EUROPEAN SECURITY ORDER, INTEGRATION AND MODERNISATION

Perspectives and Challenges in the Central and Eastern European Region

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EDITORS

Feng Zhongping, Huang Mengmeng, Ju Weiwei

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The European Integration and Modernisation of the Central and Eastern European Region in the New Geopolitical Environment

Preface

The conflict between Russia and Ukraine that broke out in February 2022 has impacted the European security landscape and promoted the transformation of the European Union's foreign and security policies. With the evolution of the European security architecture from a "cooperative" order together with Russia to a "confrontational" order against Russia, as well as the transformation of NATO's functions and the strengthening of defence construction by EU countries, the strategic thinking on "deterrence" and "defence" of the Cold War era has returned to the European continent. Meanwhile, the model of dependence on Russian energy has become unsustainable. Against this background, Finland and Sweden sought to join NATO, which filled the strategic gap in the north, and Germany announced the start of a historic "turning point" (*Zeitenwende*) in security policy, breaking with its post-World War II military "culture of restraint" and deploying its armed forces at NATO's eastern border in Lithuania. A power-shift is gradually occurring in the European Union, with Central and Eastern European countries committing to becoming important participants in the EU's security policy-making. A permanent US garrison base has been built in Poznan, Poland, and the Bucharest Nine group is committed to becoming an important security actor in the Black Sea–Baltic Sea strategic corridor.

In addition, the Russia–Ukraine conflict has brought an important "warning" to the EU and its Member States. The EU realises that European–Atlantic defence still relies on the United States, but it no longer "takes for granted" US security protection. Europe needs to show its American ally its willingness and ability to enhance its own defence.

To this end, important strategic documents such as the EU Strategic Compass call on Member States to increase defence investment and strengthen the construction of the "European pillar" within NATO. Over the 30 years since the end of the Cold War, the EU's "normative role" has been increasingly questioned, and the EU's ideals of "postmodernism" and "pacifism" have gradually been shattered. In the new geopolitical environment, the European Union is committed to promoting a strategic shift towards "realism" and the promotion of a "geopolitical role". In this process, the European Union emphasises the acceleration of its expansion agenda into the Western Balkans and attempts to exert more influence on countries applying for membership. The Franco–German axis thus advocates the reform of the EU's decision-making mechanism, with a transition from the original decision-making method of "unanimous consent" to one of "qualified majority consent" on important matters such as foreign policy, in order to enhance the efficiency and cohesion of EU decision-making. However, this has aroused many doubts among Central and Eastern European countries, with some objecting that the veto power of small and medium-sized countries will be weakened, further damaging the sovereignty of nation-states.

At the same time, problems such as high energy prices, soaring inflation and the influx of refugees from the Russia–Ukraine conflict have weakened the social resilience of the European Union. People are increasingly dissatisfied with their own economic situation. Political fragmentation and social divisions in various countries have become common, posing a major obstacle to the process of European integration. This also has a profound impact on Central and Eastern European countries. On the one hand, they have to reach a compromise with the EU on how to assist Ukraine in a complex security situation. On the other hand, they have to promote European integration and their own modernisation goals under the conditions of EU sanctions against Russia

and high energy prices. The result of the European Parliament elections in June 2024 showed that populist parties within the EU have a lot of public support, and that the traditional party dividing line is no longer between left and right, but between voters who support European supranational institutions and those who are in favour of the maintenance of the sovereignty of nation-states. In addition, the uncertainty surrounding new political developments in the USA continues to plague the prospects of transatlantic cooperation. The current international environment is obviously no longer the "end of history" expected by Fukuyama after the Cold War, but rather a "crisis of the West".

In the turbulence of the European security landscape, how will Central and Eastern European countries adjust their roles to cope with geopolitical challenges, and how will they coordinate with EU powers and EU supranational institutions? The Russia–Ukraine conflict has brought economic, energy and social challenges to Europe. In this context, how will Central and Eastern European countries make adaptive adjustments to continue to advance their modernisation processes? These are all new topics in Central and Eastern European studies. In view of this, in 2023 the China–CEE Institute launched a special scheme soliciting essays – mainly from the perspective of Central and Eastern European countries – focusing on the changes in the European security order and the European integration and modernisation process of Central and Eastern European countries. Thirteen academic papers were selected and compiled into the present volume.

The China–CEE Institute is a non-profit, purely public welfare legal entity registered by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) in Budapest, Hungary, and it is specifically organised by the Institute of European Studies of CASS. Adhering to the principle of pragmatic cooperation, the China–CEE Institute steadily and actively seeks cooperation with think tanks and universities in European countries in

order to carry out academic exchanges and think-tank dialogues. For the publication of this book, the China–CEE Institute received strong support from the Eurasia Center of Hungary's John von Neumann University. We look forward to cooperating with more European think tanks and academic institutions in the future in order to promote the continuous development of China–Europe cultural and academic exchanges.

Feng Zhongping
Director of the China–CEE Institute
Director of the Institute of European Studies,
Chinese Academy of Social Sciences

Editor's Introduction

Since the outbreak of the Russia–Ukraine conflict in February 2022, Europe's geopolitical and security order has encountered severe shocks, impacting the continent in ways that are difficult to assess. This is especially true for Central and Eastern European countries, which must on one hand deal with complex security issues, while on the other continue to advance European integration and their own modernisation goals in a turbulent environment. This situation has also introduced new topics for research on Central and Eastern Europe. In light of this, in 2023 the China–CEE Institute launched a special call for papers. This initiative focused on perspectives from Central and Eastern European countries, seeking academic papers on topics such as Europe's security order, its geopolitical situation, and the processes of European integration and modernisation in Central and Eastern European countries. After a selection process, we chose 13 academic papers and compiled them in the present publication. This anthology aims to introduce readers to how the countries of Central and Eastern Europe have responded to the various risks presented by the volatile European geopolitical environment, and how they participate in European integration and promote their own modernisation and economic development within this new security context.

Geopolitics and great power rivalry have always been hot topics in academic circles, and these issues are becoming increasingly relevant to Central and Eastern European countries. In modern and contemporary history, Central and Eastern Europe has always been an important geopolitical crossroads on the Eurasian continent. For most CEE countries, the political and economic transitions that began in the 1980s

and 1990s prompted their "return" to and "integration" with Europe, ushering in a relatively peaceful and stable period of development. At the dawn of the present century, they successively joined the EU and NATO, achieving progress and development in terms of their economic strength, social governance and legal systems. However, this was based on two fundamental conditions. First, in the initial decade of the 2000s, Europe did not experience any large-scale regional armed conflicts and the European security environment remained relatively stable, allowing countries to enjoy a "peace dividend". Second, with the EU's eastern expansion and the deepening of European integration, Central and Eastern European countries not only received EU funding support, but also enjoyed the benefits of the European common market. As their industries became deeply integrated into Western European industrial and supply chains, and there was free movement of labour and capital between the region and Western Europe, the European identity of the CEE countries was enhanced. However, after 2010 Europe faced successive security, political, economic and social crises. On one hand, after the EU had experienced the eurozone debt crisis and the refugee crisis, populist and Eurosceptic tendencies spread through various circles of European society, consequently diminishing the drive and capability for European integration. On the other hand, from the Crimean crisis to the Russia–Ukraine conflict, the European security order has been continuously challenged. The previously cooperative pan-European security order, which included Russia, gradually shifted towards a more confrontational order, and yet a new European security order is yet to take shape. Meanwhile, the major EU countries are grappling with an energy crisis and high inflation, and the prospects for a resolution of the Russia–Ukraine conflict remain ambiguous. It is thus evident that there has been a radical change in the fundamental conditions upon which the economic development of CEE countries formerly relied. Not only has the post-

Cold War European "peace dividend" disappeared, in the past decade the EU has faced significant economic, social and energy challenges, undermining the foundation of the common market's prosperity. Taking all this into account, what impact will the disorder in European security have on European countries? What will be the future direction of security policies, European integration processes and modernisation development in Central and Eastern Europe? How will EU policies be adjusted to address current crises, and what impact will that have on CEE countries? How should China, as a new stakeholder, develop its relations with Central and Eastern European countries within the broader framework of China–Europe relations? The authors contributing to this volume provide readers with detailed answers to all these questions and more.

This book focuses on the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, with its key research topics being European security order, European geopolitics, integration and modernisation. There are clear and logical connections among these keywords. Given the current situation, the greatest external uncertainty facing Central and Eastern Europe vis-à-vis regional economic development is the turbulence in the European security situation caused by the war in Ukraine and the resulting economic and energy dilemmas. However, for the foreseeable future the resolution of the Russia–Ukraine conflict remains highly uncertain. In order to enhance economic "resilience" in this challenging environment, the integration process and modernisation policies in Central and Eastern Europe will need to undergo adaptive adjustments. Therefore, this anthology discusses the issues surrounding this internal logic, which is also the main content we hope to present to readers.

Our book is divided into two parts. The first discusses "The Challenges and Prospects for the European Security Order in the New Geopolitical Environment". The studies here explain the European security situation and geopolitical landscape in the context of the Russia–Ukraine conflict,

focusing on the geopolitical strategies and security policy transformations of various national actors including regional organisations such as NATO, the EU and the Bucharest Nine, and individual countries, including Germany, the CEE nations and Türkiye. Among the articles collected here, Mihai Christopher Marian Radovici argues that in the context of the Russia–Ukraine conflict, the EU combines the pragmatism of "progressive realists" with the ideals of the "liberalists", striving to play a more significant role on the international stage. Considering the resolution of the Russia–Ukraine conflict, Slobodan Popovic and Ljiljana Stevic compare the differing perspectives and approaches of NATO and China. Nataša Stanojević analyses the impact on the European security landscape of Finland changing its post-World War II neutral stance and joining NATO. Huang Mengmeng explains the transformation of Germany's security policy during the *Zeitenwende* ("turning point") and illustrates its impacts at the national, European and international levels, arguing that this policy is constrained by Germany's strategic culture and economic resources, making it difficult to achieve quickly. Mihai Christopher Marian Radovici and Teofan Dimitrie Drăghici suggest that the Bucharest Nine are important security actors within the NATO framework along the Baltic–Black Sea strategic corridor, asserting that the institutional cooperation among member states fills the gaps left by the strategies of major powers. The collaborative study by Mihai Christopher Marian Radovici and Atahan Demirkol provides a comparative analysis of how Romania and Türkiye have shifted their geopolitical strategies in the Black Sea region following the outbreak of the Russia–Ukraine conflict. Türkiye has attempted to play the role of mediator by adopting a balancing strategy, while Romania, as a gateway country to Europe, deeply relies on EU and NATO mechanisms. Romania not only offers mediation proposals, but also sets clear red lines, forming a deterrence strategy against Russia.

The subject of the second part of this book is "The European Integration and Modernisation of Central and Eastern Europe in the New Geopolitical Environment". Bojan Lazarevski and Toni Mileski propose that during the Russia–Ukraine conflict there has been a power shift within the European Union, with Central and Eastern European countries gradually becoming significant participants in the making of EU security policy. By playing a crucial role in pushing for Ukraine to become an EU candidate, they have increased their influence on the EU integration process. Maria Pavlova believes that Poland sees itself as the new leading country in Central and Eastern Europe. This said, once the Russia–Ukraine conflict ends, EU leaders may find it difficult to tolerate Poland's overbearing policies, as the country still lacks sufficient economic and political capital to match its power-political ambitions. Basing his research on Moldova's trajectory towards the strategic goal of joining the European Union, Radu Sava analyses the evolution of the strategic partnership between Romania and Moldova. Vincenzo Maria Di Mino and Marco Siragusa believe that the current relations between Serbia and Kosovo reflect global tensions. In the course of the Russia–Ukraine conflict, the EU has attempted to exert more influence on countries applying for membership, however the EU itself faces significant issues regarding defence, integration, and eastern expansion. Dmitry Erokhin analyses the manufacturing indicators of Central and Eastern European countries and finds that these nations have not shown significant signs of deindustrialisation even during recent external crises. Duško Dimitrijević suggests that the prospects for further EU enlargement primarily depend on whether the Western Balkan countries have the political will to fulfil their obligations to the EU. This includes implementing comprehensive reforms in key economic areas and in legal and political systems, as well as addressing structural weaknesses and high unemployment rates. Blanka Kovács describes the cooperation between China and CEE countries in the area of blockchain

technology and provides recommendations for future collaboration in the digital economy between these states and the PRC.

Most of the authors of these studies are young or middle-aged scholars from European universities and think tanks, and they provide us with unique insights, clear analyses and in-depth research regarding the topics in question. The very publication of this book was, in fact, prompted by the meaningful results of their scholarly endeavours. For their efforts and contributions, they have our greatest respect.

Prof Dr Feng Zhongping
Dr Huang Mengmeng
Dr Ju Weiwei

The Challenges and Prospects for the European Security Order in the New Geopolitical Environment

The War in Ukraine Awakening a Renewed Axis Mundi within the Old Continent: The EU as a Post-nationalist Progressive Realism Global Actor

MIHAI CHRISTOPHER MARIAN RADOVICI[*]

ABSTRACT: Arguing that the European Union is more than capable of adapting its foreign policy processes in order to gain resilience and retain primacy within the international systems, this study paradigmatically follows the path of progressive realism and smart-power dissipation approaches, particularly in the context of emerging threats from the war in Ukraine. By underlining how a neo-realist-liberal (*in extenso*) symbiosis underpins the EU's identity and external assemblages, we can interpret occurrences of this phenomenon on the Old Continent. Thus, the literature overwhelmingly underlines the fact that one of the Union's core directives has been to perpetuate its fundamental interests, maintain institutional integrity, gain agency, autonomy and internal and external

*   Mihai Christopher Marian Radovici: PhD, Doctoral School of Economics and International Business, Faculty of International Economic Relations, Bucharest University of Economics, Romania.

capacities, or project capabilities and capacities outside its direct sphere. From the analysis of official discourses and narratives, coupled with recent manoeuvrings, we can observe that this was enabled by instrumentalising on one hand, constructivist narrative-building and liberal institutionalism, and on the other, a slightly postmodernist pragmatic realism. In addition, the undertones of the latter, conterminous with other interplays, further permeated Brussels' agenda, particularly in the aftermath of recent systemic modulations and dynamics, which had reverberations across Europe's eastern outskirts, all while shifting the continental geostrategic equations. Thereafter, in almost all matters, both within EU institutions and their constituents, a reorientation phenomenon emerged, which demanded the employment of such concepts as minilateralism, para-diplomacy, collaborative norms, structured projections and power-sharing in order to create resilience, the aforementioned aspects serving as precursors and consolidating the Union's transformation into a progressive realist superpower.

KEYWORDS: European affairs, international relations theories, foreign policy, institutional development, Pan-European cooperation

1. Introduction

When it comes to the European integration process, both academics and practitioners instrumentalise a palette of perspectives with respect to its evolutionary pathways. Therefore, we can underline that at times the European Union is portrayed as a magnanimous normative, institutional or civilian leviathan with ramifications having a global reach, aspects that are based on its image as a diverse and open region full of unsurpassed socio-cultural successes and enriched by past lessons. Thus, by employing internal optimisation and the usage of pivotal nodes for smart power dispersion, it ascended to become the world's rule-generator, stabiliser, trend-setter, magnet, etc., drawing resources and fulfilling a modern civilisational mission (rule of law, democracy and the promotion of human rights) (Cremoma, 2004).

However, as shadows of illiberal populism and dogmatic nationalist discourses roam the Member States (MS), fuelled by various crises, another prospective avenue has surfaced. Thus, in this regard, some view the EU as a disoriented and exhausted realm that is impaired by intrinsic rifts and constrained by the current great power balancing acts. This means that in turn, when faced with the challenges of post-national global affairs, the European Union is shifting its gears towards endeavours anchored in the "geo-" prefix (geopolitical, geostrategic, geoeconomic, etc.) as a mechanism to distance itself from an autarchic modus operandi and regain the status of *axis mundi* (Jackson, 2022).

Both conceptualisations pave the way for questioning whether Europe, at the intersection of game-changer momentums (in the full swing of hegemonic cycles' pendulums), driven by a juxtaposition of internal and external conditionalities, is becoming an inward-oriented realist player or

retains its liberalist constitutive identity. As a contiguous analysis, scholars have also pondered whether, in this "withering away of states", marked by intertwining actor and non-actor interactions, the realist and liberalist doctrines can coexist, bridging their functionalities, without devolving into petty politics (Nietzsche, 1908/2009).

Despite the fact that such inquiries as the above usually follow Brussels' lead, they are also dependent on the unfolding actions of tertiary actors, as in, for instance, Nietzsche's portrayal of Russia as the "other" in European politics (with its potential threat being historically more acute than its absolute or relative menace) which facilitated pan-European amalgamation, and which, even today, retains its validity, much like Hobbes' dichotomies (Hobbes, 1651/2017).

Moreover, Nietzsche framed a vision of a united Europe, foreseeing the continent as a supranational free-willed association with liberal-democratic principles that was a geopolitical heavyweight geared by realist foreign approaches or a high capability symbiosis, which designs tailored approaches. Although his "aesthetic pessimism" did not allow for contextualisation to occur, and in spite of the fact that he did not provide a theoretical framing, we can base our exploration on Nietzsche's overall categorisations, which follow the demarcations of liberalism, realism or progressive realism (the synergy between the first two).

2. Method and Design

We can assume that the EU represents a progressive realist Goliath, with manoeuvrings dictated by liberal objectives, and subsequently question whether post-national actors – acting in a postmodernist geopolitical

environment – can be fully pragmatic actors. As such, through mixed qualitative methods based on an in-depth literature analysis and corroboration of historical or current tendencies, it is possible to demonstrate the ways in which both the liberal and realist pillars sustain the same structure, particularly if we also assume that institutional constructivist approaches have masked power interplays and the EU's programmatic aspirations.

Additionally, when extrapolating and interpreting primary or secondary data sources (like EU documents, reports, specialised studies, etc.) we can underline that the tendency of the Union (as an entity) to employ realist prisms of understanding when dealing with threats, although in a more nuanced manner, lies within its complicated internal mechanisms (as compared to state subjects) (Priban, 2009).

Moreover, by overlaying the current regional evolutions and dynamics with theoretical observations, we can highlight how the EU's hybrid realist-liberal elements appear to be entrenched in its normative and political spectrums, whereas the rest of its strategic areas switch between perspectives based on necessities. What's more, we cannot measure the EU's powers in isolation, separated from the agency of its Member States, since the Union itself is merely a product derived from the reciprocal alterations that emerge between the constituents and the core (Pollack, 2010).

Thus, while filling in the knowledge gap, we can note long-lasting debates surrounding the primacy of either normative/civilian or hard power, which this study rejects as being a narrow overview of the European construct.

3. The EU's En-bloc Power Hybridisation

Since the EU can be defined as a quasi-autonomous actor with its own agency, at times its core identity clashes with its realist-liberal operation formats (although these are not always in opposition).

Hence, a liberal, multifaceted approach to threats and risks enables the principle of co-existence, sometimes even in a stance of complementarity, as, for instance, when individual freedoms or liberties can function within a sustainable economic model, strong institutional foundations, and international exchanges. In spite of this, after the recent systemic modulations and reverberations, from the migration crisis, the pandemic and the economic downturn all the way to the armed conflict in Ukraine, the Union adopted a more formalist and restrictive stance on core issues, shifting its methods towards a more 'cohesive system of governance' (Cohen, 2015; COM, 2018).

Due to its supranational status, working within a complex post-national decision-making process, the EU as a whole cannot become nor be treated as an entirely realist player. Despite strategic and territorial vulnerabilities, Brussels and the Paris–Berlin core do not exhibit the same anxieties regarding encirclement as Moscow or other great powers (Mearsheimer, 2014). Moreover, the Union positions itself in a different way to the USA's liberal conceptualisation of itself as an "indispensable nation", with the progressive realism of the former finding inspiration in its diplomatic heritage, adapted to post-modern contexts, rather than outward defence and security projection (Scott, 2011).

Furthermore, both the structure and its constituents primarily manage ripple effects and not necessarily direct disruptions, which still demand a careful utilisation of foreign policies, as in the case of Russian aggression.

These elements emerge mostly from delays and distortions in the international community or the inner workings of neighbouring spheres, like memories of the Soviet era across Eurasia or ethno-communal divides in the Middle East and North Africa, with the Union unable to completely encapsulate and resolve them, rather merely being capable of mitigating their propagation (Goldgeier & McFaul, 2001; Pirozzi, 2023).

In this respect, as norms provide sufficient foreign policy instruments, when dealing with tertiary regional security issues the EU chooses from a plenitude of specialised paths, including the implementation of multilateralism, minilateralism and unilateralism. Amongst these, with the Franco–German nexus as a centrepiece, minilateralism (with its variable gravity points and flexible power dispersion hubs) seems to be the most promising approach when it comes to collective security and defence measures, enabling the establishment of initiatives that further push amalgamation, for example, the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) or the European Defence Agency (EDA) (Smith, 2011). In addition, the EU's "cached unilateralism" increases its global prestige and outreach when external approaches prove that Brussels' interests match those of other actors or international communities (Price, 2006).

By spearheading key actions in conjunction with other, transatlantic, formats, the EU became a provider of security in the region, and whereas any pursuits in these domains might create boundaries between recipient actors, its universalist approaches traverse them, enabling Brussels to remain a globally-favoured player, yet nevertheless a firm one.

Therefore, in our risk-ridden neo-Hobbesian world, Europe seems capable of reigning freely and of reinforcing its periphery to preserve peace and prosperity for its citizens whilst avoiding another 'great Kladderadatsch' (Zimmerman, 2007).

4. United in Paradigmatic Diversity

As François Duchêne remarked, the European system can be regarded as 'the first of the world's civilian centres of power', which might help (re-)establish its primacy and generate 'the end of history'. Duchêne was one of the first to forecast several post-human and non-human challenges, questioning the relevance and capabilities of states in a world dominated by non-state institutions, underlining the fact that the EU has a defensive realist character (Duchêne, 1972, pp. 43-47).

Even though 'one thing Europe cannot be is a major military power', Duchêne stressed that Brussels requires enhanced deterrent capacities (even to the point of nuclear solutions) to shape the international milieu through its own means, noting that the contemporary United States had an ambivalent predisposition towards foreign affairs (Duchêne, 1972, pp. 37-43).

Writing a decade later, Hedley Bull, proposes a new perspective on the matter, implying that Europe has abandoned the pursuit of military might in favour of soft power. Thus, mistrustful of other great powers, he proposes a 'Gaullist' strengthening of Europe, especially through interconnections so as to independently operationalise its interests (Bull, 1982, pp. 160-166).

Ian Manners takes things a step further, arguing for a civilian and military distinction, as he views Europe as being 'a normative power of ideational nature characterised by common principles and willingness to disregard the Westphalian conventions' possessing 'the ability to shape conceptions of the normal in international relations'. In contrast to the visions of Carl Schmitt, Manners presents the antithetic civilian-normative power and hard power through the lenses of resources relation

and retaining leadership over either palpable or impalpable elements (Manners, 2002).

In turn, as Armin von Bogdandy comments, it is questionable whether in this two-headed framework (civilian/military), liberal values can still make it to the core of Europe's integratory processes without disturbing the Union's structure (Bogdandy, 2000; Bogdandy & Ioannidis, 2014). His assumptions are reinforced by recent shifts, as the *sine qua non* European exceptionalism displays a radical normative reorientation, weakening the 'normative predisposition' of its constituents – especially within the CEE region – and paving the way for realist expectations (Siursen, 2006).

In contrast, Georg Nolte notices that during negotiation phases, Member States often make concessions, facilitated by norm-oriented formulations entrenched in abstract views. A form of pseudo-normativity arises, which might not really demand attachment in order to reach equilibrium, rather proving that a realist expression is needed from the MS to overcome dissension and maximise internal gains (Seeberg, 2009).

Taking a step forward, Nathalie Tocci makes the case that the EU experiences a continuum when switching between idealist policies and realpolitik measures, an aspect dependent on the relationship between means, goals and impact, but primarily on the vitality of distribution effects emitted from Europe's *Mittelpunkt* (Tocci, 2008, pp. 10-17). Similarly, her other writings illustrate that, particularly when it comes to foreign policy matters or crisis response, actors realign themselves between these two clusters based on clear equations, underlining that it is not a question of whether Europe is normative and idealistic in its realist substrata, but rather to what extent (Tocci, 2008; Hamilton, 2008). Therefore, even though the EU prides itself on its wide range of smart power capacities, characterising the continent solely on the basis of either one of the theories does not do justice to its evolving realities (Cladi & Locatelli, 2012) – as the current conflict in Ukraine has proved. In light

of this, a new understanding is required to comprehensively interpret the EU's recent endeavours, with progressive realism seemingly offering fertile soil for analysis.

5. Progressive Realism Considering Post-national Progressions

As has been established, both the classical and neo-classical forms of realism or liberalism represent a nebulous theoretical ensemble which strives to apprehend international communities through a narrow prism driven by power as the key component of systemic changes. These elements represent prescriptive positions filled with prerequisites that are political (like E. H. Carr, J. J. Mearsheimer, J. Nye) and ethical (like R. Niebuhr, F. Fukuyama), meaning that their utilisation is often speculative (with an even higher degree when it comes to prospective evolutions).

Contrary to the accuracy demanded by multilevel, multiactor, multinational and omnidirectional structures, in these theories 'there are no fixed answers … insights are interpretive and historical and by definition contextual', making the juxtaposition with current or future avenues slightly redundant (Rynning, 2011, p. 32). To an extent, both ramifications represent a rather abstract conceptualisation of international relations and their dynamics; rather than a concrete explanatory schematisation, having no axiomatic cores, they 'hold power to be a permanent source of temptation' for interpretations (Tjalve, 2008, p. 143).

As such, these works present informed readings on what happens when the global actors do not perform as they should, with all authors

developing concepts without promulgating a cramped understanding of interest spheres, cooperation conditionalities or influence projection, backward models of power balancing, or portraying the security dilemma as an insurmountable obstacle to international development (Scheuerman, 2011, pp. 15-16). As William E. Scheuerman explains, most authors can be considered as part of progressive movements, with even Morgenthau evincing some respect for his colleagues' reformist ambitions (Scheuerman, 2009, p. 24). Moreover, Michael C. Williams accentuates this line of thought, believing that (not necessarily progressive) wilful realism revolves around admitting that policies might not be reduced to a mere pursuit or maximisation of power, even if it is their central element. His perspective rather seeks a politics of limits, which recognises both the destructive and productive dimensions, maximising its positive outcomes (Williams, 2005, pp. 7-10).

In this realist approach, we can observe how it is a perspective that attempts to reconcile power, politics and collective progress, a form which does not alter the spillover effects of various initiatives. With even Morgenthau opposing a purely rational or empirical understanding of international contexts, the new school of thought seeks to establish relational processes between different mechanisms that would translate into 'a *modus vivendi* and engagement between contrasting values and forms', like the EU's global stance (Williams, 2005, pp. 5-7, 208).

Additionally, by admitting the constant tension between power (material and conceptual) and morality, the progressive realism perspective seeks to 'construct a viable, principled understanding of modern politics, and to use this understanding to avoid its perils and achieve its promise' founded on plurality and critical judgement that can clearly establish interests and the steps to realise them (Williams, 2005, p. 9). Therefore, we can assert that power is tied by the interaction of different national interests (with their internal and external branches), as the end goals

of nation-states define the international communities' games (Rynning, 2005, pp. 18-19).

When applied to the EU, these positions outline European interests, those elements that require joint efforts and tackle the commonality of challenges across the continent transcending the boundaries of national ones. By way of example, Nathaniel Copsey identifies several primary categories for these processes: the promotion of internal values, free economic systems, multilateralism, the practice of democracy, and the reinforcement of the rule of law (Copsey, 2015, p. 187). Although these represent admirable objectives, all of them can be incorporated into the promotion of a liberal agenda, telling us little as regards how Europe engages with the main interests of other players.

One can argue that today's Eurasian rift, exacerbated by the war in Ukraine, is in part a derivate of this type of external engagement. Thus, by recognising the plurality of alternative national interests within the available foreign policies of the actors involved, it is easier to avoid indulging in universalist quests or in grandiose interventions which aspire 'to radically transform the world' (Bell, 2010, p. 98).

In contrast, 'the prudent actor will be attentive to the ways in which his own community results from a complex political history, a recognition that allows for a more balanced and less moralistic foreign policy' (Lang, 2007, p. 19). Since the EU is often described as being either a leader that spearheads universal normative ambitions or a monolith incapable of transposing its robustness into absolute power, prudence comes as a principle that underlines both the risks of inaction and what Morgenthau terms 'the crusading spirit' (Morgenthau, 1993, p. 381; Pirozzi, 2023).

In this context, interest, legitimacy and prudence are core drivers for the EU's recent transnational manoeuvrings, especially on a world stage in which the nation-state is considered to be an obsolete notion (Scheuerman, 2009, 2011). Similarly, there is no consensus regarding how

cross-border challenges should be tackled, with Carr and Niebuhr arguing for the necessity of regionally-based approaches, but Morgenthau seeing cosmopolitan projects as the way forward, although he is particularly sceptical of supranational organisations, since they end up 'reproducing the moral pathologies of existing nation-states', which we can observe across the CEE region and its palette of organisations (Scheuerman, 2009, p. 116; Scheuerman, 2011, pp. 53, 76-79).

With functionalist perspectives proving the way out of this dilemma, many have praised the writings of David Mitrany, believing that functional organisations create post-national societies which underpin the nation-state's establishments, in which centralising tendencies are relatively contained (Scheuerman, 2010, p. 261). Additionally, these progressive systems generate a fertile context for relations that cut across multinational blocs, preventing the division of the international community between hegemonic spheres of interest.

Europe's integratory, cohesive and combinatory pathways thus follow a functionalist trajectory, generating a post-national trans-continental society that can lead to a more concrete supra-state sovereignty, agency and autonomy, aspects that are still dependent on an act of will of the countries, and not necessarily a spillover of socio-economic measures. Hence, following the outbreak of war in Ukraine, the EU has undergone several major changes that push this unitary approach, which are noticeable in the improvement and implementation of its grand strategies (Larsen, 2022; Rosch, 2022). These processes require the constant calibration of 'means and ends, capabilities and objectives, on the basis of an understanding of the structural context within which the actor is situated', which leads to the clear definition and ranking of preferential evolutions (Hyde-Price, 2007, p. 46).

Since the EU's 'overarching aim must be to establish a societal order that can respond to social and political challenges with a minimum of warfare',

its conflict-oriented stances ultimately revolve around the realisation of its interests, as is apparent from the recent comments surrounding the CFSP, CDSP and EDA that demand a higher involvement of the community to create resilience (Neumann & Heikka, 2005, p. 13). In this context, the EU's security and defence strategies, especially when counteracting Russia's interventions in what are perceived as red lines by Brussels, can be understood as 'a general plan for, or process of, integrating policies and resources of the EU to protect and advance its core or vital interests' in the likes of financial allocations by the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), the fast-tracked accession of the Western Balkans Six (Wb6)/ Eastern Partnership (EaP), support offered to Ukraine, the imposition of sanction packages, and many other initiatives (Smith, 2011, p. 147; Rosch, 2022).

This pattern has been emerging for at least a decade, as the Union's structures have approved an entire suite of documents that are labelled strategies, from counterterrorism, cybersecurity and cross-border criminality to maritime defence, with Edwards (2013) offering a critique and arguing that the 2003 European Security Strategy alone resembles a grand vision. Even the so-called Solana Decision, which builds up the EU's international profile and precipitated Russian interventionism, does not clearly specify the ideals and objectives that it seeks to defend (Biscop et al., 2009, pp. 9-10). Additionally, it is now rather obsolete, as it does not account for institutional and structural innovations, such as the creation of the European Environment Agency (EEA) or the European Defence Agency (Emmanouilidis, 2011, p. 195).

This indicates that Brussels lacks a baseline document codifying the fulfilment of its vital interests or necessary instruments, meaning that ad-hoc measures are taken and visions, optimisation patterns and instrumentalisation techniques all vary, as we have witnessed with the tensions that rose across MS when it came to joint measures regarding the

war in Ukraine, with other institutions like the Bucharest Nine, the Three Seas Initiative or the Visegrád Group having faster response rates. (Biscop & Coelmont, 2011).

Furthermore, not only does the EU lack a fundamental perspective, but the 2003 European Security Strategy, like many other reports, puts forward an opaque normative vision of European actorness, as, for instance, it states that both the EU and USA can act together and be 'a formidable force for good in the world' (European Council, 2003, p. 13). Hence, as Manners (2002) points out, this idea of a vaguely defined leviathan which endlessly wanders in a search for purpose has led to a body which progressive realists worry 'may result in reckless policies', devised without a comprehensive anchoring and dependent on the willingness to act of 'democratically deficit entities', as was the case with the decoupling from Eastern energy sources, which was implemented at the whim of MS (Rynning, 2011, p. 35; Bickerton, 2007, p. 25).

As such, 'there is no unified foreign policy that pursues a pan-European interest and that draws its forward momentum from a direct connection with a European people', especially when it comes to hard power politics, with the largely polarised European military representing a perfect example (Bickerton, 2007, p. 37). In addition, as Stanley Hoffman stresses, although the EU's external actions generally come from the top, security and defence policies demand a public consensus; despite this, almost a century after the Schuman Plan, there still are no 'European public spaces', only overlapping national spheres, capped by a jumble of bureaucracies (Hoffman, 2000, p. 198). This means that crisis responses, like directly or indirectly intervening in the Russia–Ukraine conflict, require that a wide array of particularised agreements be reached, respecting the specificities and particularities of all parties involved, often through mediation and the making of concessions, as was the case with Hungary's dichotomic position. This is an aspect that demands the establishment of a clear

benchmark for accountability – as without it, counterviews cannot emerge – through the coherent identification and prioritisation of the EU's interests (Tjalve, 2011, p. 446; Copsey, 2015, p. 187).

As Robert Wright (2006) notes, and as current shifts in the EU's neighbourhood have accentuated, Brussels needs to 'reconcile the humanitarian aims of idealists with the powerful logic of realists', something which can only be carried out through progressive realism.

On the other hand, in the 'transformative event' which is the Russia–Ukraine conflict, we can observe that what was presented to 'help the Ukrainian brothers to agree on how they should build and develop their country' morphed into a questioning of the country's independence, through the lenses of a historically revisionist and revanchist status-quo alteration, founded on a civilisational assumption (Wood, 2011; Satter, 2011; Petro, 2018; Lavrov, 2014; Putin, 2022a; Putin, 2022b; Heisbourg, 2023). As progressive realists warn, employing ethno-communal and historical sentiments to pursue foreign policy can bring 'self-inflicted harm to the object of defence in the very effort to defend it', since it involves a gradual and systematic pursuit of shifting past representation to the point of naturalisation in public imagery in order to be able to frame and legitimise initiatives (Mayer, 2018; Smith & Mayer, 2019; Malksoo, 2021, p. 489).

Jonathan Mercer points out that the rationality behind any foreign affairs demands that emotional factors be attached (concerning liberty, democracy, securitisation, power roles, etc.), with the beliefs that form EU, US and Russian competitive conduct and social assumptions regarding Ukraine's future being embedded in the current developments and forming an ontological assimilation mechanism necessary to decision-making (Mercer, 2010; Dawson & Smith, 2022).

On account of the above, the unrestrained nationalistic universalism of foreign policy tends to obscure geopolitical realities and the outlines

that form national interests, leading to a cascade of unintended consequences (Little, 2007, p. 153-155; Klusmeyer, 2016). Hence, as international systems cannot be exhaustively quantified, being subject to interpretations which cause inconsistencies between different entities, progressive realism argues that the overall flexibility in the distribution of power has changed Russia's power calculations and forced the EU to buffer its dissipation across the continent, with Ukraine becoming an operationalised chessboard (Schweller, 2004; Smith, 2016; Ripsman et al., 2016).

Furthermore, Mouritzen (2012) and Smith (2016) both make the case that focusing on the regional security issues adds depth to the systemic stimuli, as the localised pivots are more unstable due to the fact that 'insecurity is often associated with proximity', especially in Europe's broader neighbourhood (Buzan & Wæver, 2003, p. 46). Subsequently, the changing dynamics in the CEE region and Russia's assertiveness can be described as a transition to a regional setting in which we have a bipolar distribution, meaning that, coupled with a context where there is no overlapping security architecture (like the Arctic area), it has led to a competitive stance based solely on the analysis of domestic variables and prone to ad-hoc miscalculations (Taliaferro, 2006; Rathbun, 2008; Tang, 2009; Smith, 2016; Narizny, 2017).

In this sense, most works of progressive realism embrace epistemological and ontological eclecticism to avoid 'procrustean constraints on inquiry', especially since analysis requires adjustment for domestic variables within Russia's foreign policy practices such as the creational process (Smith, 2016), status and prestige (Kropatcheva, 2012), the special role of the leadership (Romanova & Pavlova, 2012), and ideological discrepancies (Diesen, 2016), etc., diluting interpretation and creating infinite loopholes (Juneau, 2010; Haas & Haas, 2002, p. 547). Therefore, progressive realism seeks to provide an outcome explanation,

identifying loose causal mechanisms between intertwining variables, for example attributing identity and perceptions to 'systemic pressures into unique foreign policy outcomes', as it was with the palette of EU–Russia discussions regarding the prospective evolutions of Ukraine (Schweller, 2004, p. 164; Smith, 2019).

Within this understanding, Russia's actions are based on its identity embracing a civilisational role (as a protectorate of "the rest"), which narrowed down its geopolitical and geostrategic options and led to a disproportionate retaliation. Similarly, as Chafetz et al. (1999) argue, 'international actors tend to change their concepts about their roles only reluctantly and with difficulty', which impedes their ability to comprehend the alternative identities or roles of other international actors. This explains why relations between the EU and Russia have always been locked in a path of enduring 'great power pragmatism' and a 'new survival paradigm', with a civilisational turn of zero-sum logic, being unable to view anything other than opponents and competitors with respect to Ukraine, which is a projection prone to error (Jervis, 1988; Tsygankov, 2016; Smith, 2017).

To this end, the current conflict accentuates the fact that Russia clearly perceives Ukraine to be a vital part of its sphere of privileged interests and an immutable foreign-policy red line, meaning that it considers the EU's "transgressions" to be a direct threat, leading to consequent policy developments based on identity constructs and quasi-informed deduction. Therefore, at the heart of this nexus of perceptions we have the progressive realist's understanding of complex ontological security, in this case Russia's desire to explore and discover an outcome that confirms and reinforces its conceptions about both its own organisation and the systemic ordering in which it operates.

6. Conclusions

The EU, like other international actors that perform within the realm of norms, is taking a proactive step and aspiring to protect its interests on the global stage (which are overlaid with the visions of constructivist institutionalist liberalism), an endeavour that requires strategic calculations and the use of power (pragmatic and realist by default), particularly when clashing with shifts on its periphery (Grewe, 2000). In this case, it must be admitted that its progressive realist undertones are cojoined by liberal ideals, making the EU an actor that today employs its capabilities and capacities internally and outwardly, within a fixed normative format and through civilian mechanisms, as it seeks to counteract and balance systemic fluxes, even altering its trajectory if global contexts demand a more offensive stance in the international arena.

In this 'harbinger of Kantian *foedus pacificum*', David P. Fidler (1996) offers some insight, distinguishing between liberal internationalism, liberal realism and liberal globalism. While liberal internationalism stems from the role of international organisations as guarantors of peace and order, liberal realism is characterised by transcontinental, multilevel, multiactor and omnidirectional balancing acts between institutions. In contrast, liberal globalism emphasises interdependencies as stabilising mechanisms while recognising the importance of understanding systemic processes. In light of this, we might still place the European Union above all these interpretations, as it has recently entirely blurred the realist-liberal boundaries when faced with the war in Ukraine, with the only certainty being that it remains well characterised by both. As such, the EU hybridises and changes its inclinations according to contexts, even if, officially, it might not admit pragmatic or idealistic approaches,

making progressive realism one of the most suitable interpretation lenses, particularly due to its renewed applicability in explaining current game-changing momentums in the Union's eastern neighbourhood.

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A New Security for a New Europe – NATO vs. China's Global Security Initiative

SLOBODAN POPOVIC AND LJILJANA STEVIC[*]

ABSTRACT: The war in Ukraine has ushered the world into a new and unknown phase. The new security defined in the Charter of Paris for a New Europe has been broken, or at least shaken to its very core. Geopolitical interests and the short-sighted behaviour of some actors is challenging the indivisible security in Europe. NATO does not consider that Russia is a crucial part of Europe's indivisible security. Instead of respecting Russian security interests, NATO has offered a muscle-flexing manner of ensuring security based on spreading anti-Russian hysteria. Russia has been securitised as a threat. NATO has been creating bloc divisions between pro-Russian (i.e. anti-democratic) states, and anti-Russian (i.e. democratic) states. NATO has pursued the logic of mutual exclusion, that is, the logic of either A or B. Parallel to the NATO way of enacting relations, China has offered its pattern – not political slogan – for

* Slobodan Popovic: PhD, Research Fellow, Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Belgrade, Serbia.
Ljiljana Stevic: PhD, Home Director of the Confucius Institute, University of Banja Luka, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

providing global security known as the Global Security Initiative (GSI). It represents the PRC's outline of establishing relations to ensure security. Additionally, China has released its 12-point plan for resolving the war in Ukraine, which mirrors its farsighted pragmatism and maintains the understanding that alliances are not a feasible way of ensuring security since no state can ensure absolute security. In this study, we compare the diverse perspectives of NATO and China regarding the resolution of the Ukraine crisis.

KEYWORDS: NATO, China, Global Security Initiative, Ukraine, United Nations, absolute security, relative security

1. Introduction

We live in a world characterised by divergent understandings of reality, where each party or state possessing power and capacity at the requisite level offers its own version of the truth, which it believes to be the best solution for ensuring global security and development. This discourse is often infused with emotions. During the Cold War, two dominant worldviews prevailed – one offered by the United States and its allies, and the other by the Soviet Union. In both worldviews, the other side was perceived to be an existential threat. Following the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the international community, still in a state of confusion and disarray, entered a phase of integration under the geopolitical, normative, discursive and military influence of the United States. As the victor of the Cold War, it was only natural that the USA would shape and project a version of reality in accordance with its own political, security and economic interests.

Any form of dissent or criticism of the international order, which often institutionalised the power of specific states on unrealistic grounds while ignoring or challenging the power of other states, was portrayed as a challenge and an attack on the values that the United States was imposing – often by military means – as universal values for humanity. This was not an attack on universal values per se, but rather on the Western interpretation of those values, which was subsequently used as a pretext for initiating numerous humanitarian interventions, sometimes without the approval of the United Nations Security Council. With the goal of protecting its national interests, and entirely legitimate from a realist-school perspective, the United States promulgated a series of doctrines and engaged in campaigns of bombing, economic aid and the unilateral imposition of sanctions.

Regarding the above, the document US Hegemony and its Perils published by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs emphasises that the history of the United States is marked by violence and expansion. Since gaining independence in 1776, the USA has consistently pursued expansion through force: it engaged in conflicts with Native American tribes, invaded Canada, waged a war against Mexico, initiated the Spanish–American War, and annexed Hawaii. After World War II, the United States either provoked or actively launched armed conflicts such as the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Gulf War, the Kosovo War, the War in Afghanistan, the Iraq War, the Libyan War, and the Syrian War, exploiting its military dominance to facilitate its expansionist objectives. In recent years, America has consistently allocated an annual military budget exceeding USD 700 billion, constituting 40% of the world's total military expenditure and surpassing the combined military budgets of the 15 countries behind it. The United States maintains around 800 overseas military bases, with 173,000 troops stationed in 159 countries (MFA PRC, 2023a). Based on the data provided by China's official channels, it can be inferred that the USA seeks to create an environment in which its security is absolute, while it simultaneously gives the impression that it is persistently searching for an existential threat.

Contemporary international relations objectively and consistently point to the ongoing emergence of a multipolar world where certain states are not only seeking to reshape existing institutions and norms, but also establishing parallel institutions that serve their own purposes and operate outside the existing decision-making structures. One significant example in this process is the People's Republic of China. Its remarkable economic growth evidencing its ascent to the status of global superpower,[1] China

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1   For example, China's foreign exchange reserves in September 2023 reached the value of USD 3.12 trillion (Trading Economics, 2023).

has not only offered its own definition of security, but also proposed that this should be achieved through dialogue, ongoing consultations, and respecting the interests of other parties by leaving space for them, as long as they do not jeopardise other actors or the international system as a whole. In this process, China advocates the dismantling of military alliances and bloc divisions, considering these to be outdated and unsustainable methods of ensuring security (The State Council of the PRC, 2015). However, China's rise as a superpower, particularly outside Western parameters and models, has raised suspicions in the United States and NATO. In their official documents, China – along with Russia – is identified as a threat, with the views of the USA and NATO aligning as the international community's perspective. In the NATO 2030 document, it is stated that the world at the start of the next decade will be markedly different from the world during the Cold War or the period subsequent to that. It will be a world of competing great powers, where assertive authoritarian states with revisionist foreign policy agendas aim to expand their power and influence, presenting a systemic challenge that cuts across the domains of security and economics for NATO Allies (NATO, 2021). In this regard, the deepening strategic partnership between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation is perceived as the two countries' mutually-reinforcing efforts to undermine the rules-based international order and challenge Western values and interests (NATO, 2022). In the light of this understanding, China is understandably securitised, and its actions are addressed in the security strategies of both NATO as a collective entity and its individual member states. Therefore, in the US National Security Strategy 2022 document, we can read the following passage regarding China: 'the PRC is the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it. Beijing has ambitions to create an enhanced sphere of influence in the Indo-Pacific

and to become the world's leading power. It is using its technological capacity and increasing influence over international institutions to create more permissive conditions for its own authoritarian model, and to mold global technology use and norms to privilege its interests and values' (The White House, 2022). This perception of China, rather than the promotion of dialogue and the seeking of common and collaborative solutions to crises such as the situation in Ukraine, is mirrored in NATO's strategic documents. Accordingly, in NATO documents we can find the following: 'The People's Republic of China's stated ambitions and coercive policies challenge NATO's interests, security and values. The PRC employs a broad range of political, economic and military tools to increase its global footprint and project power, while remaining opaque about its strategy, intentions and military build-up. The PRC's malicious hybrid and cyber operations and its confrontational rhetoric and disinformation target Allies and harm Alliance security. The PRC seeks to control key technological and industrial sectors, critical infrastructure, and strategic materials and supply chains. It uses its economic leverage to create strategic dependencies and enhance its influence. It strives to subvert the rules-based international order, including in the space, cyber and maritime domains' (NATO, 2022). In this context, as a highly integrated military alliance, NATO's main task is defined as that of cementing its 'ability to act as the principal political forum for the strategic and geopolitical challenges facing the transatlantic community' (NATO, 2022).

From the explanations provided above, we can discern clear differences in the understanding of "security" and how it should be ensured. As a case study, these differences will now be applied to the crisis in Ukraine.

2. Securitisation, Diplomatisation, New Europe

Much like diplomacy, security is always a relational concept (Qin, 2020). Following this logic, Barry Buzan (1998) argues that in the process of securitisation, the key issue is understanding for whom security becomes a consideration concerning whom. In this sense, power politics, the security dilemma and arms races are illustrative examples of the relational nature of security (Popovic, 2022). Therefore, international security primarily concerns how human collectives interact with each other regarding threats and vulnerabilities. Occasionally, it addresses how such collectives relate to threats from the natural environment (Buzan, 1998). Thus, securitisation always involves a relationship between two actors, affirming that security, as a means of forging relations, to a certain extent represents a construction of reality. Therefore, the need is to construct a conceptualisation of security that goes beyond merely isolated threats or problems. Threats and vulnerabilities can emerge in various domains, both military and non-military, but to qualify as security issues, they must meet well-defined criteria that set them apart from regular political matters (Buzan, 1998).

We can understand securitisation as a process in which one actor, along with their capacities, normative values and structural power, is defined as an existential threat. As a result, efforts are made to transcend the boundaries established by political rules (Buzan, 1998). Operating within this conceptualisation, "security" becomes a self-referential practice because it is in this practice that an issue becomes a security issue – not necessarily because a genuine existential threat exists, but because

the issue is presented as such a threat (Buzan, 1998). Furthermore, in the process of securitisation, we can observe the significance of discursive power. A discourse that frames something as being an existential threat to a referent object does not, on its own, create securitisation. This represents a securitising move, but the issue becomes securitised only when the audience accepts it as such (Buzan, 1998; Stevic, 2022). Thus, securitisation demands the use of a specific rhetorical structure based on concepts and phrases such as "survival", "priority of action", or "because if the problem is not handled now, it will be too late, and we will not exist to remedy our failure". This creates a form of security discourse in which one actor is dramatised and presented as a matter of supreme priority. By labelling this as "security", an agent asserts the need – and the right – to address the issue using extraordinary means. To comprehend this act, the analyst's task is not to assess objective threats that "genuinely" endanger an object to be protected or secured. Instead, the task is to understand the processes involved in constructing a shared understanding of what is considered a threat and warrants a collective response (Buzan, 1998).

As securitisation is an intersubjective, normative and discursive process, security is indeed a structured field in which certain actors hold positions of power by being widely recognised as authorities on security. They possess the power to define security, but this power is never absolute since it is impossible to create a one-size-fits-all world.

In addition to securitisation, where every issue becomes a matter of security and therefore represents an existential threat, diplomatisation suggests that every challenge should be part of the corpus of questions addressed by diplomacy. Under this understanding, solutions are reached through dialogue, consultation, the overcoming of differences, or mutual respect for each other's perspectives. In this regard, diplomatisation is a distinct process of managing serious security problems by making them the subject of diplomatic negotiations (Stefanovic-Stambuk & Popovic,

2022). Conversely, Neumann argues that one thing students of diplomacy may learn from students of security is to conceptualise how and when something becomes a matter of diplomacy – that is, how a phenomenon becomes diplomatised (Neumann, 2020, p. 18).

Analysing China's foreign policy behaviour from the perspective of the diplomatisation of international relations and the global security architecture, we can observe a strong pattern of diplomatisation, indicating that China's stance on the Russia–Ukraine conflict is a case of security concerns being handled through diplomacy as a catalyst for advancing the diplomatisation of global security. China consistently seeks to dispel insecurities and to prevent conflict and the resultant global disruptions through dialogue and deliberation. This approach is centred on facilitating significant collaborative strides in transforming outdated governance structures to align with the prevailing direction of epochal change. China's global security outlook is firmly grounded in its national security concept (Stefanovic-Stambuk & Popovic, 2022). Therefore, the diplomatisation of international relations and crisis resolution in China's foreign policy is gaining in intensity, especially with Beijing's stated ambition of diplomatising the Russia–Ukraine conflict. This runs parallel to the strengthening of anti-Russian sentiments and securitisation hysteria in the Western sphere – both towards Russia and, indirectly, towards China due to China's proposed conflict resolution solutions.

Diplomatisation itself does not imply direct Chinese defence of Russia, but rather the practical implementation of strategic elements from the Global Security Initiative, announced by the PRC in April 2022. This initiative was presented by President Xi Jinping at the opening ceremony of the BOAO Forum in his keynote speech, Rising to Challenges and Building a Bright Future through Cooperation.

The Ukrainian crisis can be understood as Europe's failure to recognise its responsibility for stability, peace and cooperation. In the 1990 document

Charter of Paris for a New Europe, which alongside the Ten Principles of the Helsinki Final Act represents one of the pillars of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), it is explicitly stated that security is 'indivisible', and that 'the security of each participating State is inseparably linked to that of all others'. OSCE pledges cooperation in strengthening confidence and security among participating states and in promoting arms control and disarmament (OSCE, 1990).

3. China's Understanding of Security and Its Security Strategy for the Crisis in Ukraine

At the official level, China presents security as a relational practice. In 1999, during his speech in Geneva at the UN Conference of Disarmament, Jiang Zemin introduced the New Security Concept with principles such as 'mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality and coordination'. According to General Xiong Guangkai (2009, p. 96), mutual trust serves as the foundation of the new security concept, mutual benefit is its objective, equality is its guarantee, and coordination is the way it operates. As articulated by this security concept, the existence and constant expansion of military alliances accompanied by the deployment of troops in the territories of other states creates an atmosphere in which the subjective sense of threat increases, further fuelling security dilemmas, power politics, arms races and a Cold War mentality (Popovic, 2018).

This understanding of security is consistent in both the theoretical and practical aspects of China's behaviour. It is reflected in the Global Security Initiative, through which China recommends intensive cooperation in

order to enhance global governance, countries all over the world being seen as passengers with a shared destiny aboard the same ship. For the ship to navigate through storms and sail towards a brighter future, all its passengers must work together (Xi, 2022). According to the GSI, security is viewed as being common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable (Xi, 2022).

China's Global Security Initiative, as outlined in The Global Security Initiative Concept Paper, emphasises that security has a direct impact on the well-being of people worldwide, the noble cause of global peace and development, and the future of humanity (MFA PRC, 2023b). The document defines six core concepts and principles,[2] along with 20 priorities for cooperation, which constitute the foundational elements of this new security vision. The GSI advocates a concept of common security which respects and safeguards the security of every country. It adopts a holistic approach that addresses security in both traditional and non-traditional domains and seeks to enhance security governance in a coordinated manner. It underscores a commitment to cooperation and achieving security through political dialogue and peaceful negotiation. Moreover, it promotes sustainable security by addressing conflicts through development and the elimination of the sources of insecurity. This approach emphasises that security is most effectively established and sustained when it is underpinned by moral values, justice and the

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2   '1: Stay committed to the vision of common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security; 2: Stay committed to respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries; 3: Stay committed to abiding by the purposes and principles of the UN Charter; 4: Stay committed to taking the legitimate security concerns of all countries seriously; 5: Stay committed to peacefully resolving differences and disputes between countries through dialogue and consultation; 6: Stay committed to maintaining security in both traditional and non-traditional domains.'

right ideas (MFA PRC, 2023a). All of these principles embody China's strategic view of how to secure Ukraine and resolve the Ukrainian crisis. China's position is defined as 'active neutrality', reflecting the demands of both Russia and Ukraine for a joint effort to establish dialogue and address their mutual concerns from the perspective of the security of the international community (Khalid, 2023).

To further concretise the resolution of the complex Ukrainian dilemma, China announced its position on the political settlement of the crisis on the first anniversary of the outbreak of the conflict, 24 February 2023. This position is encapsulated in a 12-point plan, which features:

1. Respecting the sovereignty of all countries.
2. Abandoning the Cold War mentality.
3. Ceasing hostilities.
4. Resuming peace talks.
5. Resolving the humanitarian crisis.
6. Protecting civilians and prisoners of war.
7. Keeping nuclear power plants safe.
8. Reducing strategic risks.
9. Facilitating grain exports.
10. Stopping unilateral sanctions.
11. Keeping industrial and supply chains stable.
12. Promoting post-conflict reconstruction (MFA PRC, 2023c).

In a careful reading of the plan, the first thing we notice is that neither side is accused of being the culprit in the conflict. Instead, the emphasis is on respecting international law and the UN Charter, and seeking solutions through dialogue, consultation, respect for each side's interests, and the adoption of a broader vision of a stable and developed international community. This approach demonstrates that China goes

beyond narrowly defined national interests and that it views international relations through the prism of power politics.

Despite accusations made by the United States regarding the proliferation of arms in the Ukraine conflict, China's response is that it is America, rather than itself, which has been continuously supplying weapons for the battlefield. China emphasises that Washington is not qualified to issue orders to Beijing (Buckley, 2023). This obviously represents China's power, which it is now demonstrating without hesitation. Chinese leaders have shown the USA that it cannot dictate the conditions, re-educate the PRC or unilaterally frame China's behaviour in the mutual relations. Regarding the build-up of arms and ammunition in Ukraine, China's diplomats at its permanent mission to the UN have called on all relevant parties in the Ukraine crisis to take a responsible attitude, pay heightened attention and make every effort to prevent the risk of the proliferation of weapons and ammunition, especially to prevent them from falling into the hands of terrorists and non-state actors (Geng, 2023b). China's view of the UN as the central organisation in ensuring international security and global development underscores the importance of international cooperation and diplomatic efforts to create an atmosphere conducive to peace talks and finding common ground among the parties involved, which is essential for a political solution to the Ukrainian crisis (Geng, 2023a).

4. NATO Security and the Ukrainian Crisis

Bearing in mind their differing views on the same reality and different political, security and economic interests or paths to achieve the same goals, it is not suprising that the Western powers, primarily NATO and the United States, are creating an atmosphere where China's efforts at a political resolution to the Ukrainian crisis could be perceived as justifying Russia's actions and furthering autocratic values. This atmosphere was exacerbated by the Joint Statement on International Relations signed by the United States and China on 4 February 2022, where both sides claimed that there are no limits to their friendship and no 'forbidden' areas of cooperation, emphasising that their bilateral strategic cooperation is not aimed against third countries (USC US–China Institute, 2022). While both parties stressed that their actions are not directed against third parties, the Western perspective accuses China of explicitly linking its diplomatic efforts to the concept of "indivisible security" used by the Russia Federation, which served as a justification for Russia's invasion of Ukraine (US–China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2023). Moreover, critics argue that China has not adequately emphasised the unjustifiability of Russia's territorial ambitions, ignoring the first point of its 12-point plan regarding respect for the sovereignty of all nations (US–China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2023). In this regard, it is paradoxical that the United States and other Western powers both question and criticise China's growing closeness to Russia while simultaneously expecting Beijing to use its influence to encourage Moscow to soften its stance on the Ukrainian crisis (Khalid, 2023).

The founding purpose of NATO, as stated in its 1949 treaty, is to contribute to the further development of peaceful and friendly

international relations (NATO, 1949). NATO's declaration that it stands alongside Ukraine condemns Russia's unprovoked and unjustified aggression, reaffirming its unwavering support for Ukraine's democracy, independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity (NATO, 2022). Some NATO member states, however, have continuously provided military support to Ukraine, thus diminishing the prospect of a resolution to the crisis via meaningful diplomatic dialogue. Furthermore, the Western stance is marred by the hypocrisy displayed by former German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who claimed that the Minsk Agreement, signed in September 2014 with the aim of achieving peace, actually served as a delaying tactic to provide time for Ukraine's rearmament (Schwarz, 2022). This situation raises the impression that the West systematically and carefully prepared Ukraine for a conflict that introduced the world to new uncertainties, while the United States sought to maintain its global dominance, which, considering many parameters, is already fading.

The disregard for the Minsk Agreement as a means to create a time frame for Ukraine's rearmament, thereby directly challenging Russia's security, is not novel behaviour for NATO and the United States (Mitrovic, 2005). Despite verbal agreements on NATO's non-expansion towards the East and Russia's borders, it has moved its armed forces closer to Russia, militarily constraining Russia's growth and reducing the space for the realisation of its national interests. Therefore, it is NATO – via Europe – that has initiated military proximity to Russia, creating a geopolitical order in which discourses, norms, and the practices based on them depict Russia as an existential threat. Furthermore, the continuous deployment of American military forces in Europe gives the impression that the United States effectively maintains control over a significant portion of the Old Continent.

The USA asserts that Ukraine is fighting not merely for its own survival, but also for the defence of the rules-based international order

and its fundamental principles, which underlines the necessity for unwavering support for Ukraine (Wood, 2023). In this context, Russia is portrayed as an existential threat, fostering a mindset where it is isolated and excluded from the international community. However, NATO and the United States have not opted for direct confrontation with Russia. As Michito Tsuruoka (2023) notes, a crucial aspect of the Russia–Ukraine War is that while NATO – including the USA – has refrained from involvement in open combat by deploying ground troops, it has at the same time provided almost every other conceivable form of support to Ukraine. Nevertheless, it is important to note that Ukraine is not a member state of NATO, and therefore, it does not benefit from Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, concerning collective defence. Article 5 states that an armed attack against one or more member states in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against the whole Alliance, and thus pledges to assist the attacked party or parties through any necessary means – including the use of armed force – to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area (NATO, 1949). When asked about sending ground combat troops to Ukraine, President Joe Biden reaffirmed this position, emphasising that such a move was never on the table (The White House, 2021).

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, the Ukraine conflict not only highlights the USA's lack of encouragement for diplomatic practices and crisis resolution, but also fosters a sense of constant threat-perception where the ongoing deployment of American military forces in Europe equates to European

insecurity. This simplified understanding of 'throwing anyone overboard' is no longer acceptable in the modern international community, which has evolved into a sophisticated and integrated system (Xi, 2022).

Paradoxically, in its foreign policy, the United States appears to blur the line between diplomacy and military actions, treating the two as being closely interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Furthermore, the Ukraine crisis has been instrumental in promoting the "China threat theory", which is less a well-established philosophy than a label for a body of thoughts with ideological bias. The theory aims to rally support around the United States and reinforce a sense of Western identity based on values supposedly threatened by Chinese ambitions. It serves to ignite a joint re-evaluation of the decaying foundations of international politics (Stefanovic-Stambuk & Popovic 2022, pp. 9-10).

The Ukraine crisis demonstrates that – by its very nature – "security" is a relational concept. Furthermore, the crisis in Ukraine, which signifies the emergence of a new Europe, reveals that states determine security not only based on military and economic power, but also through the lenses of normative and discursive power. And among other things, it is our perception of security or insecurity which directly influences our understanding of reality and our subsequent behaviour.

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The Security Implications of Finland's Accession to NATO

NATAŠA STANOJEVIĆ[*]

ABSTRACT: After World War II, Finland pursued neutrality, which allowed it to maintain its sovereignty and security despite its delicate position in Western value orientations, along with a very long border with Russia. The Ukrainian crisis caused Finland to renounce neutrality and apply for NATO membership. On 4 April 2023, after a unprecedentedly short process, Finland became a NATO member. This study explores the implications of this revision of Finland's security strategy. Three main research questions are examined, namely: What are the effects of Finland joining NATO on NATO's objectives? What implications does NATO membership have for Finland's security? How might Finland's changing status affect the European security landscape? The basic method is a case study, an in-depth analysis of the abandonment of Finland's neutrality status in the specific security conditions. A historical method is also used, enabling a contextual understanding of the various implications of this major revision of Finnish security strategy, as well as partial causal explanations for its initiation. Content analysis is applied in order to analyse policy documents, reports, and the statements of officials about

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[*]   Nataša Stanojević: Research Fellow, Centre for Neighbouring and Mediterranean Countries, Institute of International Politics and Economics, Belgrade, Serbia.

the motives for abandoning neutrality, as well as feedback from other interested parties. The study concludes that Finland's admission to NATO could have a negative impact on the security of Finland and European security as a whole, while at the same time being very useful from the perspective of NATO goals in the Ukraine conflict.

1. Introduction

From World War II, Finland pursued a policy of neutrality, which was a pragmatic policy in the period of bipolar confrontation of the post-war world order. Neutrality allowed Finland sovereign development and security despite the delicate position reflected in Western value orientations, along with a very long border with Russia. The tectonic changes on the global geopolitical scene, triggered by the Ukrainian crisis, reflected more clearly on Finland in a formal sense than on many other countries that are not direct participants in the conflict. Finland renounced its neutrality and applied for membership in NATO on 17 May 2022. In an unprecedentedly short period compared to previous NATO expansions, Finland became a member of NATO on 4 April 2023.

This study looks at the various interests of different international entities in this regrouping process and at armed conflicts on European soil in order to gain insights into this political and security phenomenon. The main research questions examined are:

1. What are the effects of Finland joining NATO on NATO's objectives? This is the primary question, since NATO is the one that initiates the admission process, and from the perspective of global security, it embodies the most important implications of Finland's change of status.
2. What implications does NATO membership have for Finland's security? This is an important topic not only for a case study of Finland, but also from the point of view of the security of other NATO members on Russia's borders.
3. How might Finland's changing status affect the European security

landscape? This question arises from Finland's geographical position, which now doubles the length of Europe's borders with Russia, undermining established Euro–Russian security relations.

Research questions about the implications of Finland joining NATO are discussed through three separate sections, bearing in mind the very different – and often conflicting – interests of international entities, in the conditions of global regrouping and armed conflict on European soil.

The basic research method is a case study, which involves an in-depth analysis of the specific event of the abandonment of Finland's neutrality status in the specific security conditions created (or initiated) by the Ukrainian crisis. Like the basis of every case study, this article examines historical records (historical method) to obtain qualitative data in order to obtain insights into this political and security phenomenon. The historical method enables us to gain a contextual understanding of the various implications of this major revision of Finnish security strategy, as well as partial causal explanations for its initiation. Content analysis is applied in order to analyse policy documents, reports, and the statements of officials about the motives for abandoning neutrality, as well as feedback from other interested parties.

2. Background: the Short Journey from Neutrality to NATO Membership

During the 1930s and 1940s, relations between Finland and the Soviet Union were characterised by complexity and challenges. This complexity

arose from the geographical proximity of the small Northern European nation and the USSR, one of the world's two major military powers, and also from Finland's cultural and political pro-Western orientation. The perception of a potential threat emanating from the East was deeply entrenched in Finnish strategic thinking (Kilin, 2017). During this period, the Finnish leadership demonstrated remarkable political skills. In 1944, Finland pursued a policy of neutrality, a strategic decision that required the acceptance of certain limitations on its foreign-policy and military actions. This move proved crucial as it enabled Finland to avoid being classified within a specific bloc and prevented direct confrontation with the Soviet Union. Furthermore, this neutrality safeguarded Finland's internal sovereignty, allowing it to maintain its market-driven and democratic system without facing pressure to adopt a communist political framework. Moreover, Finland established 'special, extremely profitable economic ties with Moscow' (Lukyanov, 2023). From the late 1940s until the early 1990s, the relationship between the Soviet Union and Finland served as a model of successful compromise between states with differing socio-political systems and significant disparities in political and military power.

Following the conclusion of the Cold War, Finland continued to uphold its policy of neutrality while strengthening its cooperation with Western nations. In 1995, Finland became a member of the European Union, but it maintained its commitment to military non-alignment. Finland's political alignment remained firmly oriented towards the West. It achieved full technical alignment and compatibility with NATO security forces, actively participated in NATO's Partnership for Peace programme from 1994, and contributed to NATO missions in Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq, as NATO itself confirmed in 2023.

Furthermore, the Enhanced Opportunities Partners (EOP) programme, established in 2014, deepened Finland's cooperation with

NATO, solidifying its position as one of NATO's most integrated partners, alongside Sweden. This demonstrated Finland's continued commitment to maintaining strong ties with Western security alliances while upholding its long-standing policy of military non-alignment, which was 'commonly understood to be a policy of increasing cooperation with NATO without full membership' (MFAF, 2016).

A series of significant geostrategic events since 2014, particularly Russia's various actions and the subsequent responses from the Western world, have raised considerable concern within the Nordic countries. Of particular note are Russia's annexation of Crimea and the ongoing conflict in Donbass, as well as the economic and political sanctions imposed by the West in response to these developments (Stanojević, 2021). For the first time, a neighbouring Eastern power embarked on a path of territorial revisionism, visible here as the annexation of a portion of another neighbouring country through the use of force. In 2014, Finland reacted urgently to Moscow's decision to include Crimea in the Russian Federation, supporting the side of official Kyiv. Despite that, the majority of Finns had long opposed admission to NATO (YLE, 2022), a substantial portion of the public feeling greater apprehension regarding the ramifications of NATO membership than the prospect of an unprovoked attack by Russia. The prevailing sentiment among both the majority of the populace and the government was a shared understanding that joining NATO would inevitably trigger a hostile reaction from the Kremlin (Voronov, 2021).

The Ukraine conflict has reignited concerns about the "Russian threat" in Finland, sparking a debate on NATO membership. Since the conflict began, Western pressure on countries has adopted an assertive "with us or against us" attitude, leaving little room for neutrality (Stanojević, 2023a, 2023b, 2025). Even Finland's pro-Western stance, alongside its formal military neutrality, did not meet Western expectations, and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg consistently called for a 'strategic

decision' from Finland (and Sweden) without specifying the meaning of this phrase. These clichés, developed during previous expansions, coupled with anti-Russia rhetoric early in the Ukraine conflict, further eroded psychological barriers. Notably, on 28 February 2022, just four days after the Ukraine operation began, support for Finland's NATO membership exceeded 50% for the first time in history. This initial growth of backing, at 53% in February, steadily climbed to 62% in March and surged dramatically to 76% by May (YLE, 2022). This substantial swell in public support prompted Finland's deputies to take decisive action, and on 10 February 2023 they reached an agreement to pass all the necessary legislation for Finland's accession to NATO. Soon afterwards, by means of an emergency procedure, Finland formally became a member of NATO on 4 April 2023.

3. Research Results

3.1. Finland's Role in Strengthening NATO and Advancing American Objectives

To begin this section, it is imperative to provide an initial explanation for the rationale behind examining the security implications of the new NATO expansion in conjunction with the United States of America, despite the majority of NATO's member nations being in Europe. Subsequently, we will address the analysis of the European security architecture in a dedicated chapter.

The timing and substance of the initiative of Sweden and Finland – both historically neutral countries – to join NATO closely align with shifts in the United States' Arctic Strategy. The latest American strategy, unveiled

in October 2022, places a premium on 'solidarity with our Arctic partners', citing the prospective NATO membership of Finland and Sweden in light of 'Russian aggression in Ukraine' (The White House, 2022). Notably, the same strategic document also frames China's economic presence in the Arctic in a contentious context (The White House, 2022, p. 6).

It becomes apparent that the Ukrainian crisis cannot be linked to Arctic geopolitics, nor can China be situated within the context of the conflict in Ukraine. Consequently, the Ukrainian crisis appears to have served merely as a pretext for advancing American influence in the Arctic. Within the framework of US foreign and defence policy, the Arctic region is designated as a distinctive element of its foreign policy strategy. The inclusion of Sweden and Finland in NATO, ostensibly aimed at "bolstering regional unity", can be viewed as a means to curb the further economic expansion of Russia and China in the Arctic.

NATO goals are almost uniformly defined as American goals, something that cannot be asserted for other individual NATO member states. Most European countries have economies that are highly compatible with that of the Russian Federation. Importantly, Russia has consistently positioned itself as a partner of the European Union rather than a competitor. None of the European countries harbour a genuine interest in engaging in a conflict with Russia. In fact, the defence strategies of several European nations only designated Russia (and in some cases, even China) as an adversary or hostile state after approximately one year of fighting in Ukraine. These elements were incorporated into the American security strategy several months prior to Finland's application for NATO membership and well before similar strategic documents were adopted by European countries.

The above observation underscores that today's NATO serves as a means to uphold American dominance. Consequently, in this discussion, we treat NATO and the United States as a unified entity, recognising that

their security objectives and interests differ significantly from those of Europe as a geopolitical entity.

The addition of Finland and Sweden to NATO holds significant strategic importance for the Alliance, offering NATO several key advantages:

- NATO's influence and presence in Northern Europe are greatly strengthened, consolidating its regional position. Prior to Finland's accession, the closest territories from which Russia could pose a land-based threat were small and remote border regions with Norway (195 km), Estonia (294 km), and Latvia (214 km). As a NATO member, Finland, which is in proximity to St. Petersburg, the Baltic Sea, and the Arctic, can contribute valuable security coverage to the Alliance in Northeastern Europe.

- This expansion allows NATO to strategically control the Gulf of Finland, effectively isolating Russia in this vital maritime area and essentially making the Baltic Sea an internal body of water for NATO.

- NATO's earlier efforts to bolster its defensive capabilities and multinational forces in the Black Sea region are now complemented by the opportunity to establish a comprehensive defence system along its entire northern perimeter. This aligns with NATO's broader strategy of the systematic containment of Russia.

- Even before Finland joined NATO, attention was attracted to the Suwalki Corridor, which serves as a land link with Kaliningrad, the only Baltic Sea coastal city belonging to Russia. Additionally, this corridor represents the sole overland connection between NATO members Poland and Lithuania. The inclusion of Sweden and Finland in NATO offers an alternative transit route, bypassing potential access issues posed by Russia's enclave in Kaliningrad (updated from Smura, 2016) (for all instances, see Figure 1).

Figure 1: NATO on the Russian Border

Source: Business Insider, 2023

An additional and noteworthy benefit for NATO is the substantial military capability that Finland brings to the Alliance, encompassing both manpower and weaponry:

- After the end of the Cold War, Finland maintained its military size, prioritising territorial defence alongside active participation in NATO, EU and UN operations.
- The Finnish military comprises around 23,000 active-duty personnel, with potential wartime expansion to 280,000 due to mandatory service for nearly every male aged 18 to 60, supported by 900,000 reservists (Global Firepower Index, 2023).
- Finland's military is known for its efficiency and proficiency gained from overseas operations that enhance joint operations and NATO coordination.
- Despite its small population of 5.5 million, Finland's 2024 defence budget was set at approximately USD 6.6 billion – an increase of almost 5% on the previous year. Defence spending now represents 2.3% of Finland's GDP, surpassing NATO's recommended threshold of 2% (O'Dwyer, 2023).
- By size, out of 142 countries Finland's navy ranks 11th and its air force ranks 46th (Global Firepower Index, 2023).
- In 2022, Finland solidified its defence commitment with a USD 9.4 billion purchase of 64 Lockheed Martin F-35s, set for delivery by 2030 (Air and Space Forces, 2023).

3.2. The Impact of NATO Membership on Finland's Security

Joining NATO represents a significant shift in Finland's security strategy, necessitating a transition from focusing on its individual security to aligning with the collective goals of the Alliance. During peacetime, such a transition is not particularly challenging, as core values are already in sync. However, in the current context of armed conflict in Europe, where NATO is indirectly involved, adhering to collective security objectives may prove difficult or even impossible. The goals of the Alliance do not necessarily align with Finland's own goals and needs; in fact, they can be quite divergent.

As part of the push for Finland's admission to NATO, both NATO officials and Finnish politicians alike emphasised the idea that NATO membership would significantly enhance Finland's security. NATO's central argument was that in a climate of escalating conflicts and tensions, the risks facing Finland and Sweden were increasing. Remaining outside NATO could have potentially left them in a precarious "grey zone" during periods of instability in the northern Baltic region or in the event of a Russia–NATO conflict. Finland and Sweden's neutral status did not grant them full inclusion in the mutual guarantee system of Article 5 of NATO's founding treaty (NATO, 2023b), whereas joining NATO would strengthen collective defence and security.

While the specific risks of this "grey zone" were not explicitly outlined, the implication was that the countries in question might face threats from Russia. Consequently, the perceived threat of a Russian invasion became a prominent element in Finland's new political discourse, and it is worth noting that Finnish politicians collectively acknowledged the insufficiency of the security measures of the time in the face of an increased potential threat from Russia, leading to the consensus that stronger collective deterrence was necessary.

It is argued that by 2023, the situation had developed to the extent that Finland had become the most security-sensitive country in Europe – apart from Ukraine, which was already at war.

For decades, Finland recognised that maintaining military neutrality was key to its security. This stance, outlined in the 2016 Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland report (MFAF, 2016), highlighted the risk associated with Finnish (or Swedish) NATO membership, fearing a significant Russian response. This context mirrored the post-Crimea annexation security review.

Even amid the tension preceding the Ukraine conflict, concerns about NATO membership persisted. In early 2022, Prime Minister Sanna Marin expressed readiness to support Allies with strict sanctions in case of a Russian 'attack' on Ukraine, but ruled out immediate NATO membership (Reuters, 2022).

Finland's positive relations with Russia under its neutral status meant there was no imminent threat, a fact known to both government and citizens alike. The sudden narrative shift on the danger of a Russian invasion can be viewed as a "self-fulfilling prophecy". Formal NATO membership has resulted in an extension of the border between NATO and Russia, making the Finnish border the longest dividing line between these two opposing global (and nuclear) powers. Nuclear planning is of utmost importance, both in terms of providing assurances to potential NATO members and their participation in collective NATO activities. Declarations from Finland and Sweden that they will not host nuclear weapons on their territory do not substantially alter the situation. Earlier reports and agreements make it clear that, within NATO, the deployment of military force is primarily decided by the United States. Finland's conditions for joining NATO lacked specific provisions excluding the hosting of nuclear weapons. This alignment with NATO's nuclear umbrella was foreseen as far back as 2016, as stated in the report commissioned by the Ministry

for Foreign Affairs of Finland: 'Finland will be covered by the Alliance's nuclear umbrella', necessitating a new stance on nuclear deterrence and involvement in shaping NATO's nuclear policy (Iso-Markku et al., 2023).

Even statements that suggest Finland will not request NATO armaments and troops hold little significance. Finland's NATO membership entails the presence of the US military under the Defence Cooperation Agreement (DCA). As early as September 2023, Finnish President Sauli Niinistö publicly announced the intention to host US armed forces' equipment on Finnish soil (Nurmi, 2023), with US troops rotating or being permanently stationed there. Concurrently, Finland initiated diplomatic efforts to integrate its armed forces into NATO's new command structure located in Norfolk, VA. The logical next step expected in this progression is the establishment of additional anti-missile defence elements in the North Baltic, potentially including missile systems capable of carrying nuclear warheads.

NATO membership is not symbolic; Finland has essentially become a NATO member with limited influence over decisions, resulting in a diminished ability to shape international affairs (MFA RF, 2023). Research commissioned by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland after the NATO membership application stated that, with the escalation of military activities, 'the security of countries such as Finland, located in the immediate vicinity of Russian strategic regions, is becoming vulnerable' (Iso-Markku et al., 2023). This vulnerability emerged precisely because Finland abandoned its neutral status.

The transforming international stance of Finland and Sweden holds significant importance for Russia. President Vladimir Putin has indicated that their NATO membership alone doesn't pose a threat to Russia – unless they establish NATO bases and infrastructure on their territory. However, as Finland's NATO membership has grown to be a tangible concern for Russia, it has prompted the country to engage in appropriate

security planning. The possibility of conflict in this region is no longer unthinkable.

The timing and intensity of any potential conflict are not solely determined by Russia, which currently faces challenges in terms of security and foreign policy, and is not inclined to open new fronts. The likelihood of a future conflict hinges on factors such as the quantity of weapons NATO transfers to Finland, whether they include nuclear weapons, and whether the USA compels the Alliance's second-newest member to engage in provocations along the Russian border.

Beyond security considerations, Finland can only experience drawbacks from a confrontation with Russia, including destabilisation in economic, transportation and political terms alike. Increased military expenditure and budget losses due to anti-Russian sanctions could collectively have a noticeably adverse impact on the country's economic and social landscape.

3.3. Implications for the European Security Order

The entry of Finland and Sweden into NATO raises concerns regarding stability and security in Europe. Following the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, contrary to agreements with President Gorbachev, NATO expanded eastwards, incorporating former Soviet bloc nations one by one. Each step towards its borders heightened Russia's discontent. However, until recently, Russia lacked the political and economic means to rival NATO countries in any significant way.

Due to the absence of significant adversaries for both the USA and Europe, before the turn of the century, NATO expansion had a minimal impact on European security. However, post-2000, Russia's sudden resurgence, both economically and politically, enabled a significant

enhancement of its defence capabilities, based on domestic resources and industry. As Russian assertiveness grew, the concept of cooperative security, initially entrusted to the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), faltered when Russia challenged the legitimacy of the post-Cold War international order. The OSCE aimed to establish a shared approach to European security, but with Russia excluded from decision-making processes. NATO's prior expansions lacked detailed explanations. In the current context of a resurgent Russia, a rationale was needed to approach the Federation's doorstep, and the war in Ukraine provided that pretext. According to Jens Stoltenberg, this situation has given rise to 'a new normal' in European security (U.S. Department of Defense, 2022).

While Finland wasn't directly threatened by Russia, the NATO Secretary General's statements were aimed at garnering support from European governments and the public, particularly in Northern Europe, under the guise of safeguarding European security. In the current era of European security's new normal, NATO has armed Europe, deployed nuclear weapons in various European countries and increased military resources in Eastern European nations, extending the potential for conflict beyond the Finnish border. Any nation launching rockets in the direction of Russian territory can expect an equivalent response. Russia aims to delay expanding the front, as seen in its response to the more than 200 drones launched from a Baltic state in August 2023. Nevertheless, it seems inevitable that American pressure on a European country (e.g. the Baltic republics, Poland or Bulgaria) may lead to a provocation, becoming a tipping point in relations between Russia and the West.

According to the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the entry of Finland (and later Sweden) into NATO is 'detrimental to the preservation of European security and stability' (MFA RF, 2023). As Russia holds a central role in any potential conflict, Moscow's official stance serves as a reliable indicator of the deterioration of European security.

Northern Europe, once one of the most peaceful military zones on the continent, is rapidly becoming militarised on both sides, with both the EU and the Russian Federation escalating their military presence. This shift has transformed Russia, a significant military and nuclear power, into a perceived adversary of Europe. The security framework in Europe has been profoundly disrupted by Finland's NATO membership and further destabilised by the establishment of American bases and the supply of weapons along this lengthy border with Russia.

The challenge facing European security extends beyond the potential for a conflict with Russia; it also pertains to the outcome of such a conflict, from which Europe may not emerge victorious. Today, Europe finds itself with depleted reserves of weapons and ammunition due to its involvement in the Ukraine conflict, and its capacity for new production is severely limited. In contrast, Russia possesses an extensive military production infrastructure, a well-trained workforce and a broad spectrum of weaponry. Given this power balance, though it is not entirely inconceivable, direct confrontation with Russia would appear to be self-destructive from Europe's perspective.

In addition to the security implications for the EU, independent of Finland's accession to NATO, the Union grappled with the issue of defence autonomy in EU–NATO relations. The EU Global Strategy for 2016 (EU, 2016) outlined the defence goal of strategic autonomy, emphasising the strategic course of action and the need to enhance the EU's capacity for autonomous action, independent of NATO. While cooperation with NATO is acknowledged, the focus on security autonomy lies in creating opportunities for the EU to act outside the NATO alliance when necessary. The widely accepted explanation for this among EU officials is that improved European defence capabilities would enable the EU to act independently, particularly in areas and countries outside the Union, while simultaneously supporting NATO in defending its territory (Zandee,

2022). This entails a need for increased defence investment, capability development, technological expertise and operational readiness within the EU.

Despite the foregoing, this initiative has been accompanied by continuous doubts and fears regarding both its practical implications and its impact on NATO and transatlantic relations. Over the last two decades, NATO and the EU have coexisted in crisis management operations. NATO has generally handled tasks that might involve combat (high and medium-high intensity), while the EU has focused on stabilisation (even touching on policing), finding its added value in the link between the military (low-intensity) sphere and "civilian" roles (policing, legal or administrative advice, and development policy). Changes in the direction of the independence of the EU defence system did not take place at a satisfactory speed, and the Union faced various challenges even before the war in Ukraine. According to Howorth (2017), an optimistic scenario envisions the EU evolving into an autonomous international actor with genuine strategic autonomy; less optimistic projections include it maintaining the status quo or making limited progress through CSDP-Redux initiatives, since pessimistic forecasts, influenced by Brexit, raise concerns about the potential disintegration of the EU due to crises of sovereignty (money, borders and defence).

The events in Ukraine have served as a political wake-up call for NATO, highlighting the key role of the United States in European security. This applies not only to its political and diplomatic leadership, but also to operational support for Ukrainian forces. Although European Allies have stepped up their efforts, their endeavours are mostly channelled through NATO. This advantage is attributed to NATO's strong and well-established military command and control structure, along with its strong culture of deterrence.

4. Conclusions

Until recently, Northern Europe stood out as one of the world's most stable regions. However, with Finland's entry into NATO, and the subsequent inclusion of Sweden, the region has undergone significant changes, introducing new risks. The primary and most critical risk lies in the potential for American foreign policy – given its influential role within NATO – to compel Finland into entering an armed conflict with Russia. Secondly, while Article 5 theoretically implies NATO's intervention in the case of a conflict, history shows instances where the Alliance did not respond to conflicts involving its members.

NATO has asserted that it cannot afford direct warfare with Russia over Ukraine, implying that others would have to bear that burden. NATO may assist by supplying weapons, but it is unlikely to directly engage in a war with Russia due to the assessment that it might not win a direct confrontation with Russia, or the reluctance of key member states to commit significant military forces to such a conflict. While NATO has already deviated from its stance of non-interference in conflicts by arming Ukraine and providing logistical and satellite support, the overarching limitation on NATO's willingness to engage remains based on these factors

Finland's swift admission to NATO through an emergency procedure signals the USA's belief that Finland can effectively contribute to the ongoing efforts to pressurise or weaken Russia, which is defined as NATO's new most important strategic goal. Several factors make Finland an ideal candidate for this role, including its extensive border with Russia, its well-trained and well-armed military, the potential for a substantial territorial defence force, its stable economy, and the capacity for additional resource allocations. The stationing of American bases has already been agreed, and

NATO weapons have begun to be placed on Finnish territory. Contrary to the public assertion that Finland's NATO membership enhances its security, this country is now in more danger than ever before.

The prospect of an immediate conflict within Finland's borders is not on the horizon, nor is it the only conceivable scenario. Russia does not presently find itself in a situation where it is inclined to establish new military fronts. However, the unpredictability stems from NATO's activities conducted from Finnish territory. Weaponry and troops are not deployed without a reason. Realistically, these assets could be used to either provoke Russia or, in a worst-case scenario, launch a direct attack. Even if Finland manages to evade such a situation, it is likely to be pressured into substantial investments in military equipment, financial resources, logistics and, potentially, manpower to support the ongoing conflict with Russia, regardless of its sensitive location. The positioning of Finland as a new security threat for Russia leaves no chance for improving relations in the near future.

The security landscape in Northern Europe has rapidly evolved, introducing significant shifts such as increased US military presence, the erosion of neutrality in the Baltic Sea and the militarisation of the Arctic. As these developments run counter to key aspects of Russia's National Security Strategy, they have opened the door for additional security risks in Northern Europe's relations with Russia and the further collapse of the European security architecture.

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Germany's "Zeitenwende" and Its Implications for the European and International Security Order

HUANG MENGMENG[*]

ABSTRACT: Only three days after the outbreak of the Russia–Ukraine War, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz accelerated the transformation of German security policy by delivering his *Zeitenwende* ("historic turning point") speech in the Bundestag. At the national level, the federal government has broken through the military "culture of restraint" which was practiced after World War II, delivered weapons to Ukraine, and established a special fund of 100 billion euros to enhance national defence. At the European level, Germany actively promotes the functional complementarity of NATO and EU defence. At the international level, Germany's role in Asia has changed from being an economic partner to a player in Indo-Pacific geopolitical and security affairs. In addition, Germany's Zeitenwende has a significant impact on Europe's security order and the international order alike. In the mid-term, the European security order shifted from a cooperative pan-European security

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*   Dr Huang Mengmeng: Associate Professor, Institute of European Studies, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences; German Chancellor Fellow of Alexander von Humboldt Foundation 2017–18.

scenario that integrated Russia to a confrontational scenario excluding or opposing Russia. At the international level, Germany has made great efforts to maintain the influence of the "rules-based" international order, which has been manifested in the strengthening of German–US security cooperation, Germany's deeper engagement in the Indo-Pacific, and increasing competition and confrontation in Germany's strategy towards China. However, Zeitenwende could not be accomplished overnight, and the process is still constrained by various factors, such as German society's preference for the culture of restraint, power competition among ministries, high economic and social costs, and shortcomings in military resources.

1. Introduction

After its reunification, Germany continued its role as a "civilian power", exerting normative and institutional influence in international politics and cautiously using force. However, following the crisis in Crimea, Germany as a normative power found it more and more difficult to maintain its interest in the fierce competition of great powers. In recent years, the traditions of realpolitik and power politics have returned to German political discourse. With the changing security situation in Europe, Germany's political willingness to assume more international security responsibility has increased, and the expectations of its allies have also risen. Following the outbreak of the Russia–Ukraine War, Eastern Europe and the Baltic states have continued to put pressure on Germany to strengthen sanctions against Russia and assist Ukraine with heavy weapons. In February 2022, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz delivered his Zeitenwende ("historic turning point") speech, which signified the transformation of German foreign and security policy. After some hesitation and political debate, Germany broke the "taboo" existing since the Second World War by providing military assistance to the conflict zone, and – after the United States – it has now become the country providing the most military and financial aid to Ukraine (Bomprezzi et al., 2024). In addition, Germany has enhanced its contribution to NATO and the joint defence of the EU. In this study, the following questions will be discussed: What are the implications of Germany's Zeitenwende in the national, European and international dimensions? What are the impacts of Germany's Zeitenwende on the European and international security order? What are the constraints on the process of Zeitenwende?

2. The Implications of Germany's Zeitenwende

2.1. The National Dimension: From caution via enabling to proactive security policies

After reunification, Germany was no longer a frontline state, defining itself as a civilian power and continuing its culture of restraint. Although the Bundeswehr was allowed to conduct military operations overseas, its engagement was mostly limited, and it was embedded in multilateral frameworks. With the hope of a peaceful future and a "peace dividend", defence was no longer considered a top priority. The Bundeswehr was downsized and its capabilities and equipment were reduced. This eventually resulted in stagnating defence spending.

In recent years however, with the changing international environment, Germany's political willingness to take on more responsibility for international security has grown. Germany's security policy is also in the process of being reshaped, moving from a type of caution to enabling (Bunde & Eisentraut, 2020). After the 2014 Crimean crisis, German President Gauck, Foreign Minister Steinmeier and Defence Minister von der Leyen reached the "Munich Consensus" and declared that Germany would assume more international responsibility (Gauck, 2014). In 2016, the Federal Ministry of Defence launched its White Paper on German Security Policy, which stated that Germany, along with the Bundeswehr, was prepared not only to assume responsibility for international security, but also to play a leading role in it. Germany committed to strengthening NATO's European pillar to increase the capacity for action of NATO

and the EU alike. It was also emphasised that the prerequisites for such a transformation were stable funding and increased levels of personnel and equipment in the Bundeswehr (The Federal Government, 2016). In 2020, the Munich Security Conference issued the report "Zeitenwende | Wendezeiten", which assumed that, holding the presidency of the Council of the European Union at the time, Germany would enhance Europe's ability to act as one, defend the EU's strategic autonomy and European interests, and respond to both Russia's threat to the European security order and China's challenge to the international order.

The Russia–Ukraine War has triggered Germany's security fears to a great extent. Given that Kyiv and Berlin are only 1,500 kilometres apart, the war has been seen as a fire on Germany's doorstep. German public opinion is in favour of supplying weapons to Ukraine, the figure soaring from 20% to 60% since the outbreak of the war, and most supporters acknowledge that the war has led to a change in their perceptions of Germany's security policy. In 2022, nearly 70% of Germans were in favour of sending the Bundeswehr to NATO's eastern borders (Müller, 2022). In the meantime, European partners have also continued to demand that Germany take on more security responsibilities.

Under internal and external pressure, Germany broke through the military taboos that had been in place since the end of the Second World War and shifted to a proactive security policy. On the one hand, it broke the principle of not supplying weapons to conflict zones and transferred numerous armaments to Ukraine. In 2022, the Bundestag approved the supply of heavy weapons, the list of military support including, among others, Gepard anti-aircraft guns, IRIS-T SLM air defence systems, MARS II multiple rocket launchers and Patriot missiles, and it also allowed the training of Ukrainian soldiers in Germany. In 2023, Germany finally gave the green light to other countries for the transit to Ukraine of Leopard 2 main battle tanks, and 60 Marder infantry fighting vehicles with

ammunition and 20 Leopard 1 main battle tanks were also delivered to Ukraine (*Military support for Ukraine*, 2023).

At the same time, Germany has substantially increased its defence budget and participated in NATO "nuclear sharing". After the outbreak of the Russia–Ukraine War, the German federal government changed its previously hesitant attitude on defence spending and committed until 2024, planning the raising of its defence budget to 2% of GDP, which would meet the NATO standard, and establishing a special fund of EUR 100 billion for the upgrading of armaments. In addition, Germany is also committed to strengthening NATO's nuclear sharing capabilities, and at the end of 2022 the parliament's budget committee approved the spending of EUR 10 billion on US defence giant Lockheed Martin's F-35 jets, which are capable of dropping the B61-12 thermonuclear bomb (Reuters, 2022).

2.2. The European Dimension: Germany's transition from a security "free-rider" to a contributor to the strengthening of NATO's European pillar

Concerning European defence, Germany has been an "Atlanticist", advocating the functional complementarity of EU and NATO defence, rather than the formation of alternative defence mechanisms, which differs from France's "Europeanist" position for a relatively independent European defence. After the Cold War, Germany still believed that the US-led NATO mechanism remained an important pillar of European security. Thus, even during the Trump administration, Germany was still half-hearted about France's proposal for creating a "joint EU army" and did not support French President Macron's statement regarding 'the brain death of NATO' (The Economist, 2019). Despite this, its chronically

low defence spending always upset the United States, which accused Germany of "free-riding" on security. From the Clinton administration to Trump's presidency, Germany was always required to increase its military spending. The transatlantic partners quarreled over Germany's low percentage of defence budget for decades and Donald Trump even put pressure on Germany by threatening that the USA would withdraw from NATO. Even so, after the Cold War, Germany's defence budget never met the NATO standard of 2% of a given country's GDP. However, in recent years, Germany's military contribution to collective defence has increased under pressure from the Allies. Since 2017, Germany has led the enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) Battlegroup Lithuania, which currently has a strength of around 1,700 soldiers from six Nations (*German Military Commitment to Lithuania*, 2023). The German Army's 9th Armoured Brigade led the NATO High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) 2019 (NATO, 2021). In Germany's perception, it was no longer a "brakeman", but rather a contributor to collective defence. Yet in the views of NATO's member states, Germany's security contribution was still insufficient.

After the outbreak of the Russia–Ukraine War in 2022, Germany committed to contributing more to strengthening the European pillar of NATO's collective defence. Both the NATO Strategic Concept and the EU Strategic Compass for Security and Defence 2022 highlight NATO as a vital pillar of European security, emphasising the functional complementary of NATO and EU defence. One of the key military deliverables of the EU Strategic Compass is to deploy a modular force of up to 5,000 troops, including land, air and maritime components by 2025, and in 2022 Germany committed to providing a considerable share, representing the core of the unit (Dahm, 2022). When, in the same year, the NATO summit in Madrid reached a consensus to increase NATO's presence on Europe's Eastern flank, raising the number of high-readiness forces from

40,000 to 300,000, German Defence Minister Lambrecht announced a contribution of 15,000 Bundeswehr soldiers, 65 aircraft and 20 warships (Küstner, 2022a).

2.3. The International Dimension: From economic cooperation to being a geopolitical and security player in the Indo-Pacific

After the Cold War, from the Kohl to the Schroeder governments, German interests still primarily focused on the economic side of German–Asian cooperation, and Germany's economic dependence on China was also deepening. However, with the rise of China and the growing influence of the Belt and Road Initiative in Europe, from the Merkel government onwards, Germany increasingly accused China of striving for regional hegemony and attempting to reshape the existing rules-based international order. In 2020, the German government launched its Indo-Pacific Strategy, which prioritises multilateralism, climate protection, regional security, human rights and the rule of law, as well as rules-based free trade (The Federal Government, 2020). Embedded in NATO and EU mechanisms, Germany's political goals are to diversify like-minded partnerships in Asia, maintain a rules-based regional order, sustain free navigation and free trade, and counterbalance China's influence in the Indo-Pacific order. In 2023, the Scholz government launched its China Strategy, which points out that China is simultaneously Germany's partner, competitor and systemic rival (The Federal Government, 2023). This systemic rivalry is reflected in the fact that Germany and China have different concepts of the principles governing the international order.

In NATO's Strategic Concept, in addition to Russia being listed as the most significant and direct threat, for the first time, China is defined

as a 'challenge' in terms of interests, security and values (NATO, 2022). Indo-Pacific engagement has become one of the important signs of US-led NATO strategic transformation against the backdrop of the Russia–Ukraine War. Germany has also further strengthened its geopolitical and security engagement in the Indo-Pacific region, and has to a limited extent cooperated with the USA's strategy. From August 2021 to February 2022, the deployment of the frigate Bayern was a first step towards an increased German military presence in the Indo-Pacific, although it was mainly tasked with missions related to diplomacy. Following this naval deployment, Germany sent six Eurofighters to participate in the NATO Rapid Pacific 2022 project; deployed to the Indo-Pacific region via Singapore, they took part in two multinational manoeuvres, namely Pitch Black 22 and Kakadu 22 (*This Is Rapid Pacific 2022*, 2022). All the same, to avoid provoking China, these German military planes avoided passing over the Taiwan Strait.

3. The Impact of Germany's Zeitenwende on the European and International Order

The Russia–Ukraine War has greatly challenged the European security order, and the Zeitenwende in Germany's security policy has also impacted the security order in Europe and on the international stage alike.

3.1. Germany's Perception of the European Security Order: From the scenario of cooperation to the scenario of confrontation

From the *Ostpolitik* ("New Eastern Policy") of the Willy Brandt government in the time of the former West Germany during the Cold War to the *Wandel durch Handel* ("Change through Trade") implemented after reunification, Germany has always maintained hopes of strengthening economic and energy ties with Russia, promoting Russia's Europeanisation and building a cooperative pan-European security order with Russia's involvement.

However, subsequent to the 2014 Crimean crisis, Russia was increasingly perceived as a challenger to the European security order, especially by the Baltic states and Eastern European countries such as Poland and the Czech Republic, which, for historical reasons, perceived the threat of Russia most acutely, and became the frontline supporters of the EU's confrontation with Russia. At the same time, they constrained German and French attempts at diplomatic détente towards Russia. At 2020's Munich Security Conference, Germany argued that it was no longer convinced that Russia could be a 'responsible participant' able to integrate into the Western liberal order (*Zeitenwende Wendezeiten…*, 2020), and only two years later the outbreak of the Russia–Ukraine War triggered security fears in Germany. The voices of "Russian understanding" in German society were weakening, and trust in Russia fell to a historically low level, with 90% of Germans believing that Russia could not be trusted and 79% supporting sanctions against Russia even at the cost of social welfare (Müller, 2022). Six months after the outbreak of war, 86% of Germans still saw Russia as a threat to world security, and more than 60% feared that Russia would attack other countries in Europe (ARD-DeutschlandTREND, 2022).

Against the backdrop of the Russia–Ukraine War, the confrontational scenario of the European security order is returning with the logic of power politics. Firstly came the massive criticism of the "change through trade" policy. The German Social Democratic Party (SPD) took the lead in critical reflections of the New Eastern Policy it had created, with Chancellor Scholz declaring that the policy never was nor ever will be a tool for a 'special relationship' between Germany and Russia. He proclaimed the relationship between Europe and Russia to be a dividing line between the free Europe and the neo-imperial autocracy order (*Rede von Bundeskanzler Scholz…*, 2022). Former German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder was isolated within his own SPD party and criticised for his business ties to Russian energy companies. German political circles also criticised Angela Merkel's policy towards Russia, condemning her for ignoring the risks of German dependence on Russian energy. Friedrich Merz, leader of the Union parliamentary group, even described Germany's foreign and security policy over the past two decades as 'a shambles' (Schwarte, 2022).

The paradigm of German–Russian relations has shifted, as Germany seems to have abandoned its traditional approach towards Russia of "change through trade", and the European security order has moved from a cooperative security order with Russia's involvement towards a model of confrontation, which opposes or excludes Russia. In terms of security discourse, German politicians have repeatedly emphasised that Russia cannot win the war, and have continued to provide military support and financial assistance to Ukraine, also strengthening their contribution to the defence of the EU and NATO. In the fields of economic and energy policy, even while suffering from rising industrial energy costs, Germany has participated in the EU's financial and energy sanctions against Russia and has frozen the Nord Stream 2 energy pipeline. By the beginning of 2023, Germany announced its independence from Russian energy imports (*Klimafreundliche und krisensichere Energieversorgung*, 2023).

3. 2. Strengthening the Rules-based International Order

Germany is strengthening its security and geopolitical engagement in the Indo-Pacific to counterbalance the regional influence of China on the grounds of safeguarding the rules-based international order. In 2023, Germany launched its first National Security Strategy since the end of the Second World War, which underlines the concept of "integrated security" with three central dimensions, namely robustness, resilience and sustainability (Auswärtiges Amt, 2023). Besides traditional concerns such as military defence, security issues are widely connected with non-traditional security areas such as economics, digital technology, the supply chain, critical infrastructure, energy security, climate protection, cybersecurity, etc. In addition, the character of "ideological rivalry" in Germany's National Security Strategy is obvious, especially in Germany's policy towards China, emphasising the security threat "authoritarian states" pose to "democratic countries", and analogising the risk of Germany's dependence on China and Russia. Following the introduction of the National Security Strategy, Germany also launched its first China Strategy, and the weight of competitiveness and systemic rivalry has significantly increased.

At the same time however, Germany and the United States have strengthened their security cooperation to formulate a common concept of maintaining the rules-based international order. The European security order has been challenged by the conflict in Ukraine, and European–Russian relations have become confrontational. In Germany's view, the USA is indispensable to European security, and the transatlantic partners should thus strengthen security cooperation. This has also become an important feature of the Zeitenwende in German security policy. Former Minister of Defence Christine Lambrecht made the procurement of US

weapons a priority during her visit to America in March 2022. Following the turmoil in the wake of the ousting of Kevin McCarthy, the Republican speaker in the House of Representatives, in October 2023, German President Steinmeier visited US President Biden and expressed concern about further American aid to Ukraine due to congressional disputes and tried to convince the USA to continue its engagement in Europe. Steinmeier also confirmed that Germany remained by Washington's side, and he promised that efforts would be made to convince other partners to contribute stably to support Ukraine (Süddeutsche Zeitung, 2023). In addition, the US–EU Trade and Technology Council has held several meetings during the Russia–Ukraine War to strengthen transatlantic institutional coordination on export controls, technical standards and investment screening mechanisms, with the clear intention of targeting China and Russia.

Germany's attempt to maintain the rules-based international order in the Indo-Pacific region is influenced by three factors, namely the United States' pressure, China's market dividends, and the EU's strategic autonomy. Firstly, in the increasingly fierce competition between China and the United States, Germany cannot remain neutral. The transatlantic institutional coordination system for counterbalancing China's power has been formed, and Germany has also strengthened its geopolitical and security engagement in Asia and, in a limited way, coordinated with the USA's Indo-Pacific Strategy. In Germany's China Strategy, security concerns towards China have risen. Secondly, China's market dividend and the opinions of Germany's corporate groups and business associations also influence the political practice of its Indo-Pacific Strategy. Germany has committed to shaping diversified partnerships in Asia and has implemented so-called "de-risking" rather than "decoupling" measures towards the PRC. Germany's large enterprises still value the dividends of the Chinese market, and most of them are against decoupling from China,

the tendency being to rather make more effort to shape the "China+N" supply chain to cope with the geopolitical risks and increase supply chain resilience (*The German Chamber's Contribution…*, 2022). In the first half of 2022, German FDI in China exceeded EUR 10 billion, up 21% year-on-year, with Germany's large corporate groups such as Volkswagen, BMW, Mercedes and BASF accounting for one-third of the entire Union's FDI in China. In the first half of 2023, even though German politicians had repeatedly emphasised economic security and pursued de-risking measures to reduce their economic dependence on China, Germany's FDI in China reached EUR 10.3 billion, accounting for 16% of its total FDI. The third factor mentioned above is the fact that Germany's Indo-Pacific strategy is embedded in the EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy. Compared to the dualistic thinking of the zero-sum game in the USA's Indo-Pacific Strategy, the EU version is more diversified in terms of political instruments, and its goal is to maintain a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific.

4. The Constraints on Germany's Zeitenwende

In political practice, Germany's Zeitenwende in its security policy still faces normative, institutional and practical constraints, meaning that it cannot be accomplished overnight.

4.1. The Legacy of the Culture of Restraint in German Society

The Russia–Ukraine War has accelerated the transformation of Germany's security policy, but it is impossible to completely get rid of the culture of restraint in German society, which has been socialised since the 1960s.

On the one hand, the impact of the culture of restraint in the background of the Russia–Ukraine War is still present. In the beginning, Germany was not a pioneer in arms delivery. Three months after the outbreak of the war, the actual amount of German arms aid to Ukraine was only 35% of what it had promised, which was always criticised by the Eastern European countries and Baltic states. Since then, Germany has been trapped in a cycle of pressure from its allies and self-persuasion, and its political decision-making has entered into a spiral pattern: first, it hesitated or refused to provide weapons, then it defended its cautious decision based on the consensus of the government coalition, consultation with allies and avoidance of acting alone, and when the internal and external pressures escalated to an upper limit, Germany approved the arms delivery.

On the other hand, the legacy of the culture of restraint in German society is enlarging the differences in the opinions of the German public regarding the Zeitenwende. The Russia–Ukraine War was the catalyst for Germany to break through the "military taboo", but changing the political identity of the culture of restraint is not an overnight process. Before the war, German society showed a clear preference for a culture of restraint. According to a DeutschlandTrend survey, 53% of Germans opposed Ukraine's accession to NATO, and 71% opposed aid in the form of weapons to Ukraine (Ehni, 2022). After the outbreak of the Russia–Ukraine War, out of security fears, although the majority of the German people supported the enhancement of national defence, 68% of respondents denied Germany's military leadership role in Europe

(Küstner, 2022b). In addition, German public opinion was divided over the supply of Leopard 2 main battle tanks to Ukraine, with 46% in favour and 43% against (Tagesschau, 2023). As Table 1 shows, there was a strong consensus among Germans over NATO's role in European security and in perceptions of German–Russian relations (questions 2 and 3), but respondents were more divided on the question of whether Germany should be 'restrained' in providing military aid to Ukraine and with regard to the imposition of sanctions against Russia (questions 1 and 4).

TABLE 1: German public opinion regarding the Russia–Ukraine War

	QUESTION	RESPONSE		
1	Should Germany remain restrained concerning military assistance to Ukraine?	Yes	No	
	April 2022	40%	52%	
	October 2022	47%	43%	
2	Is Russia still a trusted partner for Germany?	Yes	No	
	March 2022	6%	90%	
	November 2022	10%	85%	
3	Is NATO important for European security?	Yes	No	
	March 2022	83%	11%	
	July 2022	90%	7%	
4	Are the German government's sanctions against Russia appropriate?	Too great	Appropriate	Not enough
	April 2022	14%	34%	45%
	October 2022	24%	31%	36%

Source: Infratest dimap data from March to November 2022, ARD-DeutschlandTREND, 2022

4.2. Power Struggles between Ministries and Institutional Obstacles

German security policy lacks an efficient decision-making mechanism. For a long time, it has been difficult to integrate defence resources among the various ministries. Originally intended to bind together essential security and defence policy decisions, the Federal Security Council (Bundessicherheitsrat) has existed since 1955. However, since the 1990s the functions of the Federal Security Council have grown fewer, and with its current remit it mainly decides on arms exports and has not assumed the role of being an effective coordination centre for German security policy. Against the backdrop of the Russia–Ukraine War, there are many arguments in favour of revamping the Federal Security Council (Matlé, 2023). Despite this, Germany's political elites have not yet reached a consensus on this proposal, and ultimately, the 2023 National Security Strategy did not mention upgrading the Federal Security Council to a centralised decision-making body with the possibility of bringing about interdepartmental coordination and decisions on all strategically-relevant security issues.

In addition, the power struggle within the coalition partners has become intense. The SPD-led German Chancellery Office and the Green Party's Foreign Office and Ministry for Economic Affairs are in a fierce power struggle over Germany's national security strategy and its strategy towards China. The Foreign Office favours "values-based" policies, and highlights the threat posed to the rules-based international order by China and Russia, placing the issues of human rights and democratic standards at the centre of relations with the PRC, while the German Ministry of Economic Affairs proposed to introduce a tougher economic policy towards China. This overly aggressive political narrative towards China has sparked controversy and concern in the Chancellery Office and

German business circles alike, leading to a delay in the launch of the two strategies (Kormbaki et al., 2023).

4.3. Balances between Security and Zeitenwende; Economic and Social Costs

The longer the Russia–Ukraine War lasts, the more likely it is that Germany's security policy transformation will be hampered by economic and social costs. In other words, the German government needs to find a balance between security Zeitenwende and the negative political and socio-economic consequences. If the balance is lost, it will be difficult to push the Zeitenwende process forward.

Germany's Zeitenwende in its security policy is constrained by economic, social and political factors. Germany's role as a trade power is largely based on good economic performance and export advantages in the post-Cold War era. German industry benefited from the globalisation dividend and the cheap Russian energy supply. However, after the outbreak of the Russia–Ukraine War, embedded in the EU sanctions against Russia, Germany gradually cut down its dependence on Russian energy and gave up the political instrument of "change through trade" towards Russia. The consequence for German industry is that it has to bear higher energy costs, leading to a decline in competitiveness, which has affected Germany's export performance. In addition, given the increase in the European Central Bank's interest rate and the introduction of the Inflation Reduction Act in the United States, with the USA promising to grant subsidies for consumers to buy North American-assembled electric vehicles, thus prejudicing the fortunes of European car makers, Germany's automotive exports have been under pressure. In 2023, the German economy's slowdown continued and

was projected to shrink by 0.4 % by the end of the year (*ifo Institute Confirms…*, 2023). The multiple effects of the Russia–Ukraine War, the increasing energy prices, the shortage of skilled labour and the high inflation rate have caused serious political consequences. Dissatisfied with the performance of the government coalition, the German right-wing populist party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) has attracted many dissatisfied and protest voters, its support exceeding 20% since the summer of 2023. Especially in the eastern federal states, the rate of support for the AfD was recorded as being close to 30%, surpassing that of the traditional major parties such as the SPD and the Union (Kinkartz, 2023), and finding a way to deal with the AfD is sure to be one of the greatest challenges for the major parties in Germany's 2025 federal election.

4.4. The Shortcomings of Military Resources

Following reunification, Germany was no longer on the frontline in the confrontation between the bipolar blocs. Lacking the willingness to expand its armaments, it cut its defence spending more than most of its allies. As a consequence, even though Germany has promised to upgrade its defence as a result of the Russia–Ukraine War, in the short term it is difficult to make up for deficiencies in military resources, a factor which slows down the transformation process of Germany's security Zeitenwende.

Firstly, the personnel gap in the Bundeswehr will be difficult to fill in the short term. The number of armed-forces personnel shrank from about 500,000 in 1990 to around 260,000 by the beginning of 2022 (*About Bundeswehr*, n.d.). The shortage of military personnel has worsened since 2011, when the Merkel government abolished compulsory military service.

Secondly, there is still a structural shortage in Germany's defence budget. Despite Germany's commitment to boosting its defence budget to 2% of GDP by 2024 in the wake of the outbreak of hostilities in Ukraine, by 2023 its defence budget still only accounted for 1.5% of GDP. In addition, although Germany allocated EUR 100 billion of special funds for defence upgrades, high inflation in 2022 and 2023 led to rising procurement costs for military equipment, and there is still a gap of EUR 18 billion in the German defence budget (Röhl et al., 2022).

Finally, the armaments of the Bundeswehr are old and insufficiently stocked. At the outbreak of the Russia–Ukraine War, 60% of its helicopters could not fly, and only half of its 200 tanks were ready for use (Deutschlandfunk, 2023). At the time, Lieutenant General Alfons Mais stated honestly that the Bundeswehr was standing more or less empty-handed, and its options for supporting the Alliance were extremely limited (Siebold, 2022). Germany claims to play a leading role in strengthening the European pillar in NATO, yet in practical terms, a 2022 military training exercise involving 18 Puma infantry fighting vehicles – intended to participate in NATO's Very High Readiness Joint Task Force in 2023 – was plagued by serious technical defects (Küstner, 2023). On top of all this, Germany's arms procurement process is highly complex. The bureaucratic approval mechanisms of the Ministry of Defence, parliament and the Federal Office of Bundeswehr Equipment, Information Technology and In-Service Support (Bundesamt für Ausrüstung, Informationstechnik und Nutzung der Bundeswehr, BAAINBw) are complicated. Although the Federal Armed Forces Procurement Acceleration Act (Bundeswehrbeschaffungsbeschleunigungsgesetz, BwBBG) was passed by the German parliament with the aim of speeding up the procurement process of military equipment, the procedure is still not adapted to the realities of the situation.

5. Conclusions

The Zeitenwende has not only changed Germany's security policy; it has also had impacts on the European security order and international order. In Germany's view, the European security order has gradually shifted from a pan-European cooperative security order that involves Russia to a confrontational security order that excludes Russia. As regards the international order, Germany is making more effort to maintain the Western-led rules-based order. Against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine, Germany has been strengthening its security cooperation with the United States, enlarging its engagement in the Indo-Pacific, and emphasising the security threat authoritarian states pose to democratic countries, analogising the risk of Germany's dependence on Russia and China. Germany's National Security Strategy is value-oriented and shows a clear principle of integrated security concepts. However, Zeitenwende is still faced with various constraints, namely the legacy of the culture of restraint in German society, the power struggles between ministries, socio-economic costs, and the shortage in Germany's military resources. Taking all of this into account, it is perfectly evident that Germany's Zeitenwende process will not be accomplished overnight.

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The Bucharest Nine and Europe's Eastern Neighbourhood Post-Ukraine – Assessing Geostrategic Positions within the European Security Architectures

MIHAI CHRISTOPHER MARIAN RADOVICI AND TEOFAN DIMITRIE DRĂGHICI[*]

ABSTRACT: This paper seeks to examine the strategic employment of the brokerage capabilities exerted by the Bucharest Nine (B9) and its members, understood as security vectors, either within Europe's Eastern flank or transatlantic networks, particularly in the aftermath of the Ukraine conflict. Hence, the study assumes that regional cooperation formats have shifted their defence and security trajectories to react to unfolding complex interplays across CEE spheres. Thus, cooperative frameworks, spread along the Baltic–Black Sea strategic corridor, have found

*   Mihai Christopher Marian Radovici: PhD, Doctoral School of Economics and International Business, Faculty of International Economic Relations, Bucharest University of Economics, Romania.
Teofan Dimitrie Drăghici: Bachelor in International Relations and European Studies, Faculty of Political Sciences, National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Bucharest, Romania.

themselves at the convergence of diverging regional security complexes, meaning that regional powers have spearheaded collaborative formats under the institutionalist aegis. This has translated into initiatives such as the B9 filling power voids and reassessing their international position, a phenomenon that demands a holistic understanding, particularly when it comes to the security and defence dimensions. Therefore, despite the B9 representing a central element of numerous works, with its regional relevance already confirmed by the specialised literature, the papers in question focus either on an overview (neglecting recent dynamics and particularities) or base their interpretations on its members as a whole (disregarding independent evolutions). To overcome this deficiency, our analysis represents a comparative interpretation of the B9's approaches, observed through the qualitative extrapolation of primary and secondary data in a bibliometric manner, covering the period from 2015 to 2023. The end result presents a comprehensive picture of the geopolitical and geostrategic narratives employed by the B9.

1. Introduction

It can be assumed that, even by selectively scrutinising the latest papers on international relations (IR) and security, as the core geopolitical and geostrategic pathways have shifted from Western Europe, an increased focus has emerged – from foreign policy (FP) instrumentalisation to normative conceptualisation – towards what can be considered as Europe's periphery (Pawluszko, 2021). Therefore, renewed efforts have been allocated towards the stabilisation of the Eastern Partnership's European trajectories, alongside a noticeable pivot to the EU's Eastern security and defence architecture, particularly in the light of centripetal and centrifugal forces which have been at play within the region since 2022.

In this sense, the relevance of the Baltic–Black Sea strategic corridor, flanked by the triangulations of the Three Seas Initiative (3SI) and the Bucharest Nine, simultaneously forming a continental quasi-middle-ground and micro dissipation node, emerges from the convergence, divergence and overlapping of several regional security complexes, pivotal points, power dissipation nodes and influence spheres (Griessler, 2018; Bieber & Tzifakis, 2019; Davymoka, 2022). Thus, a continuous flux of interactions is brought forth within this space's relative boundaries, particularly amplified by shared ethno-communal commonalities, all of which constitute *in extenso* a self-oriented axis or modus operandi, which needs to be comprehensively studied, especially in the recent times of turmoil (Banasik, 2021; Fylypenko, 2021).

In this context, we can note how Romania, acting as a regional power within the Black Sea spheres (and subsequently the Baltic corridor), has sought to spearhead a suite of international collaborative networks, acting as bridge point for the Eastern developments (Stănică, 2022). By

interlinking the region, Bucharest, through collective manifestations in the likes of the B9 and 3SI, has created a web of organisations that have filled certain power voids, leading the way in several strategic areas and promoting a collaborative approach (Crețu & Ardeleanu, 2018). Thus, the country, alongside these regional frameworks, reacted relatively promptly when faced with the threats that affect Ukraine, and – per se – the whole Western-led order, especially as Romania represents, be it in geographical or collective imagery terms, a major actor and a liaison between the strategic regions (Black Sea/Baltic Sea; North/South; Occidental/Oriental; liberal/illiberal, etc.) (Vaida, 2022).

As regional assemblages such as the Bucharest Nine began to appear, we can observe how they juxtaposed their areas of expertise, forming a broader umbrella which (re)united Europe's Eastern neighbourhoods under the commonality of the challenges they faced. Therefore, the B9 fits well into this mosaic – alongside the Three Seas Initiative, the Visegrád Group, and en masse with the Danube Region Strategy, the Western Balkans or the Eastern Partnership – being, for example, tasked with strengthening the security and defence flanks of the EU and NATO, whilst traversing the boundaries of various strategic areas (e.g. the Nordic and Baltic States, the Black Sea, and the Balkan states) (Orzelska-Staczeck, 2020; Orzelska-Staczeck & Bajda, 2021).

Under the chairmanship of Romania, the B9 aims – especially at the present juncture – to increase the defence and security capabilities of the participating states, expand their interoperability within the Western constructions, exert optimised control over borders and sea routes, and establish a buffer zone against tertiary interference (Pieńkowski, 2019; Dăscăleț, 2020). In this regard, as Europe rallied itself into reorganising power distribution patterns, the expertise of the US military-industrial complex was needed, forming a window of opportunity for the Bucharest Nine to address some of the aforementioned bilateral diplomatic efforts

and set in motion processes targeted at both deterring expansionist or aggressive intentions in the area and safeguarding the interests of CEE states (Gerasymchuk, 2019; Calmels, 2020).

On another note, by conducting a review of the specialised literature we can underline how a knowledge gap emerges in terms of fully apprehending how the B9 has acted on the international stage, from its position as a security vector, since the outbreak of war in Ukraine. Furthermore, most documents focus on the origin and evolution of the B9 as an independent actor, without accounting for either the international, regional and national systemic contexts in which it acts or for the interactions that have occurred both internally and externally (e.g. amongst its members, amongst its members and tertiary actors, between the structure and NATO or the EU, between the B9 and other regional organisations, etc.). This aspect means that our understanding of the organisation is based either on one country's approach and interests, the B9 taking second place in their foreign affairs, or as part of adjacent NATO and EU initiatives, neglecting the organisation's complementarity status and its own agency to instrumentalise various collaborative, omnidirectional, multilevel and multiactor solutions. Additionally, while experts have focused a large part of their attention on the ongoing Russia–Ukraine conflict, adjusting for its derivate reverberations within the global scene, scant attention has been directed to account for the reaction of the Eastern European regional organisations and their impact on the matter. Whereas we can note that the B9 has displayed some degree of capacity to consolidate states in broader or more narrow constellations as a way of enhancing their security and defence interests, few works nuance this aspect, especially in an in-depth manner.

Lastly, while Europe remains rather divided, its Eastern region and its periphery have begun to take centre stage on the continental and global agenda. Due to pre-war developments and post-war prospects, the role

of the B9 – adjusted to its realistic magnitude – must be acknowledged within these processes, in parallel with EU and NATO efforts (Stănică, 2022). Thus, an in-depth analysis – through the qualitative interpretation of EU documents – and the production of both detailed insights and summarised overviews of the matter are needed in order to present the B9 with enhanced clarity and offer the possibility to further build upon such research initiatives.

2. Method and Design

When it comes to approaching both our primary and secondary research questions – which revolve around the ways in which the Bucharest Nine has shifted its regional approaches in relation to the conflict in Ukraine – within the aforementioned contexts and assumptions, in methodological terms this research project is based on a pendulum between the positions assumed prior to and following the outbreak of the Russia–Ukraine War in 2022. Thereafter, the uniqueness of the project emerges from a mixture of qualitative analyses, put into a state of balance through the employment of a comparative analysis format which selectively binds several quantitative elements (within the 2015–23 time frame).

After the application of these methods, the corroboration of results leads to the creation of a mirrored interpretation which balances paradigmatic and empiric elements regarding the approaches of the B9, within the Eastern flank, in correlation with recent international risks and threats emerging from the conflict in Ukraine. Once all factors and elements have been discovered, extrapolated and factored-in, respecting their specificities and eliminating contextualised contingent spikes in

the input, a summarisation of key elements can be modelled in order to form a comprehensive yet non-exhaustive perspective on the matter through a bibliometric observation of the official narratives, discourses and commentaries generated by the Bucharest Nine and its heads of state, ministers of foreign affairs and ministers of defence, who lead institutions considered to have IR, FP and regional development capabilities.

3. Comparative Analysis and Findings

Heads of State

Table 1 identifies, extrapolates and interprets, through a bibliometric matrix, the official narratives, positions and discourses of the heads of state of the Bucharest Nine, presented during the specialised institutional meetings or yearly summits, in respect of core regional developments, highlighting the formulation of these aspects both before and after the outbreak of the Ukraine conflict.

Table 1: Comparative analysis of the official positions of B9 heads of state

SUBJECT AREA	PRE-CONFLICT POSITIONS	
Collective Defence and Solidarity	**2015:** 'We showed unity, we showed our capacity for decisions, and we made a significant contribution to future decisions which will be taken during the NATO summit in Warsaw. ... I am convinced that the Warsaw summit will take decisions and that NATO as a whole will show unity and determination, and above all that it will show that it is alive.' **2018:** 'We remain fully committed to implementing all the initiatives developed as part of NATO's forward presence on the Eastern flank, as well as the measures adopted so far with the aim of strengthening Allied deterrence and ability to defend collectively all NATO members on land, in the air, at sea, and in the [*sic*] cyber space. We welcome [the] progress made so far in implementing the forward presence from the Baltic to the Black Sea and we are ready to strengthen the efforts to ensure that it is up to the task and fully enabled across all domains, through Allied contributions, exercises, planning and command arrangements.' **2019:** 'We reaffirm our strong commitment to collective defence, as enshrined in the [*sic*] Article 5 of the Washington Treaty based on solidarity, shared responsibility and the indivisibility of Allied security.' **2021:** 'We reaffirm our continued determination for a strong and enduring ... bond.'	

POST-OUTBREAK POSITIONS

SUBJECT AREA	PRE-CONFLICT POSITIONS	
Security Challenges	**2015:** 'The Polish head of state added that NATO had to adapt itself to new challenges and must be ready to effectively react to current events, reduce threats and build an atmosphere of security and peace guarantees. "Today we have taken the first step on the road leading to the implementation of this great goal," he said.' **2018:** 'We remain firm on our commitment to project stability beyond Alliance territory to counter complex threats and challenges ranging from conventional and hybrid warfare, terrorism, mass migration and WMD proliferation.' **2019:** 'As we meet today, we face the most difficult security challenges in a generation. In the spirit of [the] 360 degrees approach, the Alliance should continue to be ready to respond to all threats and challenges from wherever they arise.'	
NATO's Role and Significance	**2015:** 'The Polish president stressed that apart from the political and military dimension, NATO's activity and the unity of its members had important social consequences as they built "the sense of security which is so needed for good development, including economic development, and good cooperation for the future".' **2018:** 'Reaffirming that NATO remains the cornerstone of our security and collective defence, and that our countries stand firm in solidarity, committed to developing our cooperation to better address all security concerns and contribute to the Alliance's tasks.' **2019:** 'For the last 70 years, NATO has served as the bedrock of security in the Euro-Atlantic area. It remains the unique framework for our collective defence, transatlantic dialogue and plays [an] irreplaceable role in protecting our values and safeguarding [the] security of our citizens and our territories.' **2021:** 'NATO remains the bedrock of Euro-Atlantic stability and security.'	

POST-OUTBREAK POSITIONS

2022: 'Looking to the future, we need to significantly strengthen our deterrence and defence posture towards a modern Forward Defence, in a balanced, credible, coherent, sustainable and tailored manner across the entire Eastern Flank, taking into account national specificities, in accordance with the 360-degree approach, in order to deny any adversary the benefits of aggression, and defend, contest, and prevail across all operational domains against the threats we face. We have to scale up multi-domain Allied presence …'

2023: 'We agreed on forward defences with robust in-place, multi-domain, combat-ready forces to remain credible and capable of denying any potential adversary any possible opportunity for aggression.'

2022: 'We remain committed to continue meeting in the Bucharest 9 Format as a means to promote joint approaches and contribute to Euro-Atlantic security.'

2023: 'NATO and its Article 5 commitment to defend each other stand as the backbone of Euro-Atlantic security.'

SUBJECT AREA	PRE-CONFLICT POSITIONS
The Transatlantic Bond	**2015:** 'We share a firm opinion with the president of Romania that NATO's presence in our part of Europe should be increased, that this is something natural. It is a matter of NATO's balanced development.' **2018:** 'Welcoming the increased engagement of our Allies in the region, as a sign of solidarity and strong commitment to our security, and in this context underlining the United States and Canada's enhanced military presence in Europe, which reconfirms the strength of the Transatlantic bond.' **2019:** 'We welcome, and support [the] strengthened military presence of the United States and Canada in Europe, particularly on NATO's Eastern flank.' **2021:** 'We reaffirm our continued determination for a strong and enduring transatlantic bond, based on Allied unity and solidarity, which remains the foundation of our collective defence.'

POST-OUTBREAK POSITIONS

2022: 'At this critical time, we underscored the importance of the enduring transatlantic bond, North America and Europe standing together as one in NATO.'

2023: 'We welcome the participation of the President of the United States and NATO's Secretary General at our meeting, which serves as a testimony to the strength of the transatlantic bond and underscores NATO's unwavering commitment to defend every inch of Allied territory.'

SUBJECT AREA	PRE-CONFLICT POSITIONS
Russia's Behaviour	**2015:** 'We will stand firm on the need for Russia to return to [the] respect of international law as well as of its international obligations, responsibilities and commitments as a pre-condition for a NATO–Russia relationship based on trust and confidence," the leaders said in a joint declaration.' 'Russia's seizure of Crimea and support for pro-Kremlin rebels in eastern Ukraine last year has alarmed Baltic and eastern European states.' 'Leaders of the NATO alliance have also expressed concern at what they see as Moscow's growing military presence from the Baltics to Syria, after Russia launched air strikes in support of President Bashar al-Assad five weeks ago.' **2018:** 'Noting with deep concern that Russia's continued multifaceted, destabilising actions and policies beyond NATO borders as well as on the Alliance territory, together with its continuous build-up of offensive capabilities for both conventional and hybrid warfare, and its aggressive behaviour, threaten our long-standing vision of a Europe whole, free and at peace, fundamentally challenge the Alliance and damage the [*sic*] Euro-Atlantic security.' **2019:** 'We remain particularly concerned with [*sic*] the ongoing conflict in eastern Ukraine and [the] recent tensions in the Azov and Black Seas stemming from the illegal and illegitimate annexation of Crimea and military build-up. This is another manifestation of Russia's disregard of international law, its confrontational pattern of behaviour and use of military and also non-military actions, such as the construction of the Kerch Strait bridge, to advance its geopolitical goals.' **2021:** 'Russia's aggressive actions and military build-up in the immediate vicinity of NATO, including the recent escalation in the Black Sea, on Ukraine's borders and in the illegally annexed Crimea, as well as its aggressive hybrid activities, continue to threaten the [*sic*] Euro-Atlantic security and challenge the rules-based international order. We condemn Russia's acts of sabotage on Alliance territory as evidenced in the explosions of [*sic*] the ammunition depot in 2014 in Vrbětice, in the Czech Republic, that constitute a grave violation of international law.'

POST-OUTBREAK POSITIONS

2022: 'We call on Russia to change its aggressive behaviour, withdraw its forces from the internationally recognized territory of Ukraine, ensure accountability for war crimes and atrocities, and return to act [*sic*] in compliance with international law. NATO should draw the necessary conclusions regarding its relations with Russia.'

2023: 'We condemn Russia's war of aggression in the strongest possible terms. Those responsible for atrocities and war crimes will be held accountable. We are determined to sustain international pressure on Russia.'

SUBJECT AREA	PRE-CONFLICT POSITIONS
Military Preparedness and Spending	**2015:** 'According to President Duda, … the alliance is able to react "in the present situation, in the situation of threats from the east and from the south. And this means more troops, more infrastructure and more joint operations, also military ones … in order to effectively and quickly react to possible threats".' **2018:** 'To reinforce NATO's overall capabilities, we will continue investing in our own security. We are determined to ensure that our countries continue to spend or – respectively – move towards the goal of spending 2% of the [*sic*] GDP on defence, as decided at the NATO 2014 Summit in Wales. We will continue to invest in modern capabilities and contribute to NATO's operations and missions.' **2019:** 'We are determined to work towards this objective, including through our commitment to spend 2% of the [*sic*] GDP on defence, modernising our defences and engaging in operations.' **2021:** 'We stand ready to foster equitable burden sharing in full accordance with the commitments undertaken in the Defence Investment Pledge.'

POST-OUTBREAK POSITIONS
2022: 'We stand ready to deliver on our commitments undertaken in the Defence Investment Pledge and allocate at least 2% [of] GDP for defence by 2024 and will further support increased common funding.' **2023:** 'To protect their populations and territory, Allies are committed to implementing the new baseline for NATO's deterrence and defence posture ...'

SUBJECT AREA	PRE-CONFLICT POSITIONS	
NATO's Open Door Policy	**2015:** 'The document we adopted today is open, other NATO countries can join it.' 'NATO's openness to new members will be another important issue.' **2018:** 'NATO's successful Open Door Policy effectively contributes to strengthening peace, good governance, security and stability in Europe and beyond. We encourage those partners who aspire to join the Alliance to continue to implement the necessary reforms and decisions to prepare for membership, including fully complying with their commitments and obligations.' **2019:** 'The anniversaries of our countries' accession to the Alliance reminds us how crucial NATO's Open Door Policy has been for enhancing [the] security of its members, for [the] peaceful reunification of Europe and for [the] stability of the whole Euro-Atlantic area. We will continue to support further NATO enlargement in line with the [*sic*] Article 10 of the Washington Treaty.' **2021:** 'We reiterate our commitment to NATO [*sic*] Open Door policy, as reflected in the [*sic*] Article 10 of the Washington Treaty. The decision taken at the 2008 NATO Summit in Bucharest stands. NATO's door should remain open to all willing and able to join our community. We encourage those partners who aspire to join the Alliance to continue to implement the necessary reforms and decisions to prepare for membership, based on democratic values, respect for rule of law, human rights, and full compliance with their respective international commitments and obligations. In this regard, we will continue to support their efforts.'	

POST-OUTBREAK POSITIONS

2022: 'NATO's Open Door Policy under Article 10 of the Washington Treaty has played a crucial role in enhancing Euro-Atlantic security, stability and prosperity, rooted in common values. We recall the decisions of the 2008 NATO Bucharest Summit.'

2023: 'Reaffirming our commitment to the Open Door policy, in Madrid we invited Finland and Sweden to join the Alliance. We look forward to welcoming them soon as NATO Allies.'

SUBJECT AREA	PRE-CONFLICT POSITIONS
Security in Eastern Europe and the Black Sea Region	**2015:** 'Problems of key importance for the development of the situation in Central and Eastern Europe are those of Moldova, the Black Sea basin and Ukraine, according to Poland's president. "A situation of smouldering conflict, frozen military operations, is not one that can be accepted in the long term. Ukraine must regain control of its borders", his Excellency said.'
	2018: 'NATO's partnerships are essential to increase our partners' resilience, help them advance reforms and support their European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations. We will continue to make [the] best use of them in assisting Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine as well as the Western Balkan countries in pursuing their respective aspirations.'
	2019: 'We ... reiterate our firm support for the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine, Georgia and the Republic of Moldova, within their internationally recognized borders. While pursuing their respective European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations, these countries will continue to benefit ... from our support in their efforts to strengthen their resilience against any external interference.'
	2021: 'We ... reaffirm our firm support for the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia, Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova, within their internationally recognised borders. While pursuing their respective European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations, these countries will continue to benefit ... from our support in their efforts to strengthen their resilience against any external interference.'

POST-OUTBREAK POSITIONS

2022: 'We reiterated our unwavering commitment to Ukraine's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognised borders, [as well as to] its democratically elected President, parliament and government, and its people, in their brave fight to defend their homes, their country and their sovereign right to choose Ukraine's own security arrangements and foreign policy, free from outside interference. We emphasized our continued support to [*sic*] Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic aspirations. We also support the integration of Ukraine in the European Union. We are determined to continue and further step up our assistance for Ukraine, as a strong and democratic Ukraine is important for security and stability in Europe. We have provided protection to millions of Ukrainian refugees.'

2023: 'Ukraine's future lies in Europe. We firmly support Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic aspirations. We stand ready to cooperate closely and support our partners the Republic of Moldova, Georgia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, that are most at risk of [the] Kremlin's destabilizing and malign influence, in the East and the South of the Alliance.'

SUBJECT AREA	PRE-CONFLICT POSITIONS
NATO–EU Cooperation	**2015:** 'The declaration also said the leaders would join efforts to secure "a robust, credible and sustainable" allied military presence in the region and would advocate deeper cooperation between NATO and the European Union.'

2018: 'We remain committed to the further implementation of all agreed areas of cooperation between NATO and the EU in line with the Warsaw Joint Declaration. We consider it necessary to highlight the achievements and underscore the priority areas of cooperation in a new and result-oriented NATO–EU Joint Declaration.'

2019: 'We believe that [a] stronger NATO and stronger EU are mutually reinforcing. Together they can better provide security and peace in Europe, in our neighbourhood and beyond. We are supporting an enhanced EU role in security and defence through developing initiatives in this area in full complementarity and synergy with NATO. We are determined to strengthen [the] NATO–EU strategic partnership and cooperation.'

2021: 'The cooperation between NATO and the EU has considerably developed and is essential in [the] face of the common security challenges. As NATO Allies and EU Member States, we support a strategic partnership and deeper coordination between NATO and the EU.' |

Source: Compiled by the authors from the following sources: President in Bucharest: We Showed Unity and Capacity for Decisions, 2015; Polish President Favours Bigger NATO Presence in CEE, 2015a; President Duda to visit Romania, 2015; Polish President Favours Bigger NATO Presence in CEE, 2015b; CEE and Baltics say gravely concerned by Russia's 'aggressive' stance, 2015; Joint Declaration of the Heads of State Bucharest 9 meeting, 2018; Declaration of the heads of state Bucharest 9 meeting, 2019; Joint declaration of the heads of state Bucharest 9 Meeting, 2021; Declaration of the heads of state Bucharest 9 meeting, 2022; Joint statement by the leaders of Bucharest Nine, 2023

POST-OUTBREAK POSITIONS
2022: 'We expressed our confidence that the next Strategic Concept will reflect … the new security reality created by Russia's war on Ukraine, highlight [the] Russian Federation as the most significant and direct threat to the [*sic*] Euro-Atlantic security, and renew focus on the key purpose and greatest responsibility of the Alliance – collective defence – while underscoring that NATO will continue to fulfil all three core tasks. It should also reflect the need to enhance the strategic partnership with the European Union to support global and transatlantic peace and security, including by strengthening political consultation and cooperation, emphasizing the commitment to improve military mobility.' **2023:** 'We will continue to strive for peace, security and stability in the whole of the Euro-Atlantic area.'

Ministers of Foreign Affairs

Table 2 identifies, extrapolates and interprets, through a bibliometric matrix, the official narratives, positions and discourses of the ministers of foreign affairs of the Bucharest Nine, presented during the specialised institutional meetings or yearly summits, in respect of core regional developments, highlighting the formulation of these aspects both before and after the outbreak of the Ukraine conflict.

Table 2: Comparative analysis of the official positions of B9 ministers of foreign affairs

SUBJECT AREA	PRE-CONFLICT POSITIONS	
Support for NATO's Open Door Policy (The Open Door Policy refers to the Alliance's commitment to keeping its membership open to countries that share its democratic values and contribute to regional security. It signifies NATO's willingness to expand and strengthen its alliance.)	**2016:** '[B9 foreign ministers] stressed the importance of NATO's Open Door policy, which remains one of the most successful approaches to ensuring security and stability throughout the Euro-Atlantic area.'	
Concerns about Russia (Concerns about Russia revolve around its aggressive actions, including military interventions in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea.)	**2016:** '[B9 foreign ministers] have also reiterated their firm and principled position regarding Russia's aggressive actions against Ukraine and its continued violation of international law and obligations, including the illegal and illegitimate annexation of Crimea.' **2017:** 'Russia's actions threaten the long-standing goal of a Europe whole, free and at peace.' **2021:** 'The foreign ministers' meeting in Tallinn aimed to build a common understanding of and response to security challenges for NATO's eastern flank countries, particularly in the context of Russia's aggressive actions.'	

POST-OUTBREAK POSITIONS
2023: '… the B9 countries will … firmly support NATO's Open Door Policy, including through enhancing practical and political strategic alignment between NATO and Ukraine.'
2022: 'The Russian invasion of Ukraine is the gravest threat.' **2023:** '… the B9 countries will … continue to present an unwavering support to Ukraine in its fight to defend [itself] against Russia's brutal aggression. The participants will continue their military and non-military assistance to help Ukrainians repel Russia's aggression and restore Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity.'

SUBJECT AREA	PRE-CONFLICT POSITIONS	
Transatlantic Unity (Transatlantic unity underscores the importance of a strong partnership between North American and European Allies. It is seen as crucial for addressing shared security challenges and maintaining a cohesive stance in the face of geopolitical threats.)	**2016:** '[B9 foreign ministers] expressed their determination to continue working actively [to implement NATO's Warsaw decisions], acting firmly in the spirit of Allied solidarity and unity, thereby further strengthening the vital transatlantic bond.' **2017:** 'We welcome the US enhanced military commitment to the security and defence of Europe, including the significant increase in funding of the European Deterrence Initiative for 2018.' **2021:** '... our region needs to cooperate more closely to achieve NATO's objectives.'	
Security in Eastern Europe (Security in Eastern Europe, often discussed within the B9 framework, involves the collective security concerns of Eastern European countries.)	**2016:** 'Ministers emphasized the key importance of Allied enhanced and tailored forward presence in the land, air and maritime domains on the Eastern flank, as part of the overall collective effort to strengthen NATO's defence and deterrence.' **2017:** 'Bucharest 9 provides a platform for deepening dialogue and cooperation among the participating NATO allied countries, in full compliance with the principles of security solidarity and [the] indivisibility of NATO member states.' **2020:** 'Lithuanian Foreign Minister Linas Linkevičius ... expressed satisfaction with the relevance of the B9 format and agreement of the NATO Eastern flank.'	

POST-OUTBREAK POSITIONS
2022: '[NATO Deputy Secretary General Mircea Geoană] commended the decision by the United States to deploy 100,000 troops to Europe as a strong signal of transatlantic unity and solidarity.' **2023:** '... the B9 countries will ... work towards strengthening the transatlantic link, stressing the importance of the continued US presence in Europe, in particular on the Eastern Flank.'
2022: '[General Mircea Geoană] stressed that "our responsibility will remain to ensure the security and defence of all Allies and across all domains and with a 360-degrees approach".' **2023:** '... actions aimed at strengthening the security of NATO's Eastern Flank.'

SUBJECT AREA	PRE-CONFLICT POSITIONS	
Support for Ukraine (Support for Ukraine signifies the commitment of NATO member states to stand with Ukraine in its efforts to defend its sovereignty and territorial integrity. This support can encompass military, political and non-military assistance.)	**2016:** 'Ministers have expressed their strong support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders and for Ukraine's right to decide its own future and foreign policy course free from outside interference.' **2017:** 'Reiterating our full support to their [sic] territorial integrity, independence, sovereignty and legitimate aspirations, we will examine how to further strengthen the political dialogue and practical cooperation with Ukraine.'	
NATO Adaptation (NATO adaptation reflects the Alliance's continuous efforts to adjust its strategies, policies and capabilities in response to changing security dynamics. It includes discussions on strengthening deterrence, defence and overall readiness.)	**2016:** 'Ministers have agreed to continue to support the implementation of the framework for NATO's adaptation in response to growing challenges from the South, in accordance with the principles of solidarity among Allies and of [the] indivisibility of Allied security.' **2017:** '[The 2016 NATO Summit in Warsaw was called] a decisive step in strengthening NATO's overall posture in response to the new security environment.' **2021:** '[At the B9 meeting in Riga] the participants discussed ... threats and challenges – both conventional and asymmetric ones – facing NATO's eastern flank ... as well as the Alliance's strategic adaptation in the context of works on the new Strategic Concept.'	

POST-OUTBREAK POSITIONS
2022: 'With Assistant Secretary of State [for Europe and Eurasian Affairs of the United States] Donfried, Mr Geoană discussed further support to Ukraine. He commended the decision by the United States to deploy 100,000 troops to Europe as a strong signal of transatlantic unity and solidarity.' **2023:** '... the B9 countries will ... continue to present an unwavering support to Ukraine in its fight to defend [itself] against Russia's brutal aggression. The participants will continue their military and non-military assistance to help Ukrainians repel Russia's aggression and restore Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity.'
2022: 'Ministers also addressed NATO's upcoming Summit in Madrid in June, when Allies will agree NATO's next Strategic Concept, as well as adapt our deterrence and defence posture for the longer-term.' **2023:** '... the ongoing strategic adaptation of NATO to the current and future challenges in the context of the forthcoming NATO Ministerial Meeting on 4-5 April and the Vilnius Summit on 11-12 July.'

SUBJECT AREA	PRE-CONFLICT POSITIONS	
NATO–EU Cooperation (NATO–EU cooperation highlights the collaboration between the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the European Union. It aims to enhance synergy in addressing common security challenges, promote coordination and avoid the duplication of efforts.)	**2016:** 'Recognizing that NATO–EU cooperation plays an important role ... in effectively countering today's threats, Ministers expressed their determination to contribute to the implementation of the NATO–EU Joint Declaration of July 2016, as well as to deepening NATO–EU cooperation in coping with common challenges, including from our neighbourhood.' **2017:** 'The future of enhanced EU security and defence policy lies in its further development based on inclusiveness, close coordination and complementarity with NATO. Initiatives in this area should contribute to increasing cohesion among member states.' **2021:** 'Deputy Minister Szynkowski vel Sęk underscored that our region needs to cooperate more closely to achieve NATO's objectives, including to increase synergy and interoperability, both within the Bucharest Nine and in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization as a whole.'	

Source: Compiled by the authors from the following sources: Meeting of foreign ministers of countries of Central and Eastern Europe – Bucharest Format, 2016; Bucharest 9 foreign ministers mention NATO-Russia relationship, cyber threats among main themes in joint statement, 2017; Secretary of State Szymon Szynkowski vel Sęk takes part in a meeting of Bucharest Nine foreign ministers, 2021; NATO Deputy Secretary General participates in meeting of B9 countries, 2022; Chairpersons' Summary of Bucharest Nine Ministerial Meeting, 2023

POST-OUTBREAK POSITIONS
2023: '… the B9 countries will work towards the development of NATO–EU cooperation aimed to strengthen the security of the Euro-Atlantic area, in particular in the context of Russian aggression.'

Ministers of Defence

Table 3 identifies, extrapolates and interprets, through a bibliometric matrix, the official narratives, positions and discourses of the ministers of defence of the Bucharest Nine, presented during the specialised institutional meetings or yearly summits, in respect of core regional developments, highlighting the formulation of these aspects both before and after the outbreak of the Ukraine conflict.

Table 3: Comparative analysis of the official positions of B9 ministers of defence

SUBJECT AREA	PRE-CONFLICT POSITIONS	
Common Threat Assessment	**2018:** 'We are perfectly aware of the threats and we are ready to ensure security.' **2019:** 'The Bucharest Nine has a common assessment of threats and the security situation.' **2021:** 'We have stressed that NATO and the EU are facing various threats and challenges emanating from all strategic directions.'	
Concern about Russia	**2018:** 'Russia's activities force us to pay close attention to security.' **2021:** 'We ... have expressed increased concern about Russia's actions along the NATO Eastern flank, particularly the Russian military build-up ...'	
Support for Ukraine	**2018:** 'We are perfectly aware of the threats and we are ready to ensure security. It is not just about the security of our countries, but also about Europe and the free world.' **2021:** 'We ... have expressed increased concern about ... the Russian military build-up, including along the [*sic*] Ukraine's borders. We stress the Bucharest 9 unity and strong support to further strengthening NATO deterrence and defence, so that the Alliance is fully and timely prepared to ensure the security and integrity of all Allies ... including [those situated] from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea.'	

POST-OUTBREAK POSITIONS
2022: 'We … met … with an aim to consult and cooperate on the current threats and challenges for the Eastern Flank of the Alliance.' **2023:** 'We support a 360-degree approach, and contribute to [the] security of all Allies, regarding challenges and threats from all directions.'
2022: 'We agreed that increased Russian military aggressive posture on NATO's Eastern flank, including in Belarus, coupled with Russian hostile activities in [*sic*] [the] Southern flank have had a direct impact on [the] Alliance's security …' **2023:** 'Russia is the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area. We welcomed that, in response to Russia's war of aggression, Allies reacted decisively in a united and responsible manner to protect NATO's populations and territory.'
2022: 'In the face of this aggression, we reaffirmed our unwavering support for Ukraine's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity. We stressed to [*sic*] remain united on the need to maintain and enhance the political and practical support for Ukraine, and call all members of NATO, the EU and "like minded" partners to contribute to this crucial and urgent effort. This should include enhanced effort to support nations and backfill their donated capabilities, thus facilitating further deliveries to Ukraine.' **2023:** 'In the face of this aggression against Ukraine, we reaffirm our unwavering support for Ukraine's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity. We stress the need to remain united on the need to maintain and enhance the political and practical support for Ukraine, and call all members of NATO, the EU and "like minded" partners to further contribute to this crucial and urgent effort.'

SUBJECT AREA	PRE-CONFLICT POSITIONS	
NATO Unity and Collective Defence	**2018:** 'From our perspective, the convergence of national approaches on current security and defense issues of the Euro-Atlantic area requires more cooperation. In this respect, the fact that NATO's eastern flank countries share a series of common and particular concerns from the perspective of perceiving risks and threats to security, makes us consider a debate on these issues as being very useful.' **2019:** '[The B9 meeting] focused on the security of the alliance's south-eastern flank, concerning the countries of Romania and Bulgaria, and NATO's moves aimed at ensuring security of the Black Sea. It also pertained to joint exercises and defence spending …' **2021:** 'We … met in the Bucharest 9 format for consultation, cooperation and coordination aiming at strengthening the security and defence of our countries.'	
Defence Spending and Resource Allocation	**2018:** 'Russia's activities force us to pay close attention to security. I am glad that more and more countries are granting 2% of GDP for defence.' **2019:** '[The B9 meeting] also pertained to joint exercises and defence spending, which should reach at least 2% [of] GDP.' **2021:** 'We agree that, as a part of this process, full and timely implementation of new allied military planning construct and concepts, and NATO force structure modernization, are of particular importance.'	

Source: Compiled by the authors from the following sources: Defence Ministers meet in Bucharest under the B9 Format, 2018; National Security Bureau head: Bucharest Nine unity strengthens NATO, 2019; Joint Statement of the Bucharest 9 Defence Ministers, 2021; Joint Statement by the Defence Ministers of the Bucharest 9, 2022; Joint Statement by the Defence Ministers of the Bucharest 9, 2023

	POST-OUTBREAK POSITIONS
	2022: 'We ... met ... with an aim to consult and cooperate on the current threats and challenges for the Eastern Flank of the Alliance. ... We highlighted that the new NATO Strategic Concept ... should embrace the full spectrum of agreed threats and challenges, in accordance with the 360-degree approach.' **2023:** 'We ... met ... with an aim to consult and cooperate on the current security threats and challenges for the Eastern Flank of the Alliance and the Euro-Atlantic area. ... We support a 360-degree approach, and contribute to [the] security of all Allies, regarding challenges and threats from all directions.'
	2022: 'EU Member States' increased defence spending is one of the key responses to the growing threat to European security. Existing EU instruments should incentivise greater defence spending, including by more flexible application of the EU fiscal rules with regard to the national defence expenditures.' **2023:** 'A number of the B9 countries invest 2.5% or more of GDP in defence. Therefore, we support the NATO Secretary General's idea to agree the renewed Defence Investment Pledge post 2024 during the Summit in Vilnius.'

4. Observations and Conclusion

Following a thorough evaluation, we can note that the Bucharest Nine, and consequently its heads of state, ministers of foreign affairs and defence ministers, considered as the most representative figures to conceptualise and implement geostrategic and geopolitical approaches, have presented a palette of different positions with respect to the unfolding events in Ukraine, depending on their specific objectives, although most of these remain interconnected and represent a juxtaposed stance when it comes to regional developments and Euro-Atlantic perspectives. Therefore, these assemblages and interactions are highly dependent on the political prevalence, geopolitical inclinations or strategic interests of the actors, being contextualised in the broader regional environment.

Thus, from the analysis of the positions taken by the heads of state, we can observe that their public discourses mostly emphasised the following:

- The commitment to NATO's principle of collective defence, especially referencing Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty. This is an aspect which has remained unchanged during both pre-conflict and post-outbreak periods.
- The presence of various security challenges, ranging from conventional threats, hybrid warfare and regional instability all the way to asymmetric risks, cyber threats and disinformation campaigns. Ideas have been more focused on forward defence and resilience, and are formulated in an adversarial logic since the start of the Ukraine conflict.
- NATO's prevailing role as the cornerstone of the Euro-Atlantic security architecture and collective defence mechanisms. This has

been accentuated in a more collective and joint manner since the start of the conflict.

- The enduring importance of the transatlantic bond, primarily through the prism of the role of the USA and Canada in safeguarding the Eurasian order. In CEE countries, this aspect has recently shifted towards a more demanding stance for direct support and involvement.

- The general concerns regarding the Russian Federation's actions and policies, including its interventionist presence beyond NATO borders, military build-up, local operations in Crimea, and adherence to international norms – and the need to have a comprehensive strategic approach to Russia. The stances relating to these issues have recently been transposed from a concerned and observatory position to a condemnation of Moscow's actions and a call for collective measures.

- The commitment to enhance military preparedness, increase strategic investments and develop defence and security capability, meeting NATO's 2% of GDP expenditure target. These matters have remained constant.

- The consistent support for NATO's Open Door Policy, and emphasis on the need to further sustain a comprehensive enlargement of the organisation by bolstering interactions with aspiring members. This is an aspect that has slightly faded out of the spotlight during the Ukraine conflict.

- The rising conflicts and tensions in Eastern Europe and the Black Sea region, including the unfolding external interference in Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova, with regard to the support for Ukraine's territorial integrity, sovereignty and autonomy. These ideas have become more accentuated in recent years, particularly when it comes to the independent evolution of Ukraine.

- The importance of NATO–EU cooperation and synergy when it comes to addressing security and defence challenges, especially in the CEE sphere. This matter has recently faded slightly in terms of importance, particularly due to the emphasis put into the self-consolidation and resilience building of statal power, regarding the EU's capacities and NATO's capabilities (in a more singular manner).

From the analysis of the positions taken by the ministers of foreign affairs, we can observe that their public narratives have principally gravitated towards the following:

- The willingness to expand and strengthen the Alliance through the Open Door Policy, especially in strategic areas. This aspect has remained unchanged throughout the periods in question.
- The specific concerns regarding the Russian Federation's international actions and presence in the international community. Originally portrayed as a threat, this issue is now considered a direct violation of the European order.
- The cohesive stance of the transatlantic community in the face of geopolitical threats. This aspect has been accentuated in recent years, especially through the increased need to jointly counteract the risks in the CEE region.
- The collective security concerns of CEE states with respect to their particularised needs and specific challenges or opportunities. This is a matter which has retained its relevance throughout the two periods.
- Support for Ukraine, encompassing military, political and non-military assistance measures. This element took centre stage during the most recent meetings, particularly as the core belief is

to increase individual and collective support mechanisms to assist Ukraine in the conflict, and especially to provide humanitarian relief.

- The adaptation of NATO and its continuous efforts to adjust strategies, policies and resources in response to changing dynamics, including the strengthening of deterrence, fast response and readiness. Since the conflict in Ukraine commenced, this aspect has been stressed through the need to adopt long-term defence and security postures in a more comprehensive manner, accounting for a wider range of threats and risks.

- The collaboration between NATO and EU structures to address common challenges, foster coordination and avoid the duplication of efforts. This idea has slightly faded out of the main discourses and moved more towards the specialised or inter-institutional negotiation processes.

Finally, from the analysis of the positions taken by the ministers of defence, we can observe that their objectives have been oriented towards the following:

- The evaluation of security threats and challenges in the Euro-Atlantic area, including collective awareness and vigilance regarding regional security perspectives. These notions have increased in recent years, particularly when it comes to the construction of a 360-degree approach to better apprehend evolving situations in real time.

- The military repercussions and implications of the Russian Federation's interventions across Europe's Eastern periphery. These are aspects which have been increasingly emphasised during the conflict in Ukraine, especially the aggressive build-up and direct

operations that can jeopardise the regional security and defence architectures.

- The operational support of Ukraine's military manoeuvres. This matter has been accentuated in recent years as there is an increased need to provide direct support and assistance, including military equipment, ammunition, weaponry, etc.
- The enhancement of NATO's unity and the fostering of collective defence measures. This element has remained constant throughout the two periods.
- The need for adequate defence spending and resource allocation to strategic sectorial investments as a mechanism to increase collective capabilities. This has been stressed several times in recent years, especially when it comes to the harmonisation of expenditures and the increasing of investment efforts.

Therefore, as we have presented in an exhaustive manner, it is of great importance for us to become aware of the fact that as the three aforementioned meeting structures (of heads of state, ministers of foreign affairs and ministers of defence) involved more or less similar dialogues or goals, jointly they point towards a single purpose: the endeavour to ensure regional stability and security.

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Grand Strategies in the Greater Black Sea Neighbourhood: Comparing the Geostrategic Responses of Romania and the Republic of Türkiye to the War in Ukraine

MIHAI CHRISTOPHER MARIAN RADOVICI AND ATAHAN DEMIRKOL[*]

ABSTRACT: This paper presents an in-depth exploration of how Romania and Türkiye, understood as powers that operate within the European architectures (being a Member State and a candidate country), have shifted their geostrategic approaches with respect to the Black Sea area since the start of the war in Ukraine. Through a comparative analysis of programmatic and operational documents, our study reveals the particularities and specificities that have shaped their external behaviours.

[*]   Mihai Christopher Marian Radovici: PhD, Doctoral School of Economics and International Business, Faculty of International Economic Relations, Bucharest University of Economics, Romania.
Atahan Demirkol: PhD Candidate and Research Assistant, Department of Political Science and Public Administration, Afyon Kocatepe University, Afyonkarahisar, Türkiye.

While several converging and diverging points emerge, we can notice that Türkiye has mostly tried to take a mediatory role, revealing several pivotal and balancing acts that have at times collided with previous trajectories, and instrumentalising geopolitics as a negotiation token. Similarly, the collective Black Sea frameworks and relative power clustering have been leveraged by Türkiye, especially when negotiating with the EU and, subsequently, its members, generating a rather specific dynamic between Türkiye and Romania (also within NATO). As for Romania, Bucharest has utilised its proximity to the war to act both as a West–East bridge and a gateway, offering support and drawing red lines. This duality has enabled Romania to reposition itself and spearhead several regional initiatives while retaining a moderate stance in the international forums. Hence, as the literature seems to be scarce, especially when it comes to comparatively analysing the changing stances of these two adjacent powers (whose interests should overlap in the Black Sea), it is worth delving more deeply into the contexts that have altered their pathways. In turn, by also highlighting the EU context in which they operate, we can create an overview of their strategic developments.

1. Introduction

On 24 February 2022, Moscow initiated an armed conflict in Ukraine, justifying its outward interventionism under the banner of a so-called "denazification" operation, in protection of its citizens and safeguarding its interests (Stanley, 2022). Despite these narratives, the actions of the Russian Federation have been met with criticism and even sanctioned by a large majority of the international community, pulling across Europe a new Iron Curtain that stretches from the Baltic to the Black Sea, which has also separated Belarus (Mărcău, 2022, pp. 9-10).

As such, we can observe – for the first time since the end of the Yugoslav Wars – that a military conflict of considerable dimensions has emerged on Europe's periphery, which, if it continues to escalate, is expected to spiral into a significant regional or global threat. Therefore, at first glance, we can emphasise how practitioners and experts alike consider that the socio-political ramifications of Russia's "special military operations" encompass tremendous (expected and unexpected) effects, an aspect that can already be observed in the profound shifts across local, regional and even global geopolitical and security architectures (Mărcău et al., 2022, p. 2).

In this context, it is important to stress that both Romania and Türkiye show an increased geostrategic interest in the Greater Black Sea region, as regional dynamics are fundamentally embedded in their outward equations, with Moscow's manoeuvrings playing a significant role in how Ankara and Bucharest have formulated their responses to the unfolding war. Therefore, from the interpretation of primary and secondary data sources we can note how Romania has taken a firmer stance with respect to support for Ukraine, while Türkiye has presented a rather balanced and slightly detached stance, given its particularly complex interactions with the Kremlin.

This research aspires to analyse how these two countries, being different (EU and non-EU) yet similar (Black Sea neighbours), have shaped their external projections, regional strategic perspectives and outward instrumentalisations concerning the broader neighbourhood approaches in light of the conflict in Ukraine. In order to realise this interpretation, in the first part of our study we examine the complementary measures taken by Romania, in parallel with its official positionings, while the second part observes the same matter from Türkiye's perspective. Thereafter, the third part combines both geopolitical and geostrategic understandings and provides a cross-national comparison of Romania and Türkiye in terms of their omnidirectional responses, considering their paradigmatic preconditions (especially the integration in European systems) and accounting for their individual specificities and particularities.

As a conclusory remark, we highlight how the two states have followed divergent operational, programmatic and pragmatic policies when responding to the ongoing conflict, a factor primarily founded upon their localised motivations, grand strategies and rationales. Thus, this research forges a new pathway of comparatively apprehending the interstate dynamics within the Black Sea neighbourhood and identifying the differences and similarities between these two regional powers, which can be used by future scholars. By providing a comparative summary of the recent actions of Romania and Türkiye – and an insight into the reasons behind those actions – within the context of the war that threatens the regional order and stability, we scrutinise the importance of having an increased geopolitical and geostrategic awareness concerning how different policies are being developed, alongside the ramifications they bear for the Black Sea regional security complexes.

2. Bucharest: Confronting the New Waves in the Black Sea

When it comes to understanding Romania's reactions to the unfolding conflict in Ukraine, alongside perturbations and its shift in strategic positionings within the expanded Black Sea region, it is relevant to account for previous geopolitical or geostrategic contexts, regional developments and national priorities. In this regard, we can note that Bucharest has displayed considerable solidarity with Kyiv, in a rather prompt manner, when it comes to Ukraine's territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence. These aspects are best shown through the official declarations, public narratives, diplomatic efforts, support offered across various international organisations, and even public opinion or civil sectors.

Therefore, when we analyse the concrete steps that the country has taken, one of the first measures which can be identified is the filing of the "Statement of Intervention" in the proceedings initiated by Ukraine against the Russian Federation at the International Court of Justice (13 September 2022), a document which concerns the dispute over the charges of genocide and violations of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.

Three days later, Romania lodged appeals to the registry of the European Court of Human Rights and an application for the country's intervention in favour of Ukraine's demands with respect to the case initiated by Kyiv against the Kremlin before the judges on 28 February 2022. The proceedings concern serious accusations of human rights violations committed en masse by the Russian Federation in the course

of its military intervention and seek to bring the leaders responsible for them to justice. This was part of Romania's judicial orientation towards the EU's sanctions and normative and procedural interventions.

Furthermore, as part of a collective action with 42 other states, on 2 March 2022 Romania submitted a case to the International Criminal Court for the investigation of crimes of genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in Ukraine. At the same time, the Romanian government also approved the proposal of the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to allocate an emergency fund of EUR 100,000 to the International Criminal Court Trust Fund to support investigations into international crimes committed by combatants, which was among one of the first official financial packages approved by the authorities.

Around the same time, we can observe that Romania sustained the activation of the Moscow Mechanism of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and directly contributed to the establishment of the ad-hoc investigative mission in Ukraine. Additionally, within this framework Romanian authorities supported the creation of adjacent multinational judicial and civil mechanisms to hold accountable those responsible for the 'crimes of aggression committed in Russia's illegal war against Ukraine' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Romania, 2022), which led to the establishment of a more coherent format to approach multilevel issues in a collective manner.

Romania's positionings towards the conflict have thus accounted for the regional developments and their direct or indirect impacts on national and regional security dimensions. As such, the responses have been formulated within a broader foreign policy and security landscape, as they consist of a wide palette of interconnections, such as the commitment to good neighbourhood relations, alongside coordination with partners and allies such as NATO, the EU, the Council of Europe (CoE), the Three Seas Initiative (3SI) and the Bucharest Nine (B9). Hence, as a member of

NATO and the European defence and security architectures, Romania has sustained measures to strengthen the collective security in the extended Black Sea region and has contributed to the Alliance's missions and exercises, interoperability, joint counteraction measures, risk reduction, etc. Concomitantly, through its membership in the European frameworks and EU structures, the country has also instrumentalised various socio-economic measures to support Ukraine, including humanitarian assistance, institutional resilience, foreign aid, key economic and infrastructure consolidation (market openness, tax exemptions, rerouting, etc.), patrimony and heritage preservation, inclusion for refugees, the provision of medical equipment, financial packages, etc. Similarly, throughout its statal agencies Romania has embarked on a rather intensive diplomatic mission to support Ukraine, seeking to mediate in the conflict, especially by pledging its assistance and offering mentorship in Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic aspirations, and promoting its accession to various international communities.

Aside from the foregoing, the conflict has led to the reassessment and improvement of Bucharest's outward stances, especially through the prism of its defence and security capabilities, including increasing interoperability, omnidirectional cooperation, Eastern flank consolidation, critical infrastructure development and large modernisation projects. Thus, on the afternoon when the conflict commenced, the Romanian Ministry of National Defence publicly stated that in light of the new situation all of its armed branches had activated various military command hubs tasked with closely monitoring the events and coordinating international forces and logistics for the specific situations that might arise. Moreover, in the following weeks the Ministry announced that it had taken all the necessary response measures, both internally and those in support of other relevant actors within the national and international security or defence systems, according to the inter-institutional cooperation policies

and rapid-response mechanisms. Despite this fact, it took quite some time (though less than other European actors) to formally provide technical and operational combat assistance directly to Ukraine (from logistics and equipment to weaponry and ammunition).

From another angle, Bucharest focused from the beginning on the humanitarian dimension, more often than not operating under the directions of the EU, providing medical assistance and evacuation solutions for casualties, facilitating their transfer by means of the rapid operationalisation of the EU civil protection logistics hub in Suceava (Ciocan, 2023). Hence, by 27 February 2022 the Ministry of National Defence had prepared 'all 11 hospitals under its Medical Directorate to provide assistance and treatment for wounded Ukrainian servicemen' (Agerpres, 2022). Moreover, following a request from the Ukrainian Ministry of Defence, only a few months after the start of the conflict its Romanian counterpart began the emergency shipping of surplus materials, ammunition and ballistic protection, 'equipment that constitutes an element of logistical support necessary for Ukraine's efforts to repel the aggression of the Russian Federation', worth over EUR 2 million (Agerpres, 2023). Furthermore, from the beginning and still at the time of writing (a context in which CEE countries oppose these measures), Romania has remained open to Ukrainian goods, expanding its capacity to operate, process and redistribute them as fast as possible, particularly agricultural goods (since almost 70% of grain passes through the country's Black Sea and Danube ports).

In addition, Romania has strengthened its defence capabilities in the Black Sea, initiating in mid-2022 a considerable modernisation and (re)adjustment programme for its naval forces and port infrastructure. Following the 2022 Madrid Summit, Romania hosted various NATO joint exercises and requested an increased presence of Allied contingents in the area (a position also reiterated during the subsequent NATO, 3SI and B9 Summits), alongside the full support for developing a new Strategic

Concept at the level of the Alliance (NATO, 2022; Severin, 2022). In parallel, Bucharest demanded an enhanced US military presence, a standpoint that represented a kind of strategic pivot towards NATO's Eastern border through timely and rapid policy decisions in the allied context and by supplementing deployments of US forces in the most threatened areas (Romney, 2023). In this context, the request meant that *de jure* the region would benefit from two converging security and defence strategies – NATO and US doctrines – which would strengthen the deterrence mechanism of the conventional military forces stationed there (Isac, 2023). This resulted in Romania and Bulgaria hosting multi-arms allied battle groups and the deployment of a forward command system, developments that 'prompted the Alliance to adopt a new NATO force model with a total of 800,000 troops organised in three echelons and with varying degrees of responsiveness', which was declared to be 'a clear signal that NATO's military strategy is thus shifting to a concept of graduated and asymmetric conventional deterrence across the entire European strategic theatre' (Degeratu, 2023, p. 18).

Since the Black Sea itself is often referred to as the only neighbour that never attacked Romania, Bucharest's positions can be identified as the following:

1. Romania has remained closely attached to the positions proposed or undertaken by the international community (EU, NATO, UN, CoE, etc.), seeking to respect norms and uphold principles that govern their peaceful interactions, even spearheading its own initiatives.
2. Bucharest intervened early on in support of Ukraine and has enacted major humanitarian, economic, energy, or even military measures to support its partners, all with respect to its principle of good neighbourhood relations.

3. Romania continues to be a major regional player, and it has followed its strategic interests in the Black Sea, establishing itself as a spearhead for the Western community and becoming a gateway to the region.

4. Bucharest's interventions are part of a long-term strategic concept in which the neighbourhood holds a central place for Romania's external projections.

3. Ankara: Caught between Eurasian Straits

By inspecting the primary and secondary data sources, we can clearly see how the positioning of Türkiye in terms of the Russia–Ukraine conflict encompasses political, economic, diplomatic and legal dimensions, through an intertwined contextualisation. All the same, in order to comprehend Ankara's position on the conflict and the specificities or particularities that make Türkiye's stance more nuanced, it is also worth emphasising the historical competition between Russia and Türkiye in terms of geopolitical relations. Hence, the country formulates its geopolitical strategy depending on the advantages of its geostrategic position, as it has always portrayed itself as a bridge between Eurasian powers and found itself right in the middle of the geopolitical chessboard (Mishchenko et al., 2022).

As such, we can observe that in the exchanges between Russia and Türkiye, the two countries have always been simultaneously branded as both geopolitical competitors and partners, a situation perfectly presented by Cheterian (2023). In this respect, we can observe that this "frenemies" conceptualisation of a rather distinct international affairs model has often

been highlighted by the media since 2016 (Mert, 2023). Therefore, the historical and current alliances between Russia and Türkiye, alongside Ankara's shifting stances within the international diplomatic spheres, aimed at promoting a rules-based ordering of the global community and a respect for statal autonomy, made this analysis more difficult and interpretative. Despite that – as the main topic of our research exclusively focuses on the geopolitical strategies of Romania and Türkiye, within the Black Sea neighbourhood and in the time frame of the conflict in Ukraine – the Russo–Turkish interactions merely represent a historical pinpointing that can summarise the ramifications which led to Ankara's response generation logic.

On the one hand, Russia and Türkiye have shared a competitive logic, sometimes through their divergent interests, most notably after the Cold War period and across the post-Soviet spaces in Eurasia (Köstem, 2022). Thereafter, we can notice a plenitude of complex balancing acts in their foreign assemblages. Aside from this, the increased bilateral interlinkages between Moscow and Ankara, particularly concerning energy matters and the Syrian Civil War, resulted in the establishment of strategic interconnections and dependencies. On a similar note, given the fact that Türkiye approved the acquisition of Russian S-400 air defence systems rather than US-made systems, the tensions with Washington resulted in its expulsion from the F-35 programme (Köstem, 2022).

Right after the commencement of Russian operations in Ukraine, Türkiye swung slightly in its foreign policy, and it had to choose from a palette of reactions, all of which were later formulated in accordance with its broader regional strategies. One of the first moves that Ankara made was an implicit attempt to bring forth and debate the rights and authorities given to Türkiye by the 1936 Montreux Convention, which particularly revolved around the possibility to unilaterally close the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits to military crossings. Later, picking

up on this narrative, the declaration of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Türkiye – which clearly described Russia's actions as a 'war' – placed the matter directly onto the official agendas and dominated political debate for several months (Üstün, 2022). Therefore, right at the beginning of the conflict, Türkiye announced that it would invoke Article 19 of the Montreux Convention, and it closed the straits to cut off any military advances related to the ongoing conflict (Coffey & Kasapoğlu, 2023). Furthermore, another step was taken by Ankara when it provided Ukraine with equipment that the media often portrays as 'changing the nature of warfare': Bayraktar TB2 drones, which were sold in bulk via a rather favourable contract (Witt, 2023).

Immediately after Russia's operations had commenced, Türkiye evinced a rather pacifist stance, calling on both parties to settle their dispute at the negotiation table rather than on the ground. This can be observed through the fact that even before February 2022, during a visit to the Russian Federation, President Erdoğan had formally offered to hold a Ukraine–Russia Peace Summit with the two countries, which represented an attempt to calm the situation in the separatist regions and in the aftermath of the annexation of Crimea (Al Jazeera, 2023). Although such a meeting never happened, still in the first month of the conflict (on 10 March 2022), as a diplomatic mediation mechanism, Türkiye held a trilateral meeting which gathered the delegations and Foreign Ministers of Russia, Ukraine and Türkiye at the Antalya Diplomacy Forum, with discussions revolving around humanitarian issues, economic prospects and the possibilities of ending the conflict (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023).

In addition to the foregoing, in an attempt to provide a humanitarian corridor and help the civilian population caught up in the fighting, we can mention President Erdoğan's calls with President Putin, in which he repeatedly mentioned his willingness to take the role of mediator

and provide aid, relief packages, safe routes, etc., even hosting a second peace talk between the belligerents in an attempt to establish a permanent ceasefire (Daily Sabah, 2023a, 2023b). Similarly, we can underline how Türkiye instrumentalised its diplomatic, geopolitical, geostrategic and even historical positions to resolve the conflict and restabilise the Black Sea region, whilst avoiding any unnecessary socio-economic negative spillovers into its own territory.

Therefore, to facilitate the humanitarian needs, Türkiye pressured the international community, and as a result Russia agreed to have Türkiye and the UN as facilitators for the Black Sea Grain Corridor to export nearly 33 million tonnes of grain from Ukraine to Europe, Asia, Türkiye, Africa and the Middle East – although this was a measure that lasted only for a while. Additionally, to counteract the projected global food crisis caused by the supply chain disruptions, in coordination with the UN, Türkiye implemented a diplomatic and geopolitical strategy to build a Joint Coordination Centre in İstanbul to optimise the rerouting of goods (Özer, 2023). Moreover – from a geopolitical perspective, and in a rationale of providing security throughout the Black Sea neighbourhood and sustain the balance of power – it might be concluded that Ankara has used its diplomatic capabilities to tip the scale in favour of the international community, particularly in humanitarian, energy or food-security matters, which can also be attributed to Türkiye's non-alignment policy concerning the sanctions imposed against Russia, which makes Ankara still capable of engaging with Moscow and negotiating deals (Üstün, 2022).

A further importance of the conflict to Türkiye lies in the leadership role that Ankara can claim, with balancing actions being taken from the position of mediator, which enables it to gain primacy within the international community and leverage its new status as a brokerage instrument for its own interests. Thus, the interventions made can be

considered part of broader country-branding aspirations, in which Ankara becomes the centre of Black Sea developments and represents a counterweight in Eurasian affairs.

In light of the above, we can observe that Türkiye has so far implemented a unique reordering and has positioned itself right in the middle of the geopolitical developments, remaining connected with both Western and Eastern actors and even bridging and facilitating their interactions. Yet this is not a new approach, as Türkiye's traditional role of regional leadership has deep roots in the historical gateway between East and West. Nowadays, these avenues are juxtaposed in the country, which might also mean that it may have to choose which path it forges for itself, with Ankara having to carefully manage NATO, EU and US perspectives, its traditional and historical relations with Eurasian partners, and strategic coordination with Russia, all of which have reframed the Black Sea dynamics.

However, with its clear condemnation of Moscow as an aggressor, the blocking of Russian warships from the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits, and the assumption of responsibility as a diplomatic mediator to prevent further humanitarian crises, Türkiye has highlighted its significance for the Black Sea region and its broader geopolitical importance (Üstün, 2022). This position stems not only from narrow security or defence calculations (which are often a zero-sum game), but also from the lens of a comprehensive foreign policy approach. Therefore, Türkiye has managed to surface as a pivotal node in the region, with President Erdoğan declaring that Ankara has 'undertaken many diplomatic moves ranging from the Istanbul Process, which brought the sides together around the same table, to the prisoner exchange and Black Sea Initiative' (Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye, 2023).

Grasping this historical responsibility to ensure permanent security and integration within the Greater Black Sea Basin, Türkiye almost immediately took several diplomatic and political measures to intervene

and resolve the conflict. Overall, Ankara's stance is highlighted by the following features:

1. To resolve the conflict in Ukraine, Türkiye has leveraged its historical geopolitical importance in the Black Sea region to assume a mediatory and leadership role.

2. Even though it is risking a potential prolongation of its EU-accession process, rather than implementing European Union policies for the conflict, Türkiye has followed its own foreign policy doctrines and trusted its previous experiences.

3. The geopolitical importance of the Black Sea region for Ankara to establish a secure, partnered and cooperative atmosphere has led Türkiye to approach matters in a multinational manner.

4. Through balancing the two sides in the conflict, alongside organisations such as the EU and NATO, Türkiye has proved its geopolitical significance for a grand strategy for the Black Sea region.

4. Omnidirectional, Multilevel and Multiactor Initiatives: A Comparative Analysis

Table 1 identifies, extrapolates and interprets some of the actions undertaken by Romania and Türkiye in support of Ukraine, alongside several principal dimensions in the political, social, economic, security and defence spheres.

Table 1: Comparative actions of Romania and the Republic of Türkiye in support of Ukraine

ACTION	ROMANIA	
Ukraine's candidate status in the EU	'One of the most important political objectives during this period has been Ukraine's achievement of EU candidate status, which was reached in June this year, together with the Republic of Moldova, and Romania has traditionally been one of the strongest supporters of Ukraine's European agenda' (Ministry of National Defence, Government of Romania, 2022).	
Sanctions against the Russian Federation	'Romania has chosen to align itself with EU policy and strictly comply with the economic sanctions imposed on the Russian Federation' (European Commission, 2023).	

REPUBLIC OF TÜRKIYE	DIMENSION
'Asked about Türkiye's perception of Ukraine's attempt to gain the status of an EU candidate country, [Turkish Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs] Kaymakcı offered full support for Ukraine, but also Georgia and Moldova, the three most ambitious members of the so-called Eastern Partnership' (Yar, 2022).	**Political**
'Türkiye is one of the countries that opposed the imposition of sanctions on Russia: it did not stop flights to and from Moscow, and the banking system adopted payment methods in rubles. On the other hand, it has accepted – after much resistance – NATO enlargement with Finland and Sweden, delivered Bayraktar drones to Ukraine, which have proved extremely useful on the battlefield, and in July released a number of Ukrainian commanders from the Azovstal plant in Mariupol, considered heroes for the way they tried to resist the Russian offensive on the city. Ankara's announcement came at the end of a visit by Volodimir Zelenski [*sic*] to Istanbul' (Dobreanu, 2023). Türkiye has been against the sanctions to isolate Russia.	**Economic**

ACTION	ROMANIA	
Sustaining Ukraine's combat capabilities and resilience-building	'Romania actively supports the support to Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova for their accession to the European family, as well as the cooperation in the trilateral format [of] Romania–Ukraine–Republic of Moldova, in order to strengthen common capacities and also, in the context of the invasion of [*sic*] the Russian Federation against [*sic*] Ukraine, to reduce the effects of aggressive military and hybrid actions of the Russian Federation in the two states, but also in order to strengthen the resilience of Kyiv and Chisinau' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Romania, 2023). In this context, Romania has supported the strengthening of NATO's presence in Eastern Europe and the Black Sea region, including through participation in joint military exercises with its allies. This has included hosting NATO troops and equipment on Romanian territory, notably at the Mihail Kogălniceanu military base near the Black Sea. Romania has strengthened its own military capabilities in the Black Sea, modernising its naval fleet and port infrastructure to respond to threats in the region. It has also supported military assistance and training efforts for the Ukrainian armed forces and provided logistical aid to Ukraine.	

REPUBLIC OF TÜRKIYE	DIMENSION
The Republic of Türkiye has maintained its position of strategic importance in the Black Sea region, deploying its military resources and supporting its NATO partners in the Black Sea. Thus, Türkiye was also 'the first country to provide Ukraine with combat drones when other partners were still hesitant about their military aid. Ankara's decision to close the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits to Russian warships also helped prevent escalation in the Black Sea' (Gaber, 2023). In addition, 'another significant Turkish contribution to Ukrainian defense efforts is the continued supply of Bayraktar TB2 UAVs. These drones performed several highly visible roles in the early stages of the war, including distracting [the] air defense assets of the [guided missile cruiser] Moskva when it was afloat. Video footage from the drones also helped Kyiv's information campaign by building a narrative of military success. Turkey [*sic*] has shied away from formally acknowledging the nature and quantity of its military assistance to Ukraine, but open-source data suggests support for the fight against Russia. Turkey's contributions target key capabilities, even if the materiel appears modest compared to the fighter jets and battle tanks that other NATO members provide' (Güvenç & Aydın, 2023). Türkiye has exported Bayraktar TB2 drones to Ukraine to strengthen its military capabilities.	**Military and Defence**

ACTION	ROMANIA	
Integration and support offered to Ukrainian refugees	'In just one year of war, 5.1 million Ukrainians were forced to leave their country. This is the fastest increase in the number of refugees since the Second World War. Of these, 3.7 million have arrived [in] or passed through Romania. According to data from June 2023, 95,640 of them remained in our country, 80% of them women and children' (Tepșanu, 2023). In addition, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Romania, in August 2023 the 'key figures' of the Ukraine Refugee Situation were the following: '140,931 refugees granted temporary protection in Romania. 94,257 refugees present in Romania (as of 20 August 2023). 48,718 refugees were supported with cash assistance in 2023. 43,129 refugees supported in 2022. 61,249 refugees were provided with protection counselling services and legal support in 2023. 65,000 refugees assisted in 2022. 3,784 refugees supported with livelihoods and employment services in 2023' (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Romania, 2023).	

REPUBLIC OF TÜRKIYE	DIMENSION
'In 2022, a significant concern related to migration and asylum was the number of arrivals from Ukraine as a result of the conflict with Russia. Despite the fact that the number of Ukrainian refugees has consistently ranged between 15,000 and 20,000, reportedly around 145,000 Ukrainians reached Türkiye since the war's declaration in February 2022. However, the number of Ukrainians present in the country by January 2023 was 95,000, according to UNHCR. 58,000 Ukrainians had arrived in Türkiye as of March 2022, with at least 30,000 entering by land and 900 arriving by air via third nations. The first convoys carrying Ukrainians to Türkiye consisted of women and children. 7,131 Ukrainians applied for international protection as of February 2023. However, this number declined to 4,955 by June 2023, according to UNHCR' (Asylum Information Database, 2022, p. 14).	**Social and Humanitarian**

ACTION	ROMANIA	
Asymmetric warfare and cyber security (disinformation, misinformation and supra-information)	Romania has stepped up its intelligence gathering and sharing efforts with its partners in NATO and other security organisations to monitor developments in Ukraine and the Black Sea region. Thus, 'While the present war between Ukraine and Russia is fought in trenches, in the long run, it is an ideological war, between authoritarian and democratic political views, between the East and the West. In order to help Ukraine win this war, the West needs a stable South-Eastern periphery. Although Russia does not have direct geopolitical interests in these countries, they [*sic*] are thriving on destabilising societies and countries. With no military presence in the region and with countries being in the process of energy diversification, Russia's ultimate tactics remain disinformation campaigns, the spread of fake news and conspiracy theories that will give people proxy discords to worry about with local authorities instead of supporting the longer, bigger game, the real war across the border' (Răducu & Hercigonja, 2023, p. 14).	

Source: Compiled by the authors based on the given sub-points and in concordance with their respective quotations

REPUBLIC OF TÜRKIYE	DIMENSION
'In Europe, many countries supporting Ukraine became worried that these disinformation and election interference campaigns could be used against them, which shows how this problem has become a national security concern. Disinformation campaigns, as a strategic tool, became such a national security concern that NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept spends a good amount of space discussing readiness against this threat. The transatlantic alliance's 2030 vision has called for strengthening the Alliance's readiness and taking joint action against hybrid wars and disinformation operations. The nature of the challenge has drastically altered, as exemplified by the war in Ukraine, and NATO will have to continue to pay serious attention to this challenge in the years ahead. NATO's efforts will not be sufficient, and individual states must increase their national capacities to deal with this threat as well. The sophistication and expansiveness of the threat of disinformation require countries like Türkiye to develop national capacity to address this challenge in an age of increasingly complex and hybrid conflicts' (Altun, 2023, pp. 13-27).	**Informational Security**

5. Conclusions

When summarising the evidence, we can note that Romania and Türkiye have taken different approaches to the unfolding events in Ukraine in accordance with their specific national objectives, outward projections and relations with the Russian Federation. Therefore, these assemblages and interactions are dependent on political culture, geopolitical preferences and historical dimensions, amongst a spectrum of other reasons, all of which have made their processes either diverge or converge.

Romania has remained strongly attached to EU and NATO frameworks, displaying a strong solidarity with Ukraine, whereas Türkiye has taken a more balanced approach, based on various socio-economic or strategic regional interests. Aside from this, with respect to the security and defence architecture, Romania has stepped up its efforts to provide solutions, engage threats and risks, consolidate its position, and strengthen its resilience and capabilities, while creating deterrence and establishing an effective reordering of the Black Sea spheres. Bucharest has actively engaged in gearing up and spearheading initiatives under the aegis of regional institutions (3SI, B9, the EU Strategy for the Danube Region, the Black Sea Corridor, etc.) together with its Central and Eastern European partners. Overall, we can observe that in official positions, public narratives and concrete measures alike, Romania has adopted a firm approach, often rooted in the principles of human rights, international norms, democracy, and internal independence, with humanitarian and security undertones. The country's actions are often shaped by its participation in foreign structures (under the auspices of international coordination), with Romania supporting collective actions and joint measures taken with respect to both Ukraine and the Russian

Federation, in parallel with connected processes. Moreover, most of the public and private measures taken, complementary to the ones coming from central or local authorities, are aimed at providing humanitarian support, which includes aid, financial packages, economic measures, medical assistance, etc.

In comparison, Türkiye has a more comprehensive and balanced approach in regard to the conflict. Thus, despite being a NATO member, Ankara has been less vocal regarding sanctions and criticism of the Kremlin, which is partially due to major economic and energy interests. Nevertheless, Türkiye has sustained Ukraine through various initiatives, especially in the spheres of economic cooperation, diplomatic mediation, and military and technological support (albeit to a more limited extent than other Allies), with additional aid for refugees and humanitarian measures. All of these juxtapositions and amalgamating stances are derived from Ankara's desire to carefully balance the complex regional environments and avoid any direct interference in the ongoing critical matters. In light of this, we can observe how Türkiye has trusted its historical and geopolitical status to resolve the conflict in the region, undertaking a mediatory role between Eurasian players, a stance that has clearly affected its external trajectory and projections. Hence, Ankara has placed itself in the middle of the situation, seeking to reconcile all actors, for instance approaching the conflict with a conciliatory strategy based on mediation and peaceful resolution. Moreover, avoiding measures focusing on the containment and isolation of the Russian Federation, Türkiye has taken a detached stance and has been able to comprehensively intervene in the supply chain (rerouting, the creation of corridors, civilian measures, etc.) to avoid a food or energy crisis. At the same time, Türkiye has exported advanced military systems, one of these being the Bayraktar TB2 drones, to prove its support of Ukraine's defensive capabilities. Similarly, by blocking access to the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits for military navies under

Article 19 of the Montreux Convention, Ankara has sought to limit the potential escalation of the situation and to undertake a mediatory role. Despite the fact that were the country to fully support and follow the EU's reactive isolation policies towards Russia, it could potentially accelerate its accession to the Union, Türkiye has instead opted to seize and sustain its geopolitical leadership role in the Black Sea region. Moreover, it can be asserted that Türkiye has performed most of the aforementioned actions as part of a broader perspective in the Black Sea neighbourhood, acting and reacting according to its long-term policies and aspirations to reclaim a status of primacy in the international community.

To conclude, the analysis conducted in this paper provides essential insights into the major strategic shifts that have marked the foreign policy approaches of Romania and Türkiye since the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine, with respect to the regional perspectives and prospective evolutions. Hence, the research represents a preliminary and non-exhaustive summary of the current situation, shedding some light on the gap that exists in the literature, especially through the prism of comparative interpretation. Moreover, the authors note that future endeavours might better analyse, extract, identify and interpret the discursive data and official documents, as well as the end results of the measures taken by both parties, especially with regard to the evolving contexts and the specificities and particularities that will characterise the period that lies ahead of us.

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Part II

The European Integration and Modernisation of the Central and Eastern European Region in the New Geopolitical Environment

Reshaping the European Union: The Changing Dynamics of Influence, Integration and Identity

BOJAN LAZAREVSKI AND TONI MILESKI*

ABSTRACT: The integration of Europe's Eastern region has gradually resulted in a redefinition of understanding European identity and a shifting balance of power within the EU. The outbreak of the Russia–Ukraine conflict has accelerated this process, additionally triggering a series of adjustments in the EU's foreign policy. This paper aims to explore the implications of these changes, particularly in relation to the increased influence of Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries in the decision-making processes of the EU. The research investigates the new trends in CEE countries' involvement in European integration and their impact on EU policies, and asks whether this power shift also signifies a transition from West to East within the context of European integration. Besides analysing the Russia–Ukraine conflict and European identity, the

*   Bojan Lazarevski: Political Scientist in International and Intercultural Studies; graduate of Ss. Cyril and Methodius University, Skopje, North Macedonia; Erasmus and CEEPUS alumnus at Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic. Toni Mileski: Full Professor, Department of Security, Defence and Peace, Faculty of Philosophy, Ss. Cyril and Methodius University, Skopje, North Macedonia.

study also explores EU expansion, enlargement and, hypothetically, the potential reforms of the EU as factors contributing to the power shift. With a comprehensive examination of these factors, based on reviewing the recent literature on these topics, our study contributes to a deeper understanding of the evolving power dynamics within the EU and their implications for the process of European integration. This analysis through the prism of identities explores how European identity as a parallel of national identity can be a crucial factor in understanding the power dynamics within the Union, which is a geopolitical factor in decision-making, influenced by the EU's enlargement to the East and its changing balance of power. Replies to a questionnaire on European identity are used to understand the different perspectives that different individuals have on it. The study also examines the potential for the re-creation of European identity in a new paradigm, including the possible outcomes of further potential enlargements of the EU, and what can be learned from the recent efforts to integrate the Western Balkans.

1. Introduction

Initially focusing on states in Western Europe, the EU has expanded over the years into a diverse group of nations, incorporating countries from Central, Eastern and Southern Europe. This integration growth, particularly the inclusion of CEE countries, has raised questions about how it impacts the dynamics of the EU's balance of power and about the idea of developing a common, shared European identity. While the EU has made progress in fostering a European identity, challenges persist due to strong national identities. The ongoing Russia–Ukraine conflict and the EU's response further highlight these complexities. This paper explores the intricate relationship between EU integration, European identity and the shifting power balance within the Union. It considers the impact on these dynamics of potential reforms, future enlargement and the conflict in Ukraine. By analysing historical trends and potential scenarios, this research aims to enhance our understanding of the evolving power dynamics in the EU and their consequences for European integration.

2. Methodology

In this research, the focus is on the qualitative approach to the analysis of changes in the balance of power within the European Union, primarily influenced by the conflict in Ukraine. For this purpose, the existing literature used was mainly newly-published articles and researches, and through their analysis the main topics and objectives of this study

were covered. In addition, parts of the results of a previously-conducted questionnaire to determine the impact of mobility programmes on European and national identity were also employed. Conducted between February and June 2023, The Impact of Mobility Programmes on European Identity among Young People, which featured 376 respondents from almost all the countries of Europe, provided material relevant to our research, which will be contextualised here.

3. The Historical Integration of the EU and Changes in the Concept of European Identity

3.1. A Brief Introduction to EU Integration and Enlargement

The roots of European integration can be traced back to the aftermath of World War II – when leaders sought to prevent further devastating conflicts on the continent – and the establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), later the European Economic Community (EEC) and finally the European Union (EU), with the goal of creating one common market and customs union. European integration has expanded over the years, encompassing not only economic integration, but also various other policy areas, including trade, agriculture, cooperation in foreign policy, security, justice, competition, and environmental protection. Furthermore, the introduction of the common currency of the euro in 1999 deepened the economic integration among the Member

States (MS). Today when we talk about European integration, we are also referring to the integration of new MS into the existing framework of the Union, i.e. further enlargement. The European Union stands as a unique experiment in regional integration, and in a world of rapid geopolitical changes, the capacity of the EU for fast evolution and adaptation will be a key determiner of its global position. Here it would be crucial to determine the new ways of integration, but also the influence in the other countries in the geopolitically important regions in Europe, including the possibilities of enlargement.

3.2 Analysing the Concept of European Identity

There might not be a very clear and exclusive definition of European identity, making a clear distinction of what is and what is not European, but in this section we try to briefly analyse it from various perspectives – in theory and in practice – by reviewing the responses to a questionnaire regarding European identity among individuals across Europe. Thinking about the concept of European identity, many questions may come to mind. Does European identity cover only the countries of the European Union or the whole of Europe? If it is related to the EU, what happens when new countries join? How is this identity formed and what happens to national identity? On the other hand, if this identity is linked to Europe as a continent, where are its borders? The answers to these questions might not be simple, but we will focus on analysing the concept of European identity as a necessary core pillar of the EU and a geopolitical factor that influences its global position, which will also provide us with insights to understand the power influence and potential shift, through the prism of the identities.

Regardless of whether we analyse European identity as coming from the EU itself or from the whole continent, it is clear that such an identity is

regional rather than national, and not linked to only one country, nation or ethnicity. This comes from the fact that the EU is neither a country nor an international organisation, making it a special case of *sui-generis*. However, although the Union stands for the integration of countries on the European continent, the EU in itself is also not a region, although it is in Europe. Yet there can be polemics even concerning the territory of the continent of Europe, which is not clearly determined. The natural borders of Europe are manifestly the seas on the North, West and South, but there is not a single accepted geographical boundary to the East, and the geographical identity of Europe differs in various organisations, such as the 57 countries in the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), or the 47 in the Council of Europe (Chopin, 2018). And although there can be similarities between national and regional identities, the special status of the EU and the unique position of Europe further justifies a special analysis when it comes to European identity.

While the EU is primarily a political and economic union, there have always been efforts to establish and encourage a sense of common European identity among the citizens of its Member States. European identity is a key goal for the EU, but there are many challenges due to the differences in society, culture and national identities of individual MS. The multiculturality of the countries in the European project is the inspiration for the motto "United in Diversity" to describe the identity of Europe, as a parallel to the USA's "Melting Pot" and the Canadian "Cultural Mosaic". The concept of a common EU identity remains a topic of debate and research. While the EU has made efforts to foster a common identity among its Member States through initiatives such as European citizenship, cultural diversity and mobility programmes, the extent to which there is a distinct and widely accepted EU identity is still open to interpretation. National identities and attachments to individual MS continue to play a significant role, and the idea of a common EU identity is influenced by various factors

such as historical, cultural and political contexts. Among the members of the EU, failing to embrace a European identity may result in prioritising national interests over the broader European objectives, which might not be seen as common interests. As a consequence, the differences in the interests and priorities of individual countries can lead to shifts in the power dynamics, as countries may seek to influence EU decision-making to serve their specific needs and objectives. The challenge in this regard is balancing the common European identity with the diverse national interests and perspectives of the Member States, while creating a common ground of acceptable values and visions.

3.2.1. How Do Different Europeans Understand European Identity?

Within the framework of a self-complied and conducted questionnaire entitled The Impact of Mobility Programmes on European Identity among Young People, respondents were asked to describe how they understood the concept of "European identity". The answers vary greatly, showing how broad the perceptions of different individuals are. We cite some of the responses below; as all replies were anonymous, the names given are fictitious.

Question: What does European identity mean to you?

Anna (age: 27–30) from Germany, lives in Switzerland
'Mostly 27 EU countries united in diversity, respecting human rights and the rule of law, [with a] common historical background, which are stronger together.'

Kilian (age: 27–30) from Germany, lives in Germany

'European identity means overcoming national cultural/historical differences/prejudices and cooperating "internationally" on the basis of respect and equality. Let's value individuality and personal rights and form a bond to stay calm. Also [it is] only a mid-term goal for the ambitious goal of an even broader identity and cooperation.'

Nepheli (age 24–26) from Greece, lives in the UK

'Part of a multicultural union that welcomes differences, cultural identities and security. Access [to] market [*sic*] and travel.'

Lucija (age 18–20) from Croatia, lives in Croatia

'National identities are subject to constant changes taking place everywhere. In Europe, their changeability comes to the fore because many nations, thanks to the processes of globalisation and integration, have to change their own identity.'

Tizian (18–20) from Romania, lives in Romania

'The connection you have with the knowledge that you are European, that you belong to a whole [that is] larger than your country.'

Julia (age 21–23) from Germany, lives in France

'It is sharing the same values such as democracy, liberty and equality and defending them (for ex. [*sic*] when you support ukrainien [*sic*] refugees; fighting for justice and gender equality, etc.).'

Pedro (age 27–30) from Spain, lives in Spain

'Firmly believing that we live in [a] part of the world with strong common values where democracy and freedom of choice is [*sic*] preserved.'

An analysis of such different answers reveals that European identity is multifaceted and can encompass a range of attitudes and principles, including shared values, cooperation, overcoming differences, and multiculturalism. The understanding of European identity is not uniform, and it evolves based on personal experiences, values and perspectives. This diversity of viewpoints within the concept of European identity reflects the intrinsic complexity of the European Union and its evolving identity.

4. Analysing the Factors Contributing to the Changing Balance of Power in the EU

4.1. The Impact of European Identity

According to Medrano (2010), despite the process of European integration we can identify low levels of identification with Europe. Here the importance of the need for conceptual clarity and empirical research on the subject is highlighted, pointing to three main problems in understanding identification with Europe as the blending of different concepts such as support for the EU, European integration and identification with Europe, the lack of precision in using the concept of European identity, and the assumption that the notion of identification with Europe is universally understood. Criticising the lack of conceptual rigour when using the term "identity", Medrano further points out that the existence of different dimensions of identification with Europe and their frequent mixing leads to confusion. These low levels of identification with Europe in some regions can distance the countries concerned from the decisions of the

EU and make them prefer other strategic decisions, thus potentially impacting a power shift. This is not an easy task for the Union, however, as the development of a common European identity is a complex matter and not without challenges and controversies.

National identities and attachments to individual Member States still remain strong, and debates are ongoing about the balance between national sovereignty and European integration. However, the EU continues to work and focus on developing and intensifying a sense of common identity, while respecting and preserving the unique characteristics of its MS, an approach which corresponds to the motto "United in Diversity". In this way, the Union generally strives to promote and nurture a common European identity that complements the national identities of its Member States in a way that enables the emergence of a dual identity: national *and* European. The EU recognises the cultural diversity of Europe while promoting common values, symbols, institutions and initiatives that foster a sense of belonging and unity among its citizens. Such a development of a common European identity can contribute to a potential shift in the balance of power within the EU by aligning the interests of the MS to the Union as a whole, which might encourage greater participation in EU decision-making processes, allowing for collaboration and impacting the distribution of power. The concept of a dual identity – where citizens identify both as nationals of their respective countries and as Europeans – further promotes cooperation and unity, potentially leading to more balanced power relationships within the EU.

4.2. The Impact of the EU's Expansion to the East

The historical enlargement of the EU has enabled and brought about significant changes in the balance of power within the EU. Although

characterising the power shift in a clear and consistent direction from West to East is a complex and nuanced matter, we can definitely agree that the enlargement itself is characterised as a process that gradually includes the countries of Central, Eastern and Southern Europe. The EU was originally founded (as the EEC) in 1957 by six Western European countries: Belgium, France, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and West Germany, allowing focus primarily on Western Europe in the early stages. The first major enlargement occurred in 1973, when the United Kingdom, Denmark and Ireland joined, marking the first shift beyond the original six Member States (Europa.eu, n.d.). At this time, the members were still mainly concentrated in Western Europe, which was thus the region exerting the greatest influence in the decision-making processes.

This situation changed with the EU's gradual Eastern expansion, especially following the end of the Cold War. As former Eastern Bloc countries began transitioning to democracies and market economies, they expressed interest in joining the Union. The EU embarked on a series of enlargement rounds that included countries from Central and Eastern Europe such as Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Romania, the Baltic States and, most recently, in 2013, Croatia. And while the Eastern European countries have gained representation and influence within the EU, the original Member States in the West, still possess significant economic and political weight. The increased number of non-Western members mostly influences processes through the increase in the number of representatives from these countries in the European institutions, as well as the possibility of one of these countries using the right of veto in the processes needing a unanimous vote. There is not enough evidence to claim that simply expanding to the South and East in itself brings strong countries that would catalyse a power shift within the Union, but the increase in the number of such countries from

none to a majority definitely leaves room for the possibility, taking into account the other factors that we will analyse in due course.

What is definitely clear is that the EU expansion along with the new treaties and reforms that have taken place over the decades, have allowed a re-creation of the term "European". The idea of collaboration is that countries unite to work for common interests, but there have always been power imbalances when trying to make joint decisions. Nonetheless, we would argue here that the weak European identity and lack of prioritising common interests over national ones leaves room for these enhanced power imbalances and may be one of the main factors contributing to them. For example, when we talk about the USA, there is one identity and the separate states do not necessarily fight to influence federal policies, as is the case in Europe. The same is true with the regions and identities of other major geopolitical actors such as China or Russia, but again, we cannot compare the identity of the EU with those of the other big powers, because the EU is a unique example. That said, in this instance it makes sense that a common European identity including the newly admitted members might reduce the power imbalances and change the way we view them. Or at least, they would be focused on interest groups rather than countries or regions trying to dominate a particular policy area. In contrast, in a situation where there is a lack of common identity and many different identities among the Member States, countries are likely to try to influence the common policies – in ways that they deem to be most important for them individually. The power dynamics within the EU are also influenced by various factors, including the size and economic strength of Member States, and the historical roles within the EU also have an impact. Recent events, such as the United Kingdom's decision to leave the EU, have further altered the dynamics within the Union. The departure of a significant Western European MS has had implications for the balance of power, leaving a vacuum to be filled by other countries.

4.3. The Impact of Further EU Enlargement

Before analysing the potential impact of further enlargement to the balance of power within the Union, we must first note that all of the future potential member countries are considered as part of Southern or Eastern Europe, which makes it clear that further enlargement can only contribute to a greater representation of the South and East and thus create the potential for greater influence from those directions as well. Yet the power shift analysis, of course, cannot be simplified this much, because, in such a scenario, we can also expect a greater influence of the existing members from Western Europe, who traditionally hold the power in the decision-making processes. There are a few key aspects worth noting in this analysis.

Firstly, as we have already mentioned, it has become clear and discussed many times that before any further enlargement to the East, the EU must first reform itself, and it is interesting to see in which way that might happen and how it could affect the power shift in the future. Will the new members gain more seats in the European Parliament? Will the current numbers be redistributed, or will the method of voting be altered? We still do not know the way the EU might change prior to the accession of the new members, and these changes might be crucial in analysing the impact of the enlargement itself. For instance, if majority voting is implemented in more sectors, the number of the parliamentary seats of the biggest and most powerful Western countries might not outnumber the rest, giving an advantage to the latter countries, although in this case, their unity is going to play a huge factor as well. If voting by unanimity is the case, they can still hold much power, as a greater number of countries can put potential vetoes on certain issues.

Furthermore, the enlargement to the Western Balkans (which includes countries like Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Albania and – in

the most optimistic scenario – Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina), as well as the Eastern European countries of Ukraine and Moldova, and Georgia from the Caucasus, will significantly increase the proportion of non-Western Member States. This means that these countries will gain strength in numbers and that they will have their own votes and voices in the EU decision-making processes, potentially altering the dynamics of the EU's governance. Simply put, the larger the EU becomes, the more diverse and complex its internal politics will be. And the division would primarily mean more Eastern states and fewer – although larger – Western countries. The new members can bring specific priorities and expertise. For instance, Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia could bring valuable insights into Eastern Partnership policies and relations with Russia, while the Western Balkan countries could offer perspectives on regional stability and reconciliation. Such diversity could lead to a rebalancing of EU policies in various areas. There might be an impact in the fields of economy and trade, as the single market would be expanded, potentially creating new opportunities for economic growth but also economic disparities. In terms of energy and security, however, many of these potential new Member States have strategic significance in terms of their energy routes and security considerations. Enlargement could affect the EU's energy security strategy and its overall security architecture. Lastly, the Union's internal cohesion and decision-making might also be impacted, as the EU may face challenges in achieving consensus on certain issues. With the accession of more diverse Member States, the additional cultural, historical and political differences might influence the Union's cohesion and decision-making processes. What's more, considering majority voting, the smaller countries might have an advantage by making use of negotiations and forming mini-alliances within the Union itself.

4.4. The Impact of the Potential Reforms of the EU

The calls for reforms in the EU have increased over recent years, and the process of enlargement might further accelerate this process (Noyan, 2022). It becomes clear, especially after the latest set of events where more countries are receiving candidate status and will soon be starting accession negotiations, that at the same time talks about reforms are brought to the table in the EU, which is thus another chance for the influence of CEE countries. In 2023, a Franco–German working group recommended that, due to the geopolitical importance of the process, the EU prepare for enlargement by 2030, while additionally calling for institutional reforms and the inclusion of candidate countries first (The Group of Twelve, 2023). Furthermore, among other recommendations, a call for qualified majority voting (QMV) over voting by unanimity is featured – except for questions related to foreign affairs, security and defence. In some very recent analyses, authors argue that given the current "polycrisis" climate within the EU, simply switching from unanimity to QMV is insufficient (Caliess, 2023). In the reform process, Caliess places emphasis on the importance of addressing governance, crisis management, economic stability and security to ensure the EU's capacity to act and maintain trust among its citizens, as well as to face the challenges stemming from its expanding diversity and the need for comprehensive reforms to prevent an "imperial overstretch". In his analysis, the geopolitical importance of the Balkans and Ukraine in the EU is also acknowledged.

Such proposed reforms, particularly the shift from unanimity to QMV would likely impact European identity and the power shift to the East, as they might facilitate the process of enlargement. Replacing unanimity with QMV in some areas would expedite decision-making and make the EU more efficient. This change could signify a willingness among MS to work together and find common ground more readily, reinforcing

the idea of belonging and having a unified European identity. On the other hand, implementing QMV would enable faster decision-making, potentially allowing Eastern European countries to have a more influential role in shaping EU policies. As a result, the power shift to the East could be accelerated, with these countries having more say in EU affairs. The removal of unanimity requirements may reduce the influence of the larger Western countries and facilitate a more balanced distribution of power within the EU. However, it is important to note that such changes might be twofold and not the sole reason for the power shift. Namely, smaller states can still hold power with unanimity voting, through the power of veto, but having said that, the same power is also held by the larger, Western nations.

At the same time, for instance, the stated goal of the recently elected government of Poland to 'accelerate the process of returning Poland to full presence in the EU' (Buras & Morina, 2023) seems to be against the radical reforms and contrary to the positions of France and Germany. The discussions for reforms and enlargement are further creating divisions among the MS (Nič & Seebass, 2023), and by this it becomes increasingly clear that CEE countries are becoming more vocal in their opinions. What happens with the calls for new reforms at this point will also give us an answer regarding the question of whether the existing power shift will result in an institutional blockade of the enlargement or whether the MS will find a compromise.

4.5. The Impact of the Russia–Ukraine Conflict

Alongside expansion and integration, the EU has also focused on foreign policy and security, which in a way contributes to shaping European identity by promoting a collective approach to tackling global challenges,

fostering solidarity among Member States and projecting a unified voice on the international stage (Akman, 2021). Yet according to the same author, there are challenges from phenomena such as political parties often being organised around national interests rather than EU interests. From today's perspective, we can conclude that this is clearly shown after the emergence of the conflict in Ukraine. We can add here that emerging conflicts in this case might potentially divide the countries in the Union. In such situations, it is very likely that countries will try to influence the decisions of others, based on their interests, thus the analysis of the balance of power within these terms is very relevant.

The war in Ukraine has actually challenged the ideals of what it means to be European and the values linked to European identity. According to Leonard (2023), although there was formerly a growing unity among European political parties in supporting Ukraine in the conflict with Russia, a schism over the concept of "freedom" has emerged in the Union. It seems that values such as universalism, economic interdependence and the pooling of sovereignty have been challenged by the war in Ukraine, because the EU's response has seen a shift towards militarisation, rearmament and a re-evaluation of the idea of interdependence, which means that the acknowledged fight that stands for democracy in European values could at the same time be abandoning some of the pillars of Europe's freedom project, making this situation a paradox (Leonard, 2023). As officially stated, the EU's foreign policy is based on diplomacy including respect for international rules, and a commitment to preserving peace (European Union, 2023). However, after the initial unity within the EU over Ukraine, Drea (2022) claims that the prolonged – and still ongoing – conflict has exposed deep divisions among the MS, and this is particularly the case between Western and Eastern members. An important aspect in this regard is the question of providing military support to Ukraine, where the countries that traditionally hold power in the decision-making

processes – like Germany and France – have shown reluctance, leading to a growing distrust among Eastern European members (Drea, 2022). This has resulted in a shift in the balance of power within the EU, with CEE countries looking to NATO rather than the EU for questions related to security. At the same time, while Western Europe might be viewed as prioritising economic relations with Russia, Eastern Europe, led by Poland, seeks a more robust EU response to security threats (Drea, 2022). This divergence in attitudes towards supporting Ukraine reflects the complex task of balancing national interests with the priorities of the EU, and also national concerns versus those stemming from a broader European identity. It underscores the need for the EU to develop a unified approach when addressing security challenges while considering the minimising of potential disruptions in economic stability.

We can conclude that the Russia–Ukraine conflict has exposed significant divisions within the EU, especially between Western and Eastern MS, and that these divisions have led to a shift in the balance of power within the Union. While the conflict has highlighted the EU's ability to find a unified voice in some respects, it has also challenged the notion of a shared European identity, as it prompts a reappraisal of values and a reassessment of what it means to be European in the context of security and geopolitics. In the following section, we will analyse in greater detail the current trends regarding the influence of CEE countries, in particular since the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine, with a focus on EU foreign policy, integration and enlargement.

5. Analysing the Changing Impact of CEE Countries on EU Foreign Policy, Integration and Enlargement

5.1. The Situation after the Outbreak of the Conflict in Ukraine

Numerous authors have recently expressed the idea that the EU's centre of gravity has shifted to the East, which is understandable given the CEE countries' fast response to the Ukraine conflict compared to the 'lack of leadership' in the West (Prochwicz-Jazowska & Weber, 2023). This suggests a reconfiguration of influence within the EU, and it particularly applies in the realm of security and defence. Tharoor (2023) quotes Le Monde columnist Sylvie Kauffmann, who says that in the CEE countries 'the weight of history is stronger … than in the West, the traumas are fresher and the return of tragedy is felt more keenly'. This means that the CEE countries' deep historical traumas help the establishment of their assertive role in shaping Europe's defences while contributing to the shift in power dynamics to the East, as the topics involving defence are becoming more and more prominent. Vass (2023) notes that in the early stages of the current conflict, Russia warned the West against sending weapons to Ukraine, but the CEE countries, led by Poland and Slovakia, took the initiative to provide arms and ammunition. He continues that these countries' bold actions were initially received ambiguously, but eventually they garnered diplomatic praise and support from the other MS and Allies. This shift in policy marked the breaking of a convention, where the Western countries start, and the others follow. Additionally, CEE countries, and

especially the Visegrád Group (V4: the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia), were among the first to provide refuge and assistance to displaced Ukrainian citizens, pressuring the other European countries to open their doors too. Vass also mentions yet another trend that has been set by CEE countries. Namely the fact that, in the early stages of the conflict, the leaders of the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia travelled to Kyiv to express their solidarity with Ukraine, a risky action and a move initially viewed as "irresponsible" by some Western European partners that has now become a common diplomatic practice for almost every European head of government and state. According to Vass, this increased leadership assumed by the CEE countries marks a key geopolitical shift in Europe, where Eastern and Western states complement each other.

Additionally, after the emergence of the latest conflict in Europe, the buffer zone moved from Belarus and Ukraine to within the EU's easternmost countries bordering Russia (Prochwicz-Jazowska & Weber, 2023). This directly impacts the possibilities of a more prominent role for these countries in shaping European defence policies and strategies, and this is not only true for the EU, but also for NATO. Some of the countries in Central and Eastern Europe also appear to have some the highest defence spending in NATO, especially Poland's 4% of GDP for 2023 (Ptak, 2023), while in contrast many NATO members have struggled to reach the required 2% of GDP for military spending (Tharoor, 2023). Such actions clearly demonstrate the determination to boost military strength at more than a national level, and they also provide more room for gaining increased leverage and influence in shaping European security and defence policies.

On the other hand, while CEE countries are becoming more vocal and influential regarding security, the economic and political influence within the EU remains predominantly concentrated in Western Europe. Several authors have challenged the recent studies on the power shift. Hans

Kundnani of Chatham House sees rather a psychological shift, where CEE countries have more confidence than those in the West (Erlanger, 2023). As Erlanger details, Kundnani says that there is no doubt that CEE countries 'have pulled Europe to the right' both politically and culturally, but as the economy and population are the main drivers, EU power still remains in the West. Luuk van Middelaar, has similar views, identifying a rhetorical influence and structural change within the Union, but mostly when focusing on questions other than war or defence, such as those related to the economy (Erlanger, 2023). Erlanger also cites Wojciech Przybylski's comment that Central and Eastern Europe 'delivers a lot of attitude, even if the substance is still in the hands of the bigger players', which leads him to conclude that Europe can no longer be ruled only by the Western capitals. According to other authors, such conclusions regarding the power shift might ignore the real way European defence works, and for a complete power shift to the East, CEE countries will need to gain greater economic weight (Prochwicz-Jazowska & Weber, 2023). And indeed, economic strength often underpins political influence, as among other things it allows countries to invest in defence and provide financial support for EU policies. In this regard, with the potential reconstruction of Ukraine, we may expect another shift from West to East in Europe, this time in terms of economic activity (Vass, 2023).

We will have to see whether the CEE countries can also benefit economically from this situation, which can additionally be related to further EU enlargement, including the accession of Ukraine. In fact, historically, the policy of EU relations with the countries of Southeast Europe, as well as with its Eastern European neighbours, can be divided into two segments. On one hand, we have the countries of the Western Balkans, which have a real chance for a European perspective, and on the other hand, the countries that we categorise under the Eastern Partnership (EaP) policy, which presents an alternative integrational model (Parandii,

2023). The war in Ukraine, however, has triggered changes to this "two-basket" categorisation. After the rapid membership application processes of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, with the first two receiving candidate status and Georgia being declared a potential candidate, in an update and its annual review for 2023, the European Commission also recommended 'starting accession negotiations with Ukraine, Moldova and Bosnia and Herzegovina' and 'candidate status for Georgia' (European Commission, 2023). This is a real consequence of the war in Ukraine, and to some extent the primary push for action from the Eastern MS.

5.2. The CEE Countries' Influence on EU Integration with a Focus on Enlargement

The CEE countries also have an impact on the EU's enlargement process. Jasser and Przybylski (2023) give insight into the evolving power dynamics within the EU, which are influenced by the Russia–Ukraine War. They make it clear that while major Western EU states like Germany and France hold significant sway, Eastern MS such as Poland and Hungary are gaining influence. In this context, they reference North Macedonia's struggles with EU and NATO membership due to historical disputes with Greece and Bulgaria, suggesting that Ukraine should learn from North Macedonia's experiences, as it navigates a changing landscape. This illustrates the changing dynamics in EU decision-making, with Eastern countries wielding influence and shaping the path to EU membership.

Specifically, after the case of North Macedonia's pathway for EU membership, with blockades from its southern and eastern neighbours, Greece and Bulgaria, other CEE countries might implement similar policies against the EU candidates from the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe. This means that North Macedonia's case might become a template

for other nationalists in the CEE region. Jasser and Przybylski go on to analyse the potential scenario that if nationalist powers gain ground in the CEE countries, as is actually currently happening in some states, such a situation would result in the those countries gaining further power in the European Union's enlargement, as one of the EU integration processes, although in this case that influence would be through blockades and obstructions. This eventuality, however, might be ultimately unlikely if changes are made to the unanimity voting processes for enlargement, for which there are already calls, and some authors, such as Cvijic and Nechev (2022), believe that EU enlargement without such a reform has no future. That said, even if QMV is implemented, the number of CEE countries will still outnumber the rest.

Another important point is that, given the size of Ukraine, its potential accession to the EU would increase the Union's socio-economic diversity, weakening and potentially diminishing the influence of the Southern states and the Western countries led by the Franco–German alliance (Lang, 2022). This would mean giving Ukraine, as well as the other potential new members, the right of veto, and Ukraine would have the same voting weight as that of Poland, making the two as equally powerful as the voting weight of Germany (Ondarza, 2022). Such a potentiality can only be another reason for Poland – as one of the largest CEE countries, and a country known for challenging EU policies in the past – to take a role in the pro-enlargement process. Central and Eastern European countries, particularly Poland and Lithuania, have already played a crucial role in pushing for Ukraine to be granted EU candidate status. This was initially considered unrealistic due to the ongoing conflict, yet their pressure has led to a significant shift in position. As a result, Ukraine officially began negotiations to join the EU, and in 2023 a recommendation for opening negotiations was issued (European Commission, 2023). Despite this, the recent political climate shows that CEE countries might also influence the

enlargement process by creating obstacles, similar to those witnessed in the Western Balkans, which might potentially halt the process of integration of the aforementioned candidate countries. According to Tilles (2023), in the case of Poland the issue might be related to agriculture, as Poland threatens to not allow Ukraine into the EU if there are no measures for the restriction of Ukrainian grain products. This is different from the North Macedonian case, but the blockage might still be similar. Additionally, in a recent European Parliament press release, it is mentioned that statements made by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán 'obstruct the EU enlargement process' (European Parliament, 2023), implying potential issues with Hungary's position on Ukraine, which further confirms the possibility of blockages coming from CEE countries. While Hungary sets obstacles for the integration of Ukraine, at the same time it also asks for the faster accession of the Western Balkan candidates (Nič & Seebass, 2023), thus emphasising an undoubtedly rising role in this regard. And whether pro-enlargement or anti-enlargement, the increasing vocalness of these countries undoubtedly creates room for analyses of the increase in their influence regarding key EU issues. However things continue to unfold, the views of these countries will undoubtedly be important, regardless of the reforms and whether decision-making in the EU will be with unanimity or a qualified majority.

6. Conclusions

We can conclude that in the wake of the outbreak of the Russia–Ukraine conflict there has been a notable power shift within the EU. The CEE countries, driven by their historical experiences and security concerns,

have emerged as significant players in shaping the EU's defence and security policies. These countries have taken proactive steps to support Ukraine during the conflict, showing leadership, while at the same time challenging the traditional Western dominance in matters of security. Moreover, the influence of the CEE countries is not limited to security as these states also played a crucial role in advocating Ukraine's European Union candidacy, further influencing EU integration. Depending on the much anticipated reforms in the Union, we might see an increase in the influence of the CEE countries in the enlargement process involving the other candidate countries too. For example, using the power of veto might become a practice learned from the case of North Macedonia with Bulgaria and Greece. Finally, although it is clear that numerous authors are currently arguing about the increased influence of the CEE countries within the EU following the emergence of the conflict in Ukraine, in this study, through the brief analysis of different factors and the complexity of the discussion on the balance of power, we can conclude that a shift in influence within European defence dynamics is not solely based on geopolitical actions, but that it also hinges on socio-economic factors. And while the CEE countries demonstrate strong leadership in security matters, to effect a substantial and lasting power shift in European defence, they would also need to bolster their economic weight. Time will tell whether this shift will continue, and it will be based on how the conflict in Ukraine unfolds – whether it will intensify, stagnate or abate.

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The Role of Poland in Europe's Changing Political Landscape

MARIA PAVLOVA[*]

ABSTRACT: Since February 2022, the importance of Central and Eastern European countries in the political landscape of Europe has been growing, and more and more visions of future forms of European integration have appeared. A question of special interest is the changing role of Poland, which tends to represent itself as the new leader of the whole CEE region.

KEYWORDS: Poland, European Union, USA, Ukraine, transatlantic relations, European integration

[*]   Maria Pavlova: PhD, Primakov Institute of World Economy and International Relations (IMEMO), Moscow, Russia.

1. Introduction

The key message of this paper is that after the Polish nationalist conservative party Prawo i Sprawiedliwość ("Law and Justice", hereinafter referred to as PiS) came to power in 2015, efforts were made to change the role of Polish foreign policy. After the end of the Cold War, encountering significant economic problems and challenges in security and defence areas, Poland took up the role of regional-subsystem collaborator. According to Holsti (1970), all countries from both the Socialist and Western blocs came to assume that model during the Cold War, and he described the process of adapting to the role of regional-subsystem collaborator taking Belgium and Japan as examples. It can be argued that (although only within the Euro-Atlanticist bloc) Poland also adopted that model starting from the late 1990s, and kept to it until 2015. However, after the global financial crisis of 2008–09, and driven by the decrease in the transformative influence of the European Union over Poland, the Polish socio-political mood started to gradually shift to nationalist, conservative and populist sentiments. Researchers believe that dissatisfaction with EU integration reforms within Polish society led to the need to replace the role of regional-subsystem collaborator with a new one (Arman & Kuveloğlu, 2022).

2. Methodology

The research method this study is based on is the foreign relations role model concept developed mainly by J. Rosenau and C. Walker (Rosenau,

1968). The concept allows for the discovery of the multiple roles a country can play from time to time or, indeed, simultaneously. Role formation and performance is perceived as a continuous process of adjusting to current conditions defined by "the Self" and "the Other" as the agents and the international system structure. According to Wish (1980), state actors' concept of their country's role in the world plays a key part in foreign policy decision-making. Holsti (1970), who studied the concept of roles in international relations, also believed that the foreign policy of any state is influenced by perceptions of the national role it plays in the global order, and those perceptions influence foreign policy decision-making. He was especially aware of the fact that a state's positioning within the international relations space is a totality of structural determinants, defining that positioning as a 'national role' of sorts. He listed the following components of that role: role performance – specific behaviours employed by political actors and agents; national role conceptions – perceptions that underpin those behaviours, inevitably defining and modelling them; role prescriptions – instructions for the role posed by the external environment and circumstances; role position – a system of all prescriptions surrounding national role performance. In Holsti's opinion, all those factors were important for the foreign policy formation and implementation process, because the specific actions of a country are often informed by either a set of formal decision-making requirements (i.e. the country's "position") or historical concepts of how that country should behave (the "national role concept"). The "historical reputation" of a country that forms a certain worldview and the differentiation degree for the country's involvement in the settlement of international issues should not be overlooked either. In general, according to Holsti, the course chosen by any country may depend to a significant degree on role models, while specific politicians may act as the "defenders" of those roles. At the same time, the role models themselves could impose and dictate

a certain course to politicians, as they become intrinsic parts of national political culture.

Based on the results of his own content analysis, Holsti delineated 17 foreign policy models: bastion of revolution-liberator; regional leader; regional protector; active independent; liberation supporter; anti-imperialist agent; defender of the faith; mediator-integrator; regional-subsystem collaborator; developer; bridge; faithful ally; independent; example; internal development; isolate; and protectee. He also noted that a country can assume multiple role models at the same time. They serve as justifications and arguments for some foreign policy courses in various situations or fields. Considering that this content analysis was based on speeches made by politicians and heads of state in the latter half of the 1960s, in the time that has passed since then certain models may naturally have disappeared and new ones may have taken their place. Nation-states can make conscious efforts to change their international relations role models, but those changes may cause both positive and disastrous foreign policy consequences. Factors that may usher in negative role-model change scenarios include the sudden acceleration of international processes, flux in domestic policies (such as the disintegration of statehood or the formation of new institutions), the appearance of unexpected factors on the international stage, or too sharp a contrast between the old role model and the new one.

3. Poland's General Position in 2020–21

As early as mid-2021, Poland's international position could be described as rather weak. The country was in a protracted conflict with EU leaders,

who accused Poland's ruling party, PiS, of violating democratic norms. Following a proposal by the European Commission and the European Parliament, a mechanism in the EU budget linking payments to rule of law conditions was developed, which brought Poland close to being denied payments from the Covid-19 pandemic recovery fund (Mikhalev, 2022). In addition, the Court of Justice of the European Union sentenced the country to large fines for failing to comply with its directives to dismantle the Disciplinary Chamber of the Polish Supreme Court and to close the Turów coal mine, which was causing a serious environmental conflict with the Czech Republic. In addition, PiS officially declared the priority of national law over EU legislation, which, in 2022, resulted in the European Commission blocking more than EUR 55 billion intended to help rebuild post-Covid Europe and revive national economies. Besides legal questions, the conflict between Warsaw and Brussels concentrated on such issues as a practically total ban on abortion in Poland and the declaration of several central and eastern voivodeships as "free from LGBT zones". In fact, most EU partners saw Poland as a state that had fallen out of the European family: it did not respect the EU's basic principles, did not share its values, and refused to help its partners. In turn, the Polish government tends to portray the EU as a far-left project, which has no clearly defined ideological component and is used as a kind of façade for increasing German control over the Union.

At the same time, according to the report 15 Years of Poland in the European Union, the country is said to be the most pro-Atlantic state in the EU because of its perception of threats from Russia and its readiness to hand over the main burden of containment policy to the USA (*Wpływ integracji europejskiej na polską gospodarkę*, 2019). Following the defeat of Donald Trump in the 2020 US presidential election, Polish–American relations cooled slightly. During the presidential campaign, Warsaw openly expressed its support for Trump, whose presidency was, according

to Polish politicians, a honeymoon period for the United States and Poland. In June 2020, Polish President Andrzej Duda openly expressed his confidence in Trump's victory during his official visit to Washington and made no attempt to establish even the slightest formal contact with Joe Biden's entourage. Poland remained Trump's most ardent supporter in the entire European Union, and his loss in the election was perceived by PiS as its own defeat. Be that as it may, Biden himself did not show any sympathy for Poland during his campaign. He repeatedly criticised its government's policies, and in one of his interviews he cited Poland as an example of the rise of totalitarian regimes in the world (Malinowski, 2020). Once the Polish leader had offered much-delayed and rather dry congratulations to Biden on his victory, there was virtually no contact between Warsaw and Washington in the first half of 2021 and it seemed that the "special" Polish–American relationship had been put on hold.

4. The Changes of 2022–23

The situation started to change for Poland in mid-2021, when the Belarus–Poland border crisis started, and thousands of Middle Eastern migrants attempted to enter the country. The Polish government managed to turn the migrant crisis to its advantage, manipulating the narrative of migration from the East as a threat to the EU and succeeding in drawing the attention of other European states to its concerns, inducing them to support its point of view and overlook the existing differences. The Belarussian border crisis significantly strengthened Poland's international position and helped to partially improve relations between Warsaw and Brussels.

It was then that the Russia special military operation in Ukraine (hereinafter referred to as the "special operation"), which began on 24 February 2022, created a completely new situation that placed Poland at the centre of European – if not global – politics.

The beginning of the special operation resulted in a massive influx of Ukrainian refugees to Poland. Contrary to its previous migration policy between 2015 and 2021, the Polish government decided to open its borders immediately, and by July 2022 the largest number of refugees were in Poland (1,207,650) (*Odpowiedź UE na kryzys uchodźczy w Ukrainie*, 2022). In accordance with the European Council's Implementing Decision (EU) 2022/382 of 4 March 2022, the Polish government facilitated the requirements and simplified procedures to help legalise the stay of Ukrainian migrants in the country. Among the most important moves was granting the refugees residence rights, emergency aid, and access to the labour market and social benefits and services, i.e. education, healthcare, social assistance, etc. (Uścińska, 2023). Despite additional sources of essential finance from both EU institutions and international aid organisations, as Polish researchers have stated, governmental support for Ukrainian refugees 'has put a heavy burden on the state budget and on citizens' budgets, which in the conditions of the growing economic crisis indicates a significant limitation of the possibility to continue to rely on these resources' (Uścińska, 2023). Polish experts and officials underlined that Poland and the EU as a whole were dealing 'with a crisis that we have never experienced before', as refugees from Syria or Libya mostly ended up in refugee camps, where they stayed for years without the possibility of employment and without the possibility of movement. Those who had managed to enter Europe did not enjoy 'the rights that Ukrainians now have' (Ociepa-Kicińska & Gorzałczyńska-Koczkodaj, 2022).

Poland was praised for its remarkable help for Ukrainian refugees by the EU and USA alike. As Jurenczyk (2023) notes, Poland's support

for Ukraine, including activities carried out as a member of NATO, was widely covered by the American media and succeeded in changing the opinion towards Poland not only of the American establishment, but of American society and "middle-America" as well. From 2022 on, Poland was presented 'in a positive light, as a reliable ally of the US and NATO in Ukraine' (Jureńczyk, 2023).

In addition to the above, Poland, which previously endeavoured to be at the centre of international life, has significantly increased its diplomatic activity, including at the highest levels. As data from Poland's Ministry of Foreign Affairs shows, in less than a month and a half (from 24 February to 5 April) its head, Zbigniew Rau, held bilateral meetings with colleagues from 13 countries; he also took part in meetings of foreign ministers of the EU, NATO and the Weimar Triangle (Germany, France, Poland), and was present at UN, OSCE and Arab League events (*Ministerstwo Spraw Zagranicznych*, 2022). It seemed that Poland's international position had changed overnight, transforming the country from a Trump-supporting "troubled democracy" back into one of the key players in Europe. One of the most notable events in Poland's diplomatic activity in the 2022–23 season occurred on 15 March 2022 when Deputy Prime Minister and PiS Chairman Jarosław Kaczyński visited Kyiv in the company of Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki, Czech Prime Minister Petr Fiala and Slovenian Prime Minister Janez Janša. This secretly planned visit became a propaganda event – Volodymyr Zelenskyy's guests presented themselves as envoys of the whole European Union, expressing 'unequivocal support' for Ukraine and the readiness to provide it with an extensive aid package. Morawiecki also claimed that the EU was ready to 'very quickly' grant Ukraine the status of an EU candidate and welcome it as a member (Reuters, 2022). By staying in Kyiv and risking their lives, the Polish leaders wanted not only to boost the spirits of the Ukrainians who were, in Kaczyński's words, 'fighting for all of us', but also to persuade the still hesitant Western

Europeans to provide maximum aid to Ukraine. The leader of Poland's ruling party declared that an international peacekeeping mission should be sent to operate in Ukraine, stating, 'I think that it is necessary to have a peace mission – NATO, possibly some wider international structure – but a mission that will be able to defend itself, which will operate on Ukrainian territory' (Reuters, 2022).

Besides taking this diplomatic initiative on itself, Poland undertook a strong campaign to show that it was right to alert Europe to the Russian threat. State media regularly recalled President Lech Kaczyński's statement during the 2008 Tbilisi rally warning of Russia's plans: 'Today Georgia, tomorrow Ukraine, the day after tomorrow the Baltic States, and then perhaps the time will come for my country, Poland' (*Message from the President of the Republic of Poland*, 2024). That message, and the diplomatic activity, could not fail to put Poland in the centre of European and Western diplomacy as a frontline country.

The pivotal moment in Poland's search for a new role in the international relations system seemed to come in February 2023 when US President Joe Biden travelled to Poland. The visit was highly anticipated by the Polish authorities for – according to Warsaw's expectations – it was supposed to emphasise Poland's special role both in supporting Kyiv and in current transatlantic relations in general.

Before Biden's visit (the second following the beginning of the special operation), there had been increasing claims that his "Warsaw speech" would confirm Poland's new status in the transatlantic security architecture. It was not the first time that the Polish government had pushed the idea of its effective foreign policy, as one of the main political slogans of PiS since 2015 was "Poland is getting up off its knees". Later, when, on the contrary, Poland significantly lost its political weight in the European Union due to its conflict with the EU institutions over the rule of law in Poland, PiS focused on its special relationship with the USA

under the Trump administration, claiming to be Washington's main ally in Europe. That said, such statements were more a propaganda success than evidence of any real political gains, as Poland's position continued to deteriorate.

Now, however, PiS was backed up by Western media and analysts, who wrote before the visit that the Franco–German tandem had completely compromised itself in its attempts to reach an agreement with Moscow, had lost its moral authority and control over the situation, and that the "heart and brain" of the EU and NATO were increasingly shifting to the East due to geographical and strategic factors. In this light, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni underlined the fact that, faced with the conflict in Ukraine, 'Poland represents a moral and material frontier for the West', adding, 'this is a country that we as Europeans should thank for its extraordinary work to support Ukraine' (*Ukraine war hands Poland new international role*, 2023).

Andrew A. Michta (2022) stated that 'it isn't just that Europe's center of gravity will shift northeast, but also that the once-nebulous concept of Eastern Europe as a backwater of the West – an image reinforced by the Balkan wars of the 1990s – has been all but dismantled'. He continued by referencing 'politicians from Eastern Europe showing leadership and courage at a moment of need, clearly articulating their national security imperatives and priorities, putting skin in the game', implying that Western European politicians were not so prepared to make sacrifices to the common cause. This idea was also alluded to by Steven Erlanger in the New York Times: 'Poland and the Baltic states have driven the moral argument to support Ukraine, filling a near-vacuum early in the war, when Europe's traditional leaders, France and Germany, appeared paralyzed'. According to Erlanger, it was the 'vocal pressure from Eastern and Central Europe' that was crucial to the decisions of Germany and other European powers to send Western tanks to Ukraine. With its rapidly expanding military,

Poland is becoming a more important player in both the European Union and in NATO. As Jana Puglierin, head of the Berlin office of the European Council on Foreign Relations said to Erlanger, 'power has moved east … you see the clear pattern in moral leadership' (Erlanger, 2023).

What is very noticeable here is that these statements are quite similar to those of the leader of Poland's ruling party, Jarosław Kaczyński, who has often commented that Germany has too much influence in the EU, but has no 'moral right' to it because of 'World War II, cooperation with Russia, strategic blindness, Protestant mercantilism, LGBT parades and anti-Americanism' (Dymek, 2023). As Polish journalists formulated, in February 2023 Kaczyński's dream appeared to come true. What seems important here is the concept of "moral authority" that is repeated by the Western media and the PiS leaders alike. Polish politicians and analysts tend to believe that those states which have "moral authority" or "moral capital" automatically gain political power. At this juncture, the Polish government was confident that other Member States had recognised its key role and were already talking about the need for a "change of power" in the EU. As Piotr Buras (2023) put it, 'when US President Joe Biden jets into Warsaw next week, he will disembark at the new centre of the European Union'. This statement inspired Polish publicists to assert that – in the same way as post-war Western Europe was shaped by the Franco–German tandem initiated with the approval of the United States – if Poland dreams of gaining permanent power in Europe and outside the EU, Warsaw and Kyiv should form an alliance (as Paris and Bonn once did) cemented by a new "Elysée Treaty" under the auspices of the United States that will be able to replace the Franco–German tandem and give new impetus to the EU's development (Redakcja, 2023).

Although, as President Duda put it, the very presence of Joe Biden in Warsaw during his historical speech was highly important, Poles had great expectations from the visit on the bilateral track as well. Some

commentators, like the former commander of the Polish Land Forces, General Woldemar Skrzypczak, even expected Biden to support the project of creating a permanent American base in Poland – a project that was lobbied for by Warsaw for a long time during the Trump administration. The programme of the second day of Biden's visit included a meeting with representatives of the Bucharest Nine (B9), as since 2022 Warsaw has been obviously trying to reconsider its role in regional integrational projects.

Although he gave much attention to the confrontation with Russia, events in Ukraine and new promises to support Kyiv, as well as to the enhancement of NATO unity, Biden's speech did not reference any specific resolutions, and no new decisions were announced as a result of the Biden–Duda bilateral meeting. The Polish president suggested to his American counterpart that the USA should increase its military presence in Poland by deploying additional equipment and weapons, but the only real results of the negotiations so far have been agreements on the purchase of US liquefied natural gas and the construction of the first nuclear power plant in Poland by the American company Westinghouse (*Prezydent Duda…*, 2024).

Observers had special expectations for the second day of the visit, which featured a summit of the B9, a regional cooperation established in 2015 comprised of Poland, Bulgaria, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia, Romania, the Czech Republic and Estonia. The meeting was high-level and included Joe Biden, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and President Maia Sandu of Moldova, which is not formally a member of the group. The talks focused on further steps to support Kyiv, arms transfers and the coordination of the members' positions on NATO strategy ahead of the NATO Summit in Vilnius. In addition to reaffirming the Allies' responsibilities and expressing support for the accession to the Alliance of Finland and Sweden, the B9 expressed its readiness to enhance cooperation with Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia and Moldova. Thus,

the actual results of this meeting were likewise somewhat ambiguous, as it seemed that the greatest success of the negotiations was that the B9 had managed to reach some sort of agreement (this time the joint declaration was also signed by Hungarian President Katalin Novák, although some of its points directly contradicted both Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's statements and Budapest's true policy).

Biden's visit to Warsaw was a clear victory for PiS ahead of the parliamentary election in the autumn of 2023. For two days, in the eyes of the majority of the Polish population, Warsaw had become a world geopolitical centre, a place where the president of the USA announced decisions determining the future of the European continent. The propaganda of the ruling party presented Biden's visit and his praise of the Polish people as proof of the Polish government's political strength, its effective foreign policy and its ability to win over even the least supportive politicians. This last point in particular confounded the expectations of Poland's liberal opposition, whose hopes that the US leader would criticise the ruling party for violations of the law and a lack of democracy were not really fulfilled, the meetings between Biden and the opposition leaders turning out to be merely "courtesy calls".

Despite the above, the government was still partially disappointed. While other PiS leaders were looking for historical notes in Biden's speech, the nation's most influential figure, Jarosław Kaczyński, considered the American premier's speech to be meaningless, commenting that 'He did not say anything' (*Kaczyński wrócił do wizyty Bidena*, 2023). Surprisingly, Poland's former president, Bronisław Komorowski, was in agreement, terming Biden's appearance in Poland mere camouflage for his trip to Ukraine and saying, 'There was a historic visit. But in Kyiv, not Warsaw' (*Komorowski szczerze o wizycie Bidena*, 2023).

Another important aspect to Biden's visit is that it seemed to strengthen the Polish government's confidence in its conviction that there

are no alternatives to the "Ukraine must win" scenario (Warzecha, 2023). Such confidence is particularly indicative of the current changes in Polish public opinion. According to sociologists, there is a so-called 'dissonance of positive thinking', where the majority of people still support aid to Ukraine, but their positive attitude towards Ukrainians themselves is deteriorating (*Coś zmienia się w stosunku Polaków do Ukraińców*, 2023). For example, in early 2023, 25% of respondents stated that their attitude to Ukrainian refugees had altered over the past year, with 68% of that group saying that it had changed negatively. At the same time, dissatisfaction with the level of state support for Ukrainian refugees is also growing (*Coś zmienia się w stosunku Polaków do Ukraińców*, 2023).

We can cautiously assume that the belief in Poland's changing role in Europe has also made Polish politicians more assertive with their Ukrainian counterparts. Just two months after Biden's visit, Poland officially banned imports of agricultural products from Ukraine until 30 June 2023 and then again from 15 September. Warsaw's independent decision initially provoked sharp criticism from European officials who accused Poland of violating the Association Agreement (AA) between the EU and Ukraine, which includes a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA). Polish officials were equally harsh in their evaluations of EU policy: 'Thank you for such help, where Poland is ordered over our heads to open its Polish borders to Ukrainian grain, the aim of which is to finish off Polish agriculture and Polish farmers. Mrs. von der Leyen is not the president or prime minister of Poland, and these matters are decided in Poland, not in Brussels' (RIAC, 2023). More surprisingly, purely economic conflict provoked an acute political crisis between Warsaw and Kyiv that ended with mutual accusations. Although being mostly a matter of economic interests and national competition in the EU agricultural market, the Polish–Ukrainian "grain conflict" may also be regarded as Poland's attempt to show its political potential in debating issues between the EU and Ukraine, which Warsaw

has for a long time regarded as its protégé. Unfortunately for Poland, the grain issue showed once more that the country and its elite lack the requisite political and economic capital for finding effective solutions not only at the EU level, but in bilateral relations as well.

5. Conclusions

Since 2022, Poland has been trying to find a new role model for its foreign policy, seeking to move from being a regional collaborator to a more active designation – regional leader, regional protector or active independent. This claim is based on the following factors (as asserted by the Polish government): Poland's strategic importance as a frontline country of the EU and NATO, its military potential, its "moral capital", and the "ideological decline" of "old European" powers. However, claims of Poland's "key importance" to the West should be understood in a geographic and strategic rather than a political sense. Because of its proximity to the frontline and its position in Central and Eastern Europe, over the course of the conflict Poland has become a military and tech hub for assistance to Kyiv. Declarations about the declining role of Germany and France and the growing role of Poland are usually not supported by any evidence of how Washington's policy supposedly reflects this great change. As American experts underline, 'Poland is special to the United States, but it's not going to be unique in that. It's special because it has the strategic location, it's in the forefront and Poland is committed to collective defense and it's not so small. Poland is a serious country with a serious military committed to collective defence and therefore a very valued partner for the US' (Jureńczyk, 2023).

The EU has also focused its attention on Poland as a frontline state while the military conflict is ongoing. Once it is over, however, EU leaders are unlikely to tolerate Polish political arrogance, as the country still lacks economic and political capital in EU institutions. Moreover, since 2015 Warsaw has been concentrating exclusively on the EU's Eastern policy, at the same time showing too little interest in the problems of the EU's other flanks. Now Poland has virtually nothing to offer the EU in other issues, such as the EU Green Deal, migrant policy or the global competition between the USA and China. As Hans Kudnani stated, 'confidence and the high moral ground are enough to accomplish big things in Brussels' (Erlanger, 2023). Besides, Poland's aspirations for regional leadership are not met with enthusiasm in other Central and Eastern European countries – a factor which has resulted in the instability of Poland's territorial alliances. Throughout 2022, Warsaw failed to persuade Budapest to change its position on the conflict in Ukraine, which resulted in a freezing not only of bilateral relations, but also of the activities of the Visegrád Group. Nevertheless, taking into account the likely changes in Polish domestic and foreign policy following the 2023 parliamentary elections, and a realignment of relations with the EU and USA, Poland will have the chance to review its role model on a different basis in the future.

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Redefining European Integration through Bilateralism: The Case of the Romanian–Moldovan Strategic Partnership

RADU SAVA[*]

ABSTRACT: In April 2010, Romania and the Republic of Moldova established a Strategic Partnership. According to the policymakers, this Partnership encompasses two major coordinates, namely: (1) the affirmation of the special relationship between the two countries conferred by the community of shared language, history, culture and traditions; (2) the European dimension of Romanian–Moldovan bilateral cooperation based on the strategic objective of integrating the Republic of Moldova into the European Union. Thus, this working paper intends to analyse the dimension of the second major coordinate of the Romanian–Moldovan Strategic Partnership in order to provide an analysis of the changing balance of power, interests and benefits within the process of European integration. In other words, the purpose of this paper is to describe the evolution of the strategic objective of integrating the Republic of Moldova

*   Radu Sava: PhD Candidate, University of Bucharest, Romania.

into the European Union, as well as to determine several internal and external factors that could explain the main drivers behind the second major coordinate of the Romanian–Moldovan Strategic Partnership.

KEYWORDS: European integration, European Union, Romania, Republic of Moldova, strategic partnership

1. Introduction

Given the significant abundance of factors and their consequential impact on various domains within the context of Romanian–Moldovan relations, both at bilateral and multilateral levels, the objective of this working paper is twofold. Firstly, it aims to propose new insights concerning the progression of the Romanian–Moldovan Strategic Partnership for the European integration of the Republic of Moldova, additionally analysing the bilateral relations between Romania and Moldova since their establishment in 1991. As such, this working paper is organised into sections that serve as an outline with the objective of conceptualising the *European* connection(s) between Romania and the Republic of Moldova. However, it is worth noting that the proposed outline has been further developed, with the aim of deriving the overview from two primary perspectives on European integration that are rooted in bilateralism.

As its second objective, the penultimate part of the analysis examines several internal and external elements that may shed light on the primary drivers behind the strategic ambition of integrating the Republic of Moldova into the European Union. Accordingly, this working paper includes, from the perspective of research methodology, a case study-based approach, although the issues at hand are discussed through collecting data and constructing analysis based on open sources. In other words, this working paper involves the application of inductive reasoning, nonetheless taking into account some severe limitations imposed by the nature of a working paper and its potential variabilities in open sources-based literature.

2. European Integration through Bilateralism

Perhaps similar to what Ulrich Krotz and Lucas Schramm (2022) regard as 'embedded bilateralism' based on the case of the Franco–German 'decisiveness' towards 'driving European integration, especially in times of severe crisis', it is sufficient to initiate this discussion with the following assertion: in most circumstances, the case of Romania and the Republic of Moldova is narrowly discussed in European debates, and – beyond the bilateral level – those existing discussions rarely have the potential to theorise the spectrum of Romanian–Moldovan relations in a European context. Concerning this matter, is it equally important to acknowledge the fact that the current geopolitical context in Europe, determined by the illegal and unjustified aggression of Russia against Ukraine, has given a new impetus to discussions concerning European integration through bilateralism, as applied to the case of Romanian–Moldovan relations. The idea of conceptualising various state relations through the lenses of integration, be it Euro-Atlantic integration or solely European integration, is nothing new within the specialised literature, as succinctly demonstrated in the following. Integration itself is a complex subject that has evolved on multiple levels throughout the world since the Roman Empire. Thus, redefining *sine qua non* European integration in the case of Romanian–Moldovan relations proves that the 'idea of integration' becomes a foreign policy priority in 'most post-socialist states' (Morari, 2011). In this regard, for instance, according to Popovici (2021), 'Moldova is already the largest beneficiary of the Eastern Partnership', given the fact that since the Moldova–EU Association Agreement came into force,

'Moldova's exports to the European [common] market increased by 70%', making Moldova the most engaged state actor of the Eastern Partnership to benefit from European integration.

For the most part, it is also important to assert the fact that the specialised literature connected to Romanian–Moldovan relations is abundant. In this sense, from the perspective of both Romania and the Republic of Moldova, the literature provides a significant selection of articles, volumes, books and other works, including some constructed at the intersection of academia and policy-making. However, integration and the lack of exemplification in the case of Romania and the Republic of Moldova spotlight the need to scrutinise two perspectives, excerpted from the European specialised literature:

1. **An analytical perspective.** As understood from the example provided by Franco–German cooperation, Ulrich Krotz and Lucas Schramm (2022) discuss the pivotal role in the European response to the Covid-19 pandemic of both France and Germany. They claim that 'in a period of dramatic threat to the EU's very functioning and cohesion, France-Germany provided much-needed direction and stability, that is, leadership. With immense economic, social, and political damages at stake, both countries intensified their bilateral cooperation, established common positions, issued a joint blueprint, and then forged a European compromise at large'. By providing stability and leadership, Franco–German cooperation emphasised 'how national preference formation and intergovernmental bargaining – also and especially on the bilateral level – happen simultaneously rather than successively and how they can influence each other. And unlike new intergovernmentalism, embedded bilateralism captures the importance of intergovernmental coordination'.

2. **An ontological perspective.** Joanna Dyduch (2021) considers that 'cross-loading Europeanization is identified as an independent variable that may assist our understanding of bilateralism within the framework of European integration'. Thus, she articulates the fact that interdependence, on the one hand, is a 'crucial driver of bilateralism' in EU-related affairs because, through the EU's 'specific governance system, with its variety of platforms, mechanisms, and instruments of interaction, [it] creates new (operational rather conceptual) circumstances for bilateralism', meaning that 'though European integration has not altered the interest-drive nature of relations between states, it has reshaped the framework for bilateralism'. On the other hand, 'European integration may have several consequences for the development of interdependence or its extreme version, dependence. After all, Europeanization has reduced the system's anarchy, as it has offered new mechanisms and instruments applicable to bilateral and multilateral cooperation [and] provided [governments] with an institutionalized means of cost and benefit distribution, which makes the outcome of the relations more predictable'.

3. A Brief Conceptualisation: Relations between Romania and the Republic of Moldova

Departing from the assertion that European policies are in 'a crucial need to update' in Eastern Europe, for almost a decade now scholars

have signalled the fact that the 'slowing down of integrationist processes will trigger a massive backlash of area democratization and, thus, a crisis which the EU will manage with great difficulty' (Dungaciu, 2015). As a result, Romania's 'shift in paradigm' – put forward by Dungaciu – has now become reality. One simple and clear confirmation in this regard is, beyond any doubt, today's Strategic Partnership between Romania and the Republic of Moldova and its level of pragmatism, given the fact that Romania relates to the Republic of Moldova 'starting from the legitimate interest' of the 'irreversible' European integration of the latter (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania, 2021). Notwithstanding this, Romania's relations with the Republic of Moldova have been 'the most important from the perspective of domestic policy, being complex, contradictory, and marked by the emotional element of a common language, history, and religion' (Abraham, 2016).

In spite of these pronouncements, since their establishment on 27 August 1991, Romanian–Moldovan relations have 'developed very sinuous [*sic*], sometimes with very steep ascents and descents', as the Romanian diplomat Dorin Cimpoeşu (2016) frames it. Along these lines, Cimpoeşu accomplishes perhaps one of the most extensive theorisations of the stages that have marked the evolution of Romanian–Moldovan relations – 'each of them having its own characteristics, which were determined either by the evolution of the internal political life … or by some external factors that exerted and still exert influences on these Romanian spaces' from a geopolitical and geostrategic point of view. He begins this theorisation by pointing out the fact that, representing the first stage of bilateral Romanian–Moldovan relations, 1990–91 is a 'romantic' period in which the people across the Prut River, having been under Soviet occupation, rediscovered one another. During 'this short period', *Podul de Flori* ("the Bridge of Flowers") – a massive demonstration along the banks of the Prut River – took place on two different occasions, one in which

Romanians were allowed to cross the river into the Moldovan SSR (6 May 1990) and the other in which Moldovans were allowed to cross the same river into Romania (16 June 1991) without any travel documents. Beyond its symbolic significance, 'in this romantic euphoria of the beginning', Mircea Snegur, the first President of Moldova, made 'his first visit to the Motherland.'

After first asserting its sovereignty on 23 June 1990 and then changing its name to the Republic of Moldova on 23 May 1991, Chişinău declared its independence on 27 August 1991, with Romania being the first country to recognise the newly-created state. In fact, Romania recognised Moldova's independence within hours of the Declaration of Independence and diplomatic relations were established a mere two days later. In this context, the specialised literature reveals the fact that the Moldovan Declaration of Independence had been conceived and drafted at the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, this gesture representing, according to Cimpoeşu (2016), 'a political act of support and recognition of Moldova's separation from Soviet occupation, [and] not a separation from the Motherland, as it would later be interpreted by the agro-communist nomenclature that came to power in Moldova'. Cimpoeşu goes on to assert that Moldova's Declaration of Independence 'is the first and only founding document of the Republic of Moldova, recognising the Romanian identity of the majority population on the left bank of the Prut River and the language spoken by them … implicitly recognising the newly created state in this historical Romanian province'. Regarding the matter, he believes that due to these aspects of the Declaration of Independence, 'forces adhering to [the so-called] Moldovan identity and the Russophone population' were determined 'to burn this fundamental document during the political turmoil in Chişinău' in April 2009.

The second stage of bilateral Romanian–Moldovan relations (1992– 93) could be regarded as one in which bilateral relations were established

per se. Being a complex process, this stage debuted with the opening of the Embassy of Romania in Chișinău on 19 January 1992, and that of the Embassy of the Republic of Moldova in Bucharest on 24 January 1992. Cimpoeșu points out that, shortly thereafter, inter-ministerial committees – a governmental mechanism aimed at enhancing bilateral cooperation – were established. However, above all, the purpose of these committees was to achieve the two states' 'strategic objective of economic and cultural-spiritual integration as conceived by Romania and formally agreed upon by the Republic of Moldova'. Despite this, the second stage represents the first time when Romania's strategic vision became less favourably perceived by the authorities in Chișinău. According to Cimpoeșu, the Moldovan authorities perceived the achievement of the aforementioned strategic objective to be a threat to the Republic of Moldova's very existence. In consequence, their attitude was 'reserved', and they 'sought to indefinitely delay the implementation of major economic and cultural integration projects'. Ultimately, Chișinău abandoned the strategic objective, and even after 25 years the connection of the energy and rail networks of the Republic of Moldova to those of Europe was not realised, leaving the country dependent on Russia.

During this second stage of Romanian–Moldovan relations, for the first time since their establishment in 1991, attempts to conclude a fundamental political bilateral treaty took shape. President Snegur initially launched this idea during his first trip to Romania, and it reappeared on the agenda in 1992. Despite this, obstacles emerged, since from the very beginning the Moldovan side rejected terms and notions such as "two Romanian states" and "special relations", paving the way for a two-year hiatus in negotiations.

As discussed throughout the Romanian-language specialised literature, the third stage of Romanian–Moldovan relations 'is characterised by an excessive politicization of [the] bilateral relations' (Cimpoeșu, 2016). In

supporting this assumption, it has been noted that in 1994 and the first half of 1995, Moldovan identity became an issue in bilateral relations, generating significant setbacks following elections and the subsequent installation of a pro-Russian government in Chişinău, which was hostile to Romania. Therefore, the then-new government in Chişinău 'elevated the primitive Moldovanism ideology, rooted in the Soviet era, to the level of state policy' (Cimpoeşu, 2016), passing the first Constitution of the Republic of Moldova that introduced notions such as "Moldovan people" and "Moldovan language". These evolutions determined a deterioration of bilateral Romanian–Moldovan relations, including the alteration of negotiations regarding a fundamental political treaty.

After the 1996 Moldovan presidential elections, bilateral relations experienced a period that, according to Cimpoeşu, implied a process of depoliticisation. Regarded as the fourth stage, this coincided with 'the first change of power [in Romania] after a long period of social-democratic governance', resulting in a favourable political context for Romanian–Moldovan relations. In essence, from 1997 to 2000, bilateral relations 'underwent a certain normalization and development' course, having been established by various projects such as (1) the Romania–Republic of Moldova–Ukraine Trilateral Format, (2) the Superior Prut and Lower Danube Euroregions, and (3) the completion of the legal framework for bilateral relations, comprising over 30 government agreements at the time (Cimpoeşu, 2016).

Congruently, Moldovan authorities pushed for a restart of negotiations concerning the fundamental bilateral political treaty, especially given Romania's efforts to join the North Atlantic Organization Treaty. As Cimpoeşu comments, the Republic of Moldova 'sought to take advantage of this opportunity [preceding the 1997 NATO Summit in Madrid] to force concessions from Romania' in order to further the establishment of the bilateral treaty. After further rounds of unsuccessful attempts to restart

proper negotiations, President Petru Lucinschi 'appointed a new Chief Negotiator' on behalf of the Republic of Moldova, and by April 2000, the treaty was finalised and formally signed 'during the annual meeting of the Black Sea Economic Community (BSEC)' (Cimpoeşu, 2016).

The period between 2001 and 2009 is regarded as the fifth stage of Romanian–Moldovan bilateral relations, being, as Cimpoeşu acknowledges, a nadir between the two countries. This stage coincides with the 'restoration of the communist regime in the Republic of Moldova', which, for bilateral relations, has been by far 'the darkest period' in recent history. In brief, the 2001 Moldovan presidential elections won by the Party of the Communists of the Republic of Moldova resulted in a practical return of the Republic of Moldova to Soviet-era politics. As a consequence, Romanian–Moldovan relations deteriorated once again, while the Republic of Moldova 'reoriented towards Russia' and anti-Romania sentiment 'reached its peak'. Amongst other things, this return to Soviet-era politics resulted, for example, in the suspension of the inter-ministerial committees as well as the abandonment of projects implemented under the Romania–Republic of Moldova–Ukraine Trilateral Format and the two Euroregions. Moreover, following Romania's accession to the EU, the anti-Romania campaign of the Party of the Communists of the Republic of Moldova became exceptionally virulent, reaching yet another peak in 2007. Following this, two Romanian diplomats were declared persona non grata and expelled, and in the spring of 2009 the regime installed in Chişinău 'took measures equivalent to severing diplomatic relations between the two states: the Romanian ambassador [to Chişinău] and a minister-counsellor were expelled, the Moldovan ambassador to Bucharest was recalled, visas for Romanian citizens were reintroduced, and the borders with Romania were closed' (Cimpoeşu, 2016).

From 2009 however, as discussed in the Romanian-language specialised literature, Romanian–Moldovan relations began to return to normality,

the protests associated with the 2009 Moldovan parliamentary election providing a catalyst for the country's political shift. To explain further, the newly installed centre-right government took a series of measures in order to improve bilateral relations. Hence, among others things, this culminated in the return of the Romanian ambassador to Chişinău as well as the reinstatement of the Moldovan ambassador to Bucharest, while bilateral cooperation was enhanced, resulting in 15 multi-sectoral bilateral agreements in 2010 alone (Cimpoeşu, 2016).

This 'return', to quote Cimpoeşu, is considered to be the sixth stage of Romanian–Moldovan relations (2009–16), and it achieved important results for both countries, most notably the Joint Declaration on Establishing a Strategic Partnership between Romania and the Republic of Moldova for the European Integration of the Republic of Moldova – the document adopted in Bucharest on 27 April 2010 that set 'the development framework and priorities on the medium term of the privileged relationship between the two states' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania, 2015). To give a few examples, during this sixth stage Romania and the Republic of Moldova marked the adoption of the Action Plan for Implementing the Joint Declaration on Establishing a Strategic Partnership during the first-ever joint meeting of the two governments, held in Iaşi in 2012. In 2013, they reached a bilateral framework that incorporated 159 treaties and agreements, touching upon a broad range of areas. Additionally, it has been indicated that in 2014, Romania became the largest trading partner of the Republic of Moldova, surpassing Russia in terms of bilateral trade volume (Cimpoeşu, 2016).

4. European Integration in the New Geopolitical Environment

In continuation of the previously described stages, Romanian–Moldovan relations could be further theorised by arguing that since 2016, two other stages have taken shape. As a result, the current specialised literature could potentially be updated by presenting the seventh stage (2016–20) and the eighth stage (2020 to the present). In other words, following pro-Russia candidate Igor Dodon's victory in the 2016 Moldovan presidential election, Romanian–Moldovan relations deteriorated once more, with a number of unjustified criticisms and attacks levelled at Romania during the new administration, particularly targeting how Romanian MEPs in Brussels represented the Republic of Moldova's latent implementation of reforms or how Romania handled the Covid-19 health crisis. Moreover, during his mandate, Dodon did not have any high-level meetings with Romanian officials in either Bucharest or Chişinău.

In contrast to this, the following stage (post-2020) has thus far evolved differently. In fact, a strong signal was sent to Chişinău after Maia Sandu's victory in the 2020 Moldovan presidential election – the President of Romania was quick to congratulate Sandu via a telephone call, becoming the first head of state to do so. Thus, the claim of Florin Abraham (2016) that 'bilateral Romanian–Moldovan relations were decisively marked by the political color of governments in Chişinău' remains essentially valid. Indeed, as he continues, 'Romanian–Moldovan relations were mainly determined by oscillations between a pro-European and pro-Russian orientation of the Chişinău elites'. In this logic, for instance, 'the liberalization of the visa regime for the Republic of Moldova's citizens in

the EU (since 28 April 2014), a measure taken in the context of Russia's aggression in Ukraine' paved the way for a recontextualisation of the problems arising from the constant threat of Russia in the proximity of Romania and the Republic of Moldova. In connection to this, the current conflict generated by Russia's illegal and unjustified aggression against Ukraine has determined – starting in 2022 – a pertinent settlement on the origins and the European perspective of Romanian–Moldovan relations. Similar to the case of the relaxation of the visa regime in the context of Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, the recurrence of conflict in Ukraine operationalised the Strategic Partnership between Romania and the Republic of Moldova, making it more dynamic and comprehensive than ever before.

However, taking into account some possible scenarios related to a new geopolitical environment, most importantly those related to the successive rounds of elections in Romania and the Republic of Moldova throughout 2024, as well as the European Parliament elections, European integration might face several challenges, depending on the results of these votes. In addition, in late 2024 a referendum on joining the EU is planned in the Republic of Moldova and, given Russia's continuous hybrid warfare against the Republic of Moldova (for example, cyber-attacks, disinformation, destabilisation efforts through the Russia-backed opposition or the separatist enclave of Transnistria), the referendum could jeopardise European integration efforts, despite widespread public support for joining the EU.[1] In other words, European integration – applied to and in the case of the Republic of Moldova – could soon be facing a series of new challenges, perhaps even historic ones, despite the fact that the process of European integration itself is in most cases irreversible, as the

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1   One recent opinion poll reveals that 63% of Moldovans support EU accession (Thompson, 2023).

post-socialist experience demonstrates. In particular, among other issues, the post-socialist experience establishes and indicates the fact that – as Iulian Fota pointed out – people in the Republic of Moldova 'increasingly see, understand and comprehend *the lie*' coming from the ruling elite in Russia, and realise, based on a 'series of comparisons … in search for the truth', that their 'leaders are mocking them' (Ursu, 2020). Therefore, Fota believes that the problem does not lie in or with the West – an assertion applicable to the case of Europeanisation, but rather in the fact that 'the ruling elite in Russia does not want to accept and understand' that people in former Soviet territories have become genuinely independent, connected to the rest of the world, and able to influence one another for the sake of 'a better life' (Ursu, 2020).

In this context, it is important to emphasise several particulars. First of all, the decision of the leaders of the EU in December 2023 to open accession negotiations with the Republic of Moldova signals a solid political commitment regarding the continuation of the integration efforts of the Republic of Moldova, Romania being a firm supporter of the integration of its neighbouring country. Secondly, with the opening of EU accession negotiations, the European Council recognises that the Republic of Moldova has made substantial progress in terms of achieving the objectives related to the candidate status, despite the Russian aggression in Ukraine and the hybrid attacks carried out by Russia against the Republic of Moldova. Finally, the Republic of Moldova formally applied for EU membership in March 2022, and the following June the EU officially granted it candidate status. Subsequently, in December 2023, European leaders decided to open the negotiation chapters – a decision that is (1) widely considered to be a notable success for Romanian diplomacy in 2023, (2) a direct consequence of the reforms achieved in the Republic of Moldova, and (3) an indirect result of the continuous Russian aggression against the Republic of Moldova since February 2022.

In any case, possibly the most comprehensive explanation that could support the assumption according to which today's Strategic Partnership between Romania and the Republic of Moldova is dynamic is offered by Olga Raluca Chiriac and Dan Dungaciu (2023). They believe that Russia has been engaging asymmetrically with Eastern Europe since the fall of the Soviet Union, using methods that include de-Romanisation and weaponising *inter alia* the Romanian language in Moldova and Ukraine. Obviously, as demonstrated throughout this working paper, all pro-Russian or Russia-backed leaders in Chişinău were consciously engaged in altering cooperation with Romania, though their efforts were reversed once the pro-Europeans came to power. Thus, Russia's strategy concerning the Republic of Moldova is to keep the country under Russian influence while, in the words of Chiriac and Dungaciu, 'simultaneously deepening divides between Moldova, Ukraine, and Romania', preventing the Republic of Moldova's 'accession to the EU and integration into Western institutions' – with the all-encompassing goal of undermining the rules-based international order through irregular warfare operations.

Most notably, Chiriac and Dungaciu argue that 'the pre- and post-Soviet de-Romanization projects in Ukraine and Moldova had produced glaring departures from historical fact[s], an alternative reality employed in fighting irregular warfare'. As a result, Russia's "rebranding" of the Romanian language as "Moldovan" hindered Moldova's European integration process, and sabotaged not only Romanian–Moldovan relations, but Romanian–Ukrainian relations as well. This created internal discord in the Republic of Moldova between ethnic Romanians and ethnic Russians, and 'fueled mistrust in the [European] Union and its institutions'. Simultaneously, Moscow's efforts towards creating divisions and tensions among ethnic populations 'by perpetuating fake narratives and making false accusations' reveal that Russia not only conceals its 'expansionist goals' towards Central and Eastern Europe, but also reflects

a reality: 'Romania supports not only Ukraine in its fight for state survival but also Moldova in its bid for EU membership'.

Finally, having outlined the evolution of the strategic objective of integrating the Republic of Moldova into the EU, it is imperative to point out that among the various internal and external factors potentially explaining the main drivers behind this objective are the points presented in Tables 1 and 2 below.

Table 1: Congruent factors for determining the main drivers behind Moldovan integration into the EU

EXTERNAL FACTORS	INTERNAL FACTORS
• The ongoing conflict in Ukraine • Russian policy towards Romania and the Republic of Moldova, as well as towards the EU • The confluence of cultural proximities beyond state borders – in the sense that Romania and the Republic of Moldova are situated at the confluence of Central Europe, Southeastern Europe and Eastern Europe	• Political will and public expectations triggered by similarity in foreign policy-related perspectives, notions and principles, including interpretations of security and post-socialism evolutions during pro-European Moldovan administrations • Common language, history and traditions – "two Romanian states" • Objectives to increase socio-economic prosperity and political predictability

Source: Compiled by the author

Table 2: Internal factors of Romania and the Republic of Moldova for determining the main drivers behind Moldovan integration into the EU

ROMANIA	REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA
• Russian policy towards NATO and the EU, especially on the Eastern flank and the Black Sea • Prospects of further becoming a stabilising state actor in Central and Eastern Europe, increasing Romania's profile as a committed EU and NATO member state • Ensuring extensive stability and enhancing security prospects in Romania's immediate vicinity, thus addressing the issue of historical reinterpretations in a post-socialist context by correcting historical errors and combating fake propaganda	• The possibility of attracting investment and increasing trade capacity • Ensuring security and strategic autonomy in relation to Russia; being less constrained and having enhanced capabilities to ensure state survival • Importing expertise in the process of Europeanisation

Source: Compiled by the author

5. Conclusions

This working paper reveals that the varied evolution of bilateral relations between Romania and the Republic of Moldova has experienced major transformations over the years. A series of these evolutions has ultimately determined the emergence and consolidation of the Strategic Partnership for European Integration and influenced the general trajectory of these transformations between the two countries. In light of this, it remains important to acknowledge the historical breadth and complexity of these

bilateral relations and their implications for the EU in general and for Central and Eastern Europe in particular.

In addition to this, it has been noted that relations between Romania and the Republic of Moldova have undergone different phases, marked by changes in political orientations and priorities. The political ideology of Moldovan authorities, as well as local and international circumstances, have frequently influenced the development of these stages. The oscillations of the elites in Chişinău, with their shifting stances towards Europe and Russia, have played a significant role in shaping the dynamics of Romanian–Moldovan relations, thus their variability has exerted a substantial influence on the speed and trajectory of the Republic of Moldova's endeavours towards European integration.

The pursuit of European integration in the Republic of Moldova has been a consistent objective for Chişinău since its independence, and can be characterised by fluctuating degrees of zeal among the different administrations and leaders. The election of Maia Sandu in 2020 is regarded as a significant turning point in the Moldovan government's stance, as it signifies an indisputably stronger inclination towards European integration. In consequence, this shift has fostered enhanced collaboration between Romania and the Republic of Moldova, with this leadership transition facilitating the development of a more robust cooperation between the two countries, particularly in light of the ongoing conflict in Ukraine and Russia's regional policies. Hence, recent evolutions have significantly impacted the strategic aim of Romanian–Moldovan relations, while the geographical proximity between Romania and the Republic of Moldova underscores the significance of European integration through bilateralism in the region.

Furthermore, given the current crisis in Ukraine and the geopolitical dynamics of the region, the Strategic Partnership between Romania and the Republic of Moldova has experienced a resurgence in significance

and vigour, with bilateral collaboration encompassing a dynamic and comprehensive approach that effectively tackles the security and integration problems imposed by the regional context. All the same, the question must be raised as to whether today's Romanian–Moldovan relations are a matter of "embedded bilateralism" in a European context or rather one of "cross-loading Europeanisation" in reducing the anarchy set in motion by Russia's breach of international law.

Romania's strategic objective in relation to the integration of the Republic of Moldova into the EU is in accordance with its overarching foreign policy goals. Romania aspires to assume the role of a stabilising state actor in the CEE region, with the objective of enhancing its standing as a dedicated member of both the EU and NATO. The maintenance of stability and security in the neighbourhood is of utmost significance for Romania. In contrast, the Republic of Moldova perceives European integration as a mechanism to attract investment, bolster trade capabilities and fortify its security and strategic autonomy. The dedication to the process of European integration continues to be a fundamental aspect in the context of these bilateral relations, particularly in light of the changing geopolitical landscape determined by Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine. Motivated by political, economic and security factors, both Romania and the Republic of Moldova exhibit a significant inclination towards the pursuit of this goal. In the coming years, their steadfast collaboration and ability to adjust to evolving conditions will ensure that these endeavours towards European integration through bilateralism will most likely continue to be a prominent aspect of political association in Europe, not just among EU Member States, but also between Member States and those nations aspiring to European integration.

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European Policy on Serbia–Kosovo Relations and the New Global Balances

VINCENZO MARIA DI MINO AND MARCO SIRAGUSA[*]

ABSTRACT: The war in Ukraine has overwhelmed fragile global geopolitical balances. On one side there are Europe, formally united in defence and support of liberal democracies, and NATO's political and military partners, first and foremost the United States, seeking to strengthen its hegemony through the war machine. On the other side are all those actors who have not aligned themselves with sanctions against Russia, such as BRICS. However, the new geopolitical scenario has also had repercussions on European policies towards states aspiring to join the EU. Over the years, Europe has often sacrificed the pursuit of common interests by presenting itself as an incomplete project. These shortcomings manifest themselves to their full extent when it comes to security and the enlargement of the Union. The recent tensions in northern Kosovo, the most serious in decades, have made the EU's inability to find new solutions to old problems quite clear. And – given NATO's presence on

*   Vincenzo Maria Di Mino: Independent researcher on political and social theory.
     Marco Siragusa: Journalist and PhD in International Studies, University of Naples
     "L'Orientale", Italy.

the ground, and Russia and China's outspoken support for Serbia – it is precisely in Kosovo that an important game has been restarted. For the first time, the EU has strongly criticised and sanctioned the Kosovar government, opening up the possibility of a more balanced policy. How will this affect the European paths of Serbia and Kosovo? What role do China, Russia and the USA play in what appears to be one of the greatest challenges for European foreign policy? These are some of the questions that this paper will endeavour to answer.

KEYWORDS: Serbia, Kosovo, European Union, USA, Russia, China

1. Introduction

One of the cornerstones of reflection on politics is its relation to time. Political thought has famously been articulated between two poles: that associated with the times of utopia and that articulated within the necessities and contingency of realism. Given the issues of great current relevance, it may seem trivial to say that today the timescales of politics are further reduced and compressed, forcefully flattened in the short term, so much so that forecasts and further medium and long-term strategic designs are impossible. Ever since the Yugoslav Wars (1991–2001), the materiality of armed conflict has once again taken a prominent place in Europe. Additionally, the Russia–Ukraine conflict that erupted in February 2022, which to date shows no signs of being peacefully resolved despite the heartfelt pleas of different sectors of diplomacy and international public opinion, has problematised the already shaky international forum, with other actors entering the scenario and other fronts opening up.

During this 30-year period, attempts have been made to build Europe as a *tout court* supranational political space capable, in its intentions, of ensuring a common voice for its different components, but which – behind the blanket statements of the declarations of its institutional summits – is creaking more than ever under the pressure of regional alliances and state protagonists. In this specific context, the Balkans indicate the ambivalences of European politics, closely hinged on a broad programmatic vision that dreams of a unified space yet is, nevertheless, unable to give concrete answers to economic and political contingencies or to counterbalance the attempt to build an alternative international political space to the Atlantic one as demonstrated by the recent BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) summit held in Johannesburg in August 2023.

The analysis of Serbia's relations with the EU and BRICS and, on the other hand, Kosovo's relations with the United States and the European Union, is one of the lenses through which it is possible to analyse the difficulties of building a truly peaceful space. In the following, after a more general discussion, we will specifically focus on the relations between Serbia and Kosovo. The historical reconstruction of the "Kosovo Question" will focus especially on the roles that the United States, the European Union, Russia and China have played in recent decades, from the war of the 1990s to the tensions that characterised 2023 in particular. This paper will conclude with a reflection on the European perspectives of Serbia and Kosovo in light of the two countries' relations with other powers.

2. Between the Anvil of Regional Wars and the Spectre of Global Warfare

Moving cautiously through the meanderings of global politics today means clearing the ground of simplifications and the easy temptation to settle into pre-packaged assemblages, and trying to follow the fault lines of the ever-closer rumblings of daily battles and emergencies. It can be argued that the international political situation today resembles that which followed World War I: polarisation, a constant search for an enemy, increasingly atrophied diplomatic relations and increased military spending. This is the result of the failure of 'the cosmopolitan model of the Holy Alliance', that is, the dream of a pacified world with Euro-Atlantic traction (Zolo, 1995).

The first 15 years of the twentieth century, with US hegemony, was held back by the effects of the war on the Islamic enemy, first identified as an organisation stationed in the Middle East, which later reacted by deterritorialising its action by bringing war to the heart of Western metropolises through forms of asymmetric warfare.

The second brake on this project was the financial crisis of 2007–08, which saw the emergence of China as a credible competitor to be reckoned with in economic, military and diplomatic terms alike. Through relations marked by "infrastructure diplomacy" China asserted its status as a global power, supported by the operational network of relations and a specific "capitalism of operations" aimed at delinking countries in the South from the grip of international financial and political institutions.

The third brake was brought about by the combination of the spread of Covid-19 and the concrete return of war within European space, by which old tensions exploded in all their ferocity. The analytical and critical approach to this hyperconnected system of polycrises causes a slight shift in the picture that allows us to trace both its lines of force and possible fault lines of rupture. This can be found in some passages from the works of the British economist John Maynard Keynes.

The context in which Keynes brought his writings to fruition was that of the 1920s, that is, the decade that tried to put the horror of the Great War behind it and that looked, dangerously, into the abyss that the pan-European emergence of fascism portended. Added to this picture was the slide towards the great crisis of early global liberalism of 1929, which further accelerated social crises and aggravated, as a result, diplomatic relations as well. Keynes was as critical of the diplomatic solutions that followed the 1919 Versailles Conference that brought Germany to its knees as he was of the sterile enthusiasm about the driving and balancing force of liberal economic prescriptions. In *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* (1919), he extensively criticised the policy choices of France,

Britain and the United States in the establishment of the League of Nations, seeing it as an idealistic *longa manus* of the interests of the victorious powers, and he even more precisely criticised the system of war debts, which would in time bring the German and European economies to the brink of the abyss. In essence, Keynes saw the choice of military security at the expense of economic development to be an encouragement of the arms race, strengthening both the revanchism of the defeated nations and the imperialist pretensions – disguised as the protection of order – of the victors (Ferrari Bravo, 1991).

In *The End of Laissez-Faire* (1926), Keynes highlighted the derisory optimism of the laissez faire policies that guided the political policies of capitalist economies. He criticised what Marx called the 'anarchy of production' in the name of a robust liberalism, marked by collective action and directed towards the collective demand for goods and services and, therefore, towards the provision of credit as an element of structural stability. These reflections became common heritage at the end of the Second World War, with the establishment of Western money market governance structures and the disbursement of copious loans for economic and social reconstruction in Europe (Ferrari Bravo, 1981, 1991).

Today, these reflections have great relevance when analysing the current historical phase, treasuring Keynes' realism and diplomatic bent and trying to dispense with his reliance on the liberal ideological machine. Having done away with the margins for the development of a specific "Keynesian diplomacy" imprinted on the establishment of a balance between powers based on economic development, there remain on the international chessboard two visions, one rigidly Atlanticist and one that tries to enhance and harmonise a multipolar vision. Europe, in this context, fails to emerge as a "Third", that is, the figure of the politician who can act as a mediator through their autonomy (Portinaro, 1986), but becomes a mere territorial element in the imperial (that is, military and

strategic) politics and logistics of Atlanticism. All this leads us to see the realisation of what, in geopolitical terms, is called "Thucydides' Trap" – the materialisation of critical tensions accumulated in a real war fought without any buffer. As a result, each regional conflict becomes a mirror of a clash of civilisations among the great powers, the composition of which seems to produce a mirror effect: US and Russian military interventionism is matched by Chinese and European prudence, which is an indirect form of interventionism practiced through economic support. Serving as vectors of tension in this scenario are three elements: the security race, the sanctions market and, as mentioned earlier, the European inability to build an autonomous foreign policy untethered from Atlantic influences.

The rearmament race and the dialectic between supply and demand for security is a key point in trying to find the crux of the global anomie. And this concerns foremost the economic wars for technological innovation waged by proxy by multinational corporations. That of artificial intelligence is the hottest among the fronts of wars fought by other means, and it has seen an acceleration in the last three years. The control of sensitive data and information, in fact, has required the continuous mobilisation of resources in the field of techno-scientific intelligence on the warfare side, and has accelerated the race towards the procurement of raw materials suitable for upgrading the same technological devices (Aresu, 2022; Buchanan & Imbrie, 2022).

A growing state of insecurity is matched by a need for military and economic protection, which, as in the case of African countries, has pushed them towards the Chinese area of influence (Sciortino, 2022; Colarizi, 2023). Indeed, the infrastructure diplomacy implemented by Beijing operates in the vacuum of a credible global alternative, and it has offered economic resources and infrastructure in exchange for participation in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Especially in the Mediterranean

area, the BRI has functioned as an alternative economic development vector to the financial austerity of European institutions.

Closely related to the first point are economic and political sanctions, which clearly serve as a detonator for worsening international relations. The sanctions launched by the Trump administration against Chinese tech companies such as Huawei, and those launched by the United Nations and the European Union against Russia move within the same ideological and strategic narrative, namely, to corner the enemy by depriving it of its social legitimacy base. Economic war does the same damage as war fought *manu militari*. The reference made earlier to Keynesian considerations now comes in handy: sanctions, in fact, increase the desire for revenge of the states affected by them, increase their war effort, and reduce the spaces for mediation even further. And, as a result, they highlight the frailties of the global marketplace, in which the supposed freedom of trade morphs into ironclad protectionism, justified through the pursuit of human rights and the spread of acceptable standards of civilisation. Thus, a veritable consensus market is being built around sanctions based on the ancient and vicious logic of "divide and rule", which incentivises the undecided to take sides in the Atlanticist direction to receive Hobbesian security for active participation in the pursuit of the global spread of this same order (Colombo, 2022).

The third sore point concerns Europe's role in this context, squeezed as a continental buffer to the hegemonic claims of what Carl Schmitt (1991) called 'the maritime powers', namely the United States and Britain. In the words of Lucio Caracciolo (2022), the end of continental peace has seen a passive role for Europe, being reduced to a vassal of decisions made by Washington and London. The prominence claimed by European actors such as Macron and Meloni can be downgraded to the effect of mere media overexposure, a façade compared to the operational and strategic decisions taken elsewhere.

All this, at a time when the European space is experiencing a very serious crisis brought about by its inability to receive and manage migratory flows from the Middle East and Africa, has allowed NATO to expand into the Scandinavian region as well, while certain European NATO countries are seeing an increase in instances of nationalism and fascism. At present, the European political space thrives on rhetoric, is firm in the dogmatic defence of an ideological idea of the West, and is lacking in perspective, failing to offer security and to go all the way in a fully transnational turn. It is still tied to tensions between the macro-regional interests of its constituent political units, which have broadened even more since the outbreak of the Russia–Ukraine conflict. A common foreign policy, the absence of credible cooperation with African countries (an element that still suffers from France's neo-colonial relations on that continent), and the ambiguity of cooperation with its own Eastern region, are all latent in the EU's perspective.

3. From the Global to the Local: The Kosovo Question

The analysis of the international context presented so far turns out to be of fundamental importance for understanding some of the dynamics driving what is considered to be one of the most sensitive issues for European stability and beyond: the so-called "Kosovo Question". Despite the oblivion to which it is too often relegated in European public debate, historical, political and economic elements of extraordinary importance are intertwined in this corner of Southeast Europe. At the bottom of

the Kosovo Question there is obviously the unresolved link with Serbia, but also EU recognition (five states of the Union do not recognise the independence of Priština), as well as the very functionality of the Kosovar state and its relations with other global actors. Indeed, since the late 1980s, international interests have been interwoven, turning the area into a political-diplomatic battleground between major powers: on the one hand, the United States and the European Union, true protectors of the Kosovar state, and on the other Russia and China, historically opposed to the recognition of any Kosovar statehood.

To fully understand current trends, at this point it is necessary to briefly review some historical milestones. When in October 1991, the members of Kosovo's provincial parliament convened a referendum and proclaimed, for the first time, the country's independence, the then nascent European Union did not recognise its value, nipping Kosovo's national claims in the bud at a time when the Yugoslav Federation was fast heading for war. Within a few years, the situation was turned on its head. Serbian military operations in Kosovo in 1998 found tenacious opposition from both the European Union and the United States. The failure of the negotiations held in Rambouillet pushed NATO into armed intervention against Serbia. However, the Allied Force operation was conducted without a green light from the UN Security Council due to the veto placed by Moscow and Beijing, which considered the military action as an "illegal" operation. Despite this, the grievances of neither Russia, which emerged internationally "defeated" following the fall of the Soviet Union, nor those of China had any particular effect. Beijing's opposition became even stronger after the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade on 7 May 1999, which resulted in a further souring of relations with Washington. At the conclusion of NATO operations, after three months of bombing, the Security Council issued – with the support of Russia and China – Resolution 1244, by which two missions were established: one military,

the KFOR (Kosovo Force), the other civilian, the UNMIK (United Nations Mission in Kosovo), which recognised the EU as having a leading role to play in the political, economic and financial choices in Kosovo. The decision to make the German mark, rather than the US dollar, the official currency is perhaps the most striking example of this new European role.

Tensions in Kosovo flared up again in 2004, when violent demonstrations – this time organised by pro-Albanians against Serbian Orthodox places of worship – caused thousands of Serbs to flee. Difficulties in the relationship between Serbia and the EU prompted the latter to argue more and more openly for the possibility of the recognition of a Kosovar state. In 2007, the European Parliament voted on the Resolution on the Future of Kosovo and the Role of the European Union, by which, while never making the possibility of independence explicit, it supported the ongoing process under the auspices of the UN known as the Ahtisaari Plan, which included the enactment of a Kosovar constitution, and the recognition of a flag and a national anthem. The plan had been submitted, but it was never discussed at the Security Council because of the Russian threat to veto it. Despite Moscow's opposition, however, the road to a declaration of independence had now been mapped out. This came on 18 February 2008, with a vote of the Kosovo Assembly that was not attended by Serbian representatives. This time, unlike in 1991, the declaration was immediately recognised by the EU – with the exception of five countries (Spain, Cyprus, Greece, Slovakia and Romania). The Serbian protests had no effect other than to create a new division within the international community with Russia and China as opposed to any unilateral act by Priština. China's foreign minister warned that the Kosovo decision 'may rekindle conflicts and turbulences in the region, which in turn would cause [a] serious humanitarian crisis and adversely impact the entire Balkan region and beyond', adding that 'China maintains all along that the best way to resolve the issue of Kosovo [*sic*] status is for the two parties

concerned to reach a mutually acceptable solution through negotiations' (Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the UN, 2008). Even sterner was the Russian position, which called for steps 'including voiding the decisions of Priština's self-governing institutions and adopting severe administrative measures against them' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2008). The Kosovo affair, in both its military and political phases in the first decade of the 2000s, seemed to show how US unilateralism was still far from being challenged.

A further turning point, also crucial in the current fallout, occurred in 2013 with the achievement of the so-called Agreement on Principles Governing the Normalisation of Relations between Serbia and Kosovo, which was the result of EU-mediated dialogue. Known as the Brussels Agreement, the 15-point document provided for the creation of an association of Serb-majority municipalities in Kosovo (North Mitrovica, Zvečan, Zubin Potok and Leposavić) that was granted complete oversight of the areas of economic development, education, health, and urban and rural planning. Item 14 committed the parties not to block or encourage others to block the other party's progress on their respective European paths. Just three days later, recognising that the political and economic criteria had now been met, the European Commission recommended the opening of EU accession negotiations with Serbia. Such an agreement remains unimplemented to this day – a situation that shows all the weakness and inability of the European Union to build a credible and, above all, effective dialogue between the parties, and precisely when the United States has shown a certain reluctance to continue to take a personal interest in Balkan affairs by delegating direct political management of the Kosovo Question to the EU.

4. Recent Developments

A few days after Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence, the government of the Russian Federation published a document on its foreign policy expressly stating that 'the Balkan region is of great strategic importance to Russia, including its role as a major transportation and infrastructure hub used for the supply of gas and oil to European countries' (*Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation*, 2013). Over the past decade, the Balkans have been an important test case for Russia's ability to challenge Euro-Atlantic unilateralism, if not militarily, then at least politically and economically. This is a challenge aimed not at completely replacing the EU in the region, which would be an unrealistic goal, but at creating zones of influence through which to undermine the already precarious European stability and block further NATO expansion. It is in this context that the strategic alliance with Belgrade should be considered, beyond any cultural-religious ties, often relied upon to explain the "Slavic brotherhood" between the two countries.

For Russia, Serbia has represented a kind of "bridgehead" enabling it to still have some influence in the region. This has also been possible because of the policy adopted over the past decade by Serbia, led by Aleksandar Vučić, first as premier and then as president of the republic. Vučić, formerly minister of information in the Slobodan Milošević government during the war in Kosovo, has been able to build a complex web of international relations reminiscent – albeit with different goals and ideological underpinnings – of that of the Yugoslav period. On the one hand, the country continues, not without enormous difficulties, on its path towards EU membership without forfeiting its privileged relations either with Moscow or – especially in the last decade – with Beijing.

Despite a multilateral policy, on the economic level Serbian dependence on the EU seems to have been undamaged by other competitors. Some data can help us understand the picture better. According to the EU office in Serbia, in 2022 total trade with the Union's 27 members reached EUR 39 billion – by far exceeding the 5.8 billion recorded with China and 4 billion with Russia. By way of contrast, the total value of trade with the United States was just EUR 1.2 billion. Similar results are also recorded in terms of Foreign Direct Investment, with the EU accounting for 59% of the total over the 2010–22 period, China 9% and Russia 7%.

While economically the Union can still count on a strong hegemony, politically things become somewhat more complicated, although EU membership remains the preferred horizon of Serbian foreign policy. Indeed, it has been more than 15 years since Belgrade officially submitted its application for membership and over 12 since it was granted the status of candidate country. Since then, things have not gone as hoped. To date, in fact, only two negotiating chapters (Science and Research, and Education and Culture) have been successfully closed by Serbia out of the total 34. Since the second half of 2023, the EU-mediated dialogue seems to have reached yet another stalemate, with that year in particular being the most tense in decades. In December 2022, Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabić declared that 'we really are on the brink of an armed conflict' (UNMIK Media Observer, 2022). A month earlier, over 500 Serbs employed in Kosovar institutions, including the police and courts, resigned from their posts in protest against the government. This was a carefully planned action supported by Srpska Lista ("Serbian List"), the majority party among Serbo-Kosovars, which has close ties with the government in Belgrade.

All the same, 2023 opened with a major confidence boost. Between late February and early March, a new proposed agreement submitted by France and Germany, and also supported by Italy and the United States, included

several measures that, if implemented, would lead to de facto recognition between the two countries. Highlights included the mutual recognition of national documents and emblems, the rejection of the use of force, and, above all, the formation of the Association of Serb Municipalities and an end, on the Serbian side, to any opposition to Kosovo's membership in major international organisations. That this new mediation would prove once again to be a false dawn, however, was already demonstrated by the failure of the two premiers to sign the document despite agreeing in principle to its implementation.

The first test of the new round of dialogue came with the April elections in the Serb-majority municipalities of northern Kosovo. These elections were boycotted by Srpska Lista, thus raising tension which exploded in all its violence after Kosovar mayors took office. Bloody clashes occurred between organised groups of Serbian citizens and Kosovar police, and, with Serbian President Vučić having already deployed soldiers to the border, the situation threatened to escalate into an armed conflict, with potentially catastrophic consequences. On this occasion, unlike in recent years, Priština received harsh condemnations for its actions from even its most trusted allies, the United States and the European Union. Indeed, the two entities criticised Kosovo's actions as provocation and a direct threat to the stability of the area, so much so that they expelled Kosovo's troops from the NATO military exercise Defender 2023. As if that was not enough, on 28 June the EU decided to apply some sanctions – officially 'temporary and reversible measures' – to the country (European Parliament, 2023). These include the suspension of the work of the organs of the 2016 Stabilisation and Association Agreement and, most significantly, the suspension of programming funds available from IPA 2024 (Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance). Despite pressure on Priština, tensions did not abate in the weeks that followed. In late September, in fact, an armed confrontation occurred between a group of heavily armed Serbian

militants that stormed the northern Kosovo village of Banjska, killing a Kosovar policeman. The clashes went on for a whole day before the group fled towards Serbia.

5. A Difficult Relationship with Europe

The failure of the process of normalisation of relations has shown – as if there was still a need – the inconsistency, at least on the political level, of the European Union's persuasive capacity. The so-called "enlargement fatigue" has been compounded by the multifaceted consequences of the two major global events of recent years – the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. China's commitment to Serbia during the harshest phases of the pandemic even prompted Serbian President Vučić to openly speak about European solidarity as 'a fairy tale on paper' (Walker, 2020).

Further exacerbating the distance between Belgrade and Brussels was the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. While formally condemning the aggression, Serbia has in fact never fully aligned itself with the European policy of sanctions towards Moscow. In a recommendation of 23 November 2022, the European Parliament dictated a clear standpoint: advance accession negotiations will only be conducted with Serbia if the country aligns with EU sanctions against Russia (*European Parliament Recommendation of 23 November…*, 2022). In the same document, the Parliament noted that 'due to internal blockages in the past few years, the Council has failed the enlargement countries by blocking the accession process and not delivering on the EU's long-outstanding promises', adding that this 'has created a vacuum, thereby opening up space for Russia, China and other malign third actors'. This passage is also

particularly significant for another reason: the language used. Not only is the European Parliament aware of the advance of China and Russia in the area, but it designates these actors as 'malign', a term that clearly shows how Europe continues to view Beijing and Moscow as a threat to the "calm chaos" created by the Euro-Atlantic bloc in recent decades. Actually, it is necessary to underline the different influences exerted by the two powers. While Russia still tries to influence the political debate within the Balkan countries and to direct their choices in foreign policy (we only need to think of its close link with the Serbian Socialist Party and other parties in the region), Chinese influence is limited to the economic level, affecting almost nothing in the relationship between Serbia and Kosovo.

In its report of May 2023, the European Parliament reiterated its position, calling on 'the relevant [Serbian] authorities to demonstrate an unequivocal commitment … to align with restrictive measures against Russia' and deploring 'Serbia's continued close relations and partnership with Russia, which raise questions about Serbia's strategic direction' (*European Parliament resolution of 10 May…*, 2023). Given the paths that Belgrade has taken in recent years, this is far from a minor concern. Among the most significant of these paths is the very recent alliance created with BRICS, five countries that do not recognise Kosovo's independence. This is considered central to relations with international partners, so much so that it prompted the Socialist Movement, a member of Serbia's governing majority, to present a resolution to Belgrade last August calling for the country's accession to BRICS, something considered a clear alternative to the path of accession to the European Union. For the Socialist Movement, joining BRICS 'would confirm Serbia's commitment to the creation of a more just world order based on unconditional respect for international law, while limiting Western hegemony, promoting security and stability, and ensuring [the] fundamental reform of international financial institutions' (*Pokret socijalista čiji je osnivač…*, 2023).

From the second half of 2023, however, partly because of European pressure and the threat of the use of sanctions against Belgrade, the Serbian government seems to have timidly opened up to the possibility of enforcing sanctions against Moscow. This is not a very convincing position, and it is more for the purpose of "stalling" than actual adherence to European foreign policy. For his part, in a kind of "pro-European trance", European Council President Charles Michel declared in late August 2023 that 'Europe must be ready for enlargement by 2030', and that 'enlargement is no longer a dream' (Barigazzi, 2023). This was a forward push dictated by a desire to reassure the EU's Balkan partners, but unlikely to convince them of its concreteness.

To better understand the climate of Euro-scepticism hovering over Serbia, a survey published by Novi Treci Put in June 2023 may shed some light on the situation. The survey reveals that in a hypothetical referendum, only 28.4% of Serbian citizens would definitely vote for EU membership, with an additional 20% saying that they would 'probably' vote "yes", bringing the total to 48.4% in favour of EU membership versus 51.6% against (33.8% 'definitely against', 17.8% 'probably against'). Even more negative is the opinion of Serbian citizens towards NATO, with only 15.8% claiming to be in favour of joining the Alliance. Even regarding alignment with the policy of sanctions against Russia, Serbian citizens seem to support their government's standpoint, 70% declaring themselves against the introduction of any sanctions, as opposed to 15.2% believing that Belgrade should harmonise with European policy. If Europe does not excite, BRICS, on the other hand, attracts wide sympathies. In fact, 59.7% of respondents favour possible membership of the organisation, an indication that the project relaunched in Johannesburg in August 2023 is seen to be the most credible for possible change in the current global order.

Despite the obvious difficulties, however, the European Union seems to want to make up lost ground by once more trying to play an active

role in a de-escalation of tensions. Yet another attempt promoted by the governments of Germany, France and Italy demonstrated this, with the support of European institutions. Indeed, the European Council meeting of 26 October 2023 called on Kosovo and Serbia to implement 'the Agreement on the path to normalisation and its Implementation Annex as well as other agreements reached in the EU facilitated dialogue … without delay or preconditions', insisting on 'the establishment of the Association/Community of Serb Majority Municipalities' and adding that normalising relations was 'an essential condition on the European path of both Parties' (European Council, 2023). Also showing Kosovo's intentions not to force its hand too much with the EU is the government's decision to call new elections in the Serb-majority municipalities at the centre of the clashes of 2023. On the other hand, Serbia is being asked to proceed with the de facto recognition of Kosovo, an expression as vague as it is potentially revolutionary in the fragile regional balances, but one that is unlikely to find concrete expression, as President Vučić has repeatedly implied.

In this context, the European Union, through instruments of legal and political cooperation, should become the provider of a new course in Serbia–Kosovo relations based not only on peacekeeping, but on its real implementation, trying to overcome all the limitations and contradictions that have characterised the Kosovo Question over recent decades. In addition, Europe should take charge of intervention through the means of economic cooperation aimed at opening new channels of communication with other global players acting in the region, especially China. Combining these two levels of intervention will enable Europe to present itself as a credible actor capable of contributing to the peaceful development of the region and to a new way of looking at international relations beyond exclusionary or militaristic visions.

6. Conclusions

The tensions between Serbia and Kosovo are, in essence, a mirror of other, broader global tensions. In all the conflicts of recent years, not least those in Ukraine and Palestine, Europe has shown a manifest inability not only to speak with one voice, but also to play the role of mediator between the conflicting parties by supporting and structuring a serious and comprehensive diplomatic strategy. Besides formally condemning military actions wherever they arise, especially when disguised as humanitarian interventions, Europe should engage in the search for concrete solutions.

The "lost decade" in the dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo, which began so promisingly under the auspices of the 2013 Brussels Agreement, manifests all the contradictions of a process – of European unity and political autonomy – that is uneven and without a clear perspective. To step out of the shadow of Atlanticist militarism, Europe must take charge of a strong and direct diplomatic operation targeting both the economic and the more concretely political fronts. For European diplomacy, regaining its own space of prominence means setting up an infrastructure with which to support both options, without reducing them to vague promises.

The preconditions are frankly not the best: the position taken by the European Council on the delicate Middle East situation does not portend any intention to break free from the new hegemonic project, on a global scale, of the American kind. Opening up to the East, renouncing the merely ideological and rhetorical defence of existing global power relations, and abandoning a paternalistic and still too often colonial approach would mean reconsidering and recalibrating Europe's role –

from being a transmission belt for the lines of command coming from overseas to a political space that weaves alternative narratives, opening up towards its own South and, above all, towards the East, both the Near East and the Pacific East alike.

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Ten Years of (De)industrialisation in Central and Eastern Europe: A Comparative Analysis

DMITRY EROKHIN*

ABSTRACT: In today's global economy, discussions on industrialisation and deindustrialisation are central. While prominent cases like Germany's manufacturing exodus to countries such as China and the USA grab the headlines, understanding the dynamics in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) is crucial. This region, with its intricate historical, geopolitical and economic legacies, offers a unique perspective to examine industrial sector trajectories amidst global economic shifts. In CEE, the development of manufacturing is influenced by multifaceted processes such as backshoring. The concept of backshoring gained momentum amid the Covid-19 pandemic, prompting nations to re-evaluate their dependency on distant manufacturing hubs and thus turn to nurturing domestic production resilience. Nearshoring has also emerged as a prevailing trend in Western Europe, focusing on reducing logistical complexities by relocating production closer to end markets. Additionally, the notion of friendshoring has emerged as a response to geopolitics and shared economic interests,

*   Dmitry Erokhin: PhD, Vienna University of Economics and Business, Austria; Research Scholar, International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis.

leading to the relocation of manufacturing operations to allied nations. However, these industrialisation drivers are counterbalanced by certain challenges. Escalating energy costs have diminished manufacturing competitiveness, eroding profit margins. Sanctions limiting trade with Russia have disrupted supply chains, and global value chain shifts have potentially marginalised the manufacturing capacity of the CEE region. This study comprehensively analyses manufacturing indicators over a decade to determine whether Central and Eastern European countries experienced industrialisation or deindustrialisation during that period. Considering its status as the world's factory, the manufacturing data of the People's Republic of China serves as a benchmark. While there are no definitive signs of significant deindustrialisation, vigilance is needed as market sentiment and supply chain optimisation strategies evolve within the manufacturing sector.

1. Introduction

In the contemporary global economic landscape, discussions surrounding industrialisation and deindustrialisation have gained significant traction. While media attention often gravitates towards prominent cases like Germany, where, due to escalating domestic production costs, leading manufacturers have been relocating their operations to countries such as China and the USA, it is crucial to delve into the nuanced dynamics taking place in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). This region, marked by its complex historical, geopolitical and economic legacies, offers a compelling vantage point from which to scrutinise the trajectories of industrial sectors in the face of an evolving global economic order.

The processes influencing the development of manufacturing in CEE are multifaceted. One compelling trend to explore is the phenomenon of backshoring, which found renewed momentum during the Covid-19 pandemic (Xu et al., 2020). The disruption of global value chains prompted many countries to re-evaluate their dependence on distant manufacturing centres. This catalysed the return of production facilities to home soil, as nations sought to bolster their resilience against unforeseen disruptions. Additionally, nearshoring gained prominence as Western European countries recognised the advantages of basing production in closer proximity to end markets, mitigating logistical complexities and fostering stronger regional economic ties (Bontadini et al., 2022). Friendshoring, another noteworthy trend, involves the strategic relocation of manufacturing facilities to allied nations, driven by geopolitical considerations and shared economic interests (Vivoda, 2023).

These potential drivers of industrialisation are, however, counterbalanced by several challenges. Escalating energy prices have cast

a shadow over manufacturing competitiveness, eroding profit margins and diminishing the appeal of retaining or establishing production bases (Chiacchio et al., 2023). Sanctions that restrict trade with Russia, a traditional economic partner for many Central and Eastern European countries, have disrupted established supply chains and trading relationships (Bayramov et al., 2020).

Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to comprehensively analyse a range of manufacturing-related indicators to discern whether countries in Central and Eastern Europe have witnessed a trajectory of industrialisation or deindustrialisation over the past decade. In order to provide a benchmark for comparison, Chinese manufacturing data is also included, given China's status as the world's factory and its robust presence in the manufacturing sector (Duan et al., 2021). The study is structured as follows: Part 2 presents a background on the topic of industrialisation and deindustrialisation. Part 3 elaborates on the research methodology employed and introduces the manufacturing indicators that serve as focal points of analysis. Part 4 presents the findings of the study and engages in a thorough discussion of the implications and trends observed. Finally, Part 5 encapsulates the study's insights and conclusions.

2. Background

Industrialisation, marked by the growth of manufacturing and the shift from agrarian economies to industrial ones, has been a defining feature of modern economic history (Kemp, 2013). It began in the United Kingdom in the late eighteenth century and gradually spread to other parts of the world. Industrialisation brought about urbanisation, technological

innovation and increased productivity, fundamentally altering societal structures (Grübler, 1994). The transformation was characterised by the rise of factories, the development of transportation networks and the expansion of trade.

In Central and Eastern Europe, industrialisation took root in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when the region was part of empires such as those of Austro-Hungary or Russia (O'Rourke, 2017). The development of coal mining, steel production and textile manufacturing laid the foundations for industrial growth. Though lagging behind Western Europe in industrialisation, CEE nations made significant progress in building a manufacturing base during this period. However, these early industrialisation efforts were frequently interrupted by political upheavals, wars and economic crises.

The latter half of the twentieth century saw a global shift towards deindustrialisation in many advanced economies. This process involved a relative decline in the importance of manufacturing industries in favour of the services sector (Somoza Medina, 2022). Factors contributing to deindustrialisation included automation, the offshoring of production to countries with lower labour costs and the emergence of a knowledge-based economy (Mancini, 2018). While this transition was often seen as a natural evolution, it had profound economic and social consequences, including job displacement and changes in urban landscapes.

In Central and Eastern Europe, the collapse of communism in the late 1980s and early 1990s brought profound changes. The transition from planned economies to market-based systems, accompanied by privatisation, liberalisation and trade integration with Western Europe ushered in a period of deindustrialisation (Hamilton, 1999). State-owned enterprises were privatised or closed, inefficient industries were downsized and some production was shifted to other countries with lower labour costs. This period was marked by economic turbulence, job losses and a

decline in the industrial sector's contribution to GDP. It was a tumultuous time of adaptation and structural reform.

The impact of European Union integration on CEE countries has been profound, especially in shaping their industrialisation trends. Since the fall of the Iron Curtain and the enlargement of the EU to include several CEE countries, EU membership has significantly influenced trade, investment and manufacturing policies in the region (Bruszt & Langbein, 2020; Bandelj, 2010; Cheptea, 2007). However, the extent to which EU integration has led to convergence or divergence in industrialisation paths among CEE countries varies, depending on several factors (Capello & Cerisola, 2023).

EU membership has provided CEE countries with access to the world's largest single market, facilitating increased trade opportunities. This has led to a significant rise in exports, especially in sectors like automotive, machinery and electronics (Čede et al., 2018). EU integration has encouraged trade integration within the region as well (Kulbacki & Michalczuk, 2021). Intra-regional trade has grown, and CEE countries have increasingly become part of European supply chains (European Central Bank, 2013).

In terms of investment, EU integration has attracted a substantial amount of foreign direct investment (FDI) to CEE countries, which primarily flows into manufacturing sectors (Allen & Overy, 2006). EU funds have supported infrastructure projects, which are crucial for industrial growth, improving logistics, transportation and connectivity in CEE countries (Ari et al., 2020). The shared market has encouraged specialisation in certain sectors, such as the automotive industry in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia (Pavlínek et al., 2009).

Regarding manufacturing policies, EU integration has necessitated the harmonisation of regulations, including environmental and labour standards (Koutalakis, 2010; Raines, 2000). This has led to improvements

in working conditions and environmental practices in the region. Additionally, EU membership has promoted technology transfer and innovation, as CEE countries gain access to EU research and development programmes (Suurna & Kattel, 2010).

Despite these trends, however, there is still divergence among CEE countries in terms of their industrialisation paths. Factors such as historical legacies, levels of infrastructure development and the availability of skilled labour can lead to varying industrial outcomes. In spite of the reduction of income disparities between CEE countries and Western Europe due to EU integration, such disparities still persist within the CEE region itself (Večerník, 2012). Some countries have attracted more FDI and developed more advanced manufacturing sectors while others have lagged behind.

Over the past decade, the CEE region has experienced a mixture of industrialisation and deindustrialisation trends, influenced by both domestic and international factors. The Covid-19 pandemic and the Ukrainian crisis brought about new considerations regarding the resilience of supply chains. Such disruptions led to backshoring, nearshoring and friendshoring initiatives as CEE countries sought to adapt to the changing global dynamics (Černá et al., 2022; Harper, 2023; Kolev & Obst, 2022). These trends were not unique to CEE; similar actions were observed globally as nations sought to secure essential supply chains and reduce vulnerabilities (Butollo & Staritz, 2022).

Backshoring: This ongoing process entails the relocation of production facilities from foreign nations back to the home country. The catalyst for this trend can be traced to the Covid-19 pandemic and the Ukrainian crisis, which both exposed vulnerabilities in lengthy global supply chains. Countries are reassessing their reliance on distant manufacturing centres, leading to the return of production facilities domestically. This response aims to enhance supply chain resilience and regain control over critical manufacturing processes.

Nearshoring: Another ongoing trend, nearshoring has gained prominence as Western European countries recognise the benefits of basing production in closer proximity to end markets. The pandemic and the Ukrainian crisis have underscored the importance of mitigating logistical complexities and fostering stronger regional economic ties. Nearshoring facilitates shorter lead times, reduced shipping costs and improved responsiveness to market changes. Notably, this trend is observed in industries like automotive and electronics, where proximity to end markets is crucial.

Friendshoring: This noteworthy trend involves the strategic relocation of manufacturing facilities to allied nations, driven by geopolitical considerations and shared economic interests. The shifting geopolitical landscape, partly influenced by the pandemic and the Ukrainian crisis, has led countries to reduce their reliance on potentially unreliable partners. Friendshoring aims to secure supply chains and ensure access to critical resources, reflecting a response to evolving global dynamics.

Industrialisation and deindustrialisation are dynamic processes that have shaped the economic fortunes of nations and regions throughout history. These processes continue to evolve in response to a myriad of factors, including technological advances, global supply chain disruptions and shifting economic paradigms. The case of Central and Eastern Europe serves as an instructive example of how historical legacies and contemporary challenges intersect to influence the path of industrialisation and deindustrialisation in a complex and interconnected world.

The past decade has seen a complex interplay of trends, including backshoring and nearshoring initiatives in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, alongside challenges such as rising energy prices and trade disruptions with Russia. These factors have put pressure on the competitiveness of the manufacturing sector in the CEE region. Nevertheless, some CEE countries have managed to attract foreign direct investment in the high-tech and automotive industries, indicating pockets of industrial growth.

Hungary has emerged as a significant player in the European automotive industry, with several key factors contributing to its industrialisation in this sector:

1. Investment attraction: Hungary has successfully attracted substantial foreign direct investment from major automakers such as BMW, Mercedes-Benz and Audi (Hungary Today, 2023). These companies have established production facilities and supply chains within the country.

2. Strategic geopolitical location: Hungary's strategic location in the heart of Europe provides easy access to key European markets. This makes Hungary an attractive hub for automotive production and export.

3. Incentives and infrastructure: The Hungarian government has implemented incentives such as tax breaks and infrastructure development to encourage automotive investments and support sector growth (Timmer et al., 2023; Waldersee & Szákacs, 2022).

4. Integration into the global supply chain: Hungary is deeply integrated into the global automotive supply chain. Local suppliers produce components that are exported to assembly plants across Europe, strengthening the country's role in the industry (Timmer et al., 2023).

The automotive industry in Hungary has also shifted its focus towards electric mobility, with significant investments in this sector (Waldersee & Szakács, 2022):

1. Transition to electric mobility: Hungary is gearing up for the transition to electric vehicles (EVs). Major automakers such as BMW, Mercedes-Benz and Audi have announced substantial investments in EV production within the country.

2. Battery manufacturing capacity: Hungary is set to become a prominent player in the electric battery market. China's CATL is investing heavily in Europe's largest battery plant in Hungary, and other battery manufacturers like Samsung SDI are expanding their presence.

3. Integration of the EV supply chain: Hungary has become a central hub for electric mobility technology, with suppliers for EV parts and technologies establishing a significant presence. German players, in particular, have been at the forefront of this expansion.

3. Methodology

In this research paper, the methodology for analysing the development of the manufacturing sector in Central and Eastern Europe over a ten-year period involves a systematic approach to data collection, organisation and analysis.

The research began with the collection of comprehensive data from reliable sources such as the World Bank and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The aim was to ensure data credibility and consistency. To assess the manufacturing sector accurately, a set of indicators was selected, covering various aspects of manufacturing, including output, employment, trade, investment and contributions to GDP. These indicators collectively provide a comprehensive view of the manufacturing landscape in CEE countries.

A ten-year time frame was chosen to capture both short-term fluctuations and long-term trends. This duration allows for the observation of meaningful changes while minimising the impact of transient economic events. The analysis involves comparing these indicators not only over time, but also among different CEE nations. This comparative analysis helps identify both disparities and trends within the region.

To provide a global context, the CEE countries' indicators are benchmarked against those of China, a significant player in the global manufacturing landscape. This benchmarking aids the understanding of the relative position and competitiveness of the region's manufacturing sector on a global scale.

It is important to acknowledge potential limitations in this methodology. The findings are based on macroeconomic indicators and may not capture all nuances within the manufacturing sector.

The indicators analysed in the paper include the following:

- Manufactures exports (% of merchandise exports).[1] Manufactures comprise commodities in Standard International Trade Classification (SITC) sections 5 (chemicals), 6 (basic manufactures),

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1   https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/TX.VAL.MANF.ZS.UN

7 (machinery and transport equipment), and 8 (miscellaneous manufactured goods), excluding division 68 (non-ferrous metals).

- Manufacturing, valued added (% of GDP).[2] Manufacturing refers to industries belonging to International Standard Industrial Classification (ISIC) divisions 15-37. Value added is the net output of a sector after adding up all outputs and subtracting intermediate inputs. It is calculated without making deductions for the depreciation of fabricated assets or the depletion and degradation of natural resources. The origin of value added is determined by ISIC revision 3.

- Employment in industry (% of total employment).[3] Employment is defined as persons of working age who were engaged in any activity to produce goods or provide services for pay or profit, whether at work during the reference period, or not at work due to temporary absence from a job or to working-time arrangement. The industry sector consists of mining and quarrying, manufacturing, construction, and public utilities (electricity, gas and water), in accordance with divisions 2-5 (ISIC 2) or categories C-F (ISIC 3) or categories B-F (ISIC 4).

- Inward FDI positions in manufacturing.[4] Inward Foreign Direct Investment stocks by industry measure the total level of direct investment in the reporting economy at the end of the year, by industry sector. It is the value of foreign investors' equity in and net loans received by enterprises in a specific industry resident in the reporting economy, at the end of the year. The indicator is shown for a restricted list of nine major ISIC 4 industries while the source

2   https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NV.IND.MANF.ZS
3   https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.IND.EMPL.ZS
4   https://data.oecd.org/fdi/inward-fdi-stocks-by-industry.htm

database includes inward FDI stocks for 84 ISIC 4 industries enabling the identification of the most attractive industry sectors for FDI in each OECD economy.

- High-technology exports (% of manufactured exports).[5] High-technology exports are products with high R&D intensity, such as in aerospace, computers, pharmaceuticals, scientific instruments and electrical machinery.

- ICT goods exports (% of total goods exports).[6] Information and communication technology goods exports include computers and peripheral equipment, communication equipment, consumer electronic equipment, electronic components, and other information and technology goods (miscellaneous).

- Global Value Chain (GVC)-related output (% output, manufacturing).[7] The value of manufacturing output crossing more than one border.

- Manufacturing Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI).[8] The Purchasing Managers' Index is a survey-based indicator of business conditions, which includes individual measures ("sub-indices") of business output, new orders, employment, costs, selling prices, exports, purchasing activity, supplier performance, backlogs of orders, and inventories of both inputs and finished goods, where applicable. The surveys ask respondents to report the change in each variable compared to the prior month, noting whether each has risen/improved, fallen/deteriorated or remained unchanged. These objective questions are accompanied by one

5   https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/TX.VAL.TECH.MF.ZS
6   https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/TX.VAL.ICTG.ZS.UN
7   https://wits.worldbank.org/gvc/gvc-output-table.html
8   https://www.pmi.spglobal.com/

subjective question on "sentiment", asking companies whether they forecast that their output will be higher, the same or lower in a year's time.

- Manufacturing production.[9] This indicator shows the change in manufacturing production.

4. Research Results

We can observe significant trends in the economic landscape of Central and Eastern European countries. In the following overviews, please refer to the corresponding figure for graphic representation.

Figure 1 illustrates that, with the exception of Albania and Montenegro, most CEE countries rely on manufacturing exports for more than half of their merchandise exports. These nations reached their peak around 2020 but subsequently experienced modest declines, which can be attributed to the impact of both the Covid-19 pandemic and the Ukrainian crisis. Notably, some countries witnessed more pronounced declines than others during this period, including Romania (-8 percentage points), Bosnia and Herzegovina (-6 p.p.), Lithuania (-7 p.p.), Croatia (-11 p.p.), Bulgaria (-8 p.p.), Latvia (-8 p.p.), Albania (-21 p.p.), and Montenegro (-8 p.p.). A comparison between 2013 and 2022 reveals that most countries have maintained a stable share, with positive changes in Bosnia and Herzegovina (+8 p.p.) and Lithuania (+6 p.p.), and negative changes in Croatia (-6 p.p.) and Albania (-18 p.p.).

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9   https://tradingeconomics.com/country-list/manufacturing-production

In Figure 2, we observe the wide range of the role that manufacturing plays in the GDP of these countries, from 4% for Montenegro to 28% for China. Over the past decade, all CEE countries have maintained relatively stable shares with some minor fluctuations. Notable changes include Bosnia and Herzegovina (+4 p.p.), North Macedonia (+3 p.p.), Serbia (-3 p.p.), and the Slovak Republic (+3 p.p.). During the given period, our benchmark country, China, experienced a decline of 3 percentage points.

Figure 3 indicates that in most CEE countries, the share of industry employment as a percentage of total employment has remained stable over the past decade. Notable changes are seen in Albania (+4 p.p.) and Bosnia and Herzegovina (+4 p.p.).

Figure 4, on the other hand, reveals a less optimistic trend in inward FDI in the manufacturing sector over the same period. Czechia experienced a 7-percentage-point decline, Estonia a 5-p.p. decline, and Lithuania a 9-p.p. decline. Hungary, however, saw an increase of 5 p.p. Other countries generally had a more stable share, with some fluctuations.

In Figure 5, we find a wide variation in the share of high-technology exports as a percentage of manufactured exports, ranging from 0.29% in Albania to 30% in China. Most shares remained stable with minor fluctuations, although Albania's low share decreased significantly; Hungary lost 5 p.p., Bosnia and Herzegovina's share nearly doubled (though it remains low), and Latvia's share increased by 5 p.p.

Figure 6 displays substantial diversity in ICT goods exports as a share of total goods exports, ranging from 0.04% in Albania to 25.5% in China. Hungary experienced a 5-p.p. decline, Slovakia saw a 4-p.p. decline, and Albania's share declined nearly tenfold to approach zero. North Macedonia and Montenegro saw their shares double or increase even more, though they remained at the low levels of 0.60% and 1.17%, respectively.

Figure 7 indicates an increasing involvement of CEE countries in global manufacturing value chains over the last decade. Most notably, GVC-

related output as a percentage of total manufacturing output increased in Bulgaria (+9 p.p.), Croatia (+15 p.p.), Latvia (+12 p.p.), Lithuania (+9 p.p.), Poland (+13 p.p.), and Slovenia (+10 p.p.).

Figures 8 to 11 reflect differing attitudes towards manufacturing sector development in CEE countries compared to China, with Czechia, Hungary and Poland showing more pessimism. However, all these countries remain above the levels seen in March 2020 when the Covid-19 pandemic initially hit.

Lastly, Figures 12 to 27 provide insight into changes in manufacturing production. Currently, we can observe declines in Albania, Estonia, Latvia and Montenegro, while increases are seen in China, Croatia and Lithuania. Other countries have experienced changes close to zero.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, our analysis of a set of indicators related to the development of manufacturing in Central and Eastern European countries has provided valuable insights into the ongoing discourse surrounding potential deindustrialisation, a topic that has gained significant attention in the media, particularly in relation to Germany. Upon careful examination of the available macroeconomic data, it becomes evident that there are currently no definitive signs of significant shifts occurring within the manufacturing sector in CEE countries.

While it is true that certain changes have been observed, it is crucial to acknowledge that these changes can predominantly be attributed to a confluence of external factors, including the far-reaching ramifications of the Covid-19 pandemic, the geopolitical instability stemming from

the Ukrainian crisis, and the ensuing economic and political challenges that have rippled through the global landscape. These disruptions have resulted in the interruption of global value chains, the closure of borders, the imposition of export and import limitations, the imposition of sanctions, and the subsequent escalation of transaction costs and production expenses.

Despite these external pressures, there have been no definitive indications of a pronounced shift towards deindustrialisation in CEE countries. However, we must exercise caution and maintain vigilance, as it is well recognised that macroeconomic indicators may not provide an accurate reflection of nuanced and evolving processes within the manufacturing sector.

One notable metric that warrants consideration is the Manufacturing Purchasing Managers' Index, which offers insights into market sentiment and participant expectations. It is noteworthy that the manufacturing PMI for CEE countries tends to exhibit pessimistic outlooks, a trend that may potentially exert additional pressures on the manufacturing sector and result in a slowdown. This highlights the importance of acknowledging the psychological aspects and market dynamics that can influence industrial development.

Moreover, it is crucial to remain attentive to the concurrent processes that could contribute to enhanced industrial development in Central and Eastern Europe. Such processes include backshoring, nearshoring and friendshoring, as discussed in the introduction. Adopted by multinational corporations seeking to optimise their supply chains and production networks, these strategies can have far-reaching implications for the manufacturing landscape in CEE countries and they should therefore be closely monitored in order for their potential impact to be discerned.

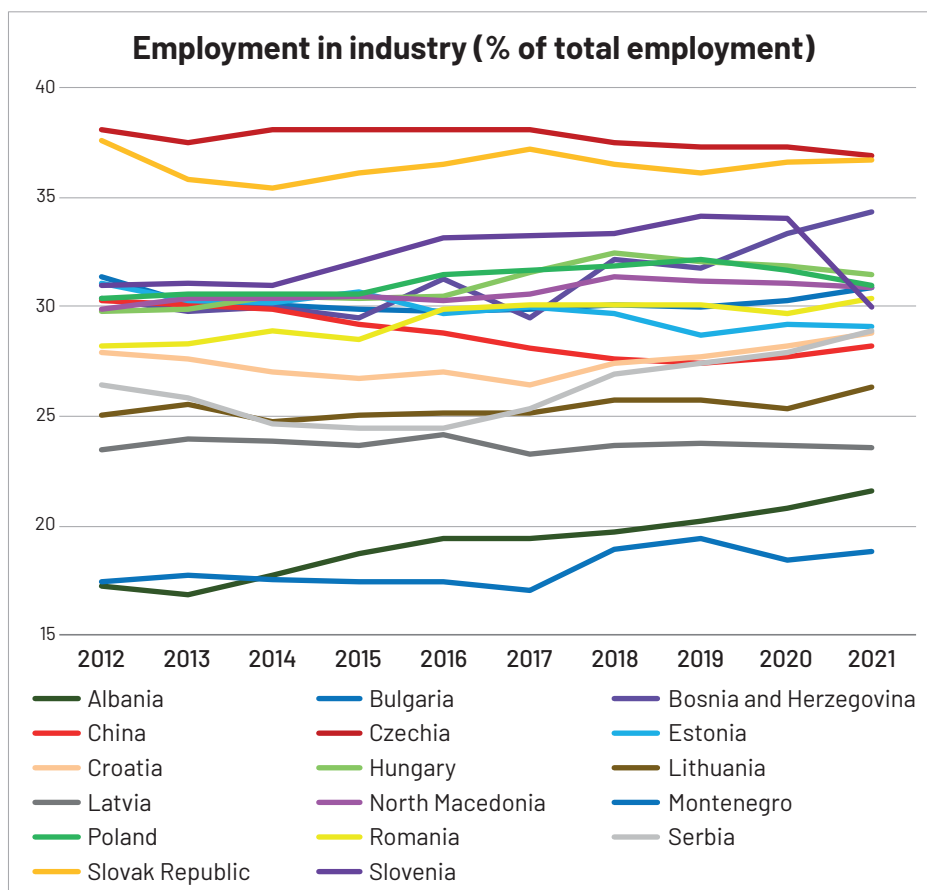## Figure 1: Manufactures exports (% of merchandise exports) of CEE and China

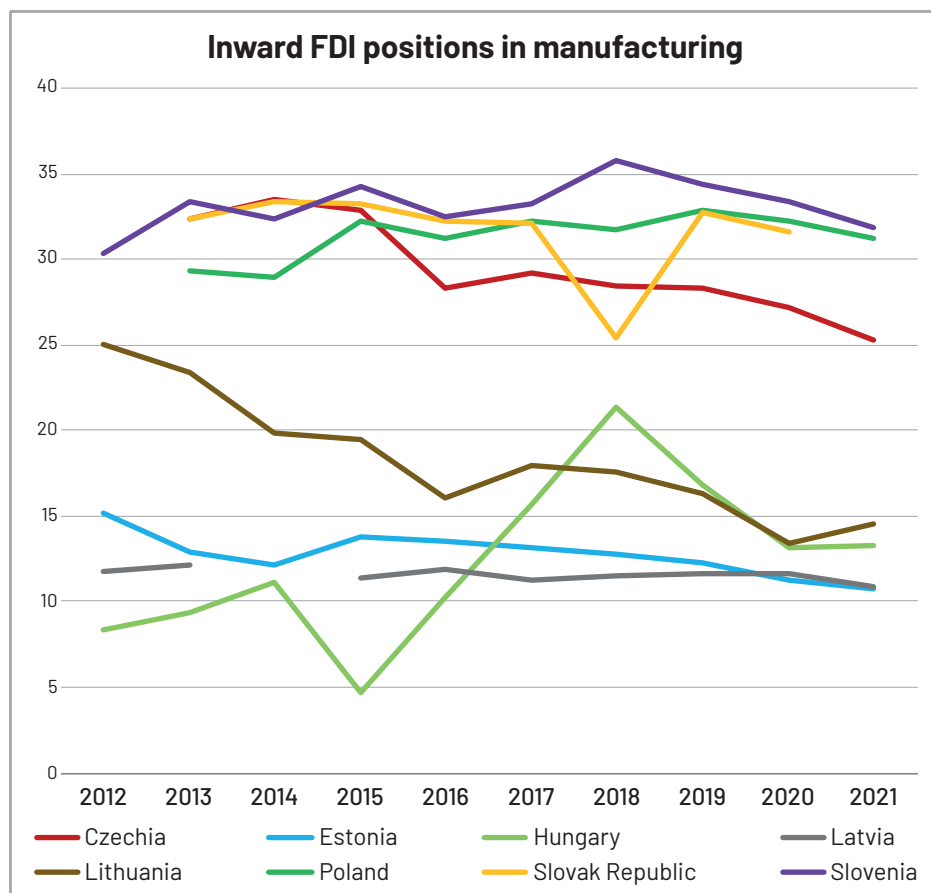*Source: Author's own graphic based on World Bank data*

Figure 2: Manufacturing, value added (% of GDP) of CEE and China
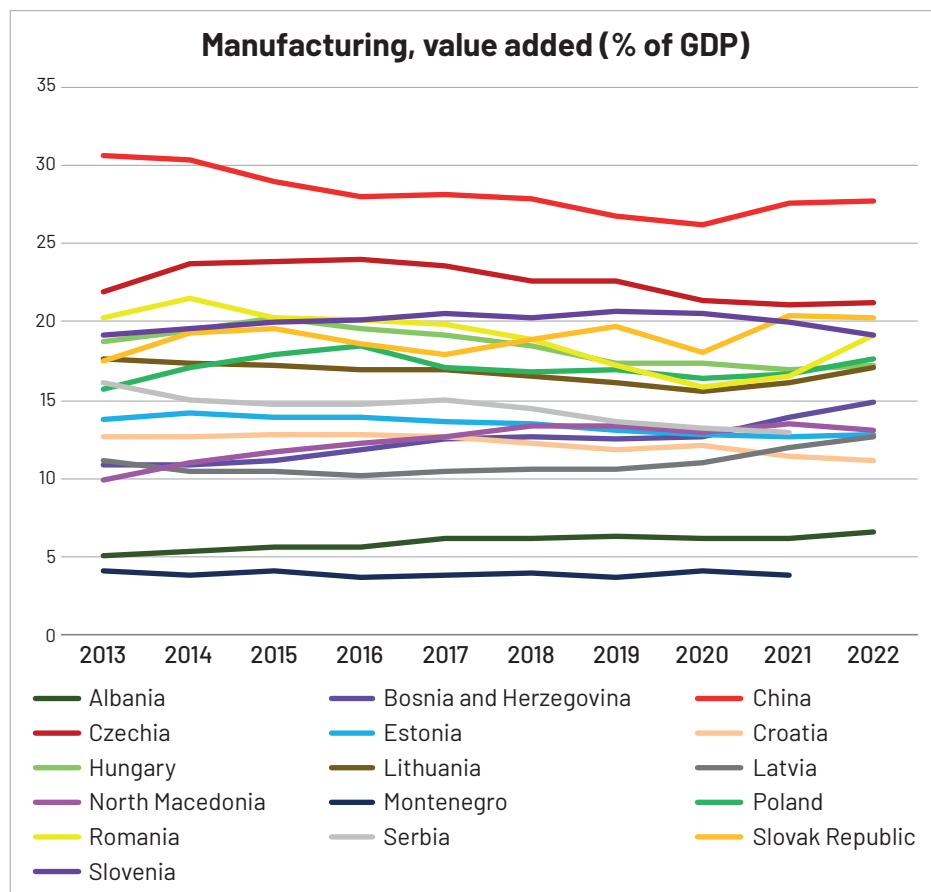
Source: Author's own graphic based on World Bank data

## Figure 3: Employment in industry (% of total employment) of CEE and China

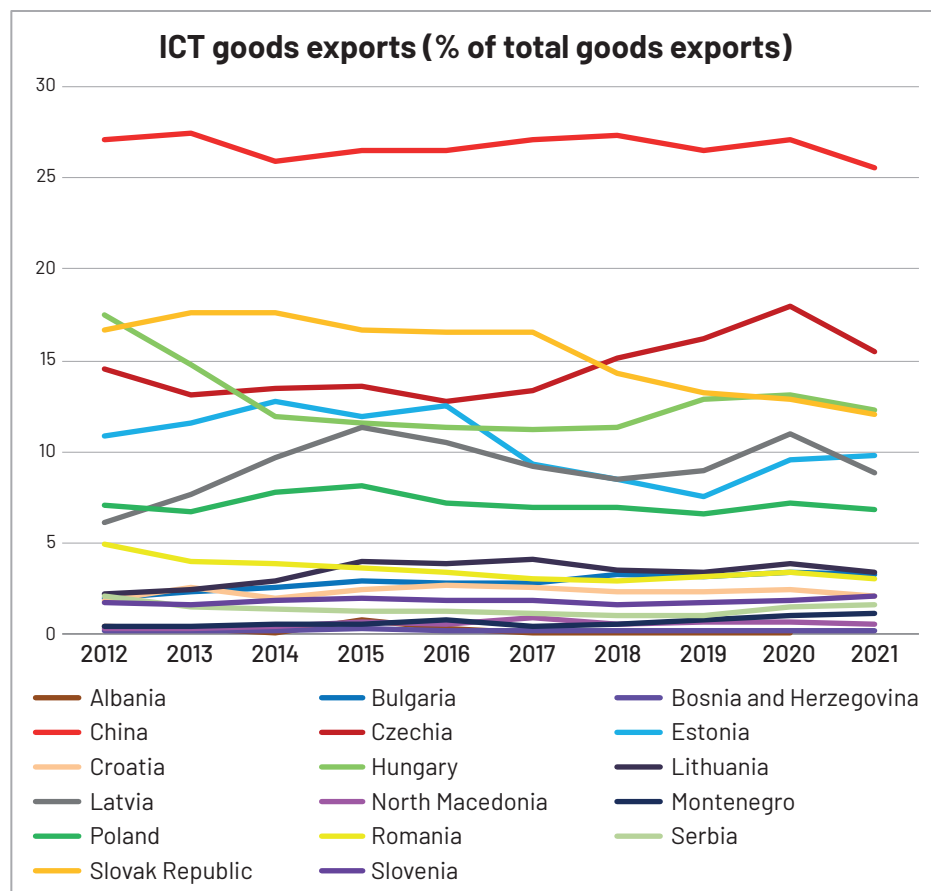*Source: Author's own graphic based on World Bank data*

Figure 4: Inward FDI positions in manufacturing of eight CEE countries

Inward FDI positions in manufacturing

Legend: Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovak Republic, Slovenia

Source: Author's own graphic based on OECD data

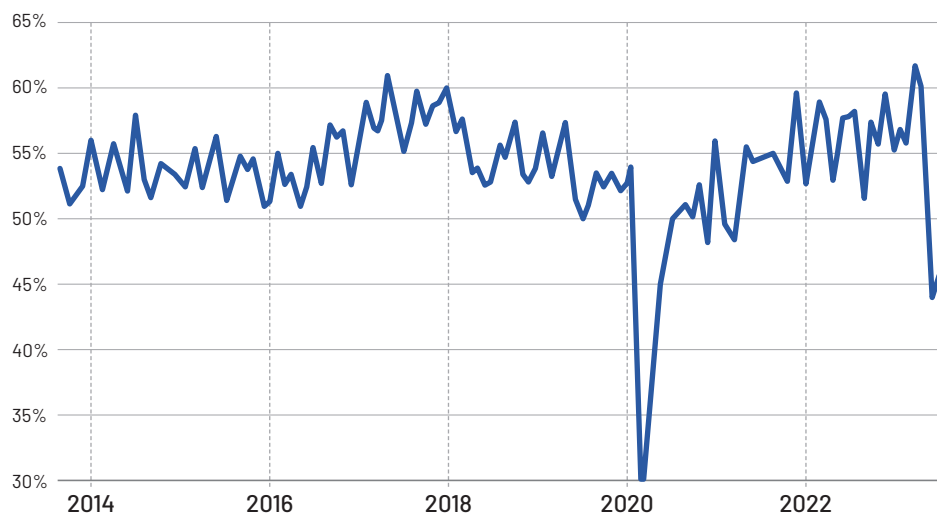## Figure 5: High-technology exports (% of manufactured exports) of CEE and China
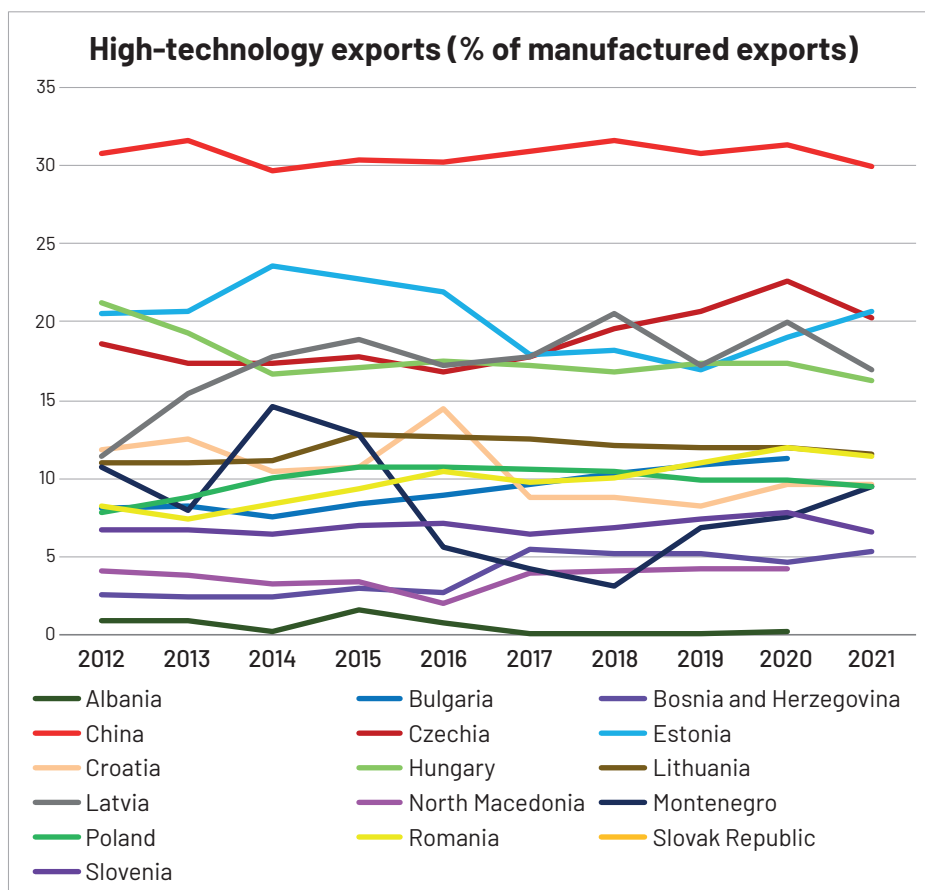
Source: Author's own graphic based on World Bank data

Figure 6: ICT goods exports (% of total goods exports) of CEE and China

Source: Author's own graphic based on World Bank data

Figure 7: GVC-related output (% output), manufacturing of CEE and China
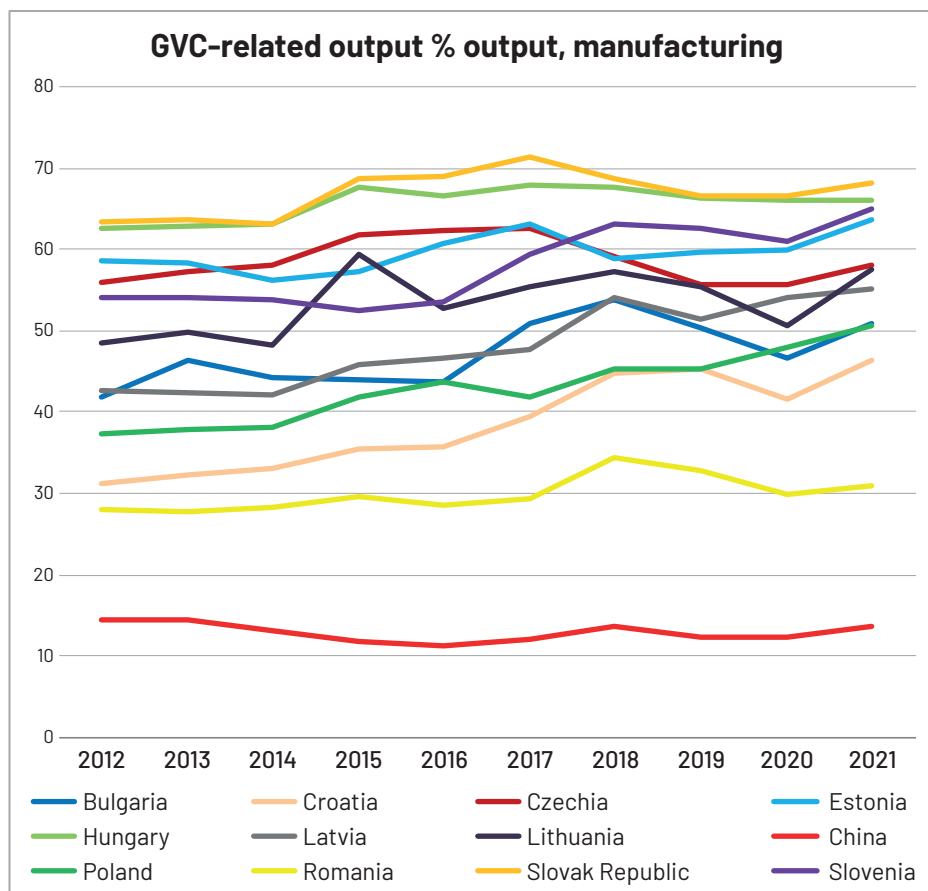
Source: Author's own graphic based on World Integrated Trade Solution data

Figure 8: Czechia manufacturing PMI[10]

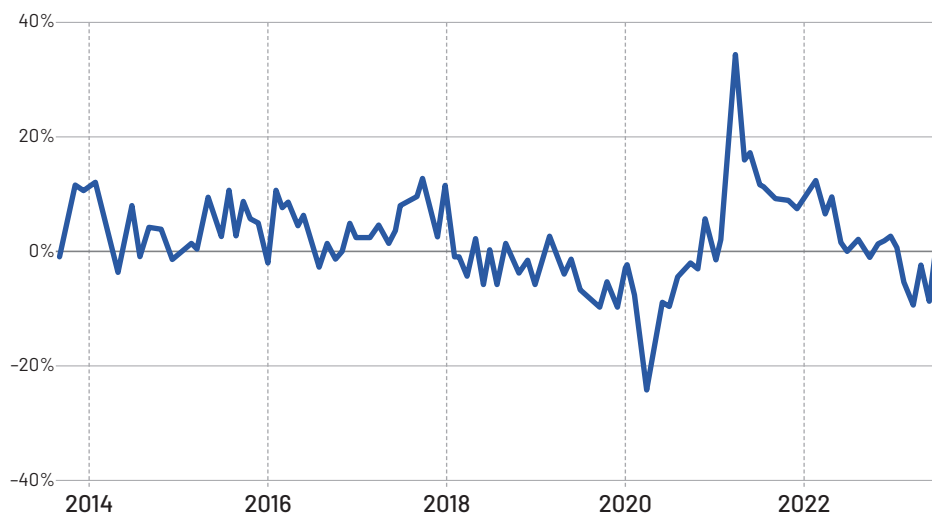

Figure 9: Hungary manufacturing PMI[11]

10   https://tradingeconomics.com/czech-republic/manufacturing-pmi

11   https://tradingeconomics.com/hungary/manufacturing-pmi

Figure 10: China Caixin manufacturing PMI[12]

Figure 11: Poland manufacturing PMI[13]

12   https://tradingeconomics.com/china/manufacturing-pmi

13   https://tradingeconomics.com/poland/manufacturing-pmi

Figure 12: Albania manufacturing production[14]
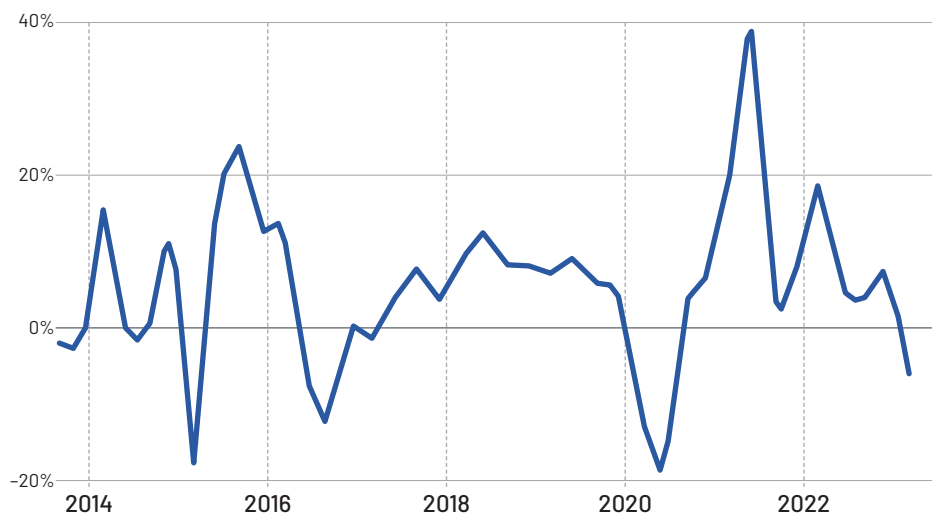
Figure 13: Bosnia and Herzegovina manufacturing production[15]

14   https://tradingeconomics.com/albania/manufacturing-production
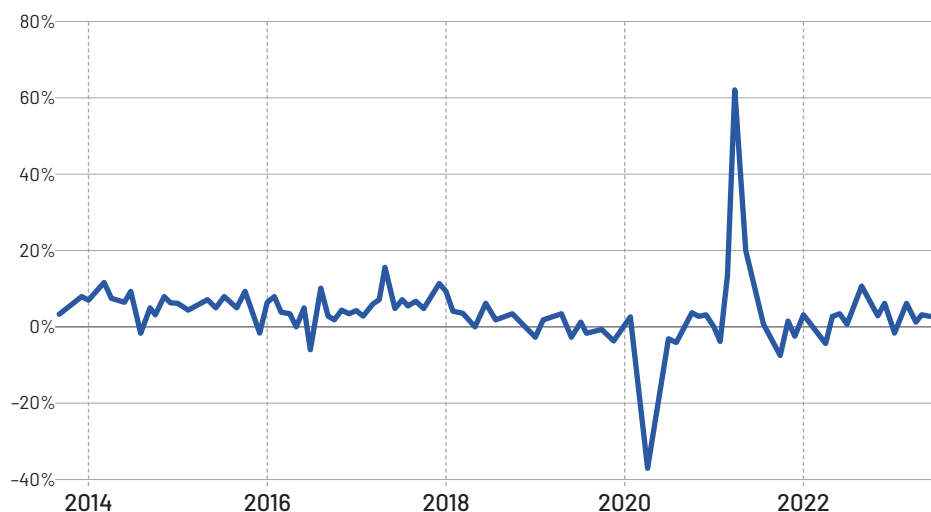15   https://tradingeconomics.com/bosnia-and-herzegovina/manufacturing-production

Figure 14: China manufacturing production[16]
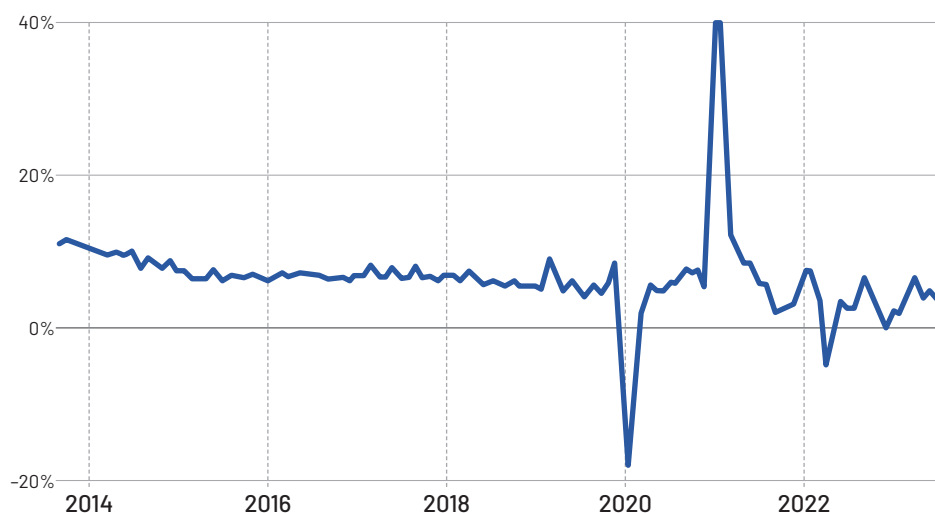
Figure 15: Croatia manufacturing production[17]

16   https://tradingeconomics.com/china/manufacturing-production

17   https://tradingeconomics.com/croatia/manufacturing-production
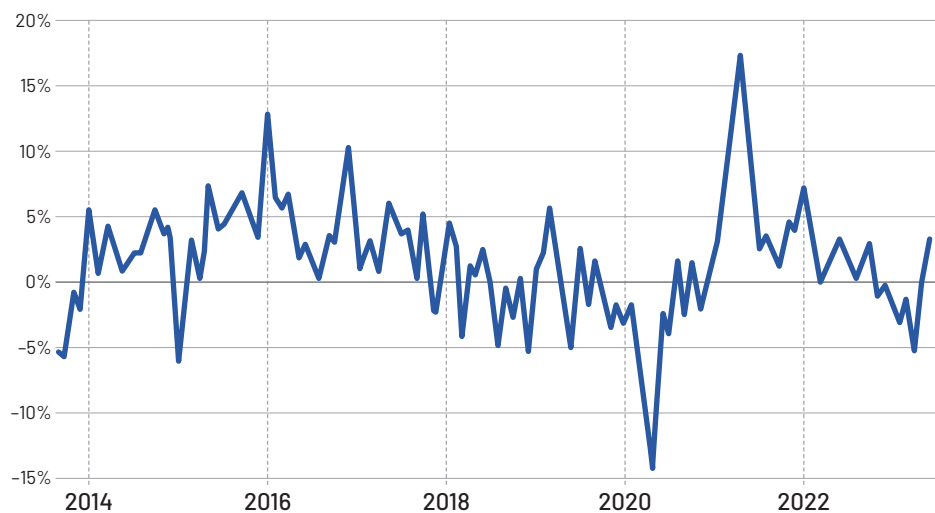
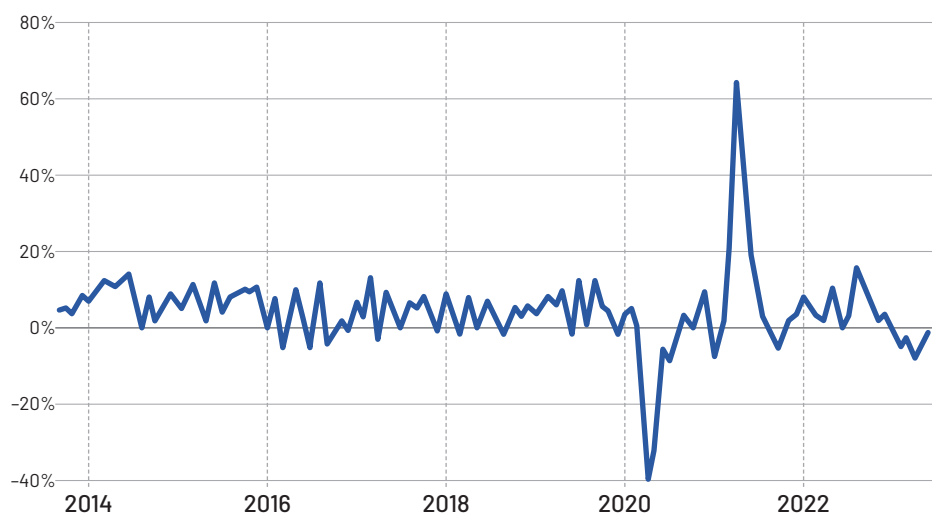## Figure 16: Czechia manufacturing production[18]

Figure 17: Estonia manufacturing production[19]

18   https://tradingeconomics.com/czech-republic/manufacturing-production

19   https://tradingeconomics.com/estonia/manufacturing-production
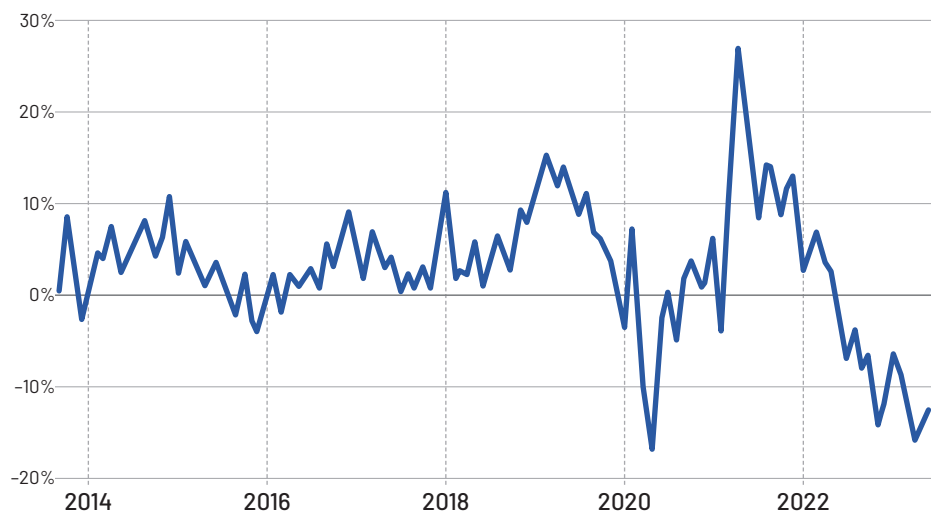
Figure 18: Hungary manufacturing production[20]

Figure 19: Latvia manufacturing production[21]

20   https://tradingeconomics.com/hungary/manufacturing-production
21   https://tradingeconomics.com/latvia/manufacturing-production
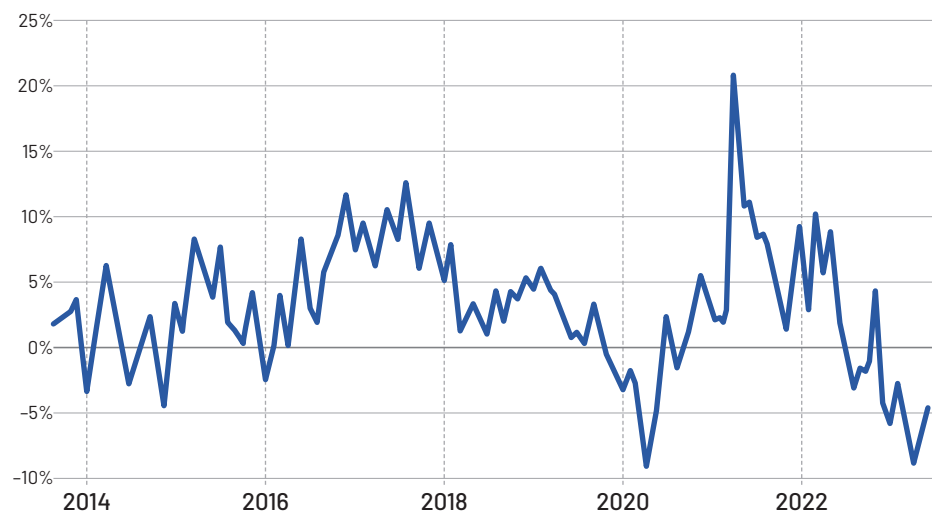
Figure 20: Lithuania manufacturing production[22]
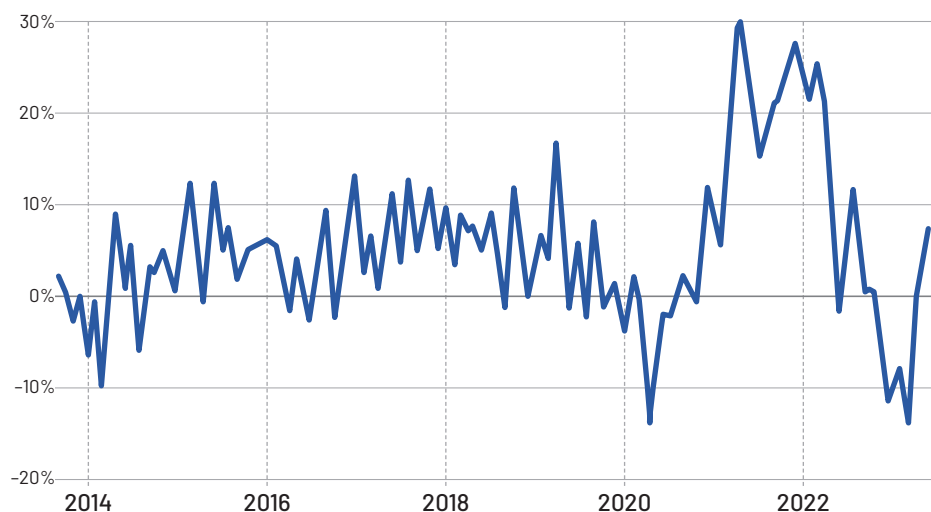
Figure 21: Montenegro manufacturing production[23]

22   https://tradingeconomics.com/lithuania/manufacturing-production

23   https://tradingeconomics.com/montenegro/manufacturing-production
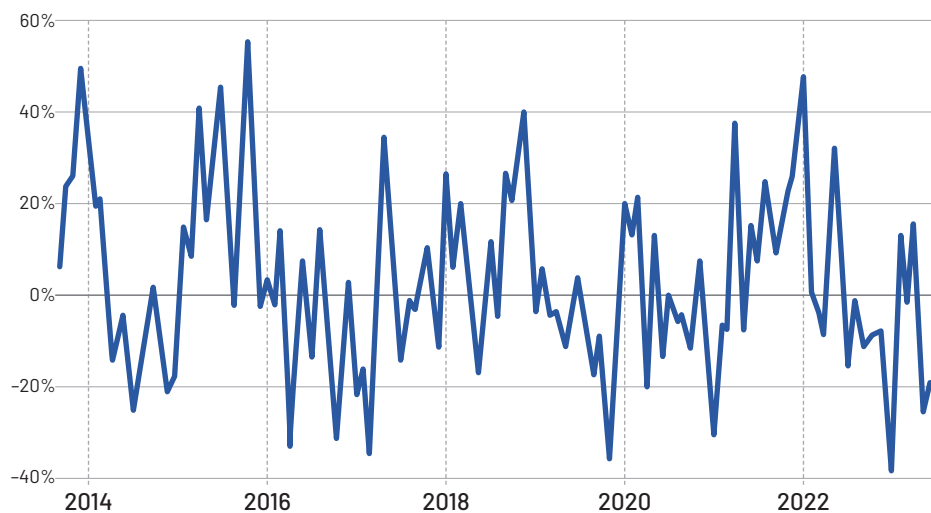
Figure 22: North Macedonia manufacturing production[24]

Figure 23: Poland manufacturing production[25]

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24   https://tradingeconomics.com/macedonia/manufacturing-production

25   https://tradingeconomics.com/poland/manufacturing-production

Figure 24: Romania manufacturing production[26]

Figure 25: Serbia manufacturing production[27]

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26   https://tradingeconomics.com/romania/manufacturing-production

27   https://tradingeconomics.com/serbia/manufacturing-production
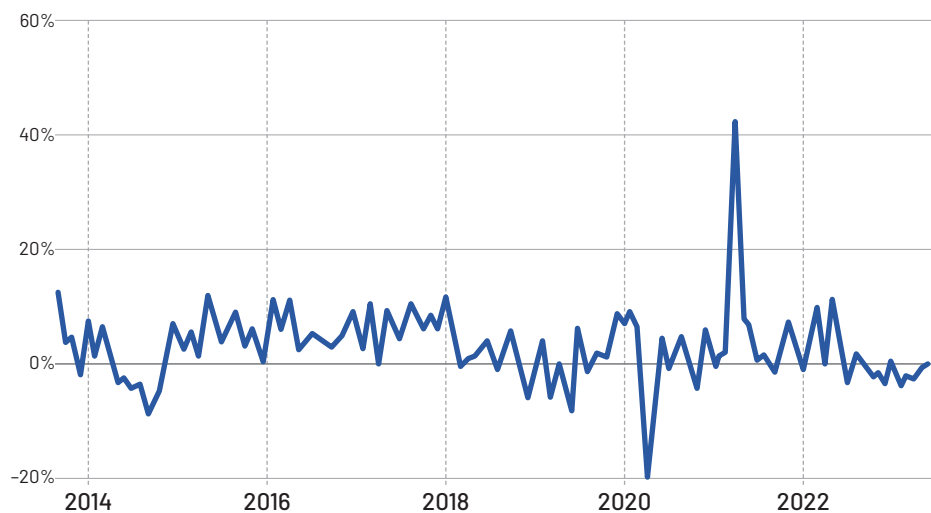
Figure 26: Slovakia manufacturing production[28]

Figure 27: Slovenia manufacturing production[29]

28   https://tradingeconomics.com/slovakia/manufacturing-production

29   https://tradingeconomics.com/slovenia/manufacturing-production
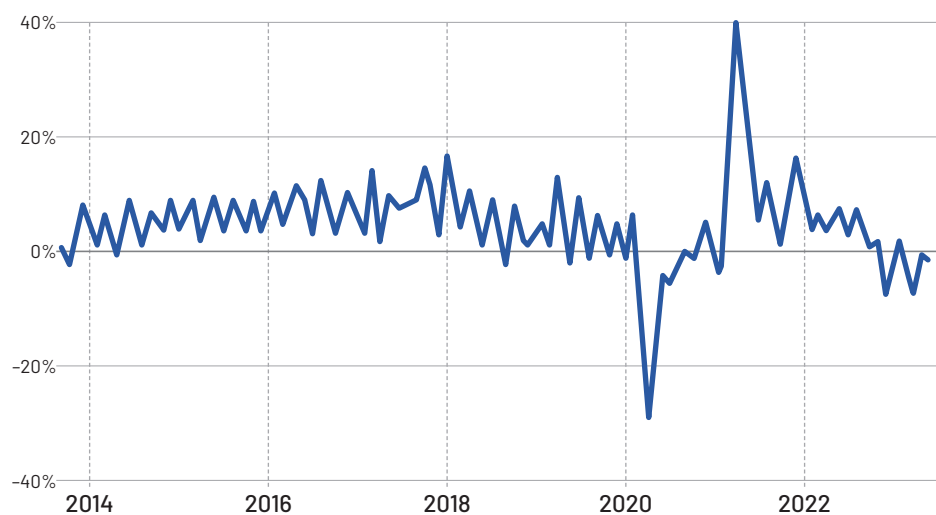
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The Challenges and Prospects of the Development and Modernisation of the Western Balkan Countries in the Process of European Integration

DUŠKO DIMITRIJEVIĆ[*]

ABSTRACT: After the meeting of the leaders of the Member States of the European Union and the countries of the Western Balkans in Thessaloniki in 2003, the Western Balkan states were included in the EU's accession strategy, which envisages concluding a Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the six candidate countries – Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Kosovo.[1] At the same time, this document projects the development of mutual economic ties through the introduction of autonomous trade measures with the aim of opening the EU market. For this purpose, the EU was ready to

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*   Duško Dimitrijević: PhD, Professorial Fellow, Institute of International Politics and Economics, Belgrade, Serbia.

1   All references to Kosovo in this document should be understood to be in the context of United Nations Security Council resolution 1244 (United Nations, 1999).

provide non-reimbursable financial assistance. The prerequisite was the harmonisation of national legislation with the *acquis communautaire* and systemic preparation for the use of structural European funds. In the implementation of the aforementioned strategy, the development of good neighbourly relations and regional cooperation was of particular importance, and in the interests of this the EU launched a number of different initiatives – from the Stability Pact for Southeastern Europe to the Berlin Process to the European Political Community. A particularly significant Common Regional Market Action Plan was initiated within the Berlin Process. Its goals are based on four fundamental freedoms: the freedoms of movement of people, goods, services and capital, as well as the creation of regional digital, investment, industrial and innovation spaces. Essentially, all EU initiatives adopted so far have the purpose of preserving and advancing the democratic future and prosperity of the countries of the Western Balkans through the revitalisation of their industries and the achievement of sustainable economic growth. However, the achievement of the stated goals has been significantly retarded by the fluctuating methodology of the accession negotiations and the fulfilment of the objectives of the Common Foreign and Security Policy of the EU, which conditions the process of European integration according to the overall stabilisation of political conditions in the region.

KEYWORDS: EU, Western Balkans, development and modernisation, European integration

1. Introduction

The EU represents a unique economic and political partnership of 27 European countries. The partnership was established in the period after the Second World War, when the countries of Europe decided to prevent similar dramatic conflicts in the future. Encouraging economic cooperation was the first step on this path. Behind economic cooperation was the idea that countries which cooperated closely were likely to avoid conflict with one another, which was confirmed when Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands formed the European Coal and Steel Community in 1951, and then the European Economic Community (EEC) – with the European Atomic Energy Community – with the conclusion of the Rome Treaties from 1957. Simultaneously with the formation of these Communities, Western Europe also worked on political empowerment, which was supposed to establish an order that could successfully compete with the Eastern Bloc (which at that time was dominated by the USSR). The basis of the unification of European states and peoples was the security component, which determined the construction of the common institutions and legal system that led to the process of European integration. First of all, this was manifested on the economic level, where through the construction of a common market, the achievement of four freedoms was ensured: freedom of movement of goods, people, services and capital. In the pyramidal structure of the goals of European integration, this was the main achievement, since it was directly reflected in the preservation of European peace and security (Radivojević & Knežević Predić, 2008; Dimitrijević & Račić, 2011).

In 1993, a new treaty was concluded in Maastricht, which led to the formation of the European Union by uniting all three of the aforementioned

organisations with the intention of establishing a supranational organisation with a clear institutional structure and competences in terms of making and implementing legal, political and economic decisions.[2] Recalling these changes and transformations, it is clear why the Treaty on European Union emphasises European values such as freedom, dignity, democracy, equality, the rule of law and, in general, respect for human rights. These common values greatly conditioned the process of expansion of this supranational organisation, since according to Article 49 of the Treaty on European Union, any country in Europe can apply for EU membership if it respects the stated values and undertakes to advocate their improvement. It thus becomes clear why the development of the EU enlargement process took place slowly and gradually, in several stages or 'enlargement waves' (Džombić, 2012).

Thus, the first wave of expansion of the EU (at that time the European Community) featured the admission of Denmark, Ireland and the United Kingdom.[3] The second wave marked the accession of Greece in 1981. The third wave included Spain and Portugal, which both joined in 1986. In the fourth wave, which took place in 1995, Austria, Finland and Sweden were involved. The accession of the Czech Republic, Cyprus, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia in 2004 marked the first phase of the fifth wave. In the second phase of the fifth wave, in 2007, Bulgaria and Romania also joined. At the end of this wave, Croatia joined the EU in 2013.

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2   The Treaty of Amsterdam of 1999 supplemented the Treaty on European Union and the Treaties establishing the European Communities. The Lisbon Treaty of 2007 amended the Treaty on European Union (Maastricht Treaty) and the Treaty on the Creation of the European Economic Community (Treaties of Rome).

3   The UK officially withdrew from EU membership in 2020, having previously concluded the "Brexit Withdrawal Agreement" with it.

Starting in 1993, each of the acceding countries had to undertake to meet the conditions known as the Copenhagen Criteria, which *inter alia* include: (1) Political criteria: stable institutions that guarantee democracy, the rule of law, human rights and the respect and protection of minority rights; (2) Economic criteria: a functioning market economy that can cope with competitive pressures and market forces within the EU; (3) The ability to undertake the obligations of EU membership, including adherence to the objectives of political, economic and monetary union.

The current EU enlargement programme includes six Western Balkan countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Kosovo) (Lopandić, 2017). Of these six countries, Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia are candidates for EU membership and are in the process of negotiations. Bosnia and Herzegovina is a candidate for EU membership awaiting the opening of negotiations and Kosovo is potential candidate country (i.e. it is not recognised as a candidate country, but has the prospect of becoming one). At the beginning of June 1999, the European Council launched the Stabilisation and Association Process, a new type of agreement that offers the prospect of joining the EU when the Copenhagen Criteria are fulfilled.[4] The Stabilisation and Association Process represents the framework for EU negotiations with all countries of the Western Balkans. It contains three main objectives: the stabilisation of countries and encouragement

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4   The Copenhagen Criteria were established by the European Council in Copenhagen in 1993 and strengthened by the European Council in Madrid in 1995. The criteria include the stability of institutions that guarantee democracy, the rule of law, human rights and the respect and protection of minorities, then a functioning market economy and the ability to take on the obligations of membership, including the capacity to effectively apply the rules, standards and policies that make up the body of EU law, as well as adhering to the objectives of the political, economic and monetary union.

of their rapid transition to a market economy, the promotion of regional cooperation, and the preparation of countries for EU membership (Miščević, 2005).

Simultaneously with the launch of the Stabilisation and Association Process, the EU also launched the Stability Pact, which was supposed to facilitate democratisation, development, cooperation and security in the Western Balkans. In June 2000, in Feira, the European Council confirmed that the countries of the Western Balkans are potential candidates for EU membership. This perspective was confirmed at the Summit in Zagreb in November 2000, and especially at the Summit in Thessaloniki held in June 2003, which defined the agenda for the Western Balkans (Uvalić, 2023). The founding summit formalised the accession process on the basis of dual conditionality. Along with the Copenhagen Criteria, which actually reflected the conditions resulting from the painful legacy of war in the territory of the former Yugoslavia, the tools used for the fifth wave of EU enlargement were also included. In this way, political dialogue and a free trade zone were promoted by the conclusion of the amended Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) at the end of 2006. Also, in line with the Stabilisation and Association Process, all the countries of the Western Balkans concluded the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (Dimitrijević & Đukanović, 2013). In May 2007, The Stability Pact was replaced by the Regional Cooperation Council, involving ten countries in the process of cooperation in Southeast Europe (five countries of the Western Balkans and five neighbouring countries – Bulgaria, Greece, Moldova, Romania and Türkiye).

In the aforementioned way, it seemed that the European prospects of the countries of the Western Balkans were guaranteed. After all, this was partly foreshadowed by the adoption of an ambitious External Investment Plan in September 2016, which was supposed to stimulate investments in the EU Neighbourhood region in order to strengthen

partnerships and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (European Commission, 2020c). However, even these incentives had no effect, and the reforms in the countries of the Western Balkans were prolonged. Thus, the European integration process was postponed until 2018, when the European Commission adopted a very important strategy named "Credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans" (European Commission, 2018). Confirming the European future of this region as a geostrategic investment in a stable, strong and united Europe based on common values, the strategy describes the priorities and areas of cooperation to strengthen, with an emphasis on the specific challenges facing the Western Balkans, especially when it comes to the need for fundamental reforms and good neighbourly relations. In addition, every year the Commission adopts an enlargement package which clarifies the EU's enlargement policy. This document includes a statement on enlargement, which determines the progress achieved since the previous year and analyses the situation in the candidate countries and potential candidate countries. At the same time, it provides guidelines on reform priorities that must be achieved before the end of the EU accession process. Although the Commission initiates decisions on EU enlargement policy, the final decisions are taken by the Member States, the European Council at the level of heads of state or government, or the Council of the European Union at the ministerial level. In October 2019, the Council of the EU did not decide to open accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia, but announced that the issue of enlargement would be raised again before the May 2020 EU–Western Balkans summit in Zagreb.

Meanwhile, in February 2020, the European Commission published its Communication entitled "Improving the accession process – a credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans" with the aim of revitalising the accession process by making it more predictable, credible, dynamic and subject to stronger political guidance (European Commission, 2020a). In

accordance with this new approach, the European Council emphasised the need to reach a consensus on the future enlargement of the EU. Acting in that direction, negotiations were opened with Albania and North Macedonia. After the EU–Western Balkans summit in Zagreb in May of the same year adopted the Declaration confirming the EU's strong solidarity with the Western Balkans region, the following October the Commission adopted the Enlargement Package with a comprehensive Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans (European Commission, 2020c). The main goal of this strategic document is to encourage the long-term economic recovery of the entire region, support the green and digital transitions, and promote regional integration and EU rapprochement. The Plan establishes a significant investment package of EUR 9 billion to be mobilised through the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA III) in order to support sustainable connectivity, human capital, competitiveness and inclusive growth, as well as the dual green and digital transition in the period from 2021 to 2027. In addition, investments of over EUR 20 billion have been earmarked for the economic recovery of the countries of the Western Balkans.

In November 2020, at the Berlin Process conference held in Sofia, the countries of the Western Balkans adopted the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, which includes five priorities: clean energy sources and climate protection; the transition to a circular economy; the removal of air, water and soil pollution; the building of sustainable agricultural and food systems; and the protection of biodiversity and ecosystems (Regional Cooperation Council, 2020). Along with energy security, the green transition (which is related to the digital transition) has thus become an inevitable factor in the further sustainable development of the Western Balkans region and the achievement of greater social cohesion and justice (Energy Community, 2022). The key mechanism that will be used for the implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans and the

implementation of the Economic and Investment Plan is the Investment Framework for the Western Balkans. The Investment Framework is a joint financial platform of the European Commission, financial organisations, EU Member States (and Norway), which has the aim of improving cooperation in public and private sector investments for the socio-economic development of the Western Balkans region. After the adoption of the new investment package through the Investment Framework for the Western Balkans, 54 leading investments from the External Investment Plan worth approximately EUR 8 billion will be supported, including EUR 2.3 billion in EU grants (European Commission, 2023a).

2. The Procedural Aspects of Accession Negotiations with the EU

Accession to the EU implies a procedure that includes several stages of pre-accession negotiations between the candidate countries and the EU (Ministry of European Integrations of the Republic of Serbia, 2023). The first phase refers to the opening of negotiations and the conclusion of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement. This is followed by the submission of an application for admission to EU membership and obtaining candidate status. Subsequently, comes the adoption of the draft Negotiating Framework of the European Commission by the Member States, and then to the opening of negotiations with the endorsement of the European Council. The negotiations formally begin with the convening and holding of an intergovernmental conference – comprising representatives of the governments of the EU Member States on the one

hand, and that of the candidate state on the other – where the negotiating frameworks of the two parties are exchanged. After the formal opening of negotiations, the phase of the analytical review of the legislation begins (so-called "screening"), which represents the phase of checking and evaluating the extent to which the legislation of the candidate country is harmonised with the EU acquis.

According to earlier methodology, the screening involved checking the legislation of the candidate countries according to the different legal areas included in the 35 chapters of the acquis, which the candidate countries can open and close in any order.[5] Although those chapters and their criteria remained unchanged in the new methodology proposed by the Commission and adopted by the Council of the EU in March 2020 (European Commission, 2020a; Council of the European Union, 2020), the 35 chapters are now grouped into six negotiating clusters: (1) Fundamentals;[6] (2) Internal market;[7] (3) Competitiveness and

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5   These chapters cover the following areas: 1. Free movement of goods; 2. Free movement of workers; 3. Right of establishment and freedom to provide services; 4. Free movement of capital; 5. Public procurement; 6. Company law; 7. Intellectual property law; 8. Competition policy; 9. Financial services; 10. Information society and media; 11. Agriculture and rural development; 12. Food safety, veterinary and phytosanitary policy; 13. Fisheries; 14. Transport policy; 15. Energy; 16. Taxation; 17. Economic and monetary policy; 18. Statistics; 19. Social policy and employment; 20. Enterprise and industrial policy; 21. Trans-European networks; 22. Regional policy and coordination of structural instruments; 23. Judiciary and fundamental rights; 24. Justice, freedom and security; 25. Science and research; 26. Education and culture; 27. Environment and climate change; 28. Consumer and health protection; 29. Customs union; 30. External relations; 31. Foreign, security and defence policy; 32. Financial control; 33. Financial and budgetary provisions; 34. Institutions; 35. Other issues.

6   The First Cluster features the following chapters: 5. Public procurement; 18. Statistics; 23. Judiciary and fundamental rights; 24. Justice, freedom and security; 32. Financial control.

7   The Second Cluster features the following chapters: 1. Free movement of goods;

inclusive growth;[8] (4) Green agenda and sustainable connectivity;[9] (5) Resources, agriculture and cohesion;[10] and (6) External relations.[11] As a rule, related chapters are opened together within negotiating clusters when the candidate country is ready for all of them, while they are closed individually in the same way as in the previous methodology.

Since the EU accession process should be built on mutual trust and the clear obligations of both the EU and the countries of the Western Balkans, the new methodology should be guided by the principles of credibility, predictability, dynamics and stronger political management. In practice, this means focusing on fundamental reforms, starting with the rule of law, the functioning of democratic institutions, and public administration, as well as the economy of the candidate countries. Of course, this requires the harmonisation of internal legislation with EU law, which cannot take place without screening. The screening process itself consists of two parts: explanatory screening and bilateral screening. Both are performed for each negotiation chapter. Explanatory screening

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2. Free movement of workers; 3. Right of establishment and freedom to provide services; 4. Free movement of capital; 6. Company law; 7. Intellectual property law; 8. Competition policy; 9. Financial services; 28. Consumer and health protection.

8   The Third Cluster features the following chapters: 10. Information society and media; 16. Taxation; 17. Economic and monetary policy; 19. Social policy and employment; 20. Enterprise and industrial policy; 25. Science and research; 26. Education and culture; 29. Customs union.

9   The Fourth Cluster features the following chapters: 14. Transport policy; 15. Energy; 21. Trans-European networks; 27. Environment and climate change.

10   The Fifth Cluster features the following chapters: 11. Agriculture and rural development; 12. Food safety, veterinary and phytosanitary policy; 13. Fisheries; 22. Regional policy and coordination of structural instruments; 33. Financial and budgetary provisions.

11   The Sixth Cluster features the following chapters: 30. External relations; 31. Foreign, security and defence policy.

is the part of the screening process where the EU acquis in a given area is presented to the candidate country by the European Commission, while bilateral screening is the part of the screening in which the government of the candidate country presents its domestic legislation to the European Commission and when the differences between domestic and European legislation are determined.

Screening is performed with the aim of determining what still needs to be done in a specific negotiation chapter in order to harmonise the legislation of the candidate country with the legal acquis of the EU before accession. In this sense, it is the basis for drafting the negotiating positions of the candidate countries, especially those where it is necessary to define transitional deadlines for the harmonisation and implementation of a certain number of EU regulations, while for the European Commission it is an indicator of the readiness of the candidate country to open certain negotiation chapters. In practice, this means that for each negotiation chapter the European Commission submits a list of regulations related to that chapter – including judgements of the Court of Justice of the European Union – and the negotiating group of the candidate country then determines the differences between its domestic laws and European legislation. The next stage in the screening process is the preparation of a screening report for each separate negotiation chapter. The report is prepared by the European Commission in cooperation with the candidate country. After preparation, the European Commission presents the screening report to the EU Member States and the candidate state. The report presents an overview of the situation and an assessment of the readiness of the candidate country for the opening of individual negotiation chapters. In the next phase, the report is presented to the Council of the European Union. When it is determined that the candidate country is sufficiently aligned with the EU acquis, the EU invites the candidate country to submit a negotiating position for the given chapter.

The negotiating position for each chapter is prepared by the negotiating groups of the candidate country. However, if it is assessed that the candidate country is not sufficiently aligned with the EU acquis, opening criteria that must be met in advance are set for certain chapters. These benchmarks are mainly set for more difficult negotiation chapters and are mainly recommendations for the adoption of strategies and action plans, the fulfilment of contractual obligations with the EU, and above all, the implementation of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement and the adoption of the necessary legal acts.

Following the screening, the decision to open the chapter is made unanimously by the Member States within the Council of the European Union. Then, at the proposal of the European Commission, the Council considers the draft of the common position of the EU and decides whether it is possible for the chapter to be opened. The Council unanimously makes a decision on the opening of a certain chapter, as well as on the EU's common position with criteria for closing negotiations, the so-called "closing benchmarks". At the proposal of the European Commission and with the unanimous decision of the Council and the political confirmation of the European Council, the chapter is temporarily closed in cases when the candidate country has met the conditions for closing benchmarks. The European Commission permanently monitors each temporarily closed chapter. Until the signing of the Accession Agreement, the possibility of reopening a given chapter remains. Such a contingency exists to make provision for the candidate country adopting new regulations that are significantly different from the previously harmonised ones or not fulfilling its previously assumed international obligations.

After all the negotiating chapters have been temporarily closed, the European Council decides on the closing of the negotiations, and then the Accession Treaty is drawn up. The draft Agreement is drawn up by representatives of the Member States, the candidate state and

the EU institutions, and it contains everything agreed upon during the negotiations. Before signing the Accession Treaty, the European Commission issues an opinion on membership and the conclusion of the negotiations. It is necessary that the European Parliament gives its consent to that opinion and that the Council of the EU unanimously decides on the acceptance of the new state. After the signing of the Accession Treaty, the procedure foresees the ratification process in the Member States and in the candidate state alike. In practice, it is common to organise a referendum on EU membership in a candidate country. This procedure is directly dependent on the constitutional practice of each candidate state. Finally, if the candidate country would seriously violate the prescribed criteria for EU accession, especially the political criteria, upon the recommendation of the European Commission, the Council of the European Union may decide to temporarily suspend the accession negotiations. The new methodology of the pre-accession negotiations thereby enables the realisation of the principle of reversibility, that is, the reopening of a previously closed negotiation chapter. Such a solution can further politicise the process of accession negotiations, reflecting the possibility of reducing or increasing EU pre-accession support to candidate countries, which essentially hinders its dynamics and efficiency.

3. The Status of the Western Balkan Countries in the Process of European Integration

Serbia

In April 2008, Serbia signed the EU's Stabilisation and Association Agreement, which entered into force in 2013. That October, Serbia made a decision on the unilateral implementation of the Transitional Trade Agreement, which was signed together with the Stabilisation and Association Agreement. In December 2009, Serbia applied for EU accession (Dimitrijević, 2009, 2010). After the European Commission made a recommendation for Serbia in 2011, the European Council made a decision on 1 March 2012 guaranteeing Serbia the status of a candidate country for EU accession (Dimitrijević, 2012). This decision came only after Serbia and Kosovo reached the Brussels Agreement on the normalisation of relations and regional representation. During 2014, the first intergovernmental conference between Serbia and the EU was held in Brussels, marking the beginning of accession negotiations at the political level (Budimir & Međak, 2014). Until 2018, several intergovernmental conferences were held, with sixteen negotiation chapters being adopted. In February 2018, the European Commission predicted that Serbia would be ready to join the EU in 2025, after the implementation of the expected reforms. At the beginning of 2020, the new methodology for conducting pre-accession negotiations was adopted, whereby the 35 negotiation chapters were grouped into six clusters. In the following year, two clusters were opened at the intergovernmental conferences: The First

Cluster – Fundamentals, and the Fourth Cluster – Green agenda and sustainable connectivity. The Fourth Cluster consists of four previously defined negotiation chapters – 14. Transport policy, 15. Energy, 21. Trans-European networks, and 27. Environment and climate change. Chapter 34 (Institutions) will be discussed at the end of the negotiation process, while Chapter 35 covers "Other issues", which includes the process of the normalisation of relations with Kosovo. At the time of writing, in the negotiations with the EU, Serbia has opened 22 out of the total of 35 chapters – including areas in which the country must meet the set criteria in order to become a member of the EU. Only two chapters are temporarily closed – 25. Science and research, and 26. Education and culture (European Commission, 2023b).

Montenegro

Montenegro applied for EU membership on 15 December 2008. After the entry into force of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement on 1 May 2010, in the following November the Commission issued its Opinion, in which it outlined the political and economic criteria for the country's accession to the EU, which are related to systemic and institutional reforms. According to this statement, Montenegro should negotiate in 33 chapters, while the last two (cooperation with institutions and "Other issues") will be considered at the very end of the negotiation process. In December 2010, Montenegro acquired the status of a candidate country for EU accession. After an intensive one-year reporting on the dynamics of fulfilling the assumed obligations, and based on the Commission's report on the results achieved in the area of reforms, on 9 December 2011 the European Council decided to start accession negotiations with Montenegro. Finally, on 22 March 2012, the Commission assessed that Montenegro had achieved the necessary level of compliance with the accession criteria,

especially with the political accession criteria, in order to be able to start accession negotiations. During the negotiation process, the Commission emphasised that it would continue to give due attention to the areas of rule of law and fundamental rights – especially the fight against corruption and organised crime – in order to provide a solid monitoring mechanism of the progress concerning effective implementation and judicial practice. The European Commission especially emphasised that it will use all available means during the negotiation process in order to achieve the planned institutional reforms. On 26 June 2012, the Council of the EU adopted a decision to open accession negotiations with Montenegro. Since the European Council confirmed this decision, negotiations began on 29 June 2012 with the holding of the first session of the Intergovernmental Conference (Đurović, 2017). In its enlargement strategy, published in February 2018, the Commission highlighted 2025 as a possible target year for the accession of Montenegro, together with Serbia. So far, Montenegro has opened a total of 33 chapters, three of which have been temporarily closed (25. Science and research, 26: Education and culture, and 30. External relations) (European Commission, 2023c).

Bosnia and Herzegovina

The Stabilisation and Association Agreement between the EU and Bosnia and Herzegovina entered into force on 1 June 2015, replacing the Interim Agreement on Trade and Trade-related Matters that was in force from 1 July 2008. The agreement established the time frames for systemic reforms in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the coordination of the European integration process, which includes activities carried out with the aim of ensuring the highest degree of compliance and coherence in the work of institutions at all levels of government. On 15 February 2016, Bosnia and Herzegovina submitted its application for EU membership in accordance with Article

49 of the Treaty on European Union. The European Commission adopted its Opinion on Bosnia and Herzegovina's application for EU membership on 29 May 2019. Opining that the country was in the early stages of meeting the conditions for EU accession, the Commission therefore presented comprehensive proposals for reforms in the areas of the rule of law, democracy, fundamental human rights and public administration. The Commission believes that the negotiations on accession to the EU with Bosnia and Herzegovina should begin only after the country has achieved the required level of compliance with the criteria for membership, and especially with the political criteria from Copenhagen. Among other things, Bosnia and Herzegovina will have to thoroughly improve its legislative and institutional framework in order to ensure the fulfilment of the 14 key priorities listed in the Opinion, thereby ensuring visible results when it comes to the functioning of the coordination mechanism on EU-related issues at all state levels, including the preparation and enactment of the national programme for the adoption of EU acquis in order to ensure proper parliamentary functioning (Kostić, 2019). In December 2019, the Council of the European Union adopted the Conclusions on the Commission's Opinion, calling on Bosnia and Herzegovina to start addressing key priorities (such as public administration reform, judicial reform, strengthening the fight against corruption and organised crime, etc.). Bosnia and Herzegovina received candidate status for EU membership on 15 December 2022 (European Commission, 2023d). In March 2024, the European Council made a decision to open accession negotiations with Bosnia and Herzegovina.

North Macedonia

North Macedonia concluded the Stabilisation and Association Agreement on 9 April 2001. In March 2004, it submitted a formal application for EU

membership. At a meeting held over 15-16 November 2005, the European Council granted the country the status of candidate for membership. In June 2018, the European Council approved the Conclusions on the Stabilisation and Association Process between the EU and the Western Balkans including the Republic of North Macedonia. North Macedonia, however, had to resolve key outstanding issues with Greece. The main problem was the term "Macedonia", with the Greeks objecting to the former Yugoslav republic's use of the name, it also being a geographic region of Greece. On 18 June 2018, the Greek and Macedonian foreign ministers signed the so-called "Prespa Agreement", in which they undertook to resolve the issue, which was done immediately after its ratification in the national parliaments. However, despite the fulfilment of the aforementioned condition, in October 2019 EU members did not agree on the proposal to start accession negotiations with North Macedonia. This delay was caused first by France's request to change the methodology of the accession negotiations, and then by Bulgaria's call for both the abandonment of the term "the Macedonian language" and its replacement with "the official language of the candidate country", and the recognition of the identity of the Bulgarian national minority in North Macedonia's constitution. Since North Macedonia is a multiethnic country, it is considered that it ought to respect the Lisbon Treaty of the EU, which guarantees cultural and linguistic diversity. Bulgaria did not agree to the European Commission's proposal regarding the negotiating framework with North Macedonia, arguing that the Macedonian side was not implementing the provisions adopted in the Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighbourliness and Cooperation of 2017. A mutual dispute that has historical roots led to Bulgaria blocking the start of North Macedonia's negotiations with the EU (Arnaudov, 2023). That situation lasted until the European Commission confirmed that North Macedonia met the conditions for opening accession negotiations on membership, after

which the European Council made a decision on 24 March 2020. Finally, accession negotiations with North Macedonia officially began in July 2022 (European Commission, 2023e).

Albania

Albania concluded the Stabilisation and Association Agreement, which entered into force on 1 April 2009. After that, it submitted a request for EU accession on 24 April 2009, and the European Commission issued an Opinion on this request in 2010, assessing that before accession negotiations could be formally opened, Albania still had to achieve a necessary degree of compliance with the membership criteria, particularly to meet 12 key priorities identified in the document. These priorities included completing essential steps in the public administration reform, adopting and implementing a reform strategy for the judiciary, strengthening the fight against organised crime, developing a solid track record in the fight against corruption, and reinforcing the protection of human rights. In October 2012, the Commission recommended that Albania be granted candidate status, on the condition that key measures in the areas of judicial and public administration reform and the revision of the parliamentary rules of procedure be implemented. Candidate status was granted to Albania in 2014. In April 2018, the European Commission issued a recommendation for the opening of accession negotiations with Albania. In June 2018, the Council of the European Union adopted Conclusions in which it agreed to respond positively to the progress made by Albania, and it set the path to the opening of accession negotiations in June 2019. In the May 2019 enlargement package, the Commission recommended that Member States open negotiations with Albania. In October 2019, the European Council postponed a decision on this issue, but in its Conclusions from March 2020, it gave political consent for the

opening of accession negotiations with Albania (Aliaj & Sulmina, 2022). This was formally adopted by written procedure and endorsed by the European Council in the days that followed. On 19 July 2022, the EU held its first intergovernmental conference with Albania. The Council of the EU welcomed the fact that the first intergovernmental conference had been held and that Albania had achieved significant progress in the European integration process (European Commission, 2023f).

Kosovo

Kosovo (more precisely, Kosovo and Metohija, which is legally treated by Serbia as its southern province), has been under the international administration of the UN (United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo – UNMIK) since 1999. Considering the fragile security situation after the establishment of the international administration in Kosovo, the UN Security Council decided to additionally engage the international military forces of its member states (the so-called "Kosovo Forces" – KFOR) and the NATO alliance under the auspices of the UN, as logistical support to the international civilian mission (UNMIK) (Dimitrijević, 2007). After the unilateral declaration of independence on 17 February 2008 (which Serbia and five EU Member States – Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia and Spain – do not recognise), the dispute with Serbia escalated, which is why the EU reacted by forming its special mission in Kosovo (European Union Rule of Law Mission – EULEX) (Ker-Lindsay & Economides, 2012). The mission carries out its mandate under the Monitoring Pillar and Operational Support Pillar, and within the framework of Resolution 1244 of the UN Security Council. As the largest civilian mission under the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy, EULEX has a role to support selected institutions of the rule of law in Kosovo on their path to greater efficiency, sustainability, multi-

ethnicity and accountability, without political interference and in accordance with international human rights standards and also the best European practices. In October 2009, the European Commission issued a Communication expressing the need for the realisation of the European prospects of Kosovo. In 2012, Kosovo declared the end of supervised independence by the International Civilian Office, which was managed by an International Steering Group made up of representatives of the countries that recognised its independence. This was followed by the preparation of a feasibility study for the Stabilisation and Association Agreement. As an entity under international protection, Kosovo signed the Stabilisation and Association Agreement in 2015, it entering into force the following year. The first contractual act between Kosovo and the EU, the Agreement determines the mechanisms and official deadlines for the implementation of all reforms that will bring Kosovo closer to the EU in a progressive manner in all areas of public policies, up to the fulfilment of all EU standards. In December 2021, the second phase began with the implementation of the political priorities within the European Reform Agenda. The following year, Kosovo submitted a request for EU accession. In the meantime, relations with Serbia drastically deteriorated due to both the non-implementation of previously concluded agreements on the normalisation of relations (the "Brussels Agreement" and "Ohrid Agreement") and the application of discriminatory political decisions in the north of Kosovo, where the majority of the population is ethnic Serbian. This practically suspended the results achieved in the negotiation process between Serbia and Kosovo under the auspices of the EU and the USA on the regulation of the future status of the southern Serbian province in accordance with Resolution 1244 of the UN Security Council, which should have led to a legally binding comprehensive agreement. Since the Kosovar government did not act to de-escalate the political situation in its northern region, in June 2023 the EU temporarily suspended the activities

of all working groups and froze financial aid to Kosovo (Beta, 2023). In such a negative situation, it is up to Kosovo to work together with the EU and other mediators to resolve existing challenges and obstacles in relations with Serbia in order to improve its existing status as a potential candidate for EU membership (European Commission, 2023g).

4. The Challenges and Prospects of the Development and Modernisation of the Western Balkans

For all of the countries of the Western Balkans, joining the supranational international organisation of the EU brings many challenges regarding development and modernisation. These challenges are related to the transformation of the economy and the institutional and legal reforms that are needed to bring these countries closer to European management models and the European legal order. Such a transformation takes place in the conditions of globalisation and integration of countries at both regional and continental levels.

In the period from the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the process of European integration officially began, the Western Balkans – i.e. the countries of the former Yugoslavia, plus Albania – had to direct most of their energies towards overcoming the effects of the policy of violence that had led to the disintegrative processes of the collapse of the Yugoslav state. With the recognition of independence and the establishment of a new state order, the successor states of the former Yugoslavia took a radical turn in terms of economic and political development, which was

connected to the process of economic modernisation and institutional and legal reforms (through the implementation of the so-called "acquis communautaire").[12] Of course, given the internal difficulties in each of the Western Balkan countries, as well as the new international circumstances created by the end of the Cold War, this process was neither quick nor easy. An additional aggravating circumstance was the fact that in the foregoing period the EU had been affected by a series of successive political crises that led to the slowing down of this process, as well as of the process of the European integration of the Western Balkan countries, which had a negative effect on the EU enlargement policy itself.

Recalling the above period, it would nevertheless still be appropriate to indicate certain positive developments that were made in this process. Firstly, in 1999, the EU launched the Stabilisation and Association Process as a framework for relations between the EU and countries in the region. Secondly, the Stability Pact was then promoted as a broader political initiative that included all key international actors. Thirdly, in 2003, the European Council adopted the "Thessaloniki Agenda", confirming that all Western Balkan countries were potential candidates for EU membership (European Commission, 2003).

This European perspective was reaffirmed in the Commission's strategy for the Western Balkans in February 2018 and in the declarations following successive EU–Western Balkan summits. Achieving EU membership by 2025 was promoted especially for Serbia and Montenegro, which at the time had made the most progress in negotiations. However, this date was rejected at the European Council held in Sofia in 2018. Instead, at the initiative of France, a new enlargement methodology

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12   The EU acquis contains primary legislation, general legal principles and international agreements concluded by the EU with third countries and international organisations, as well as secondary legislation.

was adopted in March 2020, which should accelerate the accession of the countries of the Western Balkans to the EU by giving the process a stronger political impetus through so-called "sectoral integration", which would be accompanied by significant financial incentives from the EU (primarily from the IPA III fund, from which EUR 14.2 billion would be allocated for financial and technical assistance to undertake the necessary reforms in the period 2021–27).[13] Special financial incentives should come through the EUR-750-billion Next Generation EU Fund, which is a special financial instrument for economic recovery linked to the regular 2021–27 budget of the EU's Multiannual Financial Framework in the total amount of EUR 1.074 trillion.[14] At the same time, in 2020, as part of the Berlin Process, the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans – announced in 2019 as part of the European Green Deal – was signed in Sofia (European Commission, 2019; Dimitrijević, 2022). The Green Agenda foresees the development priorities of the countries of the region in the areas of decarbonisation, circular economy, pollution reduction, sustainable agriculture and biodiversity. An Economic and Investment Plan with a budget of EUR 9 billion for the period 2021–27 is foreseen for the implementation of the Green Agenda. The planned

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13   It is interesting that in recent years, through IPA I (from 2007–13) and IPA II (from 2014–20), the EU allocated direct investments to the individual countries totalling the following amounts – Bosnia and Herzegovina: EUR 1,162.2 m; Serbia (with Kosovo): EUR 4,161.9 m; Montenegro: EUR 5,14.7 m; North Macedonia: EUR 1,223.8 m; Albania: EUR 1,230.7 m.

14   The Next Generation EU fund is financed by borrowing for six years through European Commission bonds whose maturity date expires in 2058. Repayment begins in 2026. Of the total amount of EUR 750 billion, 438 billion will be divided as grants, 62 billion as guarantees, and 250 billion as loans. The fund can be separated from the upper limit of GDP of EU Member States by 2%. In this way, the EU can use its credit rating to collect and place funds on various financial markets for projects that meet the so-called "green criteria" (Xin, 2021).

funds will be used for ten flagship projects that will be financed through the IPA III fund.

The Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans is of particular importance, as it represents a clear sign of commitment to meeting the long-term goals of the economic recovery of the countries of the Western Balkans (especially after the world economic crisis of 2008), their green and digital transition, and their faster regional integration and approximation to the EU. Offering a path for successful regional economic integration to accelerate EU convergence and close the development gap between regions, the Plan should assist the transformation of the Western Balkans into one of the most attractive investment regions in the world. In this sense, the Investment Framework for the Western Balkans includes the Western Balkans Enterprise Development and Innovation Facility and the Western Balkans Guarantee Facility. Through this common framework of the EU, and with the help of international financial institutions (the European Investment Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the Development Bank of the Council of Europe, KfV Development Bank, Agence Francaise de Developpement and the World Bank) and bilateral donors, it would be possible to accelerate the process of the European integration of the Western Balkans. According to the Economic and Investment Plan, it would be possible to mobilise an additional EUR 20 billion through the Western Balkan Guarantee Facility. The Plan additionally supports investments in sustainable transport, clean energy, the environment and climate, the digital future, the competitiveness of the business sector, and the development of human capital in the countries of the Western Balkans. In addition, it would achieve the priorities foreseen by the structural foreign policy of the EU, which seeks to influence the political, economic and security structures in the countries of the Western Balkans. At the same time, the EU would thereby demonstrate its greater competitive participation in this region

in relation to other dominant geopolitical actors and also in the global governance system, which is rapidly transforming.

In light of the above, the fact that the EU is the most important donor and investor in the Western Balkans region and its most important political partner is not without significance. Neither is it negligible that the Western Balkans region is a relatively small market with fewer than 18 million inhabitants and a total GDP of USD 144 billion (which equals only 1% of the EU's GDP). What's more, it is not insignificant that in the last two decades the EU has become the Western Balkan countries' most important trade partner, with over 80% of the foreign trade exchange of the countries of the Western Balkans being directed to the EU, although at the same time imports from the EU have remained relatively lower (at approximately 59.5%). This disproportion – which stems from the non-competitiveness of the economy of the Western Balkans – influenced the increase in the region's foreign trade deficit. A certain consolidation in mutual relations occurred thanks to the application of macroeconomic measures that led to the reduction of public spending, the reform of the tax system and the observance of rigorous fiscal rules. Consequently, these measures improved the competitiveness of the economies and the economic growth of the countries of the Western Balkans. However, the level of living standards in the region remained almost six times lower than the EU average (USD 5,336 vs. USD 31,008 per capita). With a high level of unemployment (estimated at above 16%) and a high level of external indebtedness (around 80% of GDP), the countries of the Western Balkans remain highly dependent on external financing (Milenković & Vujović, 2020). In this sense, it would be useful to distinguish which of that external financing refers to direct foreign investments and which refers to foreign loans and credits that do not have a significant impact on national GDPs.

According to economic statistics after 2020, it appears that the EU leads in foreign direct investments in the Western Balkans region (with

a share of around 61%). Therefore, it is not in dispute that by realising the objectives of the EU's structural foreign policy, through sectoral integration into the EU single market, this region could achieve a good economic perspective that would enable its sustainable development and social prosperity. This strengthening of European integration in the Western Balkans would contribute to returning the EU's displaced real industrial sector closer to its borders, which would also to some extent help in achieving its greater economic autonomy in critical industrial sectors in relation to its geo-economic competitors. The realisation of this would certainly contribute to the new EU connectivity strategy, Global Gateway, which was launched in September 2021, and which is based on the goals and leading investments of the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans in the areas of transport, digital technology and energy. By means of its implementation, a stronger connection between the region and the EU would be achieved.

Taking the above into account, it would be important to fully realise the freedom of movement as one of the fundamental freedoms promoted by the EU. For the citizens of the Western Balkan countries, this freedom is guaranteed through the visa-free regime within the EU (through the so-called "Schengen Area"). The visa-free regime has been in place for citizens of North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia since December 2009, and for citizens of Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina since November 2010. After lengthy inter-institutional negotiations and the final vote in the European Parliament in April 2023, citizens from the territory of Kosovo have been able to enter the Schengen Area without visas from January 2024. Achieving this freedom along with other guaranteed freedoms for the citizens of the Western Balkans in recent times has meant an improvement in their quality of life. In a certain way, it has also affected their well-being as measured through the human development index, which is slightly increasing in the countries of the

Western Balkans. Despite this trend indicating its positive effects, the European integration of the Western Balkans remains conditioned by the latest geopolitical shifts and challenges (especially after Russia's "special military operation" in Ukraine in 2022), which cause additional turbulence in the implementation of the EU enlargement policy.

In June 2022, the EU's need to urgently respond to the accession demands of its three eastern neighbours, Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, led to the European Council adopting a very problematic decision on the granting of candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova (while Georgia de facto received the status of a potential candidate). The extent to which this decision was conditioned by the new political constellation in Europe is shown by the fact that it was made not in proportion to the democratic achievements of these countries, nor to their consistent fulfilment of the political, economic and institutional criteria for membership, but rather on account of the assessment that the Russian aggression against Ukraine has led to a disruption of the balance of power that requires new expansion for the sake of preserving its own geopolitical interests. In this way, the EU showed the historical mistake made towards the countries of the Western Balkans, since it has been developing relations with these countries for a period of almost two decades, yet there are still no visible results in terms of European integration. In this respect, neither the incentives that came from the Berlin Process, which was primarily a German initiative to create conditions for comprehensive cooperation in the political, economic and social sense (as a kind of supplement to European policies and initiatives such as enlargement policy, the Energy Community and trans-European networks), nor the inclusion of the Council for Regional Cooperation (which, as the operative body of the South-East European Cooperation Process, inherited the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe in 2008), nor the French platform of the European Political Community from 2022 (which was supposed to contribute to greater coordination of European

policies with the aim of strengthening security, stability and prosperity in Europe), were sufficient in themselves to avoid all the negative consequences and adverse effects of the global geopolitical realignment in the Western Balkans region.

Although the European integration process has somewhat revived – and despite symbolic advances such as the opening of negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania, or the granting of full candidate status to Bosnia and Herzegovina – there are still certain challenges that burden it. The challenges for the finalisation of this process (and then for the further recovery, development and modernisation of the countries of the Western Balkans) depend not only on the implementation of the obligations undertaken, but also on the wider reform of the EU itself, which implies essential changes in the decision-making process and implementation of the enlargement policy. If we add to the aforementioned factors the rise in inflation in the eurozone in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic and the growing recession in the Western Balkans region (7.7%), as well as other aggravating circumstances on the world market caused by geopolitical shifts during the war in Ukraine (primarily on the food and energy markets), it is clear that there are serious challenges in the implementation of the accession process that depend not only on the political will of the participants, but also on global economic trends that affect the strategic positioning of the countries of the Western Balkans (Filipović & Ignjatović, 2022).

This is all the more so because, due to the geopolitical shift in the world, the tendency to build a new multipolar world order is also strengthening, in which, in addition to the leading Western powers, rising powers such as Russia and China, and regional powers such as Türkiye or the countries gathered in the BRICS intergovernmental forum for cooperation, find their place in the global governance system. These changes can consequently cause a new geopolitical regrouping, as well as changes

in existing economic models based on neoliberal concepts of global governance (Dimitrijević, 2023). In the future, this could have positive effects as it would lead to a reorientation of the economy into a knowledge economy, and subsequently to significant changes in various branches of industry, as well as in technological processes and the supply of scarce energy sources. In this regard, the finalisation of the European integration process of the countries of the Western Balkans will largely depend on these states' strategic positioning in global geopolitical relations.

Considering all of this, it should not be surprising that, although the countries of the Western Balkans have expressed their political will to accede to the EU, they have not yet made sufficient progress in economic, institutional and legal reforms. This gives the impression that they do not actually want to join the organisation or at least not in the near future. An illustrative example is Serbia, which in the past decade has demonstrated "enlargement fatigue" by not harmonising its foreign policy with the Common Foreign and Security Policy of the EU (for example, by refusing to introduce sanctions against the Russian Federation due to its aggression against Ukraine), which led to a serious stagnation in the process of European integration (Ćeranić Perišić et al, 2023). An added problem is the stagnation in the implementation of institutional and legal reforms (the absence of the rule of law), which, along with the impossibility of reaching a comprehensive agreement on resolving the status of the southern province (Kosovo and Metohija), prevents further progress in accession negotiations with the EU. In this sense, the other countries of the Western Balkans are also faced with similar internal political problems or with unresolved issues with neighbouring countries that lead to political instability and a halt in the initiated reform processes.

These reform processes are objectively necessary in order to increase the level of economic growth, reduce external debt and increase productivity, which would significantly affect the economic dynamics of the entire

region and create the preconditions for political stability. In order for this to actually happen, it is necessary to integrate the fragmented national markets more quickly and intensify regional economic cooperation.[15] In this regard, some progress has been made, since at the 2020 Summit of the Berlin Process, the Western Balkan countries gave their support for the implementation of the Common Regional Market Action Plan, spanning 2021–24. This strategy is made up of 'targeted actions in four key areas: (1) Regional trade area: free movement of goods, services, capital and people, including crosscutting measures, such as Green Lanes, to align with EU-compliant rules and standards and provide opportunities for companies and citizens; (2) Regional investment area: to align investment policies with the EU standards and best international practices and promote the region to foreign investors; (3) Regional digital area: to integrate the Western Balkans into the pan-European digital market; (4) Regional industrial and innovation area: to transform the industrial sectors, shape the value chains they belong to, and prepare them for the realities of today and challenges of tomorrow' (Regional Cooperation Council, 2020). The Action Plan aims to preserve and improve the democratic future and prosperity of the countries of the Western Balkans through the revitalisation of their industries and the achievement of sustainable economic growth. In this regard, the Western Balkan countries should be committed to its implementation, since it removes obstacles and reduces the costs and time required for the free flow of goods, services, capital and people, which in itself opens up opportunities for new capital investments in various branches of industry and technological development.

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15   The Agreement on the Energy Community of Southeastern European countries, signed in Athens in 2005, can serve as an example of good practice in this regard. The contract defines the energy market of electricity and gas of the countries of the region.

This Action Plan for the countries of the Western Balkans was also confirmed at the Summit of the Berlin Process held in Tirana in October 2023, where the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen announced the adoption of the Growth Plan. The implementation of the Growth Plan would take place through four pillars: (1) the introduction of the Western Balkans into the single market; (2) the finalisation of the formation of the regional market; (3) the completion of reform processes; (4) the new investment package of EUR 6 billion (2 billion in grants and 4 billion in loans). According to current estimates, if the Growth Plan were to be implemented, it would be possible to double the economic growth of the countries of the Western Balkans in this decade (EU in Serbia, 2023).

5. Conclusions

The prospects of the further expansion of the European Union to include the countries of the Western Balkans depend, first of all, on the implementation of their previously assumed obligations towards the EU, that is, on the concretisation of the expressed political will to fulfil the set criteria and to implement comprehensive reforms in key economic areas, as well as in their legal and political systems. Economic reforms must be decisively implemented in order to eliminate structural weaknesses, low competitiveness and high unemployment. Given that all the countries of the Western Balkans are facing the same or similar problems arising from the weakness of state structures that are manifested in the fight against corruption, organised crime, terrorism, cybercrime, illegal migration, trafficking in arms, drugs and people, and other hybrid threats, which jeopardise vital national interests, judicial and public administration

reforms should bring some real and visible results with the aim of the more efficient functioning of state institutions and the final establishment of the rule of law. In this sense, it would be advisable to take advantage of the somewhat more favourable political constellation that currently exists in the EU and emphasise the importance of the Western Balkans for the preservation of international peace and security.

Although not all EU Member States always share the same position regarding the accession of the countries of the Western Balkans, this does not mean that the EU should forgo new enlargements of its membership, because otherwise this region might remain in limbo or be open to the penetration of other international actors whose political and economic power is burgeoning. After all, the EU is obviously aware of this fact, because in recent years – in the conditions of the world economic crisis – it has adopted a series of protectionist measures and established special control mechanisms to supervise foreign investments in its strategic assets, infrastructure and technologies (European Union, 2019).

Intending to implement the model of open strategic autonomy, which should lead to the strengthening of currency stability and the revision of the existing trade policy to ensure the diversification and strengthening of global supply chains necessary to protect against potential future economic crises, the EU has established restrictions on problematic business transactions from third countries that affect its security and public order and which are partly related to the increasingly visible economic penetration of its immediate neighbourhood (through non-transparent investments and loans, unbalanced trade relations and energy ties that strengthen the dependence of neighbouring countries on foreign capital) (Dimitrijević, 2021). On the political level, this kind of action by competitors in the EU's neighbourhood is directly reflected in the strengthening of authoritarian governments that, as a rule, behave arbitrarily and often contrary to the objectives of the Common Foreign

and Security Policy of the EU. It follows logically from this that by further delaying the European integration process of the Western Balkans, the EU weakens its influence in its immediate neighbourhood, a shortcoming that will certainly be exploited by those countries in competition with the EU to realise their strategic geopolitical and geo-economic goals in this region (Domachowska, 2021). Consequently, the question arises that if its enlargement policy is one of the EU's most successful strategies and if it provides the countries of the Western Balkans with certain European prospects, then why are the parties unable to reach a consensus on the key directions and dynamics of the accession negotiations without any further conditions and with clearly defined roadmaps that would lead them to the end of the negotiations?

From the foregoing analysis, it follows that this synergistic action is achievable, but it would have to be accompanied by the EU Member States' greater solidarity with the Western Balkans region, with the provision of significant technical assistance, more funds in the pre-accession period (in order to pave the way for the use of funds from structural funds and the Cohesion Fund), and the provision of more visible support through the innovative Economic and Investment Plan, all of which would contribute to the Western Balkan countries being able to continue their modernisation and economic growth through the introduction of new, more efficient, sustainable and legitimate models of economic development that take more account of climate change and environmental protection in order to establish a socially just, ecologically sustainable and economically stable, integrated and prosperous democratic society with a common regional market of a "green" and "digital" economy. Although achieving the stated goals is realistically possible, a significant slowdown occurred due to the new fluctuating methodology of accession negotiations (which builds on the existing Copenhagen Criteria with a specific requirement to establish more efficient regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations).

It still seems that the biggest challenge in the process of European integration is fulfilling the conditions of the Common Foreign and Security Policy of the EU to achieve the stabilisation of the overall political situation in the region. This condition certainly has its justification from the security aspect of the EU enlargement policy, but we cannot ignore the fact that similar open issues existed between neighbouring countries that were previously admitted to EU membership (for example, on the occasions of the accession of Ireland and Cyprus). In light of this, the EU's approach is somewhat irrational from a political point of view, as it prevents long-term European perspectives for most Western Balkan countries (Petrović et al., 2023). In order to overcome this situation, it would be necessary for the enlargement policy to concentrate more on the enlargement of the EU itself, and to leave the politically controversial issues (which are shared by the EU Member States themselves) for regulation after the actual accession of the countries of the Western Balkans. This would bring a more rapid conclusion to the process of European integration and the models for solving open regional matters and issues between neighbours would be in line with good international legal practice and established European standards. In the long term, regardless of any inconsistencies in the legal and political situations in practice, the accession of the Western Balkan countries to the European Union would contribute not only to the improvement of security on the EU's current borders, but also to the general calming of tensions in the Western Balkans region itself.

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Enhancing Interconnectivity between Central and Eastern Europe and China through Blockchain Technology

BLANKA KOVÁCS[*]

ABSTRACT: This paper offers an analysis of the integration and evolution of blockchain technology within the geopolitical landscape of China–Central and Eastern Europe cooperation, also known as the 14+1 group. Over a decade since the inception of Bitcoin, blockchain has transcended its financial roots, promising to revolutionise transparency, trust and efficiency in various sectors. The study highlights that China and the European Union both consider blockchain to be a strategic technology and it compares their public blockchain platforms. Through qualitative analysis, we categorise the blockchain readiness and activities of the 14+1 countries, examining their regulatory, academic, industrial and community engagement with the technology. The paper concludes by identifying limitations in current research, which are primarily due to the rapidly changing blockchain industry and the reliance on English-

*   Blanka Kovács: Analyst at the Central Bank of Hungary (MNB), Budapest, Hungary.

language sources, recommending further quantitative analysis and local expert surveys to deepen understanding. The study aims to provide a detailed view of the blockchain landscape, suggesting future policy and collaborative efforts within the digital economy of the 14+1 group.

1. Introduction

Over a decade since the inception of Bitcoin, blockchain technology has re-emerged as a tool for increasing transparency, trust and the enhancement of operational efficacy. The use of blockchain technology has the potential to reduce costs and involve the participation of third parties, and it builds up trust between transaction participants using shared ledgers, processes and records. Moreover, due to its immutable nature, audit institutions can view the ledgers at any time. However, blockchain – essentially a decentralised database – faces significant obstacles in interoperability, hindering its integration with other systems. The ongoing tokenisation of assets showcases its potential, yet the absence of established standards also underscores its early stage.

In China, the approach towards blockchain technology has shifted from prohibition towards being given the status of a strategic technology (Carnap, 2021). It has been mentioned in several official Chinese documents such as National Standardization Goals 2035, Guidance on Accelerating the Application and Industrial Development of Blockchain Technology, from the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology and the Office of the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission of China, and Made in China 2025. In addition to government-level support, there is an increased investment in blockchain projects and public-private partnerships domestically (Industrial and Commercial Bank of China Financial Technology Research Institute, 2021).

Blockchain technology is also a component of China's Digital Silk Road (DSR) initiative, which is part of the broader Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The DSR, launched in 2015, aims to bolster such key areas as digital infrastructure, spanning 5G networks, IoT, AI, big data, smart cities

and cloud computing across various countries. Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, known as 14+1 (formerly 16+1), began in 2012 and all 14 of the CEE countries are members of the DSR.

The CEE region is rather fragmented – in economic, digital and cultural terms alike – and it does not have a common blockchain strategy. Those CEE countries that are members of the European Union (Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Greece, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia) have aligned their strategies to the Union, while the non EU members (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia) show different levels of development in this regard.

However, as current efforts show, China aims to foster stronger connections in blockchain. This new technology was addressed at the 2019 China–Central and Eastern European Countries (CEEC) Cooperation Forum, and the possibility of establishing a China–CEEC blockchain centre of excellence was mentioned in the Dubrovnik Guidelines for Cooperation. In December 2019, the first China–CEEC Blockchain Summit was held in Slovakia (Ekman, 2021).

This paper explores the blockchain ecosystem and landscape of the 14+1 cooperation, categorising its approach towards blockchain technology. Part 2 provides a literature review. Part 3 assesses the digitalisation level of the 14 CEE countries and their connectivity to China through FDI, trade and Digital Silk Road initiatives. Part 4 compares the approaches to blockchain of China and the EU, with the analysis of the European Blockchain Partnership (EBP) being expanded by the inclusion of five non-EU members in order to provide a comprehensive ecosystem overview. Part 5 concludes the study, also outlining limitations and suggesting directions for future research.

2. Literature Review

Distributed systems are a cornerstone of modern computing, and they form the basis for the functioning of the Internet, cloud services and many enterprise architectures. They come with unique challenges, including the need for algorithms and protocols to handle network latency, fault tolerance, data consistency, scalability and many more aspects. Blockchain technology is a type of distributed system – essentially a shared database – that gained public attention during the 2008 financial crisis when the Bitcoin white paper by Satoshi Nakamoto was published. One of the main goals of the Bitcoin white paper was to create a trustless system, as trust was diminishing due to financial crises. Research on trust shows that in the absence of a human, trust in technology may in certain cases replace interpersonal trust and it becomes a key enabler of trust in a relationship (Li et al., 2012). When users are confident in their knowledge-based trust, they are less reliant on organisational beliefs and make decisions based on their beliefs in the technology itself (McKnight et al., 2011). As a result, blockchain is commonly considered to be superior due to its third-party verifiability, immutable data and traceability of data on a long chain of blocks. One key difference between the blockchain adopted by the Bitcoin community and that adopted by most business organisations is whether the block is permissionless or permissioned. From a governance point of view, a permissionless blockchain allows anyone with Internet access to join the consensus-making process. A classic example is Bitcoin, in which millions of users from anywhere in the world can in theory join the mining and win the chance to write data into blocks. In contrast, a permissioned blockchain allows only verified nodes to approve data-editing or consensus-making.

Traditionally, blockchain was associated with banking, finance and insurance; now it is starting to gain popularity in a broader spectrum of sectors such as supply chain management, healthcare, government services and agriculture. A crucial challenge in supply chain management lies in tracking the data origin and ensuring traceability and transparency throughout the end-to-end supply chain network. Conventional centralised supply chains necessitate a third-party intermediary for transaction validation, a process susceptible to data alteration, which thereby affects procedural efficiency and interoperability. Due to its innovative features, blockchain technology can be used to facilitate the Internet of Things (IoT) and Industrial IoT (IIoT) (König et al., 2020).

Technical standards are essentially product specifications for compatibility and interoperability. Although not codified as law, compliance with these standards is a prerequisite for market participation. Additionally, these standards are often invoked within legally binding national regulations, delineating methodologies to fulfil regulatory mandates. Regulations set requirements and limits, while technical standards define methods of how to comply with these limits. In a sense, these technical standards are the basic engine of the globalisation process of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. However, different countries have different approaches towards standardisation. The US approach emphasising pure market competition has proved – by and large – to be less influential than the European approach of a market driven public-private partnership (PPP). China, in turn, is essentially state-directed (centralised), though not entirely state-controlled (Rühlig, 2020).

The global technology standards are to a large extent dictated by private corporations located in the USA, with European-based firms contributing to a lesser magnitude. China has been prioritising standard-setting for the digital economy both at national and international levels. In 2017, the PRC signed a joint initiative on strengthening standards cooperation

with 12 BRI countries. Officials from the Standardization Administration of China (SAC) stated in 2018 that standards play an important role in global research and will define the next generation of the information and communications technology (ICT) industry. The latest official document, National Standardization Development Outline (China Standards 2035), promotes interaction between standardisation and scientific innovation, strengthening standards research in crucial technologies such as AI, quantum information, biotechnology, next-generation IT, big data, blockchain, new energy, and materials. Furthermore, it sets numeric indicators for improving China's standards level between 2025 and 2035, including a ratio of 50% standards-essential research results in crucial generic technologies and applied technological projects, an 85% conversion rate of international standards, and the establishment of 50 national technological standard innovation bases.

Although advances in the development of blockchain standards have been noted, a normative standard for the compliant implementation and auditing of blockchain technology – similar to the ISO 27,001 standard for information security – has still not been established. Current standardisation efforts are predominantly concentrated on the technical aspects of the technology, with the ERC20 token standard on the Ethereum network being one of the most widely recognised. Given that compliance demands vary significantly across different industries, the creation of sector-specific standardisations could be advantageous.

China appears as a player in standardisation on the global scale as well. Despite this, technology products seldom exclusively belong to a single state. They are instead a synthesis of components sourced internationally. In its latest policy, China aims to increase international cooperation and integrate more deeply into the international standardisation systems led by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) and the International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC) and not force

its own standards on other parties. As the technologies in question are still evolving, China is also adjusting its strategies and policies regarding setting standards in, for instance, AI, cloud computing and blockchain.

The approach of the Central and Eastern European region towards the Digital Silk Road initiative has been extensively discussed in recent literature. Bánhidi (2019) delineates the EU's telecom and IT regulatory framework targeting the Chinese audience, emphasising a lack of common regulatory principles in ICT and also advocating joint research to establish common regulations. Bánhidi (2022) emphasises the lag in business digitisation and e-commerce in CEE countries compared to other EU nations, identifying the cooperation with Chinese enterprises as having the potential to be mutually beneficial. Furthermore, Bánhidi (2021a) demonstrates a mature China–Hungary relationship as a foundation for extending cooperation towards the realms of digital business and e-commerce. Moreover, the success in the CEE region of traditional Chinese telecommunication firms like Huawei and ZTE, as highlighted by Bánhidi (2021b), serves as a precedent for possible success in the converged ICT sector, with several successful Chinese initiatives transferable to the region through public-private partnerships. Szunomár (2023) posits that China's keen interest in involving CEE countries in this initiative is driven by the ongoing digital transformation in the region and the reputational benefits China could garner from successful project implementations in Europe. However, the USA's Clean Network initiative that labels Chinese ICT companies as untrustworthy, was signed by all of the CEE countries, except for Bosnia and Herzegovina, Hungary and Montenegro (United States Department of State, 2020).

In conclusion, while blockchain technology presents a transformative potential across multiple industries, there is a significant gap in the development of a comprehensive normative standard that would facilitate broader adoption and compliance. Additionally, the interplay

of global powers in the standardisation process underscores the complex geopolitical landscape that influences the evolution and governance of blockchain technology.

3. Connectivity between the 14+1

Exactly a decade ago, China's Belt and Road Initiative was unveiled as a multi-country infrastructure investment strategy. In 2015, the strategy was expanded with its Digital Silk Road component. According to a Deloitte survey, only three developed European economies – Germany, Italy and Spain – feature in the top 15 countries across the world receiving the highest estimated DSR spending. The top five recipients – India, Mexico, Ethiopia, Malaysia and the Philippines – are to be found on three continents (Xu and Chen, 2019). The BRI represents a marathon, with China engaged in a continual assessment of the project's outcomes to ensure its alignment with its overarching objectives. At the third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, Chinese president Xi Jinping announced that the PRC will shift the focus onto increased quality in projects and investment. He mentioned eight steps to support high-quality Belt and Road cooperation, keeping technological innovation and connectivity among the priorities (South China Morning Post, 2023). However, domestically China has run a sprint towards digitalisation and has become a globally significant player in the provision of digital technology as well. For instance, Huawei operates in 170 countries, and it has created 70% of the current 4G network in Africa. Chinese companies are laying vast amounts of undersea fibre-optic cables, and at the time of writing China has over a hundred ongoing projects. In cloud computing,

Amazon, Microsoft and Google own half of the world's market; Chinese firms such as Alibaba have a much smaller global imprint.

In the context of global relations, "connectivity" is a term with broad meanings, and it encompasses various dimensions such as physical, digital, economic, technological, regulatory and data connectivity. The bloc of 14 CEE countries is rather fragmented both economically and culturally, meaning that there is more competition for bilateral agreements with China than actual cooperation. As far as their level of digitalisation is concerned, they also present a rather heterogeneous group.

When analysing some of the indices that try to measure CEE countries' current level of digitalisation (see Table 1), we can observe that the level of digitalisation has been constantly increasing in all those CEE countries that are members of the EU, with Slovenia, the Czech Republic and Croatia in the first three places. As far as the GCI score is concerned, we can see a correlation with the DESI index, the Czech Republic and Slovenia taking the first two places.

Table 1: CEE countries by their level of digitalisation development (selected indices)

COUNTRY	DESI 2020	DESI 2021	DESI 2022	GCI 2019	GCI 2020
EU COUNTRIES					
Bulgaria	29.82	32.65	37.68	36	36
Croatia	37.01	43.07	47.55	38	38
Czech Republic	39.54	43.37	49.14	28	28
Greece	27.57	32.51	38.93	36	35
Hungary	35.84	38.72	43.76	31	31
Poland	33.20	36.53	40.55	39	39
Romania	24.73	27.43	30.58	41	41
Slovakia	36.19	39.95	43.45	32	32
Slovenia	42.92	47.96	53.37	29	29
NON-EU COUNTRIES					
Albania	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
Bosnia and Herzegovina	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
Montenegro	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
North Macedonia	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
Serbia	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	51	51

Source: Author's own compilation based on statistics from European Commission, 2023, and Huawei Global Connectivity Index, 2023

Even though Erokhin (2022) identifies that there are great discrepancies between Chinese outward statistics and the statistics of the host countries on the inward FDI they receive from the PRC, the distribution of Chinese

OFDI in Western Europe and Central and Eastern Europe shows a rather unbalanced picture. It even seems that the distribution is unbalanced within the region, as in 2020 51% of investments were realised in only two countries – the Czech Republic and Poland. Overall, Chinese OFDI to the CEE countries increased in 2020. As yet, there is no data available after 2020. As far as trade is concerned, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland (and Serbia) are China's most important trading and strategic partners, with Slovakia not far behind (Maró & Török, 2022). Projects under the DSR in Central and Eastern Europe are driven by 5G developments, with the most important (EU-member) CEE bases for Huawei being Poland, Hungary and Romania. In the non-EU countries, Serbia has the most involvement with 5G (Szunomár et al., 2020).

4. Blockchain in China and the European Union

4.1. Blockchain in China

China's trajectory with respect to blockchain technology has transitioned from strict regulation to strategic embrace. Initially, between 2013 and 2017, financial institutions faced prohibitions, yet cryptocurrencies flourished relatively unregulated. However, the period from 2017 to 2019 saw the imposition of bans and regulations, particularly targeting public blockchains and cryptocurrencies. The period after 2019 marks a paradigm shift, as blockchain technology is now regarded by the Chinese government as a strategic technology.

Key milestones include:

- May 2018: President Xi Jinping acknowledges the potential of blockchain, advocating greater research and investment during a session at the Chinese Academy of Science.
- January 2019: Mandatory registration is introduced, requiring all blockchain service providers to register with China's Cyberspace Administration, thereby ensuring accountability for data content on their respective blockchains.
- October 2019: In a significant discourse, often referred to as the "1024 speech", President Xi emphasises blockchain as a pivotal innovation for core technological advancement.
- January 2020: China forms a national blockchain committee, which includes representation from Ant Financial, Tencent, Baidu and Huawei, and is aimed at developing standards for the use of blockchain technology across a variety of industries.
- February 2020: The People's Bank of China establishes security specifications for blockchain in fintech, encompassing hardware, encryption algorithms, infrastructure software and several other domains.
- April 2020: UnionPay, China Mobile, Red Date Technologies and the State Information Center launch China's Blockchain-based Service Network (BSN) as a transregional public infrastructure network.
- February 2023: Focusing on areas such as basic theory, software and hardware, the National Blockchain Technology Innovation Center (NBTIC) is established in Beijing.
- June 2023: China's Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT) releases the country's first national standard for blockchain technology.

The adoption of blockchain technology is notably prevalent within supply chain, financial and government service sectors. In 2019, a mere 6% of new blockchain projects were government service-oriented, a figure that surged to 23% in the first half of 2020. Both periods witnessed a consistent focus on supply chain and financial services, each constituting 31% of blockchain projects. The application of blockchain in China has been rising rapidly in recent years, with the market size reaching USD 1.15 billion in 2022, according to Statista (2022).

Noteworthy implementations include "programmable governance" through blockchain. For instance, since April 2020 residents in Haidian, Beijing, have had their personal data managed by a blockchain system named the "One Network Portal" (一网通办). This platform facilitates civil administration and government service applications by aggregating data from various institutions and ministries, thereby simplifying verification processes and procedural undertakings. The data shared encompasses a wide range of personal and institutional information, such as ID card details, residence permits, marriage and divorce certificates, electronic business licenses, tax credit ratings, environmental assessments, medical institution licensing, housing qualification information, and more besides. Through such initiatives, China exemplifies a growing inclination towards leveraging blockchain technology for enhanced governance and service delivery (von Carnap, 2021).

4.2. Blockchain in the European Union

Similarly to China, the European Union aims to take full advantage of blockchain technology and enhance the digitalisation level of Europe. The European Blockchain Partnership was created by 21 EU Member States and Norway in 2018, marking the first EU-wide initiative specifically

devoted to blockchain. The European Blockchain Services Infrastructure (EBSI) was formed by the EBP as a collaborative initiative aimed at establishing a blockchain-based infrastructure to enhance interactions within the public sector and eventually with private sector platforms. The EBSI is designed as a peer-to-peer network where each member operates at least one node. Its initial applications have included notarisation, the verification of qualifications, European digital identity, taxation and customs. Additional uses will target SME financing, welfare services across Europe, and streamlining the management of cross-border and cross-authority asylum requests.

Both the EBSI and BSN are high-level initiatives and promote public-private partnership in blockchain. In addition to this, both initiatives seek to provide a foundational blockchain infrastructure that can support a variety of applications and services. The goal is to offer a robust, scalable and reliable platform that can facilitate blockchain adoption. However, there are several differences between the two projects, as Table 2 reveals.

Table 2: Comparison of the Blockchain Service Network and European Blockchain Services Infrastructure

FEATURE	BSN (CHINA)	EBSI (EUROPEAN UNION)	EXPLANATION
Network Structure	Three-layered: Cloud resource layer, Blockchain framework layer, Application layer	Multilayered: Base layer, Core services layer, Use-case and application-specific layers	BSN uses a three-layered architecture, while EBSI adopts a more modular, multilayered approach
Node Distribution	Network of city and provincial nodes	Peer-to-peer network with each Member State running at least one node	BSN has a more centralised node structure with roles specified for city and provincial nodes; EBSI is more peer-to-peer
Consensus Mechanism	Red Date BCOS BFT consensus algorithm	Not specified	BSN uses a unique consensus algorithm tailored for consortium blockchains; EBSI's consensus mechanism is not detailed
Interoperability	Supports various blockchain protocols	Not specified	BSN emphasises interoperability among various blockchain protocols, making it easier to integrate different applications
Possible Applications	Smart cities, supply chain management, financial services	Notarisation, education credentials, digital identity, trusted data sharing and more	BSN focuses on broader smart infrastructure, while EBSI aims at more administrative and identity-related use-cases

FEATURE	BSN (CHINA)	EBSI (EUROPEAN UNION)	EXPLANATION
Governance	Consortium including State Information Center (SIC), China Mobile, China UnionPay, Red Date Technologies	Governed by the European Blockchain Partnership (EBP); technical implementation by the Directorate-General for Digital Services (DG DIGIT)	BSN is governed by a mix of state and private entities, while EBSI governance is more centralised within the European Union
Technology Stack	Includes cloud resources, container orchestration, blockchain frameworks and APIs for dapps	Not detailed, but suggests a structured approach	BSN provides a more detailed technical stack, while EBSI's stack is not specified but presumed to be modular and structured

Source: Author's own compilation based on European Blockchain Services Infrastructure, 2023, and BSN Development Association, 2020

4.3. Blockchain in Central and Eastern Europe

4.3.1. Regulation

Today, the EBSI features 27 active nodes in 20 Member States. On a path towards harmonising their regulatory and policy frameworks, EU Member States are currently at different maturity levels in terms of regulatory and ecosystem development. EU Blockchain Ecosystem Developments (2022) elucidates the role of the EU Blockchain Observatory and Forum: 'The EU Blockchain Observatory and Forum groups each country in one of three stages of maturity in each dimension of each maturity curve (regulatory and business): Regulatory maturity curve: this dimension

measures the degree of top-down support provided by national or regional government. Ecosystem maturity curve: this dimension measures the degree of bottom-up development of the local ecosystem in each country, as evidenced through three main indicators: presence of a local business/ startup ecosystem; number of blockchain-related formal education and academic research initiatives; number of user-driven communities around blockchain or virtual assets'.

It is important to note that while this is a very fast-paced space, the matrix is a helpful instrument in assessing the change from 2020 and the current status of the European blockchain ecosystem in 2022.

Table 3: European blockchain regulatory and business ecosystem in 2022

Ecosystem Maturity		Stage I	Stage II	Stage III
	Stage III		Lithuania, Netherlands, Slovenia	Cyprus, UK, Estonia, Switzerland, France, Malta
	Stage II	Belgium, Slovakia, Denmark, Sweden, Ireland	Austria, Liechtenstein, Finland, Italy, Spain, Portugal	Germany, Luxembourg
	Stage I	Croatia, Czech Rep., Greece, Hungary, Romania, Norway	Poland, Latvia, Bulgaria	
		Stage I	Stage II	Stage III
			Regulatory Curve	

Source: The EU Blockchain Observatory and Forum, 2022

To obtain a comprehensive view of the approach towards blockchain in the 14 CEE countries, this research will now attempt to categorise and give an overview of the blockchain ecosystems of Albania, Bosnia and

Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia based on the four domains.

Table 4: Regulations in selected CEE countries

COUNTRY	REGULATORY CONSIDERATION
Albania	A draft of the Law on Financial Market based on Distributed Ledger Technology (DLT) has been submitted to parliament
Bosnia and Herzegovina	n.a.
Montenegro	Regulatory Sandbox for fintech companies since 2019; Cooperation with Ripple on central bank digital currency
North Macedonia	Working group set up for issuing a report regarding the current regulatory regime connected with crypto assets
Serbia	Consultation process on the regulation of crypto assets since 2019; Law on Digital Assets came into force in January 2021

Source: Author's own compilation based on Odorović et al., 2020

Serbia adopted a law on digital assets in 2021 that was positively accepted by the population. Montenegro also has a strong regulatory stance on crypto, and other countries are in the process of adopting some crypto-asset specific rules.

4.3.2. Academia

In the course of researching this paper, universities within the Western Balkans region were evaluated based on their academic offerings related to fintech and blockchain, as ranked by the QS World University

Rankings.[1] While it is common for these institutions to include fintech and blockchain topics within their curricula, a detailed examination has revealed an absence of dedicated degree programmes – at both undergraduate and graduate level – that are specifically focused on these fields. The trend indicates that although universities acknowledge the importance of fintech and blockchain by incorporating related subjects into their course content, they have yet to establish specialised degree programmes. In contrast, there is a noticeable inclination among companies to fill this educational gap by offering their own courses in blockchain technology. This corporate-led approach to education in the blockchain space suggests that, while university-level qualifications in this area are not yet prevalent, there is an opportunity for higher education institutions to offer courses on blockchain and fintech.

4.3.3. Blockchain across Key Industries

In the Western Balkans region, Serbia and Montenegro are emerging as significant players in the cryptocurrency and blockchain space, with both private enterprises and government support contributing to the development of this sector. In Serbia, companies such as ECD, Ulticoin, Tradecore and YourBTMs have been identified as key cryptocurrency trading entities, although they currently operate without formal regulation. Montenegro hosts Digital Montenegro and Coinmetro, which are also involved in the unregulated cryptocurrency trading market.

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1   The following universities were evaluated: University of Belgrade; University of Novi Sad; Ss. Cyril and Methodius University, Skopje; University of Sarajevo; University of Mostar; Sarajevo School of Science and Technology; University of Niš; University of Montenegro; Polytechnic University of Tirana.

According to research by Martiri (2018), the blockchain ecosystem within the Western Balkans has been mapped out using Initial Coin Offerings (ICOs) as a metric. Serbia stands out in the region with five ICOs, boasting an average quality rating of 3 out of 5, marking the highest number of ICOs in the area.

The tokenisation of real-world assets is gaining popularity across the region, with Albania making noteworthy strides. In 2023, Heritage, an Albanian asset management service provider, executed the country's first real estate blockchain transaction by tokenising an apartment in Vlora valued at EUR 60,000 (Seenews, 2023). This innovative approach to asset management underscores the potential for blockchain technology to transform traditional business practices.

Montenegro has expressed ambitions to become a blockchain hub, focusing on creating an attractive regulatory framework for the industry. Collaborating with the American company Ripple, the Central Bank of Montenegro is exploring central bank digital currency solutions. Additionally, the naturalisation as a Montenegrin citizen of the Canadian computer programmer and founder of Ethereum, Vitalik Buterin, can be viewed as a public relations boost that underscores the country's commitment to embracing blockchain technology (Coin Insider, 2022).

In Serbia, the government's endorsement of blockchain is evident through its support of a "Blockchain Hackathon" in 2020, demonstrating a commitment to fostering innovation in the field. Furthermore, the Ministry for Public Administration and Local Self Government's publication of a feasibility study on the use of blockchain in public administration is a testament to the country's proactive approach to integrating blockchain at the governmental level.

Comparatively, other countries in the region appear to be more reserved in their adoption and support of blockchain initiatives. Serbia

and Montenegro are setting precedents by demonstrating both private sector growth and governmental engagement in the blockchain domain.

4.3.4. The Blockchain Community

There are several initiatives that have started in the Western Balkans region, with several significant projects being launched to promote the technology's adoption and foster a conducive environment for blockchain businesses. Among these, NEAR Balkans stands out as a pioneering blockchain hub. This hub is an extension of a major global blockchain technology ecosystem, and it is now turning its focus to solidifying its presence across multiple Balkan countries, including Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Montenegro, Serbia, North Macedonia and Slovenia. Complementing these efforts, the Serbian Blockchain Initiative (SBI) has been established as a non-profit, non-governmental organisation. Its mission is to propel the adoption of blockchain technology within Serbia, providing support that enhances the international competitiveness of Serbian blockchain enterprises. In parallel, the Balkan Blockchain Association (BBA) operates as a non-profit entity that unites prominent figures and businesses from both the Bulgarian and broader international blockchain spheres. The BBA's core objective is to promote blockchain technology and create a collaborative network that supports the industry's growth and development in the region.

5. Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

This paper has mapped out the blockchain ecosystem across China and the CEE region, revealing a diverse landscape of adoption and application. While China has positioned itself as a global leader in blockchain initiatives, as we have seen, its 14 CEE partners present a fragmented picture. The EU's approach – through the EBP and EBSI – highlights a commitment to integrating blockchain technology into various sectors, aiming for a harmonised regulatory and digital framework across its Member States. The potential of blockchain to revolutionise industries and governance systems is evident, yet the journey towards widespread adoption and standardisation is still fraught with challenges, including the need for more cohesive regulatory frameworks, the development of international standards, and the fostering of trust and cooperation among various stakeholders.

An example of blockchain's potential can be seen in the public services domain, where academic credentials are concerned – such as those earned by CEE students on scholarships in China. The implementation of a blockchain-based system for storing and verifying academic qualifications could dramatically enhance the efficiency and reliability of cross-border educational recognition. Such a system would ensure that credentials are not only securely recorded, but also instantly verifiable by academic institutions and employers across Central and Eastern Europe, thus facilitating the seamless movement and employment of graduates within these regions.

Parallel to this, in the arena of trade finance, blockchain technology could reduce the complexity of transactions between China and the CEE

nations. Blockchain technology could make some parts of supply chain management more efficient and transparent. Each product can be tracked from its point of origin to its destination. This traceability is critical for verifying the authenticity of products, particularly in industries prone to counterfeiting. Blockchain enables the real-time tracking of goods, allowing all parties in the supply chain to view the product's journey and status instantly. By creating a decentralised ledger for recording trade transactions, blockchain could reduce transactional costs and shorten the time frames for trade settlements. This would not only bolster the efficiency of trade finance operations, but also elevate the level of trust in the economic interchanges between these diverse markets.

Agriculture is another area where blockchain could offer several advantages. The ability to track the journey of a food product from its origin to the consumer is vital in managing food safety. Third-party certifications and regular audits can be carried out in a decentralised way which can also help ensure that food producers and handlers adhere to safety standards. In 2021, Chinese President Xi Jinping proposed setting up a farm-produce wholesale market in the CEE region, which as well as improving agricultural trade between CEE and China, could lead to the introduction of an exchange programme for young agricultural professionals (Global Times, 2021).

Although these specific recommendations are few in number, collectively, such applications of blockchain could significantly contribute to the digital economy of the 14+1 group, necessitating policy implications and collaborative efforts.

This paper has served as a qualitative analysis of blockchain activities in Central and Eastern Europe. Subsequent research using quantitative analysis could consider quantifying each of the enablers as inputs into an index to monitor and track the development of blockchain hubs though intertemporal analysis, both regionally and globally. As the data collected

for this paper was predominantly in English, future research could also introduce surveys of expert opinion in the respective local languages, and a survey concerning trust in technology would add an additional dimension to the literature.

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