioned, which implies how Croatian progress toward the EU was not anyhow connected with the external actors, but internal issues, such as judicial, refugee questions, and minority problems. However, Commission 2009 and 2010 progress reports recognized the first challenge with respect to Russia in the area of visa policy within the *Chapter 24: Justice, freedom, and security*. The government has adopted a decision on temporary liberalisation of the visa arrangements for citizens of Russian Federation, Ukraine and Kazakhstan for transit through Croatia or stays up to 90 days between 1 April and 31 October 2010, which is not in line with the EU *acquis* (Croatia 2010 progress report). In 2011 progress report Croatia only partially aligned with EU visa policy, since Russian Federation, Ukraine and Kazakhstan were on the 'negative' list of Regulation 539/2001 (Croatia 2011 progress report). The period during which the Croatian government decided to temporarily remove visa regime corresponds to the touristic season in Croatia, which usually takes place from May to October. The explanation was that the current visa regime and the procedure of issuing visas were additionally complicating Russian and Ukrainian tourist arrivals whose number have risen considerably in the past several years (Ministry of Tourism of Republic of Croatia 2009).

With respect to *Chapter 31: Foreign, security and defence policy*, in the period 2008-2011, Croatia had already made a substantial progress and had reached a high

level of alignment with the EU regulations, following positive expressions used to describe Croatia's progress: 'country remains committed', 'continued to support', 'reinforced its participation', 'efforts are continuing', 'adopted the relevant decisions'. The European Commission was fully satisfied with Croatia's cooperation with an international organisation, especially the UN Security Council as a non-permanent member, OSCE, as well as NATO, whose member 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*.

As regards to political criteria, major challenges in Croatian path toward the EU were mostly detected in internal affairs, such as public administration, widespread corruption and a lack of capacity in state bodies to fight against corruption and organised crime. Progress reports show how Croatia, despite being committed to reforms, still had to do considerable progress in the judiciary, anti-corruption policy, human rights promotion, with a special emphasis on impunity for war crimes, access to justice and freedom of expression (Croatia 2010 progress report). Economic criteria have been partially fulfilled, as Croatia managed to address the domestic consequences of the global and economic crisis. Structural weakness in the labour market, as well as the corruption which affect business environment and reducing the large role of the state in the economy remained biggest challenges for Croatia (Croatia 2010 progress report).

In light of the above mentioned, during the last years of accession negotiations, Croatia did not experience any major challenges with respect to the implementation of the *acquis*. 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 ICTY, were to be strengthened in the future as regional dialogue had been set. The report analysis 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 minor disagreement between Croatia and the EU on Russia issue concerned visa facilitation regime, but the decision to grant free visa regime for a certain period was economically motivated, rather than showing any signs of purposefully countering EU regulations.

4.3.2. Serbia progress reports

Early Commission reports such as the one from 2008, was a reflection of SAP which provided a framework for EU-Serbia relations before Serbia became official candidate of the EU in 2011. Serbian path toward the EU was very much connected with Kosovo and the unresolved statehood, which has also been one of the pressing concerns of Serbian foreign policy. Since the Serbian government had not recognized Kosovo as an independent state, the Serbian government has been facing a challenge to satisfy EU demands concerning this issue, in particular.

Before anything, a set of issues in Serbia's progress in SAP has been recognized as relevant within political criteria: national security strategy, a defence strategy, a military doctrine, laws security, along with the public administration reform. Russian relations with Serbia were touched upon in the reports (2008, 2009, 2010, and 2011) with regards to energy sectors. As it is stated, under a Memorandum of Understanding with Russia on energy, several agreements were concluded, including privatisation and modernisation of NIS oil company, completion of the construction of an underground gas storage facility and the passing of the Northern branch of the South Stream pipeline through Serbia (Serbia 2008 progress report). There were no statements which would indicate that the agreement with Russia would, in any case, interfere with Serbian progress in EU negotiations. Moreover, European Commission has 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).

By and large, throughout the period 2008-2011, while Serbia was still a potential EU candidate included in the SAP, the advancement toward the fulfillment of EU regulations and measures mostly depended on internal reforms and agreements which had to enter into force. European Commission had not indicated indirectly in the reports that any Serbian relations with the 3rd country could possibly affect the negotiation process with Serbia in the future. What is more, it has assessed Serbia's foreign policy cooperation with four main pillars – the EU, the US, Russia, and China, as being 'good'. Even a deeper cooperation between Serbia and Russia within the agreement on the privatisation of Serbian oil company NIS came as no surprise for the EU and, moreover, was welcomed as a necessary act in order to finalise the privatisation of state-

owned enterprises, as one of the core objectives for Serbia in the upcoming negotiations.

As regards to the *Chapter 31: Foreign, security, and defence policy*, 2011 and 2012 reports show Serbia's positive progress 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*. In comparison with other chapters in the report, Serbia has done most progress precisely in the area of foreign policy, since other areas are inextricably connected with Serbian domestic affairs, the judicial system, monetary and fiscal policies, social policy and employment.

Unlike previous reports, the 2014 and 2015 progress reports brought more disagreements on 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 adopt 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'. The first military drill took place in September and the other one in October under a symbolic name *Slavic Brotherhood 2016*. Three countries already participated in such drills in 2015, but then it was on Russian territory. Even though not clearly stating, European Commission saw this act as a provocation from Serbia's side, especially given that the military drills were held not far from the border with Croatia, a NATO member.

However, the same report welcomed Serbia's decision to adopt Individual Partnership Action Plan and increase its cooperation with NATO. Evidence for this emerges from Serbia 2015 progress report, in which it is stressed that the agreement with NATO brought a new progress in *Chapter 31*. By doing so, Serbian foreign policy showed a certain level of inconsistency, especially taking into account NATO as Russia's main threat in Eastern Europe.

4.4. EU-Russia relations

The legal framework of the EU-Russia relations has been defined throughout the 1990s, starting with the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) which was signed in 1994 and ratified three years later. Especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the EU assisted post-Soviet countries via financial aid instruments. Broadening this perspective to West-Russia relations, one should take into account a wider dimension which includes transatlantic ties as well. Since it was the US who gradually deepened and broadened transatlantic cooperation with the EU, this country, if needed, shall be taken into account when examining EU-Russia relations. In this respect, when defining the nature of EU-Russia relations, in moments when literature allows and in case the alignment between EU and the US is present, the concepts 'West-Russia relations' and 'EU-Russia relations' shall be used synonymously. As it was the case in the past, the EU agreed with the US on many issues concerning Russia, which was crucial for advancing EU-Russia relations. The only exception was 2003 when the US intervention in Iraq divided Europe between the supporters of intervention and the countries which opposed to it.

The relations between Russia and the EU have been characterized by 'ups and downs' starting from the 1990s. Positive EU-Russia relations are marked with numbers (1), whereas strained EU-Russia relations are marked with letters (a). The guidelines for describing relationship were chosen according to the work of Forsberg and Haukkala (2016) *The European Union and Russia*:

1) Formative period of early Yeltsin (1992-1994)

Formative phase in EU-Russia relations followed right after the end of Cold War and can be characterized as an optimistic look in the future. Even though at that time the

EU was far more developed in both political and economic terms, Russia shared the same 'European values', which was confirmed by PCA. The European Commission felt a compelling need to lock Russia into an institutional arrangement that would make the economic and political changes in the country irreversible – an argument that was at key junctures rather skilfully used by the Russians themselves (Forsberg & Haukkala 2016: 9). The agreement stipulated cooperation not only in the economic sphere but also it provided an appropriate framework for political dialogue, social, financial and cultural cooperation which was founded on the principles of mutual advantage, mutual responsibility and mutual support (Partnership and Cooperation Agreement 1997).

a) The time of troubles (1994-2000)

The stable relationship between the EU and Russia was put to the test in 1994 when Russia unleashed a military campaign in the Republic of Chechnya. Criticism was energetically endorsed by some 'pure European' multilateral structures, including the EU and the Council of Europe. Meanwhile, at home, the war (at least during its initial stage) was supported by Russian public opinion as tough, painful, but indispensable operation to re-establish control over its breakaway territory that had been turned by its separatist authorities into a nucleus of anarchy and terrorism threatening to expand throughout the whole country (Baranovsky 2000: 456). Although the campaign initially put into question the ratification of PCA, after ending the hostilities in 1996, the agreement was resumed. In addition to it, Kosovo war in 1999 – although not being a particular crisis in EU-Russia relations due to the US-led campaign – influenced on the deterioration of EU-Russia relations. The US together with some member states used military intervention as an excuse to affect the regime change, but also it was done without an explicit mandate from the United Nations (Forsberg and Haukkala 2016; p. 22). Renewed conflict in Chechnya left Europe isolated in Europe, its voting rights temporarily suspended in the Council of Europe and facing limited sanctions by the EU (Lynch 2003: 10).

2) The Putin promise (2000-2004)

The aftermath of 9/11 offered Putin a new window of opportunity for rapprochement with the West and developing a common strategy in fighting terrorism. Russia's friendly attitude toward the EU was best reflected in Putin's speech in the

Bundestag of the Federal Republic of Germany. 'As for European integration, we do not just support these processes, but we are looking to them with hope' (Putin 2001). Later on, in 2003 at Saint Petersburg Summit, Four Common Spaces between the EU and Russia were agreed, which then confirmed their commitment to further strengthen their strategic partnership by giving substance to the concept of the Common European Economic Space (Hughes 2006: 9). Russia's permanent representatives to the European Communities regarded Russia's European priorities as shaping the practice of and forming a stable basis for, a comprehensive partnership (Forsberg & Haukkala 2016: 25).

b) Mutual disappointment (2004-2007)

Iraq was another turning point in West-Russia relations which then triggered the internal division within the EU. France and Germany sided with Russia in opposing Washington's decision to start their operation in Iraq. The deterioration of relations with the United States, and, to a lesser extent, Europe during 2004-2008 was fuelled by Putin's anger over participation in colour revolutions in Georgia, and especially Ukraine, and aversion to American 'unipolarity' (Lo 2016: 8). The EU's role, in particular, in that context was perceived as negative because it had intervened in the electoral process and demanded new elections on the basis of election fraud, challenging the Russian blueprint for the future of Ukraine (Forsberg & Haukkala 2016: 28). Another setback in the West-Russia relationship came on the eve of the largest round of NATO enlargement to the East when seven newly admitted EU member states also became part of NATO. The countries which once belonged to the Soviet Union and now referred to as 'common neighbourhood' suddenly became a fertile ground for contestation of EU and Russian foreign policy interests.

3) Medvedev interlude (2008-2011)

During Medvedev's presidency, there was a clear pro-Western rhetoric, especially in the circles around Medvedev. Medvedev's relatively liberal reputation in the West hopes for the Russian-European rapprochement featured strongly on various quarters of Brussels and some capitals of EU member states (Moshes 2009: 1). The events in Libya in 2011 confirmed Medvedev's desire to foster Euro-Atlantic agenda. During the 46th Munich Security Conference, Medvedev stated how 'the principles

underlying our diplomacy and our foreign policy remain the same' and went on to emphasize 'modernisation alliances' with the US and the EU (Medvedev 2010). A positive attitude toward the EU resulted in signing the P4M at EU-Russia summit in 2010. Parallel to the EU-level initiative, Russia, and practically every EU member state concluded bilateral modernization partnerships with detailed agendas, focusing on economic and legal cooperation, pushing the wider debate on values to the sidelines, despite Medvedev's views of human rights as most basic and fundamental values (Forsberg & Haukkala 2016: 32). Up to now, P4M remained to be the last attempt of creating an institutional cooperative platform for partnership between the EU and Russia.

c) Confrontation (2012-ongoing)

Although Putin's return to the Kremlin as president in 2012 did not immediately cause a crisis in relations with the West, it was in many ways the point in time when the irrevocable countdown towards a rupture began (Forsberg & Haukkala 2016:33). The events in Ukraine, which determined the direction of EU-Russia relations, started during the Vilnius Summit in 2013 when several EaP countries suspended negotiations with the EU (Rotaru 2014; Penkova 2014). Armenia was the first to cancel its negotiations with the EU and chose to join the Eurasian Economic Union instead. Russia ramped up pressure on other countries as well in order to prevent signing the agreement. A clear message was also sent to Moldova with an embargo on some food products, although the real target was Ukraine. The combination of threats and economics prospects swayed the Ukrainian government (Forsberg and Haukkala 2016: 36). It was then that the true crisis began and resulted in the annexation of Crimea on 18 March 2013. Since then, Moscow pursues completely different narrative toward both the EU and the US. Internationally it is leading a resurgent nationalism that openly defines US leadership and challenges the legitimacy of many existing global norms and institutions. The feelings of inferiority that once characterized Russian elite attitudes have given a way to a new militancy and, in public at least, aggressive self-confidence (Lo 2016: 16).

4.5. Coalition Governments

4.5.1. Coalition government in Croatia

The fact that Russia had nurtured friendly relations with Serbia, a country with whom Croatia had still a few unresolved disputes dating back to the Balkan wars, prevailed in the governmental decision to keep Russia at a safe distance and focus on the EU solely. Ever since the independence, Croatia sought to disassociate itself from other post-Yugoslav countries and become a part of Europe. Croatian nationalist rhetoric in the period of post-war reconstruction rested on the country's strive to assume European identity and leave behind 'Yugoslav past', just like Slovenia did in 2004 by joining the EU. There was a broad national consensus among all major political parties regarding EU membership. Despite growing Euroscepticism, the national discourse was pro-European and cleavages between parties existed on the right-left ideological axis. Political parties were not bewildered about which side with respect to Russia they should take. Russia as EU's neighbour to East had too many connections with Serbia and Croatia felt the extensive 'friendship' would only slow down the country's progress toward the EU. This line of thought was also confirmed in the media at that time: 'When at the end of 2012 or beginning of 2013 we [Croatia] finally joins the EU, discussions about any sort of association with Yugoslav prefix will, fortunately, become, long-forgotten history' (Butković 2010).

In the period of 2008-2011, Croatia was ruled by a leftist president and a right-wing coalition government. Although right-wing government led by Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) tends to be more nationalistic and pro-European rather than it seeks to ensure its interest in Russia, few official visits under the right-wing government speak in favour of cooperation with Russia. In light of enhanced economic cooperation and an agreement to participate in South Stream pipeline, the cooperation between Russia and Croatia was experiencing positive outcomes. It shows that regardless of right-wing nationalistic rhetoric in the country at that time, Croatia did have successful cooperation with Russia in economy sector. The exception was the right-wing government in the first mandate of president Mesić who was from Social Democratic Party (SDP), the HDZ's strongest rival on the Croatian political scene. SPD also built for itself a reputation of being the more democratic and modern of the two parties, particularly as the HDZ's more nationalistic, authoritarian and clientelistic profile

became apparent in the second half of the 1990s (Stratulat 2014: 18). PM Sanader, unlike president Mesić, was not in favour of striking a deal with Kremlin on South Stream Pipeline. He rejected Putin's offer to make Croatia a transit country through which the main South Stream pipeline would pass, which triggered discontent among many energy experts for what they considered to be governmental sloppiness. The political initiative to conclude any kind of energy agreement with Russia did not exist, neither Sanader's government made commitments in terms of economic and trade deals.

After the leftist coalition took the power in December 2011 and maintained PM position until 2015, not much had changed in terms of intensifying diplomatic and trade relations with Russia. The reason for this lies in the fact that under leftist presidency and the SDP-led coalition, Croatia entered the EU and lost much of its decision-making power when it came to relations with 3rd countries, at least within multilateral EU framework. It was also a time when EU-Russia relations experienced a twist in their bilateral relations, as Putin came to power for the third time. The Kremlin began to actively try to stop the efforts of the EU's Eastern Partners to move closer to Europe. Now Russia has changed from a 'strategic partner' to a 'strategic problem' (Bildt 2015). Unlike in Serbian case, Croatian rapprochement toward Russia did not depend on the left and right parties, because even during the coalition of the leftist presidency and right-wing government, there have been major successes in dealing with Russia.

In the contemporary geopolitical setting, right-wing government tends to downplay relations with Russia, which was seen on the example of PM Plenković's statement in support of Ukraine which led to a diplomatic backlash with Russian counterparts. In June 2014 Croatian ambassador to Russian Federation resigned his post in order to continue his career in the private sector. The presidential elections were unfolding at that time and it was unclear whether the new president-elect will give its consent to the appointed ambassadors. Throughout 2015, the leftist government led by SDP and president Kitarović, freshly appointed president of the right-wing HDZ party, failed to agree on the most suitable candidate for Moscow. Only in the beginning of 2017, the government and the president of Croatia came to an agreement about the new ambassador to Moscow and ended the broken diplomatic dialogue between Russia and Croatia.

Due to diplomatic pitfalls between two countries, official visits were almost non-existent. However, Russian ambassador to Croatia continues to put efforts in conserving so far successful trade exchange and business cooperation between the countries. On several occasions during his interviews, ambassador Azimov, pointed out that 'Russia accepts Croatian membership to both NATO and the EU, two countries have no open questions, and Russia wants to develop better economic and political relations with Croatia' (Vijesti HRT 2016; Nacional 2016; Večernji list 2016c). Also, he added that he does not 'bind together the complexities which connect Croatia-Russia bilateral relations with Croatian membership to NATO and the EU. It is a sovereign choice of Croatia and we treat the choice of Croatian people in favour of European integration with respect' (Hlača 2017).

4.5.2. Coalition government in Serbia

Serbian political elite currently faces the daunting and sometimes contradictory tasks of maintaining the state's current territorial boundaries, attracting investments in the economy and infrastructure, improving its trade relations with major partners, managing its relations with various international organizations and navigating complex security structure of the contemporary Western Balkans (Konitzer 2010: 2-3). Two major parties played an important role in either setting Serbia closer toward the EU or driving the country away from Europe. Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), being the successor of Milošević's communist party, played a major role a decade ago in setting EU agenda and proceeding towards the EU integration. Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) that was established in 2008 after the split from Serbian Radical Party (SRS) opts for a more flexible position with regard to Serbia's EU integration and relationship with Kosovo. At the level of rhetoric, the SNS and its leaders made considerable efforts to reform, distance themselves from their authoritarian past, and project an image of a pro-European, moderately nationalistic and conservative party (Stratulat 2014: 55). Party maintains a close alliance with United Russia party which is detected in party's official rhetoric.

Contrary to the popular narrative, the current arrangement of interests allows major Serbian political actors to pursue policies directed towards both the EU and Russia, simultaneously acquiring benefits of relations with both while avoiding serious

costs in terms broken ties (Konitzer 2010: 3). Both of the SNS party leaders, ex-president Boris Nikolić, and current PM Vučić share the same vision of Serbia joining the EU in due time, but their diplomatic moves and rhetoric on Russia differ. When Serbia was invited for the first time to participate in the military parade in Moscow on Victory Day in 2016, PM Vučić refused to come but had instead accepted an invitation of US vice president Joe Biden. Before departing for the US, PM Vučić reminded of Serbia's strategic goal to join the EU but went on to say that country's aim is to sustain a correct partnership with Russia, referring to the example of Germany (Blic 2015). President Nikolić, on the other hand, pledged his loyalty to Russia reminding of Kosovo and Moscow's unconditional support before the UN Security Council and UNESCO (Kremlin 2016).

Under the presidency of Boris Tadić, two major coalitions took turn in the office, the first one being Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS) – national conservative and Christian Democratic party under PM Vojislav Koštunica – and the other one being Democratic Party (DS), which is the major centre-left social-democratic party. Under DSS, Serbia continued to develop bilateral relations with Russia, which shows the consistency between nationalistic agenda of DSS and the Russian sentiment among ruling party at that time. Both PM Vojislav Koštunica and Serbian president Boris Tadić used South Stream pipeline as a *leitmotiv* during their campaign. The pro-Russian government in Serbia justified the closure of a strategic energy deal as a country's necessity to secure energy stability in the region, which would be accomplished by constructing the South Stream project. When in 2012 SNS coalition led by PM Ivica Dačić won the elections, Serbia started to position itself as pro-European. The country sought to deepen its relations with Russia, even at times when EU member states imposed sanctions on Russia and persisted on their stance to see Russia as their ally. However, it was under PM Dačić that Serbia decided to fully cooperate with ICTY and made efforts to extradite war general in order to comply with EU regulations. Hence, in this period, one can observe a positive pro-EU turn in the Serbian government with the approval of mostly all other political parties.

Currently, the only political party that officially advocates the severance of ties with the EU is DSS. To that end, the DSS publicly embraces all nationalistic, openly pro-fascist and ultraconservative clerical groups, gathered around the Serbian Orthodox

Church. The party leader, Rašković Ivić, urged the president to call a referendum on country joining the EU (Kurir 2015). The main party's narrative on the referendum was focused on changing the course of actions and leaving the EU behind because of its inability to cope with the refugee crisis. Putin's party – having won the majority in 2016 parliamentary elections – strongly supports DSS as well as the idea of holding a referendum. In 2016 Putin demanded from PM Vučić to call a referendum on the country joining the EU and NATO, but Serbian PM refused to even take it into consideration as EU membership is the main aim of Serbia's foreign policy. Along these lines, the pro-Western and pro-Russian divide is entrenched in the political class despite all political parties currently in Parliament being in favor of EU integration (Torralba 2014).

While there is a broad consensus among Serbian political parties with respect to EU membership and the importance of partnership with Russia, the unresolved statehood of Kosovo continues to be a dividing line in the current political landscape and weights heavier for Serbia than any other issue. Serbia's progress toward the EU is largely defined by its parallel process of dealing with Kosovo and normalizing relations between two countries. The ruling coalition led by SNS and the president-elect Vučić stand for keeping Kosovo and Metohija within Serbian borders, although the initiatives of PM Vučić previously showed Serbia's readiness to engage in a more meaningful dialogue with Kosovo. The second most important coalition partner SPS considers Kosovo and Metohija as an inseparable part of Serbia. Only a few parties that are more liberal advocate for Kosovo's independence. In case Belgrade loses Russian support on Kosovo, its negotiation position will be weakened to the extent that may lead to a renewal of Kosovo's status in the international community, the main thing Serbia is trying to avoid. Being fully aware that Kosovo is very much part of the political debate and as such directly influences country's relations with Russia, examining this issue goes beyond the scope of this research. However, an indirect effect of the debate is addressed in European Commission progress reports.

4.6. Case studies comparison

This chapter presents the results obtained from two cases, Croatia and Serbia. The main aim was to analyse countries in line with the defined variables, test two hypotheses and answer the research questions set in the introductory chapter. The independent, dependent and two intervening variables were subjected to analysis, results of which are summarized in the table below. The table is divided by intervening variable (1) on two periods – positive and negative – which relate directly to the research questions and hypotheses.

For the purpose of evaluating the results efficiently, appropriate values were attached to tested variables. The first component of the independent variable, foreign policy outlook (FP), has three values i) 'strong' being the most positive and pointing out that the visits between two countries are carried out on a regular basis with bilateral relations developing gradually; ii) 'stable' value presupposes bilateral relations on a working level via diplomatic representations, the main goal of which is to keep the current status of cooperation without any attempts of deepening it; iii) 'weak' FP means that bilateral relations are reduced to the lowest level with the absence of top-level visits. The second component of independent variable Trade relations (TR) is defined similarly to FP with three values – 'high', 'mid-low', and 'low'. Since the results obtained with respect to this variable were straightforward, there was no need of developing extra categories in order to describe trade relations. 'High' TR means that a high level of interdependency is established between the units of analysis with financial revenues being beneficial to both parties. Mid-low TR is defined by the existence of trade relations between countries, but with no significant contribution to either one of the countries' economy. Finally, 'low' TR describes the situation where trade between countries is reduced to a minimum.

Additionally, the values of *Coalition government* are defined as 'effective' and 'ineffective'. The effective coalition government presupposes defined action plans and strategies with the aim of further developing or maintaining relations with Russia. The ineffective coalition government speaks of the lack of political willingness, strategic vision that might have an impact on the governmental decision to engage with and develop policies on Russia. Lastly, 'yes' and 'no' values for the DV - *Stalling on the Europeanization process* – were defined in accordance with RQ1 and RQ2.

Table 5 Results of the analysis

IN (1) Positive relations (2008-2011)						
	IV				IN (2)	DV
	FP	TR	VF	SA	CG	
HR	Stable	High	Yes	-	Effective	No
SR	Strong	High	Yes	-	Effective	No
IN (1) Negative relations (2012-2015)						
	IV				IN (2)	DV
	FP	TR	VF	SA	CG	
HR	Weak	Mid-low	No	Yes	Ineffective	No
SR	Strong	High	Yes	No	Effective	Yes

With respect to the IV *Foreign policy outlook*, Croatia-Russia high-level visits were more based on economic talks and cooperation in technical, energy and tourism sectors, rather than being politically and strategically motivated, as it was the case with Serbia. One of the reasons lies in Russian support for Kosovo and Metohija status, which is considered to be an important impetus for other areas of cooperation including, but not limited to, military, economy, and energy sector. In contrast to Serbia, Croatian state visits and official talks with Russia were mainly held in the 2008-2011 period, which coincides with the time when EU-Russia relations were positive. Conversely, Serbian-Russian relations were intensified in the second period of the analysis (2012-2015) with official talks mostly concerning Kosovo, military and defence cooperation and other political issues.

The wholly different outcome in two cases concerning foreign policy outlook is recognized in the number of official visits. Comparatively, Croatia never saw president Putin paying an official visit to Zagreb, neither had Russian MFA Sergey Lavrov been to Croatia during the two periods, whereas both Russian presidents and PMs (Medvedev and Putin), as well as MFA, visited Belgrade on several occasions. Presidents of Serbia showed close affiliation and willingness to engage with Kremlin on a higher level during their presidency, whereas in the case of Croatia, only during the two leftist

presidents in the first period, a closer bilateral cooperation was observed. In such a degree, the current Croatian president Grabar Kitarović shows an assertive stance toward Russia.

Apropos of *trade relations*, unlike in the case of Serbia, Croatia and Russian Federation have not had any agreement which would stipulate free trade and free custom duties in foreign trade. Instead, Croatia has been the beneficiary of the Generalized System of Privileges (GSP) of Russian Federation, under which developed countries grant tariff preferences to developing and least developed countries (Štulec et al. 2014: 7). With Croatia becoming a new member of the EU, its status changed from being a beneficiary to the country offering those benefits to other countries. Serbia, on the other hand, has regulated customs regime with both the EU and Russia. The trade liberalization between Russia and Serbia was agreed in 2011, whereas three years earlier the customs regime with the EU on restricting customs duties was signed. Serbia is therefore in a more beneficial position with regards to trade with Russia, the proof of which is demonstrated in the higher trade revenues in Serbian case. After the sanctions against Russia were imposed by the EU, statistics in Croatia started to reflect low numbers in trade between two countries.

Moreover, Croatian ties with Russia in the energy sector are far less developed than it is the case with Serbia, where the economic linkage in energy cooperation is the strongest. This, however, makes Serbia fully dependent on Russian exports of oil and gas, which threatens country's energy security. Comparatively, Croatia is one of the EU member states which succeeded in cutting its dependence on Russian gas imports, following the construction of the Hungarian-Croatia interconnector. In addition to that, Croatia, unlike other neighbouring countries, holds 24 billion cubic metres of proven natural gas reserves (Natural Gas World 2015). It is, therefore, this energy strategy that places Croatia in a more comfortable position with respect to the energy security, a challenge that Serbia is still facing. Whilst both countries try to benefit from the trade with Russia to the highest extent possible, the methods they employ demonstrate a different understanding of the nature of their relations with Russia.

Besides, the national policy in Croatia is notably similar to the approach Serbia took with respect to *visa liberalisation*. During the 2008-2011, both countries had in place a visa-free regime, at least for a certain number of months (the case of Croatia). In

years before joining the EU, due to the touristic season which continues to have a major stake in country's economy, Croatia temporarily removed visa regime for citizens of Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and Russia, whereas Serbia made it permanent. Whilst in Croatia a decision to lift the visa regime for Russian citizens was economically motivated, in Serbian case it was a friendly and strategic cooperation between the countries that made the decision possible. Had Croatia not joined the EU, it is highly likely that the visa-free regime would be in place during the touristic season, as numbers show a sharp decrease in tourists after the visa-free regime was annulled in 2013. In the second period of the analysis, Croatia had no choice in defining the visa policy towards Russia, as it aligned with the general EU stance to restrict visa-free regime for Russian citizens. Conversely, Serbia continues to decide freely upon the issue during the EU negotiations, and the installed visa-free regime contributes to the facilitation of the dialogue with Russia and deepening of economic ties.

The divergence between Croatia and Serbia can be observed in the fourth component of IV – *sanctions against Russia*. Both countries showed the support for recognizing the territorial integrity of Ukraine but diverged in condemning the Russian actions in Crimea and imposing sanctions. It is notable to mention that Croatia was left with no choice in deciding on sanctions, as the decision was made unanimously between all member states. Had Croatia been in the situation as Serbia to freely decide on foreign policy trajectory, it is highly unlikely that the country would change its stance and refuse to align with the Western strategy. Known as a strong supporter of NATO and West in general, Croatian foreign policy narrative differs to a large extent from Serbian, which was clearly demonstrated on the example of sanctions. Nevertheless, both Serbia and Croatia tried to be as pragmatic as possible when dealing with sanctions regime against Russia; Croatia because of strong business and economic ties with Russia, and Serbia due to politically motivated reasons, the most important being that of Kosovo. Even in the circumstances when most EU countries refuse to think about any possibility of continuing cooperation with Russia, Croatia along with a few other member states tried to exempt business deals from the sanctions. Similarly, Serbia's pragmatism lies in close political and bilateral ties with Russia, thus, Serbia saw the chance to prove Russia its loyalty in exchange for Moscow's support on Kosovo.

Furthermore, the intervening variable *Coalition government* sought to inspect whether the ideology of coalition government and the (non-)existence of similar views of both the president and the ruling coalition have an impact on the quality of country's bilateral relations with Russia. The outcomes show that coalition governments of respective countries adhere to a different system of belief and approaches concerning intensified political engagement with Moscow. The period 2008-2011 saw two right-wing coalition governments in Croatia which showed different levels of willingness to engage in cooperation with Russia. Under PM Sanader, a coalition government was more reluctant to strike any deal with Moscow, even if that meant participating in what was said to be an important energy project for Croatia. Even though due to the more nationalist rhetoric of the right-wing government coalition in Croatia, one would expect of the government to alienate Russia as a potential partner, the leader of the right-wing government, PM Kosor, made sure not to repeat mistakes of her predecessor and made efforts to show Kremlin its readiness to engage more profoundly. It was not, therefore, the ideology which determined the relations with Russia, but the geopolitical context which was unfolding in 2013.

Besides this, the current Croatian coalition 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 PM Vučić is not as unequivocal in foreign policy and tends to shift preferences to both Moscow and Brussels. Throughout two periods, Serbian government was pro-Russian, which is proved by continuous state visits of presidents, PMs and MFAs to either Moscow or Belgrade. Also, the 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 regarding Russia.

Lastly, the governmental stance in military and defence sector also drove the country further away from the EU and in the past several years downplayed the success that Serbia made from 2008. The *Chapter 31* proved to be decisive in this respect, as it was there that the EU showed its inappropriateness of Serbia's behaviour which did not

correspond to EU regulations. Although Serbia was not legally bounded to align its national foreign policy with the EU, the Commission did hope that Serbia would react differently. On the other hand, given that the geopolitical setting regarding EU-Russia relations was more positive than it is now the case when Serbia is in the process of EU negotiations, the EU did not have such major concerns with respect to the *Chapter 31*. Moreover, Croatia did not go against regulations stipulated in *Chapter 31* and was extremely cooperative in all CSDP missions and other sectors when necessary. Thus, if comparing the negotiations with the EU with respect to Russia, the conditions for Croatian negotiations with the EU were much more favourable than the ones Serbia has under current geopolitical developments, with the EU and Russia being on different sides.

5. Discussion: Evaluating Russian impact and acknowledging limitations

This chapter reveals how the research undertaken in this thesis relates to the aims set in the introductory chapter, as well as it explains the main findings. The thesis sought to shed light on the WB countries' advancement toward the EU by placing an emphasis on one external actor – Russia. For that purpose, two research questions were developed and two hypotheses formulated in order to shift the focus of the analysis onto two specific periods of EU negotiations. The following findings might pave the way to different interpretations and leave space for future debate. These findings not only further broaden the knowledge on Russia's role in the region but also offer more insights into the processes of possible interference in the accession negotiations.

In the interest of focusing solely on the Russian factor, the research did not take into account additional aspects which might play a role in the Europeanization process. Though cultural and ideational facets lie behind the dynamic of the research, the focus was given to rational assumption to European integration. Two cases taken into account for this research showed a different level of preparedness in the EU accession negotiations, as well as a divergent stance toward Russia. With reference to the research question RQ1, *How do country's close bilateral ties with Russia affect the Europeanization process*, the following hypothesis H1 was formulated: *Those WB countries with more historically, economically and geopolitically entrenched relations with Russia are more likely to stall the Europeanization process*. The analysis of two cases affirmed that Serbia is the country which shows warmer historical, economic and geopolitical ties with Russia, as the H1 was strongly confirmed. On the other hand, a significant difference was not revealed in the case of Croatia in two periods covered by the analysis.

Better results were obtained in the case of Serbia, where a substantive evidence of country's closer economic, political and bilateral ties with Russia was detected. The Free Trade Agreement from 2000 makes Serbia the only country apart from the Commonwealth of Independent States to negotiate a trade liberalisation deal with Russia and create an attractive business environment for foreign investments. Another 'Declaration on strategic partnership' agreement from 2013 elevates bilateral

cooperation on the highest level, insofar as it entails economic and trade, business contacts, increasing investments, cooperation between ministries of internal affairs on combating organized criminal, terrorism, and drug trafficking. Although Serbia reassured the EU how it will not take the advantage of EU sanctions imposed on Russia due to the annexation of Crimea, Serbian exports to Russia rose up to 68% in comparison with the year 2013. Another strong linkage between Serbia and Russia came in light of the energy deal in 2008 when Gazprom obtained 51% stake in the state-controlled oil company NIS. The pro-Russian government in Serbia at that time justified the closure of a strategic energy deal as a country's necessity to secure energy stability in the region, which would be accomplished by constructing the South Stream project and preserving Kosovo within Serbian territory. Kosovo, thus, became an impetus for deepening bilateral relations, whereas increasing commitment to maintaining high diplomatic ties indicated mutual interests in harnessing the full potential of mutual relationship.

Stalling on the Europeanization process was detected in *Chapter 31* in the second period of the analysed time frame. Serbia 2014 and 2015 progress reports brought disagreements on behalf of the European Commission, following Serbia's absence at the vote of UN General Assembly Resolution on the territorial integrity of Ukraine. Other evidence came in light of the illegal annexation of Crimea when Serbia chose not to align with Council's decision on adopting restrictive measures. These two decisions shed a wholly new light on Serbia's foreign policy outlook vis-à-vis Russia. It was then that the European Commission seemed to take into consideration the strong linkage between Serbia and Russia as a possible impediment to Serbia's EU path. Although it cannot be said how Russian factor solely affected Serbia's amiss performance in progress reports, country's close ties with Russia did contribute to the overall degrading of Serbia's advancement in the course of EU negotiations.

As for the case of Croatia, during the 2008-2012 period, the European Commission had no major complaints about country's connections with Russia, neither were Croatia-Russia ties scrutinized in Commission reports, as it was the case with Serbia. Croatia, wanting to be a textbook example of an EU candidate, did not want to risk accession negotiations by engaging with a more meaningful politically motivated relationship with Moscow, especially in the final years of negotiations when the

relationship between the EU and Russia faced obstacles. Croatian economic ties with Russia and existence of any kind of political and geopolitically motivated cooperation did not interfere with the accession negotiations. Historically speaking, Croatia had no major links with Russia, mostly because Russia is traditionally seen as the supporter of Serbia – Croatia's troubled neighbour. The fact that Russia and Serbia share religious Orthodox links proved to be decisive in nurturing only an economically beneficial relationship with Moscow, a relationship which, nonetheless, could not affect Croatian negotiations with the EU.

The only disagreement Croatia and the EU had over Russia was on the visa facilitation regime. In 2010, the Croatian government adopted a decision on temporary visa liberalisation for citizens of Russia, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan for transit through Croatia or stays up to 90 days. The decision was not in accordance with the EU regulations within the *acquis* as these countries were blacklisted in the EU Regulation 539/2001. Croatia justified the decision as being economically beneficial to the touristic sector of the country since measures adopted by the EU could significantly affect the overall number of guests per touristic season. The reasons behind such a decision were, hence, economically motivated and indicated that Croatia was able to pursue more independent and pragmatic policy that was not necessarily coinciding with the EU policy.

It can, therefore, be concluded that the H1 was confirmed as in the sample of two cases Serbia is the one which nurtures closer bilateral ties with Russia and, by doing so, risks being criticized more by the European Commission. With respect to RQ1 and H1, Serbia can act as a representative of those WB countries which maintain close geopolitical, economic and historical relations with Russia, which is also the reason why the findings of this thesis go beyond two cases scrutinized in the analysis. However, for a deeper insight into other WB countries which tend to share the same approach with Russia as cases discussed in this thesis, a further research should be conducted.

With respect to the RQ2, *How could the volatile nature of EU-Russia relations be the reason for stalling the Europeanization process in countries with closer ties to Russia?*, the H2 was formulated: *All else being equal, those WB countries with closer ties to Russia are more likely to stall the Europeanization process during periods of*

increasingly strained EU-Russia relations. In light of RQ2, two periods are of relevance for the analysis (2008-2011/2012-2015). The first period is defined as a positive period of relations between the EU and Russia, whereas the second is characterized as a period of strained EU-Russia relations. H2 was confirmed by the findings of the analysis and proved to be righteous in defining countries which tend to stall more the Europeanization process during periods of increasingly strained EU-Russia relations. Again, as in the case of RQ1, the case of Serbia confirmed the H2. The findings further strengthened the conviction how H2 is correct and the external geopolitical context – defined in this research as EU-Russia relations – tends to influence country's stance on Russia. Further analysis of independent variables (foreign policy outlook, trade relations, visa facilitation regime, and sanctions) and intervening variables (1) and (2) showed that EU-Russia relations have a significant impact on WB countries' relations toward Russia, either in a positive or negative way.

Throughout 2008-2011, or commonly referred to as the positive period of EU-Russia relations, European Commission greeted deeper cooperation between Serbia and Russia in light of the privatisation of Serbian oil company NIS. Moreover, a closer Serbia-Russia energy cooperation was supported by the EU, as Russian Gazprom was the one to privatize NIS by buying the majority of shares from the state. In *Chapter 31 Foreign, security and defence policy*, European Commission also noted Serbia's positive progress in alignment with all major EU declarations and Council decisions and, at that time, *Chapter 31* was one of the most advanced chapters within the *acquis*. Serbia 2014 and 2015 progress reports provided evidence of Serbia's stalling the Europeanization process in the period of strained EU-Russia relations. Starting from 2013 when EU-Russia relations hit a new low, Serbia's general advancement toward the fulfillment of EU regulations within the *acquis* was notably lower in comparison with the previous years. High-level contacts with Russia were marked in the report as something that needs to be scrutinized more thoroughly. Unlike in previous years when high-level contacts and cooperation with Russia were not seen as something negative which would downgrade Serbia's progress in *Chapter 31*, at times of far-fetched EU-Russia relations, it seemed to have caused a problem for Serbia on foreign policy matters.

On the other hand, Croatia progress reports in the final years of accession negotiations (2011/2012) revealed no significant evidence of increased links with Moscow that could have interfered with the course of negotiations. The problems were mostly related to the justice department, internal affairs, and minority issues. Although Croatia became EU member in 2013 which makes it hard to extensively compare two periods as in the case of Serbia, changes in country's stance toward Russia were nonetheless detected. The diplomatic communication between Zagreb and Moscow was ongoing during positive EU-Russia relations, which is demonstrated by the number of official visits. After 2010, Croatia held only one meaningful official talk with Moscow in February 2013, just a few months prior to joining the EU. General cooperation on economy, tourism, and the military armament was discussed, but no major agreement had been achieved.

Starting from 2013, Croatia's stance toward Russia deteriorated to a large extent, mostly because of the EU negative stance on Russia. It all culminated with Croatia not being able to appoint Croatian ambassador to Moscow for two years. Although Croatia, being the only EU country without its ambassador to Moscow, sent a clear message about its stance toward Russian foreign policy in Ukraine, in the wider context of damaged EU-Russia relations, the act of non-appointing the ambassador did not influence anyhow the relations between Zagreb and Moscow, as they were already all-time low. At the beginning of 2017, the government and the president of Croatia came to an agreement about appointing a new ambassador, and by doing so, a two-year period of broken diplomatic ties ended.

Respectively, H2 has confirmed that in both cases the general EU assertive stance toward Russia has a significant impact on countries' foreign policy outlook. Whereas in the case of Serbia that represents countries which are more dependent on Russia, Croatia can speak for those WB countries which are closer to the EU and tend to show more pro-EU stance in both domestic and foreign policy matters. By proving H1 and H2, a clear divergence in countries' stance toward Russia was observed, and the level of countries' commitment to the EU was formulated in a more concise manner. A room for generalisation certainly exists as other WB countries show the similar pattern of behaviour to one of the two cases analysed in the research. By applying the same

methods of analysis to other WB countries, the outcomes would confirm that Croatia and Serbia are appropriately labeled as a representative sample of the whole region.

Intervening variables (1) and (2) were used to support RQ1 and RQ2. With respect to *EU-Russia relations* – defined as an intervening variable (1) – the analysis showed that in both cases the variable had an effect on Europeanization process. Strained EU-Russia relations proved to be decisive in Serbia's less successful performance within the *acquis*, and for Croatia, strained relations meant more Europeanization and less attachment to Russia. Although initially it was thought that the geopolitical context, i.e. EU-Russia relations, would not be detrimental for determining country's relations with Russia, closer inspection revealed that – especially in the case of Croatia – the geopolitical developments influenced severance of ties with Russia once Croatia became the EU member.

As for intervening variable (2) *Coalition government*, the main aim was to inspect whether the ideology of coalition government and the (non-)existence of similar views of both the president and the ruling coalition have an impact on the quality of country's bilateral relations with Russia. Due to the more nationalist rhetoric of the right-wing government coalition in Croatia, one would expect that the government alienates Russia as a potential partner, but the right-wing PM at that time made efforts to engage profoundly with Russia. Under the incumbent right-wing coalition government and rightist president, Croatia started to send politically negative signals to Moscow while at the same time trying to safeguard what is left of economic cooperation. During the positive EU-Russia relations when the right-wing government assumed the office, the relations with Russia were reportedly affirmative, as many talks on economy and energy cooperation were held. At times of strained EU-Russia relations, however, the governmental stance towards Russia experienced a slight downturn, although the leftist president Josipović showed a cooperative stance toward Russia. It is not, therefore, the ideology which affects Croatian relations with Russia, but rather a geopolitical context and the nature of EU-Russia relations.

On the contrary, Serbian coalition government acted unilaterally throughout both periods covered by the analysis. The coalition government and two presidents showed a high level of affiliation toward Moscow, which implies that individual preferences of country's officials play a role in determining the country's foreign policy

outlook. The governmental stance in military and defence sector also drove the country further away from the EU and in the past several years downplayed the success in EU negotiations. Two military drills with Russian troops which were held in 2016 under a symbolic name *Slavic Brotherhood 2016* near the border of a NATO member Croatia were seen as a provocation by the European Commission. Unlike Croatian coalition government which eventually gave in to the EU pressure in showing assertive stance toward Russia, the government of EU candidate members continued to follow the same trajectory with regards to its relations with Russia while at the same time trying to ensure the continuation of EU negotiations.

This research can serve as a stepping stone for further exploration of the impact of EU-Russia relations on the Europeanization progress. Thereupon, the findings of the two cases can be generalized and serve as a valuable outcome for the WB region as a whole. Nonetheless, in order to obtain even more plausible results and explain divergences among all WB countries, a further in-depth examination of the bigger scale of cases (seven) is needed. What is also notable to mention is that the analysis did not show any unexpected or surprising findings at the very end. All the hypotheses were identified and confirmed. Having inspected all seven countries, the outcomes might have been different, but in a small number of countries, the limitations are also greater. In the following paragraphs, the limitations of this research will be discussed.

To begin with, the time frame selected for this research is highly functional to H2 and serves its purpose, since the main aim was to see how two distinctive periods in geopolitical terms can affect Europeanization process differently. The periods were, hence, chosen confidently for the sake of testing H2. However, the results as such cannot be taken as granted beyond the scope of the timeframe discussed in the research. It means that the geopolitical context, as well as domestic outlook, may change in the near or distant future and cause new (un)expected developments in the WB region with respect to both EU and Russia. A major source of unreliability also lies in the intervening variable (2) *Coalition government*, which is prone to change every four years, when citizens vote in elections. Though it is unrealistic to expect that coalition government would take a sharp shift in defining country foreign policy outlook in a wholly different manner and, hence, oppose everything the previous government did in terms of maintaining/deteriorating relations with the EU and Russia, slight changes in

ideological approach can be expected with every new coalition government assuming the office.

Secondly, the focus of the study was on the rational factors behind the European integration which are related to economic, geopolitical, and security interests, rather than being connected with ideational aspects such as religion, culture, language and so forth. The guiding thought was that rational factor might come to the fore when it comes to these dimensions and, consequently, influence country's decision to either sever or advance ties with Russia. Accordingly, the sole focus of the analysis was precisely in those areas which account for rationality in decision-making. What the research did not encompass, however, are other dimensions which may also play a role for certain countries in terms of defining their relations with Russia. The aim of the thesis was to look into rational factors behind countries' relations with Russia as a mean of affecting the Europeanization process, so a more holistic approach to the region is very much needed in order to detect which areas, in particular, are under threat of Russian influence and which features might trigger them the most. Certainly, the study showed that the majority of the country's decisions are rooted in economic and geopolitical reasons, but rationality does not account for every decision taken by the government.

As it was elaborated in the methodology part, Croatia was chosen as one of the sample countries, despite the fact that the country joined the EU in the second half of the second period. Thusly, being aware of the Croatian case specificity, it is worth taking into account that the same methods of analysis could not have been applied onto Croatia, as it was in the case with Serbia which remained the EU candidate during both periods of the analysis. Surely, this matter made it harder to inspect Croatian foreign policy outlook, which by joining the EU became a part of the bigger EU foreign policy vis-à-vis Russia. Nonetheless, after studying thoroughly both cases within the same analytical methods it became clear that even if Croatia had remained EU candidate throughout the whole period of analysis, the final outcomes would not have had an impact on the final revelations, as the country showed unilateral support for the EU even before joining the Union.

Furthermore, the findings had strengthened the conviction that in dealing with WB countries, the EU has to continue developing a country-specific approach and

addressing especially those areas which are considered to be vulnerable to external and/or internal pressures of the country in question. These results offer indisputable evidence that the EU should not underestimate the complexity of the region and related to it Russian factor, which might play if not decisive then substantial role in driving certain countries farther from the EU and causing more unrests across the region. As anticipated, the findings also single out pressing concerns which do not necessarily derive from within the country but are influenced by the external factors. Even though this research emphasized the role of Russia as a significant factor in the region which might interfere with the EU negotiations, other actors should not be underestimated.

The findings are generalised in two ways. As it was already acknowledged, the first facet contains generalisation within the WB region, as similar results would be obtained by applying the same methods of analysis to other WB countries – Montenegro, BiH, FYROM, Albania, and Kosovo. The historical legacy, similar cultural and language traits, the necessity of internal affairs reforms, memory politics, and the decision to become part of the EU place WB countries in the same position when it comes to Europeanization process. The other facet enables generalisation within the sphere of 'Other' credible actors whose interests in WB region do not necessarily diverge from Russian approach.

On this point, the high-profile interests of Turkey and China in the region should not be neglected. The reason for increasing importance of the WB region for actors other than Russia lies mostly in economic and energy sector. For China, the WB region is important insofar as it fits in China's foreign policy 'The Belt and Road Initiative' which would increase China's political and economic power and presence worldwide. Chinese investments in transport, infrastructure and energy projects across the region tend to ease the transport corridor from China to Europe, create additional jobs for Chinese workforce and find new investment opportunities in the region. On the other hand, Turkey's presence has mostly been detected in BiH (where Muslim Bosnians comprise half of the country's population) but also in FYROM, Albania, and Kosovo. The strong Ottoman legacy in the region creates a fertile ground for establishing networks of religious, cultural, and academic structures which might lead to the augmentation of political influence. The imminent tensions between Turkey and the EU are an additional incentive for Turkey to create problems in the region by promoting

non-democratic practices which could result in growing alienation from the EU. In the matter of declined support for the EU, Ankara would be in a position to gain an upper hand in the region and pursue its own agenda.

Last but not least, this study had no intention of taking a normative stance in a sense of proving that the Russian interference can irrevocably damage Europeanization process of WB countries. It is certainly not a two faceted matter, meaning that in case a country gets one step closer to Russia, it automatically turns away from the EU. The study sought to assess the impact of Russia on EU negotiations without assuming that this same impact would have a detrimental effect on Europeanization process. The findings indicated that there exists the tendency toward Russian interference in the region and those countries that are closely affiliated to Russia can reach an impasse in the accession negotiations. On the one hand, Serbia is publicly set toward the EU and is undergoing serious reforms of the judicial system, cracking down on corruption and promoting human rights, whereas, on the other hand, the country openly challenged EU regulations by aligning with Russia in the midst of a geopolitical crisis in 2013.

To conclude, this study gave an explanation for countries' closer bilateral ties with Russia – at least when it comes to rational-driven factors. The extent to which these ties can be detrimental for country's relations with the EU was not discussed, which in itself leaves enough space for improvement. By proving that the connection with Russia within the context of EU negotiations exists, the primary objective of this thesis has been met and any other attempts at addressing this topic from a different angle would require additional academic research.

6. Conclusion: Framing Europeanization in the wider geopolitical context

The regional cooperation and, eventually, integration serves not only Western Balkan countries, which are experiencing internal challenges and political tensions, but also EU interests in assisting the development of the region and ensuring stability in its neighbourhood. 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. Russia as a regional power pursues an adversarial foreign policy in its neighbourhood aiming specifically at the countries that are actively engaged in dialogue with the EU. The objective is to obstruct Western policies intended to secure either European geopolitical landscape or promote democracy, human rights and the rule of law in countries that are still coping with challenges of that kind.

This thesis sought to shed light on the prospect of Western Balkan countries enlargement to the EU with consideration of Russia as an external actor. The intention was to explain the extent of Russian influence on the Europeanization process of Western Balkan countries and examine the factors that lie behind it. The cases of Croatia and Serbia were subjected to in-depth scrutiny within a closely defined framework divided into two periods (2008-2011/2012-2015). Bilateral ties with Russia were examined by looking at official visits between countries, trade relations with Russia, each country's stance on sanctions, and the introduction of visa-free regime vis-à-vis Russia, whereas the dependent variable *Stalling on the Europeanization process*, was assessed via European Commission annual progress reports with a special emphasis on *Chapter 31 Foreign, security, and defence policy*.

The main theoretical framework applied in the thesis revolves around liberal intergovernmentalism and the rational approach to European integration. The theory of liberal intergovernmentalism as an updated version of intergovernmental institutionalism emphasizes the importance of domestic politics in national interest formulation. The intervening variable *Coalition government* was introduced for the purpose of studying the extent to which domestic political actors influence preference

formation with respect to the EU and Russia, as well as identifying political cleavages within the party system. Unlike liberal intergovernmentalism which underlines the member states as the main drivers of EU enlargement, rational approach to European integration takes into account applicants' preferences which lie behind the Europeanization process. It offers a broader framework for inspecting Western Balkan applicants' preferences that rest exclusively on rational factors related to economic, security, and geopolitical benefits. The thesis, thus, nominates rational and pragmatic incentive of Western Balkan countries' bilateral relations with Russia amid EU accession talks over constructivist and ideational facets.

The aim was to indicate that Western Balkan region does not rely solely on the EU's influence, 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 that lie at the core of rational approach to European integration. The research showed 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. 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 was observed in *Chapter 31*. This 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, the geopolitical developments triggered severance of ties with Russia and rapprochement to the EU. Croatian stances on Russia throughout both periods shifted in accordance with the EU official foreign policy narrative.

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. The rationalist assumption presented in the thesis leads to several expectations with regard to economic, geopolitical and security areas. 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 was the case with sanctions in 2014. Throughout the period of eight years, at least one official visit per year between Serbia and Russia took place either in Belgrade or Moscow. 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 – serving as a rationalist factor – affect the rapprochement towards the EU during the Europeanization process.

Furthermore, the research has also revealed that EU-Russia relations cannot be overlooked, and that wider geopolitical developments have an impact not only on the overall state of affairs in the EU, but also on EU relations with candidate countries. Geopolitical developments and global changes tend to influence the very nature of the EU and the formulation of its foreign policy toward Russia. EU-Russia relations are a reflection of what happens in the EU and its close neighbourhood. The developments in Eastern Ukraine and in the Middle East, specifically Syria, have pushed relations between the EU and Russia to all-time low, attributing it to different views on geopolitics and strategic interests in the wider region. Notwithstanding strong Russian presence in EaP countries through military, security and economic mechanisms, this research 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. Russia has made systematic attempts to destabilize Western efforts in bringing countries closer to the EU and NATO and has engaged in hybrid warfare in order to safeguard its interests in the EU's neighbourhood.

Washington's [temporary] negligence of NATO has left the EU alone to deal with the threats emerging from an increasingly adversarial Russia and NATO's second largest military power in the East – Turkey. In the event that NATO redefines its role, from a security consumer the EU will come forth as a security provider, a task which might be costly for the 'Union of 28' considering upcoming lengthy and extensive

Brexit talks and a sharp deterioration of relations with Turkey. The rise of right-wing populism in Europe and the US, additionally spurred by Donald Trump's presidency and extreme far-right parties in the EU, provokes growing nationalistic sentiment among Europeans who tend to advocate more and more for national policies instead of European ones. It deprives the EU of power and authority that is necessary in order to formulate EU foreign policy vis-à-vis countries which do not necessarily share European values and do not advocate for democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. The many internal and external challenges in the past several years have damaged the image of the EU as a safe haven for all countries involved. Having to rely only on its own military and security forces in order to secure its close neighbourhood, the EU might not have enough resources and efforts to stretch enough to accept new members.

Western Balkans are seen as the turf where geopolitical struggle and cross-cutting interests of the West and Russia meet. The research model that has been applied in this thesis may relate to other contexts, either to other candidate countries that are interested in EU membership or actors which have the potential to exert their influence in the region. Being on the brink of ethnic and political collapse, this research pinpointed possible complexities in the EU policy toward the region that are being exploited by other foreign actors, the most important being Russia, China, and Turkey. To say nothing of the still undefined American foreign policy toward the Eastern neighbourhood and Western Balkans countries that have been under the US protectorate since the Balkan wars ended. 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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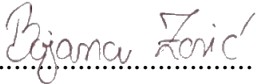
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