

FOREIGN POLICY IN FLUX: BALKAN STATES BETWEEN EAST AND WEST

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Valeriya Kamenova', with a stylized, cursive script.

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Abstract

Why do some post-communist states pursue Atlanticist and pro-European foreign policies? I argue that these states chose to pursue these policies based on a cost-benefit analysis of both domestic and external factors undertaken by the current regime. The outcome of this analysis then determines what policy that regime will pursue based on what will allow it to maintain power.

I explore how these regimes make this cost-benefit analysis by examining the foreign policy orientations of states in the Balkans and using Montenegro, Serbia, and Bulgaria as case studies. I utilize novel interview data generated through discussions with European diplomats, Government officials, and other experts specializing in post-communist state affairs. This thesis employs process tracing and discourse analysis to understand how these actors complete their cost-benefit analysis in determining their foreign policy since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia.

This research contributes to the study of how small states determine their foreign policy orientations. It also demonstrates that Balkan states pursue whatever foreign policy will allow them to extract the most benefit from other international actors. The findings of this study might prove helpful to Western institutions that are seeking the cooperation of these small post-communist states.

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List of Abbreviations

CEE	Central and Eastern Europe
CFSP	Common Foreign and Security Policy
CSDP	Common Security and Defense Policy
CSO	Civil Society Organization
DPS	Democratic Party of Socialists of Montenegro
EU	European Union
EUCO	The European Council
FARA	Foreign Agents Registration Act
ICC	International Criminal Court
MP	Member of Parliament
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NIS	Naftna Industrija Srbije
NOVA	New Serbian Democracy Party
OSCE/ODIHR	Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights at the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe
PM	Prime Minister
QMV	Qualified Majority Voting
SNS	Serbian Progressive Party
TEU	Treaty on European Union
UN	United Nations

Chapter I: Introduction

Since the end of the Cold War, many former communist states in the Balkans have directed their foreign policies towards integration with Western institutions such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU). In the years following the Russian invasion and subsequent annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014, many of these states have altered or reaffirmed their foreign policy orientation towards the West and the institutions that represent it. States like Montenegro have taken a firm policy of continued integration with the West, although there are growing movements in Montenegro to limit or prevent the amount of integration these states achieve. Others, like Serbia, have acted as vacillating states that implement policies towards the West and Russia, depending on which policy is likely to serve the current political authorities and the state better at any given time.¹ Finally, there are states like Bulgaria, which are already members of these institutions but have a growing movement that supports limiting the amount of integration that the state has within these institutions. The actions of these states become all the more interesting when examining the domestic and international pressures and incentives from both pro-Western and pro-Russian actors.

These differing foreign policy orientations that post-communist states have adopted in response to the pressures and incentives in the years since the Russian invasion and subsequent annexation of Crimea have led to my research question: *Why do some post-communist states pursue Atlanticist and pro-European foreign policies?* The extant scholarship has examined this question in three important ways: the credibility of accession and integration offers from Western

¹ Ecaterina Locoman, “Explaining Variations in International Alignments: The Post-Communist States and the Choice Between East and West, 1991-2014” (PhD diss., Rutgers University, 2018) p.8. ; Ana Jovic-Lazic and Ivona Ladevac, “Serbia’s Approach to the EU and Russia – Implications for its Internal and Foreign Policy,” *Međunarodni problemi* LXXV, no.1 (2023): 39-64, <https://doi.org/10.2298/MEDJP2301039J>.

institutions,² the cost-benefit analysis of domestic political leaders in determining foreign policies,³ and the role that the radical right and left play in shaping the credibility of accession and integration negotiations.⁴ While the scholarship has approached the question using these factors in isolation, it has not examined the interconnection and role that all three of these factors concurrently play in determining a state's pursuit of Atlanticist or pro-European foreign policies, instead of a single factor being the driving force behind their foreign policy objectives. These studies have also been primarily directed at examining the foreign policies of the former Soviet Union.

This thesis aims to fill these gaps by examining the interconnection of these factors in shaping the cost-benefit analysis post-communist states use to determine their foreign policies. In addition to focusing on post-Soviet states, researchers have mainly examined the period following the collapse of the USSR to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This thesis examines the effects of an aggressive Russian state in shaping the foreign policies of post-communist states in the Balkans from the start of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine to the present.

Prior studies that have examined the role of domestic political elites tend to focus only on either domestic or international factors, not accounting for how both may concurrently influence the judgments of political elites when making determinations about foreign policy. These studies also do not examine these actors' role in shaping the credibility of accession and integration

² Locoman, "Explaining," p.7. ; Cristian Nitoiu, "The Influence of External Actors on Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Space," *Europe-Asia Studies* 70, no.5 (2018): 685-691, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2018.1480924>.

³ Locoman, "Explaining," p.8. ; Marko Kovacevic, "What Place for East and West? Discourses, Reality and Foreign and Security Policies of Post-Yugoslav Small States," *Third World Thematics: A TWQ Journal* 1, no.1 (2016): 110-131, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23802014.2016.1229133>.

⁴ Rosa Balfour and Stefan Lehne, "Charting the Radical Right's Influence on EU Foreign Policy," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 18, 2024. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/04/charting-the-radical-rights-influence-on-eu-foreign-policy?lang=en¢er=europe>.

negotiations with Western institutions and the subsequent effect it has on the states' cost-benefit analysis. In addition, this prior scholarship has been limited in its exploration of the role played by the radical right and left (including former communist parties) on Atlanticist and pro-European foreign policies.

This thesis argues that the outcome of the cost-benefit analysis for pursuing accession and integration into the EU and NATO increases when Russia acts aggressively in the region. A similar phenomenon can be seen with domestic institutions placing more pressure on political elites to join or further cooperate with these institutions. A notable example is seen in the actions of the radical right and left to influence the domestic political elite in the aftermath of actions taken by Russia. Finally, this thesis argues that these factors affect the cost-benefit analysis undertaken by domestic political elites in post-communist states and can explain why some of these states have decided to pursue Atlanticist or pro-European foreign policies.

The design of this thesis focuses on two case studies from the Balkan region. The case studies for this thesis include Montenegro and Serbia, with Bulgaria serving as a test case. They were selected because they provide a representative sample of states from across the Balkans, and each has pursued different policies since the Russian annexation of Crimea. The data generated for the study of these states comes from novel data generated through interviews with European diplomats, government officials, and other experts who specialize in post-communist state and European affairs. This data is then analyzed using discourse analysis and process tracing to help understand how the cost-benefit analysis taken by post-communist states regarding foreign policy has changed since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The use of these methods to analyze the novel data collected in the course of this study contributes to the

current understanding of how domestic and international issues shape the foreign policy outcomes of both post-communist and small states.

The data collected shows that through the completion of their cost-benefits analysis, Montenegro and Serbia have elected to follow different foreign policy outcomes. In the case of Montenegro, its political leaders have determined that the best foreign policy is to build ties with Western institutions like the EU. The outcome of the cost-benefit analysis was shaped by the renewed commitment and support Montenegro has received from the EU and the disruptive nature of Russian actions in its affairs. On the other hand, Serbia continues to follow a vacillatory foreign policy due to the combination of positive and negative factors that affect the benefits it can extract from both sides. This decision was informed by the EU's conditions on Serbia regarding the rule of law and its normalization of relations with Kosovo, balanced by the economic incentives the EU uses to entice Serbia to follow a pro-European foreign policy. The push for occasionally implementing a pro-Russian foreign policy from Serbia is driven by its support for the non-recognition of Kosovo in international institutions and the support that Russian actors provide the ruling political party in Serbia but hinders its ability to gain financial support from the EU. These different foreign policy orientations reflect the Montenegrin goal of maintaining its independence from unwanted foreign influence by joining the EU and the Serbian goal of extracting financial benefits from the EU while maintaining control of its perceived territorial control of Kosovo through relations with Russia.

This thesis will start with a literature review examining the existing theories about what makes states follow a pro-European foreign policy and what makes states choose a pro-Russian foreign policy. Then, the thesis details the causal factors it proposes and the methods used to analyze how they affect the cost-benefit analysis of the selected case studies. The following three

chapters examine the data from the case studies, each dedicated to one case study. The final chapter of the thesis explains how the data collected and the case studies' analysis are relevant to how the EU pursues the enlargement process and add to our understanding of how post-communist states determine their foreign policy orientation.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Atlanticism and Pro-European Foreign Policy:

As the European Union and NATO look to expand their membership, scholars have closely examined what makes states want to pursue closer ties with these institutions. Research has also examined what these institutions do to support states through the accession process and what demands are made of states that want to join these institutions. The primary factors found for why states decide to pursue Atlanticist or pro-European foreign policies have to do with the norms that states want to promote and the immediate goals that states have with their foreign policies. The central norms that emerged in the post-Cold War era were the desire to strengthen democratic institutions and values, regional security, and the desire to distance the relationship that former communist states had with Russia.

In the years immediately following the end of the Cold War, post-communist states adopted Atlanticist policies; any foreign policy aligned with US-led initiatives was considered a primary ideology behind their adoption.⁵ The United States undertook a serious effort to support its foreign policies as it held the belief that it had a moral duty to back the Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) states as they were making progress towards democratic reform or were seeking security commitments with the West.⁶ The role of the US in these early years was to reinforce CEE states as they sought to implement reforms that would help them evolve from authoritarian states under the control of communist institutions towards ones that espoused democratic values. During this initial period of transition towards democracy, the US focused on providing

⁵ Kristina Mikulova and Michal Simecka, "Norm Entrepreneurs and Atlanticist Foreign Policy in Central and Eastern Europe: The Missionary Zeal of Recent Converts," *Europe-Asia Studies* 65, no.6 (2013): 1192–1216, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2013.813681>.

⁶ Nitoiu, "The Influence," 685-691.

diplomatic training and statecraft for the CEE states desperately needed, especially as doing so ensured that these states would pursue Atlanticist foreign policies, thereby following the US's overall objectives.⁷ The initial role the US played in backing the democratic norms of CEE states would be gradually replaced by the EU.

The EU would take over the role of the US as the implementation of democratic institutions was a necessary change for any state to undergo were it to complete the accession process into the union. There is, however, disagreement as to what served as the primary driving force for this democratic reform in EU candidate states. Some scholars believe that CEE democratic reforms were primarily motivated by ex-dissidents who would have advanced these reforms regardless of the role of the EU, while others argue that these states only pursued reforms because of conditionality terms for EU accession.⁸ Both of the arguments for what was the driving force behind the democratic reforms do not consider the possibility that these factors are not inherently in opposition and may have been synergistic in motivating CEE states to pursue the reforms required by institutions like the EU and NATO.

Domestic actors who were considered dissidents under the more authoritarian regimes of the communist era pushed for democratic reform as a response to the Western influence they were exposed to during the Cold War, leading them to adopt Atlanticist policies. These former dissidents were believed to be the force around which post-communist states could introduce new national political, social, and moral values in the aftermath of communist rule. Often, during the process of establishing these shared beliefs, these domestic actors would adopt policies that reflect Atlanticist ideology as they were trained or otherwise influenced by the US, especially

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Mikulova and Simecka, "Norm Entrepreneurs," 1192–1216.; Ulrich Sedelmeier, "The European Union and Democratization in Central and Southeastern Europe Since 1989," in *Central and Southeastern Europe since 1989*, ed. Sabrina Ramet and Christine Hassenstab (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 539-562.

when examining the political actors that took office in the foreign ministries of these states. The lasting influence of the US on these former dissidents turned political elite explains why these states encouraged the expansion of NATO and the EU into Eastern Europe.⁹

The possibility of EU membership is another driving force behind the growth of democratic institutions in post-communist states. These states lacked sufficient national identities and structures to have an exclusively internally motivated push for democratization. The EU provides external motivation and support to CEE states for democratization reform efforts through the requirements it outlines in its conditions of accession. The proponents of the value of democratic reforms as a part of the conditions states must meet for accession point out flaws in the system, specifically that the conditions the EU desires in candidate states are poorly defined. Additionally, the drive from both the EU and the states that want to make these reforms suffer from a lack of consistency as both sides have to take an active role in advancing democratic reforms, which can turn a motive for reform into a barrier to accession.¹⁰ The lack of consistent commitment, support, and clarity from the EU concerning the requirements of accession can lead to states auctioning off aspects of their foreign policies in the short term so that they can receive some sort of tangible benefit for the policies that they enact.¹¹

The lack of support CEE states receive from the EU can be seen by examining the way that the EU uses funds in states that are participating in the accession process but have failed to meet the necessary democratic reforms outlined by the EU. Studies have shown that the majority of EU funding during the accession process, specifically in the Western Balkans, focuses on areas concerning humanitarian and socio-economic development instead of projects that would

⁹ Mikulova and Simecka, "Norm Entrepreneurs," 1192–1216.

¹⁰ Paula M. Pickering, "The Constraints on European Institutions' Conditionality in the Western Balkans," *Europe-Asia Studies* 63, no.10 (2011): 1939-1944, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2011.618709>.

¹¹ Nitoiu, "The Influence," 685-691.

foster long-term democratic reforms. The EU is ostensibly pursuing a developmental plan to create the conditions necessary for an internally motivated democratization process. Had the EU been seriously committed to the accession of these states, it could have taken a political strategy that would have prioritized the lasting democratic reforms that these states would need in order to join the EU. The developmental strategy that the EU has chosen over the political strategy might also be actively hindering the democratization process in these states as they have to direct their focus towards the socio-economic issues that the EU provided funding. The lack of funding and distraction that the funding that the EU does provide highlights the fact that the EU does little actually to support states throughout the accession process.¹²

The high standards that the EU seeks in states undergoing the accession process can serve as a double-edged sword, as they ensure the standards are met at the time of accession but lack a measure that ensures they are maintained afterward. Issues associated with having such high standards can be seen in the levels of democratization required by the EU for accession. While the standards effectively keep out states that fail to meet these requirements as intended, they fall short of ensuring that accepted states follow through with maintaining the changes once they join the EU. The conditions of accession to the EU might be effective in ensuring that democratic institutions are created, but no mechanism can change beliefs or attitudes toward the reforms that make these institutions possible. Without internal motivation for democratic reforms to allow accession into the EU, the state will likely revert to its pre-accession institutions. As part of the accession process, EU bureaucrats observe domestic institutions and apply external pressure on CEE states to move towards compliance. However, once the state becomes an EU member, there will be fewer monitoring and enforcement mechanisms for subsequent noncompliance with

¹² Sonja Grimm and Okka Lou Mathis, "Stability First, Development Second, Democracy Third: The European Union's Policy towards the Post-Conflict Western Balkans, 1991–2010," *Europe-Asia Studies* 67, no.6 (2015): 916-947, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2015.1055237>.

democratic norms. Therefore, the most important part of the accession process with regard to creating democratic norms in the applicant state might be found in the factors motivating states to complete the reforms outlined in the EU conditionality agreements, as there are no existing mechanisms that ensure compliance after a state has completed the accession process.¹³

Pro-Russian Foreign Policy:

Three primary factors push states to pursue pro-Russian foreign policies over a more European-oriented policy. The first factor can be called Pan-Slavism, which comprises multiple factors that can be exploited by actors wanting to pursue a pro-Russian foreign policy. Pan-Slavism utilizes identity politics to make states believe that seeking a foreign policy aligned with Russia is more beneficial than further integration with European institutions. Other factors are less reliant on identity politics and focus more on the role of pragmatic decision-making in international affairs. The next main factor is the need for states to have their energy needs met with the ready availability and often pre-existing Russian infrastructure that supports the export of oil and gas from Russia to these states, thereby providing the Russian state a means of shaping the policies of these states. A final factor leading states to pursue pro-Russian policies can be found in the pragmatic rules that dictate the behavior of small states interacting with regional hegemony seeking to extract what benefits they can from each other in international affairs.

Modern Pan-Slavism has its origins in the Russian experience of the collapse of the USSR. The advantages that Pan-Slavism utilized in the post-soviet space were its emotional appeal and the conceptual coherence it provided people during this transition period. The movement would continue beyond the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the USSR because

¹³ Geoffrey Pridham, "Status Quo Bias or Institutionalisation for Reversibility?: The EU's Political Conditionality, Post-Accession Tendencies and Democratic Consolidation in Slovakia," *Europe-Asia Studies* 60, no. 3 (2008): 423-454, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668130801948000>.

of the political advantages provided to actors using this narrative. The ideas that serve as the driving force behind the Pan-Slavism movement are religion, history, nationality, and territory.¹⁴

The roles of religion and history are vital to understanding the role that the modern movement hopes to replicate regarding the relationship the Balkan states have with Russia. The primary origin comes from the historical legacy of the Russian Empire going to war with the Ottoman Empire over the treatment of the Orthodox Slavic communities. It was the growth of Pan-Slavism in the Russian imperial bureaucracy that pushed the empire to take action in the Balkans against the Ottomans due to a sense of responsibility that Russia held for all Slavic people, especially those who were Orthodox Christians. The legacy of Russian involvement in liberating several Balkan states and fighting for the rights of Orthodox Christians is still emphasized by the modern Pan-Slavism movement, especially when they have been faced with conflict from an external actor. This sentiment was shown by Serbia during its conflict with NATO in the 1990s. The history and the continued cultural and religious bonds that connect Russia and the Balkans states have maintained Pan-Slavism as the driving force behind states choosing to support a pro-Russian foreign policy over an Atlanticist or pro-European policies that clearly lack these historical and cultural ties.¹⁵

Another factor that plays a significant role in states pursuing pro-Russian foreign policies is the energy connection that many states in Eastern Europe and the Balkans share with Russia. Before explaining the nature of its energy policies in the region, it is essential to understand that Russia views relations in this region as being a zero-sum game between itself and the West. Due to this perceived nature of relations in the region, Russia has used economic, political, and

¹⁴ Mikhail Suslov, "Geographical Metanarratives in Russia and the European East: Contemporary Pan-Slavism," *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 53, no.5 (2012): 575-595, <https://doi.org/10.2747/1539-7216.53.5.575>. ; Dimitar Bechev, *Rival Power: Russia in Southeast Europe* (Yale University Press, 2017), 3-5.

¹⁵ Suslov, "Geographical Metanarratives," 575-595. ; Bechev, *Rival Power*, 4-5.

military means to build support among actors in the region, especially through the use of its energy policies. This incentivization can come in either the form of a carrot or a stick.¹⁶ It is essential to understand why Russia should prefer one method over the other in its relations with the Balkans states.

The ways that Russia has used a “carrot” in its energy policies come across in two main ways. The first is offering financial deals to governments that have developed close energy ties, boosting domestic actors' political standing. The second is through the development of energy infrastructure with financial support from Russia. Russia also has two “sticks” that it has made use of to ensure that states adopt or maintain pro-Russian policies when Russia believes these states may be getting too close to the EU or other Western institutions. The first is to cut off or significantly reduce the amount of oil and gas Russia exports as a means to raise prices artificially. The second is through purchasing a controlling stake in national energy corporations, ensuring that Russia has a long-term role in the affairs of these states. All of these methods have been used in Serbia, a state that has a tendency to vacillate between having a pro-European and a pro-Russian foreign policy. Similar policies have been noted in the actions that Russia has taken with states throughout the region.¹⁷

In the case of Serbia, the Russian use of positive incentives can be seen when Serbia was assured that it would be allowed to participate in the South Stream gas pipeline project Russia organized throughout the region. This commitment allowed the regime of former President Tadic to hold on to power as they were able to simultaneously appear both pro-European and pro-Russian during a presidential election year, as President Tadic had previously agreed to let the EU act as a mediator for Kosovo while simultaneously partaking in the Russian South Stream

¹⁶ Aleksandar Fatic, “A Strategy Based on Doubt: Russia Courts Southeast Europe,” *Contemporary Security Policy* 31, no. 3 (2010): 441-464, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2010.521693>.

¹⁷ Bechev, *Rival Power*, 64-71.

project.¹⁸ Russia, spurred by the energy connection, also made inroads in the financial sector, with two Russian-owned banks acting as major lenders. These banks' loans have incentivized Serbia to limit its integration with European economic policies, especially as these banks become targeted by Western sanctions. The increase in Russian financial support, even when it falls short of what was promised, has had a significant effect on the opinions Serbians hold regarding Russia, with many believing that Russia is the biggest supporter of the Serbian state despite it actually giving less than the EU, USA, or Japan.¹⁹

Russia's use of energy policy as a coercive measure can be found when Serbia took actions that went against the interest of the Russian state. Russia has the most ready access and immediate control of the pricing and amount of oil and natural gas it exports to states. In Serbia, Russia utilized potent measures when it was unable to pay off its debts to Russian enterprises. Russia responded by cutting off the supply of natural gas to Serbia until it came to an agreement that allowed for the partial paying off of debts while simultaneously opening Serbia to Russian companies.²⁰ Another coercive practice Russia can utilize requires the acquisition of a controlling stake in the energy sector of a state in which it wants to maintain its influence. In the case of Serbia, this process happened when Russia gained a controlling stake in NIS, one of Serbia's largest energy companies, anticipating that Serbia would need Russia's support in denying international recognition of Kosovo. The control that Russia gained over the Serbian energy sector allowed them to continue to maintain political influence in the state even when the South Stream project was canceled.²¹

¹⁸ Bechev, *Rival Power*, 64-65.

¹⁹ Bechev, *Rival Power*, 66-67.

²⁰ Bechev, *Rival Power*, 57-58.

²¹ Bechev, *Rival Power*, 66-68.

The final factor that has played a role in shaping the foreign policy orientation of the Balkan states can be found in the rules that govern how small states act when dealing with other states in international affairs. Small states in international affairs pursue policies that allow them to extract the greatest benefit from larger states as these large states are seeking greater influence in the region. Traditionally, these small states have achieved this goal by following one of two main paths in international affairs: bandwagoning or balancing. In bandwagoning, states allow themselves to become subordinate actors under a typically hostile or aggressive large regional state. Balancing occurs when groups of small states join together to balance against the influence and power of the larger state. The main benefits these small states seek by pursuing these policies are to ensure the state's survival and as a means of increasing their relative power and influence in international affairs. Despite the tendency for small states to pursue bandwagoning or balancing, some states chose to vacillate their policies between different actors who are seeking regional influence as a means of maximizing their potential gains from both sides. When examining why states pick which of these policies to pursue, it is vital to look at how they perceive potential external threats, the behavior of internal actors, societal structures, and the input that they receive from the more significant actors in the region.²²

Significance and Literature Gap:

The significance of the thesis is that it identifies and addresses four gaps in the existing literature. The first gap is that most research on the Balkans tends to focus on a specific sub-region, whereas this thesis examines post-communist states across the region. Second, the extant literature tends to focus exclusively on domestic or external factors and does not effectively study the interactions these factors may have on states as they determine their foreign policy

²² Kovacevic, "What Place," 110-131. ; Jovic-Lazic and Ladevac, "Serbia's Approach," 39-64.

orientations. By studying the interaction of internal factors in conjunction with external factors, this thesis gives a more complete picture of the process states go through when determining foreign policy. The third gap is that when domestic factors are considered, the role of radical left and right parties or former communist parties and their effect on the cost-benefit analysis that these states undertake are not examined. The final gap in the literature is temporal. Most studies tend to focus on the period between the collapse of the USSR and Yugoslavia and 2022 when Russia annexed the Crimean peninsula. This thesis explains the factors and issues that shaped the foreign policy determinations that these states pursued in the period that followed the Russian annexation of Crimea to the end of 2024. By studying this period, this thesis aims to explain these states' actions after Russia adopted a more hostile foreign policy orientation compared to the previous era studied.

Chapter 3: Research Design

This thesis analyzes why some post-communist states pursue pro-European and Atlanticist foreign policies. In particular, this thesis focuses on the decision-making process these states undertook in determining their foreign policies in the years following the Russian re-instigation of hostilities and the subsequent full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The main theoretical argument this thesis advances is that domestic actors in post-communist states determine their foreign policy orientation based on a cost-benefit analysis of both domestic and international factors, such as which policy will allow the regime to maintain political power or influence, incentives offered by outside actors, and consequences that the state could face for pursuing one policy over another. When looking at the role of domestic factors, it is vital to consider the positions of the radical parties as they shape public discourse around issues related to foreign policy. Additionally, the politicization of history and neighborly relations play an essential role in the cost-benefit analysis the politicians undertake. As for international factors, the thesis examines the role of Russian influence in the region and the credibility of accession offered by Western institutions like the EU and NATO, as both play a significant role in determining their foreign policy orientation.

This thesis plans to support the above theoretical arguments about the foreign policy determinations of post-communist states through a qualitative comparative case study design. It will utilize novel data generated through interviews with European diplomats, government officials, and other experts specializing in post-communist states and European affairs. The thesis will also use process tracing and discourse analysis to gain a deeper understanding of how these domestic actors complete their cost-benefit analyses.

The case studies that this thesis examines are Montenegro and Serbia, with Bulgaria serving as a test case. This thesis chose these states based on the policies they have adopted in the years following the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. Montenegro was selected as it has been a state that has previously pursued closer ties to Western institutions in the aftermath of hostile actions taken by Russia. In the years following the initial Russian invasion and subsequent annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, Montenegro sought membership in NATO as a response to both the international policies that Russia was pursuing as well as an attempted Russian coup took place to prevent a pro-NATO government from coming to power. Despite the attempted interference, Montenegro joined NATO in 2017 but has dealt with domestic backlash from pro-Serbian and pro-Russian members of government and society, especially from supporters and members of the pro-Russian political alliance Democratic Front consisting of the New Serb Democracy party, Democratic People's Party, and the Movement for Changes party.²³ Now that Russia has launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Montenegro is once again turning to Western institutions for support. When a pro-Western coalition government came to power in Montenegro after the 2023 presidential election, it started to take significant steps towards deeper integration with the EU. Montenegro has taken steps towards reforming domestic legislation and the judiciary system to be more in line with the EU. These reforms have created

²³ Simeon Kerr, "Montenegro Ratifies NATO Membership in Historic Shift to Western Alliance," *The Guardian*, April 28, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/28/montenegro-ratifies-nato-membership-in-historic-shift-to-western-alliance>. ; Dusica Tomovic, "Montenegro MPs Back NATO Treaty Despite Protests," *Balkan Insight*, April 28, 2018, <https://balkaninsight.com/2017/04/28/montenegro-approves-nato-membership-amid-protest-04-28-2017-4/>; <https://balkaninsight.com/2017/04/28/montenegro-approves-nato-membership-amid-protest-04-28-2017-4/>; European Western Balkans, "Democratic Front (DF) in Montenegro dissolves after 11 years," last modified May 15, 2023, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2023/05/15/democratic-front-df-in-montenegro-dissolves-after-11-years/>.

the hope that Montenegro will close five more accession chapters by the end of 2024, bringing it significantly closer to full accession into the EU, which it hopes to achieve by 2028.²⁴

Serbia is a state that has been vacillating in its foreign policy orientation. Serbia has sincere economic desires to join Western institutions like the EU but faces domestic pressure to maintain its historical ties to Russia. Serbia has continued to allow visa-free access to Russian citizens since the start of the War in Ukraine, which displays its continued links to Russia despite it building closer ties to the EU. Serbian cooperation with the Russian military also signals its lack of commitment to other Western institutions like NATO, while it is building economic and political ties with the EU by maintaining its citizens' access to the Schengen zone and by joining the EU's sanctions on Belarus and Ukraine's former president Viktor Yanukovich. Serbia also vacillates between the West and Russia due to its ongoing issues with Kosovo, with further integration with the West being contingent on maintaining good relations between both states. Russia has maintained its influence in Serbia partly because of its efforts to limit the recognition of Kosovo as an independent state in the international arena. Although the use of Kosovo serves as an example of why Russia felt justified in its actions against Ukraine, it might ultimately weaken its influence in Belgrade. Serbia primarily experiences the cultural influence of Russia through the ideology of Pan-Slavism and the control of the media by pro-Russian sources, which have created an uphill battle in the country for support from Western institutions.²⁵

Bulgaria was specifically selected as it is a member of NATO and the EU and has maintained its foreign policy orientation towards cooperation with Western institutions despite its political instability and Russian influence in the country. As Bulgaria has had seven elections in

²⁴ Aleksandar Markovic, "Montenegro's Window of Opportunity," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, March 13, 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/europe/strategic-europe/2024/03/montenegros-window-of-opportunity?lang=en>.

²⁵ Andrew Morrison, "Hedging Its Bets: Serbia Between Russia and the EU," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, January 10, 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2023/01/hedging-its-bets-serbia-between-russia-and-the-eu?nter=europe>.

the last four years, parties that support Russia have increased in popularity as voters turned away from more traditional political parties.²⁶ In the aftermath of the most recent election, the Bulgarian Socialist Party and the Revival party have openly declared their support for the Kremlin through meetings that they held with Russian political figures like Dimitry Medvedev during a summit in Sochi meant to build ties between members of BRICS and European states.²⁷ Russia can exert its influence on Bulgaria through its control of the Trans-Balkan pipeline. Russia has also previously shown that Bulgaria is particularly vulnerable to being cut off from Russian gas as it has been reliant on Russian oil and gas to meet its energy needs.²⁸ The War in Ukraine has driven the Bulgarian people away from Russia and toward the West, as Bulgaria has also taken steps to limit its reliance on Russia for its energy needs.²⁹ Bulgaria has also used the up-tick in support of Western institutions to allow it to join the EU's Schengen zone.³⁰ These factors allow Bulgaria to serve as a test case study of why the EU is more concerned about candidate states meeting the pre-accession reforms suggested by the EU Commission.³¹

The selection of these particular states for the case study provides external validity to the study as it examines post-communist states across the Balkan region. The combination of looking at many types of post-communist states in the Balkan region allows the findings of the

²⁶ Marton Dunai, "Pro-Russia parties gain ground in Bulgaria ahead of elections," *Financial Times*, October 25, 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/c001b515-499a-4657-854c-f92bb224e088>.

²⁷ Krassen Nikolov, "Bulgaria's pro-Russian parties display increasingly open ties with the Kremlin," *Euractiv*, November 21, 2024, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/bulgarias-pro-russian-parties-display-increasingly-open-ties-with-the-kremlin/>.

²⁸ Bechev, *Rival Power*, 201-203.

²⁹ Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, "Is Bulgaria Drifting Back into Russia's Orbit?," Last modified June 9, 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2022/06/is-bulgaria-drifting-back-into-russias-orbit?lang=en>.

³⁰ Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs, *Bulgaria and Romania join the Schengen Area*, 2025. https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/news/bulgaria-and-romania-join-schengen-area-2025-01-03_en#:~:text=On%201%20January%2C%20Romania%20and,lifted%20since%2031%20March%202024.

³¹ European Council on Foreign Relations, "Hanging in the Balance: How to Save Bulgaria's Foreign Policy from Political Turmoil," Last modified December 12, 2022, <https://ecfr.eu/article/hanging-in-the-balance-how-to-save-bulgarias-foreign-policy-from-political-turmoil/>.

thesis to apply to a broader spectrum of post-communist states and how they determine their foreign policy orientation. The selection of these states also allows for the comparison of states that are both already members of Western institutions and those that publicly claim to be pursuing a policy of integration or accession to these organizations. The comparative nature of the thesis of states across the Balkan region gives the thesis high levels of internal validity because it reduces the effects of other confounding variables.

The data for the thesis is collected through the combination of three methods. The first method generates novel data through interviews with European diplomats, government officials, and other experts specializing in post-communist affairs or European affairs.³² There was difficulty obtaining interviews with members of multiple political parties in the case study states, as some parliaments were not in session or experiencing active boycotts by parties of parliamentary proceedings, not allowing for interviews to be conducted. There were also issues with contacting members of civil society as many academic institutions were on break when the interviews were being conducted. The thesis collects data from primary sources produced by the case study governments or relevant international organizations, like the European Union, as all the states in the case study are limited in the foreign policies by this institution as they are either member states or actively seeking to join the EU. Official statements from politicians are examined for discourse analysis to determine the credibility of negotiations and commitments made by the case study states. These sources provide limitations to the thesis, as gaining access to governmental documents might limit the data that the thesis could study. Transparency might also be a problem as interviewees might have altered their answers to be more in line with what they believed their respective government or institution wanted them to say or answered in a way that hid their true beliefs. Transparency might also be an issue when evaluating documents from

³² A full list of those interviewed is provided in Appendix B with a list of question topics listed in Appendix A

these states and institutions, as they could have been written in a manner that hides the true intentions of the authors concerning policy decisions. This thesis aims to limit the influence of these limitations by comparing the data collected from one state or institution with the others to generate a clearer picture of the decision-making process these states and institutions undergo.

The collected data is analyzed using discourse analysis in conjunction with process tracing. The discourse analysis explains how domestic actors in the case study states conduct a cost-benefit analysis of both international and domestic factors when determining the foreign policy orientation of their state, as well as track any changes in the level of commitment or credibility that the states display towards pursuing the policies that their states have publicly committed to following. Process tracing provides further insight into how the cost-benefit analysis is used to determine foreign policy changes over time based on changing international and domestic factors in the period between the start of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the end of 2024. The limitation of using these analytical methods is that the results of the thesis are limited in applicability to other regions or post-communist states as all the data for the thesis comes from states exclusively in the Balkan region, although the results should apply to other post-communist states in the region. The other limitation of the thesis is that it examines past and ongoing events in international affairs and might be limited in its predictive power of how these states will act in the future. However, gaining a deeper understanding of how these states come to determine their foreign policy orientation is critical for knowing what kind of role domestic and international issues play in shaping the foreign policy outcomes of both post-communist and small states.

Chapter 4: Montenegro

Since its independence from Serbia in 2006, accession to both NATO and the European Union has been a vital goal for Montenegro.³³ In this chapter, this thesis aims to explain what role domestic and international factors played in shaping the cost-benefit analysis undertaken by political leaders as they determine their foreign policies since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In the case of Montenegro, its foreign policy has consistently been directed towards accession and closer integration with the European Union despite the efforts of Russian-backed actors to hinder this process. While Russia has taken steps to limit the ability of states like Montenegro to effectively pursue integration into the EU, the EU has taken measures to improve and support candidate states as they advance in the accession process in the years since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Montenegro was unable to make significant progress along the road of accession to the EU. Montenegro's lack of progress was due to the EU entering a standstill after Croatia joined in 2013, as it realized that the states joining the EU were not fully ready and that the EU was not prepared to accept new members.³⁴ The idea that the EU was not ready for further enlargement was explicitly stated by Jean Claude Juncker soon after he won his bid to become the President of the European Commission in 2014. In a statement to the European Parliament, Juncker explained that the EU needed a "break from enlargement" and that "no further enlargement would take place over the next five years."³⁵ These declarations seem to have been driven by popular opinion in the EU as citizens were suffering from enlargement

³³ Ivan Vukovic (Chairperson of European Integration Committee in Montenegrin Parliament) in discussion with the author, January 29, 2025.

³⁴ Vukovic, interview.

³⁵ Frank Schimmelfennig, "Juncker's enlargement standstill threatens the EU's credibility," *Friends of Europe*, November 12, 2015, <https://www.friendsofeurope.org/insights/junckers-enlargement-standstill-threatens-the-eus-credibility/>.

fatigue and helped to restart old debates about the EU's ability to support the accession process.³⁶ They also helped undermine the EU enlargement process as it removed the meritorious aspects of the accession process and shifted the bulk of the demands of the accession process onto the candidate state while signaling that the EU would provide minimal support. Juncker reinforced this sentiment in 2017 when he again stated that during his mandate, there will be no further enlargement of the EU as no state is ready yet but that the Western Balkans need to maintain credibility in the accession process and that the European Union needs to remain a united democratic Union built on shared values like the rule of law, justice, and fundamental rights which should all be prioritized by candidate states to the EU.³⁷

The sentiment expressed by President Juncker towards the accession process took a dramatic shift following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Ivan Vukovic, the chairperson of the Committee on European Integration in the Parliament of Montenegro, noted that "this kind of sluggish pace of the integration process started changing with the Russian aggression on Ukraine. Because our EU partners finally understood that the European integration process is not only a technical process, it's not bureaucratic process, it's a political and geopolitical process."³⁸ This quote shows that candidate states like Montenegro have come to the understanding that the accession process into the EU is no longer simply a process of merit but that the geopolitical reality of both the candidate state and the EU has to be considered. This quote also explains that the new geopolitical situation created by Russia in Eastern Europe has made the EU start to

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Noemi Arcidiacono, Juncker: EU to maintain credible enlargement perspective for the Western Balkans," *European Western Balkans*, September 13, 2017, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2017/09/13/juncker-eu-maintain-credible-enlargement-perspective-western-balkans/>.

³⁸ Vukovic, interview.

seriously re-examine the enlargement process and the needs of the states going through this process.

Multiple new initiatives undertaken by the EU show its newfound commitment to enlargement since the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Two examples are the Report of the Franco-German Working Group on EU Institutional Reform³⁹ and the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans.⁴⁰ The common thread through these documents is the need for reform on behalf of the candidate states and within the EU while maintaining a strong focus on developing democratic institutions and the rule of law.

The purpose of the Franco-German Working Group on EU Institutional Reform was to find ways to increase the EU's ability to act, prepare the EU for enlargement, and strengthen the rule of law and the democratic legitimacy of the EU.⁴¹ One of the most important areas in which the working group sought to improve the EU was in terms of the rule of law. The working group recognizes the importance of this value as a core founding principle of the EU that is essential in building trust and mutual respect among members of the Union and between the Union and candidate states.⁴²

The recommendations that the working group generated around the rule of law revolve around two main areas: budgetary conditionality and refinement of Article 7 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) procedure. The budgetary conditionality reforms revolved around imposing sanctions on members that violate EU norms around the rule of law or other core values of the EU, as outlined in Article 2 TEU. The more important side of the reforms around

³⁹ Group of Twelve, *Report of the Franco-German Working Group on EU Institutional Reform: Sailing on High Seas: Reforming and Enlarging the EU for the 21st Century*, September 18, 2023.

⁴⁰ European Commission, *New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans*, COM (2023) 691 final (Brussels: European Commission, 2023), https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/8f5dbe63-e951-4180-9c32-298cae022d03_en.

⁴¹ Group of Twelve, *Report of the Franco-German*, 5.

⁴² Ibid.

the rule of law that the working group made is its recommendation concerning reforming Article 7 of the TEU procedure. The main suggestion that the working group proposed was to replace the unanimity minus one principle with a majority of four-fifths at The European Council (EUCO).⁴³

The other key areas the working group sought to reform were the institutions and processes associated with the enlargement process. The institutional reforms the working group advanced center around making the EU ready to admit new members. The two main institutions that require reform before the enlargement of the EU can be reprioritized are the European Parliament and The Council of the EU. The reforms suggested for the European Parliament entail formally limiting the size of the Parliament to its current size and adopting a formula to determine the distribution of seats among member states. The Council of Europe should change the trio format for the presidency to being a quintet that each lasts for half of an institutional cycle. The other institutional reform to the Council of the EU that the working group suggested was the implementation of Qualified Majority Voting (QMV) for all policy decisions, removing the previous policy of unanimity for all decisions. The only caveat that the working group makes to this change in decision-making is for policies that concern foreign, security, and defense issues where ordinary legislative procedures would apply.⁴⁴

The renewed focus on the rule of law within the EU is vital, especially in the case of Montenegro. The principle of the rule of law has played an essential role in Montenegro's accession process, and having reports like the Franco-German Working Group on EU Institutional Reform helps to signal to candidate states that the reforms they are making are not just some hoop that they must jump through before being allowed to join the EU. Rather, the

⁴³ Group of Twelve, *Report of the Franco-German*, 8.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

reforms that they are undergoing will be supported by the EU and are expected to advance beyond the accession process. The reforms that the working group also suggests for the decision-making process in the Council of the EU would also serve to make the claims that the accession process is based on merit, the meeting of certain criteria, and the geopolitical needs of the entire EU and not on the resolution of bilateral issues more credible. The newfound credibility of the Council of the EU would stem from the fact that no single member of the EU would have the ability to completely halt the accession process of a candidate state for bilateral issues that are unrelated to the criteria that the EU has outlined in the chapters and clusters that candidate states have to complete before becoming full members of the EU.

The reforms concerning the rule of law that the working group has proposed in the EU are reflected by the ongoing reforms Montenegro has pursued in the years following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In every report from the European Commission on Montenegro's progress in the accession process between 2021 and 2023, the issues of rule of law and the development of democratic institutions have played a vital role in determining the country's ability to advance in other aspects of the accession process.

In each of these reports, there were statements such as: “Progress towards meeting the interim benchmarks set in the rule of law Chapters 23 and 24 is key to achieving further progress in the negotiations overall, as no further chapters will be provisionally closed before this milestone is reached.”⁴⁵ These statements would also include references to the Intergovernmental Conference held on June 22, 2021 where Montenegro came to an agreement about the methodology that it would use for enacting rule of law reforms.⁴⁶ The consistent inclusion and

⁴⁵ European Commission, Montenegro Report 2022, SWD (2022) 335 final (Brussels: European Commission, 2022), 3, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/927a32f7-609f-401a-970e-831eee3abd33_en.

⁴⁶ European Commission, Montenegro Report 2023, SWD (2023) 694 final (Brussels: European Commission, 2023), 3, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/e09b27af-427a-440b-a47a-ed5254aec169_en.

prominence of these remarks in the reports of the EU Commission show that all other aspects of the accession process play a lesser role in the accession process when compared to the rule of law and the development of democratic institutions.

The reforms undertaken during the period between 2021 and 2024 have proved fruitful for Montenegro, as the EU Commission describes in their 2024 report:

On 26 June 2024, the 16th meeting of the Accession Conference with Montenegro confirmed that Montenegro overall met the interim benchmarks for chapters 23 and 24 and adopted the closing benchmarks for these chapters. This opens a new phase in the accession negotiations, with the possibility to proceed with provisionally closing further chapters.⁴⁷

This excerpt shows that Montenegro has been able to advance and remain committed to making serious and challenging reforms so that it can continue to move toward EU standards and advance along the accession path, especially in areas concerning the integrity of the Parliament, judicial system, and the role of civil society. The EU's focus has been placed on reforms in these specific aspects of the rule of law, and the development of democratic institutions has made them targets for Russian interference.

In the Parliament, Montenegro was facing a crippling standstill for many years due to the inability of political parties to collaborate effectively. The Commission's report from 2022 detailed that the functioning of Parliament was severely hampered by the "deep polarisation and mistrust between and within political coalitions," which led to there being two different ruling governments during the reporting period of the report. Even during the period that these governments were in power, their ability to act was severely limited due to most Members of

⁴⁷ European Commission, *Montenegro Report 2024*, SWD (2024) 694 final (Brussels: European Commission, 2024), 3, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/a41cf419-5473-4659-a3f3-af4bc8ed243b_en.

Parliament (MPs) boycotting the sessions of Parliament to ensure that new legislation could not be passed.⁴⁸ After suffering two successive votes of no confidence, one of which was triggered by the Fundamental Agreement with the Serbian Orthodox Church, the government entered into caretaker status.⁴⁹

The dysfunction of the Parliament continued into the 2023 report from the Commission. Since the establishment of the caretaker government in 2022, the Montenegrin Parliament has been unable to form the necessary ruling majority to appoint a new Prime Minister (PM) and government. The Parliament attempted to continue to pass legislation and act as if it were not a caretaker government even after the Parliament's official dissolution in March of 2023. The functioning of this Parliament was also limited due to political parties like the Democratic Party of Socialists of Montenegro (DPS) and its partners boycotting sessions. When a new Parliament was elected and a majority was formed, it sought to enact unconstitutional reforms that would limit the power of the President to nominate a PM-designate. Only after the intervention of the Constitutional Court were the laws repealed. After new elections in June 2023 was a new Parliament able to take power and confirm the mandates of MPS and place a new Parliament speaker into power.⁵⁰

The establishment of an elected and working Parliament during the 2023 reporting period laid the foundation for the reforms made during the 2024 reporting period that allowed Montenegro to reach the benchmarks set by the EU that would enable it to advance further along the path of accession. The Parliament established a clear majority that filled key government and judiciary positions that previous Parliaments could not fulfill. It also passed EU-related legislation in key areas related to the judiciary, anti-corruption, and the media. The Parliament

⁴⁸ European Commission, *Montenegro Report 2022*, 11.

⁴⁹ European Commission, *Montenegro Report 2022*, 12.

⁵⁰ European Commission, *Montenegro Report 2023*, 13.

also endorsed a United Nations (UN) resolution on the Srebrenica genocide in May 2024, which resulted in part of the ruling majority siding with the opposition in supporting a resolution on genocide in the concentration camps in Jasenovac, Dachau, and Mauthausen generating tension with Croatia. The Parliament also implemented reforms that would positively support the accession process, including the establishment of a Chief Negotiator in the Ministry of European Affairs. Working groups for each chapter and lead negotiators for each cluster were also formed. Significantly, the Parliament also passed legislation where it consulted with the appropriate EU institutions and adopted a program that would guide its accession-related policies until 2027.⁵¹

The developments that Montenegro was able to make during these years regarding the functioning of its Parliament highlight the desire of the country for accession. The country was able to overcome the dysfunction that plagued it in 2022 due to intense polarization and mistrust among the political parties to a state that was able to form a working government with a ruling coalition that has been able to enact pro-EU policies with the support of opposition parties. MP Vukovic explained in 2024:

*Despite political divisions in Montenegro and sometimes very intense political debate, we had managed throughout this period to remain constructive, to work together, irrespective of the parties that we represent.*⁵²

This quote shows that while there does still remain political contention among the parties in the Parliament, they have been able to reform towards EU standards and pursue a common policy regarding issues related to the EU and the accession process, as they all see the benefits that joining the EU would bring to the Montenegrins that they represent.

⁵¹ European Commission, *Montenegro Report 2024*, 23.

⁵² Vukovic, interview.

Montenegro has also made progress in reforming its judiciary to be in line with EU standards, despite difficulties in filling certain appointments due to issues within the Parliament. In 2022, the Commission reported that Montenegro's judiciary was moderately prepared for accession and that there was limited progress made on the reforms recommended by the Commission during the reporting period for that year. The report details that many of the judicial reforms that were supposed to be implemented during the reporting period were stalled because of several empty judicial appointments, including in the Constitutional Court. There were also concerns about the accountability and independence of the courts.⁵³ The main recommendations of the commission that Montenegro should have implemented between 2022 and 2023 were to enact legislation that would allow for the merit-based appointment of judges with the ability to act independently and impartially. Montenegro was also recommended to implement the recommendations of the Venice Commission to implement relevant constitutional reforms that would prevent the undoing of the progress that it had already made in its judicial reforms. The final recommendations for the Commission in its 2022 report were that the courts should aim to improve the performance of the courts without compromising its accountability and integrity.⁵⁴

These issues remained prevalent in the Commission's 2023 report, which stated, "No progress was achieved in justice reform, the most challenging area of the rule of law to date."⁵⁵ Much of the lack of progress achieved in the area of judicial reforms is a reflection of the political turmoil that the country was facing during the 2023 reporting period, as reflected in the discussion about the reforms of the Parliament. The main takeaway that the report had for this period was that the judicial system was facing an institutional crisis compounded by issues of corruption and vacancies that had been filled beyond the mandate of the constitution or other

⁵³ European Commission, *Montenegro Report 2022*, 5.

⁵⁴ European Commission, *Montenegro Report 2022*, 19-20.

⁵⁵ European Commission, *Montenegro Report 2023*, 5.

relevant legislation. The Constitutional Court also faced issues with multiple vacancies for much of the reporting period. The Commission suggested that Montenegro pursue stringent and unambiguous criminal justice responses to corruption cases that are limiting its ability to advance on serious judicial reforms. Also, the executive and judiciary need to guarantee the implementation of reforms and fill empty judgeships while maintaining appropriate dialogue with the Parliament. The Commission also recommended that Montenegro continue making the reforms previously mentioned in previous reports.⁵⁶

During the 2024 reporting period, the Commission found that Montenegro made good progress in terms of judicial reform and had met the interim benchmarks for Chapter 23, which allowed for the setting of closing benchmarks. The report highlights the enactment of a new strategic framework for the judicial system and the implementation of amendments to several judicial institutions in an effort to bring them into line with the EU acquis and standards. The Parliament was also able to appoint judges and prosecutors to key vacancies while allowing for the advancement of a more transparent and meritorious process for filling these judicial appointments. Given the progress that Montenegro was able to make on the past recommendations of the Commission, new recommendations for reforms were listed in the 2024 report. The main recommendations for judicial reforms were the appointment of a permanent President of the Supreme Court and other high-level judicial positions, continuing the alignment of the constitution and appropriate legislation on Judicial behavior to EU standards, and implementing the plan on the rationalization of the court network and digitalization of the judiciary.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ European Commission, *Montenegro Report 2023*, 21-22.

⁵⁷ European Commission, *Montenegro Report 2024*, 5-6.

The developments Montenegro has achieved between the reporting periods of the 2023 and 2024 reports demonstrate that it is exceptionally committed to making difficult reforms to its judiciary system. It has shown that it is willing to enact the necessary constitutional and legislative reforms that the EU demands of it. The judiciary reforms also highlight the government's interconnectedness as many of the issues and reforms that revolve around the judiciary require either input or legislation to be passed by the Parliament, thus demonstrating the importance of having a functioning Parliament unified around the ideals of accession to the EU. This interconnectedness, while necessary, also opens the judiciary system to manipulation by outside actors, as many of the high-level appointments require the input of Parliament. The meeting of the interim benchmarks stands as a strong signal of the progress that can be made when the levers of government are functioning properly and the country can rally behind the common cause of EU accession.

Finally, concerning the role of Civil Society Organizations (CSO), the 2022 and 2023 reports find that the role of CSOs is recognized and promoted but that more could be done to ensure the legal protections provided to these actors.⁵⁸ The 2022 report also explains that “an empowered civil society is a crucial component of any democratic system and should be recognized and treated as such by state institutions.”⁵⁹ This quote highlights the EU's value of having a well-developed and supported civil society that can serve as a consultative partner in the accession process. The report also encourages the Montenegrin government to improve its efforts further and create transparency between its institutions and CSOs. The Commission also explains that the role and regulations around volunteers need to be clearly defined so that CSOs have access to the manpower that they need to function properly. The report also commends the

⁵⁸ European Commission, *Montenegro Report 2022*, 14. ; European Commission, *Montenegro Report 2023*, 16.

⁵⁹ European Commission, *Montenegro Report 2022*, 14.

Montenegrin government for its inclusion of civil society on the political level, especially in areas related to EU accession, but does call for more ministries to work with CSOs as they draft legislation.⁶⁰

The 2023 report continues to expand on areas where the Montenegrin government could improve its relationship with civil society. The primary recommendations of the Commission revolved around the communication between the government and civil society as well as the funding of CSOs. The communication aspect of the report revolved around the use of critical language by politicians, including those at the highest levels, against CSOs. The implementation of legislation would ensure the support of volunteers and access to government data for civil society so that they can effectively conduct their work. Regarding funding, the report suggests that aspects of tax law should be reformed to further encourage philanthropy towards various CSOs. The other aspect of funding that the report addresses is the allocation of government grants. More ministries need to fulfill their obligations to consult with CSOs so that both the input of civil society is included and the funds allocated to these organizations can be properly dispersed. There is also a need for clarity to be implemented with the selection process of CSOs that receive government funding, as the Commission found cases of CSOs receiving funding to conduct research in areas that they had no experience.⁶¹

The 2024 report from the Commission shows that Montenegro has made progress with the treatment and funding of CSOs but still needs serious reform. Montenegro has successfully implemented the legal frameworks that allow for CSOs to operate freely.⁶² The inclusion of civil society in policy making has been formalized, but in some aspects, it remains symbolic. In an effort to address this issue the government has adopted a strategy for cooperation between state

⁶⁰ European Commission, *Montenegro Report 2022*, 14-15.

⁶¹ European Commission, *Montenegro Report 2023*, 16-17.

⁶² European Commission, *Montenegro Report 2024*, 4.

institutions and non-governmental Organizations (NGO) but requires further measures to ensure it is being implemented in the most effective manner. The government also needs to improve its dialogue with CSOs as some ministries continue to avoid public consultations on legislation. In terms of funding, the report found that the allocation of government grants had been improved, and the transparency of the process increased.⁶³

While the commission has been constantly critical of some ministries and other government institutions for not having consistent meetings with members of civil society, the Parliament's Committee on European Integration has been constantly meeting and working with them. The chairperson, Ivan Vukovic, explains that CSOs provide “a very big reservoir of ideas, knowledge, and expertise that we have been trying to use, and my idea, ..., has been to make our work as inclusive as possible, to reach out to these organizations to attend their conferences, to have them over so that we discuss the most important issues in this context.”⁶⁴ This quote helps to show that when the issues involve working towards European accession, the government is more than willing to reach out and collaborate with members of CSOs so that it can implement the best reforms and policies for advancement in the accession process. Once again, the role of CSOs in supporting and working with the Montenegrin state to prepare it to join the EU has made it a target of Russian influence.

The progress and emphasis that both Montenegro and the EU have placed on reforms in the Parliament, judiciary, and civil society have made them all targets for Russian interference as it attempts to prevent Montenegro from joining the EU. Russian interference comes through multiple angles: it maintains influence through pro-Serbian political parties, the generation of

⁶³ European Commission, *Montenegro Report 2024*, 24.

⁶⁴ Vukovic, interview.

bilateral tensions with members of the EU, unduly influencing the judiciary, and attempting to intimidate members of civil society through the adoption of a foreign agent's law.

The Russian influence in the Montenegrin Parliament stems from its control over the Serbian nationalist parties and the tensions that these parties generate with the more pro-European parties. The case of the current Speaker of the Montenegrin Parliament is a key example of the interference with Montenegro's accession process Russia has thanks to these political parties. The speaker of Parliament, Andrija Mandic, a member of the New Serbian Democracy party (NOVA) and former leader of the Democratic Front, a pro-Russian coalition, was the target of a no-confidence vote in early 2024. The pro-EU DPS party led the vote as they believed the speaker was pursuing Serbian nationalist and anti-European interests by meeting with the President of the Republic of Srpska, Milorad Dodik.⁶⁵ The meeting with the President of the Republic of Srpska was problematic as the republic maintains close ties to the Russian government, even after its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and has acted as a disruptive actor in the region by actively working to prevent Bosnia and Herzegovina from participating in sanctions and other acts against Russia. The meeting also faced pushback from Montenegrins, as on Dodik's arrival at the parliament building, protests were being made against Dodik and Mandic as Russian envoys. Despite this response, Mandic declared that it was an honor to meet with Dodik and that their parties were sisters.⁶⁶ This rhetoric and the actions of Mandic serve to highlight the influence that Russia has within political parties like NOVA, while the protests against his actions demonstrate that the Montenegrin people do not agree with these actions.

⁶⁵ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, "Montenegro Speaker Mandic Survives No-Confidence Vote, Dodik Claims Victory," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, March 29, 2025, <https://www.rferl.org/a/montenegro-mandic-speaker-survives-no-confidence-dodik/32857507.html>.

⁶⁶ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, "Protesters Boo Putin Envoy Dodik as Montenegro Pro-Russian Party Welcomes Him," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, March 27, 2025, <https://www.rferl.org/a/protesters-boo-putin-envoy-dodik-as-montenegro-pro-russian-party-welcomes-him/32837738.html>.

These pro-Russian/Serbian parties have also acted on Russia's behalf by unnecessarily generating bilateral tensions with Montenegro and members of the European Union, specifically Croatia. The issues between Croatia and Montenegro started to flare up when, in June 2024, the ruling coalition, one formed of primarily pro-Russian parties, including NOVA, passed a resolution on the actions of Croatia at Jasenovac during WWII. Mandic proposed the resolution, only a few days after Montenegro had passed the interim benchmarks for chapters 23 and 24 of the accession process, as a response to a UN resolution around Serbian actions in Srebrenica in the 1990s.⁶⁷

The timing and purpose of this resolution are suspicious; as MP Vukovic points out, "We knew that Croats would take it as a provocation because it came out of the blue. It's simply not a political issue nowadays... they [Croatia] understood it as an attempt of the ruling coalition to damage bilateral relations with this country."⁶⁸ This quote highlights the fact that the purpose of the legislation was only superficially about the historical legacy of the Jasenovac camp and more about creating political tensions between Montenegro and an EU member state as an attempt to limit its future ability to advance in the accession process. There were hopes that Croatia would see the actions of actors like Mandic as being purely bait for limiting Montenegro's ability for accession, but they proved futile when Croatia set a list of conditions for Montenegro's accession to the EU. Croatia claims that it is still supportive of Montenegro accession but requires action from Montenegro on issues of maritime borders, post-Yugoslav property, and minority rights, and notably the settling of historical issues. These conditions only serve to support the Russian

⁶⁷ Sofija Popovic, "Blocking Montenegro's EU Accession Over Jasenovac Resolution by Croatia Would Be Destructive," *European Western Balkans*, July 9, 2024, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2024/07/09/blocking-montenegros-eu-accession-over-jasenovac-resolution-by-croatia-would-be-destructive/>.

⁶⁸ Vukovic, interview.

goal of halting Montenegro from joining the EU and undermining the credibility of EU membership prospects due to bilateral issues.⁶⁹

Through pro-Russian political parties, Russia has also been able to limit the reforms Montenegro needs to make to its judiciary if it is to continue implementing the recommendation of the EU Commission. Once again, due to the actions of the Speaker of the Parliament and other representatives of his party, the constitutional committee of the Parliament has attempted to enforce the unconstitutional forced retirement of Judge Dragana Djuronovic, who served on the Constitutional Court. The committee claimed that the judge met the age requirement for retirement under the Law on Pension and Disability Insurance, but the Constitution mandates that the Constitutional Court must ascertain the reasons for the removal of a judge during its sessions. The committee's attempt to force Judge Djuronovic into retirement under the authority of the Law on Pension and Disability Insurance violated the procedures of the Constitution.⁷⁰

This action, headed by the constitutional committee, has led the opposition parties to take steps to limit the ability of Parliament to function. Notably preventing the passing of the 2025 budget as MPs boycotted the session of Parliament until their demands for the annulment of Judge Djuranovic's retirement and an agreement to not amend the Constitution in the areas of identity issues and Montenegrin Citizenship, policies previously pushed for by pro-Russian MPs. The EU attempted to act as an intermediary or to have the Venice Commission act as an advisory body, but little progress was made as opposition parties like DPS stated that there was no room for compromise when the Constitution was being violated.⁷¹ MP Vukovic, the vice president of

⁶⁹ Paulina Wankiewicz, "Croatia Sets Conditions for Montenegro's Accession to the EU," *Centre for Eastern Studies*, December 13, 2024,

<https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2024-12-13/croatia-sets-conditions-montenegros-accession-to-eu>.

⁷⁰ Human Rights Action (HRA), "N3-T1: Unconstitutional Operation of the Constitutional Court," *Human Rights Action*, January 12, 2025,

<https://www.hraction.org/2025/01/12/n3-t1-unconstitutional-operation-of-the-constitutional-court/?lang=en>.

⁷¹ Politiko, "Chaos in the Montenegrin Parliament: Opposition Blocks the Session and PEN," *Politiko*, January 12, 2025,

the DPS party, stated that the idea behind the Speaker of Parliament's and his party's actions was “to put the Constitutional Court of Montenegro under their political influence. And then we [DPS] strongly resisted this decision, and we said that we will not go back into the plenary hall of the parliament as long as this decision is not taken back, because we want to defend the constitution. We want to defend democracy in this country.”⁷² This quote helps to show that the actions of the opposition were motivated by a desire to protect the Constitution of Montenegro and the democratic institutions that it has worked to develop. It also highlights the concern that the opposition that the motive for the removal of Judge Djuranovic was motivated by the desire of pro-Russian parties to further influence the state by exerting undue influence in the Constitutional Court. If the pro-Russian parties are able to exert their influence on the courts successfully, it would significantly affect the country's ability to meet EU standards for an independent and meritoriously selected judiciary.

These pro-Russian parties have also been seeking to curb the influence that civil society can play in politics by trying to pass a foreign agents law similar to those passed in Russia and Georgia. The purpose of the legislation would be to make a legal framework that severely restricts or makes it impossible for CSOs to properly operate in their role as advisors to public policy. Groups like the Center for Democratic Transition have condemned the law, noting that it would only serve to undermine the democratic process in Montenegro and further hinder Montenegro's ability to advance in the accession process. The political group that has advocated for the passing of the foreign agents law claims that it will serve a similar purpose to laws like the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) in the US, but the wording of the proposed legislation is more in line with the legislation that Russia has supported in the region. The

<https://politiko.al/english/rajoni/kaos-ne-kuvendin-e-malit-te-zi-opozita-bllokun-seancen-e-kuvendit-dhe-pen-i523753>.

⁷² Vukovic, interview.

comparison to FARA serves only to lend legitimacy to a piece of legislation that would only serve to limit the ability of CSOs to operate and support the democratic institutions of Montenegro.⁷³

While the pro-Russian parties that currently form the majority in the Parliament are aiming to pass legislation that would limit the ability of CSOs to act, the opposition seeks to work with and support the activities of these organizations. Parties like DPS recognize that CSOs have an important role to play in the areas of the rule of law and reforms for state administration demanded by the EU. The party's Vice President MP Vukovic explained that:

*They play a crucial role in making sure that the state is performing its duties in accordance with the Constitution and the law that the public officials have political responsibilities for what they do. So they're pretty much very important watchdogs in the overall democratic process.*⁷⁴

This quote highlights why the pro-Russian parties want to limit the ability of CSOs to act on the domestic front; they help serve as watchdogs and defenders of democracy. This role played by CSOs threatens these parties as they seek to impose unpopular laws and policies that serve to restrict Montenegro's ability to join the EU, which is a policy that enjoys widespread support, with 79% of the population supporting Montenegro's bid to join the EU.⁷⁵ The popular support that Montenegrins still hold for accession to the EU shows that despite the actions of pro-Russian actors, Montenegro will continue to work towards meeting the standards set by the

⁷³ Global Voices, "Montenegrin Civil Society Condemns Initiative for Russia-Style Foreign Agents Law," *Global Voices*, November 16, 2024, <https://globalvoices.org/2024/11/16/montenegrin-civil-society-condemns-initiative-for-russia-style-foreign-agents-law/>.

⁷⁴ Vukovic, interview.

⁷⁵ European Western Balkans, "IRI Poll: Most Western Balkan Countries Support EU Membership, but Many Citizens Are Sceptical of EU's Seriousness," *European Western Balkans*, May 16, 2024, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2024/05/16/iri-poll-most-western-balkan-countries-support-eu-membership-but-many-citizens-are-sceptical-of-eus-seriousness/>.

EU for accession. Also, despite the best efforts of these malign actors, Montenegro has still made significant progress and enjoys support from many states in the EU and broad domestic support for integration into the EU.

In terms of the accession process, Montenegro has been able to overcome each of the threats that Russian influence has presented against its progress towards accession. In Parliament, pro-Russian parties have tried their best to limit the country's ability to enact reforms or listen to suggestions that would allow it to meet the closing and interim benchmarks of the accession chapters. Despite this attempted interference, the Committee on European Integration has maintained its ability to achieve bipartisan support as demonstrated through its collaborative work with the Ministry of European Affairs, which members of the majority coalition head. Regarding the committee's work during the reporting period of the EU Commission's 2024 report, the chairperson noted:

We had a very productive year as a committee, and that we managed, to a great extent, to keep daily politics out of our community... We have these consultation hearings of the Minister of European Affairs and the chief negotiator, we bring them over, and we give them a chance to tell us about the progress that Montenegro is making, the challenges, and then we give them suggestions.⁷⁶

This quote demonstrates that despite the political differences that might have arisen between the majority and the opposition during the reporting period, they could still work together. It also shows that the opposition is willing to work with the majority when it comes to issues concerning accession to the EU, as they understand that the benefits of membership outweigh the political benefits that they could gain by disrupting the majority. Additionally, the quote displays the limitations of pro-Russian parties to act since some members must be listening to the advice

⁷⁶ Vukovic, interview.

of the opposition as it was during this reporting period that the country was also to make significant progress, as shown by Montenegro meeting of the interim benchmarks for chapters 23 and 24 and in December closing three more chapters of the accession process bringing it to a total of six chapters (chapters 7, 10, 20, 25, 26, and 30) closed out of a total of 33.⁷⁷

During this period, while pro-Russian parties were working to stoke unnecessary tension between Montenegro and Croatia, the rest of the country was building closer ties with other members of the EU. The strongest cases of support for Montenegro's accession come from Hungary and Poland, which is significant since Hungary held the Presidency of the Council of the European Union in the second half of 2024, and Poland holds the current Presidency.⁷⁸ Hungary placed a special emphasis on reforming and encouraging the enlargement of the EU as it believed it was one of the most important international issues. Hungary especially supported accession for Montenegro as it believed that it was the most prepared state and that it had already developed strong economic ties to the EU and especially with Hungary.⁷⁹ Poland's reasons for backing Montenegro in the accession process have much more to do with geopolitical reasons than economic ones. The focus on geopolitical concerns can be seen in the emphasis that Poland has also placed on Montenegro's role within NATO, as it was also a key talking point between the two states.⁸⁰ Poland has also expressed its desire to help Montenegro accelerate the speed at

⁷⁷ Hungarian Presidency of the Council of the European Union, "Significant Step Forward in Montenegro's EU Accession: Three Negotiation Chapters Closed," *Hungarian Presidency of the Council of the European Union*, January 12, 2025, <https://hungarian-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/en/news/significant-step-forward-in-montenegros-eu-accession-three-negotiation-chapters-closed/>. ; European Commission, *Montenegro Report 2024*, 20-21.

⁷⁸ Council of the European Union, "Timeline of Presidencies of the Council of the EU," *Council of the European Union*, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/council-eu/presidency-council-eu/timeline-presidencies-of-the-council-of-the-eu/>.

⁷⁹ Hungarian Prime Minister's Office, "Hungary and Montenegro Can Count on Each Other," *Hungarian Prime Minister's Office*, <https://miniszterelnok.hu/en/hungary-and-montenegro-can-count-on-each-other/>.

⁸⁰ Polish President's Office, "Andrzej Duda: Montenegro Can Count on Poland's Support in Its EU Bid," *Polish President's Office*, <https://www.president.pl/news/andrzej-duda-montenegro-can-count-on-polands-support-in-its-eu-bid,97264>.

which it is completing the accession process.⁸¹ The support that these states have expressed for the accession of Montenegro helps not only counteract the negative relations that pro-Russian actors are trying to create with Croatia but shows their support for expanding the EU's influence into the Western Balkans and denying Russia the same opportunity:

*So for the first time, probably in a decade of so, we [Montenegrins] feel the enthusiasm on the side of the European Union, because they want to see Montenegro first and then others as member states of the European Union, because they see it as a way to prevent the spread of malign foreign policy influence coming from Russia.*⁸²

This quote shows that the enthusiasm that Hungary and Poland have demonstrated for Montenegro during their Presidencies of the Council of the European Union has had a twofold effect on the country. Their actions have helped to restore the sense of support that the country feels it is receiving from the EU and have helped to make Russia and its regional actors more desperate, especially as the influence and support that EU members display in Montenegro serves to dramatically limit their ability to inject their malign influence and policies. The limited ability of pro-Russian actors to effectively influence Montenegro's policies on building ties to the EU, passing pro-EU legislation, and collaborating with the Parliamentary Committee on European Integration with CSOs shows the dedication that Montenegro has for advancing along the path of European integration.

This data shows that the major components of the cost-benefit analysis conducted by the political leaders of Montenegro came from the credibility of accession and the conduct of Russian influence in the country. The fact that the war in Ukraine helped to restart the EU's

⁸¹ Government of Montenegro, "Poland Committed to Advancing the European Path and Closing Chapters," *Government of Montenegro*, <https://www.gov.me/en/article/poland-committed-to-advancing-the-european-path-and-closing-chapters>.

⁸² Vukovic, interview.

commitment to the accession process, as shown through the increased bilateral support that Montenegro has received from important EU member states like Hungary and Poland and through the EU commissioning the Group of Twelve to improve the accession process by finding ways that the EU could reform itself. These commitments and changes that the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia made the EU enact allowed Montenegro to rally around the reform process, especially in areas relating to the rule of law as the EU placed significant emphasis on this component of the accession process.

Russian influence was the other major component of the cost-benefit analysis conducted by Montenegro's political leaders. Unlike in different states, Russia has sought to conduct its influence primarily to hinder Montenegro's path towards accession to the EU instead of building meaningful ties. Russia has done this by supporting the pro-Serbian parties in the Montenegrin Parliament, resulting in votes of no confidence and boycotts of parliamentary proceedings by different parties, most recently over their attempt to remove a justice from the Constitutional Court unconstitutionally. In addition to halting parliamentary proceedings, these parties have attempted to implement a foreign agents law to limit CSOs' ability to function properly. They have also worked on Russia's behalf to generate bilateral issues with Croatia through the politicization of history, hoping that these new bilateral issues would cause Croatia to prevent Montenegro from advancing in the accession process. The combination of the positive signaling from the EU through its recommitment to the accession process and broad support shown for Montenegro to join, combined with the negative actions of Russia in the country has made the result of its cost-benefit analysis the implementation of a pro-European foreign policy.

Chapter 5: Serbia

Serbia has publicly declared its vested interest in accession to the EU since opening accession negotiations in January 2014 but has only used the accession process to extract value for itself from the EU and Russia as they compete for influence in the region.⁸³ In this chapter, this thesis aims to explain what role domestic and international factors have played in Serbian political leaders' cost-benefit analysis as they determine Serbia's foreign policy decisions since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Notably, unlike other actors in the region, Serbia has actively pursued policies that allow it to claim that it is determined to advance along the accession process while not cutting off its ties with Russia. The purpose of maintaining this non-committal foreign policy is that it has allowed Serbia to extract value from both the EU and Russia. In terms of the EU, Serbia has gained financial benefits as it openly claims its aim is to join the EU. In terms of Russia, Serbia has been able to rely on its support in international matters concerning Kosovo and maintaining a secure supply of gas and oil, and domestically, Aleksandar Vucic has been able to exploit pro-Russian groups for his party's political aims.⁸⁴

Before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, tensions with Kosovo and concerns about the rule of law were the primary factors limiting Serbia's ability to advance along the path of European accession.⁸⁵ Since the full-scale invasion, Serbia's failure to fully align with the EU's restrictive measures against Russia has acted as an additional barrier to its advancing in the

⁸³ European Commission, *Serbia Report 2022*, SWD (2022) 338 final (Brussels: European Commission, 2022), 3, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/d87e4167-65fd-42b0-8ede-7fa05c3d9355_en?filename=Serbia%20Report%202022.pdf.

⁸⁴ Nina Miholjcic-Ivkovic, "Russia-Serbia Relations: True Friends or Pragmatic Players?" *Geopolitical Monitor*, <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/russia-serbia-relations-true-friends-or-pragmatic-players/>.

⁸⁵ European Commission, *Serbia Report 2021*, SWD (2021) 288 final (Strasbourg: European Commission, 2021), 3, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/fbe0f0b7-d8ff-4b89-a4ed-af5ccd289470_en?filename=Serbia-Report-2021.pdf.

accession process.⁸⁶ The concerns around the rule of law, Serbia's relationship with Kosovo, and its foreign policy concerns were highlighted in the EU Commission's 2022-2024 reports, which offered recommendations on actions that Serbia could enact to fall more in line with EU standards. Despite these recommendations, Serbia's lack of progress was noted, with all reports containing a sentiment similar to "the Serbian government has continued to declare EU membership its strategic goal, but actions need to follow."⁸⁷ This quote emphasizes the EU's perception of the Serbian Government's accession action concerning the rule of law, stabilization of relations with Kosovo, and the alignment of its foreign policy with the EU as ringing hollow due to the lack of execution.

The EU's concerns about the rule of law mainly focused on the functioning of parliament, democratic institutions, civil society, and freedom of expression. The EU Commission's 2022 report places a special emphasis on the functioning of democratic processes and institutions, citing them as a "central pillar of Serbia's EU accession process,"⁸⁸ showing how valuable this area of reform and alignment with EU standards is for Serbia to advance in the accession process. The report provided recommendations for improvement that the Serbian government could implement to bring its Parliament in line with EU standards, especially since a more pluralistic Parliament was formed during the reporting period. The Commission's main recommendation came with the urging of strengthening the autonomy, transparency, and the role of the opposition so that the necessary checks and balances within the government could be maintained, given the populist Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) and President Aleksandar Vucic retained significant influence in the Parliament.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ European Commission, *Serbia Report 2024*, SWD (2024) 695 final (Brussels: European Commission, 2024), 3, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/3c8c2d7f-bff7-44eb-b868-414730cc5902_en?filename=Serbia%20Report%202024.pdf.

⁸⁷ European Commission, *Serbia Report 2022*, 3.

⁸⁸ European Commission, *Serbia Report 2022*, 10.

⁸⁹ European Commission, *Serbia Report 2022*, 10-12.

The report paid special attention to how elections were conducted during the reporting period as a new constitutional amendment triggered early parliamentary elections that experienced significant delays with its certification. The report notes that the International Election Observation Mission found several shortcomings in the way the elections were conducted, as they provided incumbents an unfair advantage. The main ways that the mission found that the elections were unduly influenced were through the unequal access to media provided to incumbents, pressure on public sector employees to vote for incumbents, campaign finance disparities, and the misuse of administrative resources, giving incumbents an unfair advantage when compared to new candidates. While the media did cover all candidates, there was an unusual amount of focus given to the incumbent President, Alexandar Vucic, and the ruling coalition. The report also mentions that several irregularities on election day only served to decrease trust in the electoral process further.⁹⁰ Before these elections, the Parliament passed a series of laws concerning elections, which did act upon some previous recommendations from the International Election Observation Mission but failed to adopt legislation that would address previously noted issues with access to the media, campaign finance, illegitimate pressure on voters, and public scrutiny and auditing of voter lists.⁹¹ These concerns show that the Commission needs Serbia to develop a strong and fair electoral process before it can advance in its accession process. In relation to the election process, the EU has expressed its main concern about the rhetoric used by members of the Serbian government and those running for office. Despite the government adopting the official policy that EU membership is the country's strategic goal, government representatives have continued to use language that does not substantiate this goal. The EU wishes that the Serbian Government would be more proactive in

⁹⁰ European Commission, *Serbia Report 2022*, 10.

⁹¹ European Commission, *Serbia Report 2022*, 11.

its communication with its population about the role of the EU as its leading political and economic partner.⁹²

The report also consistently calls for the inclusion and increased support for the role of civil society, especially concerning governance and the adoption of reforms that would support Serbia's advancement in its accession negotiations. The report highlights the idea that CSOs are a crucial cornerstone of any democratic system and that any state that is serious about accession to the EU should treat them as such. As CSOs help to build support for civil and political rights, they face verbal attacks and smear campaigns from high-level officials. CSOs that were specifically focused on addressing issues related to the rule of law and were critical of the authorities faced undue pressure from governmental officials. Despite these issues, the government has passed legislation supporting the cooperation between CSOs and the government, but it has not entirely implemented the law. CSOs also need to be given sufficient consideration and follow-up by the government institutions that they consult.⁹³

The final major area that the 2022 report covers for the rule of law is the role of freedom of expression. The report notes that Serbia has made no progress in implementing the EU-recommended reforms from the previous reporting period. The safety of journalists remains a priority as they continue to face threats and violence, which serve to hinder progress in the protection of freedom of expression. The EU has expressed its desire for Serbia to pass legislation that would allow for transparency and equitable funding for media that serves the public interest, transparency in media ownership and advertising, and to increase the independence of media regulators.⁹⁴ Another critical aspect of the EU recommendation around protecting freedom of expression concerns the role of disinformation. The EU made the demand:

⁹² European Commission, *Serbia Report 2022*, 12.

⁹³ European Commission, *Serbia Report 2022*, p.13-14.

⁹⁴ European Commission, *Serbia Report 2022*, 37.

*Serbia ... takes urgent action to counter foreign information manipulation and interference and anti-EU narratives, most obviously in the context of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. Several EU-sanctioned Russian state-sponsored outlets are broadcasting radio and multimedia programs in the country... These outlets manipulate the information environment in Serbia and in the region more broadly.*⁹⁵

This quote, in combination with the other recommendations pushed by the EU, shows that it is concerned about outside influence and manipulation in Serbia's media environment and the potential effects that it might have on the larger region. The safety and protection of journalists from harassment is paramount if they have the freedom to hold the state accountable to the people. Transparency in the ownership of media outlets also serves to make Serbians more aware of potential actors who might be seeking to shape or otherwise influence their political opinions. The independence of media regulators is also tantamount as it would allow for malign actors in the media sphere to be removed or effectively managed. Countering the spread of misinformation by foreign actors is vital because it serves to generate anti-EU sentiment among Serbians while building a stronger sense of support or sympathy for Russia. These effects can also have a larger spillover effect for other EU candidate states in the region.

The EU Commission continued to express these concerns in its 2023 report. In terms of the functioning of the Parliament, the EU noted the increased pluralism of the Parliament, which included parties that had previously boycotted elections. The Parliament was also faced with heightened tensions between the ruling coalition and the opposition as they both used offensive language and experienced bias from the Speaker of Parliament, who displayed an obvious bias towards the ruling coalition. The Parliament also only issued fines and penalties to members of the opposition. During the reporting period, the Parliament was operating without a working

⁹⁵ European Commission, *Serbia Report 2022*, 41.

plan, allowing the President and the executive branch to set the agenda for the Parliament. The Parliament's plenary sessions all operated with only the minimum required 24-hour notice to limit MPs' ability to propose changes to the agenda and table proposals. The Parliament also failed to meet its legal obligations when passing the 2023 budget and following up on a citizen's initiative. The opposition also faced suppression at the hands of the ruling coalition by hindering the committee meeting headed by the opposition. The ruling coalition also limited the oversight that the Parliament enacts over the executive.⁹⁶

The 2023 report placed less emphasis on election reform, as there were no national elections during the reporting period. The commission maintained its desire to implement the reforms suggested during the previous reporting period. The previous recommendations and issues that the 2022 report highlighted around the electoral process were reiterated in a joint opinion issued by the Venice Commission and the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights at the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE/ODIHR). The EU Commission concludes the section on elections by encouraging Serbia to implement the reforms suggested by OSCE/ODIHR.⁹⁷

Serbia has implemented a legal framework for cooperation between the government and civil society, but further improvements could be made to support systematic and genuine collaboration. The polarization of the Serbian government has created a challenging situation for CSOs to navigate. The Commission recommends that Serbia works towards establishing an environment that effectively strengthens the running and financing of CSOs. The report notes that there has been ongoing harassment against CSOs by high-level officials. Serbia has also

⁹⁶ European Commission, *Serbia Report 2023*, SWD (2023) 695 final (Brussels: European Commission, 2023), 12, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/9198cd1a-c8c9-4973-90ac-b6ba6bd72b53_en?filename=SWD_2023_695_Serbia.pdf.

⁹⁷ European Commission, *Serbia Report 2023*, 11-12.

failed to make measurable progress in the implementation of its strategy to create a growth environment for the development of civil society. Transparency and fairness in the distribution of public funds to CSOs also need to be strengthened. The government has increased the participation of civil society in some areas but has failed to publish material about the results of its consultations with CSOs, and the input of these organizations is not given appropriate consideration.⁹⁸

Serbia made limited progress with the EU Commission's recommended reforms concerning freedom of expression. The report notes that there was an increase in lawsuits designed to limit the ability of journalists and other representatives of the public interest to act in political affairs. The use of these lawsuits generated a hostile relationship between these groups and members of national and local authorities and created a system of self-censorship. The report makes the specific request that "the overall environment for the exercise of freedom of expression without hindrance still needs to be further strengthened in practice."⁹⁹ This quote shows that despite the improvements that Serbia has been able to achieve on paper, the implementations and actions of the state need to be updated to reflect the reality of the law. Serbia has made advancements with its media strategy action plan, with specific action being taken to ensure the independence of media regulators. There has also been progress with the transparency of funding that media companies receive. The Commission's report highlights the need to clarify that Serbia's antitrust and merger control laws apply to the media sector and that the safeguards for media pluralism and independence must be strengthened.

The role of misinformation and anti-EU narratives through the use of the media sector by foreign actors, especially Russia, was addressed again in the 2023 report.¹⁰⁰ Russian-sponsored

⁹⁸ European Commission, *Serbia Report 2023*, 14-15.

⁹⁹ European Commission, *Serbia Report 2023*, 41.

¹⁰⁰ European Commission, *Serbia Report 2023*, 41-42.

media outlets continued to operate in Serbia, with some starting to create broadcasts in the Serbian language and illegally using their platform to help promote “military recruitment for the Wagner paramilitary group, which is prohibited under Serbian legislation but was not followed up by prosecution services.”¹⁰¹ This quote helps to show the influence and manipulation that the Russian state can achieve when allowed access to the media sector, especially in candidate states that have a significant pro-Russian element. The disinformation and pro-Russian content that these Russian-sponsored media outlets produced is especially dangerous as it is often disseminated through the mainstream Serbian media, thus to the broader region.¹⁰² The spread of Russian disinformation and anti-EU rhetoric helps to generate more challenges for Serbia as it works to advance the accession process, and it makes more members of Serbian society hesitant to fully commit to the reforms that are necessary for the accession process.

The EU Commission’s 2024 report makes more specific criticisms and recommendations for reforming the Serbian Parliament. The commission notes that the Serbian Parliament’s inability to effectively enact checks and balances with the other branches of the government stems from issues with its effectiveness, transparency, autonomy, and ability to provide oversight for the executive and law-making process. The Parliament is still plagued by tensions between the ruling coalition and the opposition despite a new, more pluralistic parliament being formed during the reporting period. During the 2024 reporting period, the Parliament continued to operate without a working plan, allowing the executive to continue to have outsized influence over the agenda that the Parliament could follow. In addition to the continued oversight of the executive on the Parliament’s agenda, the tension between the ruling coalition and the opposition has continued into the 2024 reporting period, with the Speaker of the Parliament showing

¹⁰¹ European Commission, *Serbia Report 2023*, 44.

¹⁰² Ibid.

favoritism for members of the ruling coalition. The Parliament also continued the practice of amalgamating unrelated agenda items and also continued showing a lack of progress in the reforms that the Commission had pushed for in its previous reports; thus, many of the earlier recommendations for reforming the parliament remain relevant.¹⁰³

The 2024 report provided a deeper analysis of elections in Serbia compared to the previous reports. A major finding by the OSCE/ODIHR was that the elections “though technically well-administered and offering voters a choice of political alternatives, were dominated by the decisive involvement of the President, which, together with the ruling party’s systematic advantages, created unjust conditions.”¹⁰⁴ This quote again shows that the reforms that the EU Commission has been advocating for since the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine have not been implemented, especially as the current system of elections favors the incumbent in the presidency and his ruling party. The report points out that the oversight bodies meant to ensure fair and free elections are ineffective at deterring violations during elections. The opposition has filed lawsuits challenging the result of the elections, as there were irregularities at several polling places. In March of 2024, the Parliament created a new working group to address issues around the conduct of elections in Serbia with the help and input of members of CSOs. The Parliament also passed legislation that would enact some of the reforms pushed for by the Commission and OSCE/ODIHR.¹⁰⁵ Serbia still has progress to make in enacting the reforms and recommendations of the EU Commission and OSCE/ODIHR if it is to meet the EU’s standards for transparent and inclusive elections.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ European Commission, *Serbia Report 2024*, 23-24.

¹⁰⁴ European Commission, *Serbia Report 2024*, 22.

¹⁰⁵ European Commission, *Serbia Report 2024*, 22-23.

¹⁰⁶ European Commission, *Serbia Report 2024*, 4.

The 2024 report continued to outline the challenges that civil society faces in its operations in Serbia. The report mentions that the verbal abuse and smear campaigns against CSOs in Serbia have intensified since the last reporting period. For the first time, the report makes an explicit note that the media have targeted specific CSOs, with some outlets releasing the personal data of activists, and that human rights groups have been the subject of spyware attacks. These groups have not filed complaints with the authorities because they do not trust the process. CSOs investigating electoral irregularities and criticizing the authorities and lithium mining have reported that the authorities are pressuring them. The Commission still calls for improvements to be made in implementing the legal framework of cooperation between the government and CSOs. CSOs continue to claim that the time given for consultation with the government is too short and that when they can provide input, it is not given appropriate consideration. The EU Commission calls for more transparency and fairness in the appropriation of public funds for CSOs.¹⁰⁷

The last section of the 2024 report has to do with the rule of law in the Serbian context, which is on freedom of expression. The report notes that Serbia has made no progress with the reforms that the commission has advanced in previous reports and thus should continue to focus on implementing those reforms.¹⁰⁸ High-level officials have continued to use verbal intimidation tactics against journalists. There was also a case where a ruling party MP attacked two members of the press, which did not receive the appropriate level of condemnation from the appropriate authorities. The report also details that the use of lawsuits as a means of hindering investigative journalists increased during the reporting period, causing the EU Commission to call for Serbia to hasten its alignment with EU standards for the protection of journalists.¹⁰⁹ The OSCE/ODIHR

¹⁰⁷ European Commission, *Serbia Report 2024*, 25.

¹⁰⁸ European Commission, *Serbia Report 2024*, 7.

¹⁰⁹ European Commission, *Serbia Report 2024*, 38.

report on the ability of media regulators found that media regulators in Serbia have persistent problems in effectively overseeing media coverage and providing remedies for possible violations. The report continues to reinforce the EU's directive that the media in Serbia needs to limit the spread of misinformation and anti-EU narratives propagated by media outlets controlled by maligned actors, most notably Russia. Serbia has also worked to meet the reform recommendations of the EU Commission concerning the transparency in the funding of media companies as political and economic influence in the media sector remains a chief concern for the EU.¹¹⁰

The failure to make the reforms that the EU has pushed for in terms of the Parliament and the conduct of elections has been noted by pro-European groups in Serbia. Marko Todorovic, a researcher at the European Policy Centre in Belgrade, when asked about what has caused issues with the implementation of reforms around the rule of law, said:

*We [Serbians] can mostly hold the government accountable for the shortcomings in democracy. Just consider the fact that, for example, Freedom House has been consistently reporting a decline in Serbia's democracy scores year after year.*¹¹¹

This quote shows that members of civil society see the government's shortcomings in enacting reforms. The lack of reforms from the current ruling government might be a result of the cost-benefit analysis these actors are undertaking. The ruling coalition can maintain power without concessions to the opposition by not implementing the recommended reforms, especially around elections, as the system would remain biased towards incumbents. The benefits these actors gain from delaying reform in terms of Parliament and elections show that despite their

¹¹⁰ European Commission, *Serbia Report 2024*, 38-39.

¹¹¹ Marko Todorovic in discussion with the author, January 20, 2025.

official statements of wanting to achieve EU membership, they are disincentivized as the current system favors them.

The lack of reforms and support CSOs receive from the government has also been noted. Milan Igrutinovic, a research associate at the Institute of European Studies in Belgrade,¹¹² commented:

*I don't think that there is so much to be done to raise the effectiveness of the NGO sector within the government or towards the government... or [for the] government to be more open to critics and the like, good recommendations from the NGO sector... I don't think things can be changed or improved... We have the same government and the same NGOs for like, 10 years. Everyone knows everyone and everything is set here for the long run.*¹¹³

This quote helps to highlight the inability of the current ruling coalition to implement the reforms suggested by the EU Commission. The frozen relationship that has developed between the CSOs and the Government has made it almost impossible for representatives of CSOs to bring complaints to the government, as there has been a nearly complete deterioration of relationships. The inability of the ruling coalition to listen or create opportunities for collaboration with CSOs in areas concerning the rule of law makes it extremely difficult for these actors to provide their vital input for the other areas of reform that Serbia needs to make if it is to advance on its accession path. Mr. Todorovic also reflected this sentiment:

*The Government does not show a constructive attitude when it comes to cooperation with the civil society sector. That's why some of the recommendations that we provide to the government simply don't reach the target audience... because these topics are inherently political and there is no political will to address them...*¹¹⁴

¹¹² A government funded research institute.

¹¹³ Milan Igrutinovic in discussion with the author, January 14, 2025.

¹¹⁴ Todorovic, Interview.

This quote helps to highlight that the ruling coalition is more hesitant to work with CSOs on issues that might be seen as politically contentious, like the rule of law, Serbia's relationship with Kosovo, or its alignment with EU foreign policy. The cold relationship that the Serbian government has cultivated with CSOs and the lack of input that they can provide in key areas of reform goes against the EU's belief that a strong and active civil society is a key component of any democratic system and should be treated as such by state institutions, especially those that are seeking EU membership.¹¹⁵

The role of the media is also vital to examine, given the intense focus that the EU has placed special emphasis on this aspect of the rule of law since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The main source of concern that the EU has expressed around the media is the lack of transparency and freedom in the media sector. The other major concern is that the media is spreading both Russian-propagated misinformation and anti-EU rhetoric. As Slobodan Zecevic, the director of the Institute of European Studies in Belgrade, explained, "some European countries think that the situation [of the] media is under the control of the ruling party, SNS."¹¹⁶ This quote shows that the EU has the perception that the media in Serbia is not free and that the ruling coalition has not effectively taken measures to build a strong independent media sector if many European states believe that SNS is exercising an outsized influence over the media. In addition to the influence the ruling party exercises over the media, Mr. Todorovic has taken note of the excessive anti-EU rhetoric and Russian narratives that the media spreads:

We [Serbians] see in the media is that the European Union is not always, but in many cases portrayed negatively because of what officials say. And that's always something about the EU putting pressure on Serbia, blackmailing Serbia, for some reason,

¹¹⁵ European Commission, *Serbia Report 2023*, 15.

¹¹⁶ Slobodan Zecevic in discussion with the author, January 14, 2025.

*interfering in domestic affairs... There are also a number of Serbian media outlets that are actively spreading the Russian narratives.*¹¹⁷

This quote shows that the members of the Serbian government who are critical of the EU are using the media sector as a means of propagating misinformation and anti-EU narratives. The spreading of these narratives only serves to turn the Serbian people away from the idea of pursuing the necessary reforms for the accession process, especially since it is framed as the EU blackmailing or otherwise unfairly extracting something from Serbia without Serbia benefiting. The quote also highlights the fact that media outlets help to further spread Russian-sponsored narratives and misinformation to the detriment of the Serbian people and those who wish to see Serbia make genuine progress on the path to EU membership.

Zoran Trifunovic, a program director for Newsmax Balkans, has noted the problem with the spread of misinformation is drastically increased when people use social media for their news compared to traditional media. He explained that using social media also allows for the rapid spread of misinformation as “no one reads [the] whole topic, whole article. They read the headline or maybe two words and nothing else.”¹¹⁸ The problem that this quote highlights is that social media users are less incentivized to read through whole articles, limiting their ability to analyze the information they are consuming critically. The ability to analyze the whole story and communicate with sources of information is what makes Mr. Trifunovic believe traditional media is superior to social media, especially when it comes to limiting the spread of misinformation; as he stated, “[on] Television you have the guest in a show, you have a TV host, you [can] ask a question or make your own opinion. The other hand, the other person can react... Online... [you] don’t have a two way communication, which has to assure me that it is real.”¹¹⁹ This quote helps

¹¹⁷ Todorovic, Interview.

¹¹⁸ Zoran Trifunovic in discussion with the author, January 17, 2025.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

highlight Mr. Trifunovic's belief that the ability to communicate and immediately challenge any information presented in real time is crucial for limiting the spread of misinformation. Additionally, traditional media incentivizes its audiences to listen to all the facts of a story before forming an opinion. In contrast, social media prioritizes strong titles, as many users do not read whole articles on these platforms.

Having examined the EU's reports on the development of the rule of law and the realities that Serbian have shared, it is time to take a serious examination of the development of relations between Kosovo and Serbia as it is one of the major factors in determining Serbia's ability to progress in the accession process. Serbia, unlike other candidate countries, has a unique chapter relating specifically to the normalization of relations with Kosovo as a part of its requirements for accession to the EU.¹²⁰ The EU Commission's 2022 report noted that the EU has continued to help facilitate dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo but that no concrete progress was made during the reporting period. The purpose of the EU helping to facilitate the negotiations between these states is the development of a comprehensive and legally binding normalization agreement that would stabilize the relationship between Belgrade and Pristina. The report specifies that "reaching such an agreement is urgent and crucial so that Kosovo and Serbia can advance on their respective European paths."¹²¹ This quote shows that if these states eventually want to become members of the EU, they need to come to a settlement that would provide stability and mutual agreement between the states.

The report highlights the completion of the energy roadmap that allows the states to fully implement the previous dialogue agreements on energy from 2013 to 2015. A key aspect of this agreement was establishing a Serb-operated energy company compliant with Kosovar law to

¹²⁰ European Commission, *Serbia Report 2022*, 10.

¹²¹ European Commission, *Serbia Report 2022*, 7.

serve the Serb minority in Kosovo. Progress was also made with both parties agreeing not to implement or otherwise remove the need for Kosovo and Serbian ID holders to hold entry-exit documents when crossing the border. Despite the agreement about the need for entry-exit documents, the states could not come to a consensus on an agreement about license plates. The EU is now pushing these states to form an agreement on a political declaration of missing persons. The report ends this section by calling on Serbia and Kosovo to meet their obligations under previous dialogue agreements. There is also a specific demand that Serbia and its authorities take steps that limit actions and rhetoric, including in its international relations, that serve to undermine the stability of the dialogue between them and Kosovo.¹²²

The 2023 report calls on Serbia to continue negotiating in good faith with Kosovo and to be more open to compromise as the negotiations advance. Kosovo and Serbia are recommended to fulfill all past commitments and constructively engage in flexible negotiations to achieve more progress. It is also in the 2023 report that the EU suggests that the parties might lose important opportunities if they fail to make noteworthy progress on the completion of the normalization of relations. The report includes a discussion about the increase in violent or otherwise hostile actions that have taken place between Serbia and Kosovo during the reporting period, specifically detailing an incident in Northern Kosovo involving the Kosovo police. It was during this altercation that a considerable quantity of small arms and light weapons were discovered; the EU and West Balkan countries have been working to reduce the number of these types of weapons in the region.¹²³ The EU is placing pressure on the Serbian authorities to fully participate and support the apprehension and prosecution of the perpetrators of the attack. The incident was related to Kosovo increasing the presence of special police and expropriation of

¹²² European Commission, *Serbia Report 2022*, 86-87.

¹²³ European Commission, *Serbia Report 2023*, 7-8.

land in areas of Northern Kosovo.¹²⁴ There were other more minor incidents during the reporting period that revolved mainly around freedom of movement, the withdrawal of Kosovo Serbs from Kosovar institutions (police, judiciary, and administration), roadblocks relating to the arrest of Kosovo Serbs, and the boycotting of early elections.¹²⁵ During the reporting period, elections were held in Northern Kosovo, which were boycotted by the region's ethnic Serb population. The report demands that Serbia also participate in the investigation of attacks against Kosovar soldiers during protests and to help encourage the ethnic Serb population in Kosovo to fully participate in elections and other democratic practices.¹²⁶

During the reporting period of the 2023 report, Serbia and Kosovo came to an agreement on the path to normalization and an implementation annex in which both parties “took note that the Agreement and the Implementation Annex will become integral parts of the respective EU accession processes [of each state].”¹²⁷ This quote helps to show that in comparison with other states in the accession process, the case of Serbia has presented a special challenge to the EU as the normalization of relations with Kosovo has increasingly become a priority for the EU authorities as they consider the advancement of Serbia in the accession process. There was also no progress made with the implementation of the energy roadmap that the countries agreed to during the previous reporting period. The EU is calling on Serbia, Kosovo, and the private sector partners to rapidly implement the terms of the roadmap so that the Serb majority municipalities in Northern Kosovo can start paying off the electricity that they consume. Serbia and Kosovo, despite these issues, were able to come to an agreement for a political declaration on missing persons and were encouraged by the EU to start the implementation of the declaration

¹²⁴ European Commission, *Serbia Report 2023*, 94.

¹²⁵ European Commission, *Serbia Report 2023*, 95.

¹²⁶ European Commission, *Serbia Report 2023*, 7-8.

¹²⁷ European Commission, *Serbia Report 2023*, 94.

immediately. The 2023 report also notes that Serbia has experienced severe backsliding with its compliance with previous dialogue agreements with Kosovo. The report ends the section by reiterating the importance of Serbia creating and supporting the continuation of dialogue between itself and Kosovo.¹²⁸

During the 2024 reporting period, Serbia and Kosovo recommitted to meeting their obligations under the Agreement on the Path to Normalization and its implementation annex. They also made progress in establishing a community of Serb-majority municipalities in Northern Kosovo. There was also discussion on the implementation of the energy roadmap and the resolution of mutual recognition of license plates, allowing for greater freedom of movement. The report calls on Serbia to meet its obligations of recognizing Kosovo's documents, symbols, and institutions. The report also repeated past warnings about the respective states meeting all current and past obligations under agreements relating to the normalization of relations if they want to continue progressing in their EU accession negotiations. The report also detailed ongoing issues that are generating tensions between Serbia and Kosovo, specifically Kosovar police actions against Serbia-supported offices and services in Northern Kosovo, the Central Bank of Kosovo banning any financial transactions that take place in a currency other than the Euro, the banning of some Serbian institutions in Northern Kosovo. The EU made Kosovo aware of its concerns that many of these actions would only increase tensions between it and Serbia and generate confusion on the ground in Serb communities. Again, the section ends with the EU urging Serbia and Kosovo to limit the use of rhetoric and actions that serve to limit or otherwise constrain the progress that they can achieve as they work on constructive dialogue and reconciliation.¹²⁹

¹²⁸ European Commission, *Serbia Report 2023*, 95-96.

¹²⁹ European Commission, *Serbia Report 2024*, 65-67.

The legacy and negative rhetoric that Serbian media and authorities have advanced around the relationship and involvement with Serbia and Kosovo can be clearly seen in the language used by members of CSOs. Zoran Milivojevic, an associate at the Center for Strategic Alternatives associate, spoke extensively about the EU and its interference in Serbia's relationship with Kosovo. He started with comments around the fact that Serbia, unlike other candidates, had political preconditions placed on it could start and later advance in the accession process, specifically:

The separation or dissolution between Serbia and Montenegro was the first precondition. Secondly, [the] hate tribunal¹³⁰ and obligations about that... so cooperation with [the] Hauge is the precondition for starting the discussion for accession... and the third precondition is Kosovo... We have this famous chapter 35 and question of the independence of Kosovo... the position of majority in EU, for us [Serbia], it's not possible to [have] entry [into the EU] without [the] recognition of [the] independence of Kosovo.¹³¹

This quote helps to show that the perception of the EU having an outsized influence on the policies that Serbia is allowed to follow or must enact reaches far beyond the current situation with Kosovo. In the quote, it is clear that Serbians believe that it was due to the pressure of the EU that Serbia allowed Montenegro to declare its independence in 2006, as they thought it was a necessary precondition for Serbia to start and advance in the accession process. This same line of thinking is now being repeated in the context of Serbia and Kosovo. The EU has made it exceptionally clear that if Serbia is to advance in the accession process, it has to come to an agreement with Kosovo to at a minimum normalize relations, if not fully recognize the independence of Kosovo as a separate and fully sovereign state. The recognition of Kosovo as an independent state is exceptionally unlikely as Dr. Milivojevic later stated, "It's also clear for us

¹³⁰ A UN created Criminal Tribunal that investigated allegations of war crimes which occurred during the Yugoslav Wars. The tribunal lasted from 1993-2017. <https://www.icty.org/>

¹³¹ Zoran Milivojevic in discussion with the author, January 15, 2025.

[Serbians], it's not possible to recognize [the] independence of Kosovo. For us, it's no question. For us [it] is [a] question to have some compromise, some normalization in the function of normal life."¹³² This quote helps to show that Serbs emphatically oppose the possibility of Kosovo gaining independence, but for the sake of accession to the EU, might be open to having another type of relationship with Kosovo that would allow it to have normal relations with the rest of Serbia, while keeping it under the sovereignty of Serbia.

A significant portion of the Serbian Parliament has also worked to hamper the normalization of relations between Belgrade and Pristina. Radical parties have worked to limit the development of relations with Kosovo as a broader strategy to limit Serbia's ability to advance toward EU membership. Marko Todorovic noted:

*There are some right-wing groups that are against the independence of Kosovo, which is, I think, understandable, it's the Serbian constitution that sees Kosovo as the part of Serbia. However, there are also some extremist groups, which are not just against independence, but also against any kind of normalization of relations. And this might be a major problem because they're also, I would say, opposed to Western institutions in general.*¹³³

This quote helps to highlight the inability of a stable relationship between Serbia and Kosovo to develop. As Mr. Todorovic explains, the relationship of Kosovo as a part of Serbia is framed in its constitution, making it hard for the dialogue between these states to advance even with EU involvement. The claim that Kosovo is Serbian territory under the constitution allows members of Serbian society and government to claim that negotiations with Kosovo are illegitimate or inappropriate, as the Serbian constitution clearly explains that Kosovo is part of Serbia's territory. The territorial claim over Kosovo and the role of extremist groups that fight even against the

¹³² Milivojevic, Interview.

¹³³ Todorovic, Interview.

normalization of relations serve to severely limit the ability to work on the accession process, especially as these groups stand opposed to Western institutions, limiting the ability of the EU to act as an effective mediator between Serbia and Kosovo. The role of Kosovo in Serbia's accession process has a far-reaching effect as it affects not only the progress that Serbia can make with Chapter 35 but also its compliance with EU foreign policy requirements.

Serbia's compliance with EU foreign policy is the last of the three major areas that it needs to implement reforms if it is to show the EU that it is serious about its stated objective of EU membership being a strategic goal for Serbia. The 2022 report explained that Serbia's alignment with relevant EU decisions "was 64%, but dropped to 45% as of August 2022."¹³⁴ This drop in alignment is a reflection of the fact that Serbia, in the months following the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, failed to implement sanctions against Russia and to comply with other restrictive measures that the EU implemented against Russia. Most of the shortcomings that Serbia faced in meeting the requirements of the EU came from its lack of compliance with the standards set by the EU within the area of common foreign and security policy (CFSP). The report specifically notes that Serbia is moderately prepared, but there was a possibility of this changing as Serbia experienced backsliding during the reporting period. The issues of Serbia's compliance stem from its bilateral relations with Russia, as in other international institutions like the UN, Serbia has voted on measures that condemn Russian actions in Ukraine. This stability of Serbian-Russian relations can be seen in the continuation of statements and actions by high-level officials that went against official policies and statements about Russia from the EU. It was also evident in Serbia's reception of several high-level Russian officials who the EU has placed on a

¹³⁴ European Commission, *Serbia Report 2022*, 130.

sanctions list. On a more positive note for Serbia's alignment with the EU, it did join an EU declaration against Russia's referenda in the occupied Ukrainian territory.¹³⁵

The 2022 report continues by detailing the ongoing relations that Serbia has maintained with Russia despite its hostile actions in Ukraine. Serbia has refused to apply any sanctions to Russia and has allowed for the spread of a Russian disinformation campaign through its media sector. Additionally, as a response to the commencement of the full-scale invasion, Air Serbia significantly increased the number of flights it had going to Russia, but these flights were later reduced to pre-invasion levels. Through bilateral negotiations, Serbia has also used the conflict to extract a favorable energy supply price with Russia. During the reporting period, it was also noted that there was frequent contact between officials from both Serbia and Russia.¹³⁶

Despite the continuation of relations with Russia, Serbia has complied with other areas of the EU CFSP. Serbia has supported EU measures for conflict prevention and has worked on joining treaties on arms control and non-proliferation of weapons. Serbia has also maintained its policy of sharing classified information with the EU. Serbia also actively participated in EU crisis management operations and in the roster of the EU Battle Groups under the common security and defense policy (CSDP).¹³⁷

The EU Commission continued to monitor Serbia's compliance with the CFSP and CSDP during the reporting period of its 2023 report. During the reporting period, Serbia was able to raise its compliance rate with EU decisions to 51% in August of 2023, which is an improvement from the previous reporting period but is still significantly lower than before the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The EU continued to urge Serbia to enact policies that align with

¹³⁵ European Commission, *Serbia Report 2022*, 132-133.

¹³⁶ European Commission, *Serbia Report 2022*, 133-134.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

the declarations and overall policies of the EU in the realms of CFSP and CSDP.¹³⁸ A positive development for Serbia's compliance with the EU's CFSP was its commitment to take appropriate action to limit the possibility of Russia using Serbia to circumvent the restrictive trade measures imposed by the EU. Serbia specifically made a commitment to monitor, identify, and inspect "suspicious trade flows of priority battlefield goods and economically critical goods."¹³⁹ These commitments show that Serbia is willing to cooperate in some aspects of the anti-Russian policies that the EU sought to employ, but there is still a limitation as Serbia has yet to pass legislation that would bring it into alignment with the EU's trade restrictions on dual-use goods.¹⁴⁰

Additionally, Serbia has maintained its policy of operating flights to Russia, going directly against the policy set by the CFSP. In the UN, Serbia has continued to mostly align with the EU in condemning the actions of Russia in Ukraine, with the notable exception where it decided to abstain during a vote on Russian reparations to Ukraine. Despite its policy of either siding with the EU or abstaining in votes related to Russian actions at the UN and other multilateral organizations, Serbia has maintained close bilateral relations with Russia, as shown by the ongoing high-level meeting between officials, including some that appear on the EU sanctions list, which has raised concerns in the EU about the strategic aims of Serbia. Serbia has also been vocal in its support of Ukraine's territorial integrity and has provided humanitarian aid, but these actions seem to be more about maintaining appearances when contrasted with the previously listed pro-Russia actions, its failure to join the Crimea Platform Declaration,¹⁴¹ and criticisms of the arrest warrants issued by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for Russian

¹³⁸ European Commission, *Serbia Report 2023*, 144.

¹³⁹ European Commission, *Serbia Report 2023*, 146.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁴¹ Crimea Platform, "Declaration of the Crimea Platform," *Crimea Platform*, <https://crimea-platform.org/en/samit/deklaraciya/>.

President Vladimir Putin and the Russian Commissioner for Children’s Rights.¹⁴² In terms of the EU’s CSDP, Serbia has maintained its support of EU measures on conflict prevention and has joined many of the non-proliferation, disarmament, and arms control treaties promoted by the EU. Serbia has also continued participating in EU crisis management missions classified information sharing and has met its obligations under the European Peace Facility. Notably, Serbia conducted a military exercise with NATO titled “Platinum Wolf,” showing that Serbia is willing to work with partners like NATO despite its close relations with states like Russia.¹⁴³

The EU Commission’s 2024 report noted that Serbia had made no progress in cluster 6 (external relations) for the accession process. The concerns around Serbia’s relationship with Russia and its noncompliance with EU policies were reiterated, and the report addressed only a few major changes or new topics. The first was that Serbia had high-level meetings with Ukrainian officials as well as Russian officials. Secondly, Serbia participated in the Summit on Peace in Ukraine, which was hosted in Switzerland. Finally, Serbia failed to align with the EU’s declarations and restrictive measures in reaction to the cyber-attacks that occurred during the reporting period.¹⁴⁴

Out of the three major areas where Serbia has failed to meet the EU’s reform and alignment demands to date, its foreign policy might be the area where it can most readily bring itself into compliance. Marko Todorovic, stated:

The easiest issue would be the foreign policy, because it's just a matter of deciding whether something will be done or not, whether we will, for example, introduce sanctions on Russia, whether we will just decide to align with every declaration of the High

¹⁴² European Commission, *Serbia Report 2023*, 148-149.

¹⁴³ European Commission, *Serbia Report 2023*, 149-150.

¹⁴⁴ European Commission, *Serbia Report 2024*, 94-97.

*Representative of the European Union. So it's a political decision that can be done relatively easily...*¹⁴⁵

This quote helps to highlight the fact that Serbia's lack of advancement in its alignment of the EU's CFSP and CSDP has been a political decision made by the current government because non-alignment better serves its ability to maintain power. If the cost-benefit analysis changes were in alignment with the EU's policies and would better suit the needs of the government to maintain its political power, then it would be an easy change for Serbia to implement.

Despite the shortcomings in the realms of the rule of law, the normalization of relations with Kosovo, and foreign policy, Serbia does have some big supporters in the EU, with the main supporters falling into two major categories; the first support Serbian accession on purely geopolitical grounds and then those that do not recognize the independence of Kosovo. The geopolitical supporters have mainly come about as a result of the EU shifting its policy to emphasize the enlargement process in the wake of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Hungary and Poland are some of the most noteworthy supporters,¹⁴⁶ especially since they were the latest Presidents of the Council of the European Union.¹⁴⁷

In the case of Hungary, the relationship was built on good bilateral relations between the political leaders of both states, as they both suffer from issues concerning the strength of their democratic institutions.¹⁴⁸ Hungary and Poland, along with other central European states, have supported Serbian accessions because they "are trying to gain some more influence in the Balkans through economic issues..."¹⁴⁹ This quote helps to show that these states were partially motivated to support the Serbian accession process because it would allow them to exert more

¹⁴⁵ Todorovic, Interview.

¹⁴⁶ The interviewees also listed Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, and Slovenia as supporters of Serbian accession to the EU.

¹⁴⁷ Council of the European Union, "Timeline of Presidencies of the Council of the EU."

¹⁴⁸ Todorovic, Interview.

¹⁴⁹ Igrutinovic, Interview.

economic influence in the region. Though Hungarian support was not always well received in Serbia as it came with benefits and problems. The main benefit of its support was that Hungary brought the topic of EU enlargement with Serbia back as a top priority for the EU. The drawbacks were noted by the interviewees, Former Ambassador Aleksandra Joksimovic and Mr. Todorovic:

*The reputation of Hungary inside the European Union is very low nowadays, so being supported by Hungary is not always very productive for the region.*¹⁵⁰

*Hungary has been putting the question of Serbia's cluster three so many times on the agenda, and that creates a kind of frustration among member states, and it can be counterproductive.*¹⁵¹

These quotes help to show that the support of Hungary serves to be counterproductive for the accession of Serbia as Hungary faces many of the same issues that Serbia has around the rule of law and its alignment with EU foreign policy. The other negative that the quotes help to highlight is that Hungary has repeatedly pushed for Serbian advancement, despite the EU determining that Serbia was not ready, creating new issues for Serbia with other member states.

On the other hand, Serbia has received positive support from Poland. Minister of European Integration Tanja Miscevic stated she had a very good exchange with the Polish President Donald Tusk and that she was told, "Poland has Serbia as the priority."¹⁵² This quote highlights the new geopolitical importance of enlargement for the EU, as Poland would be the second President of the Council of the European Union to make Serbian accession a priority. As noted above, Poland has an economic interest in the region and sees the enlargement process as a

¹⁵⁰ Aleksandra Joksimovic in discussion with the author, January 15, 2025.

¹⁵¹ Todorovic, Interview.

¹⁵² Tanja Miscevic in discussion with the author, January 16, 2025.

strategic process that limits Russia's ability to exert its influence in the region.¹⁵³ However, the benefits of the Polish desire to see the EU expand can only be realized by Serbia if it is able to make some progress in the three areas of concern for the EU. Overall, Polish support is seen as being more positive than Hungary as:

*Poland is... a very influential member state, especially among the Eastern member states, and it just gives more credibility to the process, if Poland is supporting it.*¹⁵⁴

This quote shows that, in contrast to Hungary, Polish support provides a substantial benefit to Serbia. It would help garner the support of other states and make any reforms that Serbia implements seem more legitimate. Serbia is a very reliable member of the EU that holds to the standards of the union, unlike Hungary.

The other EU member states that provide support to Serbia in the accession process are those that are less stringent on requirements concerning Kosovo as they do not recognize its independence. The biggest supporter in this category is Spain, which has supported the Serbian position of non-recognition as it does not want to provide legitimacy to the independence movement in Catalonia. Cyprus and Greece are supporters of Serbia for a very similar reason, but more because of the issue of the independence of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, but all three states have shared that they would be willing to support any resolution that passes with the support of both Serbia and Kosovo. Romania and Slovakia also do not recognize Kosovo and support Serbia but do not have as clear of a justification for their position as Spain, Cyprus, and Greece.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵³ Trifunovic, Interview.

¹⁵⁴ Todorovic, Interview.

¹⁵⁵ Craig Turp-Balazs, "The Explainer: The EU's Kosovo Refuseniks," *Emerging Europe*, <https://emerging-europe.com/analysis/the-explainer-the-eus-kosovo-refuseniks/>.

Outside of the EU, Russia has been the largest actor that has worked against Serbia's advancement in the accession process. The Russian effort in this regard has not been very difficult due to Serbia's desire to maintain close ties with the Russian state despite its hostile actions in Ukraine and the limitations that it places on its ability to advance in the accession process. Slobodan Zecevic, noted:

*If the European integration of Serbia fails, they also want to keep some relations with China and Russia, not to lose these relations as alternatives if everything's going up with the Europeans.*¹⁵⁶

This quote shows that, on some level, Serbia is willing to tolerate the interference of the Russians in the accession process because they want to hedge their bet on European accession, especially considering that the accession process for Serbia has been ongoing for almost 20 years. Russia has also used its influence over the Serbian oil industry to stoke tensions between Serbia and states like the US, which could cause further complications in the accession process. The US placed sanctions on the Serbian company Naftna Industrija Srbije (NIS), the national oil and gas company in Serbia, as its majority shareholders are affiliates of Gazprom. The aim of the sanctions is to force the company to reorganize its ownership to exclude Russian influence.¹⁵⁷ Serbia has used the implementation of sanctions as a justification for not imposing sanctions on Russia.¹⁵⁸ Russia has acted as a malign influence in Serbia's attempts to strengthen its democratic institutions further; if Serbia did develop strong democratic institutions, it would allow it to implement the reforms suggested by the EU. Russia has also utilized its cultural and historical perception in Serbia to maintain influence and as a springboard for its propaganda and

¹⁵⁶ Zecevic, Interview.

¹⁵⁷ Joksimovic, Interview.

¹⁵⁸ Miscevic, Interview.

misinformation campaigns in Serbia, which Russia uses to “present just itself as a friendly state of Serbia, presenting the European Union and the West is always against Serbia...it manipulates the feelings of the Serbian population.”¹⁵⁹ This quote helps to show that the spread of misinformation and the cultural/historical connection might be Russia's most powerful tool as it directly targets the Serbian people to turn them against the idea of integration with the EU.

The attempts of both the EU to encourage Serbian reforms and the Russian attempts to limit its ability to move towards accession have enabled Serbia to extract some key benefits from both sides. The two biggest benefits have been the economic support that Serbia has extracted from the EU, with the latest form of support coming from the New Growth plan for the Western Balkans and Russia’s use of its veto power in the UN Security Council on issues relating to the independence of Kosovo. The New Growth plan calls for financial aid to be given to the Western Balkan states through non-repayable support of up to 2 billion euros and low-interest loans up to a value of 4 billion euros. This aid has been tied to the completion of a reform agenda proposed by the Western Balkan states, which has to target reforms around the rule of law. In the case of Serbia, this includes advancement in the normalization of relations with Kosovo. This system of tying economic aid to reform allows Serbia to gain economic support from the EU while the EU incentivizes accession-related reforms.¹⁶⁰ In terms of Serbian-Russian relations, Serbia allows Russia to maintain a certain level of political influence in its affairs in exchange for Russia opposing the independence of Kosovo and other related resolutions in the UN Security Council with its veto power.¹⁶¹ This continual veto from Russia allows Serbia to limit Kosovo’s negotiating power when it has when discussing the normalization of relations, as it is not officially recognized as an independent state by the UN. These examples help to highlight some

¹⁵⁹ Todorovic, Interview.

¹⁶⁰ European Commission, *New Growth Plan for the Western Balkan*.

¹⁶¹ Todorovic, Interview.

of the benefits that Serbia has been able to extract from the EU and Russia as they seek greater influence in the Balkans.

The cost-benefit analysis of the political leaders of Serbia primarily consists of the credibility of the accession process, Russian influence, and the conduct of neighborly relations. In terms of credibility, Serbia sees the accession process as unfair. Unlike other candidate states, it has a special chapter added to its accession process, demanding it reach some normalization of relations with Kosovo. The length of the Serbian accession process has also played a part in the Serbian perception of the lack of credibility in the accession process. This prevailing sense of unfairness and the minimal credibility of the accession process has made Serbia reluctant to implement the reforms advanced by the EU, compounding its inability to advance in the accession process and thus furthering its perception that the accession process is not credible. Despite the minimal progress Serbia has made in the accession process, it has still received support from EU member states, which fall into two main categories: those that support its accession as a means of limiting Russian influence in the region and those that do not believe that Kosovo needs to be independent for Serbia to join the EU.

Russian influence has also played a significant role in the cost-benefit analysis of Serbia's political leaders. Russia, through pro-Russian political parties and Russian-controlled media, has advanced anti-EU rhetoric and pro-Russian narratives that help to undermine popular support for EU accession. Pro-Russian parties have also used intimidation tactics against CSOs as a means of limiting their participation in the functioning of the government. These parties have also taken steps to restrict the normalization of relations with Kosovo as they believe that it is a part of Serbia and that any normalization of relations would violate the Serbian constitution. Russia has

also supported this position in international organizations like the UN, where it has used its veto power to prevent the UN from recognizing Kosovo as an independent state.

Then, for good neighborly relations, Serbia has been informed of the benefits that implementing EU reforms can bring in the New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans. This plan from the EU would allow Serbia access to six billion Euros of aid if it can make meaningful progress in implementing the reforms suggested by the EU, especially in areas relating to the rule of law and the normalization of relations with Kosovo. While Serbia wants to maintain access to the financial incentives that the EU offers, it also wants to keep the geopolitical advantages of good relations with Russia. The main advantage of maintaining good relations with Russia has been its ability to limit the international recognition of Kosovo. The combination of Serbia's different perceptions and needs concerning the credibility of the accession process, Russian influence, and the conduct of neighborly relations has made the result of its cost-benefit analysis: a vacillator foreign policy, where it will implement policies depending on whether the EU or Russia will provide it the most benefits.

Chapter 6: Bulgaria

Bulgaria plays a unique role in the analysis of this thesis as it is already a member state of the EU. It is crucial to examine the role of Bulgaria, though, as the developments since its accession have played a vital role in shaping the accession process for Montenegro and Serbia. This thesis aims to show how the rise of Russian influence in Bulgaria due to its political instability has made the EU place stricter requirements about the rule of law and combating disinformation on new candidate states. The role that the Bulgarian radical right political party Revival has played in its domestic and international affairs is vital to examine as it has used the country's political instability to increase its relative power and promote pro-Russian narratives.

Revival was only able to rise to political prominence in Bulgaria due to the political instability of the government. Since 2020, Bulgaria has held seven snap elections, as it was impossible for a ruling coalition to be formed in each election. The rate of voter participation has fallen to levels not seen since the fall of communism as voters have become increasingly apathetic since no stable government has been able to be formed.¹⁶² The issues with elections started in 2020 as there were protests against the corrupt political practices of government officials. These protests began a chain of events that caused there to be no ruling coalition that could survive for longer than nine months. Maria Simeonova, the head of the Sofia office of the European Council on Foreign Relations, noted:

We [Bulgarians] have again... a government which will be quite unstable, because it has to get into a coalition with political parties that don't necessarily share the same political

¹⁶² Edward McAllister, "Bulgaria Holds Seventh Election in Four Years as Coalitions Fail Again," *Reuters*, October 24, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/bulgaria-holds-seventh-election-four-years-coalitions-fail-again-2024-10-24/>.

*lines... Every Bulgarian that wants to see Bulgaria being back on the stable political track will tell you, judicial reform inevitably is what we need.*¹⁶³

This quote helps to highlight the instability of the political institutions within Bulgaria. It shows that despite finally being able to form a ruling coalition, there remains a distinct possibility that Bulgaria will need to hold an eighth snap election as the political tension is still extreme and relies on the ability of political parties who share distinctive views to cooperate. The point of view of Ms. Simeonova also shows that the only way to address the fundamental issues of corruption and the government's meddling in judicial practices is to implement pertinent judicial reforms that can restore political stability.

The seven snap elections and ongoing political instability in Bulgaria, with the only realistic possibility for change being judicial reform, help to explain why, in the cases of Montenegro and Serbia, the EU has placed such a strong emphasis on the rule of law, particularly the resilience of democratic institutions, before allowing them to advance towards EU membership. The European Union, in its 2022 Communication on the Enlargement Policy, has placed a strong emphasis on the imputation of reforms in key areas “notable in the area of rule of law and in particular the independence and functioning of the judiciary and the fight against corruption.”¹⁶⁴ The inclusion of these categories shows that the EU has raised its standards in the main areas of the rule of law that Bulgaria continues to struggle with. The EU focused on these issues to ensure that new states that join the EU will have already implemented the reforms Bulgaria needs to adopt before accession, ensuring that all new member states are politically stable.

¹⁶³ Maria Simeonova in discussion with the author, January 23, 2025.

¹⁶⁴ European Commission, *2022 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy*, SWD (2022) 528 final (Brussels: European Commission, 2022), 1, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/b1e6a334-656a-48ab-b84a-8b191b2b07f8_en?filename=2022%20Communication%20on%20EU%20Enlargement%20Policy-v3.pdf.

Now, examining the case of the Revival political party, it is clear why the EU has placed such an emphasis on compliance with the EU's foreign policy and limiting the spread of Russian narratives in candidate states. Since 2020, Revival used the seven successive elections to develop "from a very low position with small participation in the parliament to reaching its status of third biggest party."¹⁶⁵ The growth of Revival shows the ability of ultra-nationalist and pro-Russian parties to exploit political and international instability to their advantage. Jean Crombois, a professor at the American University in Bulgaria, noted that due to Bulgaria's inability to form a ruling coalition, Revival attempted to take advantage as there was "a kind of caretaker government, and so the parliament was in a bit of a free fall... [there was] all those kinds of crazy ideas that were introduced by MPs trying to take advantage of the political situation."¹⁶⁶ This quote helps to show that thanks to the lack of a ruling coalition Revival was able to push forward with some of its more radical policies with varying levels of success.

An example of some of the policies that Revival pushed for was the adoption of an anti-LGBTQ+ amendment to an education law that would prevent the topic from being addressed in schools. Revival also attempted to pass legislation similar to that of the Russian foreign agents law to freeze the actions of CSOs.¹⁶⁷ The party has also protested the possibility of Bulgaria finally joining the Eurozone based on arguments that doing so would cause Bulgaria to lose important aspects of its sovereignty to the EU.¹⁶⁸

These protests and legislation from Revival cover its negative influence within domestic politics, with the other negative area being the spread of Russian narratives. Dr. Crombois noted, "Revival is super good at amplifying all those disinformation campaigns domestically...

¹⁶⁵ Simeonova, Interview.

¹⁶⁶ Jean Crombois in discussion with the author, January 22, 2025.

¹⁶⁷ Dimitar Keranov, "Foreign Agents Law Is the Next Goal for Bulgaria's Revival Party," *GMFUS*, <https://www.gmfus.org/news/foreign-agents-law-next-goal-bulgarias-revival-party>.

¹⁶⁸ Simeonova, Interview.

especially when it comes to the question of [North] Macedonia, when it comes to those sensitive questions relating history and the culture of the country.”¹⁶⁹ This quote helps to show that Revival is a critical tool in the more extensive Russian disinformation campaign designed to generate anti-Western and pro-Russian sentiment among Bulgarians. One of the narratives that have been advanced is the idea that Bulgaria will send soldiers to go and fight in Ukraine, which generates tension because it can easily be connected with Bulgarians being made to fight with the Nazis during World War II and the claim that Bulgarians would not make good fighters against Russians since they are too culturally connected.¹⁷⁰ Other narratives use Soviet nostalgia and highlight moments in history that paint Russia in a positive light, such as when Russia helped liberate Bulgaria from Ottoman rule.¹⁷¹

The 2022 Communication on the Enlargement policy also included a new emphasis on candidate states taking action to counter the spread of misinformation, which has become a central issue for states like Montenegro and Serbia wanting to advance in the accession process. The communication classifies the spread of misinformation as being a hybrid threat, especially when the narratives used come from maligned foreign actors. The EU calls on these states to actively take measures to counter the spread of misinformation that undermines the credibility of the EU public trust in democratic institutions and deepens polarization and ethnic divides. The report also identifies that:

The bulk of information manipulation, including disinformation in the region [Balkans], is produced and spread by domestic players for domestic purposes and/or acting as proxies for third states aiming to influence public discourse, using information

¹⁶⁹ Crombois, Interview.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Luke Allnutt, "Kremlin Interference in 2024 Elections: Disinformation Campaigns Target Eastern Europe," *RFE/RL*, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kremlin-interference-2024-elections-eastern-europe-disinformation/33161041.html>.

*manipulation to antagonize the public against the EU and Western democracies in general.*¹⁷²

This quote helps to show that the EU is adapting to the new realities that Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has brought to the EU by ensuring that the candidate states develop measures that counter the spread of misinformation, even if it is being spread through domestic political parties. The EU has seen the consequences of allowing states that do not have appropriate countermeasures to the spread of misinformation on member states, like the case of Revival in Bulgaria. The measures and changes that the EU wants to see implemented through the accession process are meant to help prevent the rise or ability of parties like Revival to act as they seek to implement anti-EU policies and spread the influence of Russia. These changes around a state's ability to effectively implement a counter to hybrid threats and the increased scrutiny for the rule of law initiated by EU member states like Bulgaria have made the accession process for Montenegro and Serbia significantly more complicated than in the 2000s.

¹⁷² European Commission, 2022 *Communication on EU Enlargement Policy*, 18.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

The geopolitical competition between the EU and Russia has created many opportunities for states to react to the domestic and international pressures generated through this competition. The primary goal of this thesis was to explain why some post-communist states pursue Atlanticist and pro-European foreign policies, specifically focusing on states in the Balkans. The analysis of the thesis focused primarily on the actions of Montenegro and Serbia as they are candidate states to the EU. Bulgaria was also examined to show how its political instability and Russian interference in its affairs have changed the EU accession process for current candidate states. The theoretical arguments the thesis uses to explain the outcomes noted in these states was that their foreign policy orientations resulted from a cost-benefit analysis conducted by political actors. As part of this cost-benefit analysis, these actors had to factor in the incentives and consequences that their foreign policy decision would likely incur, the role of radical parties, political narratives around national histories, and the credibility of threats and promises made by the EU and Russia. The thesis explored the role of these causal factors using discourse analysis, process tracing, and novel data collected through interviews with different actors in these states. This analysis shows that Montenegro and Serbia have responded to the competition for influence by the EU and Russia in different ways. Montenegro has pursued a consistent policy of European integration despite Russia and its proxies in Serbia attempting to prevent its progress. The result of Serbia's cost-benefit analysis was that it has more to gain by pursuing ambiguous foreign policy, which would allow for the extraction of benefits from both sides, primarily financial from the EU and the limited recognition of Kosovo from Russia.

The case of Montenegro is pertinent as its perceptions of the roles played by both the EU and Russia have helped to determine the overall foreign policy orientation of the state. As a

result of the cost-benefit analysis undergone by Montenegro, it has decided to pursue a policy of closer ties to the EU as a means of advancing its interest in the accession process. The first major aspect of the cost-benefit analysis conducted by Montenegro factored in the credibility of the accession process with the EU. While the EU, under the direction of President Juncker, did not view the enlargement process as a priority, the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia forced the EU to reexamine the accession process. Through this reexamination, the EU sought ways that it could reform the accession process to make it more efficient and to show candidate states that the geopolitical context and the adherence to recommendations, especially in areas related to the rule of law, made by the EU were more critical than ever before. In the case of Montenegro, this emphasis came across in the EU Commission's reports, which tied its ability to advance in the accession process to meeting the interim benchmarks the EU placed on chapters relating to the rule of law. The other aspect of the new EU stance towards enlargement, which helped to restore Montenegro's faith in the credibility of the accession process, was the support it received from individual members of the EU. The support of Hungary and Poland was specifically important to Montenegro as they were two states that both held the Presidency of the European Council and thus were in a position where that could make the enlargement of the EU a priority.

The other major factor that affected the outcome of Montenegro's foreign policy determination was the role of radical and pro-Russian actors. In the period following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the new emphasis the EU had placed on enlargement, these actors took steps that served to undermine the reform process in Montenegro, particularly in areas relating to the rule of law, like the functioning of parliament, the judiciary, and CSOs. In terms of the Parliament, these parties would go on boycotts, instigate votes of no confidence, and seek to exceed the constitutional authority of the Parliament. These actions taken by

Montenegro's radical parties were meant to limit the ability of the Parliament to implement the reforms suggested by the EU. These actors also sought to cause issues with the functioning of the judiciary by unconstitutionally removing a justice from the Constitutional Court, which also created more problems in the Parliament as the opposition parties initiated a boycott until the constitutional crisis was resolved. The final area in which these parties generated issues concerning the rule of law was the Government's relationship with CSOs. The radical and pro-Russian parties in Montenegro sought to implement a law similar to the foreign agents law passed by Russia as a means of censoring CSOs who try to support the democratic processes in Montenegro.

These radical and pro-Russian parties also started to politicize certain aspects of Montenegro's history to counter the positive support that Montenegro was receiving from EU members like Hungary and Poland. In particular, they wanted to generate tensions between Montenegro and Croatia by politicizing Croatian support during the Nazi-led genocide at concentration camps located in Jasenovac, Dachau, and Mauthausen. They initiated this policy due to the UN passing a resolution on the genocide that occurred in Srebrenica. The reaction of the radical parties with their legislation condemning Croatia had a twofold effect of creating unnecessary hostilities between them and Croatia while showing their support for Serbia in the issue of the legacy of Srebrenica and Russia by impeding the Montenegrin accession process. Despite these actions by Montenegro's radical parties, the outcome of its cost-benefit analysis has been to pursue a pro-European foreign policy as the overwhelming support of the population is directed towards accession with the EU, and the EU has renewed the credibility of its desire for Montenegro to become a member state. Montenegro also views accession to the EU as a means of limiting the ability of both Russia and Serbia to take action in its affairs as the current

issues it is facing from these states is primarily directed against its attempts to advance in the accession process.

On the other hand, Serbia has maintained a vacillatory foreign policy due to its cost-benefit analysis. A major factor in its inability to commit to a foreign policy orientation is the self-determination and independence of Kosovo. Regarding the credibility of accession, Serbia sees the process as unjust because it is subject to special chapters of accession that do not affect other candidate states, particularly concerning chapter 35, which forces Serbia to pursue the normalization of relations with Kosovo. The interpretation of this chapter plays a significant role in Serbian's perception of what fully committing to a pro-European policy would mean. To many Serbs, it would entail the recognition of Kosovo as an independent state, as many states in the EU recognize its independence. Others see it as simply stabilizing the relations between the states without necessarily recognizing its independence, as states like Spain do not recognize the independence of Kosovo. The radical parties in Serbia view the entire process as unattainable as they hold strictly to the Serbian Constitution, which holds that Kosovo is a part of Serbia; thus, they see any attempt to normalize relations as violating the Constitution.

The credibility of the accession process is also undermined by the disparity that Serbia uses between its rhetoric and actions around the issue of accession to the EU. Serbia has repeatedly stated that its strategic foreign policy aim is to join the EU; its Parliament's actions show that this declaration is empty. The Parliament of Serbia has repeatedly failed to implement the reforms that the EU Commission has recommended concerning the functioning of its Parliament, democratic institutions, civil society, and freedom of expression. The most notable failures in these areas relate to the unfair elections that have taken place in Serbia, as they provide an unfair advantage to the ruling coalition and the lack of checks and balances that the

Parliament is able to impose over the executive branch, especially since the Parliament has been operating without a working agenda give more power to the executive. Radical parties have also generated issues as they utilize anti-EU rhetoric when campaigning and also use their access to media to help spread Russian narratives that paint their relationship in a positive light while villainizing the EU and other Western institutions. These issues are compounded by the fact that Serbia openly collaborates with Russia and is resistant to implementing policies that might negatively affect its relationship with Russia. Serbia wants to maintain the possibility of aligning with Russia if relations with the EU break down. The combination of these issues has made it exceptionally difficult for the EU to make Serbia accept the credibility of its accession offer, as Serbia shows little desire to complete the process.

The most that the EU can do in the case of Serbia is to make suggestions for how it can comply with EU standards and provide it with the means to implement these suggestions. This attempt to support Serbia can be seen in the New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, which has allocated a total of 6 billion Euros, via varying means, to Serbia to support its economic growth while tying the release of the funds to Serbia implementing reforms relating to the rule of law. This system created by the New Growth Plan shows that the EU is willing to support Serbia through accession but that tangible reforms must be implemented to access that support. Russia is able to maintain its influence in Serbia through the spread of its narratives, which utilize historical and cultural perceptions and anti-EU rhetoric through the pro-Russian media sources that operate in Serbia. The other means Russia uses to maintain influence in Serbia is its veto power in the UN Security Council to prevent Kosovo from becoming a member state. It is the combination of the benefits that Serbia is able to extract from both the EU and Russia while not

remaining committed to a single foreign policy that has made the result of its cost-benefit analysis vacillatory, so long as it can benefit from both sides.

Knowing the role of the cost-benefit analysis that these states in the Balkans conduct when determining their foreign policy orientations is vital as institutions like the EU seek to compete with Russia for influence in the region. This research also helped to provide a more complete understanding of how post-communist states, specifically in the Balkans, determine the orientation of their foreign policies. This thesis faced limitations in the analysis. A limited number of interviews were conducted in Montenegro and Bulgaria, which limited the scope of analysis that this thesis could achieve. In the case of Montenegro, only a representative of the opposition was interviewed, giving the views shared by those parties a larger presence in this thesis. In the case of Serbia, there was a larger number of interviews, allowing for a greater depth of analysis compared to the other case studies. There was also a limited analysis of data from national sources, as all data had to be available in English. Future research can address these limitations by interviewing a wider range of subjects, allowing for a greater spectrum of perspectives to be analyzed and including sources in the national languages of the case study states. Due to time and resource constraints, this research was forced to focus exclusively on post-communist states in the Balkans. A more expansive study should include a broader range of case studies from across the post-communist world and other states seeking membership in the EU. Additionally, future research should re-examine these states and their foreign policy orientation as the war in Ukraine continues to develop and in the years following any type of conclusion to the conflict. The study of post-communist states and how they determine their foreign policy will continue to prove to be important as the EU and Russia continue to compete for influence in these states.

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Appendix A: Interview Topics

Montenegro:

- How credible has the EU been with the Montenegrin accession process
- Have there been states that are supportive of Montenegrin accession
- What role has the Hungarian and Polish presidencies of the Council of the European Union played in the accession process
- What are your concerns about the future of the accession process
- What has been the role of Russian influence in the accession process
- What other states have been influencing the accession process
- How has the population reacted to such a lengthy accession process
- Has the EU been clear with what it expects Montenegro to do
- Are there concerns about Ukraine advancing more rapidly than the Western Balkan states in the accession process
- Are there EU member states that are opposed to Montenegrin accession
- What has been the role of the Parliament's European Integration Committee
- What is the role of the Parliament's European Integration Committee post-accession
- What is the role of civil society in the accession process
- What are Montenegro's next steps in the accession process
- How can Russian influence be removed from the Montenegrin accession process

Serbia:

- What are your thoughts about how the mood of EU member states would affect EU accession for Serbia

- What states have been supportive of Serbian accession or have been speaking on its behalf for accession
- What are your thoughts on the credibility of the EU accession process
- Is the EU being supportive of Serbian accession
- Could the EU be more clear in what it expects of Serbia
- What states have been against Serbian accession to the EU
- What role has economic integration played in shaping the accession process
- Does the population still have faith in the accession process
- What can Serbia and the EU do to make the population more aware of EU support and restore faith in the accession process
- Will Ukraine and Serbia advance in the accession process together
- What has been the role of states outside the EU in the accession process
- What is the role of think tanks or similar institutions in the accession process
- What is the relationship between the government and NGOs
- What has been the role of the Hungarian and Polish presidencies of the Council of the European Union
- Has there been any parties or groups opposed to EU accession
- Can Serbia maintain a balance of relations between the EU and Russia
- What will be the role of a Trump presidency
- What are your thoughts about the possibility of reforming the accession process
- Will candidate states advance individually or in groups
- Have there been hybrid warfare events targeting the accession process
- How has Serbia's relation with Kosovo shaped the accession process

- What areas can Serbian and the EU cooperate during the accession process
- Was there a time when there was a dramatic shift in domestic affairs that affected the accession process
- What is the role of the media in the enlargement process
- What is the role of the youth in the accession process
- What is the role of new technology, like social media, in the accession process
- What changes have you noticed since the start of the war in Ukraine
- What role has Russia's cultural influence played in the accession process

Bulgaria:

- How has Bulgaria been acting as a disrupter in the accession process of Western Balkan states
- How have radical parties been shaping Bulgaria's relations with the EU and with Western Balkan states
- How has Russia been working to influence Bulgarians
- What is Bulgaria's role in the EU and the way that it shapes policies since the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine
- How has Bulgaria's caretaker government shaped its role in the EU
- How has Bulgaria's political instability affected its position in the EU
- What has been the role of Revival in shaping both Bulgaria's foreign and domestic politics
- How are NGOs perceived in Bulgarian society
- What can NGOs do to raise awareness of their role in society and government

- How will the transit of gas from Turkey affect its relationship with Bulgaria
- What is Bulgaria's role in the accession process
- What reforms should Bulgaria implement to achieve political stability

Appendix B: Interviewees

Montenegro:

Ivan Vukovic is the Chairperson of the European Integration Committee in the Montenegrin Parliament and the deputy leader of the Democratic Party of Socialists in Montenegro. He was interviewed in Podgorica, Montenegro, on January 29, 2025.

Serbia:

Aleksandra Joksimovic is a former Serbian Ambassador to the United Kingdom and former Assistant Minister in the Yugoslavian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Her interview was conducted in Belgrade, Serbia, on January 15, 2025.

Marko Todorovic is a researcher at the European Policy Center, where he focuses on EU enlargement, geopolitical issues, and the foreign policy of the Western Balkans. He was interviewed in Belgrade, Serbia, on January 20, 2025.

Milan Igrutinovic is a research associate at the Institute for European Studies. He was interviewed on January 14, 2025, in Belgrade, Serbia.

Slobodan Zecevic is the Director of the Institute for European Studies. He was interviewed on January 14, 2025, in Belgrade, Serbia.

Tanja Miscevic is the current Serbian Minister of European Integration. Her interview was conducted in Belgrade, Serbia, on January 16, 2025.

Zoran Milivojevic is a former Serbian diplomat with mandates in Belgium, the United States, France, and Croatia. He is currently an associate of the Center for Strategic Alternatives. His interview was conducted in Belgrade, Serbia, on January 15, 2025.

Zoran Trifunovic is a program director for Newsmax Balkans. His Interview was conducted in Belgrade, Serbia, on January 17, 2025.

Bulgaria:

Jean Crombois is an Associate Professor of EU Politics at the American University in Bulgaria. He was interviewed via video conference on January 22, 2025.

Maria Simeonova is the head of the Sofia office of the European Council on Foreign Relations. Her topics of focus include EU foreign policy, Bulgaria in the EU, and the Western Balkans region. She was interviewed in Sofia, Bulgaria, on January 23, 2025.