

HCSS Security

# Geopolitical Influences of External Powers in the Western Balkans

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## Executive Summary

This report examines how and to what extent multiple external actors are increasing their influence over the political elites and peoples of Western Balkans countries. It considers economic, political, religious cultural and security-related factors, and their impact on the future of peace and state-building processes. Increasingly, Eastern actors have been using hybrid threats (disinformation warfare, covert operations to win the hearts and minds of the population by Russia), spreading violent extremism (Gulf countries), potentially debt-trapping some Western Balkans countries (China), violating the EU laws on arms trade (Gulf countries) and implementing identity reengineering (Gulf countries, Iran, Russia, Turkey) in order to advance their geopolitical interests. Indeed, the Eastern actors often adopt a holistic approach in focusing on winning hearts and minds of the Western Balkans population.

These security risks can derail the stability of the region in the long term with negative ramifications towards the EU and NATO integration processes as well as EU regional policies. For instance, it has been found that for political reasons, the West is now less attractive to the Western Balkans. Local elites may be less willing to engage with the West because they are reticent to promote the rule of law, or because of a lack of personal ties between the Western Balkans elites and Western counterparts. Moreover, there is fatigue to engage with the West because interaction is very time-consuming and complicated, for instance with regard to obtaining grants. Most importantly, factors such as the lack of coherent strategy from the West, the failed post conflict reconstruction due to the prioritization of stability over democracy, the lack of a realistic EU enlargement agenda, and the lack of engagement with the local population has disillusioned both elites and common people across the Western Balkans region. This is why engagement with Eastern partners often seems more appealing: it is easier to obtain grants for projects, leadership styles are more similar, and local elites feel more secure about their own positions and the maintenance of the status quo, effectively perpetuating the grip on power by illiberal elites.

The central objective of this report is to outline policy recommendations which can holistically deal with the challenges posed by Western and Eastern actors in the Western Balkans region. In aiming to bolster peace and security in the Western Balkans region, the policy recommendations are grouped from general to specific, focusing on aspects of law, economic, security and social affairs.

Generally, the region may be at a turning point where populations that are generally torn between the West and the East may begin gravitating more towards the latter. The West, therefore, needs to craft a response soon in order to avert further instability in the region. For this purpose, it would be crucial to re-establish legitimacy while strengthening the moral authority of the West, speaking with one voice in the region, and, crucially, maintain a realistic EU Enlargement Agenda, such as opening the membership negotiations for North Macedonia and Albania. It would also be beneficial to award Bosnia and Herzegovina a candidate status, and to agree to visa liberalization for Kosovo. The agenda needs to remain proactive and to be implemented thoroughly. Existing instruments need to be employed and more exposure needs to be generated to show and explain Western engagement with the region, not only aimed at the elites but also at the local population.

It is therefore crucial that Western actors respond swiftly and reinforce their efforts to promote democracy. This in turn would help in winning the hearts and minds of the local population. In addition, it is important to provide alternatives to local governments to prevent them from getting caught in the debt trap diplomacy of China, to counter Turkish authoritarian propaganda, to prevent violent extremism, supported by the Gulf countries and Iran, as well as to counter disinformation warfare conducted by Russia, as well as the rising far right violent extremism identified in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Croatia.

In the legal sphere, our recommendations call for implementing laws on transparency and strengthening of the judiciary, regulating housing prices and building new mosques. In the security sphere, it is crucial to harmonize security policies of Western Balkans countries with those of the EU and its member states; consider sanctions for arms exports if in violation with the EU laws; promote individual responsibility; strengthen the border control; and to limit the appointment of foreign imams. Regarding economic measures, it is suggested to open the EU Cohesion Fund to Western Balkans countries and to encourage further investment in rural areas. In terms of societal measures, it is important to increase the prominence of public awareness campaigns, and to promote civil society engagement. It is also proposed to challenge the attractiveness of Eastern actors by informing the local public about these countries' strategies to sow social divisions. It is also important to increase cultural exchanges and language courses. Finally, it is essential to monitor the changes in societal values and beliefs. A combination of these types of measures may assist in strengthening democracy in the region as well as countering external influences. However, this necessitates tailored implementation tracks for each country which requires further in-depth research on how to implement such strategies through a governmental and societal approach.

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## Understanding Geopolitical Influences of External Powers in Western Balkans

### Domestic Dynamics

This study analyses the influence of external powers in the Western Balkans region in various spheres of influence. Initially, the challenges posed by the domestic dynamics are outlined, followed by the challenges posed by the international influencers. Lastly, the design of the study with research questions is outlined. The Western Balkan region has been a zone contested by outside forces for centuries, from Kosovo Polje to battles between Russians and Ottomans in XIX century, to WWI and II, and lastly with the 90's wars.

Historically, Western Balkans has been at the *heart of war* in the Western Balkans region.<sup>1</sup> Initially, World War I began in Sarajevo, with the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of the Austrian Hungarian empire in 1914. Gavrilo Princip assassinated him with the help of a group of Serbs and Bosnian Serbs. The assassins' primary goal was to establish a South Slavic state without Austria to be known as Yugoslavia, composed of six countries, two independent provinces and populated by mainly Slavic population. As a result, the Austro-Hungarian empire declared war on the Kingdom of Serbia, which led to one of the biggest wars seen on the European continent. The number of casualties has been estimated to be around 40 million combatant and civilian casualties. Some of the unresolved grievances from World War I led to World War II, such as the Treaty of Versailles, which left Germany with much less territory than desired as a defeated power (Pruitt 2018). World War II placed the entire region under the Axis power occupation. Resistance movements in the region were active, such as the Yugoslav Partisans led by Josip Broz Tito, which aimed at removing the German occupation from power (Cohen 1996).

In 1943, the Democratic Federal Yugoslavia was proclaimed under the governance of the Partisan Resistance. King Peter II of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, then living in exile, recognized the Partisan governance as legitimate government. In 1945, after the liberation from the Axis powers' occupation, the Monarchy was abolished, and in 1946, the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia was established, with a communist system of governance. In 1964, the country was renamed as the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (The Constitution of Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, 1963). It consisted of six equal republics Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Slovenia two provinces with independent status: Kosovo and Vojvodina. These two provinces were granted full autonomy in 1974. Yugoslavia was governed by Josip Broz Tito and his Communist Party of Yugoslavia until his death in 1980, which marked a whole new chapter for the future of the territories (Malcolm 1999; Bieber, Galijaš, and Archer 2016). Despite the growth the country experienced from the 1950s to the early 1980s, the period of growth ended in the 1970s, with the oil price shock and recession in

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<sup>1</sup> We refer to six countries in the region: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo in line with the SC Resolution 1244 and the ICJ's Advisory Opinion, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia.

Europe which affected Yugoslavia as well. After Tito's death, the country stemmed in further political and economic crisis.

During the 1980s, Yugoslavia started to face inflation and unemployment whilst the productivity level remained low. The pressure increased also due to asymmetries and hostilities between regions when it came to economic prosperity and political inequality. While the North and West of Yugoslavia were traditionally wealthier, the East and South were the poorest regions and thus required more investments of development funds, to which wealthier regions were required to contribute. In addition, ethnic tensions grew in the Country. With the amendments of the Yugoslav Constitution in 1974, the decision-making processes on federal level were almost impossible, which in turn resulted to conflicts of interests between the different states. In 1981, the Albanian majority in Kosovo began demanding the status of a Republic of the (then) independent province, whilst the Serbian authorities suppressed these sentiments (Allock, 1998).

The disagreements grew further in the early 1990s. In 1990, at the 14th Congress of the Communist League of Yugoslavia, a disagreement as to the voting mechanism of "one person one vote" led to the Slovene and Croatian delegations leaving the Congress, which in turn led to a constitutional crisis. Slovenia and Croatia sought independence first. Macedonia followed and through means of referendum, proclaimed independence in 1991. Bosnia and Herzegovina declared independence one year later, in 1992, whereas Serbia and Montenegro formed the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Bieber, Galijaš, and Archer 2016).

These proclamations of independence inevitably contributed to the rise of ethno-nationalist and nationalist sentiments, all across the newly independent republics. This ethno-nationalist rhetoric was particularly used by Slobodan Milosevic the President of Serbia from 1989 and subsequently the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, who took advantage of the vacuum created by a progressively weakening central state and deployed the use of Serbian ultra-nationalism to fan the flames of ethno-nationalism in the other republics (particularly Bosnia and Croatia, as well as towards Kosovo) and gain legitimacy at home. While attending a party meeting in the Albanian-dominated province of Kosovo in May 1987, Serbians in the province rioted outside the meeting hall. In 1989, he made a speech in Gazimestan at the 600 years anniversary of the Kosovo Polje battle between the Kingdom of Serbia and the Ottoman Empire. Having found a new source of legitimacy, Milosevic quickly increased his power in Serbia through control of the party apparatus and the press. He moved to strip the two autonomous provinces of Kosovo and Vojvodina of their constitutionally guaranteed autonomy within Serbia by using mass rallies to force the local leaderships to resign in favor of his own preferred candidates. By mid-1989 Kosovo and Vojvodina had been reintegrated into Serbia. The Montenegrin leadership was primarily composed of Milosevic's allies.

In Bosnia, ethnic Serbs and ethnic Croats made proclamations as to the independence of the regions they largely inhabited - in the case of the former, Republika Srpska, and in the case of the latter, the Croatian Republic of Herzeg-Bosna. These territorial claims, paired with the rise of ethno-nationalism and the dissolution of Yugoslavia, led to the largest war in Europe since World War II, which claimed hundreds of thousands of atrocities, and displaced over a million people (Bieber, Galijaš, and Archer 2016). This led to some peaceful secessions but also violent

ones, which resulted in the ethnic cleansing of Albanians and genocide of Bosniaks (BBC News).

For nearly thirty years, the region has been unstable. Despite these historical instabilities, these states are currently facing a potentially new turning point affected by the domestic developments and the changing international global order. On national level, the Western Balkans seem to be experiencing economic progress since the conflicts in the 1990s and early 2000s as seen in the increased GDP per capita, increased exports and goods, increased business freedom (except in Bosnia and Herzegovina), and a recent decline in freedom of trade, based on the HCSS Datawarehouse explained below.

However, the political environment shows more mixed messages. In terms of control of corruption, the trend is generally upwards, although countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Serbia seem to be backtracking recently (QoG Data). Regarding perceived government effectiveness, the trend over time seems to be increasing even though the scores are still quite low (ibid). In terms of democracy, all countries seem to be fully institutionalized democracies (Polity 2014). Nonetheless, when analyzing the electoral processes, the countries are moving towards becoming partially autocratic, partially democratic (Varieties of Democracy). More concretely, Serbia's score decreased a lot in the past 15 years, while North Macedonia's score increased in recent years due to the change of governmental structures. Regarding the perceived *rule of law*, which captures the perceptions of various agents in society in terms of their confidence in the quality of contract enforcement, property rights, the police and courts, as well as the likelihood of crime and violence, the scores are low. Some countries, notably Serbia and Albania, have seen their perceived rule of law decline in the last few years (QoG data). Yet, the region is still currently dealing with past grievances.

Lastly, the state of violence and security of the Western Balkans region shows a mixed image. Compared to the 1990s and early 2000s, the countries seem to be experiencing less social unrest. Having said that, protests such as the so-called Colourful Revolution in North Macedonia in 2016 and the Parliament Coup in 2017; the anti-Vucic protests in Serbia in 2018 and the protests in Montenegro in the spring of 2019 in the wake of multiple corruption scandals show that the social unrest has not completely diminished.

In terms of perceived *political stability and absence of violence*, the trends show progress since the armed conflicts of the early 2000s, however, in recent years, the perceived scores are decreasing in all countries, except for Albania, which implies more fear for political instability and politically motivated violence. Lastly, infrastructure attacks are low, nonetheless, Kosovo has been affected by incidents recently - in two different instances in 2016 and two in 2017. In terms of direct violence, hostage taking and assassinations, have been less as of 2000. Yet in Kosovo, a high-level politician was killed.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This designation is without prejudice to the position on status, and is in line with the UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence. The term will be used accordingly in the rest of the report.

Moreover, the number of outgoing foreign fighters to Iraq, Syria, Crimea, Donetsk, Donbas and Lugansk has been approximated at 1500 individuals (Balkan Insight, 2014 and Balkan Insight, 2018). In addition, the Balkan migration route is assumed to have been used from one of the Paris attackers (Rothwell 2016), Serbian nationalism inspired the New Zealand attacker (Zivanovic 2019) and an Albanian has been arrested for planning an attack in a synagogue in the US as a response to the New Zealand attack (JTA and Oster 2019). Also, there is a spike of use of nationalist rhetoric used by both Serbians and Albanians regarding Kosovo. The Serbian Prime Minister recently called Albanians in a derogatory way as coming out of the woods, whereas the Albanian Prime Minister has invoked discussions regarding greater Albania (Lapsi 2018). Lastly, Serbia and Albania have been experiencing substantial numbers of immigrants and asylum seekers. In fact, the number of asylum seekers to Albania was 8664 and to Serbia was 4642 in 2017. This is much more than the other countries in the region, which showed minimal change over time. However, the number of asylum seekers has stabilized in 2017 again to less than before 2014 (Western Balkan Factsheet HCSS, 2019). Nonetheless, it is important to also note that the number of requests in 2017 were higher than in 2018, a decrease that indicates the reduction of asylum seekers emigrating to the Western Balkan region. Interestingly, the largest group of new citizens in the EU Member States in 2017 were citizens of Morocco, followed by citizens of Albania with 58.9 thousand or 7.1 % (Eurostat 2019).

Therefore, regarding domestic dynamics, there are long lasting challenges on the functioning of the political environment with decreased rule of law and high levels of corruption. Next, there are security risks arising from social unrest, political instability as well as ethno-nationalist, far right and religious (non) violent extremism. These challenges, tied to the slow economic progress, the loss of perspectives towards the EU integration and the lack of consolidation of democracies, places the region into a very complex geo-political conundrum (Bonomi and Reljic 2017).

The EU Enlargement Strategy and NATO accession processes have slowed down. This, combined with the lack of domestic progress, deepening the regions polarizations that had previously led to war, as well as higher likelihood of influence by external actors, may result into deepening insecurity, potentially violence, authoritarianism, violent extremism, migration and organized crime (drugs and human trafficking) on the EU border.

Since globalization offers stronger interconnectedness and interdependence among states, physically and online, the breeding of tensions is not confined to a single geographical area. Physical borders are no longer the only barrier to security risks and threats due to diaspora links. For example, a former foreign fighter was able to travel via Kosovo, Albania, Italy, Switzerland and France by car (Anonymous Interview, Islamic Violent Extremist, Fall 2018, Kosovo).

Overall, the region seems to be prone to insecurity and instability, and may be susceptible to (outside) influences. Therefore, the dynamics between various international influencers and the countries in the Western Balkans will be analyzed, in order to identify the influence mechanisms. Accordingly, mitigation strategies will be devised, if negative influence arises on the basis of empirical evidence.

The role of international influencers in the Western Balkans will be elaborated below.

## International Influencers

International influencers in the region vary: some promote liberal values, such as democracy, the rule of law and open society; others instigate non-democratic values focusing power on few individuals, surveillance, coercion and co-optation, depending on the nature of the state regime or non-state entities.

Broadly, it is presumed that the Western influencers, because of their democratic political regimes, represent the 'good guy', implying that the non-democratic forces represent the 'bad guy'. This stems from the democratic peace theory, proposing to promote liberal democracy worldwide as stronger democracies are supposed to result in higher levels of peace (Russett et al. 1995). This also stems from assumptions that the United States is, and will always be, the 'good guy' and that the competitors will adopt, but also lose (Nathan et al. 2016).

With the emergence of new powers that have autocratic regimes, such as China, Saudi Arabia and others, the balance of power between democratic and non-democratic powers is shifting towards the latter. In turn, alterations in political regimes of proxy states may follow. The changes of global international order and the competition between democratic and non-democratic values is also mirrored in Western Balkans.

Following the wars in the 1990s, the region experienced an influx of various international organizations, foundations and humanitarian relief organizations. The European Union (EU) increased its presence in Western Balkans. Most recently, the European Commission (EC) launched the Digital Agenda for the Western Balkans in June 2018, aiming to support the region's transition into a digital economy. The countries committed to invest in broadband connectivity (€30 million of EU grants) (European Commission 2018). However, prior to this, the EU and the Western Balkans have already been highly connected: financial aid has been as high as €8.9 billion in 2017, EU companies are the largest investors equaling 72,5% of all foreign direct investment, and the EU is Western Balkans's largest trading partner (72,8%), providing the majority of imports and exports (Council of the EU 2018b). The Western Balkans also has high direct participation in EU programs such as Erasmus+, Horizon 2020, Creative Europe and COSM (Council of the EU 2018a). Additionally, the EU provides more than €31 million to counter terrorism, next to other programs on security and rule of law, as well as assisting with €100 million on migration and humanitarian aid, and providing expertise on the ground. Two Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) missions are also based in the region (EEAS 2017). Finally, the EU contributes to media freedom as well by providing funding to networks of journalist associations, building trust in media and strengthening investigative journalism (European Parliament 2017a). The most recent enlargement agenda released by the EC in May 2019 attempts to set out a path to incorporate the Western Balkans countries in the EU.

The United States, the United Kingdom, Austria, and some Nordic countries are also pursuing major investments in the region (Anonymous Interviews, NGO Officials, Spring 2019, Kosovo). The Western oriented countries have mainly focused on ameliorating the security challenges and reconstructing the region after the wars through bilateral aid or through various programs with the support of both

international and non-governmental organizations. At the same time, other countries have also exerted their influence, through similar security and cultural instruments.

The Eastern powers such as Russia, China, Iran, Turkey and Gulf countries have also exerted their influence. Examples are provided below to illustrate their increased role in the region (the chapters will offer a full overview). The involvement of Russia and China in the region has recently taken an upward turn with increasing investment flows. Russia has had a long-standing relationship with Serbia in particular, predominantly focused on political and religious (Christian Orthodox) affairs. Both China and Russia have threatened to use and used Security Council vetoes in support of Serbia's opposition to Kosovo's independence (Krstic and Bytyci 2011). Both China and Russia have heavily invested in the region's energy industry, purchasing and upgrading power plants. Russia has also invested in oil and gas companies in the region (Hartwell and Sildo 2017). China has additionally focused on transport infrastructure and has funded projects (most importantly the Belt and Road initiative) through Chinese state banks, in all of the states in the Region. Russia on the other hand, has primarily focused on Serbia and Republika Srpska (RS). Both China and Russia have provided military equipment to the region, although China has stuck to lower-tier military equipment, whilst Russia has provided Mig-29 fighters to the Serbian Air Force (Radio Free Europe 2017). Additionally, Russia and Serbia have been conducting joint military exercises since 2016, much to the annoyance of the EU (Vasovic 2016). Religious cooperation has been quite high among the Russian and Serbian Orthodox Patriarchies as well. On a different front, both China and Russia have invested in cultural and language promotion in the region. The promotion of Chinese culture is a common feature of Chinese investment around the world and the Western Balkans region is no exception as it hosts four Confucius institutes, whereas Russia has been supporting the opening of Russian Cultural and Language Centres.<sup>3</sup> Both Russia and China have invested in deepening the links with the political elites (for example, the visits of Russia's President Putin and China's President Jinping visits to Serbia).

Iran and Turkey have longstanding ties with the Western Balkans region, predominantly with the Muslim communities. An exception to this is the recent spike in interactions between Turkey and Serbia (for more detailed descriptions on the different types of interactions, please consult the individual chapters on Iran and Turkey below). Both countries offered support to the Bosnians in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the Yugoslav wars. Iran's presence in the region is particularly tied to Bosnia's president Alija Izetbegovic, who was galvanized by the Ayatollah Khomeini's Islamic Revolution in Iran. Iran was one of the first Islamic countries providing support to Izetbegovic's rule in Bosnia, especially throughout the war, despite the UN Security Council arms embargo imposed on the belligerents in Bosnia. (G. Bardos 2013). On the other hand, the opposition forces, namely the Mujahideen e Khalq, the People's Mujahideen of Iran, are also present in the region which mirrors the Iranian competition in the region, but also the region's conflicting views on Iran. In 2013, two Iranian diplomats were expelled from Bosnia and Herzegovina due to their

<sup>3</sup> See for example: "Confucius Institutes Around the World - 2018." <https://www.digmandarin.com/confucius-institutes-around-the-world.html>

involvement in anti-Israeli terror attacks around the world (Weinthal 2013). Most importantly for the regional instability, Albania has also expelled the Iranian Ambassador and another employee of the Iranian Embassy in Tirana for “threatening the security of the country” (BBC News 2018).

When it comes to Turkey, their connections with the region are due to the Ottoman Empire. Turkey has been heavily investing in the reconstruction of Islamic infrastructure, such as mosques and educational facilities, since the end of the Yugoslav wars (Ballin, Demircan, and Siebenhaar 2017). Turkey has invested in educational facilities, including establishing colleges that promote the relationship between Turkey and the Western Balkans region (Birnbaum 2013). Turkey and Albania extensively cooperate in the military domain; Albanian soldiers serve under Turkish command in the ISAF Afghanistan mission (Lange, Nechev, and Trauner 2017). Turkey has also extensively invested in the region’s businesses and trade. Therefore, Turkey’s political, security, economic, cultural and educational cooperation with the region remains high.

Many of the Middle Eastern Gulf countries, part of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), that cluster on the Arabian Peninsula have recently increased ties and cooperation with the Western Balkans countries. Out of these countries, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have been the most involved ones. The increased involvement can be seen in downtown Sarajevo and Belgrade. Most notable has been the establishment of Al Jazeera Balkans by Qatar, (Al Jazeera 2011) the investment in mosques and religious schooling by Saudi Arabia (Pancevski 2010), and the Belgrade Waterfront project funded by the UAE (Shepard 2016). Additionally, the Serbian national air carrier is now owned by Etihad airlines, and the UAE has made noteworthy investments in the Serbian defense industry. The states from the Gulf region purchased over €561m worth of armaments from Western Balkans in 2016, supporting the arms industry (Lange, Nechev, and Trauner 2017, 54). Saudi Arabia is the largest purchaser with around 118 million worth of weapons and ammunition while the remaining were sold to Iraq, Turkey, Afghanistan, Algeria and the US. From the regional export list, Serbia leads with sales exceeding 400 million euros, followed by Bosnia with 104.3 million, Albania with 1.28 million, North Macedonia 1.21 million and Montenegro with 1.13 million (Vasovic 2018). There are major concerns about the funding of mosques by foreign powers in Western Balkans, particularly Saudi Arabia, which is frequently associated with extreme Salafist mosques in the region, as well as Saudi religious charities funding extremist organizations (Pancevski 2010). The presence of these mosques in the region has led to a departure from the more traditionally liberal interpretation of Islam in Western Balkans. Overall, the last ten years has seen a massive increase in GCC involvement in Western Balkans with beneficial economic effects for both sides, but with risks attached, especially with regard to fears of radicalization in Saudi-funded Salafist mosques. Their involvement across cultural, educational and religious activities as well as the increased political interactions in the region have raised questions regarding the long-term objectives. Now, we turn to the research design of the study.

## Research Design

The need for a deeper understanding of international influences is two-fold: it stems from both the domestic fragility in the region, as well as the heightened interest of both the Western and the Eastern powers. Defining international influencers is very challenging, therefore the topic of international influences in Western Balkan should be dealt sensitively. Firstly, international influences are ‘foreign’, and hence will promote their national strategic objectives, be it the United States, the EU and its member states or other non-democratic and semi-authoritarian countries such as Iran, China, Russia and other countries such as the GCC countries. The intra-regional influences (including Croatia) will not be analyzed in this report as it falls outside the scope of the current research question focusing on international influences originating outside of the region. Thus, the international influences can be both positive and negative, some promoting democratic principles, whereas others promoting anti-democratic principles. It is especially significant to understand the latter, as the Western Balkan region’s *progress* may be hindered and the risks to *return to authoritarianism* and potentially *conflict* rise. The authoritarian influencers can result into the Western Balkan countries mirroring the political regimes of the anti-democratic influencers. This in turn poses risks to NATO, the European Union and its member states. According to a local academic, the main inclination of the international donors from the West is to focus on the foreign influences, such as Russia and China, rather than the United States or the EU without good arguments on why they focus on Eastern influencers and not the Western influencers (Anonymous Interview, Spring 2019, Kosovo). Moreover, the term foreign influence is viewed by the local researcher as a research agenda “to justify the *failures of the international community* by *diverting the attention* to foreign influences” (Anonymous Interview, Spring 2019, Kosovo). The interviewee also alluded that the foreign influences i.e. of Russia/China/GCC are non-existent in comparison with the Western influence. In addition, the interviewee argued that researching only one stream of influence may result in limited conclusions as studying only 1% of few international influencers, then it may make these influencers seem bigger such as “100% of the influence” (Anonymous Interview, Spring 2019, Kosovo). This local critique, which is prevalent in other interviews, calls for more comparative research on the role of both the Western influencers and the Eastern influencers rather than focusing only on the latter. Therefore, a comparative analysis is provided investigating how both the Western and the Eastern influencers impact progress in the region.

Despite the central role of influential powers contributing to the maintenance of peace in Western Balkan, some concerns regarding their role when projecting power in the region are raised as well. Various tools seem to have been used to project power through soft power instruments, but also sometimes through hybrid threats and identity politics. Therefore, this study provides an in-depth analysis of the influence of international power in the Western Balkans region by shedding more light on *the extent and depth of influential powers’ involvement* in the region. More specifically, it provides an analysis of how influential powers use various *foreign policy tools* – whether military/security, economic, political/diplomatic or cultural/religious – in the region and how it *impacts communities* on the ground, the EU and the enlargement processes (both NATO and the EU).<sup>4</sup> Moreover, questions such as why

<sup>4</sup> There are four foreign policy instruments that are classified: the political (propaganda), diplomatic, economic and military instruments. See: (Lasswell, 1958 p.202). All FP instruments

these powers invest in the region as well are taken into account. For instance, various Gulf states and China are building ports around the Horn of Africa, which is a strategic area. Thus, the question of what is the justification for entering into the Western Balkans becomes key? Is it representing a new strategic area, a backdoor to Europe, or something else? And why would for instance the Europe Union or KSA need to be alert if Qatar becomes more influential? And why would their activities be seen as destabilizing? In the eyes of who? And are these new influencers deliberately trying to overtake the West by design, or is this by accident?

On the basis of the various perspectives of the analysis and measurements of influence, the Eastern Powers project their influence on Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia in various spheres. The countries exerting influence and analyzed in this study are: the People's Republic of China, the Russian Federation, Turkey, the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Gulf Cooperation Council States: the Kingdom of Bahrain, the Sultanate of Oman, Kuwait, Qatar, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Due to low levels of influence exerted, the Kingdom of Bahrain and the Sultanate of Oman are not featured in this study, and their influence is not individually analyzed on a country level.

Despite various research conducted on the role of Russia in the region, such as the book by Dimitar Bechev on *Rival Power: Russia's Influence in Southeast Europe* (2017), and several publications from various think tanks (RAND, ECFR), the findings derived from interviews point to their increased role in the region vis-a-vis other countries. As such, the case study of Russia has been added to the study pointing out new directions for further research. Lastly, the role of the so-called Eastern powers is compared to the Western influential powers in the Western Balkans region to derive informed and balanced debates on foreign influences discussions.

Hence, the study addresses the following central research question: *What is the perceived and objective impact of various influential powers' foreign policy tools on political stability in Western Balkans?* Answering the question requires an analysis of various local actors in Western Balkans as well as of the influential powers. This will allow for a comparison of influential powers' impact through various foreign policy instruments on different states/case studies: BiH, the Republic of Kosovo, Albania, Serbia, North Macedonia and Montenegro. It also explores the dissonant views among various communities within those states. Sub-questions include:

- What are the perceived ends of influential powers' (the West, Russia, China, Iran, Turkey and GCC countries) foreign policy in Western Balkans, from the influential powers' perspective?

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are used in the report, respectively political, military and economic classifications, however a separate category religious is added in cases that are relevant as well as cultural that could sometimes be understood as diplomatic as well.

- How do the foreign policy mechanisms (economic, security, political, religious and cultural) of different influential powers impact various states and communities in Western Balkans?
- What drives certain local communities towards influential powers' in the region?
- How do citizens of the various countries regard the different influential powers compared with the role of the Western countries and IOs: NATO and EU?
- What are the perceived challenges in the foreign policy of the influential powers, if any? If negative, how can they be addressed?
- What does the new role of Turkey and its changing relation to Russia in the region mean for the strategic interests of the European Union (EU) and NATO? In what areas does Turkey have a comparative advantage over these other actors? And, in what areas the Eastern powers (China and Russia), GCC and Iran have comparative advantage over the European Union (EU) and NATO?

The central objective with this research is to expand the established thinking about influential powers' foreign policy in Western Balkans, in order to inform a set of innovative and empirically grounded recommendations on peace and security policies in Western Balkans. It aims to serve as a catalyst for opening a research policy debate, which gives greater consideration to local contexts vis-à-vis influential powers and to thereby inform academic analyses and practitioners policies. It also aims to implement a socially innovative approach to foreign policy through using life story interviews to uncover the perceptions of local communities regarding influential powers and their perceived impact. Moreover, the study provides recommendations on how to prevent negative (un)intended consequences of influential powers' foreign policy, if any, through developing a portfolio of policy options on how to potentially address the vulnerabilities of specific Western Balkans countries to interference of influential powers. Furthermore, the study attempts to increase awareness regarding the potential risks that may arise from the negative (un)intended consequences of international influencers in the Western Balkan region and explores in-depth the potential impact of these interferences on Europe and the Netherlands, specifically in the security domain.

Methodologically, the report utilizes a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative and qualitative research methods. It combines qualitative (life story interviews with local and international authorities) and quantitative methods based on the following datasets: *Formal Bilateral Influence Capacity dataset*, *Integrated Conflict Early Warning System (ICEWS)*, *Temporally Extended, Regular, Reproducible International Event Records (TERRIER)*, the Phoenix Dataset, and *Global Database of Events, Language, and Tone (GDELT)*. The latter database is a big data tool used to measure the interactions between states and inform the recent trends of influential powers in the Western Balkans region, whereas the FBIC Index is used to measure the long-term influence trends. Lifestories Database is utilized for the report as well which contains more than 300 interviews with local communities (governments, NGOs, academia, journalists and community representatives) as well as international

officials and regional experts to provide in-depth analysis of influential powers' foreign policy in Western Balkans and uncover communities' voices. Since both quantitative and qualitative methods have their shortcomings, they are both used to corroborate the findings, and ideally point to new research questions and inform policymaking with evidence-based research.

## Conclusion

The most external research focuses on either the role of Russia or on terrorism, while Turkey's role receives little attention (Anonymous Interview, NGO Official, Fall 2016, Kosovo). Therefore, this study will shed some light on how external interferences by *influential powers* in a multipolar world order – including those propagated by the East (Russia and China), Turkey, Iran and the Gulf countries– are likely to affect influence the stability and democratic processes in the Western Balkans and its contested zones. The impact of influential powers in the Western Balkans has potentially profound implications for the future of the region and Europe, as the Western Balkan's discontent surrounding the challenges in potentially join the 'West' – the EU and NATO in particular (varying per country) – continue to manifest. In order to gain a better understanding of influential powers' hybrid grand strategy, the study analyzes the impact of influential powers' foreign policy instruments (economic, military/security, political and cultural/religious) in the Western Balkans region, and will include an overview of how influential powers impact the countries in Western Balkans in each sphere of influence and how to best address the (un)intended negative consequences. The main concepts that will be used across the chapters for the analysis are hybrid threats, identity politics and geopolitics.

This section will be followed by a chapter outlining the theoretical approaches and the methodology. Afterwards, the chapters outlining the case studies, influential powers role in all the Western Balkans countries, respectively The United Arab Emirates, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, Iran, China, Russia and Turkey. They are structured in the following way. In the beginning, the long-term trends of influence are presented followed by the recent trends based on the quantitative datasets. Afterwards, we delve deeper into various spheres of influence: economic, political, religious, security, cultural and social based on literature review, news outlets, usage of quantitative datasets and the Lifestory Interview Database. Some of the chapters may lack an analysis of one of the spheres of influence since there have not been significant relationships between the influential powers and the countries in the Western Balkans in that respective spheres of influence. After the case studies, the chapter on the Western influences in the Western Balkans outlines that Western influence and compares it to the other Eastern influences. Lastly, final remarks and a few policy recommendations are provided.

The following section outlines theoretical concepts, such as hybrid threats, identity politics and so on, that are used to understand the significance of international influencers in terms of aims, mechanisms of influence and responses.

## Theoretical Approaches

It is important to unwrap the theoretical models that are used in the study to understand the geopolitical influences in the Western Balkans region, across different foreign policy instruments; political, economic, security/military and religious/cultural. As discussed above, various influencers use various instruments which can be analyzed in terms of hybrid threats, politicians' warfare and geopolitics. For example, the cyberattack in Kosovo on December 2018 represents one of these incidents that can be analyzed from the theoretical lens below, namely the hybrid threats. The Kosovo MFA Tweets claim that the cyberattack originated from Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, while other sources claim also North Macedonia. It is important to note that North Macedonia, the town of Velez, is the fake news hub used during the US election campaign which spread pro-Trump misinformation. Russia is known to be a prime exporter of fake news globally that may have influenced the town of Velez. This poses new political warfare in the Western Balkans that has not been encountered. Therefore, the following sections will outline the main concepts used across the study of hybrid threats, identity politics and geopolitics.

## The Significance of Countering Hybrid Threats and Political Warfare

The nature of warfare is constantly evolving from interstate to intrastate. For example, there were 27 intrastate armed conflicts and only one interstate conflict in 2011 (UCDP). Whereas, in 2016, 47 intrastate conflicts and 2 interstate conflicts. In fact, it is argued that the intrastate conflicts between ethnic, tribal, religious or political groups will intensify and increase (Frunzeti 2013). It is important to note that the number of armed struggles in the world declined slightly from 52 in 2015 to 49 in 2016, 14 percent fewer people died in 2016 as a direct result of violent conflicts than in 2015, however 2016 was the fifth most violent year in the world since the end of the Cold War. For the next five years, the number of conflicts in the world is expected to remain somewhere between 30 and 40 (Dupuy et al. 2017). In today's wars, distinguishing between insurgents and civilians has become more difficult, which makes the response more complicated to respond, and as well on time by both the local or international actors (Munteanu 2015).

The security challenges arising from hybrid wars and hybrid threats are high on the security agenda in Europe and globally (Bachmann et al. 2018). The concept of hybrid threats is a fixture of the security environment. "*Subduing the enemy without fighting*", known also as "*supreme art of war*", was already mentioned by the Chinese military strategist Sun Tzu in the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. (ibid). Hybrid threats are often conflated with hybrid warfare, hybrid conflicts, hybrid tactics, hybrid confrontations and hybrid operations. While there are some definitions for hybrid threats, it is argued that there is a lack of impetus to come to a consensus about its definition as doing so may hinder counter measures, therefore responses should be preferably based on the current manifestations of hybrid threats (EEAS 2018). The term hybrid threat was coined in 2002 during the Chechen insurgency and mainly linked to Russia, and it was used for the Crimea annexation and Donbass region as well (Popescu 2015a). However, other academics argue that it has also been used during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, the Cold War during the 1980s and Hezbollah against Israel in 2006 but it was not labelled as such (ibid). But the Russian invasions altered the

security debate as hybrid operations were used for the first time by a state actor (ibid). It is viewed as a highly effective form of warfare, which poses complex challenges to the EU and NATO members as well as their neighbors.

The very word 'hybrid' refers to the variety of diplomatic, informational, military, economic/financial and legal instruments (often abbreviated as DIMEL<sub>4</sub>) that may be employed to affect elements of a targeted country's society with the so-called PMESIIP factors (political/governance, military, economic, social, infrastructure, information and physical environment). With probing actions, the defenses and resilience of the target countries are tested. Shaping actions prepare the ground for possible future 'hot' confrontations (Bekkers, Meessen, and Lassche 2019). The most prominent example of a hybrid threat is Russia's '4D' approach: Dismiss, Distort, Distract and Dismay. The main idea behind it is to not confess and admit, rather raise confusion and keep on attacking (EEAS 2018).

While there is a lack of definition regarding hybrid threats, some *characteristics* are outlined. Hybrid threats are characterized by their asymmetrical nature, horizontal and vertical escalation in multi and cross sector domains. They are typically ambiguous, blurred, and attempt to undermine trust. This places the decision-makers into a *fait accompli* and into risk dilemmas of action-inaction (Bekkers, Meessen, and Lassche 2019). The main aim is to use a wide range of power instruments to coerce an opponent to achieve one's political objectives. The EU considers that "[h]ybrid threats combine conventional and unconventional, military and non-military activities that can be used in a coordinated manner by state or non-state actors to achieve specific political objectives" (EEAS 2018, 1). The hybrid threats aim also to "*undermine public trust in government institutions or deepen [...] social divisions*" (EEAS 2018). More concretely, "*Full-scale information warfare... (is) aimed at devaluing the most important currency in democracies - trust - and thus upending the ability of governments to function*" (Klimburg 2017). Exploiting social vulnerabilities is key (Kremidas-Courtney 2019). These threats target critical vulnerabilities of the adversaries '*seek[ing] to create confusion to hinder swift and effective decision making*' (EEAS 2018, 1). For example, Russia's seizure of Crimea obscured attribution to Russia, which also aimed at paralyzing and delaying the Western responses (Hoffman 2016, 22-36). A similar example has been seen in the case of attempting to misuse the United Nations system of privileges and immunities by Russia, when a Russian UNMIK official attempted to halt a police raid on organized crime in the north of Kosovo. The two UNMIK staffers with their cars were part of the barricade that Serbian local citizens made, that police had to remove to successfully execute the operation (Begisholli 2019). This aimed to paralyze decision making by the Kosovo government due to the UN's employees' immunities and privileges. This represents a gray zone conflict: A set of interconnected activities to achieve decisive results through moving gradually towards its objectives (Mazarr J. 2015), and *ambiguous warfare* where the state actor remains below the threshold of use of military forces (ibid). A relevant concept is also the *fait accompli*, which describes a quick, limited grab of power to demonstrate control before anyone can react (ibid). The usage of unconventional tools represents 'a new standard form of conflict' (ibid, 4). The threats are usually unique, context dependent (ibid), and therefore, adaption is crucial (ibid).

Hybrid threats as such fall short of hybrid warfare, but if they are not detected or responded to, hybrid warfare can ensue (Saarelainen, 2019). Thus, once the targeted country becomes weak, then the use of conventional or paramilitary forces follows

(Kremidas-Courtney 2019). The involvement of the *local population* is key in hybrid warfare (NATO Review 2015). They are highly integrated and part of a strategic plan (Bachmann et al. 2018). *Destabilization* of a functioning state and *polarization* of the society is also significant (ibid). Another characteristic is that hybrid warfare is assumed always to have an inter-state dimension, albeit that at least one side uses proxies or other indirect means of warfare in one way or another (Bekkers and Oosterveld 2015). It is also dangerous as it is easy and cheap to launch for external aggressors, but costly in various ways for the defenders (Popescu 2015b). These threats pose systemic challenges to countries that are at the receiving end of hybrid warfare and the US's position and authority (Freier 2016), and it will be the most common resistance activity to counter the US (ibid). The threats posed to the US may be extended to the rest of the Western states as well. Methods to successfully implement hybrid threats vary. Targeting *critical infrastructures* is often used, such as cyberattacks on critical information systems to *disrupt* the functioning of the state (energy, financial services) and others (Saarelainen, 2019).<sup>5</sup> Among other methods are influencing *information and propaganda*, economic and trade related blackmail, undermining international institutions by rendering rules ineffective, terrorism, increasing insecurity (border incidents like airspace violations without admission, talking about legitimate interests, immigration questions), and so on (Saarelainen, 2019). However, for hybrid warfare, *psychological operations and information warfare* are key. *Criminal behavior* is used as well (Hoffman 2009; as cited in Jacobs and Lasconjarias 2015, 2). The threats posed by information warfare are tremendous:

“The threat of the information warfare narrative, with the overtones of ‘all information is a weapon,’ is one of the *most dangerous challenges facing democratic society* as a whole, for it threatens to make everything, including free speech and basic human rights, the battleground... at worst it would mean not simply a loss of national prestige or a shattering of alliances but even a *fundamental weakening of democracy* itself [emphasis added]” (Klimburg 2017, 129).

Most importantly, the significance of *non-military means* to achieve strategic objectives has been acknowledged among NATO member states in a Joint Publication 1-02 (Bekkers and Oosterveld 2015). The influence over the *population* seems to be the key: “a violent struggle among state and non-state actors for *legitimacy and influence* over the relevant population(s)” (Department of Defence 2007). It is essential to understand that legitimacy and influence cannot be won by force alone (Bekkers and Oosterveld 2015). Irregular forces try to achieve control over the population. Hybrid warfare increases the importance of *perceptions* by involving the population into the conflict (Murray and Mansoor R. 2012). This, combined with *modern communications* such as the Internet, television, and radio, amplify the transmission rates of propaganda and public information (ibid). The information war supplements the military actions, swaying ‘perceptions of both their own people and the enemy's population’ (ibid). As counterinsurgency expert John McCuen points out, the battle over *competing narratives* plays out among three audiences: the indigenous

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<sup>5</sup> Terrorism is also viewed by some academics as part of hybrid threats which is contentious as terrorism is much broader as a concept.

population, the home front of the great power, and the wider international community (McCuen, 1966). Great powers risk losing conflicts in which they fail to understand either the *human terrain* (understanding local populations) or the “decisive battlegrounds of *public opinion at home and abroad*” (Murray and Mansoor R. 2012). Most importantly, China and Russia refrain from applying international law on cyber domain, as ‘essentially, these nations consider cyber a means to control and influence populations, rather than simply an expansion of the conventional toolkit of war and espionage’ (Klimburg 2017, 126).

While hybrid threats and warfare are useful concepts for understanding international influencers, the concept of *political warfare*, which is similar to the former concepts, presents another lens which seems also to refer to politics described as:

“the intentional use of one or more of the traditional instruments of national power (diplomatic, informational, military, and economic) to affect the political composition or decision-making within another state” (Pronk 2018b)

Political warfare is seen as the expression of international relations in today’s competitive and polarized world (ibid). It is used outside the context of traditional war. Often it is understood in the West as a gray zone or hybrid warfare, in Russia as a new generation warfare, whereas in China as unrestricted warfare (ibid). The key characteristics are: (i) employs all the elements of national power, (ii) relies heavily on unattributed forces and means, (iii) stays below the legal threshold of an open armed conflict, (iv) extends traditional conflict and can achieve effects at lower costs, (v) *exploits shared ethnic or religious bonds or other internal issues*, and (vi) detection requires a heavy investment of intelligence resources.

In all concepts, disinformation campaigns can be employed to achieve national objectives (Bachmann et al. 2018). Disinformation campaigns can have a short-term objective, such as trying to influence an election outcome, or a long-term objective, such as trying to undermine trust in the EU (Bendiek and Schulze 2019). Moreover, globalization and technological progress have resulted in increased vulnerabilities (Bachmann et al. 2018). *Disinformation* is considered as one of the most powerful political weapons in today’s international order, and a critical tool of hybrid warfare and military deception (ibid). The main aim is to reduce the credibility of politicians and governments and disrupt the functioning of democratic institutions or the media. It also functions by trial and error, and is tailored to every target country (Van der Putten, et al. 2018). The internet revolutionized modern warfare (Turk 2019). Political language is designed to make lies sound truthful (ibid). Publications of news can be done by anyone and can be easily boosted. 40 percent of the traffic into fake news sites comes from social media (ibid). Disinformation spreads mainly through Facebook, which as a platform, decides which 10 percent of all the news viewers would see (ibid).

In terms of countries, Russia and China engage in hybrid warfare to change the balance of power in various ways (van der Putten, et al. 2018). Most importantly, China is also fixated on this type of war (Klimburg 2017). However, China usually focuses mainly on gradual, long term aims and does not aim at destabilization (ibid). Whereas Russia’s hybrid warfare aims to weaken NATO, subvert pro-Western

governments, annex territories and create pretexts for war (Chivvis 2017). Therefore, in this study, it is inquired also whether other influencers are as well employing hybrid threats and warfare in Western Balkan. Hybrid warfare seems to be redefined in relation to the characteristics of each new conflict (Popescu 2015a). Therefore, this raises questions on whether hybrid warfare will be redefined again with interventions in Western Balkan. Now, we move to the second concept that is critical to understand the influencers role in Western Balkan.

## The Significance of Identity Politics in Post Conflict Zones

Traditional warfare, internal and international conflicts, violent extremism, next to nuclear and cyber warfare, remain the main threats to international peace and security. However, globalization, global migration flows and changes in demographics, as well as economic volatilities and climate change are also factors to undermine the stability of countries or regions. In fact, the changing demographic weight of the developed countries, where there is an aging workforce that demands migrant workers, dropped 25% in the West, thus shifting the economic power to developing countries. Moreover, the population is increasing in the poorest countries (Frunzeti 2013). With such shifts in power and identities, and especially with migration, identity alterations follow.

Increased use of identity politics leads to conflict, and if not countered appropriately, it can lead to escalations and war (Prague Security Studies Institute 2019e, 4). Conflicts can be initiated by leaders exploiting *sectarian tensions for personal political benefit* or strengthening their legitimacy by appeals to *nationalism* (Hoffman 2016). The same can be applied to misuse of religion. Huntington argues that the clash of civilizations will occur due to both geopolitics and identity. The conflicts are most likely to erupt between religiously defined “civilizations” in particular between Christianity and Islam (Huntington 1993). Huntington’s thesis is viewed as one of the most controversial and disputed claims in the realm of international politics, as there is minimal support for the clash of civilizations hypothesis. However, Huntington’s hypothesis still holds true, to a certain extent. Muslims favor religious political leaders (read: authoritarian) more than Christians. In a survey conducted in 86 nations (Breznau et al. 2001). Muslims have scored higher on their preferences towards more authoritarian leaders. Overall, big variations appear among nations in the degree to which their citizens show preference towards religious political leaders. Muslim majority nations are the most supportive. Christian majority nations, despite more differences, are overall much less supportive of religious political leaders.

However, the clash of individual beliefs, most notably between secular and devout individuals, as well as whether the status of the state is developing, transitional economy or developed state explain these differences between different “civilizations”. More important factors in the determination as to why conflicts arise are education, degree of government corruption and the shift of political ideology (most notably from communism to democracy). To return to the case studies of the Western Balkans region, these factors are present which calls for caution when engaged in the region. Similarly, it has been argued that the potential to relapse to war is an imaginable scenario, especially due to the high usage of identity politics (Chrzová et al. 2019).

Identity is very complex. While most of the conflict is often viewed in terms of economics, in fact often it is about identity. Fukuyama identifies various assumptions underlying the modern concept of identity, which he finds extremely important in world politics. Identity is based on distinction between inner and outer self, where the former is more important than social arrangements and constructs. *Dignity* is a crucial aspect underlying the inner self which relies on *moral freedom*, which is universal to all humans. This needs to be recognized as such. People need to feel that their dignity is *accepted, acknowledged* and that they are seen as *capable* of sharing political power. In the past, people were supposed to suppress and hide their dignity. These issues are seemingly economic or political, but they are mostly about being recognized and having one's identity accepted (Fukuyama 2018). Identity issues have been prominent throughout history.

*Nationalism and religion* are crucial concepts in the formation of identity (Fukuyama, 2018). Francis Fukuyama argues that because identity is not economic per se, it is not *rational* or negotiable, people are very *emotional*, anger follows and people find it more important than anything else. For example, suicide bombers from Kamikazes to Muslim extremists, find dying as a hero very important, even though it is irrational from every traditional decision-making model. Among methods for spreading international influence, it is religion and culture that may have the greatest impact, because they create a broad and long-term impact among the local population. External actors then utilize these religious and cultural links as a double-edged sword, using their popularity in local communities to ensure continued cooperation with local politicians in Western Balkan (Prague Security Studies Institute 2019, 3). Moreover, sociologists and anthropologists argue that identity is largely a social construct, creating imagined communities, hence alterations of the identities in the Western Balkan region are likely.

It is argued that compromises on identity are difficult, therefore people need to be recognized fully rather than partially (Fukuyama 2018). This makes it very difficult to stabilize situations and political tension until the quest for recognition and dignity is over. However, in many cases there is no outcome whereby both sides are satisfied, therefore increasing recognition for one group might result in less recognition for the other. Therefore, it is argued that similar mechanisms apply to religious and national identity as well. *Globalization* makes identity challenges even more pressing, since the way how people interact with each other is changing and intensifying, hence making friction more likely (Fukuyama 2018).

Identity politics are extremely complex in the Western Balkan. The states in the Western Balkan region have always struggled with identity issues, and identity has always played a key role in political processes. Starting from the Ottoman Empire, which ruled over all six countries in the region, to struggles for acceptance of a pan-European identity, the concepts of statehood, ethnicity, nationality, language and religion have been severely intertwined. For example, attempting to maintain Albanians within Serbian territory against their will led to the mobilization and the independence of Kosovo. However, the result of nation-building in Kosovo is considered by some academics to have failed due to the elite-led mobilization for their own personal interests and misuse of democratic political discourse, while other academics argue that Kosovo's nation building has not completely failed due to the state's recognition, the ICJ's decision on the status and the integration of minorities in the southern area of Kosovo. Most importantly, the political system that has emerged

in Kosovo is deeply marked by the *ethnic national cleavages*. Moreover, the interests of the ethnic elites in Kosovo are never entirely or sufficiently compatible with the objectives of a liberal democratic nation based on methodological individualism (subjective individual's motivation) and the political interests of international presence (A. Rama 2019). This argument could be extended to the rest of the region as well, such as in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Albania. Moreover, everything in Western Balkan is inextricably interlinked, and if Serbs in the north were to secede from Kosovo, this could encourage secessionist demands (Clark 2014), in Republika Srpska, Vojvodina and North Macedonia. A significant number of Albanian minorities live in the Preševo Valley area of South Serbia but also in the northern and western parts of North Macedonia, potentially instigating secessionist demands.

North Macedonia has struggled with the notion of identity, with the acceptance of national minorities, most notably with the Albanian minority, in the early 2000s and with the internal armed conflict, which still to this day leads to tensions with regards to the use of language, religion and politics. On a different front, the name dispute with Greece, ultimately culminating with the change of the constitutional name of the country, as well as the disputes over historical figures and language with Bulgaria, have caused a deep divide between ethnic Macedonians themselves.

Serbia is also experiencing an identity battle on multiple fronts: the acceptance of the sovereignty and independence of Kosovo, the question of the Muslim minority in Sandzak region and the relations between the different minorities in Vojvodina and Presevo Valley. Kosovo is in a dispute with Serbia regarding independence. Furthermore, the instability in Republika Srpska is both a struggle for Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (and partially Croatia). Bosnia and Herzegovina is also struggling with its own "tripartite" identity, shared between the Bosniak Muslims, ethnic Serbs and Croats.

In Montenegro, the longing for strong national identity has resulted in the officialization of the Montenegrin language as an official language of the country, which was traditionally called "our language", "mother tongue" or simply referred to as Serbian, in addition to the establishment of the Montenegrin Orthodox Church.

In Albania, identity politics is quite crucial as the opening of the country after communism raises questions regarding the reintroduction of religion into society, where the majority of the population identifies as Muslim with 2.5% identified as atheist. Nationalism and nationalist ideologies have been a historical feature of nearly all government establishments of the region.

Recently, all across the Western Balkans, the notion of European identity has also arisen. There has been a rise in Euroscepticism and rejection of European values, as they are viewed as "non-traditional" or "too progressive", which can be viewed as problematic vis a vis the aspirations of the six states towards the European Union, and for some, such as North Macedonia, towards NATO. Now, we move to the third concept that is useful to understand the influencers role in the Western Balkan region, namely geopolitics.

## The Significance of Geopolitics

The processes in the Western Balkans region have historically been shaped by geopolitics, which can be analyzed through balance of power, realism and soft power. Joseph Nye coined the term 'soft power', arguing that it is "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payment" through "culture, values and foreign policies [...] to obtain preferred outcomes" (2004, x). This is perceived to be an effective method, and some argue that it can reinforce 'hard power' capabilities (ibid, 11).

According to realism, where the balance of power theory is central, states need to be prepared for violence at home and abroad. Because some states are prepared to use force, other states must always be prepared to do so as well (Morgenthau 1963; Waltz 2010, 102–28). The balance of power tends to form whether some or all states consciously or unconsciously aim to establish and maintain a balance, or whether some or all states aim for universal domination. The changing balance of power from a bipolar to a multipolar global order, with the decrease of the US power, results in a shift and creates new uncertainties. The great power competition is significant for the future of peace and stability, as major theater war can occur if the Great Power conflict is inevitable. While the US military budgets are reduced by about 25 percent, the military spending in Asia is greater than total spending in Europe. In addition, conflicts can be initiated by leaders exploiting *sectarian tensions for personal interests* (Hoffman 2016, 25–36). Therefore, the increase of military spending in Asia compared to the West (Europe and US), combined with *personally invested leadership*, represents threats in long term to the current peace and stability, also in Western Balkans due to the refocus of the West towards Asia. The potential of interstate war exists and is arguably increasing. The first step to counter it is recognizing a growing danger through understanding the complex challenges and threats that states face (Hoffman 2016).

Moreover, proxy wars are often employed to pursue geopolitical interests. For instance, the Middle East is one of the most complex regions globally, where proxy wars have historically been employed. Moreover, the West sees Russia's involvement in Ukraine crisis as a proxy war, while the West also employs its own groups and Moscow others, and each of them view their groups as legitimate (Munteanu 2015). In the Western Balkan, hybrid threats and warfare has been witnessed in Montenegro, North Macedonia, BiH, Kosovo and Serbia, where the role of Russia was or is prominent. The role of other external influencers will be also analyzed in depth in the case studies in which this conceptual lens will be applied.

However, criticism has been raised toward the geopolitical framework from the peacebuilding approaches. Accordingly, shortcomings derive from the inability to think beyond fixed *boundaries* and state sovereignty in the current times of globalization, and a belief in the primacy of *geo-strategic and geo-economic* order and hierarchy under the current terms of global governance. Moreover, the support for critically dysfunctional, but relatively orderly regimes, such as Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, undermined the legitimacy of the liberal system. There is also an inability to deal consistently with the free mobility of ideas, capital and people, especially in the face of new technological developments (Richmond and Ginty 2019, 610). Nonetheless, it is crucial to note that the development of technology is not sufficient to win wars in the future (Munteanu 2015).

While this section provided the theoretical lenses that are critical for understanding the influencers in the Western Balkan region, now we turn to the section outlining the methodology of the study. The next chapter describes the methodology that is used for the study.

## Methodology

Methodologically, the report utilizes a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative and qualitative research methods. It combines qualitative (life story interviews with local and international authorities) and quantitative methods based on the following datasets: Formal Bilateral Influence Capacity, Integrated Conflict Early Warning System (ICEWS), Temporally Extended, Regular, Reproducible International Event Records (TERRIER), the Phoenix Dataset, and Global Database of Events, Language, and Tone (GDEL). The latter database is a big data tool. The quantitative data analysis will use structural and dynamic data on influential powers' Foreign Policy instruments based on diverse sources that HCSS has access to, using its HCSS Datawarehouse and several models feed with open source big data. They are used to measure the *interactions* between states to inform the recent trends of influential powers in the Western Balkans region. However, the FBIC Index is used to measure the long-term influence trends in the Western Balkans region. Most importantly, the report employs qualitatively, a minimum of 100 life story interviews with local communities (governments, NGOs, IOs, academia, journalists and community representatives) as well as IR and regional experts to provide in-depth analysis of influential powers' foreign policy in Western Balkans. Since both quantitative and qualitative methods have their shortcomings, they are both used to corroborate the findings, and ideally point to evidence-based conclusions and new research questions.

### Quantitative Methods: Influence Measurement

This report aims to measure the influence of external state actors in Western Balkans. Firstly, it is necessary to conceptualize 'influence'. Our conceptualization adheres to that of the Formal Bilateral Influence Capacity (FBIC) Index, from which we extracted our quantitative measures of state influence. We conceptualize influence as a "force that transforms into power when actor A actively (and successfully) utilizes it to modify the behavior of actor B [...] the relationship between power and influence is best captured as a hierarchy in which influence is the general concept, and power is the conscious manifestation of influence" (Moyer et al. 2018, 6). Therefore, influence is possessing the potential to dictate the behavior of another (state) actor, and which manifests itself as power when this influence is actively used to alter behavior. The potential to dictate behavior comes from possessing resources (economic, political and/or security means), as well as "relational, context-specific dynamics between countries A and B" (Moyer et al. 2018, 7). In addition, "[b]ecause of the array of potential types of influence and its context specificity, the concept of influence is best expressed in terms of state A's potential capacity to influence state B rather than through the analysis of actual outcomes." (Moyer et al. 2018)

The FBIC Index contains bilateral measures of the formal economic, political and security *influence capacity* of states worldwide from 1963 to 2016 (unfortunately no data is available after 2016 as of yet). It is comprised of 42 indicators with over 200 million individual observations. The measure of influence consists of two sub-indices: Bandwidth and Dependence. The former measures "the extent of the connection between two countries reflected in the volume of shared economic, political, and security interactions" (Moyer et al. 2018, 8). This measures the absolute size and

number of “connection points” between two states in all three of the potential spheres of influence. The latter measure, Dependence, assesses the strength of the connections based on the flow of resources in each direction, or “the degree to which an ‘influencee’ relies on an influencer for crucial economic and security assets” (ibid).<sup>6</sup> Economic dependence is assessed by measuring the “importance of a flow relative to that total inflow for a country”, while security dependence is “the importance of a flow relative to the aggregate economic or military capacity of the country” (ibid). The FBIC Index therefore is calculated through both the Bandwidth and Dependence sub-indices, enabling an overall measure of influence in the economic, political and security spheres (ibid, 9–10).

The data used from the FBIC Index cover the time period between 1984 until 2016. This ensures the assessment of the long-term trends of influence, aiming to capture changes (i) before the fall of the Soviet Union and afterwards, (ii) before and during the war phase, and (iii) the peace and state building phase. Due to the lack of data after 2016, the lifestories are used to further explain the recent developments together with the datasets below focusing on interactions measurement. Additionally, various other qualitative and quantitative sources are used to create an evidence-based answer to the research question.

## Quantitative Methods: Interactions Measurement

In order to assess the relationship between the influencee and influencer in Western Balkans, this study compiles four databases to create an overview of the interactions between the countries in question and the content and tone of these interactions. The following databases have been used: *Global Database of Events, Language, and Tone* (GDEL), *Integrated Conflict Early Warning System* (ICEWS), *Temporally Extended, Regular, Reproducible International Event Records* (TERRIER) and the Phoenix Dataset. In this study, the events are analyzed according to the source country (influencer) and target country (influencee). The events are normalized compared to the total amount of events for that period in order to assess the relative importance of the story. These datasets assess the language tone and category of the event. The *language tone* in the event datasets is the kind of the interaction, which is measured on the *Goldstein scale*, from conflict (-10) to cooperation (10). Another important category is the *event type*, which categorizes events in different groups, such as “state visit” or “Appeal for easing of administrative sanctions”. These event types are then automatically analyzed to yield: Material Conflict, Verbal Conflict, Neutral, Verbal Cooperation and Material Cooperation. The datasets are explained below.

GDEL is an open-source (big data) database released in 2013, which covers millions of full-text newspaper articles (that go back as far as 1979) and applies different coding, as well as natural language processing and machine translating to over 50,000 sources in over 100 languages. This allows GDEL to be the most extensive event database in the world, which is both an advantage and a disadvantage

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<sup>6</sup> The Dependence sub-index does not include any political indicators.

since the quality of the data due to misreading of the algorithm can be lower, while the large size of the dataset partially offsets this (HCSS - Strat Base n.d.). Due to its size of over 750 million events, it is the main event dataset used in this report (GDEL T n.d.). However, there are some shortcomings regarding the usage of GDEL T. Unfortunately, much of the conflict material classification of news stories in North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina seems to be the result of miscoding, since the automated article reading tool of the database, mostly GDEL T, makes occasional errors in the identification and categorization of news sources. Therefore, the remaining gaps of the quantitative methods are complemented by the life-story interviews, which, for example, explain in depth Saudi Arabia's influence in the region.

The Integrated Crisis Early Warning System (ICEWS) is maintained by Lockheed Martin and has recently been made available for public use. The "program is a comprehensive, integrated, automated, generalizable, and validated system to monitor, assess, and forecast national, sub-national, and internal crises" (ICEWS n.d.). It uses mostly larger news organizations, but a lesser number of them around 300 news outlets, resulting in a dataset of over 45 million stories. However, the fact that the dataset only reads sources in English, Arabic, Spanish and Portuguese can be problematic given our geographical focus (ibid).

The Temporally Extended, Regular, Reproducible International Event Records (TERRIER) dataset is produced by a team from the University of Oklahoma. The dataset has over 200 million news stories from over 500 news sources from around the world. These sources are machine-read and produced 60 million news stories from 1976 to 2016 (Terrier n.d.).

Phoenix is an open source event database, maintained by Open Event Data Alliance, a US based non-profit dedicated to event data using around 380 news sources (OEDA Datasets). Due to its open source nature, all of the underlying data, tools and software are freely available.

## Qualitative Methods: Lifestory Interviews

Qualitative interviews are used to complement the findings derived by the quantitative datasets and to shed light on new developments in complex local dynamics that cannot be captured by the quantitative datasets. The lifestories approach is an open-ended technique of interviewing. It touches upon all elements of life, such as childhood experiences, family, education, work and other personal factors. It covers 'the time from birth to the present or before and beyond' (Atkinson 1998, 8). In other words, a life story is subjective: "the story a person chooses to tell about the life he or she has lived, told as completely and honestly as possible, what is remembered of it, and what the teller wants others to know of it, usually as a result of a guided interview by another"(ibid). They articulate at the same time "individual and collective, private and public, structural and agentic and real and fictional worlds" (Clough et al. 2004, x). Lifestories reveal the notions of identity in both empowerment and alienation situations. They are often taken-for-granted 'truths' and thus ignored by the official discourse (ibid). Individuals that are less likely to speak up due to taboos

may open up easier through this technique. Therefore, lifestories are used in the current report as they are rich in content, are often used to research sensitive themes such as war and are often used to represent the voices of marginalized categories, such as ethnic and religious minorities, women, LGBTQ+, and others. This also translates to the theme of international influencers, which is considered to be a sensitive theme and experienced often by marginalized individuals.

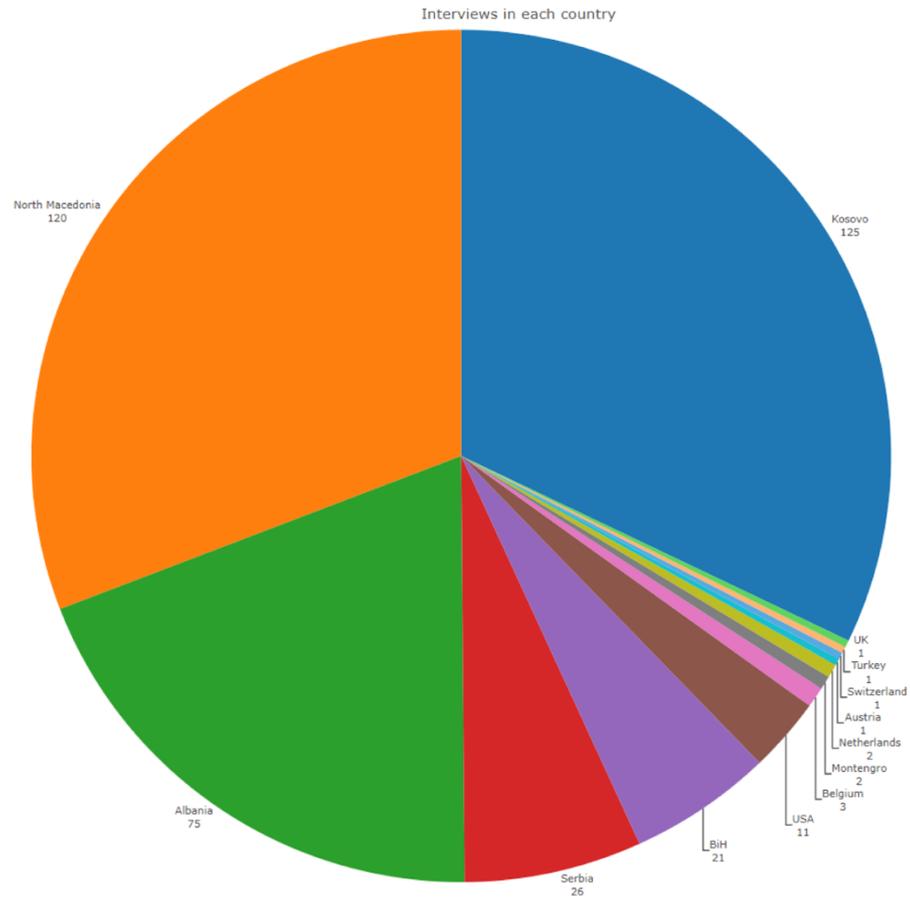
However, in this study, the life-story interview technique is also used to interview the elites in order to maintain consistency in the research, and also because the local elites can be equally viewed as voiceless in global power dynamics. In addition, they are used with elites as well, since they can offer richer data on the relations between the influencee and influencers. There are more interviews that have been employed for this study, conducted mainly in Western Balkans and Western European states, such as Belgium, Netherlands, Turkey and some Skype interviews with the participants in various locations.

The lifestories method does touch upon elements of different qualitative research methods (phenomenological method, historical model, narrative model and grounded theory) and as such provides for an abundance of information on the basis of which this study could have been complied. However, the verification of information gathered through the life-story interviews has been of crucial importance in the research phase, as well as in the compiling phase of this study. Hence, primary and secondary sources have been utilized to corroborate and verify the information provided by the interviewees.

Such sources include, but are not limited to national, regional (predominantly EU and Council of Europe) legislation, international treaties, customary law, academic and policy resources, which include the writings of prominent academics, analysts, theorists and writers in the field, governmental reports and reports of central and local governance entities, institutions and agencies, reports by international and intergovernmental organizations, reports by non-governmental organizations, local and international news sources, as well as information provided by private and other entities (for example, annual reports by corporations, information released by educational facilities, information provided by religious entities like churches, mosques etc.) and other resources. In the case of conflicting information provided in a life-story interview and information found in an official, academic or otherwise relevant source, other interviews have been utilized to further verify and corroborate the evidence provided.

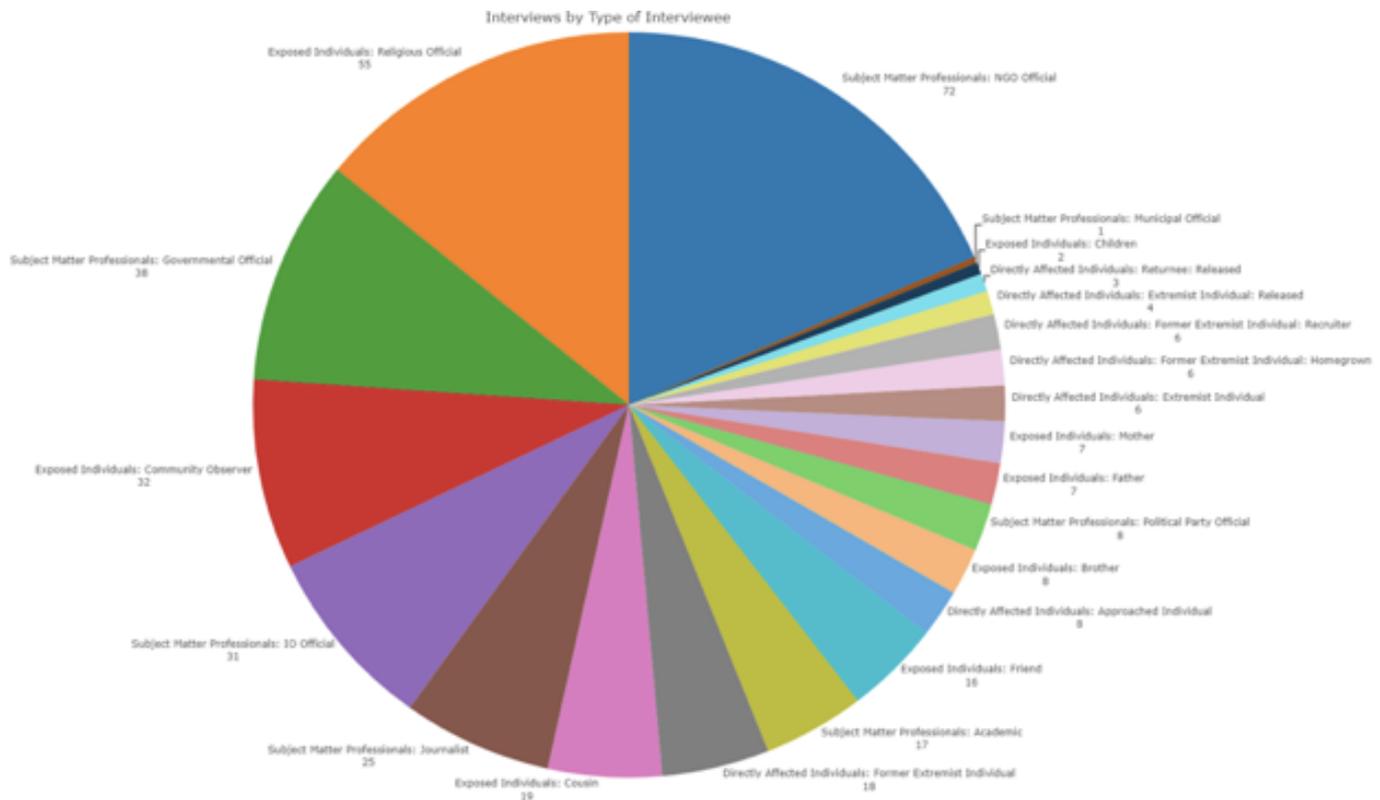
In the following section is shown a breakdown of the Lifestory Database in the Western Balkans region, in terms of number of interviews per country, type of interviewee, gender, date and ethnicity. In the appendix, a breakdown per each country is provided.

**Pie Chart no. 1: Number of interviews per country**



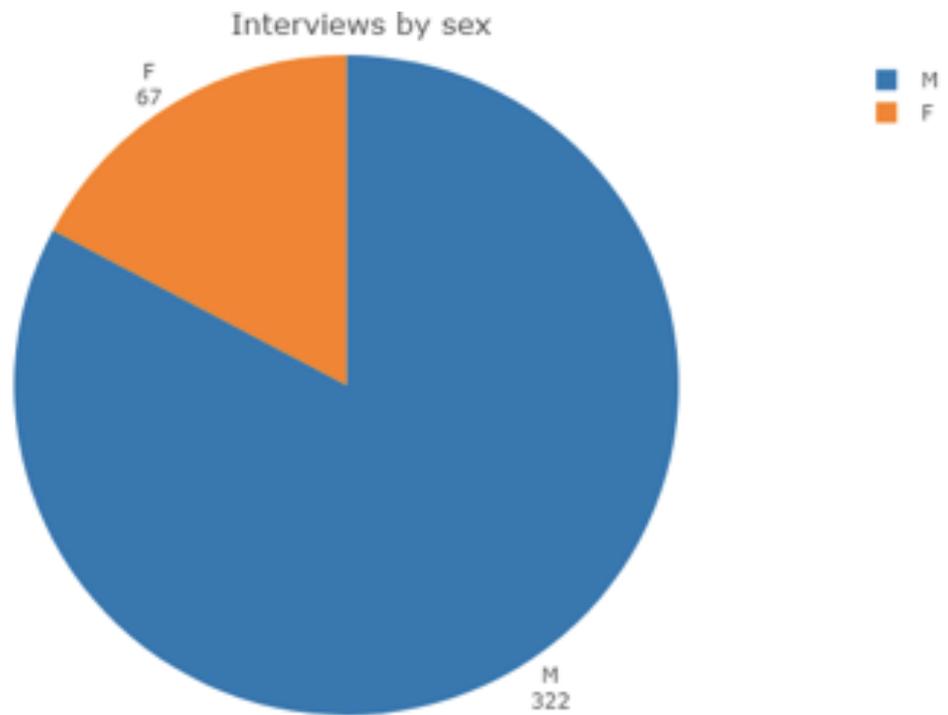
In North Macedonia, 120 interviews have been conducted. In Kosovo, 125 interviews have been conducted. In Albania, 75 interviews have been conducted. In Serbia, 26 interviews have been conducted. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, 21 interviews have been carried out. In the United States of America, 11 interviews have been carried out. In Belgium, 3 interviews have been carried out. Both in Montenegro and the Netherlands, 2 interviews per country have been carried out. In Austria, Switzerland, Turkey and the United Kingdom, 1 interview per country has been carried out.

**Pie Chart no. 2: Number of interviews per type of interviewee**



The following type of interviewees have been interviewed: Exposed Individuals: religious officials (53), community observers (32), cousin (19), parents (14) siblings (8), friend (16); Directly Affected Individuals: children (2), returnee (3), extremist individuals (10), formers (30), approached individuals (8); Subject Matter Professionals: governmental officials (38), IO officials (31), journalists (25), NGO officials (72), academics (17), political party officials (8)

**Pie Chart no. 3: Interviews by sex**



Out of 389 interviews, 67 have been carried out with female interviewees. 322 interviews have been carried out with male interviewees.

#### IV: Relations between The Gulf Cooperation Council and The Western Balkans

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) represents a group of six nations, all located on the Arabian Peninsula. In 1981, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Bahrain, Kuwait and Qatar signed the Charter of the GCC, officially creating the organization. Overall, the “presence and influence of the Gulf States [...] in the Western Balkans have been historically very limited” (Chrzová et al. 2019, 41). However, they did play a supportive role for Muslims in Western Balkans during Bosnia's 1992-5 war and the war in Kosovo in 1999, especially Saudi Arabia (Radio televizija Srbije n.d.), which provided financial assistance for the purchase of weapons. Nonetheless, some argue that GCC's influence decreased significantly after the terrorist attacks on 9/11 and the subsequent global clampdown on Islamic NGOs and other groups.

Since the economic crisis of the late 2000s, the presence of the Gulf States in the Western Balkans has increased, predominantly through foreign direct investment (FDI), which has proven vital for the states in the Western Balkan region. The influence of the Gulf states is no longer limited to the religious and cultural sphere, as they are increasingly making economic investments in tourism, construction, agriculture, aviation and military technology (Radio Televizija Srbije). All of them employ a mode of governing through personalized power blurring the line between public and private resources, which is further assisted by the lack of independent media and control of major broadcasts (Bassuener 2019, 3).

As a result, aggregate GCC FDI outflows have “steadily increased in recent years to around \$26.7 billion in 2013” (Mandaci 2018, 344). From the GCC's perspective, Western Balkans offers a “lucrative destination as it is desperately in need and offers a very subfigure environment to invest in... [and] also offers them other opportunities to sustain and reinforce their international economic and political profile” (Mandaci 2018, 348). Each state has had their interactions with the region defined in different ways, but common themes can be found throughout all the relationships: FDI is mostly given in the energy sector across the region, wealthy private investors play a key role in economic interactions, and a considerable influx of tourists from Gulf countries impact social and cultural spheres. The latter two phenomena have made the Arabic presence more visible, particularly due to purchasing real-estate properties (Chrzová et al. 2019).<sup>7</sup> For these reasons, the Gulf countries have begun playing a more significant role in Western Balkans.

The key players of the Gulf states in the region are the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Kuwait. The latter became the region's top international investor in 2013 (\$8.4 billion), for the first time surpassing former champions Qatar (\$8 billion) and Saudi Arabia (\$5 billion) (Mandaci 2018, 344). Beyond economic measures, the UAE is often cited as one of the most influential GCC state across all spheres of influence, as illustrated by the figure below and also during the interviews. All four of the major Gulf players will be assessed in the following sections.

<sup>7</sup> This is partially connected to more traditional vacation spots in Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, and Turkey becoming more insecure because of conflict or political tensions.

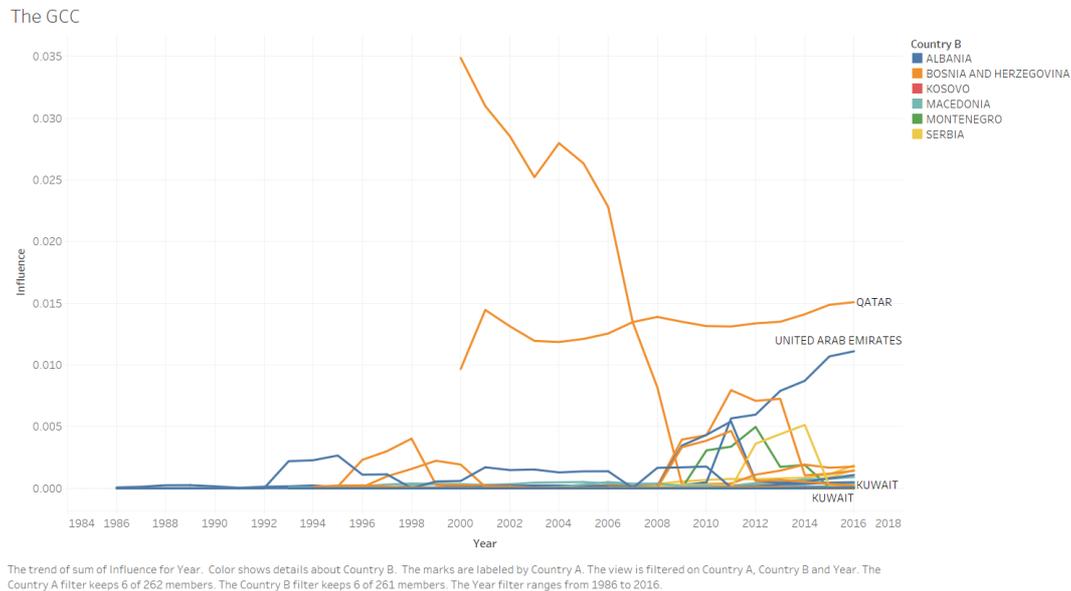


Figure 1: Influence of the GCC states in the Western Balkans, from 1984-2016 (FBIC Index)<sup>8</sup>

Figure 1 displays the long-term influence of all GCC states in the Western Balkans region. The most noteworthy relationships have been labelled to show the ‘influencer’. The Qatar-Bosnia and Herzegovina is the strongest influencer-influencee connection as of 2016, followed by UAE-Albania. Another interesting connection is between Kuwait-Serbia, which was the third highest influencer-influencee relationship in 2014, before seeing a sharp decline. When breaking down the data, it is also visible that Saudi Arabia holds some influence in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia. Bahrain and Oman do not have comparatively significant influence in the region, according to the FBIC Index. The quantitative datasets and the life-story interviews will offer further in-depth analysis per each influencer and influencee in the following chapters.

<sup>8</sup> The dataset has been composed and visualizations have been created prior to the entry into force of the Prespa Agreement, with which the constitutional name of the Republic of Macedonia was changed into the Republic of North Macedonia. The graphs contained in this report do not reflect the name change, however the report itself does.

## 1: The United Arab Emirates

### Introduction

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has been involved in the Western Balkans region for the past 25 years, beginning with the Yugoslav wars and continuing to the current day. A country of six million people, of which only 11% hold Emirati nationality, the United Arab Emirates has the 31<sup>st</sup> largest economy in the world (Abed and Hellyer 2001). The UAE plays a significant regional role, both unilaterally and multilaterally. Originally an oil-based economy, the UAE has pursued economic diversity, and is now a noteworthy investor in the Western Balkans region, while also having significant political and military relations. In fact, the role of the UAE has shifted between economic, security/military, social and political spheres: from provider of aid, to KFOR peacekeepers after the conflict, to property developers, and tourists. This shifting dynamic raises questions regarding the role that the Arab nation currently plays in the Western Balkans region, and the influence that this allows it to wield.

The influence of the United Arab Emirates in the Western Balkan region is predominantly exerted through investment, in particular in prestigious real estate projects such as the Belgrade Waterfront in Serbia, as well as through investments in local air carriers (for more information, please consult the section on Economic Influences). Additionally, the UAE has proven to be a strong supporter of the Muslim communities across the states in the region, especially since the end of the armed conflicts (Radio Free Europe, 1999).

As the wars came to an end, the influence could be easily recognized as mosques and schools were being built that supported the widespread of Wahhabism (Konrad Adenauer Stiftung 2018, 7), which did not align with the Western Balkans tradition. Aside from intensively, along with other Gulf states, establishing religious institutes throughout the Western Balkan states since the fall of communism, the UAE has also paid special attention toward development financing (ibid, 11). For instance, in Kukes, on the border with Kosovo, the UAE financed the construction of a new airport and the Belgrade Waterfront project in Serbia. Despite the stronger economic and diplomatic relations that came into being as the outcome of such efforts, nevertheless, the UAE faced major criticism in regard to its handling of some projects. Negative public perception toward the Arab nation has harmed its reputation, and thus its influence, following the Belgrade Waterfront project from which accusations of inadequate transparency, corruption and absence of public debate arose (ibid, 38). The following sections will show the influence trends and the impact on the economic, political, cultural and security spheres.

## The Influence Trends in Western Balkans

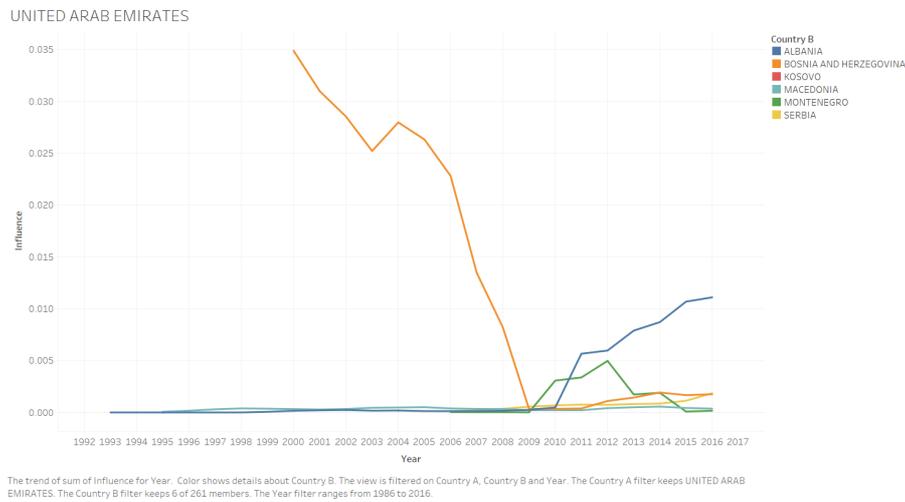


Figure 2: The influence of the United Arab Emirates in the Western Balkans from 1992-2016 (FBIC Index)

Figure 2 shows that the overall long-term trends of the influence of the UAE is less significant. Generally, the total flow of economic, political and security relationships with the UAE - as expressed by Bandwidth - is increasing in Western Balkans. But while the magnitude of the relationships has increased, the opportunities to exert influence and the average dependency between the UAE and Western Balkans countries, besides Albania, remain steady while slightly increasing.

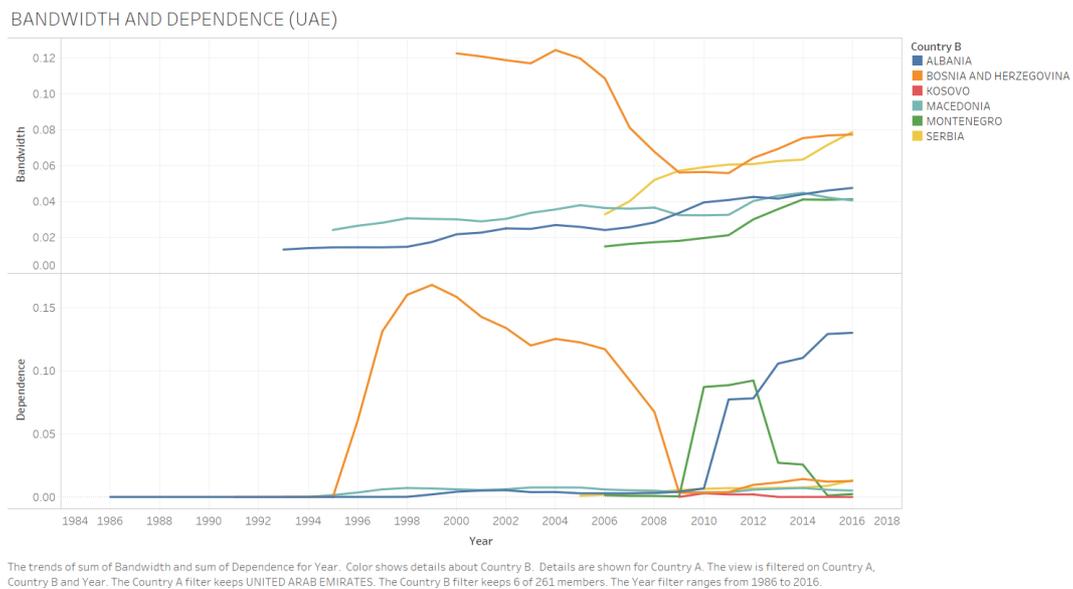


Figure 3: Bandwidth and Dependence (sub-indices of Influence) of United Arab Emirates in Western Balkans from 1984-2016 (FBIC Index).

Respectively, the long-term influence trends of the UAE reveal upward trends for Albania and Serbia, and downward trends for Montenegro as well as Bosnia and Herzegovina (compared to earlier time periods, even though recently it may be trending up). The total flow of *security* relationships - as expressed through the Security Bandwidth - is high between the UAE and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The UAE's historic ties to Bosnia and Herzegovina are explicit due to their support for Bosnian Muslims during the Yugoslav wars. However, a significant decrease of influence is observable since 2004, aligning with trends registered across the rest of the region post 2009, which suggests a normalization in bilateral relations. In contrast, the UAE's influence in Albania has significantly expanded since 2010, increasing from 0.03% to 0.81%. This influence is largely observed in the *economic* sphere due to improved trade relations, which translates into a relatively high dependence on the UAE. This is because of Albania's relatively small economy compared to Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, who have the most intensive economic, political and security relationships with the UAE, largely due to heavy economic investments (for a more in depth analysis, see below Economic Influence section) and political connections (for a more in depth analysis, see Political Influence section). Yet, these countries maintain a relatively low dependence on the Arab nation.

Normalized interactions of the United Arab Emirates with the Western Balkans



Figure 4: Normalized and categorized events between the United Arab Emirates and the Western Balkans region, 2014-2019 (HCSS Datawarehouse)

Figure 4 shows the recent interaction trends between the UAE and Western Balkans countries over the past five years. It indicates a very minor upward trend with regards to the number of events occurring. Strikingly, Serbia's interactions with the UAE rose strongly in 2013. The nature of their interactions was at times considered controversial due to the reported "shadowy" political dealings of the UAE in Serbia (Donaghy 2014). This cooperation, among others, is seen in large Emirati investment in *Air Serbia*, property in Belgrade, the development of the Belgrade waterfront project by an Abu Dhabi based company, and a large investment in a Serbian arms company

(Belgrade Waterfront n.d.; Balkan Insight 2013). This indicates that the UAE is mainly operating within the political and economic spheres of influence.

## The Economic Influence Trends

The UAE has become a key economic partner for some Western Balkans states. Its ties to the region began with the provision of aid to Bosnia and Herzegovina during the Yugoslav wars (represented as well by the high measures of Influence and Dependency in the FBIC Index (for more see above)), when several efforts were made by the UAE to raise money for Bosnian Muslims, including a nationwide telethon that raised over \$43 million in one day (Burg and Shoup 2000). Important members of the Emirati royal families also contributed personally to such efforts, with President Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al-Nahyan donating over \$10 million, and the Minister of Defense, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum, donating nearly \$15 million (UPI Archives 1995). This aid primarily arrived in the form of food, medical supplies, electricity and oil. After the end of the war, the UAE continued to provide support to Bosnian Muslims and provided aid earmarked for the rebuilding of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Khaleej Times 2003). This came primarily in the form of financial support and undoubtedly contributed to the rebuilding process in Bosnia and Herzegovina following the war.

After the war, the UAE continued its economic involvement in the region. The primary areas of interest, following moves to diversify their economy after the global financial crisis of the late 2000s, have been in construction, aviation, agriculture and the defense industry. This has helped fulfill a variety of needs for the economy and national interests of the UAE, while also benefiting the economic sectors chosen for investment (Will Bartlett et al. 2017).

As mentioned, Serbia has been a key focus of Emirati investment, where economic influence seems to be increasing rapidly. According to data revealed by the Serbian Finance Minister, the investments from the UAE boomed from the years from 300.00 euros in 2010 to 180.000 million euros in 2018 (Tanjug News 2019a). Large loans have been supplied, totaling more than \$1 billion, and with generous repayment terms (William Bartlett et al. 2015). Trade between Serbia and the UAE has also been on the rise from \$23.4 million in 2012 to \$122 million in 2016, and “politicians have plans for this to hit billions of dollars within the next few years” (Prague Security Studies Institute 2019b, 29). Their investments have been most visible in the commercial real estate sector. The standout project is undoubtedly the Belgrade Waterfront Project (Belgrade Waterfront), which potentially involves up to \$3 billion of investment. The project aims to completely redevelop the waterfront of Belgrade and build hotels, apartment complexes and the largest shopping mall in the Western Balkan region (Barnard 2015). Despite being dubbed as the most luxurious real estate project in Serbia, the project was met with some skepticism by the public and the media (Stevanović 2019). According to an interview, there is a lack of transparency and accountability regarding the decision-making among top political elites (Anonymous Interview, NGO Official Spring 2019, Serbia).

The UAE also plays a significant role in the Serbian aviation, agricultural and defense sectors. Firstly, in 2013, the UAE’s state-owned airline *Etihad* purchased a 49%

share of *Air Serbia*, the Serbian national carrier (Sekularac 2013). Similar deals were made worldwide with a large number of carriers coming under the control of Etihad (Karmali 2013). The effect of the investment on Air Serbia was significant, resulting in major profits in the years that followed (Center for Aviation 2015). Despite the initial skepticism in both Serbian and regional media, Air Serbia ultimately became a successful project and made Belgrade a regional air transport hub (Center for Aviation 2015; RTS 2014). Another sector of the Serbian economy that has benefited from significant UAE investment has been agriculture. As a consequence, to the climate of the UAE, the country is extremely dependent on imported food, which makes up approximately 85% of its food consumption. Consequently, the UAE invested nearly half a billion dollars into agriculture in Serbia with the aim of ensuring food security in the future, which also had a positive impact on the Serbian agricultural sector (Arab News 2013). The UAE has also heavily invested in Serbia's defense sector, which will be discussed later in this section.

Beyond Serbia, other investments in the region include the construction of the *Buroj Ozone* tourist city, slightly outside of Sarajevo (Buroj International Group; MacDowall 2017). The project is particularly noteworthy as it cost "a reported 4.5 billion Bosnian Marks (BAM) (\$2.5 billion) [... which] equates to 15% of Bosnia's GDP" (Brunwasser 2016). This contributes to the UAE being "the third main investor with €33.7 million in 2016" in Bosnia and Herzegovina (for comparison, Saudi Arabia invested less, 17.2 million in Bosnia and Herzegovina) according to the Bosnia and Herzegovina Foreign Investment Promotion Agency and Central Bank (Prague Security Studies Institute 2019b, 26). However, the project has been deemed as controversial due to big delays in the building process, the extremely high prices of properties and the negative effect it was projected to have on the local economy, such as increasing the prices in local shops, as well as the rising property prices (BUKA 2017). The concerns were also cultural, with opinions that these investments would result in a shift of values, from Bosnian to Arabic, due to the changing demographics (Brunwasser 2016).

In Albania, there has also been a great deal of economic provisions from the UAE. For example, approximately \$61 million in grants and concessional loans were given by the UAE to Western Balkans states between 2009 and 2013, with Albania and North Macedonia receiving the bulk of the money (Will Bartlett et al. 2017). These funds supported a variety of projects, such as the construction of the *Sheikh Zayed Airport* in Kukës, Albania, which was finished in 2006 (Mejdini 2016). Another example is the Tirana-Elbasan road project, for which the Abu Dhabi Fund for Development (ADFD) provided a €36.7 million concessionary loan to Albania (Will Bartlett et al. 2017). Since these investments were largely loans, they lead to the development of a *high level of economic dependence of Albania* on the UAE.

The UAE has also been the second largest non-EU donor of official aid to the North Macedonia, behind the United States (William Bartlett et al. 2015). A notable investment of an Emirati Company in North Macedonia has been the one of *FlyDubai*, which entered the Macedonian market in 2012, utilizing the government subsidies for air carriers, providing low cost flights from Skopje to Dubai (Press Clipping 2012). Moreover, the UAE also holds an interest in investing in the sector of agriculture in North Macedonia by presenting the latest technologies, according to the UAE Minister of Climate Change and Environment, during a meeting with his homologue from North Macedonia (Kolekjevski 2019).

Similar economic projects have been implemented in Montenegro, where the UAE is said to be the “most significant investor” among the Gulf states. According to 2017 data from the Central Bank of Montenegro, they invested €92.8 million, primarily in companies and banks, property and construction, and the tobacco industry. Moreover, in 2016, the UAE contributed to Montenegro’s economy with €21.3 million in FDI, and as such was “preceded only by Russia” of the non-western external influences in the region (Prague Security Studies Institute 2019b, 28). Their projects include the *Capital Plaza Center* in Podgorica worth €140 million, the Porto Montenegro, a luxury yacht homeport and a marina village in Tivat (ibid). In addition, the Emirati based *Consortium Nirvana* has expressed strong interest for investment in the Montenegrin seaside town of Ulcinj, and conversations have begun for the advancement of bilateral cooperation between the two countries (Bankar 2019).

Lastly, in Kosovo, the UAE has made some investments although not to the same degree as those described above. This is evident as the Ambassador to the United States, Vlora Citaku, said that even though Kosovo is “primarily looking West and not East”, it is grateful for the Emirati charity gestures, such as the UAE’s €20 million pledge to build a hospital in Kosovo (Prague Security Studies Institute 2019b, 26).

Generally, the economic involvement of the UAE in the region is significant, and is the highest in Serbia, followed by Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, North Macedonia and Kosovo. The investments by the Arab nation are important in offering another route away from the EU funding, and multiple ambitious construction projects are visibly speeding up the modernization of cities and economies in the region. However local criticism regarding their investments are frequently raised, citing a lack of transparency and accountability, spiking of local prices and a potential shift of cultural norms from Bosnian to Arabic. These investments serve as a basis for the UAE’s activities in other spheres of influence, as it will be shown below.

## The Political Influence Trends

The UAE plays a significant role in the political contexts in the Western Balkans region, mainly in Serbia and less in Albania, Montenegro and Kosovo. This is partially due to their economic influence (especially in Serbia), and partially due to the close relationships with individuals within local power structures (Prelec 2018). A local expert, who started to track UAE investments since 2015 in Serbia, claims that the approach of the UAE during the 1990’s in the Western Balkans region has changed drastically compared to now, as their approach shifted to a much more pragmatic *modus operandi* since 2008. Even though today Serbia remains the biggest or the most important ally of the UAE in the region, the first country to engage was in fact Montenegro (Anonymous Interview, Spring 2019, Serbia). According to a local expert, Gulf countries in general but the UAE in particular, see a long-term engagement in the region because of the necessity to prepare for a post-oil future. This fits to the UAE’s Economic Vision 2030 to build an open, efficient, effective and globally integrated business environment (Prelec 2018). This, in turn, assists them to diversify the economy and plan for post-oil phase. Even though this is positive for Western Balkans, skepticism is raised regarding the lack of transparency and accountability concerning the transactions. In other words, while the compatibility between political

cultures of Western Balkans and UAE leaders is positive for continued economic engagement, it raises concerns for the democratic development of the region (ibid). Interviewees confirm that these relations are based on secret governmental contracts in Montenegro and Serbia, which also extends into political influence (Anonymous Interviews, NGO Officials, Spring 2019, Montenegro, Serbia).

An important political decision was in late 2008, when the UAE became the first Arab state to recognize Kosovo as an independent country (Al Qassem 2008). This demonstrated a commitment to the Muslims in the region as previously demonstrated by its military and aid-based support during and after the Yugoslav wars. By recognizing Kosovo, the UAE risked ostracizing Serbia, but this did not play out in reality as in recent years the relationship between the two countries has flourished regardless.

There is a debate around the precise nature of the relationship between the UAE and Serbia, and the motives behind it. The Serbian PM Vucic and Sheikh Mohamed (the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and the UAE President reportedly share a close relationship, but it is highly unlikely that the reason for the continued Emirati investment is solely based on a friendship (Open Source Investigations 2017; Gomez M. and Filipovic 2015). However, it has been said that “[all] business with the UAE is based on the agreement on cooperation [...] and personal ties” between the two leaders (Prague Security Studies Institute 2019a, 29). They met four times in less than a year from October 2012, exemplifying the close connection and importance of the relationship (Angelovski and Marzouk 2015). In December 2018, another meeting was held between both countries, where their mutual economic cooperation was praised and new ideas on energy, agriculture and education were discussed. Moreover, the Serbian PM pointed out the need to support a peaceful solution in Kosovo, that both the US and Russia would agree on, and that Europeans would need to accept this solution (Beta and Tanjug 2018). This access certainly suggests that the UAE has a prominent role in Serbia, and indicates that the UAE could potentially exert political influence in the country. In fact, the decision making through close relationships between political leaders from the UAE and Western Balkans can be understood through the lens of illiberalism. One of the explanations for the close friendship is the “meeting of minds” in the political leadership style also coined as “sultanism”, considering that so far cooperation has been established at the highest political levels, with similar traits when it comes to policy-making behind closed doors (Will Bartlett and Prelec 2019). The features of “sultanism” are in many ways similar to features of illiberal democracy prevalent in Western Balkans (Anonymous Interview, Spring 2019, Serbia). In the long run, this may shift Serbia's regime toward authoritarian rule.

Alongside the nature of the relationship, there is also debate regarding the precise motives for the relationship, particularly on the part of the UAE. Experts such as Rori Donaghy, the former editor of the Middle East Eye, argue that one of the key reasons behind the ongoing investment and presence of the UAE in Serbia is related to the balance of power in the region. These experts view the interests of the Arab nation as primarily centered around regional competition with Turkey for influence in the region, and that the efforts of the UAEs are supported by Serbia, who is opposed to greater Turkish presence in Western Balkans (Donaghy 2014). Despite the former argument that Serbia is opposing the Turkish presence, the economic cooperation and the number of the state official visits between Turkey and Serbia in recent years has flourished. Conversely, it has been theorized that Serbia is in fact

seeking out potential partners in order to prove to the EU that it is not reliant on Russian investment, while also offering the potential for Serbia to find alternative sources of support outside of the EU (Vasovic and Doherty 2013). It is also possible that it is a combination of these factors and that the UAE-Serbia relationship performs multiple functions for the respective countries.

There have been other additional points of concern, such as the Serbian fast-tracking of a passport for Mohammad Dahlan, a close ally of the UAE leader and a key rival to Mahmoud Abbas in Palestine (Marzouk, Angelovski, and Ramusovic 2015). It was reported that this was directly related to Dahlan's facilitation of Emirati investment in Serbia. The Palestinian Authority has repeatedly accused Dahlan of corruption and has exiled him from the Palestinian territories (B92 2017). In addition, the lack of transparency around the approval of his citizenship has been contentious in Serbia (Angelovski and Marzouk 2015). The decision was particularly controversial as the Serbian government also granted citizenship to his dependents and political allies, in addition to his family owning land in close proximity to Belgrade since 2006 (Angelovski 2015), which prompted Grant Rumley, an expert in Palestinian affairs, to ponder whether the decision was in order to establish a new base for Dahlan's Palestinian leadership ambitions (Marzouk, Angelovski, and Ramusovic 2015).

The precise nature and depth of the relationship between the UAE and Serbia is relatively unknown, as are the precise calculations behind it. Both countries undoubtedly benefit from the relationship, and the UAE has raised its standing in the region as a result. The close relationship between the countries' leaders again suggests that the UAE is an influential country in the Serbian political sphere, highlighted by the decision to grant citizenship to Dahlan simply for facilitating the relations between the countries. A similar case occurred in Montenegro in 2014, where Libyan born Emirati citizens have been warranted passports due to their significance in the establishment of trade relations between Montenegro and UAE (Tomovic and Ramusovic 2016).

This level of political influence is not mirrored in other countries within the region. The UAE does play a role in most of the Western Balkans states, but only in Serbia is such a high level of political cooperation observed. This is not to say that the UAE is unable to wield political influence in other countries, as it still invests heavily into many of the region's various economies, which is likely to result in political influence on the long run. For example, meetings between high level political elites of the UAE and other Western Balkans countries have occurred in the past. In October 2017, Albania's current prime minister, Edi Rama, visited the UAE and had several meetings with high political officials including his political homologue. The main theme of discussion was the need for further economic investments and the commitment of the UAE to stimulate investments in Albania and even the possibility for the establishment of a direct air transport routes between the two countries (TVI-Channel 2017). One year later, in November 2018, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Albania, following an invitation of Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, participated in the so-called Sir Bani Platform to discuss issues and challenges of the Middle East and its impact on European security. At the end, a Memorandum of Understanding for political consultation was signed (Ministria për Evropën dhe Punët e Jashtme 2018).

Just recently, similar meetings were held among state officials from Kosovo and the UAE. More specifically, in March 2019, Bexhet Pacolli, First Deputy Prime Minister of Kosovo met with Abdullah bin Zayed (Klan Kosova 2019). This was not the first visit of this kind. A year earlier, Valdrin Lluca, the Minister of Economic Development of Kosovo met with several high political officials in the UAE, with a main focus on investments in the fields of energy, mining and waters (Gazeta Blic 2018). In January 2019, Milo Djukanovic, President of Montenegro met Sheikh Hazza bin Zayed al Nahyan, Deputy Chairman of Abu Dhabi Executive Council during the Abu Dhabi Sustainability Week (MoFAIC 2019). Interviews reveal that Montenegro was the first country to be approached by the UAE (Anonymous Interview, NGO Official, Spring 2019, Serbia).

Lastly, in the 1990s, the UAE provided aid and support to Bosnian Muslims, and the continued presence of the UAE in the region has had an effect. During both the Kosovo and Bosnian conflicts, the UAE was an active supporter of Muslims in Western Balkans. The humanitarian support provided by the country has had a long-lasting impact on the region, particularly in Kosovo, for whom the humanitarian mission was the largest ever undertaken by the UAE. This has meant that the UAE has had an established presence in the region for nearly 25 years, and influence on the local social structures is consequential.

## The Security Influence Trends

The final sphere of influence in which the UAE has been significantly influential is concerned with military and security. Originally, the UAE contributed to KFOR troops in Kosovo (Al Nowais 2019), and in the provision of money to buy weapons to Bosnian Muslims during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In recent times, the UAE has invested heavily in the Serbian arms industry, and concerns have emerged about Serbian-origin weapons being transferred to rebel groups throughout the Middle East (Marzouk, Angelovski, and Patrucic 2016).

During the Yugoslav wars, the UAE was one among the Muslim states that declared outrage over the attacks on the Bosnian population and openly announced its intention to support the Bosnian military in contravention of the international arms embargo (Abed and Hellyer 2001). In addition to this material support, the UAE also organized training for Muslim Bosnian army soldiers in the country, again in clear defiance of the international arms embargo (Rugh 2002). This military-related support for the Bosnian Muslims came alongside conventional humanitarian aid.

Shortly after the conflict in Bosnia, violence in Kosovo erupted between the Serbians and Albanians. During the mass expulsion of ethnic Albanians across the Kosovo border, the UAE dispatched its military in order to set up refugee camps for the fleeing Albanian refugees (Pennington 2013). The size of the force was relatively small, but it was significant in that it was the first military deployment of Emirati forces to Europe. After the initial outbreak of violence, the UAE also contributed soldiers to KFOR, the international peacekeeping mission in Kosovo (NATO 2000). In doing so, the UAE was the first non-NATO and only Arab Muslim state to contribute to the peacekeeping force. Following the end of the war, the UAE retained a military

presence in Kosovo as a part of the peacekeeping force and continued to provide aid, often conditionally, to countries in Western Balkans.

In relation to Serbia, despite the UAE investing in urban construction, aviation, and agriculture, it is believed that “the backbone of Serbo-United Arab Emirates cooperation is the export of Serbian ammunition and weapons” (Prague Security Studies Institute 2019b, 31). The UAE has heavily invested in the Serbian armaments industry, which has rapidly grown in size in the past 15 years. In 2008, exports were worth approximately \$200 million but between 2009 and 2011 almost \$1.2 billion worth of arms and military equipment were exported. In 2014, the UAE and Serbia signed a defense cooperation agreement and the Emirates have subsequently acquired Serbian military technologies (Malek 2015). One such example is the jointly developed *Advanced Light Attack System*, a land-based anti-ship missile, which was successfully tested by the UAE’s navy in 2015 (Will Bartlett et al. 2017).

There is some concern that the UAE’s interest in the Serbian arms industry is due to less stringent regulations than many other European weapons exporting nations (Angelovski 2016). This, then, allows the UAE to supply Serbian-bought weapons to armed groups throughout the Middle East, which has a degree of precedent as the UAE had its Swiss weapons import licenses briefly suspended following the discovery of Swiss manufactured munitions in the hands of Syrian rebels (Paterson 2012). The impact of these weapon purchases should not be understated as they directly impact regional stability, and given the relatively high levels of participation of Western Balkans nationals in the Syrian conflict, increased *instability through the presence of high amount of weapons and their easy flow* can have a subsequent negative impact, not only in the Middle East but also in Western Balkans and the European region.

The UAE’s influence in the region has further been less well received by some of the locals. For example, there have been demonstrations against the Belgrade Waterfront project as individuals involved have been accused of corruption and connected to a series of suspicious incidents involving properties potentially blocking the project (Schindler 2014). Additionally, there has been widespread criticism of the Etihad-Air Serbia deal, which is cloaked in a shroud of secrecy, and the President of Serbia was accused of corruption over the deal in 2015 (Global Voices 2015). Both of these scandals had an impact in the security sphere in Serbia and caused protests against the leaders of the country. Moreover, their influence has been tied to the building of mosques and schools after the wars that supported the widespread of Wahhabism (Konrad Adenauer Stiftung 2018).

This subsection has shown that the UAE has made a significant impact in the military and security sphere in the Western Balkans region. Being involved in the peacekeeping and stabilizing missions of the late 1990s (Warm-hearted United Arab Emirates 2007), the UAE established a presence in the region, which it has maintained in a number of different ways as discussed earlier. The presence of the UAE as an important investor in the Serbian arms industry is a different issue, and while the high-tech investment is undoubtedly welcomed, the connections to Syria bound weapons should not be ignored. The weapons bought by the UAE may have had a positive impact on the Serbian economy, but they can contribute to the conflict in Syria, with wide ranging implications for the Western Balkans region. The high potential to produce arms in the region and the number of fighters from the wars in

1990's alongside with the Syria and Crimea war provide further challenges. Moreover, with the UAE ties to spreading Wahhabism, it makes the region more volatile on the long term. Lastly, controversies surrounding business deals made by the UAE have also had an impact, particularly leading to social unrest in Serbia.

## The Cultural Influence Trends

The UAE has had an impact on the cultural sphere in Western Balkans. Increased tourism is one significant consequence of the UAE's presence in the Western Balkans region. This is demonstrated as 13,000 UAE tourists visited the region in the first six months of 2016, compared with 65 for the whole of 2010 (Sito-Susic 2016). This has been facilitated by the establishment of economic relations, and expansion of the UAE airlines in the region, as elaborated above. This has had effects on the local culture, and although these effects cannot be solely attributed to the UAE, changes are evident mainly in Sarajevo. For example, Arabic is increasingly visible in tourist cities like Sarajevo, and growing numbers of the region's populace are learning the language to communicate with the influential Arabs. Generally, the UAE has had some small-scale effects on cultural dynamics in Western Balkans. A general trend of increasing Middle Eastern tourism in the region means UAE nationals are now visiting Western Balkans in far greater numbers than before, and this has had an impact in the cultural sphere, most visibly in the growing use of Arabic. However, unlike Saudi Arabia, for example, the UAE does not appear to have explicitly propagated more conservative Islam in the region.

## Conclusion

The UAE plays an important role in Western Balkans, starting with the military struggle of the 1990s, and expanding on that position ever since. The relationship between the UAE and the Western Balkans region has evolved significantly over time, with the UAE originally acting as a provider of military and humanitarian aid to Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, before deploying in the field as a part of KFOR in Kosovo. Aid and loans from the UAE continued throughout the 2000s, with projects such as the airport in Kukes, alongside political maneuvers, such as the recognition of independent Kosovo. Politically, the number of high-level visits between the UAE and Western Balkans states has increased. Moreover, tourism and the increased usage of Arabic and local populations learning it indicates an increased influence in the cultural sphere as well (especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina). After 2010, there was a massive increase in economic investment in the region, with real estate being a primary focus, and Serbia being the largest single beneficiary. Bosnia and Herzegovina and Albania are also noteworthy in relation to the UAE's projects, with Albania in particular becoming dependent on their investment. Military and security cooperation with Serbia also forms a key part of the relationship with the major investment in the Serbian arms industry. Moreover, their links with spreading Wahhabism in the region add another layer of insecurity onto the region but also to the European security (even though in the last five years these links seem to have faded). The (UAE) investments are perceived by citizens positively "a long-term engagement because of the plans for a post-oil future, so their

way of investing is long -term which is unlike what Western countries are doing and this is actually good for the Balkans” (Anonymous Interview, NGO Official, Spring 2019, Serbia). However, their investments have also raised questions from the local communities, such as the lack of transparency of the deals, increased in corruption within Serbia, spiking of local prices in Bosnia and Herzegovina and a potential shift of cultural norms from Bosnian to Arabic. Therefore, the UAE has a significant influence in Western Balkans in multiple spheres: political, economic, cultural and military/security. This, in the long run, can translate into shifts of the region towards a potentially more authoritarian rule (especially in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina (with Milorad Dodik taking power) and Albania).

## 2: The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

### Introduction

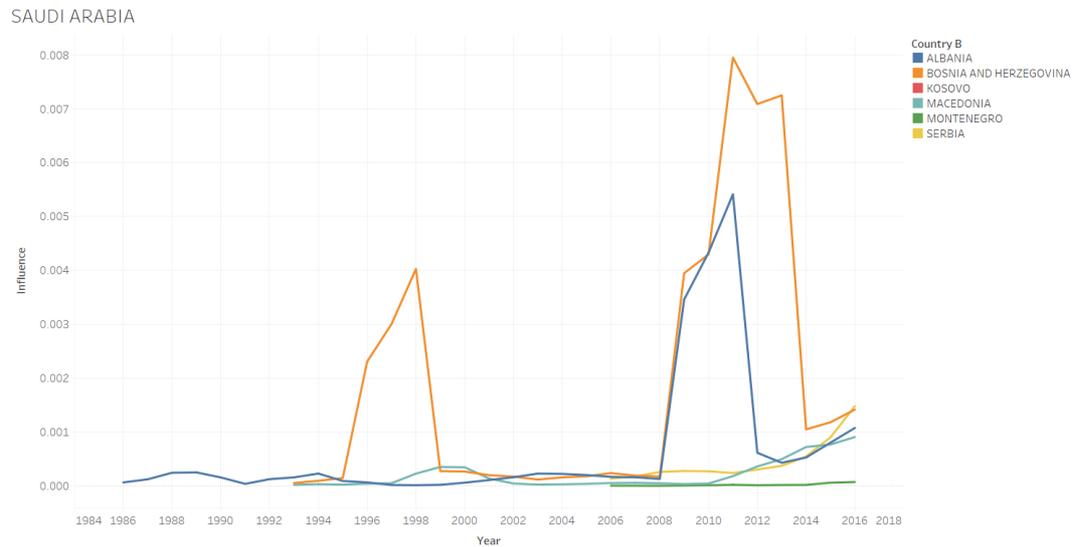
The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), is a Middle Eastern nation that was established by Muhammad bin Saud in 1744 AD. In 2017, the Kingdom's population reached 32.94 million, among which the majority identify as Muslims. Saudi follows a political system of absolute monarchy, and has memberships in various international institutes including the UN, WTO and the Arab Bank for Economic Development in Africa (General Authority of Statistics 2016). The Kingdom enjoys an oil-based economy and is considered to be one of the richest countries in the world with its possession of about 16% of the world's petroleum reserves (Forbes 2018).

KSA particularly holds a high position to Muslims all around the globe given the fact that it is home to many of the holiest Islamic sites, such as المسجد الحرام / Masjid al-Haram (Sacred Mosque) in Mecca and المسجد النبوي / Al-Masjid an-Nabawi (Mosque of the Prophet) in Medina. But most importantly, the Kingdom is home to the holiest site to Muslims, the *Kaaba*, which is commonly described as the house of Allah and is the location to which Muslims determine the direction of their prayers (Sulaiman Abdo and Glubb n.d.; Mecca n.d.). Aside from its economic gains from oil exports, KSA also provides an extremely popular destination for Islamic tourism, as millions of Muslims head there annually to perform a pilgrimage around the Kaaba (Smith 2017). Therefore, Saudi is a religious and economic powerful actor throughout the Islamic world, being the home of Mecca and Medina and the world's largest exporter of petroleum.

The current foreign policy of KSA is largely focused on the Islamic world in the broadest sense. This "originates from the comprehensive image of the meaning of Islamic solidarity that includes several concepts, the major concept is the collective security of Islamic countries, and working out to peacefully settle disputes among Islamic countries, and provide economic aid to Islamic countries and societies of limited potentials, provide emergency assistance and relief to Islamic countries affected by disaster, and back up Muslims and defend their issues and provide moral and material support to Islamic groups wherever they exist, through generous contribution in building mosques, and establishing Islamic civilized centers" (MFA Saudi Arabia 2016). The links to Muslim communities in Western Balkans should be seen through this lens.

Similar to the UAE, Saudi Arabia has had a noteworthy presence in the Western Balkans region dating back to Yugoslav wars in the 1990s. KSA has been highly involved in the post-Yugoslav Islamic reawakening observed in Muslim communities across the region. Originally a provider of aid in support of Bosnian Muslims in the war against Serbia, Saudi Arabia has heavily invested in religious infrastructure and financially promoted Wahhabism in the region. Initially, Saudi Arabia was extensively involved in the religious and cultural sphere, but in recent years, there has been an increasing economic involvement in the region. This is mainly observed in dealings with arms industries, and a tourism boom experiencing increased visits of Saudi's throughout the region. It seems that KSA wields significant influence in Western Balkans (Western Balkans) on religious, economic, as well as cultural sphere which will be shown below.

## The Influence Trends in the Western Balkans



The trend of sum of Influence for Year. Color shows details about Country B. The view is filtered on Country A, Country B and Year. The Country A filter keeps SAUDI ARABIA. The Country B filter keeps 6 of 261 members. The Year filter ranges from 1986 to 2016.

Figure 5: Influence of the Saudi Arabia in the Western Balkans from 1984-2016<sup>9</sup>

Figure 5 shows that the overall long-term trends of the influence of Saudi Arabia in Western Balkans are irregular. Generally, the total flow of economic, political and security relationships with KSA - as expressed by Bandwidth - is increasing in Western Balkans, except in Montenegro and Kosovo, where their influence is almost non-existent. The political bandwidth has been increasing in Albania since 2000 onwards and in Bosnia and Herzegovina since 1995 onwards as they created diplomatic representation at intergovernmental organizations and in the respective countries. But while the magnitude of the relationships has increased the opportunities to exert influence, the average dependency between Saudi Arabia and the Western Balkans countries remains low, as it can be seen in Figure 6. Strikingly, Saudi Arabia's influence increased sharply from 2008 onwards, mainly in Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina. This is solely in regard to the economic dependency measure, indicating that Saudi Arabia operates more in economic spheres of influence, exclusively through trade, representing \$2.5 million with Albania and \$10 million with Bosnia & Herzegovina. This economic investment in comparison with the Western powers investments is miniscule.

<sup>9</sup> FBIC Index

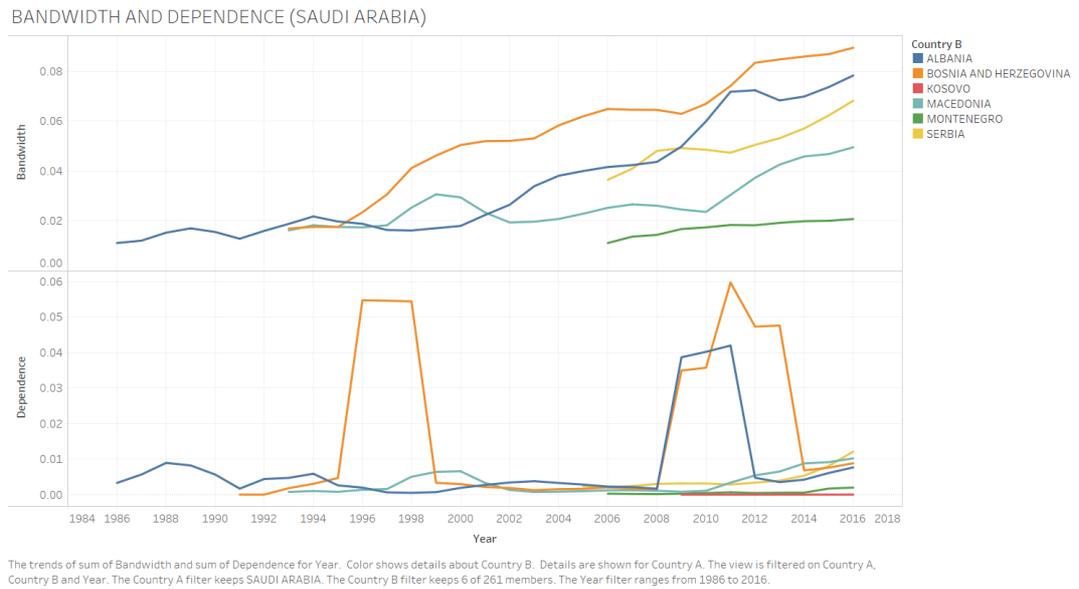


Figure 6: Bandwidth and Dependence (sub-indices of Influence) of Saudi Arabia in Western Balkans from 1984-2016 (FBIC Index)

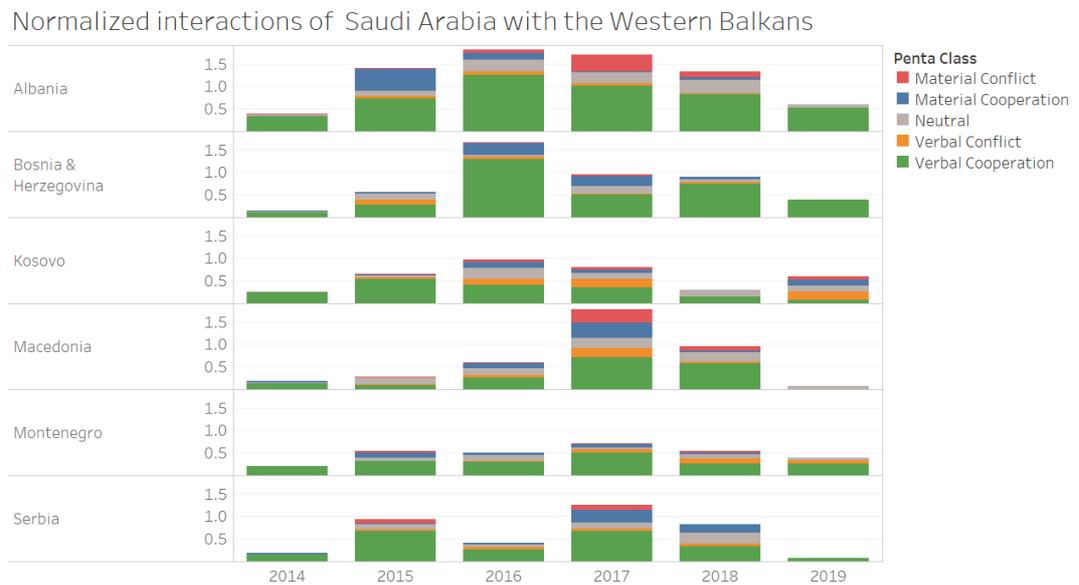


Figure 7: Normalized and categorized events between Saudi Arabia and the Western Balkans, 2014-2019 (HCSS Datawarehouse)

Figure 7 shows recent interaction trends between Saudi Arabia and Western Balkans. From 2013 onwards, there is an upward trend in all countries, approximately correlating with the FBIC Index. However, the number of events decreased for all countries from 2017 to 2018. More specifically, while the interactions between Saudi Arabia and three countries - Albania, North Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina - seem to be decreasing, they still remain higher than the interactions between Saudi

Arabia and Serbia, Montenegro, and Kosovo. The recent increase of interactions with Albania falls in political and economic spheres of influence. For example, visa free travel of Saudi citizens to Albania was granted in 2019 (Arab News 2019). Unfortunately, much of the material conflict classification of news stories in North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina seems to be the result of miscoding, since the automated article reading tool of the databases, mostly GDELT, makes occasional errors in the identification and categorization of news sources. Therefore, the remaining gaps of the quantitative methods are complemented by the lifestory interviews, which explain KSA's influence in the region in depth.

## The Religious Influence Trends

KSA is one of the most influential countries in the Muslim world. This is particularly true with regards to religion as the holy sites and the legacy of the House of Saud tie Islam and Saudi Arabia together. This is an idea that Saudi Arabia brings forward to the world in the form of Wahhabism, a form of highly conservative Islam. Large amounts of money have been invested on spreading Wahhabism that led to security countermeasures (i.e. on Bosnia and Herzegovina) but such investments took place also in Kosovo and North Macedonia (for more information, please see the next section on security influence).

After the end of hostilities in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, Saudi Arabian religious influence was maintained and developed across many Islamic communities in Western Balkans. This was particularly visible in the rebuilding of religious infrastructure damaged during the conflicts. Funding came from the Saudi government, as well as a large number of Saudi-based religious NGOs that were active across the region, often attempting to conceal the origin of the money (Georgievski 2017). These organizations include the International Islamic Relief Organization, Al Haramain, Saudi High Commission for Relief of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Merhamet (Burr 2006). Over 240 mosques have been built in Kosovo since the end of the war, with a large number of these being funded by Saudi Arabia (Gall 2016a). Interestingly, the King Fahd Mosque in Sarajevo, the largest in Western Balkans, has been provided as a gift by the King Fahd. Although KSA's focus has primarily been on the Muslim majority states, hundreds of millions of dollars of Saudi money have also been poured into North Macedonia, again for religious institutions (Marusic 2010). This has been in the form of financing construction and operation of mosques, as well as providing financial support (up to €260 a month) for some followers (Pancevski 2010). In Albania, specific programs have been developed to also support the building of mosques inside prisons and installing imams in each of them (Anonymous Interview, NGO Official, Fall 2018, Albania). According to an NGO official, their main work focused on getting prisoners to believe in Islam in order to shift them away from sins. They have managed to create a community inside the prisons, which they render successful as many prisoners have shifted presumably toward religion and away from organized crime (Anonymous Interview, NGO Official, Fall 2018, Albania).

Saudi Arabia has been involved in restructuring both the physical infrastructure and the ideological debates of Islam in Western Balkans. This has manifested in the propagation of Wahhabist political Islam by Saudi Arabia, which had historically been absent in the region, traditionally seen as a protector of liberal

Islam. Saudi Arabia has exerted its influence in the ideological sphere in a number of ways, particularly through the training of imams in Saudi Arabia (Tadić 2017). In Kosovo for example, scholarship programs allowed young preachers to receive conservative Islamic education in Saudi Arabia. These preachers then returned to Kosovo teaching Wahhabist Islam, and mosques associated with them have been heavily linked with Jihadist foreign fighters (Gall 2016a). This has created further friction between the moderate religious imams and Wahhabi-oriented ones, as well as the Kosovo Islamic Community, which removed moderate imams in order to place more conservative ones in control of mosques (Anonymous Interview, Imams, Fall 2018, Kosovo). Whether the latter has been done under pressure or because ties exist between the Islamic Community of Kosovo [BIK] and Wahhabi groups, it remains to be researched further.

This was also the case in North Macedonia, where imams with Saudi-backing took over four mosques in Skopje that were previously associated with the official Islamic authority in the country (Marusic 2010). Examples also exist in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where an unknown number of imams have travelled to Saudi Arabia for religious education and returned as preachers of Wahhabist ideology (The Economist 2007). Between the end of the war and 2008, over \$700 million were sent into Bosnia and Herzegovina through Saudi Arabian state and Saudi-affiliated charities. This investment was primarily focused on mosques, both their construction and their operation, including the Wahhabist preachers associated with them (Bilefsky 2008). The influence of KSA in this realm has been brought to the attention of the EU, by neighboring Croatia (NI BiH 2018). However since Croatia is attempting to portray Bosnia and Herzegovina as the center of Muslim radicalism, their perspectives must be taken with caution since they may be biased.

This represents a common theme across the region and is indicative of Saudi Arabian strategy at the global level. High level documents released by WikiLeaks showed that the Saudi Arabian government maintained a vast network of paid clerics, with 140 on the consulate's payroll in New Delhi alone (Gall 2016a). It is therefore likely that similar activities are being conducted by Saudi Arabia in Western Balkans. This modus operandi clearly alters the religious environment in the region, while also having both security and cultural implications. This has been confirmed in local interviews in Kosovo, North Macedonia and Serbia (Novi Pazar area). The individual perceptions are that KSA provides for the religious education, indoctrination and propaganda, usually through financial means. The imams that are educated in Saudi Arabia seem very well connected and returned to the region. Their beliefs do not allow them to shake hands with women, unlike with other imams that have been educated in the region. Moreover, they aim to be respected equally by the state institutions and have a long-term vision for the society to increase the so-called *religiousness* (Fieldwork Notes, Fall 2018, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Albania, BiH). As mentioned below in the section on Security Influences, Saudi Arabia finances some mosques and organizations veiled as NGOs and CSOs that are promoting Wahhabism, Salafism and Jihadism.

Thus, the religious influence exerted by KSA manifests itself in building and funding of Wahhabi mosques (Anonymous Interviews, Imams, North Macedonia, Spring 2019). The extreme ideology they propagate has been consistently linked with security concerns related to foreign jihadist fighters, particularly in Syria and Iraq. Running parallel to this has been noticeable changes, due to the increasingly

conservative interpretation of Islam, in dress, appearance, and customs (Anonymous Interviews, Imams, BiH, Spring 2018). This demonstrates that Saudi religious influence is also impacting the culture in the region, as will be explored in the following sub-section.

The impact of Saudi Arabia has been perceived negative among many interviewees as changing the cultural-religious norms:

“Saudi Arabia did a lot of harm, in countries traditionally more conservative, such as Albanians. They have influenced us extremely bad. They have overthrown a tradition of centuries of belief, practice and traditions of Albanians. For example, on the thought on religion, because religion turning into a life system, life style, is allowed to eat pig meat, it is not allowed to eat pig meat, it is allowed to drink alcohol, it is not allowed to drink alcohol, it is allowed to smoke, it is not allowed to smoke, it is allowed to go with other wives, it is not allowed to go with other wives, it is allowed to cheat, it is not allowed to cheat. This means, it is a system of life. For Arabs, the system of life has been interpreted in the most radical way possible and the imposition of their rules has brought up to that point that others who are not convinced with their system, are called infidels, non-believers. A small group of people with a small influence is able to call you a non-believer. This is too much especially in a conservative society or one that practices religion. This is the Arabic influence.” (Anonymous Interview, Governmental Official, Fall 2018, Kosovo). Others for instance do not agree with Saudi religious customs of praying, Pejgamber, remembrance of the dead, discussions with women, and dress code (Anonymous Interview, NGO Official, Fall 2018, Kosovo).

To show the impact that the finances of the international foundations have, an example of an Albanian town is provided. The local community during Ramadam does not open the shops and some claim that people do not smoke in the streets out of respect. Interestingly, an inter-religious family, whose son studied theology abroad, converted his mother to a Muslim, who was Catholic and a known singer. She ceased singing as well (Anonymous Interview, NGO Official, Fall 2018, Albania). This indicates that conversions and changes in local customs are taking place in the country due to the international influence of Saudi Arabia through financial incentives and education abroad.

## The Cultural Influence Trends

Religion in the Western Balkans forms a vital part of identity, both on an individual and national scale. It is therefore also closely linked with culture, and given Saudi Arabia’s vast religious influence in the region, they are also influential in the cultural sphere. There have been pronounced cultural shifts as a result of this in the region, most visible in changes in appearance and increasingly conservative customs, and use of the Arabic language within selected communities. These changes are facilitated by Saudi funding of cultural centers and activities.

Islam, as practiced in Western Balkans, is widely considered to be a more moderate and secular form than that of the Arabian Peninsula. Traditionally, in all states, Sunni Islam is predominantly practiced, with Bektashi minorities in Albania and Kosovo, Sufi minority in Bosnia, and other smaller religious denominations in the rest of the countries. The moderate religious tendencies are thought to be partly due to its communist history and the subsequent religious oppression in the region

(Brezhan 2016). However, there has been a proliferation of the Salafi and Wahhabist communities, especially since the 1990s (Puhalo, Abazovic, and Bulajic 2016).

In Kosovo, the most pro-Western state, a moderate interpretation of Islam was evident in the population's dress habits, which were closer to western styles than Islamic dress historically. However, there have been changes in attire recently, which indicates a shift to a more conservative interpretation of Islam in the region, and Kosovo in particular. More women are covering their heads and faces, challenging the status quo. Equally, men are more likely to grow out their beards, another indication of a conservative interpretation of Islam (Anonymous Interviews, Religious Officials, Spring 2018, Kosovo, BiH). These developments have coincided with the increasingly conservative sermons, as often given at Saudi-funded mosques. Anecdotal evidence suggests that not only are the sermons more conservative than before, but attendance has also increased, suggesting an increase in both the breadth and depth of the influence of radical Islam (Brezhan 2016). A manifestation of the increased extremism was an attack on a LGBT meeting at a Youth Center in Pristina (ILGA 2013). The government has responded by trying to retain the traditionally secular culture of Kosovo, resulting in, for example, the banning of headscarves at primary and secondary education schools throughout the country (Lowen 2010).

Similar cultural trends have been seen throughout the region, and have been attributed to the increased Saudi Arabian influence in the religious sphere. Changes in dress, customs, and appearance, in alignment with more conservative Islam, have been widely reported in Bosnia and Herzegovina (DW 2011). The cultural divisions are leading to deeper divisions in the society, even hate crimes. Moreover, a violent attack took place also in Sarajevo against the LGBT, with eight participants of a gay pride festival being injured by men shouting "Allahu Akbar!" (Bilefsky 2008). The rise of the hate speech and violent attacks can be partly attributed to the increasingly conservative interpretation of Islam (Salafism and Wahhabism) in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which the Saudis propagate in the region (Panos 2015).

The cultural and religious centers contribute to the increasing relevance of Wahhabist Islam in daily life and, in addition to changes in dress, customs, and appearance, there has been an increased usage of the Arabic language (Der Brelié 2018; Mediterranean Affairs 2017). Saudi cultural centers offer Arabic language courses often for free, meaning the high levels of unemployment among the young population creates more likelihood for reaching and producing more Wahhabist followers (Arapski jezik za odrasle | Kulturni Centar Kralj Fahd 2019; Der Brelié 2018). The effects of the increasing importance of Arabic, can be seen in Sarajevo where there is increasingly both Arabic and Bosnian being used side-by-side on storefronts and in conversation (Klix.ba 2016; Fieldwork Observations, May 2018, BiH). These religious-cultural changes represent the cultural influence that Saudi Arabia exerts on Islamic societies in the region.

Equally, there have been social objections to the growing use of the Arabic language. In certain areas that receive a large number of Arab visitors, many signs are exclusively in the Arabic script, thereby excluding the vast majority of the population that does not read the language. This can cause particular problems given the religious divisions in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the explicit association made between Islam and the Arabic script (Der Brelié 2018). When combined with religio-

cultural changes in custom, dress, and appearance, this has the potential to further deepen differences between Muslim and non-Muslim communities in the region.

The individuals paid by them claim that the finances have been stopped and this took a toll into their work in Albania. To illustrate the societal impact of Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries, an example is provided from Albania. In Albania, during the summer, the youth travel from the north to the south for summer jobs lasting three months. In the southern area of Albania, some of the youth that have been interviewed explained the high polarization that is created. Three youngsters that originated from an inter-religious family, the father being a Catholic and the mother Muslim, started to follow the mosque sermons which we don't know whether they were (non)VE. The son (18 years old) had been more impacted in comparison with the daughters as the story shows. In the South where they are working in the summer, Orthodox churches organize parties where sermons and drinks are offered to the youth. They all went however the son started to speak against the priest, and had been kicked out. He remained in the garden of the church trying to persuade the rest of youth to not enter into the church as Islam is better (Anonymous Interviews, Students, Spring 2017, Albania). He never returned any longer to these parties and he claimed that he would never do so. It seems that for what Albania is known inter-religious tolerance, it seems to fade away, perhaps in an invisible way, which may represent a long-term threat if not countered.

The groups that experience radicalisation report stigmatization due to the overemphasis of international and local groups on religious radicalisation. This causes twofold challenges, one breaking the taboo of the topic and the other dealing with it sensitively in order to mitigate counter effects. The local communities view themselves as being stigmatized, saying that 'Islam as a religion is being stigmatized by the work of the international and the local community'. After watching the videos of life stories showing how a mother prevented a child from joining ISIS, an interview claimed that the story was stigmatizing Islam, as the focus of all actors seems only on Islam rather than for instance ethnic challenges (Fieldwork Notes, North Macedonia, Spring 2019). The general perception is to deny the challenges originating for religious VE among the Albanian and also the Bosnian community, as well as ethnic VE among the Serbian community (Fieldwork Notes, Fall 2018). Since hesitance and resistance is encountered when discussing these issues, it warrants further research but also open debates regarding these topics on the community level to break the taboo, increase awareness but also knowledge on these themes.

On the other hand, parents seem to show fear from the changes in the society. Sometimes they are forced to *create informal solutions with teachers such as missing a course*, change classes for children and *relocate*. In fact, many parents show fear from what is being taught at schools as often when children return at home, they request to pray, not eat pork and ask questions why the parents drink. In one case, the parent was forced to go to school and discuss with the teacher. There was no class on religion, but it was being taught in history class by the teacher, most likely under instructions of the Director of the School. The teacher said that he would lose the job, if he stops doing it. Thus, the parent requested that the child stops completely to follow the course. As a solution, they created an informal agreement with the teacher that the child would receive a grade but would not follow the class. As such the situation was solved for this particular family however the rest of the children remained in the class and received knowledge on Islam as being the only religion that

Albanians have. In another case, the family decided to relocate completely to another country in the region to avoid these types of influences at primary school. The parent said: “At least my family is safe there, but we really need to change this” (Anonymous Interview, Directly Affected Individual, Spring 2017, North Macedonia). In other cases, when the parents could not stop the process, the child radicalised while the parents were highly influential and liberal (Anonymous Interviews, Parents, Spring 2018, North Macedonia, Kosovo, Albania, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina). These shows the mixed impact on the society. Some could refrain from the (non) VE influences but were richer by deciding to relocate or more powerful to enforce informal agreements in order to keep the children *safe*. However most of the society does not have the power to request and may not be aware of these changes, hence the process may in turn create threats to the society if not countered, as it seems that children are taught that everything else is wrong ‘haram’ essentially what the parents believe, results in *early indoctrination and family conflicts* which are some of the aspects that contribute to (non)VE.

Thus, Saudi Arabia has therefore had a significant impact on culture in the Western Balkans region, recognizable through changes in appearance and customs. The adoption of more traditionally Islamic styles of dress further emphasizes the impact of Saudi Arabia outside of the direct religious sphere. This is facilitated by the presence of Saudi-funded cultural centers that provide Arabic language lessons and further emphasize religious customs outside the direct influence of the mosque. These practices mean that the impact of KSA in the religious and cultural spheres in Islamic communities has been present, and this has affected the wider society while deepening cultural divisions.

## The Economic Influence Trends

Saudi Arabia is one of the largest economies in the world, and holds billions of dollars in investments abroad (Algethami 2017). They have been less involved in regional investments than other GCC countries, but still have some economic presence in the Western Balkans region (Mandaci 2018). Despite Saudis being the largest provider of aid to Muslim communities in Western Balkans in the 1990s, the UAE, Qatar, and Kuwait are more economically powerful in the region. A key difference in their approach is that these states “have chosen to separate politics from economics to safeguard their benefits in the long run”, whereas the Saudi’s still have “ideological priorities” as the “basic motivation” for their interest in the Western Balkans (Mandaci 2018). This is why KSA’s economic power in the region does not match that of the other GCC countries.

This being said, there remains significant Saudi Arabian investments in Western Balkans. This has been showcased by the 2011 foundation of an investment company (whose name is unknown) for Bosnia and Herzegovina by Saudi investors (Sito-Sucic 2011). This investment has been in property development, which has been split between commercial and residential investments. Residential investment has primarily aimed at catering to Middle Eastern tourists. This has coincided with a boom in Saudi tourism to the Western Balkans region, and Bosnia and Herzegovina in particular (The Economist 2016b).

There are also obvious examples of Saudi Arabian investment on the commercial side, with these having also come “primarily” in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Prague Security Studies Institute 2019b, 24). One of the most noteworthy is the *Sarajevo City Centre*, Bosnia’s largest shopping mall, financed by Saudi Arabia (Der Brellie 2018), who set a requirement for the mall to not sell alcohol, demonstrating how economic investment can have an impact in cultural sphere (Yahiaoui, Farhat, and Vasina 2018). The same company also built an office tower and two hotels in the city (Garaca 2017). These financial ties have been further exemplified in the formation of a trilateral committee between Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Saudi Arabia, focused on trade between the kingdom and the region (Saudi Arabia News 2017).

The influx of Saudi tourists and property owners has also led to some issues with regard to transparency on matters relating to property ownership and residence in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Although many have welcomed the foreign investment in the property market, there have been criticisms over the nature and transparency of the transactions. For example, Bosnian law forbids foreigners buying property, and consequently a registered company is employed in order to purchase the desired properties in the country, on behalf of the foreign investor. This has resulted in a lack of transparency over who is purchasing the properties and where the money directly originates from (Mediterranean Affairs 2017). The lack of transparency provoked suspicions as to the depth and exact nature of the Saudi Arabian presence in the region, but also of the other external influencers.

Last year, in April 2018, a business forum between Kosovo and Saudi Arabia was organized in Prishtina with plans on further deepening economic cooperation between businesses of both countries (Osmani 2018). Kosovo also “received pledges of around 70 million dollars from Saudi officials” to support development, with around \$15 million allocated for building the Prishtina-Mitrovica 30 kilometer road in Kosovo (Prague Security Studies Institute 2019b, 27). Representatives of the Development Fund of Saudi Arabia also committed to support the health sector in Kosovo by about \$50 million with a possibility to extend their support for the field of innovation and education (Balkan Insider 2017). Trade has therefore increased, making KSA a top 10 non-EU trading partner with the region (European Commission 2019b).

According to local interviews, there is also the perception that KSA is involved in the oil and energy businesses in the region (Anonymous Interview, Religious Official, Fall 2019, North Macedonia). However, there is no empirical source in previous research or investment in the states in the region, and in local energy businesses to justify this perception, with the exception of the encouragement of Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama towards Saudi investment in the country's vital sector, at the signing of a memorandum of understanding between the two countries in February 2019 (Asharq Al- Awsat 2019). This shows that although comparatively limited in relation to other players in this study, Saudi Arabia remains a substantial economic contributor to the region.

## The Security Influence Trends

Saudi Arabia is undoubtedly an important factor in the military and security spheres in Western Balkans. Originally linked with the provision of weapons during

the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, in recent times a twofold linkage has been established: Saudi Arabia has become a major purchaser of weaponry from the region, while also being linked with the extremist Islam that has resulted in young Muslims leaving Western Balkans (rough estimates of 1000) to fight in Syria and Iraq (Shtuni n.d.; Gall 2016a).

During the break-up of Yugoslavia, KSA (among other countries) directed support and aid to Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This aid came in the form of weapons and money for religious projects. In addition, there are assumptions that besides support in money and religious projects, during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, a number of mujahedeen wanted to become martyrs, causing a high amount of challenges and atrocities, especially towards Croats in central Bosnia and Herzegovina. Some of them remained after the war trying to influence and preach radical Islam (Anonymous Interview, International Official, Spring 2019, BiH). Concerns regarding the mujahideen who remained in the country and their religious influences led to the EU and US countermeasure policies out of fear of religious extremism (Bassuener 2019). It is important to note that in the war in North Macedonia a small group of approximately 10 mujahedeen was present as well (Anonymous Interviews, Political Officials, Spring 2018, North Macedonia).

Moreover, religious institutions have been used for terrorism purposes while financed by KSA. Saudi Arabia's support was primarily directed through the Saudi High Commission for Aid to Bosnia, founded by Prince Salman, a member of the Saudi royal family (Levitt 2002). The commission was reportedly responsible for distributing nearly \$600 million worth of aid to Bosnia and Herzegovina, with significant parts of the money being channeled into Islamic services, such as schools and mosques (Pallister 2002). The Commission was raided by NATO forces in 2001, as it was presumed to have contributed to terrorism-related activities (ibid). After the Bosnian war, Saudi Arabia was also involved in the Kosovo war, again sending large amounts of aid to the country, including \$20 million in private donations from Saudi citizens (Gardner 1999).

KSA, like many of the other Gulf States, was openly supportive of the Bosnian cause during the Yugoslav wars of the mid-1990s. They were vocally opposed to the lack of action by the Western states and the arms embargo on Bosnia and Herzegovina. Saudi Arabia also reportedly facilitated the travel of Jihadist foreign fighters and clandestine arms deals in support of Bosnia (European Parliament 2017b), Croatia as well (Marzouk, Angelovski, and Sviric 2017). Additionally, it is believed a small number of Saudi Arabian mercenaries were serving with the Kosovo Liberation Army against Serbian forces during the Kosovo war. Upwards of a dozen Saudi Arabian nationals formed a part of the 115-strong "Abu Bekir Sidik" unit (Mincheva 2013). However, high members of the Kosovo Liberation Army were not aware of the existence and rejected many mujahedeen to join the Kosovo war from the onset of war (Anonymous Interviews, Spring 2018, Kosovo). The Bosnian mujahideen have been linked to European-wide security issues since this time, and the foreign fighters are considered to be amongst the first modern jihadists (Wood 2007).

The involvement of Saudi Arabia is considered by some to be detrimental to the internal and external security of Western Balkans. The most pertinent connection has been between Saudi-funded mosques and the numbers of foreign fighters that left the region in order to fight in Syria and Iraq. More than 1,000 nationals of Western

Balkans states are estimated to have travelled to fight in Iraq and Syria 2012-2016 (Shtuni n.d.; Gall 2016a). The exact influence that KSA has over this situation is debatable and Western governments are reluctant to publicly accuse the kingdom of directly supporting Jihadist terrorism (Rujevic 2018). However, ongoing criminal investigations, alongside past actions, suggest a level of complicity between the Saudi establishment and Jihadist actors in the region. One example is the Saudi High Commission for Aid to Bosnia, which had its offices raided by peacekeepers in September 2001. During the raid, a cache of materials related to Islamic terrorism was discovered, and multiple terrorism-related arrests were made involving figures associated with the Commission (Pallister 2002). Moreover, weapons and ammunition used by the Paris attackers were traced back to jihadis in Bosnia, where preachers at the King Fahd Mosque in Sarajevo, who were trained and funded with Saudi support, declared those attacks were staged by the West as an excuse to discriminate against Muslims (E. B. Choksy and Choksy K. 2015). However, interviewees point out that the Muslim Bosnian citizens are much less radicalized as it could have been and that radicalization occurs in pockets (Anonymous Interviews, International and Local Officials, Spring 2019, BiH).

In Kosovo, on the other hand, the charity *Al-Haramain* which was active in 2004 was designated by the US Treasury Department as having links to terrorism (Gall 2016a). North Macedonia is also investigating various Saudi-based Islamic charities suspected of spreading radical Islam and laundering money for terrorist organizations, whose links with Saudi Arabia have been further corroborated with interviews (Marusic 2010; Local interviews in Kosovo and North Macedonia with Political and Religious Officials). The security implications of these actions can be insurmountable.

Saudi Arabian investment in the region has also been connected to the armaments industry. Serbia, in particular, is a source of arms-related investment, boasting a high-tech industry not subject to the same export restrictions as NATO and EU states (Marzouk, Angelovski, and Patrucic 2016). This has attracted some of the other Gulf states, such as the UAE. Unlike the joint-venture approach of the UAE, Saudi Arabia has been linked primarily with the purchase of ready-for-use weaponry. These weapons have then been linked with Islamist groups across the Middle East, particularly in Syria and Yemen (Marzouk 2016). The purchase of these weapons causes subsequent cash flows into a sector of the economy that is notorious for its links to organized crime throughout the region (The Economist 2016a). Investigations have uncovered that the Serbian Interior Minister Nebojsa Stefanovic's father mediates lucrative weapons trade between a Serbian company and a buyer from Saudi Arabia (Rudic, Georgiev, and Djordjevic 2018).

Additionally, given that these weapons ended up in the possession of terrorist groups like the *Al-Nusrah Front*, further ethical and legal regarding the arms trade between Serbia and Saudi Arabia are raised (Belford, Futtersak, and Marzouk 2016). Currently, Saudi Arabia is not placed on a sanction list of the EU when it comes to trade in arms, and is not embargoed by the United Nations. However, according to European Council Common Position 2008/944/CFSP, Defining the Common Rules Governing Control of Exports of Military Technology and Equipment, Criterion 3 and 4, declare that states shall not export military technology and equipment where such exports could provoke or prolong armed conflicts, aggravate existing tensions or disturb peace and security. The arms transfers then are likely to violate the EU law, as

well as treaties governing the international arms trade (Angelovski 2016; Arms Trade Treaty; SIPRI). This demonstrates that Serbia's accession towards the EU may be hindered as there is a lack of alignment regarding arms trade.

That countries, including EU member state Croatia, violated these agreements in order to provide weapons to the benefit of Saudi Arabia, indicates a degree of subservience and illustrates the influence the Kingdom has in the region. In Montenegro, following a blueprint used across the region, Saudi Arabia purchased large quantities of Cold War era weaponry and ammunition, inferior to the equipment used by regular Saudi forces (Tomovic 2016). Large amounts of this weaponry were then discovered in Syria, in the possession of groups considered terrorist organizations by the US, EU and UN. The consortium that directly sold the weapons to Saudi Arabia was a company named *MDI*, which is linked with numerous controversial arrangements in the past. The precise nature of Saudi Arabia's interactions with these organizations is unknown, but appear to reasonably demonstrate a degree of influence in the Western Balkans region. The latest report of SEESAC (Disarmament and Arms Control Activities in South East Europe) on arms exports shows that Saudi Arabia remains among the biggest buyers of arms from the Western Balkans region. There has been a 12% increase in total arms exports from Eur 461 million in 2015 to Eur 514,643,433 in 2016. Serbia tops the list of the Western Balkans with Eur 406 million followed by Bosnia Eur 104 million, Albania and North Macedonia with approximately 1.2 million each and Montenegro with 1.2 Million (SEESAC 2018). While the source does not indicate any data for Kosovo, we can conclude that there is no arms export with the latter.

Interestingly, a new discourse in the Western Balkans region has been uncovered portraying Saudi Arabia as a force to counter violent extremism (Anonymous Interviews, BiH, North Macedonia, Kosovo). While some may view them as a counter force, it is important to understand *a priori* the *hidden motives* of Saudi Arabia since it unpredictably seems to have changed the policy, and Saudi educated imams. While their conduct and behaviour is in accordance with a Saudi influenced Islam, they differ from the Albanian/Bosnian influenced Islam, where for instance shaking the women's hand is allowed. Moreover, strengthening the power of the Saudi trained imams who already have high influence in their environments, may alter the composition of the society in the long run with religion playing a more important role in society. Therefore caution should be placed when deciding to use religious communities to alleviate security challenges.

Saudi Arabia has, therefore, long been linked with security concerns in Western Balkans. From the aftermath of the Bosnian mujahideen to the current exodus of young Muslims to wage jihad in Syria and Iraq, KSA has had ties to religious violence. The finances of so-called religious institutions and NGOs has exacerbated the security situation in the region. The Saudi Arabian influence stems directly from activities in the religious sphere, which are used for security purposes on long run to produce higher numbers of violent extremist followers. This is complemented by the more recent accusations of directly supplying weapons purchase in the Western Balkans region to rebel factions in Syria and Iraq. This shows that KSA influences the military and security spheres in the region which impacts the region itself, the Middle East but also Europe as religious (Islamic) violent extremist attacks have increased in Europe as well.

## Conclusion

Overall, KSA undoubtedly wields significant influence in Western Balkans, primarily through the religious sphere which has security implications from the region as well as Europe. As the home of two of Islam's holiest sites, Saudi Arabia unquestionably holds a position of authority in the Islamic world, and this is reinforced by the propagation of the Wahhabism abroad. In the region, this has primarily manifested itself in a cultural shift towards more conservative strands of Islam and a growing usage of the Arabic language, for instance in the notifications of shops for tourists. Moreover, it is difficult to attribute this entirely to the kingdom, but the vast amount of money they have funneled into mosques and cultural centers must be noted as it has altered the liberal Islamic identity in the region shifting it towards more conservative interpretations of Islam, unknown to local communities in the Western Balkan region prior to the wars. Polarization of the societies, family conflicts and reluctance to engage with the impact of religious VE has been uncovered through interviews. Furthermore, using religious communities, or Saudi founded communities to counter VE may also increase security challenges as it empowers communities whose hidden motives are unknown to policymakers. Saudi-trained Wahhabist preachers have also been connected to the Albanian and Bosnian foreign fighters involved in the war in Syria, which poses a future security threat to Western Balkans upon their return. Moreover, the number of violent extremists in the region that have not traveled pose threats as well. Saudi Arabia seems to directly supply weaponry purchased in Western Balkans to rebel factions in Syria and Iraq. Outside the realm of security-religion sphere, the Saudis have invested economically, although less so than the other key GCC players. Their investments have been most noticeable in the property sector, where large-scale commercial projects have been financed alongside residential properties intended as summer homes for Saudi Arabian citizens. All these interactions point towards the Saudi's tangible and growing presence in the region, which may further deteriorate the region but also Europe, as borders are no longer the sole maintainers of European security due to interconnectedness rising from globalization. This chapter demonstrates that identity re-engineering of Islamic communities is occurring, alongside terrorism.

### 3: Qatar

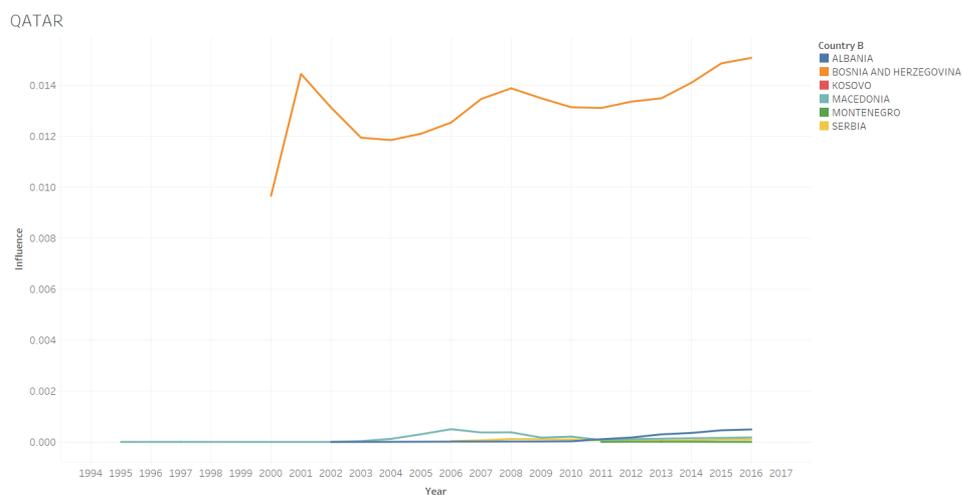
#### Introduction

Qatar is a peninsula located in the Arabian Gulf, which is recognized as an independent sovereign state in the Middle East. Following its independence from the UK in 1971, Qatar has emerged as one of the prominent oil and gas producers in the world. The Arab peninsula identifies as an Islamic state, in which laws and customs derive from and comply with Islamic law. Qatar is a kingdom that is ruled by his Highness Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, who has been in power since 2013. Despite increasing investment in non-energy sectors, oil and gas still account for more than half of Qatar’s GDP, making the Arab state’s per capita income among the highest in the world (Qatar e-portal).

Qatar’s foreign policy objectives emphasize peace and security. The main objectives, according to Qatar’s official statements, are to promote and enhance international cooperation with all countries and organizations towards the achievement of world peace, to consolidate Qatar's bilateral and multilateral relations to best serve the goals of Qatar's general policy and to contribute to development efforts in the various fields (MFA Qatar).

Qatar’s connection to Western Balkans has been historically similar to that of the other Gulf states, namely through providing support for Muslims during the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s. Due to the religious connection, many foundations became actively involved in constructing mosques and schools after the wars (Konrad Adenauer Stiftung 2018). This has since transcended also into other spheres of influence. Qatar is “the second most important economic and political Gulf country in the Western Balkans” (after the United Arab Emirates) (Mandacı 2018). The interest in the region is based on its perception as a gateway to the EU market. In fact, there is a widening of the scope of Qatar’s interest and influence combining economic and political spheres with the original religious cooperation.

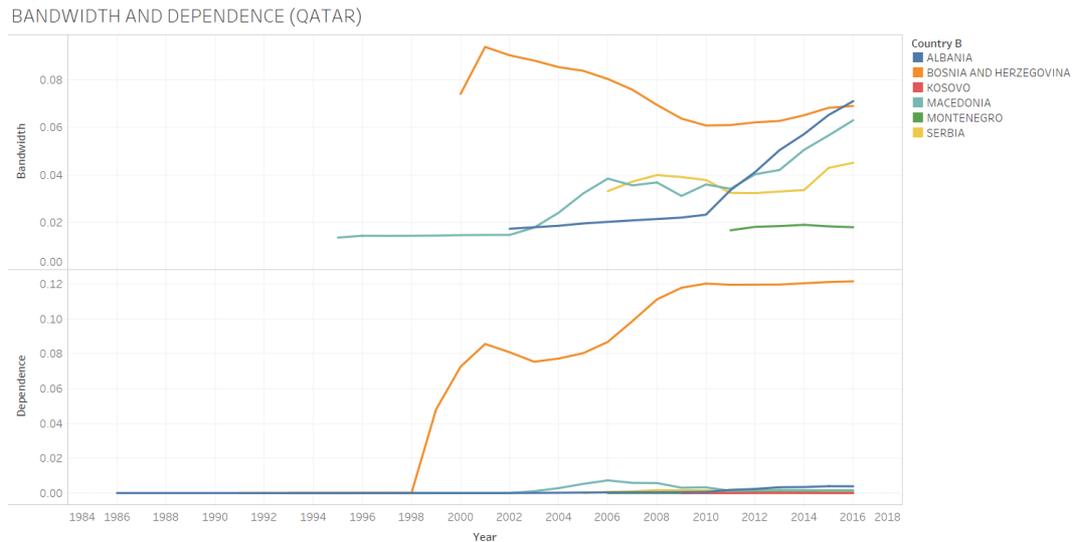
#### The Influence Trends in the Western Balkans



The trend of sum of Influence for Year. Color shows details about Country B. The view is filtered on Country A, Country B and Year. The Country A filter keeps QATAR. The Country B filter keeps 6 of 261 members. The Year filter ranges from 1986 to 2016.

Figure 8: Influence of Qatar in the Western Balkans from 1994-2016 (FBIC Index)

Figure 8 shows that the overall long-term trends of the influence of Qatar in Western Balkans, besides Bosnia and Herzegovina, are not particularly significant. Qatar's influence ranges from 0.01% to 0.04% of total influence for 2016. In comparison to Qatari influence, Iranian influence ranged from 0.01% to 0.05% in the same year, indicating a similar influence. Strikingly, Qatari influence in Bosnia and Herzegovina was much higher (1.02%) than the rest of the other countries. Therefore, Qatar (and Iran) is not a significant influential power on the economic, political, and military spheres in Western Balkans.



The trends of sum of Bandwidth and sum of Dependence for Year. Color shows details about Country B. The view is filtered on Country A, Country B and Year. The Country A filter keeps QATAR. The Country B filter keeps 6 of 261 members. The Year filter ranges from 1986 to 2016.

Figure 9: Bandwidth and Dependence (sub-indices of Influence) of Qatar in Western Balkans from 1984-2016 (FBIC Index)

Generally, the total flow of economic, political and security relationships with Qatar - as expressed by bandwidth - is increasing in the Western Balkans region. But while the magnitude of the relationships has increased, the opportunities to exert influence, the average dependency between Qatar and Western Balkans countries remains low. A potential reason is that Qatar operates more in the religious and cultural spheres of influence, which are not measured in the FBIC Index. These spheres of influence are further substantiated by the lifestory interviews (for more, see Cultural and Social and Religious sub sections).

The long-term influence trends in Figure 9 reveal various notable aspects in the relations of Qatar with the states of Western Balkans. The case of Bosnia and Herzegovina is striking as Qatari influence is the highest there. Bosnia and Herzegovina has high dependency on Qatar, most significantly in the security sphere, due to a high level of arms stock from Qatar in Bosnia Herzegovina donated in 1997. The political dependence on Qatar is also relatively high ascribed to its great level of diplomatic representation. Moreover, the highest Economic Bandwidth, exclusively through trade, has been observed between Qatar and Serbia in 2016. Nevertheless, this does not translate into economic dependency since Serbia's economy is relatively large. As Figure 9 illustrates, Albania's economic dependency with Qatar is the highest. This can possibly be attributed to the reception of high numbers of loans for infrastructural investment (for more, see Economic sub-section).

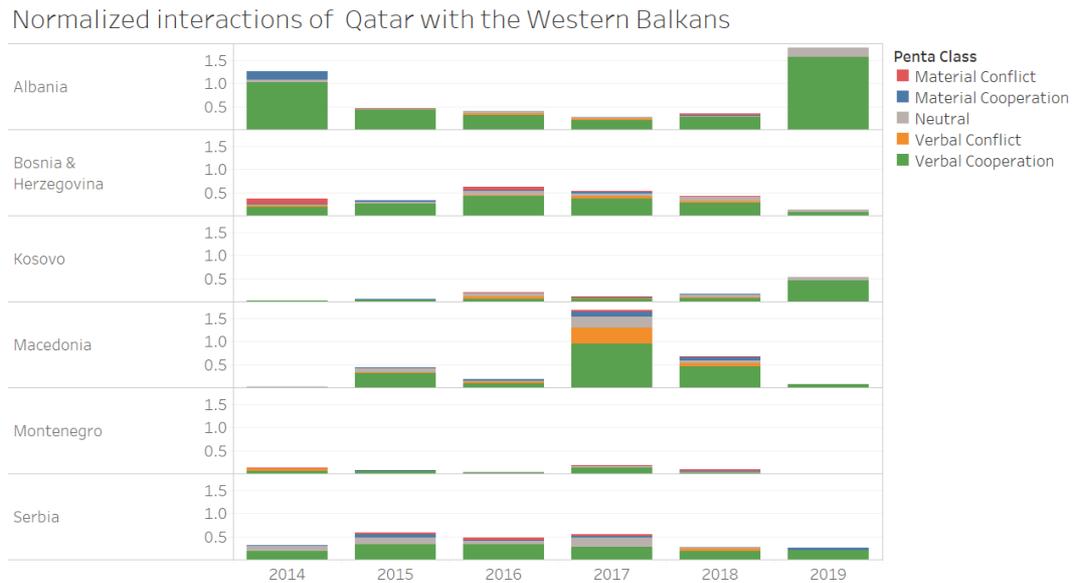


Figure 10: Normalized and categorized events between Qatar and the Western Balkans, 2009-2018 (HCSS Datawarehouse)

Figure 10 shows various developments regarding interactions between Qatar and Western Balkans. Firstly, the scale is comparable to other Gulf states. Secondly, most of the interactions seem to be verbal cooperation. With respect to the interactions, there are notable results in three countries: Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia. With regards to Albania, the high amount of interactions in 2014 are the result of a state visit of the Albanian Prime Minister to Qatar, during which both signed a Memorandum of Understanding (Gulf Times 2014). The peak in interactions this year, 2019, is the result of a transport conference, where Qatari and Albanian delegates were present (Elmastaş 2019). The peak in interactions with Kosovo is due to a recent meeting of the Kosovar Deputy PM and a Qatari envoy (The Peninsula 2019), while the peak in interactions with North Macedonia is largely the result of the opening of direct flights between Qatar and North Macedonia. Thus, based on quantitative data, Qatari recent influence seems to fall mainly in the economic and political sphere.

## The Economic Influence Trends

As of 2013, Qatar stands as the second largest Gulf investor (in terms of FDI) in Western Balkans after Kuwait, investing \$8 billion across the region (Mandacı 2018). This indicates that Qatar holds some economic influence in Western Balkans. An interesting development in recent years is that the Gulf nations, including Qatar, have shifted away from solely focusing on exerting economic influence in states with significant Muslim populations. Gulf investors, particularly from Qatar and the UAE, have turned to Serbia as it “offered more lucrative returns” (ibid). Serbia was “initially highly suspicious of the Gulf countries’ intentions for the Western Balkans, seeing their economic activities as a strategy for spreading radical Wahhabist/Salafist Islamic ideology in the region” (ibid). However, Serbia is now “taking the lead in the region by establishing a growing network of commercial relations with Gulf countries, ranging from heavy industry to real estate.” (ibid).

In 2016, trade between Qatar and Serbia amounted to about \$5 million, according to the Ambassador of Qatar to Serbia. He declared that Serbia mostly imported “polyethylene, unsaturated polycyclic hydrocarbons, aggregates, petrol and methanol” from Qatar (Ekapija 2018). He also stated that the plan is to “strengthen the economic cooperation” because Serbia “holds a very important strategic position,” and has a “good traffic infrastructure network, whereby any shipment can be delivered from Serbia to any place in Europe within 24 hours” (ibid). Furthermore, “low tax rates are also one of the benefits for doing business” (ibid). This indicates that Qatar’s economic influence in Serbia is likely to grow in the coming years as the demand, and the business environment, for doing so are present.

Albania also has been a target of Qatari investment. The Islamic Development Bank (IDB), supported by Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE, has invested in large infrastructure projects, namely in “the reconstruction of the Albanian Parliament (\$160 million) and the Tirana– Elbasan Highway (\$373 million)” (Mandaci 2018). Furthermore, the Qatar Fund For Development (QFFD) and the government of Albania have signed a grant agreement worth \$1.350 million to finance the reconstruction project of the 'Jeronim De Rada' school in Tirana (Qatar Tribune 2018). To facilitate this trade, in July 2014, a Business Council between Qatar Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Albanian Chamber of Commerce was formed (Mandaci 2018). This demonstrates that Qatar economic activities in Albania are taking place, with a focus on infrastructure and construction.

Despite significant contribution to combined projects in Albania by Qatar, this does not translate into direct state trade, which is not particularly noteworthy when compared with other state investors in the country. According to the Albanian Institute for Statistics, Qatari investment in 2016 in Albania was only 61<sup>st</sup> globally at \$2.62 million. For comparison, Saudi Arabia and the UAE were 51<sup>st</sup> and 52<sup>nd</sup> with \$5.43 million and \$5.36 million respectively (Konrad Adenauer Stiftung 2018). This shows that Qatar is certainly investing in Albania, but not at an extraordinary level.

Bosnia and Herzegovina economic relations with Qatar have grown in recent years: “Figures provided by Qatar Chamber showed that trade volume between the two countries increased from \$2.9 million in 2016 to \$4 million last year. Qatari imports in 2017 stood at \$1.8 million, while Qatari exports amounted to \$2.2 million” (Qatar Chamber 2018). This demonstrates that there has been a significant increase in trade, demonstrated by the rise in trade volume from 2016 to 2017, but it is still at a lower level than Qatari investment in Serbia and Albania, as shown above. Qatari exports to Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2017 comprise largely of unwrought aluminum, according to the Qatar chamber. However, the Qatari and Bosnian officials indicate that they plan to widen economic investment beyond this since at a joint trade meeting at the Qatar Chamber in Doha it was announced there would be “several tax incentives for foreign investors” and that Qatari investors would look to branch out into “agriculture, food, renewable energy, medicine, tourism, banks and finances” (ibid).

North Macedonia also has economic relations with Qatar, dating back to January 2013, when Qatari officials made clear their interest in investing in an “electricity company and several tourism projects” in North Macedonia (Mandaci 2018). The official talks culminated in the establishment of a Joint Economic Cooperation Committee. Qatar also struck deals with North Macedonia regarding air services, the employment of North Macedonian workers in Qatar, deepening cooperation in other fields like tourism, culture, education, health, the economy and education (ibid). These economic developments once compared to other states’ “[b]ilateral trade between North Macedonia and the Gulf States is not particularly

pronounced” (Konrad Adenauer Stiftung 2018). This shows that Qatar is engaging with North Macedonia, but its economic influence is not very significant.

Finally, Montenegro and Kosovo do not have a great deal of economic relations with Qatar, and so their influence in this sphere is insignificant. Qatar did contribute €1.2 million in FDI to Montenegro, with their main interest being a tourist complex “Plavi Horizonti” (Blue Horizons) near Tivat (Prague Security Studies Institute 2019b, 28). There is also one noteworthy agreement between Qatar and Kosovo (as well as with Bosnia and Herzegovina) which is in relation to people travelling to Qatar as guest-workers, particularly as Qatar builds infrastructure for the 2022 World Cup. These agreements have been controversial, with some media outlets strongly criticizing the agreements as “akin to modern-day slavery” (Mandacı 2018). However, Qatar’s economic influence is insignificant in relation to Kosovo and Montenegro.

Generally, Qatari economic influence in Western Balkans is fairly substantial, especially for a country of its size in comparison to other Gulf countries. It is noteworthy that much of this influence relates to FDI. High FDI indicates that trade will increase in the coming years, so this is an expected future trend. Direct state trade officially stands at a lower level currently, as can be seen by the figures provided above. Serbia, Albania, and Bosnia and Herzegovina have the strongest economic ties with Qatar, while North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Kosovo’s are less noteworthy. However, plans to extend economic cooperation between Kosovo and Qatar are already taking place after an initiative by the Ministry of Trade and Industry has been approved by the Government of Kosovo (Insajderi 2019b).

## The Political Influence Trends

Qatar is argued to be the “second most important” Gulf country in Western Balkans in relation to political influence. They have embassies in all the states besides Montenegro and Kosovo. However, in Kosovo there is a non-resident Ambassador of Qatar and the Qatari Embassy will be inaugurated in September 2019 (Insajderi 2018a; Shefkiu 2019). Qatar’s political ties with Kosovo were low before having recognized the state since 2011 (Balkan Insight 2011). Since then, Qatar has played a “significant role” in urging other member states of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to recognize Kosovo (Gevataj 2014). They are also backers of Kosovo’s UNESCO membership bid (B92 2016). These efforts are “highly appreciated” by Albania, according to the Qatari Ambassador to the country (ibid). This demonstrates significant political relations between Qatar and Kosovo (and Albania). Beyond this, Qatar also plays a role in Kosovo through their charity foundations. Out all the South European states, Qatari charities invest the most in Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and “to a lesser extent” in Albania and North Macedonia (Raxhimi 2010). Kosovo provides a case for this as the Qatar Charity foundation implemented 373 projects in education and sustainable development projects in 2018 alone (Gulf Times 2019). This shows that Qatar has substantial political relations with Kosovo, as it advocates for wider recognition of their state and provides support through humanitarian activities.

Kosovo’s close ally, Albania, also has political ties with Qatar. High-level talks have taken place between the two over recent years. For example, the last two

Albanian presidents, two prime ministers and other ministers have visited Doha (Konrad Adenauer Stiftung 2018). They have signed “series of agreements related to cultural cooperation (and) collaboration in the health sector” (Mandaci 2018). North Macedonia has had a similar relationship, with high frequency of visits such as their president, Gjorge Ivanov, visiting Qatar in 2010, 2011, 2013 and 2015. Numerous cooperative agreements have also been signed (Qatar Embassy in Skopje). Serbia is also a similar case, whose president visited Doha in 2016 and signed “a number of bilateral agreements” as well (Qatar Embassy in Belgrade). Bosnia and Herzegovina has also received the Father Emir in 1998 and 2010, and Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al-Thani, Emir of the State of Qatar in January 2016 (Qatar Embassy in Sarajevo). Qatari funding has ceased but they are still active in Tirana (Anonymous Interviews, NGO/Political Officials, Spring 2018, Albania).

In North Macedonia, Qatar opened its Embassy fairly recently - in 2012 - the first Arab embassy in the country (Qatar Embassy in Skopje). Both countries consider the establishment of bilateral relations as highly important, especially in the sphere of attracting foreign relations and economic investment (MFA North Macedonia). Local interviews claim that Qatari, Saudi and Turkish investments have been made into the processes of the establishment of the BESA Movement, a socially conservative political party that represents the Albanian minority interests in North Macedonia (Local Interviews, North Macedonia, Religious Islamic Officials and Political Officials, May 2019, Spring 2018). It has been further mentioned that they support the expansion of the Islamic cause through investment in media, notably television stations, radios, publishing houses and newspapers. This illustrates that Qatar too utilizes hybrid threats through misinformation campaigns that attempt to influence the political environment in the Western Balkans region.

The high-level visits and agreements between Qatar and Western Balkans, besides Montenegro, show that Qatari political interest is rising and perhaps through time also influence when combined with the high number of economic investments in the region. The relations with Kosovo are more interesting given that some states, as seen with Iran and China, do not recognise Kosovo. Given this, and the fact that Kosovo is a young state, the level of attention Qatar pays to the country is noteworthy, which necessitates further research into the real motivations behind it.

## The Religious and Cultural Influence Trends

Qatar is a Muslim-majority country, and it is in this sphere that it seeks to project influence in Western Balkans. Hamid and Mandaville argue that Qatar is replicating Saudi practices in “supporting transnational religious propagation” albeit at a “more modest scale” (Hamid and Mandaville 2018). They have “supported many of the same Islamic causes, engaged in mosque building, and funded religious education in ways that are similar to Saudi Arabia. Qatar’s religious establishment, for example, has long been influenced by scholarship and religious trends from Saudi Arabia, and its national mosque is named in honor of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab” (Hamid and Mandaville 2018). These practices have also extended to the Western Balkans region. This demonstrates the Qatari affinity for the Wahhabi branch of Islam, which has “begun to strengthen significantly... (and) is now present in all Balkan countries where Muslims live” (Rakic and Jurisic 2012). This is achieved “primarily through [Qatari] Islamic religious centers, Islamic schools and Islamic charity organizations” (Rakic and Jurisic 2012). This demonstrates that the Wahabi branch of Islam is being exported abroad by Qatar as well, and this has potential security implications.

The local interviewees point out Qatar as one of the states that, much like Saudi Arabia, heavily provides financial contributions to causes that they deem worthy, especially in the religious and cultural sphere. An example of this is the Qatari investment in the *Foundation for Cultural Advancement and Islamic Religion* in North Macedonia. Despite that the Foundation's online presence being fairly focused on Iran's contributions to the Foundation, interviewees have provided information that Qatar, Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait have all presumably contributed financially to this Foundation for the purposes of "creation awareness for Islam" (Anonymous interviews, Spring/Fall 2018/9, North Macedonia, Kosovo, BiH and Albania).

Since the Arab Spring and a wave of new conflicts, there has been an influx of Gulf visitors in Western Balkans. However, there is "very little in common in cultural and linguistic terms between the Balkan Muslims and their Middle Eastern coreligionists" (Entina, Pivovarenko, and Novaković 2018). Therefore, their cultures are not similar. This gap could be bridged in the coming years, however, with greater exchange of ideas.

Qatar and Albania have signed a "series of agreements related to cultural cooperation, collaboration in the health sector and the regulations concerning the employment of Albanian nationals in Qatar" (Gulf Times 2014). Furthermore, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, they "have endowed mosques and funded religious and cultural institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina (schools, kindergartens, cultural centres, sports fields, libraries, and museums)" (Konrad Adenauer Stiftung 2018). These examples demonstrate overt cultural cooperation in Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina, with shared religion often being the bridge. Further collaboration in this sphere is seen with North Macedonia through "[j]oint news exchange between Qatar News Agency (QNA) and the Macedonian Media Agency (MMA) and deepening cooperation in other fields like tourism, culture, education, health, the economy and education" (Klan Kosova 2018). Moreover, Qatar together with Iran established a Cultural Centre in North Macedonia, as well as the publishing house Logos which distributes Islamic knowledge presumably aimed to target the Albanian elite. Accordingly, their target seems to have been achieved as the Albanian elite has been influenced. For example, a secular, highly educated couple were practicing a non-conservative lifestyle, turned to religion due to the foreign influences. The wife put on the headscarf, they stopped going out at night, listening to music and so on (Anonymous Interview, Spring 2018, North Macedonia). Several similar cases have been uncovered. Their impact seems successful so far while seeing that the elites are moving toward their religious and cultural beliefs. These examples demonstrate that Qatar is attempting to gain social and cultural influence, particularly in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia.

These collaborative initiatives are further supplemented with increased exchange of peoples and visa-free travel. Qatar has these agreements in place with some Western Balkans states. Their citizens no longer require visas to enter Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and North Macedonia (Konrad Adenauer Stiftung 2018; Embassy of BiH to the state of Qatar 2015; MFA Serbia; Qatar Airways 2017). This works hand-in-hand with the Qatari national carrier, Qatar Airways "introducing flights to Skopje and Sarajevo, as well as boosting both frequencies and capacity on its services to Zagreb and Belgrade" in 2017 (Magazine 2017). There is also a growing interest in going to Qatar and the Emirates for work, especially in the fields of construction and medicine, thus contributing to the brain - drain in Bosnia and Herzegovina which is already a large challenge in the region as highlighted by the interviewees (Anonymous Interview, Academic, Spring 2019, BiH). This indicates that

social and cultural exchange of people and ideas is likely to be a growing trend in the coming years.

Besides cultural collaboration and free travel, one of the most significant means of Qatari exertion of influence on culture and society is through its ability to “influence global public opinion via its Al Jazeera media empire” (Mandaci 2018). Al Jazeera Balkans, launched in 2011, broadcasting across Western Balkans in Serbo-Croatian, headquartered in Sarajevo, with smaller studios in Belgrade, Zagreb and Skopje (Haschke 2011). This is argued to be an effective source of “international soft power” as “Qatari media, led by Al Jazeera, is both deeply influential... and occupies a prominent position among international media” (Fadli 2018). In turn, Al Jazeera can serve to promote the general perception of Qatar in Western Balkans, hence increasing its political and cultural influence in the region. Media experts have concluded that “AJB (Al Jazeera Balkans) is free of propaganda, yet some of them do think that the selection of information in some cases points to the existence of particular focus on certain topics, especially if the occurring events are of some special geopolitical interest to Qatar” (Vukojević 2016). This shows that Al Jazeera is a mechanism, albeit a subtle one, of increasing Qatari influence in the region, as if they choose to focus on topics which show Qatar in a positive light and avoid those that do not. This indicates that the local population’s perception of the country is likely to improve and that the social and cultural influences can grow from economic, cultural, religious and work links that are gradually increasing. Thus, some hybrid warfare tools such as information campaigns to win the hearts and minds of the Western Balkan citizens are being utilized by Qatar.

## The Security Influence Trends

Qatari-Kosovo ties are cited as being particularly relevant for security reasons. Local authorities and moderate imams have claimed that a “network of extremist religious officials who are being funded by Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait and other Arab nations... are spreading Wahabi Islam with the support of a shady network of private and charity donations and Islamic scholarship programs” (Konrad Adenauer Stiftung 2018). There are claims that Qatar has overtaken Saudi Arabia in contributing funds to Wahabi Islam projects: “Kosovo Central Bank figures show grants from Saudi Arabia averaging €100,000 a year for the past five years. It is now money from Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates – which each average approximately €1 million a year – that propagates the same hardline version of Islam” (Gall 2016b). Wahhabi Islam is argued to be a security threat as it “represents the most radical branch of Islam” bringing people “closer to radical political Islam, which resulted in their radicalisation” according to Fatos Makolli, the Current National Coordinator for Counter-Terrorism and Countering Violent Extremism and former Director of Kosovo’s Counter-Terrorism Police (Rakic and Jurisic 2012). Interviewees also note that Qatar has supported Wahabi Islam in the region, especially in Kosovo. Therefore, while it is difficult to attribute Qatar directly for violent extremism in Western Balkans, it can be argued that in promoting more extreme forms of Islam, which are unfamiliar to the local culture and customs, the state is fostering a climate that makes radicalization more likely.

On the other hand, during an official visit of the Kosovo's Minister of Internal Affairs with the Prime Minister of Qatar, both countries agreed for stronger cooperation on security matters (Insajderi 2019a). This was not the only official visit of Kosovo officials in Qatar within 2019. A similar meeting was also held between Qatar Prime Minister and Minister of Labor and Social Affairs in Doha and another one in Prishtina between the Minister of Culture, Youth and Sports and the non-resident Ambassador of Qatar in Kosovo (Insajderi 2019d; Insajderi 2019c).

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, too, claims exist that Qatari funding is facilitating radicalization. For example, the public prosecutor in Sarajevo said that "the Salafists purchased eight hectares (20 acres) of land [...] using a \$200,000 donation from the emirate of Qatar. As a rule, fundamentalists in Bosnia buy property where it is cheap, remote and unlikely to receive unwanted visitors" (Mayr 2016). Remote locations exclusively used by religious fundamentalists are likely to be breeding grounds for extremist thought, and so, Qatari donations are likely causing security challenges in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Intezet concurs, arguing that Qatar is a contributor to a "thriving political Islam" in the Western Balkans and "especially Kosovo and Bosnia", where it has contributed to "jihadism" (Intézet 2018). The interviews uncover that Qatar financed also radicalisation in North Macedonia as well (Anonymous Interviews, Imams, JournalistsFall/Spring 2018/2019, North Macedonia). This illustrates the connection between Qatari religious funding in Western Balkans and radicalization due to the hardline type of Islam being propagated. This is where Qatar, in a similar (but to a lesser degree) way to Saudi Arabia, has a detrimental effect on security in Western Balkans and potentially Western Europe due to the interconnectedness.

## Conclusion

With respect to the Qatari involvement in Western Balkans, there are increasing political interactions in terms of state visits between Qatar and Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia. Their influence has been identified to reach the local politics, for instance, in North Macedonia with assisting the establishment of the BESA political party, which illustrates that a mechanism of hybrid warfare is already being used to achieve their strategic national objectives. The political influence is complemented with high level of economic influence, especially in Serbia (energy), Albania (infrastructure), and Bosnia and Herzegovina (energy and guest workers), which have the strongest economic ties with Qatar. Plans to extend economic cooperation between Kosovo as well as North Macedonia and Qatar are increasing as well.

Most importantly, Qatar is attempting to gain social and cultural influence, particularly in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia. The work package arrangements, visa-free travel, high economic investments and usage of media to alter the local populations perceptions, are likely to increase the influence of Qatar in the region as the social and cultural exchange of people and ideas is likely to be a growing trend (except in Montenegro and Kosovo less). In addition, the Wahabi branch of Islam is being exported abroad by Qatar is further leading to radicalization and potentially violent extremism at home and abroad, which poses high security implication (mainly identified in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Albania) for the region and Europe. Qatar also supports the construction of

Islamic infrastructure in the areas populated by Muslim communities. While various spheres of influence (political, economic, cultural and security) are used by Qatar, including meddling in local politics, altering the local populations' perceptions and contributing to cultural/societal engineering towards their objectives, it is arguable that Qatar is engaging in hybrid warfare in Western Balkans. As a consequence, this places wider Europe at risk due to the interconnectedness of the region with the rest of the countries in the European Union.

## 4: Kuwait

Kuwait has been incorporated for analysis as some studies measure the country to be the biggest economic investor. As of 2013, Qatar stood as the second largest Gulf investor (in terms of FDI) in Western Balkans after Kuwait, who has invested \$8.4 billion across the region (Insajderi 2019a).

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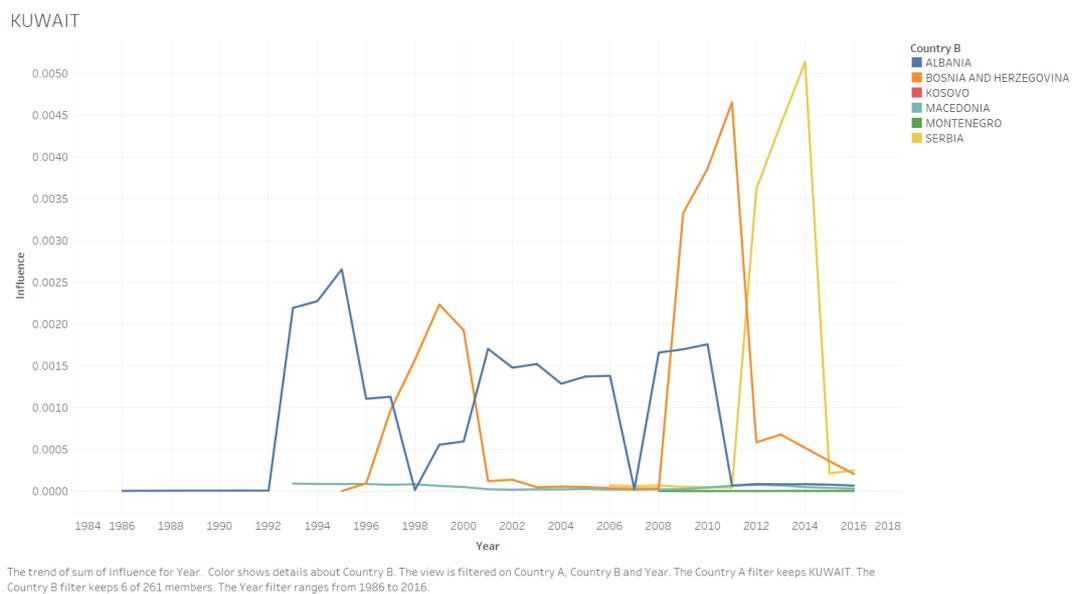


Figure 11: Influence of Kuwait in the Western Balkans from 1984-2016 (FBIC Index)

Figure 11 shows that the overall long-term trends of the influence of Kuwait is inconsistent in Western Balkans. Even though there are some significant changes over time, Kuwait’s influence never surpassed 0.005 in any country. Comparatively, Kuwait’s influence is not significant when compared to other Gulf countries, such as Qatar, and especially when compared to China or Germany.

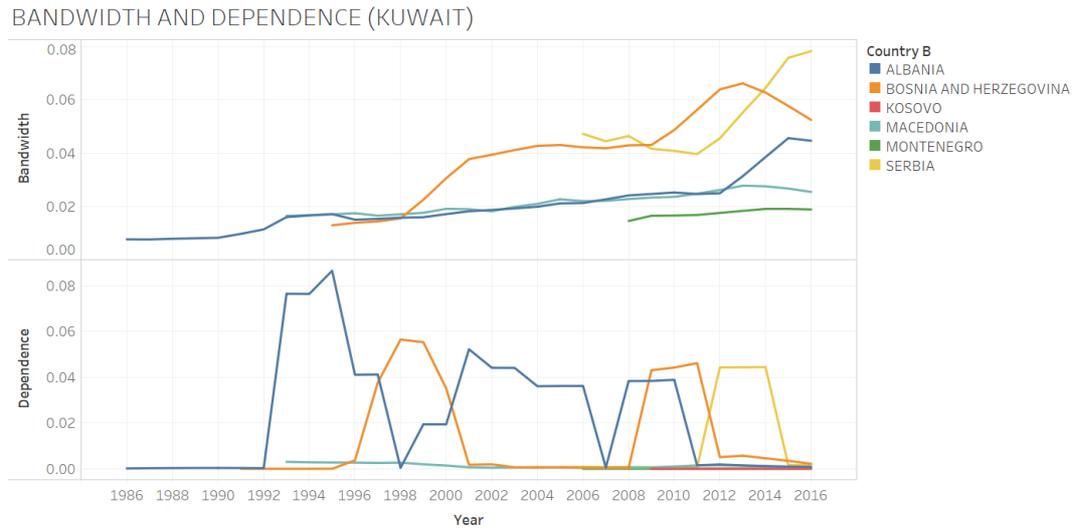


Figure 12: Bandwidth and Dependence (sub-indices of Influence) of Kuwait in Western Balkans from 1984-2016 (FBIC Index)

Overall, the total flow of economic, political and security relationships with Kuwait - as expressed by Bandwidth - is increasing over time in Western Balkans, especially in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Albania. This is mainly in the economic sphere due to increased trade, however, this may also be part of an overall trend of globalization. In fact, the economic dependence of the countries is not increasing, while the economic bandwidth is, indicating increased trade with several other countries, not only Kuwait. The political bandwidth is also increasing steadily, largely through increased diplomatic representation in the respective countries.

Lastly, interviewees note that the money has been stopped from both Qatar and Kuwait and there is a struggle to reintegrate into the society (both socially and financially) as they are perceived as being VE. They are considering migrating to Middle East if integration does not follow (Anonymous Interviews, NGO Officials, Spring 2018, Albania).

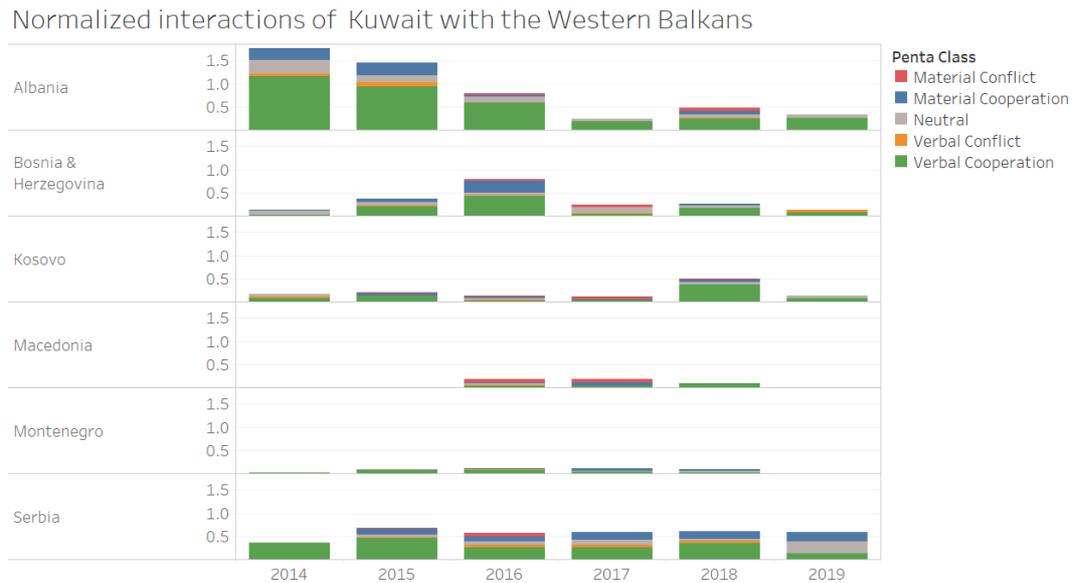


Figure 13: Normalized and categorized events between Kuwait and the Western Balkans, 2009-2018 (HCSS Datawarehouse)

Figure 13 shows the recent trends of the interactions of Kuwait with Western Balkans. The interactions are low, but have been increasing slightly in recent years. There are notable results in Albania, Kosovo and Serbia. The high numbers of interactions with Albania are caused by the signing of various cooperation deals in regard to agriculture and environmental protection in 2015, a state visit and a visa-free travel deal for Kuwaiti travelling to Albania in 2016 (Kuwait News Agency 2014; Kuwait News Agency 2015). The peak in interactions with Kosovo in 2018 was due to various statements made regarding cooperation between both countries. A Parliamentary group of friendship between Kuwait-Kosovo visited Kosovo, where members of different Committees (Committee on Human Rights, Gender Equality, Missing Persons and Petitions, Foreign Affairs, Diaspora and Strategic Investments) had met in 2018 (Klan Kosova 2018). In addition, following an invitation by his political homologue, the Minister of Labor and Social Welfare of Kosovo visited Kuwait and met with several political officials, including Hind Sabeeh Barak Al-Sabeeh, Minister of Labor and Social Welfare of Kuwait. The main topics of discussion were cooperation in the field of welfare, elderly, children and other vulnerable groups and reaching agreements regarding seasonal employment with the state of Kuwait (Insajderi 2018c). The latter also met with the Kuwait Ambassador to Albania, who visited Kosovo in 2018 (Insajderi 2018b). Kuwait also co-financed the building of a health center in one of the Kosovo’s municipalities, inaugurated last year in September 2018. The center intends to serve more than 10.000 people who live in that area. The recent increase in interactions with Serbia in 2019 (the interactions are as high for the first 3 months of 2019 as the whole of 2018) is attributable to the offer of Kuwait to complete the construction of a tech institute in the Muslim region of Sandzak. Moreover, Kuwait has been investing in Albania on institutions promoting religion (Islam) and mainly focusing on women and orphans. However, the donations seem to be gradually decreasing (Anonymous interviews, Spring 2018, Albania). Lastly, the interviewees also uncovered that Kuwait may have been involved in financing radicalisation in North Macedonia (Anonymous Interviews, Fall/Spring, 2018/2019, North Macedonia).

Broadly speaking, it is important to emphasize that Kuwaiti influence is increasing in the region, and it mainly relates to cultural, religious, economic and political spheres. Despite the renewed interest in the region, its influence is much lower when compared to the rest of the Gulf countries, the other Eastern powers and the Western ones.

## V: Relations with the Other Non-Western Influencers

### I: Iran

#### Introduction

Iran is another important player in the changing international global order. It is a polarizing player as some consider it an enemy, as for example, the US, whereas other states have fostered cooperative relationships with the Islamic Republic. For instance, the European Union supports the nuclear Iran Deal, and views Iran as an “unavoidable interlocutor” in the processes of pursuing policies in the region, which would be less effective with Iran absent from the negotiating table (Parsi and Esfandiary 2016, 4). The European Union is also of the view that, if it does not claim its spot in trade and politics with Iran, other actors, such as India, Japan and China, would claim the leverage (ibid).

Iran’s strategic position in the region is important for the region and the wider Europe in the long term. As a bridge between the West and the East, it provides an alternative route for goods and oil to Europe: one that does not pass through Russia. Broadly, Iran is viewed also as a revisionist actor, seeking advantage and cultivating it while other actors are weak. Iran aims to create instability through supporting regional competitors, for instance Hezbollah. In addition, Iran seeks to create a physical buffer with the US with a strong A2AD network and unconventional approaches. From the US perspective, a consequential approach to countering Iran’s power are proxy wars or removing Iran’s nuclear weapons rather than direct confrontation (Freier 2016). Iran is also viewed as one of the biggest cyber actors “in the eyes of many national governments” (Klimburg 2017, 307). For instance, Iran implemented DDos attacks against the US banking sector. In addition, Iran conducted the DigiNotar attack in 2011 against Dutch-based certificate issuer needed to secure internet connection, most likely to get Gmail accounts of Iranian dissidents rather than targeting Netherlands per se (Klimburg 2017, 308).

The cultural ties between the Western Balkans region and Iran are not that prominent, however, Iran has managed to establish and cultivate relations with each of the states in the past 30 years or so (Trad 2017). The involvement and influence of Iran remains marginal, among other things because of Western sanctions against Iran as well as religious differences between Shia Islam, which is practiced in Iran, and traditional Sunni Islam, which is more prominently present in the region (Prague Security Studies Institute 2019c, 31). However, it is argued that their presence in the region is important for foresight. The following sections outline the influence trends in Western Balkans, particularly in each sphere of influence: economic, political, security, religious and cultural influence.

#### The Influence Trends in the Western Balkans

Iran has had historic ties to Western Balkans, largely due to its support for Bosnian Muslims during the war in the 1990s. Iran has established positive relations

with Serbia in particular, despite the religious differences. Iran's relations with Serbia have been particularly good, and even visa-free travel had been established between the countries. However, under EU pressure, in 2018, the visa-free travel arrangements were abolished (Embassy of the Republic of Serbia in Tehran 2018). As a result, Iran does not recognize the independence of the Republic of Kosovo, even though both countries share a common religious background but falling in different sects (Kosovo/Sunni, Iran/Shia). The influence of Iran in Albania is weak as there is an ongoing dispute over Iranian dissidents in the country (for more, see Security sub section). In fact, Iran is not a significant player in the region in regard to economic and/or political spheres of influence. But its influence in the cultural and religious sphere is moderately higher which is used for political purposes, and may translate into a long-term security impact.

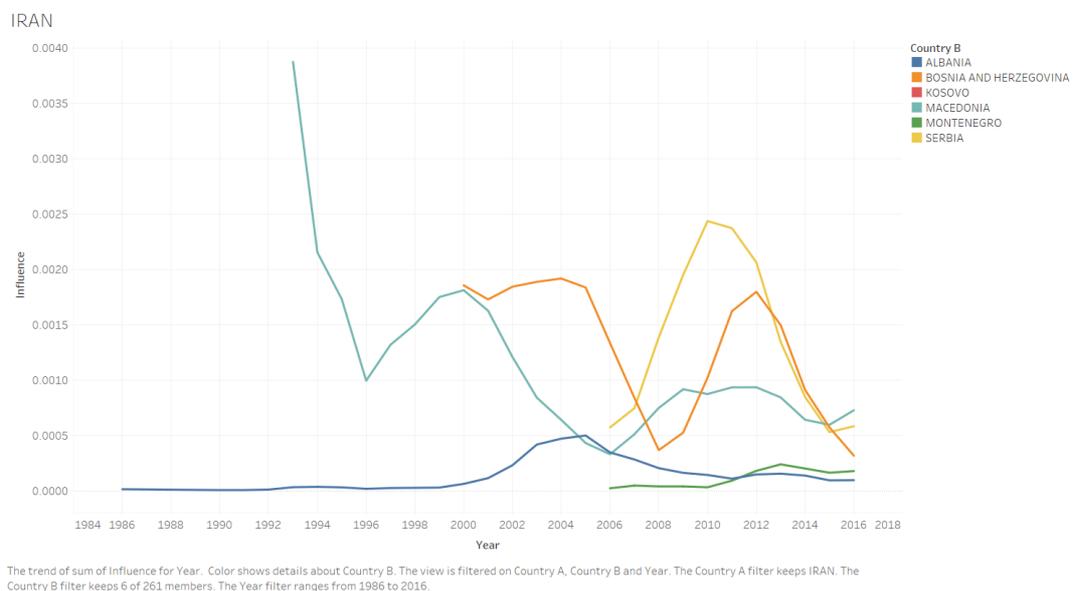


Figure 17: Influence of Iran in the Western Balkans from 1984-2016 (FBIC Index)

Figure 17 shows the long-term trends of the influence of Iran in Western Balkans, even though it is not a significant power in comparison to other external influencers. They indicate inconsistent influence over time. The Iranian influence is 0.05% of total influence in North Macedonia in 2016 and 0.07% in Serbia in the same year. Comparatively, the influence of China is much higher, representing 2.27% in North Macedonia and 1.92% in Serbia. According to the FBIC Index, the Iranian influence is minimal in comparison to other countries. The largest variation of Iran's influence has been observed in North Macedonia, which was relatively high but decreased significantly since 1990 due to sanctions. Currently, the region seems to be experiencing a lower Iranian influence than in the past.

Generally, the total flow of economic, political and security relationships with Iran - as expressed by Bandwidth - is increasing in Western Balkans. This is likely due to Iran continuously looking outward for economic exports and bilateral relations, while Western Balkans states are opening their doors to foreign investment. Notably, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia have the highest economic and political bandwidth due to increased trade and a higher level of representation in each respective country. In 2017, trade with Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and North

Macedonia amounted to \$20.6, \$7.8 and \$5 million respectively (OECD 2017; OECD 2017). Serbia ranks highest, again because of its sizeable economy. However, all the countries have low levels of dependence on Iran, despite the increasing bandwidth. Therefore, Iran appears not to be a key player in the region, since Western Balkans countries dependence on Iran is low.

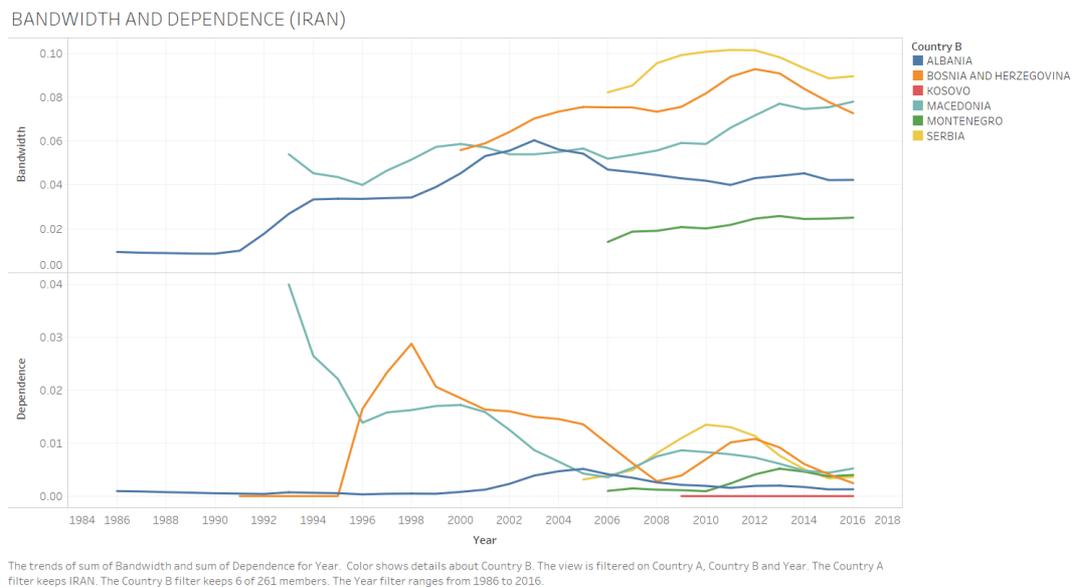


Figure 18: Bandwidth and Dependence (sub-indices of Influence) of Iran in Western Balkans from 1984-2016 (FBIC Index)

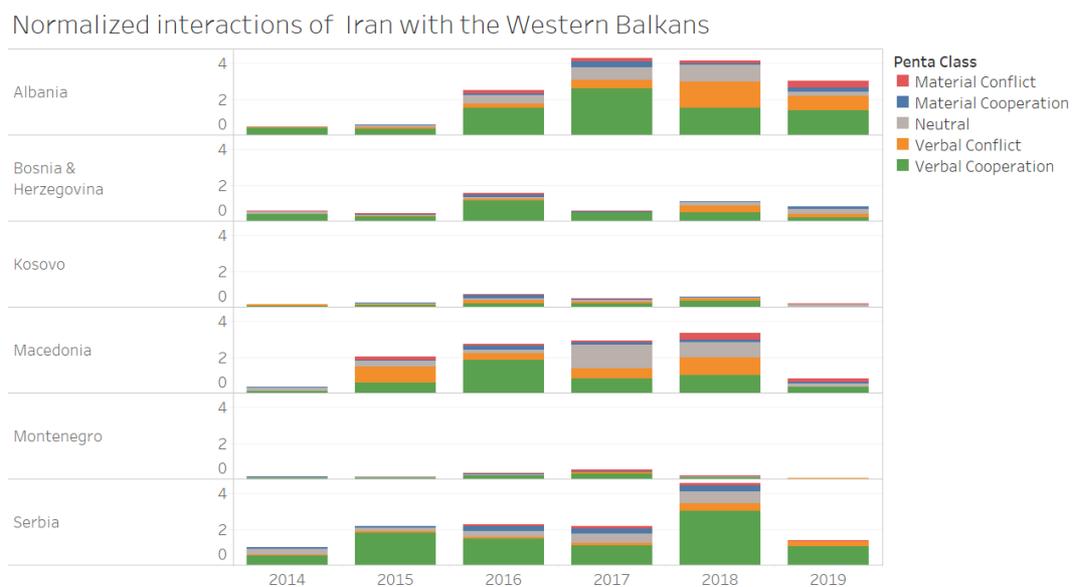


Figure 19: Normalized and categorized events between Iran and the Western Balkans, 2009-2018 (HCSS Datawarehouse)

Figure 19 clearly shows that the frequency of interactions between Iran and Albania, Serbia and North Macedonia in particular, has risen since 2014. Serbia has

fairly strong economic and political ties with Iran, who seeks to improve its security ties with Serbia as well (Tasnim News Agency 2018). The increased interactions with North Macedonia also align with the increasing FBIC Bandwidth. Regarding Albania, increased interactions exist. The rise in media coverage is likely tied to the recent diplomatic dispute between the two countries resulting on Iranian diplomats being expelled due to their threats posed to the national security (BBC News 2018).

## The Economic Influence Trends

Iran's economic influence in Western Balkans "has been historically very limited" but it has been growing in recent years, possibly due to the 2016 Iran nuclear deal (the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action), which saw economic and financial embargos on Iran lifted (Prague Security Studies Institute 2019b, 24); (Turak 2018). Increased economic relations have been particularly evident in Serbia, while its relationship with Kosovo is non-existent, as the FBIC Index shows, due to Iranian non-recognition of the Kosovo state. The latter is due to the belief that Kosovo's independence is "an American project" confirmed in their eyes by the US owning a military base inside the territory of Kosovo (Progonati 2017, 206).

Iranian support for Serbia over Kosovo issue serves as a base for improved relations in other spheres, such as expanding economic investment. In February 2018, Iran's Foreign Minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, met his Serbian counterpart Ivica Dacic, discussing avenues for increasing trade in oil, gas and petrol, as well as agriculture and IT services (Shirazi 2018). The level of trade between Iran and Serbia stood at \$20 million in early 2018 (ibid). This is likely to grow, as in June of that year Iran signed agreements with Serbia aimed at promoting bilateral economic cooperation and cooperation in the aviation sector (Financial Tribune 2018b). However, these moves toward cooperation have "not yet brought tangible, or visible economic benefits [...] the total trade of Serbia and Iran in the period from 2011 to 2016 had been decreasing from year to year" despite a visa-free travel regime and the establishment of the direct flights between the two states (Prague Security Studies Institute 2019b, 31). The desire to increase cooperation is present, and this could increase in the future, with Serbia particularly interested in energy sector trade (Prague Security Studies Institute 2019b, 32).

North Macedonia, too, signed a memorandum for economic cooperation in 2017, and both the Bosnian PM and the Montenegrin President have recently voiced their desire to see increased trade with Iran (Xinhua 2018; Financial Tribune 2018a; Iran Daily 2017). However, North Macedonia is wary in the processes of cooperation with Iran. This is due to North Macedonia's accession to NATO, as Skopje treads carefully around the Iranians in order not to upset some of its NATO allies, predominantly the United States (Balkan Insight 2019). This demonstrates a trend which may increase in the near future. Albanian governmental figures voiced their willingness to improve trade, but their diplomatic relations took a sharp downturn in 2018, which will likely bring a halt to improving economic relations.

Several local interviews from the region have reconfirmed Iran's economic role and importance. They have made significant investments in the sphere of media, especially when it comes to Albanian language media. The news portal *Lajm* and radio

*Haracine* are considered to be an Iranian investment (see for example, <http://www.lajm.net/>). However, the investment in media and purchasing media houses can also be seen as a means of exerting political and cultural influence (Anonymous Interviews, Fall 2018, Albania, North Macedonia). The usage of communication tools presents one of the hybrid threat tools that apparently Iran is employing in the region to win hearts and minds of local populations, in particular the Albanians community where the common religion even though can be exploited for strengthening the ties between Iran and the Albanian community, in particular the Bektashi community. However, it is important to note that Shia sect of Islam is foreign to the Albanian community and is found in small scale communities.

In conclusion, the grand scheme of Iranian foreign investment, their focus on Western Balkans is miniscule despite the signed economic agreements, resulting in “very limited if any economic influence in the Western Balkan countries [...] There have been small developments including lifting visa regimes and several high-level meetings, but tangible economic results are yet to be seen” (Prague Security Studies Institute 2018a, 24). However, Serbia seems to collaborate more with Iran on the economic sphere of influence than the other countries in the region.

## The Political Influence Trends

Politically speaking, Iran is known for its exertion of soft power through proxies and tactical support and advice to groups and political fractions. This is of particular importance when it comes to Iran’s military capabilities and efforts, which is elaborated on the security section below. Iran’s influence can be noted not only in the six countries, but also in neighboring countries. For example, Iran and Bulgaria have had a long-standing relationship despite cultural and religious differences. Bulgaria, a predominantly Christian Orthodox country, a Member State of the EU, has been a “logistical base state” for Iran’s network and expansion of activities in the Western Balkans (Avramov and Trad 2018).

Iran has embassies in each Western Balkans state besides Kosovo and Montenegro, signifying the lack of political influence they wield in these two states (Iran - Embassies and Consulates n.d.). The largest embassy in the region is in Sarajevo, which, as of 2013, was the largest Iranian embassy in the whole of Europe (ibid). This represents Bosnia and Herzegovina’s historic ties with Iran, dating back to Iranian provision of arms and fighters during the Bosnian war in the early 1990s. Their political linkage is further demonstrated by Bakir Izetbegovic, a member of the three-man Bosnian presidency until 2018. He hosted the Iranian President in 2016 and was “widely seen as the leader of the pro-Iranian faction in Bosnian Muslim political circles” (Tehran times 2016); (Bardos 2013). However his ties with Iran are weaker than the ones with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Despite this, however, when it comes to visible political action, Iran’s influence on Bosnia, or lack thereof, was demonstrated on two occasions: firstly, in 2010 as the Bosnian government voted in favor of tightening sanctions against Iran in the UN Security Council (ibid). This is likely because Iran’s “room to maneuver in Bosnia is also limited by the substantial autonomy of Bosnia’s Croat-populated cantons, or the Serb entity in Bosnia, RS, which has no sympathy for the Iranians”

(Bardos, 2013). They are also not the only predominantly Muslim nation with interests in the country any longer, with “a three-way struggle” taking place within the Bosnian Muslim political and religious establishment, which “pits Iranian sympathizers against one group that is in favor of closer ties with Saudi Arabia, and another group that now sees Turkey as the logical model for Bosnia” (ibid). Although, their impact may be small. Moreover, a diplomatic dispute in 2013 soured relations (this will be expanded upon in the security sub-section). Therefore, it seems that the historical connections between Iran and Bosnia and Herzegovina do not influence the political decision-making, however, there seems to be some pro-Iranian groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Serbia has, in recent years, taken steps to improve political relations with Iran by allowing the resumption of direct flights between the two countries after almost 27 years and at the same time removing visa restrictions for Iranian nationals traveling to the country (Shirazi 2018). This is likely tied to their desire for cooperation in the aviation sector, as mentioned above, and allows greater social and cultural ties to be developed. However, in October 2018 Serbia was forced to abolish visa-free travel for Iranians, “apparently in response to European Union pressure after the system was abused by migrants trying to reach the bloc. More than 15,000 Iranians have visited Serbia since visas were abolished last August, but local media claim arrivals were not returning but instead moving on to Western Europe” (AP News 2018). This policy, despite the fact that it was stopped, serves as a strong indicator of the desire to build ties between the two states.

In relation to the rest of the region, Iran does not have strong diplomatic ties. This is exemplified by the Iranian foreign minister’s tour of Western Balkans in 2018, in which Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Kosovo were not visited (Iran Daily 2018a). In Albania, twice Iranian diplomats were expelled due to threatening their national security which hinders their political relations with Iran. Therefore, Iran is not a key political influencer in Western Balkans.

## The Security Influence Trends

Iran is a major regional security player, which in turn shows that it is a major global security player as well. Despite lacking strong military and technical capabilities, it possesses strong ballistic missile capabilities, rocket systems, and it heavily relies on proxy groups to project regional and international power. Iran has been involved in Iraq and Syria through proxy groups, such as Hashd-Al Shabi, Shia militias and through provision of support to the Iraqi Army (Magri and Perteghella 2015). It acts in support of Hezbollah, and in Yemen, Iran provides support to the Houthis (Tabatabai and Esfandiary 2016).

As mentioned in the section above, Iran has ties dating back to the Bosnian war in Western Balkans and, in particular, Bosnia and Herzegovina. According to an international official in Bosnia and Herzegovina, it is difficult to gather information on the general influence of Iran since “today the influence is limited” (Anonymous Interviews, NGO Officials, Spring 2019, BiH). However, during the war, the main Iranian support was given through weapons. Accordingly, the Iranian influence was elite-oriented and they provided extensive arms and intelligence support (Anonymous Interviews, NGO Official, Spring 2019, BiH). This is further demonstrated by the

presence of the various mujahedin forces who have “become deeply embedded” in the country (Bardos 2013). By 1997, it was estimated that Iran “had approximately two hundred agents in various Bosnian institutions” and at the same time, the Bosnian government was also sending police and military personnel to Iran for training (Bardos 2013). This cooperation was largely due to the religious connections between the two nations, as will be dissected further in the following section. The influence of Iran in the security sphere has reduced since then, as demonstrated by Bosnia’s siding with the western powers during the 2010 UN Security Council vote on tightening Iranian sanctions (ibid). Furthermore, in 2013 the Minister of Security asked the Foreign Minister to expel two Iranian “intelligence officers posted to Bosnia and Herzegovina as diplomats” for being involved in espionage and having “connections to terrorism” (Levitt 2018). According to Israeli intelligence, one of them had supposedly been involved in terror attacks in India, Georgia and Thailand (Pugliese n.d.) . This represents a proactive approach of Bosnia and Herzegovina seeking to counter Iranian influence in the country.

Despite this, more covert operations are alleged to have continued. Milorad Dodik, a Bosnian Serb and the President of the RS, who aligns with Belgrade and Moscow, declared on 6 May 2014 that Bosnia “is subject to the interest of several intelligence agencies, including Iran’s” (ibid). However, his perspective on Iran’s influence must be taken with caution since it is used in an attempt to portray the Bosniaks as Islamic terrorists for domestic politics. There are also claims that Iran has a “considerable espionage base in Bosnia” because they view it as a “safe haven for their secret operations in the rest of Europe” (Schindler 2014). The Ministry of Security assesses that about “one thousand secret operatives are present... [t]he lion’s share come from Iran, but there’s also significant representation from the secret services of Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait. Western security agencies place the figure around 650, but this has more to do with counting methods — i.e. who is actually considered to be a spy — than disagreements about the extent of the threat” (Schindler 2014). Whilst the overt security related influence of Iran over Bosnia has lessened, there are still alleged attempts to maintain a more covert influence within the country.

Similar claims have been made about Iranian intelligence activities in Albania and Kosovo, albeit on a smaller scale. For example, in 2016, an Iranian cleric in Kosovo was charged with financing terrorism and money-laundering through an NGO he operated. The state authorities claimed that he “ran five Shi’ite organizations with links to Tehran” (Amiri 2017). In Albania, a similar pattern emerged, with alleged “charities” and “cultural organizations” that serve as front organizations for the Ministry of Intelligence (G. N. Bardos 2013). Despite such efforts, “Iran draws little sympathy in either elite circles or among the general population” in Albania and Kosovo, likely as both states align with the US. Albania is a NATO member and Kosovo is an aspiring member (ibid). This was made clear in December 2018, when Albania expelled Iran’s ambassador to Tirana and another diplomat on the grounds of “threatening the security of the country” (BBC 2018). The US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo praised the move, while President Donald Trump wrote a letter congratulating Albania’s Prime Minister (ibid).

Albania also has aligned with a controversial Iranian group, as Albania’s Parliament was in “unanimous agreement to allow a large number of members of Iran’s democratic opposition group, the *MEK*, to settle in Albania” (Amiri 2017): In 2013, the Obama Administration asked them to offer asylum to about 250 members of the Iranian “dissident group,” with the total now being up to 2000 members (Spahiu 2017). Since July 2017, just as Trump began re-imposing sanctions on Iran that Obama

had lifted as part of the nuclear deal, the MEK has been buying plots of land in Albania, setting up its own radio communications network and launching deceptive information operations to influence the debate about Iran (The Independent 2018). There are also claims that the MEK is actively training terrorist agents, which means that Iran “now has a direct interest in this region” and Albania can be considered a “frontline country in Iran’s fight against terrorism” (Khodabandeh 2008). This indicates that Iranian focus in Albania and also broadly on the region is likely to increase, while also demonstrating that Albania has aligned itself strongly with the west and the US.

As mentioned, the MEK is seeking to influence the debate in the Western Balkans about Iran. Iran is responding with their own (dis)information activities. This involves “the use of social media, dissemination of fake news, provision of grants for biased and slanderous reports, and even hiring reporters” (Sheehan 2018). For example, the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence has claimed in Albanian media that Ashraf 3 (a MEK compound) is “a prison, where no one can leave without permission from the hardline leadership and where even basic freedoms are denied. They claim that defectors are tortured and even murdered” (Stevenson 2018). In the social media realm, “one study demonstrated that most of the tweets related to the MEK are in Persian, followed by English, Arabic, Spanish, French, Albanian, and Pashto” (Sheehan 2018). In turn, in North Macedonia and Kosovo, journalists accepted working for Iranian media due to the higher payments (Anonymous Interviews, Spring 2019, Kosovo, North Macedonia). This shows the international scope of Iranian efforts, and that the (dis)information warfare is being waged in Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia involving Iran and the MEK.

It is argued that “Iranian global disinformation operations” could be a growing trend, and one that is overlooked currently because the Western Balkans states are “not usually associated with highly visible Iranian presence or activities, unlike Russia and Turkey that are considered as key regional players” (Avramov and Trad 2018). This is problematic, however, as Iran “views the region as a subfigure ‘quiet’ logistical platform, outside the focus of global intelligence and security agencies, with relatively lax security, weak institutions, and pervasive corruption. Because of the Balkans’ geographic position, the region offers Iran a convenient bridgehead to Central and Western Europe” (ibid). The Iranians are “targeting very specific local communities that would be vulnerable and prone to outside influence. In Bulgaria, the Alawites serve as such a community” (ibid). As this is occurring in Bulgaria and Albania (in relation to the MEK), as well as in Kosovo and North Macedonia, the trend must be monitored to prevent unintended security consequences (The Globe Post, 2018 and Anonymous Interviews, Imams, NGO Officials, Fall 2018, Albania).

Furthermore, the susceptibility of Western Balkans states to disinformation could increase the threat of widening Iranian disinformation in the near future. The region is “among the most vulnerable to the spread of fake news” according to the Open Society Institute of Sofia (Lesenski, 2018). Out of the 35 European countries listed, North Macedonia is ranked the lowest in terms of media literacy (ranked 35th in 2018). Albania (ranked 33rd in 2018), Bosnia and Herzegovina (ranked 32nd in 2018), Montenegro (ranked 31st in 2018) and Serbia (ranked 29th in 2018) are also at the bottom of the list. This shows that the Western Balkans are an easier target for (Iranian) disinformation campaigns.

When looking beyond countries with significant Muslim populations, Iranian influence is much less tied to covert security operations and much more centered on declarations of military intent. In April 2018, Iran’s Defense Minister met his Serbian counterpart and declared that “defense cooperation between the two countries could

greatly contribute to regional security and stability” (Iran Daily 2018b). Beyond Serbia-Iran willingness to increase cooperation in the sphere of security, there is very little interstate military relations between Iran and the other countries in the region.

## The Religious and Cultural Influence Trends

Religion could be viewed as a key factor in forming the relations between Iran and Western Balkans. Although, they practice different sects of Islam, respectively Sunni in the Western Balkans region and Shiite in Iran. The countries with which shared religion is particularly relevant are Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, North Macedonia and Kosovo, with Bosnia and Herzegovina being the most important. This is mainly because “[a] non-Sunni actor like Iran, has a greater success in Bosnia than in Albania and Kosovo where the ethnic nationalism is more pronounced” (Progonati 2017, 202). This manifest itself as a “pro-Iranian, pro-Shiite faction within the Bosnian Muslim religious establishment [despite the fact that Bosnian Islam itself is Sunni]” (G. N. Bardos 2013, 65). Sarajlić argues that “although not as visible as during wartime and the immediate post-war period, various Islamic networks, with sponsors from Muslim countries such as Iran and Saudi Arabia, are still present” (Sarajlić 2011, 174). They claim that the “most frequent nodes” of these Islamic networks in Bosnia and Herzegovina are “mosques, schools, non-governmental organizations, embassies and cultural centers, education abroad, publications and the cybersphere” (Sarajlić 2011, 178). Iran has invested in elite circles in Bosnia and Herzegovina as observable in its efforts to establish a Persian-Bosnian College outside Sarajevo, which offers graduating students trips to Iran (G. N. Bardos 2013). In the academic sphere, “Iranian influence is particularly effective thanks to local Muslim intellectuals and Islamic studies professors in Sarajevo who have come to promote Iran’s cultural values and ways of thinking” (Sarajlić 2011, 184). The activities aimed at increasing Iranian cultural influence include “the dissemination of books, the provision of funds for various local actors and activities, as well as the organization of cultural and promotional events” (Sarajlić 2011, 179). This is effective due to “the systematic financial support” the Iranian state gives to cultural centres. The Iranian networks in Bosnia and Herzegovina are “almost exclusively linked to the Iranian embassy” (Sarajlić 2011, 184). This means that their activities are less strictly tied to religion, as mosque networks would be, and instead are largely related to cultural influence. Moreover, the interviewees note that there is a small number of Shia Muslims in BiH, alike with Wahhabis (Anonymous Interviews, Academia, NGO Officials and Directly Affected Individuals, Spring 2019, BiH).

Besides Bosnia and Herzegovina, there are claims that Iran is exerting religious influence in Albania, North Macedonia and Kosovo through Wahhabism: “(t)he threat Iran and its proxies pose to Western interests in the Balkans is multiplied by the growth of Wahhabi movements” due to the development of “extra-territorial, sharia-run enclaves that over the past two decades have become safe havens and recruiting grounds for jihadis” (G. N. Bardos 2013, 60). Wahhabism is more generally associated with Saudi Arabia (and to a lesser extent, Qatar) however, and so will be analyzed more in chapters describing those influencers. The Iranian religious influence presumably is decreasing in other Western Balkans states despite the presence of both Muslim majority and large minority populations. This seems to be

attributed to the increased ethnic nationalism present in these states that results into a non-Sunni actor like Iran with reduced religious influence (Progonati 2017).

However, the local interviewees claim that local Islamic schools, Sufi Muslim House of Prayer and other objects with religious meanings have been financed by Iran. They find that the Iranian organizations promote unfamiliar practices to local customs, as illustrated by an interviewee: “religious practices that are like cults, non-traditional way”. Iran according to interviews spreads Shiasm among Albanians among other forms also through some schools to learn Quran (hafez). These children accordingly “know Quran by heart and they do not understand it since it’s Arabic” (Anonymous Interviews, Imams, Spring 2018, North Macedonia). Moreover, the Foundation of Cultural Advancement and Islamic Religion in North Macedonia which publishes books, newsletter, and so forth, which is an inherently Iranian institution, has been funded by various Gulf states. Moreover, the Lajmi portal and Radio Haracina are present in the region and Iranian financed (Anonymous Interviews, Religious Officials and NGO Officials, Fall 2019, North Macedonia). Moreover, radio Tehran is broadcasted in Albanian language as well. As explained in the Qatar’s chapter, their influence has been quite high as Albanian highly educated elites have turned toward their ideas. In North Macedonia, Iran has an embassy in Skopje, and in 2013, they allocated their first Iranian ambassador in North Macedonia (Progonati 2017).

In Albania, the Iranian religious community has received high backlash from the pro-Turkish community and traditional religious community since they are perceived to be different, promoting different customs, praying differently, dressing differently, greeting differently. Moreover, they are also critiqued for targeting mainly children (Anonymous Interviews, Imams, Fall 2019, Albania). In Serbia and Montenegro, Iranian religious influence is miniscule due to these states having much smaller Muslim populations. Thus, it seems that Iran is using ‘hybrid techniques’ in Albania and North Macedonia to spread its political power through using various types of communications to promote its strategic interests.

In recent years, there has been an overt display of increased interactions between Serbia and Iran through travel but also education. The resumption of direct flights after 27 years assisted the relations between both countries. While the decision was made to improve bilateral relations, the Serbians also said it was to attract tourists and investors to Serbia. The outcome has, therefore, had social effects, such as the fact that more than 15,000 Iranians have visited Serbia since visa requirements were abolished in August 2017 (AP News 2018). However, given that the EU has recently forced Serbia to cease the visa-free travel, this trend of increased social interaction is unlikely to continue growing. In addition, in Serbia, Iran has a well-established cultural centre with a multitude of regular activities (Iran RS 2019). There is even a department of Persian language at the Philology Faculty in Belgrade (ibid).

In relation to the other Western Balkans countries, Iranian religious and cultural influence is much less. For instance, in Kosovo, they do not have an embassy due to their refusal to recognize the state, which may also contribute to the poor relations between Albania and Iran on a diplomatic level, best displayed through the explosion of the Iranian Ambassador from the country in 2018. In regard to Montenegro, the Iranian Embassy is based in Croatia, making it difficult to promote

strong cultural ties and indicating the lack of importance they place toward cultural influence in this country (Progonati 2017).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, Iran does not exert a particularly significant level of influence in Western Balkans through the traditional mechanisms of economic, political, or military influence. Iran's strategic position in the world, bridging the east to the west and offering a geographical alternative to Russia, is naturally extended to Western Balkans. However, Iran is gradually increasing its cultural and religious activities to potentially counter EU and US activities on the ground, whilst collaborating with anti-Western actors. The region is therefore an area of strategic interest for Iran, engaging in various activities.

The highest impact is observed in the security sphere. Much of Iran's influence originates from employing hybrid warfare techniques in the Western Balkans region. Unconventional tools such as disinformation campaigns, covert operations and terrorism accused individuals are used across the region, and in particular in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Albania. With reportedly hundreds of operatives present in Bosnia, Iran uses the country as a safe haven for the region. Iran considers Albania to be a "frontline country in Iran's fight against terrorism", since the Iranian opposition group MEK trains militants in the country (Khodabandeh 2008). Additionally, Iran seems to be exerting religious influence (shiaism) in Albania, North Macedonia and Kosovo. Disinformation campaigns focus on Muslims in the region, at which the local population is particularly susceptible to. In non-Muslim countries, the focus is much more on military cooperation instead of covert, hybrid activities, such as the recent expression of willingness of military cooperation between Serbia and Iran.

In the economic sphere of influence, Iran is miniscule in the region. Despite signed economic agreements and lifting of visa restrictions, bilateral trade and investment is low. Politically, the engagement is also low, shown in a lack of state visits and the region's alignment with the EU in many cases concerning Iran. However, some political parties are perceived to have connections with Iran, such as Vetvendosja, SDA and Besa. In addition, there is an increased promotion of cultural, religious ties through a substantial amount of cultural and educational centers, mosques, embassies, media and a focus on elites.

In conclusion, Iran's conventional influence is low to medium through overt political and economic interactions. However, the engagement in the region through proxies (political parties), intelligence officials and the presence of opposition group militants make the region important in the global strategy of Iran. The region can arguably be used as a base and could potentially, though quite unlikely, become a proxy of future wars of Iran against the West.

## 2: China

### Introduction

China is a key global actor and a leading technological power. Its increasing presence in the world, including in Europe, should be accompanied by greater responsibilities: upholding an international order based on rules, reciprocity, non-discrimination and the openness of its system (European Commission 2019a). China, in general, represents a revisionist actor. In the international sphere, China strongly favors multilateralism (EEAS). Overall, China utilizes A2AD capabilities, as well as influence peddling, intimidation, coercion and other means of influence to achieve war like ends. This is prevalent in its territorial disputes, such as in the South China Sea and the first island chain. With its technologically advanced A2AD capabilities, it challenges the spheres of influence in which the US dominates, while avoiding perceived US redlines.<sup>10</sup> Noteworthy, Beijing's campaign like gray zone competition integrates all elements of national power (Freier 2016). China has chosen gray zone style strategies to pursue their measured revisionist goals.

China is the only state that has published the Three Warfare's Doctrine to date. It defines interstate conflict, unlike the West, through three principles: legal warfare (using international law to advance a strategic objective), media warfare (to win public and international opinion) and psychological warfare (coerce an opponent eg. freezing diplomatic relations) (Klimburg 2017, 295). The General Political Department/Liaison Department (GPD/LD) works with Chinese intelligence to identify foreign political, business, military elites, or potential 'friendly' contacts. They usually analyze their position towards China, their career trajectories, motivations, make 'cognitive maps' to guide the "direction and character of tailored influence operations, including conversation, exploitation, or subversion" (Klimburg 2017, 295–96).

While traditionally focusing on Taiwan, the GPD/LD is moving toward operations abroad: "China's intelligence services put an emphasis on gaining influence over Czech political and state elite in this fashion [...] the GPD/LD as a whole can be described as an instrument of 'political warfare' [...] Given its focus on manipulating both public opinion and elites abroad, however, it is no surprise that it acts as a distant mirror: just as China invests in this aspect of state conflict, it worries that Western nations [...] will do the same" (Klimburg 2017, 296; China Daily 2016). This may demonstrate how the future political warfare and influence may entangle (Klimburg 2017, 296).

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<sup>10</sup> The first island chain military doctrine is a doctrine by the People's Republic of China, aiming to secure the geographical area of the first island chain from American military bases, aircrafts and aircraft carried groups. (the chain of major archipelagos from the East Asian mainland coast: Kuril Islands, Japanese Archipelago, Ryukyu Islands, Taiwan, the Northern Philippines, and Borneo, from Kamchatka to the Malay Peninsula). It is a doctrine of preemptive self-defense. By 2020, according to RAND, China is well on its way to completely achieving its first island policy. See more at: <https://www.economist.com/briefing/2012/04/07/the-dragons-new-teeth>

Moreover, the threats deriving from China are outlined in China's 2015 military white paper that sees cybersecurity as the "the commanding height of all future conflict" implemented by military forces, officials in civilian organizations and non-governmental organizations. Cyber provides a "large-scale deployment of cyber espionage and covert action [...]. The danger is that this expanded concept of psychological warfare will leave the confines of the battlefield and infect the wider paradigm of security and therefore justify the Russian and Chinese assertion that information - all information - is indeed a weapon" (Klimburg 2017, 186). China's propaganda focuses on "cheerleading or distraction away from the political argument" (Klimburg 2017, 272, 281). Social media is perceived to be "the perfect propaganda monitoring [of local grievances] and planning tool [for early warning and response] ... a nightmarishly effective form of government control" (ibid).

The strategic communication term needs renewal. The Chinese approach favors information warfare directed at an adversary and their own citizens, perpetually distorting and, therefore influencing decision making (Klimburg 2017). However, the line between strategic communication and information warfare emphasis 'honesty' (Klimburg 2017). Generally, China's foreign cyber activities thus far have been economic. The 2015 agreement has ended this, and so China may turn to political activities abroad more. While China mainly focuses on domestic affairs, it is also active abroad: "Today, it is still possible to say that the great majority of obviously politically relevant cyberattacks [...] reported worldwide are Chinese. This is partially due to an observation bias: Russian cyber operations, let alone those of the U.S., are much more sophisticated and often escape detection" (Klimburg 2017, 286). China engages in hybrid conflict to change the balance of power. However, the Chinese approach seems to be more gradual, long term and does not aim to destabilise (van der Putten, et al. 2018).

The consequences of the growing China are insurmountable. China's economic competitiveness, which is a source of political influence, may also impact the EU and Dutch national security. Already, the Dutch economic security is decreasing as Chinese investments in the Netherlands is increasing very quickly, mainly in mergers and acquisitions (M&A) (ibid). The investments in Western Balkans may as well decrease the economic security of the Netherlands due to the interconnectedness.

The Western Balkans region is crucial for the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China is treating it as such, especially since the region is a focal point in China's logistical and economic access to the EU. Despite China's Foreign Direct Investment remaining fairly low in the region, approximately only 3%, their economic presence is strong due to loans, not investments (Zeneli 2019). The Chinese influence in Western Balkans is on the rise, particularly in the economic sphere also due to the BRI project, which was formally introduced by Chinese President Xi-Jinping in 2013. China's turn toward Western Balkans is seen in the '16+1' (now known as 17+1) framework established in April 2012, which brings heads of state together annually to strengthen dialogue between China, and Central and Eastern Europe (Oosterveld and Roelen 2017). All the Western Balkans states are members. There are also other critical infrastructure projects.

Debt trap diplomacy is one of the most common features of China to subdue other powers. The debt diplomacy has been a prominent feature of the foreign

relations of China, especially under Xi Jinping’s rule. It is considered to be an expansion of Deng Xiaoping’s infrastructure-based development strategy. Considering China’s frontrunner position in infrastructure development, there is a growing fear that the Chinese are utilizing “their overseas spending sprees to gain foothold in some of the world’s most strategic places” intentionally and deliberately, with the purpose of achieving China’s dominion as the American influence seems to weaken in developing countries (Beech 2018). This has been the case in Sri Lanka, the Maldives and in Malaysia, and it may become the case in Western Balkans: Montenegro owes 40 percent of its state loan to China. Similarly, North Macedonia owes approximately 20 percent of its state loan to the Chinese, whereas Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia follow, with 14 percent and 12 percent, respectively as of 2018 (Beech 2018). Despite these threats in the long term, the general attitude of the Western Balkans governments is illustrated by the following quote: “we will worry about it later”, indicating a lack of strategy and likely ad hoc responses (Anonymous Interviews, Governmental Officials, Spring 2019, BiH, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia). This uncovers the disconnect between the threats posed by China and the responses from the Western Balkans countries. The following sections outline the influence trends then point out the impact of China’s influence in each sphere, political, security, economic and cultural, for each Western Balkans country.

### The Influence Trends in the Western Balkans

Historically, China has been connected to the region through its relationship with Albania and Serbia. In particular, the “long-standing collaboration” until the late 1970s, between Maoist China and Hoxha’s isolationist Albania “stands out as peculiar”, while there was also cooperation with Yugoslavia prior to and following its disintegration in the early 1990s, with “diplomatic relations and commercial ties” intensifying under the President Slobodan Milošević (Bastian 2018).

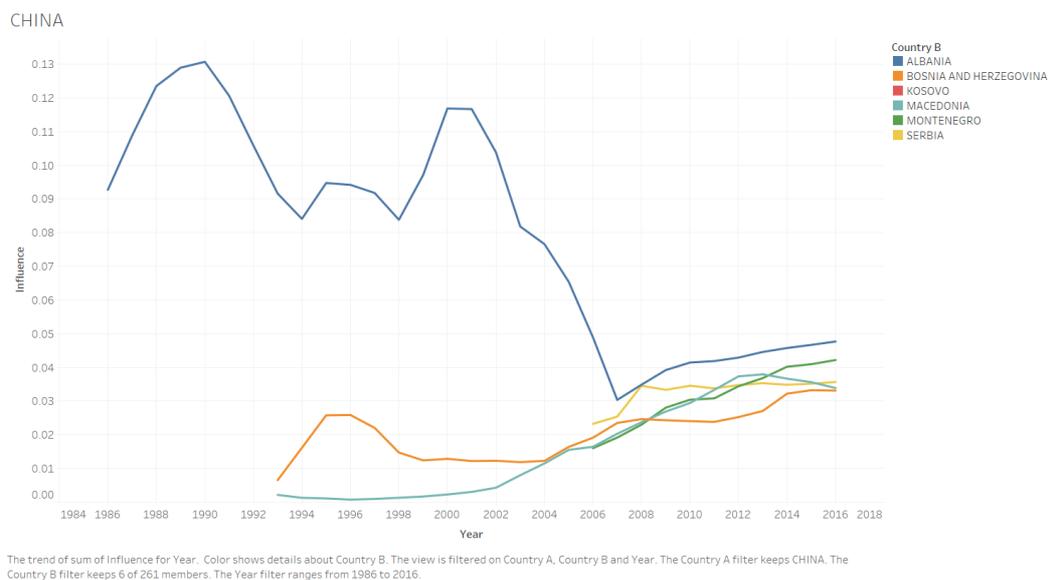


Figure 20: Influence of China in Western Balkans from 1984-2016 (FBIC Index)

Figure 20 shows the long-term trends of Chinese influence in the Western Balkans region. China's influence has been steadily increasing in Serbia and Montenegro as of 2006, but also across the region. This is largely due to the fact that China has become much more outward looking over the past ten years, particularly in terms of economic investment, with the OBOR initiative as a key example. Historically, China wielded substantial influence in Albania while it was a communist state. Chinese support for Albanian economy has been crucial during the 70s and 80s, while the years 1971-1975 were the golden years of Chinese - Albania economic cooperation. To take an example, in 1973 and 1974 Albania sent 24 percent of its exports to China from where it received 60 percent of the total imports (Hackaj 2018).

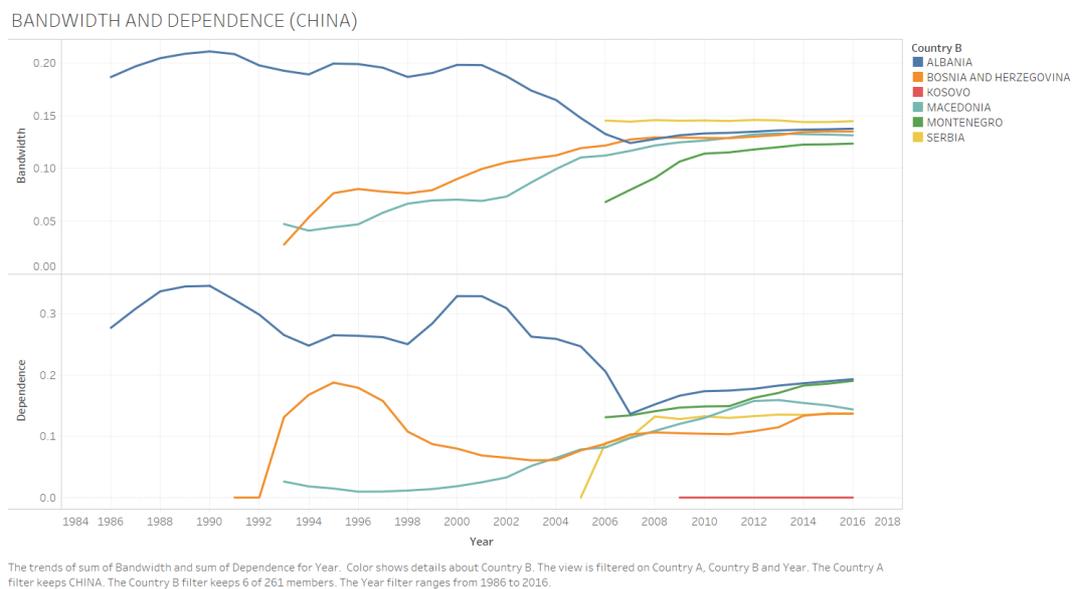


Figure 21: Bandwidth and Dependence (sub-indices of Influence) of China in Western Balkans from 1984-2016 (FBIX Index)

While assessing the Bandwidth and Dependence measure, various trends become visible. There are notable results on all Western Balkans countries, except in regard to Kosovo (likely because of China's lack of recognition of its independence). For example, Serbia scores highest on Bandwidth as it is the country with the most significant connections in terms of economic and political relations, having the highest bilateral trade of the region worth over \$600 million in 2016 (WITS 2016). However, it does not translate into higher dependence on China, indicating that the relationship is more equal due to the relatively large economy of Serbia. Additionally, Serbia does not have any security relations with China, only Bosnia and Herzegovina does. Strikingly, Albania owned large stocks of Chinese weaponry, indicating high dependence in the 80s and 90s, however most of this has been eliminated (Chinese blogger n.d.). Albania and Montenegro rank highest in terms of general dependence on China, indicating stronger economic and political relations. In the case of Albania, this is partly due to political bandwidth, while in the case of Montenegro it is almost exclusively through economic bandwidth, i.e. trade. These two countries have high levels of debt to China, which may translate into dependence, as well as the fact that

their economies are relatively small (for more information, please see the following subsection).

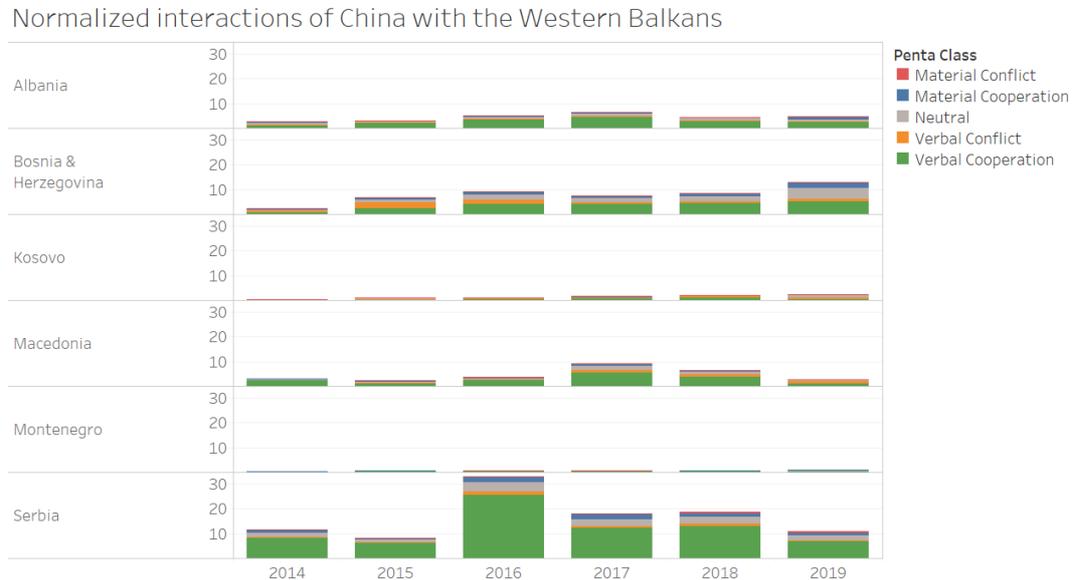


Figure 22: Normalized and categorized events between China and the Western Balkans, 2009-2018 (HCSS Datawarehouse)

Figure 22 shows the recent interactions between China and Western Balkans in the past five years. 2014 represented a significant turning point as Albania, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia experienced a substantial rise in interactions. This aligns with China’s introduction of the BRI initiative in 2013, as will be described in the following subsection. However, Montenegro and Kosovo have lower interactions. This is partly because Montenegro has the smallest GDP of the other Western Balkans states and is therefore likely to receive less media attention. However, their dependence score is the highest, which is likely due to their relatively smaller GDP, meaning that Chinese investment firms contribute to a greater portion of its economy. Kosovo has barely had any interaction with China.

### The Economic Influence Trends

China’s authoritarian governance model has proven to be useful in the processes of pursuing mercantilist economic policies. China is the second largest source of outward direct investments globally after the US. China’s economic competitiveness is a major source of its global political influence (van der Putten, et al. 2018). China’s BRI, as well as industrial/technology plans such as ‘China 2025’, are increasingly viewed as a symbol of its definitive move towards mercantilism (ibid). China’s policy on banks falls between claims of Chinese mercantilism and Chinese development-oriented foreign policy rhetoric and aims. Loans are often used to be given to poor or middle-income countries (mostly in Africa, the Caribbean and Asia). So far, China’s Ex-Im Bank played the most important role both in and near the EU. They have upgraded and constructed newly a 350-kilometre high-speed rail line in

Hungary and Serbia, linking the two countries' capitals. China so far is engaging on the global level, but currently they are primarily operating on the EU's periphery (ibid).

The investments are not only crucial to the region, but also the EU. For example, the Belgrade Budapest railway, will be constructed by Chinese companies but under EU standards and supervision. As such, it legitimizes Chinese investment on one hand, and it provides cheaper infrastructure in the EU (Makocki 2017). Overall, Chinese infrastructure projects make up about \$9.1 billion (€7.8 billion). Almost 90 percent of these projects have been initiated only since 2013, well after the Financial Crisis. The most important transport sector contractor is the predominantly state-owned China Communications Construction Company. In the energy sector, the state-owned China National Machinery Industry Corporation – known as Sinomach – is the leading contractor (European Investment Bank 2018).

It is very difficult to categorize the Chinese involvement in the region as negative or positive. On the positive side, the Chinese investment has had immediate impacts – for example, the purchase of Zelezara Smederevo, a steel mill in Eastern Serbia has led to the saving of 5200 local jobs (Banovic 2019) and showed the political goodwill between China and Serbia. Chinese (and Russian) investments in Serbia are regarded positively by local populations (Bloomberg 2018) and are considered visionary. However, on the negative side, beyond the debt diplomacy perpetrated in the region, questions arise as to corrupt practices as well as mismanagement and security failures (Erebara 2019). The reason why China is getting deeper in Western Balkans stems from the fact that the region needs infrastructure and the connectivity agenda. Infrastructure costs are very high, other EU countries such as Romania and Bulgaria benefit from cohesion funds, but Western Balkans states are not eligible for them.

First Chinese investments after 2008 in the region were mostly state-owned enterprises: in public infrastructure tenders in transport and energy. Chinese investments in the region are characterized by (i) low bids, (ii) fast loan procedures especially compared to the EU or other International Financing Institutions and (iii) revitalization of “lost” cases, such as the case of Zelezara Smederevo (Hackaj 2019). The Chinese loans also normally do not have conditions in contrast with IMF loans. Regarding the investments, there is currently a general consensus that Chinese business in the region means only business. However, there is also a prejudice around Chinese investments since it may increase corruption in the region. In addition, Chinese companies have entered the region in sectors in which there was little to no competition from EU companies (ibid).

As mentioned, the BRI initiative means that the economic sphere is China's greatest realm of influence in Western Balkans. The project which is aimed at integrating trade and investment in Eurasia, encompasses over \$900 billion in planned investments on infrastructure (Oosterveld and Roelen 2017). The Western Balkans region is important as it serves as a ‘bridge to Europe’ for the project. Of the Western Balkans states, “the country that has attracted the most investments and has the highest number of projects is Serbia, where beside a favorable economic climate [...] there is a high readiness of political elites for bilateral cooperation with China” (Klepo 2017). Serbia is the main country to attract Chinese investment in Western Balkans (79% of the total stock of its FDI). This is attributed especially due to strong

economic diplomacy between Chinese and Serbian political elites (Hackaj 2019). This readiness for bilateral cooperation can be witnessed as trade between China and Serbia tripled between 2005 and 2016 (Vuksanovic and Le Corre 2019), with Serbia attracting “over \$1 billion in investments in the form of soft loans to finance road building and energy projects” (Oosterveld and Roelen 2017).

During the summer of 2018, it was also announced that a Chinese company, Shandong Linglong, would be investing \$1 billion investment in a new tire company from April 2019 (Vuksanovic and Le Corre 2019), and a high-speed rail line connecting Belgrade to Budapest is under construction. However, this is “being investigated by the EU for possible infringements of European requirements for public tenders” (Oosterveld and Roelen 2017) and has failed to materialize thus far. Beyond infrastructural investment, multiple Chinese companies have signed deals to construct power plants in Serbia, BRI and €200 million have been invested in an initiative aimed at “decreasing the gas imports and enabling cheaper heat for the capital of Serbia” (Klepo 2017). Additionally, there is an expanding interest from Chinese companies to invest in Serbia in various sectors, such as manufacturing of construction and electrical materials, consumer goods etc. For example, in May 2019, 58 representatives from one Chinese province visited Belgrade seeking local partners. According to the Serbian Minister of Finance, there are more upcoming efforts for attracting Chinese investment (Tanjug News).

The aforementioned investigation into Chinese infringements on European laws indicates that there may be some sort of a ‘push-back’ from the EU against Chinese investment (Vuksanovic and Le Corre 2019). This could mean that, for China, “the temptation to bend the rules is arguably higher in the Western Balkans than it is within the EU” (Oosterveld and Roelen 2017). Le Corre concurs, arguing that “there is no procurement process; the government decides on the arrangements. It is clear that the ‘Chinese way,’ [...] is more sui figure to less regulated, pluralistic countries. Serbia is one of them” (Vuksanovic and Le Corre 2019). For this reason, a future trend may be China focusing on the states in Western Balkans rather than on EU member states, such as Hungary. In fact, recently, an international conference on Belt and Road for the 16+1 (now known as 17+1) Initiative was organized, which reinforced the fact that Serbia is one of the closest allies of China in Europe and specifically in Western Balkans. So far, Serbia has agreed on projects worth \$5 billion according to Ivica Dacic, Foreign Minister of Serbia (Oosterveld and Roelen 2017; Tanjug News 2019b). This, however, raises questions about how the Chinese investments will impact the EU accession process. According to an international official, the EU is attempting to discuss with the prospective members regarding their harmonization of the EU rules and regulations, meaning requesting to align the Chinese investments with the EU norms (Anonymous Interviews, International Officials, Spring 2019, Belgium).

There have already been very significant levels of investments in the other Western Balkans states. In Montenegro, the China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation is upgrading a 10km stretch of railway connecting a port city on the Montenegrin coast with Belgrade (Tonchev 2017), and there is a \$3.19 billion project led by the China Pacific Construction Group (CPCG) to build an expressway between Montenegro and Albania (Oosterveld and Roelen 2017). Finally, a €689 million loan was provided by Chinese state-owned Export-Import (Exim) Bank of China for the construction of a Podgorica-Kolasin motorway section (ibid). Beyond railway and road infrastructure in Montenegro, the Exim Bank has loaned €56 million for the

construction of new ships by the Chinese Poly Group Corporation (ibid). This shows that, while Chinese investments focus on road and rail, they also stretch into maritime affairs, transport and shipping. This makes sense on the back of Chinese acquisition of a 51 percent stake in Greece's Piraeus Port Authority (Stevens 2018). Challenges have been raised as well in Montenegro, as in Serbia, where the Chinese investment on power plant industry in Tuzla raised questions of incompatibility with Montenegro's laws as well as the EU ones. Interviewees uncover that the local elites are leaning more toward changing the laws rather than refraining from the investment (Anonymous Interviews, IO/NGO Officials, Spring 2019, Montenegro).

The Greek port development also makes North Macedonia "very important... as the landlocked country sits on a prospective commercial route" connecting Piraeus to Budapest. It is therefore seen as the "gateway" to markets in Central and Western Europe (Tonchev 2017). This importance is displayed as they were offered a \$580 million loan in 2013 to help build a highway (Vuksanovic and Le Corre 2019). According to interviews, the Chinese investments in North Macedonia are much lower compared to the rest of the region (Balkan Insight 2017; Xinhuanet - New China 2017; Anonymous Interviews, NGO Officials, Spring 2019, North Macedonia).

A 2019 report by the Munich Security Conference, points out in particular that the Chinese loan for the "construction of the first stretch of a highway to Serbia has sent Montenegro's debt soaring to an unsustainable 80 percent of GDP, raising widespread concerns about Beijing subjecting Montenegro to 'debt-trap diplomacy'" (Munich Security Conference 2019). EU Commissioner Johannes Hahn, leading EU enlargement negotiations, also stated that China is being "underestimated" in Western Balkans (Hopkins 2019). As China "never cares how and if a country is able to pay its loans. And if they cannot pay, there is some pressure that things are transferred into their ownership" (Hopkins 2019). This articulates the EU's concerns over potential debt-trapping. Therefore, this shows that the economic influence of China, although already very substantial since commencing the BRI initiative, has the potential to increase in the future if debts cannot be repaid, and that this could be used to exert influence beyond the economic realm, to be translated into political and security leverage.

The Chinese debt diplomacy in Sri Lanka and the Maldives illustrates stories that serve as cautionary examples that are relevant to Greece, North Macedonia as well as Montenegro. They represent the darkest side of the BRI in Sri Lanka. The instruments are supposed to be a win-win. Colombo would make a profit from the operation of the port, while Beijing would receive a strategic transit in the Indian Ocean where Chinese commercial ships travel to Europe. China's competition with a great Asian power, India, presented this as a key strategic location. Sri Lanka was unable to repay more than \$8 billion in loans. In response, China threatened to cut off financial support. After two years of negotiations, the port was transferred to China for 99 years in exchange for the cancellation of its debt (Seibt 2019). This mirrors the challenges that may arise from the port investment in Montenegro that allows Chinese commercial ships to travel to Europe, which could also be used for military purposes i.e. war ships in the longer-term. This port loan in Montenegro can be viewed as a deliberate plan to acquire strategic positions in Europe, marking a terrible geopolitical failure and lack of EU responsibility if allowed to proceed.

Albania, too, has agreed on terms with the Exim Bank, as of December 2014, to construct a motorway to North Macedonia to Bulgaria, the Kicevo-Ohrid and Miladinovci-Stip sections of the M2 motorway ([Balkan Insider 2018](#)). Furthermore, two Chinese companies, China Everbright and Friedmann Pacific Asset Management, have announced the acquisition of Tirana International Airport SHPK, the operator of the airport in Albania's capital city. However, it should be noted that in the case of Tirana Airport it was a German-American company, who originally privatized the airport and later sold it to the current Chinese owners. In addition, according to an interviewee, Albania is the only country in the Western Balkans (excluding Kosovo), where Chinese companies have not won any public tender in infrastructure (Anonymous Interviews, Academia, Albania, Spring 2019). The group will run the airport until (at least) 2025.

Beyond transport, Albania is an "important piece" for China due to its position on the '21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road,' as well as its "considerable energy resources" (Арутюнян 2018). This is visible as the Shanghai-based Geo-Jade Petroleum Corporation bought the controlling rights of two Albanian oil fields for \$442 million. In addition, Albania occupies a key spot along the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP), which is currently under construction. Once completed, it is to carry gas from Turkey, through Greece and Albania, to Western Europe (Tonchev 2017). To put this in perspective, China was the third-largest foreign investor after Italy and Germany at \$409.61 million in 2016, according to the Albanian Institute for Statistics (Konrad Adenauer Stiftung 2018). By January 2017, 103 Chinese-owned companies were active in Albania while there were over 100 companies operating in the market (Hackaj 2018).

Bosnia & Herzegovina has also been of interest to China, as in 2018 they signed "two cooperation agreements concerning road infrastructure, worth over BAM 2 billion (around €1 billion)" (NI Sarajevo 2018). In fact, trade cooperation between Bosnia and Herzegovina and China has increased 100% under the BRI Initiative (Sarajevo Times 2019). They are currently developing three thermal power plants (Lakic 2018). Furthermore, in September 2018, China's largest state-owned shipping company, COSCO, opened a branch in Sarajevo (*ibid*). The nature of Chinese investment in Bosnia and Herzegovina, particularly relating to the power plants, has been controversial ([Lakic 2019](#)). The EU has been critical of a "loan guarantee covering 100 percent of a €614m loan from China's Exim Bank to finance a coal power plant" and have called on the country's lawmakers not to approve it, saying it constitutes illegal state aid according to EU law (Hopkins 2019).

The final Western Balkans state, Kosovo, is not recognized by China and so does not have economic ties with them. However, some interviews reveal that construction projects are taking place in the northern area of Kosovo most likely with the permission of the Serbian government (Anonymous Interviews, NGO Officials, Spring 2019, Kosovo).

Therefore, there is a rapid expansion of Chinese economic interests in Western Balkans, mostly in providing loans for building infrastructure, but also in energy and innovation. This provides China a wide influence over the region, particularly due to the fact that many of the investments are loans. Despite these loans being granted under "soft conditions", they increase the countries' debts, particularly for Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia (Oosterveld and Roelen 2017). Oosterveld and Roelen argue that the size of their debts will make it very difficult for these four states to repay. China will therefore "be able to exercise

leverage over these countries, should they get into financial difficulties” (ibid). They display that China has precedent for this, using the examples of Chinese loans to Venezuela and Pakistan (Oosterveld and Roelen 2017, 11–12).

Of particular importance is the Chinese involvement in the tech sectors in the region. Huawei and ZTE have prominent presence in all six states, as their products are reasonably priced for the markets, widely available and have good performance reviews. However, Huawei’s presence is not only prominent in the small electronics markets. Namely, the Chinese tech giant has been the company in charge for updating the Albanian electrical grid (Huawei n.d.). Likewise, Huawei is to launch a so-called “Western Balkans digital transformation hub” in Serbia (News 2019). In 2018, the Serbian government has made a statement that Huawei had plans to offer its Smart City solution in Serbia (B92 2019). This raises concerns over the security of digital information in Western Balkans.

Despite the increase in Chinese spending and loans in Western Balkans, an interesting counter perspective is provided. Despite the growing Chinese focus on Western Balkans: “today, China’s countries of choice are the EU member states, Greece and Hungary as well as the EU candidate country Serbia” (Bastian 2018). Moreover, the Chinese investments have risen in Croatia as well (China Daily 2018); (Obućina 2019). This indicates that the perception of China’s economic influence in Western Balkans beyond Serbia (and potentially Montenegro), may be overstated. The South China Morning Post makes a similar observation, pointing out that despite the BRI, the EU accounted for “73 per cent of all 2017 trade within the non-EU Western Balkans... China and Russia each had a share of about 5 percent” (Bloomberg 2018). They therefore argue that “in the jostling for influence in the Balkans, perception trumps reality” citing a government survey in which Serbs think China and Russia are in the top three biggest investors in their nation, but in reality four of the top five are EU states (Bloomberg 2018). This is interesting to note as the perception of increased Chinese economic influence arguably works in China’s favor because it means they can project power and influence beyond what is the reality. Furthermore, the visibility of Chinese influence also “undermines the idea that the EU is the region’s best and only hope and, by extension, erodes popular consent for the painful reforms needed to qualify for EU entry” (Bloomberg 2018).

Moreover, it is argued that “China’s real economic impact [...] in the Western Balkans remains low, except perhaps for Serbia, which enjoys a more robust economic relationship with China. [...] Chinese FDI outside of Serbia remains negligible [...] The capital inflows from China that do materialize are mostly not strictly speaking FDI, but rather loans from China’s policy banks such as the EximBank with conditions like the mandatory use of Chinese contractors and labor” (Prague Security Studies Institute 2019b, 12). However, it is undeniable that Chinese economic influence in the Western Balkans has massively increased since the beginning of the BRI. Serbia is the most prominent partner, but all Western Balkans states have had significant investment, besides Kosovo, which in the long term may translate into debt trap diplomacy that translates into influential power in the region. Concretely, the debt-trap diplomacy in Montenegro may become a challenge for the future of the region and the EU.

The impact by local communities is viewed as positive, producing more jobs for citizens in some other towns where jobs are lacking and as a country opening an

infrastructural door to Europe (Anonymous Interviews, Family Members, Fall 2018/Spring 2018, North Macedonia, Bosnia, Kosovo, Serbia). Thus, the impact on local communities is both positive (saving jobs, improvement of infrastructure, fast agreements) and negative (potentially strengthening corruption, losing popular support from the region towards EU and the reforms). However, China's economic engagement is mainly through loans, not grants or foreign aid, which is usually how EU supports Western Balkans countries. This in turn may increase the appeal of the region towards the EU and counter the impact of China in the long term. Therefore, it is argued that despite the massive rise in flows of Chinese cash into Western Balkans, the EU is still far and away more economically powerful in the region, despite what the perceptions may be in comparison with the West, i.e. Germany, (for more, please see the Conclusion). These perceptions that China's role is high may be amplified by the use of technology in the region. Some authors see the investment of China as a way to gain greater economic and political leverage in the future (Bassuener 2019). Finally, China supports the integration of Western Balkans states to the EU and thus, similar to Saudi Arabia, views Western Balkans as a gateway to the EU market (Konrad Adenauer Stiftung 2018).

Lastly, it has been uncovered that the region lacks national strategies on relations with China and their potential responses. The other spheres of influence, which will be assessed in the following sections, are largely tied to or resulting from Chinese economic power and investments in the region.

## The Political Influence Trends

In the process of analyzing China's (and all other foreign actors') influences (Carafano 2017), it is important to note the gradual disengagement of the US from the region under Trump era. The US and its other Western compatriots had strong presence in the aftermath of the Yugoslav wars and armed conflicts of the 1990s and 2000s. However, since the mid-2000s they have slowly started to disengage, which has opened the door for other influences (Krivokapić 2018). This is especially noticeable under the Trump administration and their indifference towards NATO (Hoffman 2016), an organization that recently admitted Albania and Montenegro, and is in the process of admitting North Macedonia as its member state. Although, recently the US appointed a new envoy, Matthew Palmer to deal with the Kosovo-Serbia border dispute indicating a return of the US focus on the region (Gramer 2019).

There are also some Chinese efforts to alter perceptions of their country through media and civil society in the Western Balkans countries. For example, the CPC "promotes 'positive' China coverage through bolstering state media cooperation with Serbian media outlets, orchestrating, for example, joint symposiums on 'sound journalism'. Serbian media have also regularly published opinion pieces by Xi Jinping" (Munich Security Conference 2019). Beyond Serbia, the CPC has also "promoted increasingly think tank exchanges between state-led Chinese institutions and partners from North Macedonia as well as other countries, such as the China CEEC Think Tank Network, and has used these exchanges to popularize Chinese core interests" (ibid). These activities demonstrate that China does have an interest in exerting social influence, and that they wish to ensure China is viewed in a positive light by the

general population. This is largely a similar motive as to those behind the Confucius Institutes (as will be described in the cultural section). One can tie these motives to the CPC's belief that culture and education are part of its "waixuan, or 'external propaganda' apparatus" (Brady 2015). President Xi sees this as one of the CPC's three 'Magic Weapons,' and the basic aim is claimed to be to make friends in order to "offset elements hostile to the CPC's ideology and rule" (Grieger, 2015). This shows that Chinese informational activities may have greater political motives than one would initially presume.

The Chinese political influence in Western Balkans is largely tied to their economic interests in the region: "The need to build diplomatic bridges in the Western Balkans remains high and the importance of sui-figure the region's political geography features prominently in the Belt and Road Initiative" (Bastian 2018). Therefore, it is with Serbia that China has most political ties, which coincides with economic investment. Serbia's prominence is demonstrated by their Minister for construction, who declared that "It would not be immodest or wrong to call Serbia China's main partner in Europe" (Vuksanovic and Le Corre 2019). This political partnership has actually pre-dated the BRI, as China cooperated with Yugoslavia prior to and after its disintegration. For example, "(t)ravel diplomacy between Belgrade and Beijing intensified under President Tadić". The Presidents met in Serbia in February 2005, followed by another meeting in Beijing in 2009, and the meeting in 2016 with President Xi Jinping in Serbia led to the visa free regime (Bastian 2018). In 2019, Xi is expected to pay his second visit to Serbia which is viewed as "a statement of China's strategic interest for southeast Europe" (Vuksanovic and Le Corre 2019). This displays the strength of the political ties between the two states and shows that Serbia is indeed China's closest partner in Western Balkans.

Due to this partnership, China and Serbia reciprocate political support over controversial issues. For this reason, China does not recognize Kosovo and supported Serbia when the latter was under the EU pressure to recognize Kosovo's independence. This support is very well received by the political elite in Serbia. For example, during his last visit in China, President Vucic confirmed the unconditional support of China on the "Kosovo and Metohija" case reassuring the public that China will not change its stance towards Kosovo anytime soon (Tanjung News 2019d). Belgrade, similarly, has supported China on their former 'one child' policy and with disputes in the South China Sea (Tonchev 2017). The Serbian president voiced reasoning for their alignment with China, stating that "(t)hirty years ago you had one, absolutely dominant military, political, and economic power [the US] [...] with its economic, but also with its military and political power [the] People's Republic of China dramatically catches up" (Vuksanovic and Le Corre 2019). This recognition from the President has been reiterated among some parts of the population, who "perhaps out of frustration over past specific Western policies [...] have become somewhat anti-Western, favoring closer links with powers like Russia and China. Although it is hard to detail China's influence on Serbian political elites, there is undoubtedly a shift" (ibid). One example of this shift is the establishment of a "rather unique institution" namely, the National Council for the Coordination of Cooperation with Russia and China in May 2017. Run by the former President Tomislav Nikolić, they do not appear to "coordinate any specific policies but is no doubt a useful networking platform. It is also the first official body in all of CEE combining a Russian and Chinese agenda" (Prague Security Studies Institute 2019a, 17). This shows a recognition of the multipolarity of the world, from both the political class and the population, and this is likely to be a growing trend as the rise of China continues.

The political influence may be tied to the warfare strategies. It is argued that China's "state-driven 'economic diplomacy' typically supports (and conceals) its 'political warfare' objectives" (Prague Security Studies Institute 2019a, 13). This takes the form of elite capture, including high-level corruption, and "discourse management through the captured elites and various Belt and Road "think tanks" and friendship organizations" (ibid). The result of this, in Serbia, is that "China's political influence permeates both the governing and opposition parties" (ibid). This is hard to verify, but it is worth noting as it may explain Serbia's public support for China over controversial issues on the international stage, as outlined above.

Albania, historically, is the only Western Balkans state with some form of political ties to China due to "the long-standing collaboration between Maoist China and Hoxha's isolationist Albania" until the late 1970s (Bastian 2018). This is not replicated today, although "Albania does figure into China's investment radar in southeast Europe, [it is] with a far lower ranking than in the ideological halcyon days" (Bastian 2018), when they were united as two communist states on the world stage. There are indications that this could shift, however, as of 2018, Albania allows Chinese tourists to travel to the country without visas, albeit only during the peak tourist season (Huijuan 2018). The Chinese political support for Serbia over the Kosovo issue is also likely a reason for the limited political influence China has in Albania.

Beyond Albania, Montenegro has also introduced simpler procedures for Chinese visa-applicants, while Bosnia and Herzegovina has mutual visa-free regime with China. Through visa liberalization, the political/economic ties between several Western Balkans states and China will improve. However, China is still a relatively new "player" in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and North Macedonia, and so far there is no evidence that Chinese officials have established specific political activities (Prague Security Studies Institute 2019b, 13). In addition, since January 2017, China and Serbia signed the agreement abolishing visa requirements for citizens of both countries with ordinary passports for a period not exceeding 30 days since their first day of entering into the territory of the other country (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Serbia 2017).

Importantly, North Macedonia and the Republic of China on Taiwan (ROC) established diplomatic relations in 1999. This created an incident between North Macedonia and China, which vetoed the UN resolution renewing the mandate of the UNPREDEP (a peacekeeping force) in North Macedonia in retaliation. However, North Macedonia still opened an embassy in Taipei, ROC. The relations between China and North Macedonia were normalized in 2001. A joint statement was released in which North Macedonia recognized "emphatically that there is but one China in the world, that the Government of the People's Republic of China is the sole legal government representing the whole of China and that Taiwan is an inalienable part of the Chinese territory" (The Economist 2010). This showcases the effectiveness of China's willingness to employ coercive diplomacy used in the region.

China's recent political relations with (most of) the Western Balkans states are therefore largely tied to boosting economic and tourism relationships. The Montenegrin Foreign Minister argues that so far there has been no "meddling in the affairs" of the region's governments, and that they "just want to make good business" (Karnitschnig 2017). This supports the view that "China has yet to exert its political influence in the Balkans," demonstrated as "despite its growing role, it hasn't been

invited to participate in gatherings such as the Western Balkan summit, an annual regional forum hosted this year by Italy in Trieste” (ibid). This underlines that China is less interested so far in political symbolism.

In the long term, the Chinese economic investments combined with the high political links may translate into political leverage. This raises new challenges regarding corruption as noted by interviewees below, which also increases the corrupt elite’s likelihood to secure power in the long turn, and potentially move towards an authoritarian political model. Several EU officials note that the risk of ‘corruption is significant’. Therefore, there is a “fear (is) that those Chinese projects are prone to corruption and that they do not correspond to the local needs, and since these countries are indebted themselves, such as Montenegro, they need to make sure that they need to pay the debts and if not, it gives political leverage in the future to China”. This would allow the current elites to maintain power in long term and potentially become authoritarian states mirroring China’s political model. Moreover, the EU officials note that the infrastructure projects may not be able to connect the Western Balkan region with the EU due to their incompatibility with EU standards (Anonymous Interviews, International Officials, Spring 2019, Belgium). Thus, similar to Gulf states way of “doing business”, China is criticized for its opaque deal making with established political elites and lack of transparency and accountability in Western Balkans (Bassuener 2019).

However, some view China’s role in Western Balkans as aligning with the EU. Vuksanovic argues that “one should not overstate Chinese influence in the region” (2017), drawing on the simple fact that the geographical distance between Beijing and Western Balkans means China “will still be too far away to exercise influence in the same way as the West does”. He further argues that China is not looking to derail the European Union’s incorporation of the Western Balkans countries. On the contrary, this would make its own investments safer, and it views engagement in Western Balkans as a way of boosting ties with the European Union. Therefore, “Balkan leaders should not fall into the trap of perceiving China as an alternative to the European Union” (ibid). Makocki similarly argues that “China doesn’t have any alternative political vision for the Balkans. It is actually supportive of the region’s European perspective, as it needs a sufficient level of political stability to facilitate its economic interests” (Makocki 2017). This could change in the future, as if/when “Chinese interests diverge from those of Europe and EU member states, there is a growing risk that it will resort to hybrid tools, including economic leverage and Information Confrontation. For now, however, Beijing is heavily dependent on economic engagement with European states and is therefore much more cautious towards them” (Pronk 2018a). This makes it clear that currently, stability in the region is beneficial to Chinese interests. In short term, China does not represent an enemy to the EU. However, on the long run, there might be a shift of interests and relationships, especially if the countries in the region pursue EU accession.

That being said, while “Chinese influence in the Balkans should not be exaggerated, it is higher now than at any other time in modern history (Vuksanovic 2017). This is concerning, especially because of the likely accession to EU membership of several Western Balkans states, which “gives rise to concerns that China is attempting to use the region as a medium through which to influence the EU from within. This influence manifests itself primarily in the form of initiatives which aim to persuade and/or pressure Western Balkans countries to adopt favorable policies vis-à-vis China” (Oosterveld and Roelen 2017). The result may be that Beijing can “fend off criticism over its human rights record and other knotty issues, a role Greece has

recently taken on. Just last month, Athens blocked the EU from issuing a statement condemning a Chinese crackdown on activists” (Karnitschnig 2017). It also could allow China to “garner support on issues of strategic importance closer to home, such as its various territorial disputes in the South China Sea” (Nova Europa n.d.). Therefore, the benefit of having political support from (potential) EU members is explicit, as it will undermine western criticism of China in both its domestic and foreign policy, and it is already receiving such support from Greece (and Serbia). The most likely development, then, based on the current evidence is that Chinese influence will be utilized to garner diplomatic support, rather than to act as a direct political rival to, or cause instability for, the EU in the region.

### The Security Influence Trends

As mentioned above, China’s interests in Western Balkans is predominantly economic, and so any influence in other spheres is generally tied to this. For example, in 2018, a deal was reached for China to supply military drones to Serbia (Vuksanovic and Le Corre 2019). This is an economic decision, but with potential security-related implications for the region as it will alter Serbian military capabilities. Due to China’s geographical distance from the region, it does not have to take an active role in security, even though it should be noted that Western Balkans is the EU’s ‘backyard’.

Nevertheless, there have been some indications that China could look to provide security assurances for the BRI. The Chinese Defense Minister Wei Fenghe stated that China was “ready to provide security guarantees for the One Belt, One Road project” (O’Donnell 2018). This is framed as protecting their economic interests, but some argue that *maritime infrastructure investment* can serve a dual purpose of enhancing legitimate business activity whilst being a base to conduct military operations (Thorne and Spevack 2018). Thorne and Spevack uses the example of the Greek port, Piraeus, and quotes a Chinese official saying “(w)e could use the Chinese navy and take the evacuees [of overseas crises] to our own port at Piraeus” (ibid). Moreover, the port in Montenegro, if trapped in debt, could be utilized for dual purposes, commercial and military. This shows the potential for Chinese military interference in what appears at first to be a solely economic project.

Similar examples have occurred in Sri Lanka, where China has provided loans for port developments alongside a “security guarantee” principle (O’Donnell 2018). This “creates a pretext for China to establish a regular military presence around each of its OBOR project areas” (ibid). Stanzel also argues that “China’s focus in Afghanistan is moving away from development projects and towards the containment of perceived security threats” (Stanzel 2018). These examples demonstrate that there is some justification for the belief that China’s economic interests tied to the BRI project has the potential to have military and security implications. It is therefore arguable that this could become potentially a trend that becomes replicated in Western Balkans in the future.

On the other hand, China has invested on facial recognition software, cutting edge surveillance technology provided by the Chinese technology giant Huawei in Serbia. They are implementing the Safe City Project, installing 1000 high definition cameras in the capital to recognize faces and license plates. This is aimed to shorten

the police investigation time, improve arrest time and deter crime overall. Overall, there are fears that Huawei technology strengthens the autocratic systems. While in Serbia Vucic's rule is viewed by Serbian citizens as autocratic, this may strengthen his likelihood to remain in power. The citizens may feel more fear. The number and identities of protestors will be revealed and as such this may hinder citizens to express themselves out of fear of reprimand, deterring any dissenting voices or protests. In addition, concerns are raised regarding violation of the basic privacy freedoms and rights, as it is unknown how the data will be processed, which could therefore be misused. There are fears that the data may be publicly released. Huawei may as well assist with providing broadband internet (5G) on highway (Stojkovski 2019). While Washington views Huawei as Beijing's spy, Vucic views China's friendship as "made of steel" (Tanjug News 2018) potentially since it can secure him long lasting rule of Serbia. The question is what Beijing will request in return from Belgrade. Serbia and generally the Western Balkan can be seen as a backdoor to the EU. Serbia's case may provide a test case for not only 5G and surveillance but also the potential to have an international Chinese intelligence company, and a push towards the EU (Stojkovski 2019).

Furthermore, Chinese BRI in the Western Balkans are largely roads and rails, which have less strategic and security implications than maritime infrastructure. As discussed in the economic section, the port investment in Montenegro may be utilized for both commercial and military purposes i.e. war ships in the long run. Furthermore, the surveillance project in Serbia provides another security cooperation that poses challenges in the long term regarding the Serbian political system and its implications to the EU. Therefore, one can conclude that China's security and military influence in Western Balkans is minuscule currently except in Serbia, however, if debt trap diplomacy functions in Montenegro, this may increase in the future. There is also a potential that China may combine the commercial BRI projects with military objectives, as already seen in other regions (i.e. Afghanistan). This could also be replicated in Western Balkans which calls for precaution from the local and Western actors.

## The Cultural Influence Trends

China does not historically have any significant cultural ties to Western Balkans due to obvious factors such as geography, religion and language. However, there are efforts to promote Chinese culture in the region, predominantly through its Confucius Institutes, which are "taking the lead role in projecting [...] soft power" globally (Kucharczyk 2018). As with other spheres, Serbia is the Western Balkans state in which China has the greatest cultural influence. Chinese language schools and two Confucius Institutes in Belgrade and Novi Sad University have been established recently. Furthermore, a massive eight-story Chinese cultural center is under construction on the site of the bombed Chinese Embassy (Vuksanovic and Le Corre 2019). Moreover, the Chinese government agreed to support the renovation of the Opera House in Tirana with a grant of \$2 million in May (Hackaj 2018).

Besides Serbia, China also has a Confucius Institute in Albania, North Macedonia, (and two in Croatia) (Digimandarin.com). In Albania, the exchanges of students and public servants are reported to be high (Anonymous Interviews, NGO

Officials, Spring 2019, Albania). It is reported that “China is actively seeking students from countries along its Belt and Road Initiative, including the Balkans” (Luca and Vladislavljevic 2018). However, these developments, combined with the increased presence of Chinese nationals in the region due to the BRI, have not greatly altered the views of young people, who still see China as a “remote” country with little cultural attraction and who still prefer to immigrate in large numbers to Western Europe (Vuksanovic and Le Corre 2019). For this reason, “cultural and social ties between E.U. countries and the Balkan countries are incomparably stronger than those with China” (Vuksanovic 2017).

In North Macedonia, a memorandum of cooperation was signed between North Macedonia’s Academy of Sciences and Arts MANU and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS). Moreover, the agreement between the two governments on joint recognition of academic diplomas and other educational certificates is in the final stage. Moreover, this year, from November 19 to 21, in Skopje will be held the 4th Ministerial Forum for Cultural Cooperation from the process 17 + 1 organized by the Ministry of Culture of the North Macedonia and the Center for Coordination of Cultural Cooperation between the People's Republic of China and the CEE countries. The PM Zaev recently reported that the Chinese Prime Minister Keqiang will visit Skopje and hence North Macedonia will host the "Culture Forum" within the 17 + 1 process from 19 November to 21 November 2019 (Anonymous Interviews, NGO Officials, Spring 2019, North Macedonia).

Additionally, Republika Srpska has recently sought to include Chinese language in different educational curriculums, in line with the expanded economic influence of China. This demonstrates that there is some level of desire from the Chinese to increase their cultural influence in Western Balkans, but this has not yielded many results yet.

There is also an increased Chinese social and cultural influence as seen through the liberalization of visas in several Western Balkans states, as outlined in the political section above. For example, “according to Bosnia and Herzegovina's Agency for Statistics, from January to April 2018, Chinese tourists coming to the country increased 77.9 percent year-on-year, while the number of tourists who stayed overnight in the country rose 69.6 percent” (Sarajevo Times 2018). Visa liberalization has also been implemented in Albania, Montenegro and Serbia. As of 2019, Chinese tourists are the second largest group of foreign visitors in Serbia, according to the Tourism Organization of Belgrade. In addition, the latter organization participated in the China Outbound Travel and Tourism Market trade show in April 15-17 2019 (Tanjug News 2019c). A similar situation is noticed in BiH where since the initiation of the visa liberalization for Chinese citizens and the BRI, China has climbed to the fifth place of biggest tourist source, while approximately 100.00 tourists are expected to visit BiH the upcoming year (Sarajevo Times 2019). However, according to Federal Statistical Institute, the number of overnight stay of Chinese tourists in 2018 was 61.877 which is 3.7% of the total number of overnight stay in 2018 (Federalni zavod za statistiku n.d.), rendering China the ninth place of biggest tourist source. They are unconfirmed reports that these exchanges are taking place in BiH, specifically in Banja Luka and Sarajevo (Anonymous Interviews, NGO Officials, Spring 2019, BiH). This allows for greater social and cultural exchange and is therefore a noteworthy trend for potential increased influence in this sphere in the future.

Similar to China's low level of cultural connections with Western Balkans, religion is the sphere with the least potential for Chinese exertion of influence. Most importantly, the CPC is officially atheist: "The party prohibits its nearly ninety million party members from holding religious beliefs, and it has demanded the expulsion of party members who belong to religious organizations" (Albert 2018). Moreover, China's dominant religions (folk religions and Buddhists) are not present in Western Balkans (Albert 2018). As the Chinese state is atheist, there is a lack of exportation of religious influence in Western Balkans.

The significance of the Confucius Institutes established in the region should not be overstated, when tourism, education and NGO exchanges and tech are being used to alter local populations attitudes. This technique of altering the local perception towards a positive view of China are part of the long-term strategy to offset elements hostile to the CPC's ideology. It represents one of the techniques of soft diplomacy but also of hybrid threats.

## Conclusion

Broadly speaking, Chinese influence has increased in the region. It is mainly linked to the economic sphere which may have security related implications. If these Western Balkan countries are trapped in debt which is likely due to the lack of responsive strategies toward China and the difficulties to pay the debt, then it poses long term threats to the region and the EU. An indication of the increasing Chinese political influence is the Sino-friendly stance demonstrated internationally by Serbia receiving the highest state visits from China, and positive appraisal from both sides. Currently, however, there is no strong indication that China will seek to use its economic influence to cause political instability in the region, as this could negatively impact Chinese BRI. Some view China's investment in the region as a means to secure the BRI. Another noteworthy element related to China's security influence is China's push for a dual use, commercial and military, for some of its BRI and potentially the Port of Montenegro, and the Greek Port linked to North Macedonia. This dual usage has been observed in other regions and may be replicated in the Western Balkans in the future, posing long term challenges to the region and the EU. Moreover, surveillance technology by Huawei is being used specifically in Serbia which may strengthen illiberal democracy. On a European level, this implies that Serbia may be used as a gateway to the EU with the potential to have an international Chinese intelligence company push towards the EU.

There are also attempts to alter the attitudes toward a more positive view of China in the region through cultural tools such as; cultural centres, NGOs and governmental exchanges, student exchanges, language schools, establishment of Confucius Institutes, etc. Moreover, special networks and offices have been formed to secure the relations between China and Serbia, such as the China CEEC Think Tank Network and National Council for the Coordination of Cooperation with Russia and China. This indicates that Serbia is shifting towards rising global powers while acknowledging the declining power of the US. These initiatives are implemented to counter hostile elements to the CPC's ideology, which represents a form of hybrid threat in particular to Serbia with implications for the EU. These developments can be seen as negative in Serbia as corruption may be strengthened which in turn may secure power to the current elites. These elites then would potentially enter the EU, and politically support Chinese domestic and foreign policy, undermining Western legitimacy in the long run. For instance, Greece recently stopped a bill to condemn

China for human rights violations in the EU. Potential-EU Western Balkan countries would be used similarly in the long run, undermining the EU pillars of liberal rights and democracy.

Finally, the undeniable influence China holds in the region should be met with caution by the West, especially with regards to EU aspirations of some of the states in the region. If Western Balkans prospective EU members shift away from the EU rules when engaging in economic investments, which also are often viewed to be corrupt and unaccountable deals, complemented with indebting diplomacy (i.e. Montenegro), the prospective members may stall the political EU accession processes.

Regarding the case studies, Serbia seems to receive the highest Chinese influence in the region through all mechanisms of influence. There are concerns that despite the EU remaining a powerful actor - *providing aid, not loans* - the negative perception in Serbia may shift popular support away from EU reforms to Chinese and Russian engagement, hence undermining the accession process into the EU. On the contrary, Serbia and other Western Balkans countries may be used as a backdoor to the EU if the membership is granted, allowing China and Russia to wield indirect decision making in the EU Commission and Parliament.

### 3: Russia

#### Introduction

It is often argued that Russia's hybrid warfare aims to weaken NATO, subverts pro-Western governments, annexes territories and create pretexts for war (Chivvis 2017). Russia presumably bases its strategy on four 'Russian truths': war is eternal, war is fought by the state and not (just) the military of a state, 'You fight your way, I fight mine', and that victory does not require the capture or occupation of territory implying the necessity to control political leaders (Bachmann et al. 2018). The main elements of Russian Strategy Culture include history, geopolitics, ideology and religion (ibid).

The main characteristics of hybrid threats and warfare by Russia include spreading of disinformation or information operations (strategic communications to shape political narratives in many countries), interference in political processes, cyber-attacks (for example, hacking to collect valuable information) and leveraging economic influence for political means (for example, energy as a tool of foreign policy) (van der Putten, et al. 2018), using proxies (groups that have sympathy with Russia's objectives) and clandestine measures (using traditional espionage) (Chivvis 2017). The Information Security Doctrine published in 2000 highlights the importance of information as a weapon outlining two types of informational attacks: technical and psychological. Russia's hybrid methods employ also technological means, will power, moral authority and organizational ability (Bachmann et al. 2018). Others argue that Russia also causes disruption at the expense for the target state, such as migrant dumping (van der Putten et al. 2018). Their work is conducted often in accordance with the law, as their actions have an appearance of legality, i.e. using 'little green men' (ibid).

Propaganda is a critical tool of hybrid warfare and military deceptions in the Western Balkans, as also in Libya, Syria and Iraq. Russian disinformation represents Putin as an artist and the Western states as consumers (Bachmann et al. 2018). It is also argued that the best means to counter propaganda is presumed to show the truth and demonstrate that is the truth ((Klimburg 2017). Russia is argued to use the lack of desire of the Western nations to engage in existential conflict, presumably because of their unwillingness to sacrifice high standards of living (ibid). Moreover, Russia is mainly focusing on supporting psychological attacks conducted through 'foreign propaganda' through Russian 'agents', to maintain the control over information consumed internally, and counter "uncontrolled expansion of the foreign media sector in the national information space" as well as the activities of NGOs, journalists, missionaries and religious institutions (Klimburg 2017, 212-13).

Regarding Western Balkan countries, Russia aims to develop a comprehensive pragmatic and equitable cooperation. While Western Balkans seems to not present a direct sphere of influence, as for instance the Baltics do due to it being a neighbouring region. However, the region is of great strategic importance to Russia, including its role as a major *transportation and infrastructure* hub used for supplying gas and oil to European countries (Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, 2016). The role of Russia in the region is one of a "disrupter", destructive and aiming at creating instability in the region (Konrad Adenauer Stiftung 2018). Russia is involved on both, right- and left-wing side of the radicalization spectrum. This demonstrates that

ideology is not the basis of Russia’s role in the region, rather that Russia’s role is more of a spoiler to trouble the waters, create confusion and attract the local population (Anonymous Interviews, Academic and NGO Officials, Spring 2019, Serbia). Moreover, this is in line with the broader foreign policy of Russia in the past few years relies on the support for conservative and far right groups in Europe. The following sections will outline Russia’s general influence trends in Western Balkan, and shed light on the specific trends across the following spheres of influence: political, economic, religious and cultural and security.

### The Influence Trends in Western Balkan

Russian involvement in the South is “far from new” (Stronski 2019). Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, post-Soviet Russia “secured a small role” in Western Balkans by voicing its support for Serbia in the UN during the Yugoslav wars (ibid). This formed the base for future Russian ties to the region, with Serbia being the country in which Russia exerts most influence. Additionally, North Macedonia and Montenegro have relatively strong ties to Russia as it was among the first states to recognise both countries’ independence (in 1992 and 2006) and “enjoyed a high degree of influence (by) drawing on notions of shared Orthodox faith and Slavic origin” (Prague Security Studies Institute 2019e, 24). This form of religious and cultural influence is not measured in the FBIC Index, but it will be analyzed through life-story interviews.

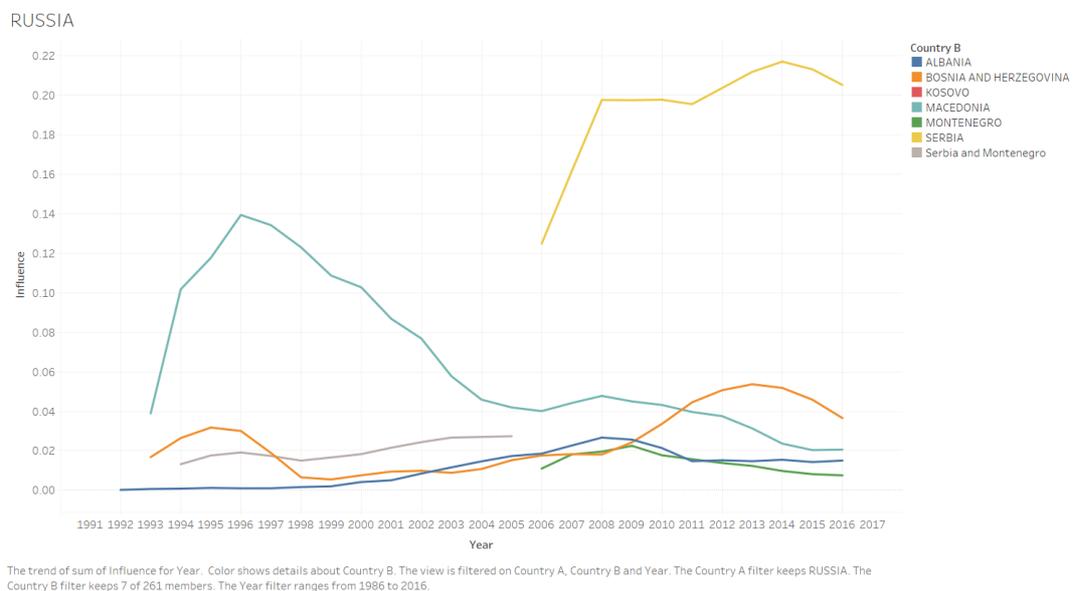


Figure 23: Influence of Russia in Western Balkans from 1991-2016 (FBIC Index)

Figure 23 illustrates the long-term influence trends of Russia in Western Balkans, which show notable developments. Strikingly, it reveals a sharp alignment and increased influence in Serbia from 2006. Russia’s influence remains very high, holding 11.02% of the total influence in the country for 2016, rendering Russia the

most influential external actor in Serbia. This also translates into dependence in all spheres of influence.

In comparison, Germany holds 8.59% and France holds 3.69%, as the second and third most influential external actors. Across the rest of the region, Russia's influence for 2016 averages about 1.25%, which is significantly less compared to its influence in Serbia. Russia's large influence in North Macedonia during the 1990s has waned significantly. Lastly, Russia's influence in Kosovo is 0% as its sovereignty is not recognized.

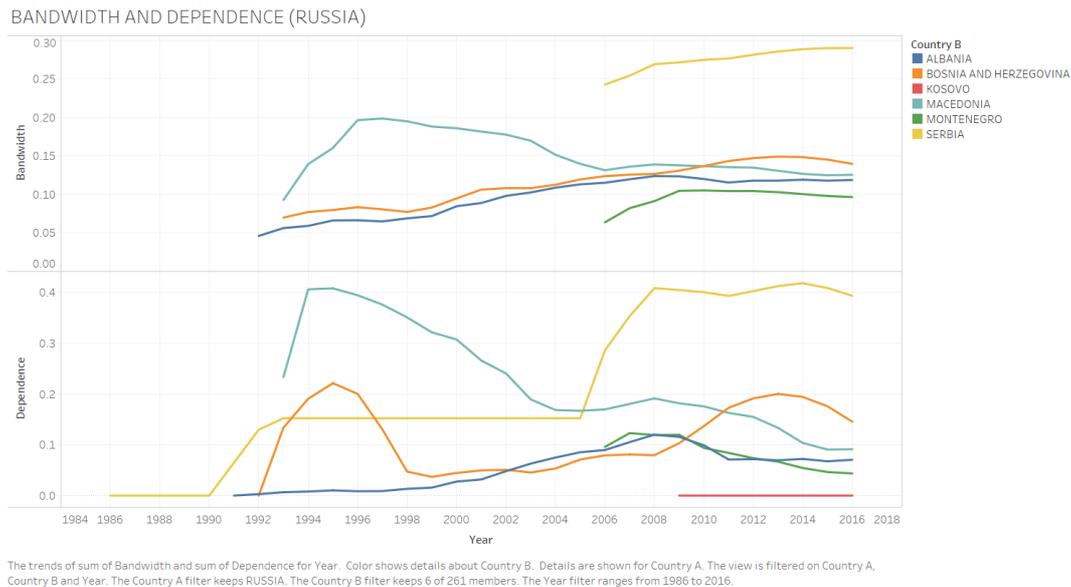


Figure 24: Bandwidth and Dependence (sub-indices of Influence) of Russia in Western Balkans from 1984-2016 (FBIC Index)

Figure 24 shows the influence variations between bandwidth and dependency. The security relations - expressed by Bandwidth - between Russia and Serbia have increased steadily since 2002, with 2016 representing the peak year. This is due to arms trade between Russia and Serbia. The security relations between Russia and North Macedonia were historically the highest but have decreased from the early 2000s onwards and currently stand at zero. The security relations between Russia and Bosnia and Herzegovina have started to increase since 1998 due to arms trade. However, the security relations of Russia with the other Western Balkans states seem to be insignificant. Nevertheless, Russia has substantial political and economic Bandwidth with all Western Balkans states, besides Kosovo. The political Bandwidth is based on both substantial levels of representation in the respective countries and common membership in intergovernmental organizations. Economic dependence and bandwidth is highest with Serbia, due to large amounts of trade and a free trade deal. Because of large trade relations, the economic bandwidth with Bosnia and Herzegovina is also substantial, especially relative to the size of the economy, representing over \$130 million in bilateral trade in 2016 (WITS 2016). In general, the economic bandwidth between Russia and the Western Balkan region has been rather stable for the past ten years, with dependence even decreasing in recent years.

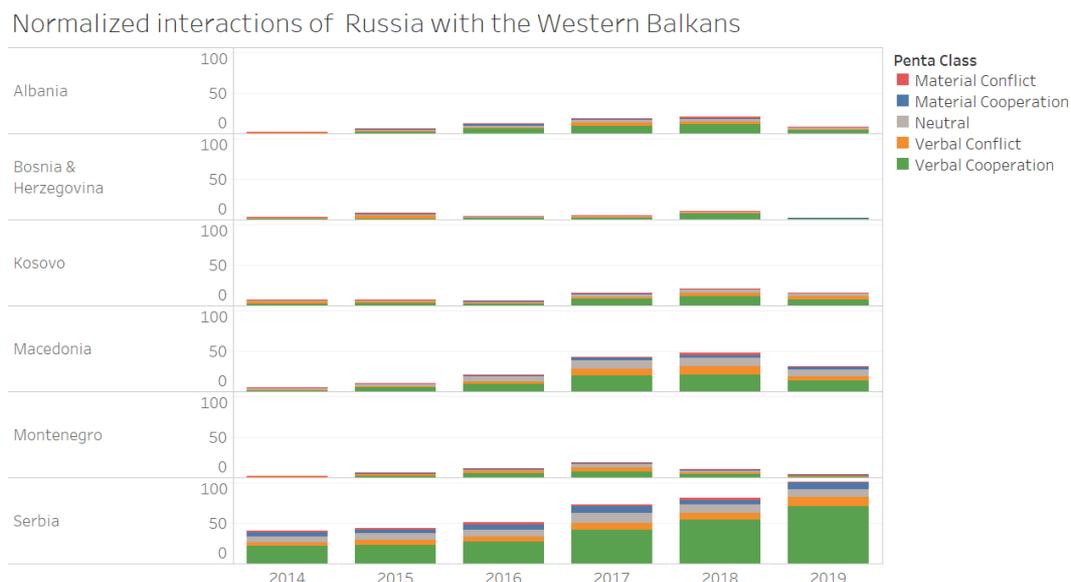


Figure 25: Normalized and categorized events between Russia and the Western Balkans, 2009-2018 (HCSS Datawarehouse)

Figure 25 shows the recent interactions of Russia with Western Balkans. The most Russian interactions are with Serbia. The high interactions in 2019 can be contributed to a state visit of Putin in Serbia (Walker 2019). The Russian relations with North Macedonia stand out, as their interactions increased sharply since 2016, and these have largely taken a negative tone. This is likely due to Russian interference in North Macedonia’s referendum, which centered around the nation’s name. Another noteworthy trend is the rise in interactions with Kosovo. These are largely tied to Russia voicing support for Serbia in ongoing disputes with Kosovo, such as Russia’s support to a Serbian politician named Marko Djuric who serves as the head of Serbian government office for Kosovo, who was arrested and expelled from Kosovo (Stojanovic 2018), and Putin criticizing Kosovo’s decision to form an army (Rudic 2019).

## The Economic Influence Trends

Overall, Russian economic influence in relation to foreign trade, investment, credit, and remittance flows “has been on the decline for several years, falling from one of the region’s top economic partners at the beginning of the century to single digits today” (Prague Security Studies Institute 2019b, 3). However, this does not mean the region has become irrelevant for Russia. In particular, Russia remains among the key economic partners for Serbia, as the FBIC Index shows, and also is developing closer ties with the Republika Srpska entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina (ibid).

Russia’s economic presence in the region is most visible in the energy sector as it owns energy monopoly in Serbia, the Republika Srpska entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia where it controls the Trans Balkan Pipeline (TBP)— “the single gas route to the country” (ibid). This makes energy “the primary economic tool of Russian influence in the region” (Stronski 2019). This is particularly

evident in Serbia, a country which imports approximately 75% of natural gas from Russia.

An example of Russian influence relating to the energy sector is Russia's Gazprom Neft taking a controlling stake in the Naftna Industrija Srbije (NIS) oil and gas company, Serbia's "biggest business" (Galeotti 2018), in a deal worth over \$450 million. Critics "claimed the price was far too low and that Belgrade was paying back Moscow for Russian diplomatic support over Kosovo" such as when Russia blocked the UN recognition of Kosovo's independence (Stronski and Himes 2019).

Economic incentives with possible political motives were also evident as Russia offered Serbia a \$300 million bailout amid tensions with the IMF, which may be construed as a strategically timed offer to rival Western investment. These strategic alternative propositions may (partly) be why opinion polls show that many Serbs mistakenly believe Russia is their biggest partner for trade, aid and military assistance when in reality "Russia lags behind the EU by a factor of ten... regarding Belgrade's foreign trade, which amounted to just 6.7 % with Russia in 2016" (Prague Security Studies Institute 2019b, 10). This demonstrates how Russian economic dealings are used for political gains, such as undermining the trust in the western institutions (ie EU) in order to present Russia as a viable alternative.

Russia is also particularly active in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and more specifically the Republika Srpska, the Serb-dominated entity of the country. Their economic focus is narrow, however, as "the RS oil industry remains the only substantial Russian investment in Bosnia and Herzegovina". (Prague Security Studies Institute 2019b, 5). This is most visible as Russia's Zarubezhneft controls oil refineries in two towns. These deals, among others, mean that Russia is the fourth largest investor in Bosnia and Herzegovina. For example, Russia's FDI in BiH accumulates to around €547 million between 2005-2016, which accounts to 3.3% of GDP. This renders Russia the biggest foreign investor in Republika Srpska (ibid).

Stronski and Himes believe that Russian dealings in this sphere, again, have political rather than purely economic motives, citing the fact that refineries have been operating at a loss and have cost investors around \$60 million since 2016, but they continue to operate. This "suggests that economic profit is less important than leverage over the RS" (Stronski and Himes 2019). Russia has also pledged several loans to prop up the Republika Srpska state budget. According to Republika Srpska leader, Milorad Dodik, Russia promised at least \$625 million in 2014 but there is "little evidence that Moscow has in fact delivered" (Higgins 2018). Nonetheless, "perception matters more than reality. From Moscow's point of view, these pledges help keep Dodik in place as a lever[age] inside Bosnia [and Herzegovina]. And after the imposition of Western sanctions for pushing forward a 2016 referendum in defiance of the Bosnian Constitutional Court, Dodik has few options besides Russia" (Stronski and Himes 2019). This renders Russia as one of the most important external influencers in Bosnia and Herzegovina, largely due to the Republika Srpska region, with large political implications that can translate into security ones. For example, Russia may destabilize the country as a tit for tat strategy to the West.

Kosovo, too, has economic relations with Russia tied to the energy sector. Kosovo does not have its own oil refinery and so is heavily dependent on imports. Regarding imports, it has been found that "a high percentage of diesel which appears to come from Serbia and Bulgaria, in fact, originates in Russia" (Prague Security Studies Institute 2019b, 7). Besides energy, Russia's economic influence in Kosovo is not significant and is declining. The Russian FDI in Kosovo has continuously dropped since the declaration of independence in 2008, with its investments in Kosovo amounting to €2 million in 2016, representing a small portion of overall FDI. Russia

does seek to extend economic influence in Kosovo in investing or donating money for the Serb community living in the North Kosovo, where “Kosovo’s central authority exerts only limited control” (Prague Security Studies Institute 2019b, 6). This implies that Russia is not a key economic player in Kosovo, but certainly has a noteworthy economic presence.

North Macedonia is particularly dependent on Russia in the energy sector, which is “a major vulnerability” because Russia controls the *Trans Balkan Pipeline*, the single gas route to North Macedonia. This creates a dependency, which results in North Macedonia paying among the highest prices in Europe for its gas supply (Prague Security Studies Institute 2019b, 8). This has contributed to rising revenues of Russian companies in the country (from €63 million in 2006 to over €212 million in 2015). Nevertheless, these companies only total around 1% of the total revenues in North Macedonia. However, if one takes into account “third-party investments transmitted through tax haven countries, Russian investment in Macedonia is estimated to be around 4 % of total FDI” (ibid). This means that, while significant, Russia “has had a more limited economic footprint in [North] Macedonia” in comparison to other Western Balkans countries (ibid).

Nevertheless, the government of North Macedonia has historically been in favor and has encouraged Russian investments, especially in the energy, tourism and agriculture sectors (Ministry of Finance of North Macedonia, 2012). Additionally, there is a Macedonian-Russian Chamber of Commerce, that further encourages and supports the engagement in business activities. The Russian major oil company, LUKOIL, operates in North Macedonia through its subsidiary LUKOIL Macedonia LTD since 2005, on the basis of a memorandum of cooperation between LUKOIL and the Government of (at the time) Republic of Macedonia (LUKOIL). The established customers of the Macedonian subsidiary of LUKOIL include the country’s government, the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and other clients, including embassies, commercial banks, power-engineering companies and foreign-owned enterprises (ibid). Currently, there are 33 gas stations in the country operated by LUKOIL (ibid).

Montenegro is subject to even greater levels of Russian economic influence, but not in the energy sector. Real estate and tourism are the most attractive sectors for Russian investment. According to data by the State Statistical Office of Montenegro, in 2016, out of over 42000 foreign-owned companies registered and operating in Montenegro, 32% are owned by Russians (Tomovic 2016). A contributing reason for this is the Law on Foreigners of Montenegro (2012). Its amendments of 2012 stipulate that foreigners owning property in Montenegro can stay in the country for up to a year, which is a significant change from the 90 days stipulated prior. Additional extensions of annual residence permits are not subject to temporal limits. The visa liberalization has meant that “non-citizen landowners” can have “visa-free access to the country for up to a year”, seeing a rise in Russian visitors and potential investors to the country (Stronski and Himes 2019). By 2016, roughly one-third of all foreign companies registered and operating in Montenegro were Russian owned, rendering Montenegro as the mostly influenced country by Russian investments (Tomovic 2016).

For comparative purposes, 2016 Russia was responsible for €52.8 million of total FDI in Montenegro, while Serbia invested €25.3 million, Germany €16.7 million and the US €5.6 million (Chrzová et al. 2019, 66). This also comparatively shows that Russia is a key economic player in Montenegro. FDI’s from Russia to Montenegro represented around 30 percent of Montenegro’s GDP in 2016, and 13 percent of all inward FDI. In addition, tourism now represents 20 percent of Montenegro’s GDP,

and Russians account for the largest group of tourists visiting Montenegro today. Moreover, an estimated 70,000 properties in the country belong to Russian owners (Conley and Melino 2019). Consequently, 40 percent of real estate on the Montenegro's Adriatic coast is owned by Russia (Konrad Adenauer Stiftung 2018).

Albania is the least subjected to Russian influence as it is "largely regarded as offering few opportunities for Moscow" (Galeotti 2018). However, there are reports that specific political leaders have been implicated with Russian funding as Lulzim Basha, received secret funds from Russian sources via a US lobbyist Nick Muzin (Voice of America 2019). While the opposition denied it, the prosecution opened a case and questioned Basha and three other politicians. Interviews confirm that this is the likely case of Russian influence through political leaders but it is difficult to speak up regarding the issue due to fear of being persecuted by the Democratic Party, since they are perceived to intimidate opponents (Anonymous Interviews, Spring 2019, The Hague Netherlands; Governmental Officials, NGO Officials, Fall 2018, Albania). Nevertheless, Albania aligns itself more strongly with the US, and their adversity to Russia is aptly portrayed by their Foreign Minister Ditmir Bushati who said Washington was "a bastion against Russia's influence in Serbia, Montenegro, [North] Macedonia, Bosnia [and Herzegovina] and Croatia" (Galeotti 2018).

Russia is influencing the banking system as well. In 2012, Sberbank (a Russian state-owned bank) purchased Volksbank International (an Austrian banking group) giving the Russian bank a large banking presence in Western Balkans with branches in Bosnia, Croatia, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, etc., and currently being one of the largest creditors in the region (Stronski and Himes 2019).

Therefore, the "Russian influence is limited primarily to energy, real estate, and banking" in the economic sphere (ibid). It appears their economic influence over Serbia is perceived to be greater than it is, and a recurring pattern is that economic power is used to influence politics by Russia. This has been observed mainly in Bosnia and Herzegovina, particularly the Republika Srpska region. Beyond these countries, Russia's influence is noteworthy in Montenegro, and specifically in its real estate and tourism sector.

## The Political Influence Trends

The Russian officials report that the connections between Russia, the Western Balkans and the European Union are mainly economic, but the links with the Western Balkan are in different realms as they have long standing relationship. The culture and church are not viewed from their perspective as a tool of influence, as it occurs through many years, and they function based on the wishes of the people. The Russian authorities emphasize that the Western Balkans must enter into the EU presenting it as a common aim of all parties involved regarding the region (Fieldwork notes, Spring 2019, Kosovo, Netherlands). Based on their discourse, the political and security influence seems to be the Russian priority in the Western Balkan region. Broadly speaking, interviewees in the Western Balkans view the role of Russia as 'spoiler'. For instance, an interviewee illustrating common perceptions in the region pointed out "Russia has the most anti-Western confrontational view because it is a zero-sum game. They they do not want enlargement of NATO or the European Union or if they do it is to get more of its allies into the EU" (Anonymous Interview, Spring 2019, Serbia). Thus the region may be used as a backdoor to the EU.

As mentioned in the previous subsection, Russia's economic activities have often taken place with the underlying tendency to increase political influence. This

appears to be a key motive for them in the region, the overarching aim being to “delay and complicate the expansion” of NATO and the EU as Western Balkans is the last part of Europe to be fully integrated into Western political structures (Stronski 2019). It is argued that they seek to do this by aggravating political instability with the belief being that democratic backsliding and polarization will lessen the chances of EU and NATO accession (Stronski and Himes 2019). This represents the hybrid warfare tactics used in the region, which are very difficult to detect and especially attribute. Most importantly, Russian efforts aim to aggravate political instability through “cultivation of far-right groups and authoritarian-style politicians” in the region (Stronski and Himes 2019). Moscow’s political ties to the region, and in particular Serbia, can be traced back to the Yugoslav wars when post-Soviet Russia “secured a small role for itself in the Balkans” by standing up for Serbia in the UN” (ibid). This fostered a relationship with Serbia that has lasted to this day. Their relationship has been symbolized by high profile diplomatic visits. In 2018, the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov visited and in 2019 Putin undertook a “highly symbolic visit”, in which several high-level bilateral trade, investment, and cooperation agreements were announced (ibid). These engagements are seen to be “largely performance art that allows Moscow to show it retains influence in Europe” and these symbolic visits are important in strengthening the perceptions among Serbians that Russia is a viable alternative to the West (ibid).

However, Galeotti presents an interesting take on Russian political motives in Serbia that counter the previously mentioned and widely held beliefs that Russia is attempting to slow down Western Balkans states’ EU accession. He states that Russia is “tacitly encouraging” Serbia’s ambitions to join the EU, demonstrated by Lavrov explicitly stating Russia had no objections to this during his 2018 visit. This may be motivated by Russia’s hopes to have a “Trojan horse” inside the EU (Galeotti 2018). While their motives are difficult to verify, it is consequential of their foreign policy within the EU. Therefore securing Serbia’s membership or BiH’s would be beneficial for Russia. This is particularly relevant for Serbia because Russia is confident that they could maintain their relationship, despite Serbia’s EU membership, due to their social and cultural ties, as will be explored in depth later. Following this line of argument, it is more likely that Russia’s disruption tactics to slow accession processes will focus mainly on the other states in the region who are less closely aligned with Russia *prima facie*. Nevertheless, others argue that Serbia uses Russia as a tool to pressure the EU and hence speed up the accession process, while reminding them that Russia is a plan B for Serbia and that the EU is not the sole option that Serbia might have (Anonymous Interviews, NGO Officials, Spring 2019, Serbia). Broadly speaking, Serbia may use Russia as a bargaining tool in the regional politics (i.e. Kosovo issue, RS) and European politics (EU membership). However, it is important to note that the Serbian Foreign and Defense policies need to be harmonized with the EU Common Security and Defense Policy vis-à-vis Russia if the membership path is to be pursued.

Russia’s political interventions in North Macedonia demonstrate that they aim to destabilize the country and bring them under their sphere of influence, while outwardly rejecting their integration to NATO or the EU. For example, in 2017 during a political crisis, the Russian Foreign Ministry stated that “attempts, which are actively supported by EU and NATO leaders, are being made to make Macedonians accept the ‘Albanian platform’ designed in Tirana”, declaring these as “gross external interference” (Galeotti 2018). The perceived aim of this statement was “to present Russia as an honest broker and ally compared with the ‘interfering’ Westerners [...] anecdotal evidence suggests it has had some traction in Macedonia’s elites” (ibid). This shows that Russia wants to sow distrust for the West among Macedonians, with the

aim to improve their perception of Russia. The interviews point out that Russia backed the anti 'name deal' protests (Anonymous Interviews, NGO Officials/Political Officials, Fall 2018/Spring 2019, North Macedonia).

The main perception is that Russia promotes an anti-West, anti-EU, anti-US role in the region, as will be shown below. There is a pro-Russian political party in North Macedonia led by Janko Bachev, named United Macedonia, who explicitly has lined their political views with the so-called Russian cause. He advocates North Macedonia to join the Eurasian Economic Union, a clear rival to the EU, and has "boasted of having undergone training with leading political technologists in Moscow intended to help his party win power in Macedonia" (Prague Security Studies Institute 2019d, 11). VMRO as well represents somewhat pro-Russian stance via the political leaders (Anonymous Interviews, NGO Officials and Political Officials, Spring 2019, North Macedonia). The relationship between the VMRO DPMNE government and Russia is further confirmed with the fact that Putin voiced Russia's gratitude to his Macedonian counterpart Gjorgje Ivanov stating that for "our Cyrillic alphabet came from Macedonia" (Balkan Insight, 2017). President Ivanov was also awarded an honorary doctorate by the Moscow State University in 2014 (Prague Security Studies Institute 2019c, 9).

Russians are 'big on sovereignty', and the current government is perceived to have "sold Macedonia's sovereignty" with the name change (Anonymous Interview, Spring 2019, North Macedonia). Few priests are reported to have joined the demonstrations, i.e. against the referendum, and also NATO accession. It remains unknown whether they were affiliated to the Russia's Orthodox Church or the NM Orthodox Church (Fieldwork notes and Anonymous Interviews, Spring 2018, North Macedonia). Moreover, an interviewee illustrates common perceptions in NM that the Russian influence aims to create confusion through hooligan's "There are hooligan groups here that are very much connected to Russia, so we know there are ties and known for nationalist propaganda. Some of the ties are difficult to prove" (Anonymous Interviews, Journalists, NGO Officials, Fall 2017, North Macedonia). Moreover, during the referendum on the name change of [North] Macedonia, Russia demonstrated influence – the same type of influence for which they blamed the West. This was done through "critical statements by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, damning publications in state-owned Russian media, suspicious activity on social media, and a visit to the Kremlin by Macedonian President Gjorge Ivanov [...] were all enough to convince the West of large-scale Russian interference in Macedonia" (Samorukov 2019). Furthermore, a Russian oligarch and former parliamentarian in Putin's party, Ivan Savvidis, was found to have supplied around \$350,000 to incite opposition to the deal, including social media efforts aimed at deflating turnout for the referendum (Stronski and Himes 2019). The name change being a prerequisite for the EU accession means that Russian motives were to prevent North Macedonia turning toward the Western institutions. Some argue that the North Macedonia's fast membership to the NATO alliance 'surprised people as it could have never been dreamt a while ago' (Anonymous Interviews, Spring 2019, North Macedonia). This portrays that Russia is certainly seeking to exert political influence, and succeeds in sewing distrust and slowing the integration processes.

Moreover, disinformation campaigns have been utilized. The fake news stories provided statements arguing that American troops, on exercise in [North] Macedonia, used depleted uranium ammunition (Telegraph UK, 2018). More recently, the Prime Minister, Zoran Zaev, has been a target of a duo of Russian comedians, Vovan and Lexus, who have prank called the PM posing as the Ukrainian Prime Minister Petro Poroshenko and NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg (Republika

English 2019, Time MK 2019). The recordings have then been uploaded to the video sharing platform YouTube.

Counter responses are also present in North Macedonia. Based on the interviews countering Russia means entering into NATO and the EU, which has been perceived as a high success by the Albanian community. Ordinary citizens claim that if NATO and the EU do not endorse them, the country will turn to Russia easily (Anonymous Interviews, Journalists, NGO Officials, Spring 2018/2019, North Macedonia). The current government is countering Russia's influence. For instance, an interviewee explained that the current government under PM Zaev is trying to remove any type of Russian influence, that is why they attempted to remove the businessmen and owner of Vardar Handball Club Sergey Samsonenko at the end of this season (Anonymous Interviews, Spring 2019, North Macedonia and Handball News 2019).

Russia has taken similar political actions in Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as in Serbia, namely through high profile visits. Putin and Milorad Dodik met in Belgrade in 2019 ([Sarajevo Times 2019](#)) and Lavrov visited Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2018 around the time of the elections ([Radio Free Europe 2018](#)). It is believed that the Republika Srpska leader, Milorad Dodik, utilizes these meetings to highlight "historically good ties between Russians and Serbs to boost his ratings" (Kovacevic 2018). Interviewees uncovered similar relations of Russia with Serbian representatives but also the Croatian representatives (Anonymous Interviews, Academia and NGO Officials, Spring 2019, BiH). This shows Russia's influence in Bosnia and Herzegovina and particularly in Republika Srpska. Critics have called these interventions a "brazen interference in the election process in Bosnia and Herzegovina" (Prague Security Studies Institute 2019d, 7). There are also unverified claims that Russia interfered in a more direct manner "through the creation of a large number accounts on social networks that became active ahead of Bosnia and Herzegovina's elections", however it must be said at this stage that there has been no confirmation of this by independent officials (*ibid*). There is certainly some degree of Russian political influence in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and there is a wide held view that Milorad Dodik presents Russia's interests and exploits the divisions in the country (Mujanovic 2019). The stalling of the NATO's progress by lastly forming the government without clarifying the Annual National Programme, the ANP, a survey of the country's defence and security initiatives which Bosnia needs to hand in to NATO shows that Dodik is stalling the NATO membership process (Mujanovic 2019). The appropriation of the NATO integration process by local ethnic party elites has already been warned back in 2014 (Turčalo and Kapidžić 2014). Accordingly, the challenges arising not only from international influences but also from local ethno-nationalists or extremists in BiH, such as Dodik and Covic, are considered as 'dangerous' (SAFF 2018).

Even more overt operation has been observed in Montenegro, "ranging from diplomatic protests to a pro-Russian boycott of ratification for Montenegrin membership in NATO within the Montenegrin parliament" (Prague Security Studies Institute 2019d, 13). Furthermore, during the general elections in 2016, a pro-Russian coup was attempted, aimed at overthrowing President Đukanović. Those behind the coup were intent on stopping Montenegro joining NATO and putting the Democratic Front, a pro-Russian party, in power (*ibid*). The religious figures have been used as well to campaign against the West, as Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church publicly expressed concerns to the prospects of NATO accession (Conley and Melino 2019, 3). These examples clearly demonstrate a high level of Russian attempts at political influence within Montenegro, and that they have Montenegrin agents who align themselves with Russia. The coup attempt shows that the Russian pull is strong

in the country. It is interesting to note, that the data from the recent polling by the National Democratic Institute highlights that Russia is favored by Montenegrins compared to other foreign states and perceived as militarily superior to NATO. The level of public support for Russia provides many possibilities of influence to advance its foreign policy goals (Conley and Melino 2019).

In the other Western Balkans, such as in Albania and Kosovo, “Russian options... are more limited” (Galeotti 2018). Kosovo is used “instrumentally” by Russia forcing Serbia toward their sphere of influence. This provides Russia leverage (ibid). Moreover, there are claims that Russia is using media to promote their political objectives (Anonymous Interviews, Spring 2019, Kosovo and North Macedonia). Political graffiti of Putin are present in the Serbian inhabited areas in Kosovo such as in Mitrovica. Recently, police action has been held in the northern area of Kosovo, where a Russian UNMIK official has been arrested and afterwards released due to diplomatic immunity. He attempted to halt a police raid by the Kosovo Police. Interviews also reveal that several Russian humanitarian organizations are present and many Russian speaking individuals live in Serbian inhabited areas. They are perceived to be directed via Belgrade/Moscow and some local Serbs fear them (Anonymous Interviews, Fall/Spring, 2018/2019, Kosovo). This shows the deep presence of the Russian influence within Kosovo.

Albania is not subject to Russian political influence given that they have strongly aligned themselves with the West, however, claims of political parties, respectively the Democratic party, Lulzim Basha may have received finances to fund the political campaign as described above. Moreover, Albania expelled two Russian diplomats in line with the collective action of NATO, after the usage of nerve agents in the United Kingdom (Reuters 2018).

In sum, Russian political actions in Western Balkans entail high-level visits predominantly, but there have been cases (both verified and unverified) of undercover tactics, which meddle with political processes in the region. The failure of these undercover tactics show that one should “be careful of overinflating Russia’s power in the region” (Stronski 2019). Nevertheless, Russia’s intent and capacity to fully exert their political will to halt the Euro-Atlantic process is present in the region through using hybrid warfare tactics, influencing far right organizations, political parties, leaders and the population via media and other tools i.e. in Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia. Perhaps also in Albania recently, if reports about the Democratic party meddling are confirmed.

Nevertheless, their influence may have weakened in Montenegro. However, they are trying to gain influence in Montenegro after they joined NATO. This demonstrates that Russia’s will for political influence does not match its capabilities in reality, and these botched efforts of exerting political influence may actually have had the opposite effect of pushing Western Balkans closer to the West.

## The Religious Influence Trends

Broadly, Russia is considered to be “undoubtedly [...] the key external player influencing the religious, cultural, and academic spheres of the Western Balkans countries” (Galeotti 2018). This has been demonstrated through highlighting historic ties, mostly with the local Slavic and Orthodox population, while recently they have been “more active and assertive in its attempt to present itself as a protector of traditional values and an alternative to Western dominance” (Prague Security Studies Institute 2019c, 4). This counter message is particularly noteworthy at a time “when

Brussels is demanding greater respect for ethnic, religious, or sexual minorities in order to join the EU” (Stronski 2019). The main argument is that if Orthodox populations of the region do not align with western beliefs, Russia will continue to present itself as an alternative.

More specifically, Russia’s socio-cultural and religious influence is most prominent in Serbia. However, other states, especially North Macedonia and Montenegro, are also subjected to certain levels of cultural and religious influences. The Kremlin exploits religious and cultural leverage through the Orthodox Church (Conley and Melino 2019). The central tenet of this process has been in enhancing the status of Orthodoxy in the region, especially with the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC). The Church, which has a high standing and role in the country, has maintained relationships with every high-profile politician in Serbia since its independence from Yugoslavia. From Slobodan Milosevic to Aleksandar Vucic, all heads of state have visited the Belgrade Patriarchy (BBC News in Serbian, 2019). It is important to note that there is no Russian support to the Macedonian Orthodox Church. This is due to the fact that the Macedonian Orthodox Church has not been granted autocephaly due to an ongoing quarrel with the Serbian Orthodox Church on the matter (Religion.mk 2018). The same goes for the Montenegrin Orthodox Church which also has an ongoing dispute with the Serbian Orthodox Church over the autocephaly status (Radio Free Europe, 2019).

In Serbia, the country most closely aligned with Russia in the religious sphere, part of the connection transcends activities Russia undertakes as “spiritual links between Orthodox Christians existed regardless of the cooperation among the Russian and Serbian Orthodox Church” (Prague Security Studies Institute 2019c, 13). That being said, however, their relations have “intensified” since 2008 as Russia provided substantial material support for the reconstruction of Serbian churches in Kosovo. Russian influence is evident in these projects as there is “a Iversk chapel containing the name of Vladimir Putin” (Telegraph RS 2017).

Russian religious influence is also present in the northern Kosovo. Russia has provided funding amounting to \$2 million to restore four historical UNESCO Orthodox buildings in 2010 (Kosovar Centre for Security Studies 2017). The Russian Orthodox Church has also been involved in a project on “the return of Serbs” in Northern Kosovo, building 300 houses to accommodate around 1500 Serbs (i.e. displaced Serbs) (Prague Security Studies Institute 2019c, 7). They are also believed to be planning to build a church in this area. These activities are considered illegal by Kosovo authorities (ibid). This illustrates the Russian interference based on religious ties in Kosovo, and may serve to bring greater sway over Serbia as they are ‘supporting’ their people in Kosovo.

In 2018, they have also built a Russian Orthodox religious and cultural center in the heart of Banja Luka, the administrative center of Republika Srpska. This location, and the size of the construction, aims to have “much greater impact and visibility in RS” (ibid). This demonstrates that religious influence is a strategic objective for Russia through using church constructions. The Kremlin has tapped the Orthodox Church to influence Montenegro’s foreign policy decisions on two occasions: Montenegro’s 2006 push for independence and its 2016 accession to NATO. Patriarch Kirill attempted to incite domestic opposition (Conley and Melino 2019).

Russian religious influence, therefore, is strongest in Serbia due to historical ties that manifest in visible cultural centers, symbolic street names and statues. In the northern Kosovo, there are similar manifestations of religious ties, where they are also linked with a political element as Russia's support for Serbs in Kosovo, as well as in Republika Srpska. This type of influence can be instrumentalized to further increase their own sway over Serbia.

## The Cultural Influence Trends

As mentioned above, Russia's shared religion with the region serves as a base for cultural and social influence because in Orthodox majority countries, "popular attitudes toward Russia are more positive" (Stronski 2019). Considering cultural nexus, states with a considerable Slavic and/or Orthodox population have stronger cultural ties to Russia with Serbia being at the forefront, followed by Bosnia and Herzegovina due to the entity of Republika Srpska, and the northern area of Kosovo where the majority of the Serbian population lives. Therefore "this is where Russia's stance can find the greatest understanding and support" (Entina and Pivovarenko 2018). This demonstrates that the region is fertile ground for Russian influence in this sphere, and they seek to amplify social connections through cultural and language centres, think tanks, and the media.

Serbia is one of the countries in which Russia is highly present. Several streets and squares in Belgrade are being (re)named after Russian leaders, such as Soviet heroes, diplomats, intellectuals and architects (Prague Security Studies Institute 2019c, 13). Serbia has historic connections to Russia in this sphere through the Russian Centre of Science and Culture, 'Ruski dom', which was established in 1933. Today, the Russian Centre provides for cooperation in cultural affairs, hosts movie and theatre nights, concerts and other cultural events, provides the resources for Russian language learning and is the contact point for the Russian diaspora in Serbia. These institutes represent the traditional presence of Russian cultural, religious and academic traces in Serbian public life.

These centers have undoubtedly contributed to the Serbian people's perception of Russia. It is argued that the "[m]ajority of Serbs have an idealized image of Russia" due to alignment of ideological concepts and family traditions, with such ideological tendencies being developed over generations. These feelings have been fostered while the "majority of Serbs have never visited Russia, nor do they speak the language". The success of Russian social influence is explained often in terms of being supporters of "the rejection of Western values and the symbol of a traditionalist and conservative system of values" (Prague Security Studies Institute 2019c, 12). However some interviewees note that the educated elite as well as the population do not have such strong cultural ties with Russia since "FRY has been open during communism and citizens freedom of movement did not allow this myth to become as big as it could be" (Anonymous Interview, NGO Official, Spring 2019, Serbia). Despite the various beliefs in the country, the anti-Western sentiments are more prominent due to history (i.e. the NATO bombardment) and these beliefs clearly hold sway in Serbia, and in other parts of Western Balkans where Serbians are living, and so Russia is able to amplify its influence by 'defending' their values.

Additionally, the Center for Russian Studies was opened at the Faculty of Political Sciences at the University of Belgrade in 2018, next to the signing of a memorandum for cooperation with the Moscow State Institute of International Relations. This would provide Serbian students with the opportunity to deepen their knowledge in the spheres of Russian relations through exchanges and educational cooperation within the Russian academic sphere (University of Belgrade, Faculty for Political Science, 2018). As of 2017, there have been 110 registered non-governmental entities that appear to be directly connected to the Russian lobby in Serbia (Kremlin Watch 2017). Sputnik and RT provide TV programs, online news and radio broadcasts in Serbian, whereas the Russian state newspaper Russian Gazette (Rossiyskaya Gazeta) prints the weekly paper *Nedeljnik* (Kremlin Watch 2019; AALEP 2017). Many of these organizations have been established in the past two-three years and “the majority of them act as the right-wing movements and use a prefix like ‘Serbian’, ‘patriotic’, ‘patriarchal’” (Prague Security Studies Institute 2019c, 13). Moreover, the Russian media is used as the main content provider and therefore individuals using this content may perceive Russia as a donor due to the monetary gains created by clicks in the media in the Western Balkans region in the territories inhabited by ethnic Serbians (Anonymous Interviews, NGO Officials, Spring/Fall 2018, Spring 2019, BiH, Serbia, North Macedonia). This shows that Russian social and cultural impact is strongly felt in Serbia and that is increasingly visible to the local population via media.

Similarly to Serbia, Russia is fostering a relationship in the sphere of academia, predominantly linguistics, in North Macedonia. In 2015, when VMRO DPMNE was the governing political party, the Russian Centre was formally established in Skopje, within the Ss. Cyril and Methodius State University, and beyond its academic and research scope, it offers free Russian language courses (Ss. Cyril and Methodius University, 2017). This makes Russia only the fourth country “to have its own specialized cultural center within the biggest public university” in North Macedonia (Prague Security Studies Institute 2019c, 8).

There is a Russian Centre in Podgorica as well, which has a similar cultural agenda, next to offering language courses (Ruski Centar 2018), and there is a Department of Russian Studies at the Philology Faculty in Niksic (Sputnik News 2018). In Albania, there is no Russian Cultural Centre, however, the Russian Embassy has been offering language courses in Tirana and Vlore, with intentions to expand in Durres, Saranda and Fier (Ruskiy Mir Foundation 2016).

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the cultural presence is stronger in the entity of Republika Srpska. However, the Embassy of the Russian Federation is located in Sarajevo. Additionally, a Russian Language Centre called *Ruski za Sve* (Russian for All) operates in the capital. As mentioned in the previous subsection, Russian influence is evident in architecture and street names. Educational institutes are also present to increase student exchanges and Russian language uptake. There are also regular academic and cultural activities. The outcome is that Russia has developed a “foothold” in RS through a mixture of religious, cultural, and academic activities” (ibid).

Several interviewees pointed out the increased Russian influence in the cultural sphere. To illustrate the point, an international officer in BiH recalled his visits to Republika Srpska and Belgrade, where one can “see the face of Vladimir Putin everywhere, even on mugs” (Anonymous Interview, Spring 2019, BiH). This shows

that Russia is using their leader's appeal in different types of memorabilia and souvenirs, making it a common sight in Belgrade and elsewhere. This type of influence in the cultural sphere has the potential to render Russia a positive actor in the eyes of the local population, and hence increase their influence politically in the long term. This represents the active attempts of Russia to win the hearts and minds of the local population.

The Russian cultural influence in Montenegro takes much of the same form as in other Western Balkans countries. The mobilization of the Orthodox Church (in Montenegro through the Serbian Orthodox Church) is a weapon in the eyes of the Kremlin to revive pan-Slavism and unite the Slavic world under Russian patronage (Conley and Melino 2019, 2).

Despite Russia simultaneous efforts to increase their presence in the region, some argue that "Russia's cultural and historic ties to the region are often exaggerated. Russia's engagement in the Balkans has traditionally been more about influencing European security issues" (Stronski 2019). This may be the motive behind Russian support for far-right groups as this serves to "exacerbate political and social fissures" (ibid). This is also the likely reason for another prominent Russian activity that impacts society in the region: media influence. Russia has overt ties to some media outlets, and is also seen to cultivate disinformation in the region. To illustrate this common view in North Macedonia, an interviewee noted: "There are a lot of TV shows to create a public opinion that this population is pro-Russian against EU and NATO" (Anonymous Interview, Religious Officials/NGO Officials, Spring 2018/2019, North Macedonia). These practices will be assessed below.

In relation to media, it is claimed that "Russia has the most effective influence on the local media". They use local outlets to spread their message, and Russia is able to garner their support "without the need to inject financial investment heavily" (Prague Security Studies Institute 2019d, 4). This involves partnerships with small newspapers, bloggers, and politicians with the aim to encourage "Russian-friendly news stories or anti-Western narratives" (Stronski and Himes 2019). These operations have been "expanding" recently, most overtly with the *Sputnik* news service opening in Serbia in 2014 (Galeotti 2018). This has been described as the "leading media apparatus in the Western Balkans" as it "produces a lot of free content, and press agencies and media outlets in the Balkans often without verification republish its content in local languages" (Prague Security Studies Institute 2019d, 5). This increases proliferation of pro-Russian news very easily, and in Serbia this is compounded by the fact that more than 51 percent of citizens older than 15 years are computer illiterate, meaning TV and newspapers still play a major role in shaping Serbian public opinion. This has benefited Russian efforts in this sphere. Accordingly, since *Sputnik*'s launch, Russia's popularity among Serbs has increased from 47.8 percent to 60 percent in June 2017 (ibid).

Beyond Serbia, Russia has "sought to provide assistance and funding to news outlets with convenient political positions, such as Albanian-oriented ones in Macedonia" (Galeotti 2018). These positions include the typical anti-NATO or anti-EU viewpoints, but also calls for the "unification of ethnic Serbs from Serbia, Montenegro, North Kosovo, and Bosnia's RS into a single political entity that should have close ties to Russia" (Stronski and Himes 2019). They have also launched RBTH Daily, a mobile news app, in a variety of Western Balkans languages. This shows that

Russia is producing their own news in Western Balkans that gains traction, while also facilitating production of news from local outlets that promote their agenda.

Disinformation is also alleged to be a key tactic, used to highlight “an alleged Western preference for defending Muslim groups in the Balkans at the expense of Orthodox Christians” (ibid). Similar sentiments have been particularly prevalent in Kosovo, where Russian-owned media is produced in the Serbian language (e.g. R Magazin, Nova Srpska, Politicka Misao, or Radio and TV Sputnik) targeting the Serbian community in Northern Kosovo. The “purpose behind this form of propaganda is to spread fake news in order to shape public opinion and create a distorted reality of in country developments”. One example is Sputnik’s claim that ethnic Serbs in Kosovo should “‘sleep with one eye open’ because of the threat from Albanian extremists”. (Prague Security Studies Institute 2019d, 8). These messages are divisive and amplified given that Serbs rely on this media because of existing language barriers. This shows that disinformation is utilized by pro-Russian news agencies with a view to sowing divisions and increasing polarization. Similarly, the far-right groups have been co-opted to achieve similar aims.

Generally, Russian media activities in Western Balkans appear to have similar motives to the other social and cultural activities they partake in across the region, respectively to push a pro-Russia agenda at the expense of the West, and to sow divisions among the groups by fueling extreme beliefs. This is done through Russian media outlets, supporting local (pro-Russian) media, and disinformation campaigns. It is “often difficult to trace direct Russian involvement in these activities and in many cases the initiative comes from the local actors rather than being inflicted from outside” (ibid). The media usage by Russia is likely to be a growing trend as a consequence of “rising internet penetration rates across the region, growing smart phones usage in key countries, and the popularity of social media” (Stronski and Himes 2019). Russian media influence, both through Russian media and internal supporters of the Russian regime, is therefore likely to affect society and culture in Western Balkans for some time.

## The Security Influence Trends

Russia has significant influence on the security situation in the Western Balkans region. As seen in other spheres of influence, this ties directly to the Russian state. However, the practices under assessment here are aimed at advancing Russian interests, regardless of whether they are enacted by the Russian state or its supporters, in order to strengthen Russian influence in this realm. This involves direct military influence, particularly in Serbia and in the Republika Srpska of Bosnia and Herzegovina, alongside co-opting with private (para) militaries, and supporting organisations promoting ethnic segregation. Most of the interviews also reveal that Serbs are allying with Russia regarding Northern Macedonia (Anonymous Interviews, NGO Officials, Fall 2018, North Macedonia). The aim, as in other realms of influence, is to undermine NATO and to present Russia as a viable alternative.

As mentioned, Serbia and Republika Srpska are subject of the Russian security and military influence, “(w)hen it comes to security ties, Moscow’s efforts in the Balkans focus primarily on Serbia, the one country without formal aspirations to join

NATO, and the RS” (Storski and Himes 2019). Serbia has been an observer to the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) military alliance since 2013 and participates in military exercises with Russia and other CSTO partners. They also signed a “military technical assistance agreement” with Russia in 2016, aimed at modernizing Serbia’s military by “upgrading and replacing its Yugoslav-era military stocks with used MiG-29 fighter jets, T-72 tanks, and combat patrol vehicles donated by Russia or Belarus” (ibid). The visit of Foreign Intelligence Service Director, Sergey Naryshkin, in 2018 also highlighted the security service’s “growing influence on Russian foreign policy outreach” (ibid). Local news in Serbia also announced the visit of Ivica Dacic, PM of Serbia to Russia, in order to, among others, celebrate the 140 years anniversary of the Diplomatic Office of the ‘Principality of Serbia in the Russian Empire’ (B92 2019). In addition, it was recently made public that Serbia will receive new weapons from Russia as a “special treat” (ibid). These activities represent Russia’s overt and traditional military influence over Serbia as they supply them with weapons, conduct military exercises together and have regular high-level security visits. Moreover, Russia is believed to invest on the right-wing groups in order to create confusion and attract population (Anonymous Interviews, NGO Officials, Spring 2019, Serbia).

Beyond traditional military connections, Russia has also partaken in less overt practices that strengthen their influence in the security sphere in Serbia. This ranges from sponsoring “patriotic” organizations such as the Night Wolves and the Serbian / Balkan Cossacks Army (Radio Free Europe, 2016), to providing financial support to “military- patriotic solidarity” training camps for individuals as young as 14 in Serbia (Balkan Insight, 2018) as well as facilitating exchanges and trainings in Russia (Balkan Insight, 2017). One of the training camps was shut down by the Ministry of Interior of Serbia, with concerns about child abuse (Storski and Himes, 2019).

The establishment of a humanitarian response center in Niš, Serbia has also raised concern, as on the surface it is said to be a center to provide support during natural or man-made emergencies. However, it is allegedly dual-purpose as “Western governments generally regard it as an intelligence hub” with the US explicitly stating their concerns that it could be “some kind of a special center for espionage or other nefarious activities” (Galeotti 2018). These activities represent Russian influence on the military and security sphere in Serbia.

When it comes to financing and funding of organizations which are established and/or sponsored by Russia, the Night Wolves are the most prominent example. The Night Wolves are a motorcycle gang founded in Russia, with branches in predominantly Slavic countries such as Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Ukraine, Latvia, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Romania, to name a few (Pronk, 2018). They are also active in Germany, Australia and the Philippines, albeit to a lesser extent (Romriell, 2003). The Night Wolves’ leadership is very close to Putin (Telegraph 2014 and 2015), and the Russian Orthodox Church (Radio Free Europe, 2015) . Their notable support has been expressed towards the Crimean independence from Ukraine (Euronews, 2019). In the Western Balkans, they have been quite active in their anti LGBTQ+ sentiments, anti-Pride Parades, and most notably, in North Macedonia, members of the Night Wolves have partaken in the Parliament Coup of 2017 (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2019). Similarly, in 2018, the Kremlin reportedly provided \$41,000 to the Night Wolves for a

Western Balkans tour to demonstrate Russia's support for Milorad Dodik (Higgins 2018).

Moreover, Republika Srpska has fallen under Russian security and military influence, which is grounded on historical ties dating back to the 90's war. The Russians fought alongs Bosnian Serbs; the fallen volunteers were later commemorated through monuments. Nowadays, several monuments. In fact, it is assessed that the "most intensive cooperation between Bosnian Serbs and Russia [...] is channeled through the Republika Srpska's [de facto] security forces" (Mironova and Zawadewicz 2018). This reliance is largely because the region is not allowed to form its own military as part of the peace agreement following the Bosnian war. Russia works with Republika Srpska's police force and they have established an "increasingly close relationship" (ibid). This entails a 2016 agreement to partner their security assets against intelligence collection, counterterrorism, and cybercrime, while also sending police to each other's country for training. Furthermore, there are concerns over the militarization of the RS police, as at least 2,500 automatic rifles were bought from Serbia, while Bosnian officials in Sarajevo claim they are also trying to procure Russian-manufactured anti-aircraft Iгла 1-V missiles that can be mounted on helicopters (Stronski and Himes 2019). The trend of militarization is seen beyond the police force.

Moreover, Russia established a similar center as in Nis, in Mahovljani near Banjaluka. Serbian Honor, an organization founded in Nis, self-described as "a patriotic organization, which is Slavic and orthodox, willing and ready to help their people" is also active in Republika Srpska, and is presumed to be supported by Russia financially. The youth is being trained in Serbia as well for survival techniques (Anonymous Interviews, NGO Officials, IO Officials, Spring 2019, BiH). Additionally, the Veterans of Republika Srpska, a veteran organization, is also supported by Russia. There have been claims in the media that these organizations have facilitated the recruitment of locals to private military companies and paramilitaries who have fought on the Russian side in Eastern Ukraine and in Syria (Mironova and Zawadewicz 2018). However, the organizations themselves have come out in the media and declined such involvement (Anadolu Agency, 2018). Such practices have built an image of increased military activities in Republika Srpska, both among police forces and "patriotic", far right and paramilitary groups, all of which have been exposed to Russian influence or support.

Russia has, therefore, been increasingly turning to private militaries (such as the Wagner Group) for transnational security purposes. Given the Serbia/BiH, RS-Russia links on security/military sphere, some local interviewees pointed out that Serbia would not like to join NATO, even though they are a member of Partnership for Peace of NATO, since "they fall under the Russian sphere of influence" (Anonymous Interviews, NGO Officials, Spring 2019, Serbia). Russia's aim is to "prevent states... from abandoning the Russian sphere of influence in favor of the Euro-Atlantic institutions". This is more prominently featured in states that have traditionally been exposed to Russian influence the most, such as Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia (Pronk 2018). However, the geographical reach of such influence by Russia has been expanding to the Western Balkans, as noted from the elaboration on Republika Srpska and Serbia above.

In 2018, Russia's Ambassador to North Macedonia ominously warned that in a clash between Russia and NATO, Skopje would become a "legitimate target", if it continued down the path of accession and became a NATO member state. This would occur only if a conflict arises between NATO and Russia. The presence of Russian private military in Serbia and in RS and Russia's use of "little green men" in Ukraine, for example, mean that these veiled threats carry more weight. These types of threats are presumably a growing trend, as Russian efforts will "likely increase in the so-called 'near abroad' and in Western Balkans, especially in states that approach accession within Euro-Atlantic institutions" (ibid). A commonly held perception in North Macedonia is that Russia is facilitating radicalization of Albanians through proxies. An interview pointed out that Russia also engaged on 'creating patriotic organizations to promote ethnic segregation, anti-Albanian spirit'. Moreover, they are believed to destabilize North Macedonia via VMRO, however the latter's political power waned in the last elections (Anonymous Interviews, Journalists, NGO Officials, Spring/Fall 2018, North Macedonia). However, considering recent political developments in North Macedonia, VMRO's political power is not to be entirely neglected, not only vis-a-vis their closeness to Russia, but also overall.

In Montenegro, besides the coup aiming to topple Djukanovic's government before the parliamentary elections in 2016, direct involvement of Russian officials has been difficult to prove. In fact, the *Night Wolves* have been accused of having links with those who attempted the assassination of the Montenegrin Prime Minister, according to officials from Montenegro and Serbia, showing that their interference is across the region (Stronski and Himes 2019). The Balkan Cossacs Army, which has been labelled as a Russia friendly organization, held a parade in the seaside town of Kotor. Interestingly, their swearing ceremony was attended by a representative of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro, Momcilo Krivokapic (Radio Free Europe, 2016). This presents the increased strength of the relationship between Montenegro and Russia, with the latter attempting to increase their influence within the Western Balkans countries.

Other Russian non-state entities have impacted security and stability in Western Balkans. This occurred in Montenegro in 2016 and 2017 prior to their NATO accession, through cyber-attacks carried out against government institutions. These attacks were traced to "APT28, also known as Fancy Bear, which the United States claims is tied to Russia's military intelligence service, the GRU. The attacks occurred alongside a robust Russian-driven anti-NATO propaganda campaign in the country, as well as the 2016 coup plot" (ibid). Cyber-attacks and coup attempts represent hybrid warfare tools, and while these practices are difficult to tie directly to the Russian state, they were carried out to advance Russian interests in Montenegro.

Russian security activities beyond collaborating with and deploying their own non state actors are also increasingly using other non-state actors in Western Balkans. More specifically, Moscow is "seeking to develop its role in the region as a counter terrorism partner" (Galeotti 2018). This has the dual purpose of increasing security influence, while also undermining the West. This is illustrated in 2017 when the Russian and Serbian Deputy Foreign Ministers "played up Europe's 'refusal' to acknowledge Belgrade's 'legitimate concerns' about terrorism from Kosovo and Muslims from the Middle East" (ibid). This clearly strengthens perceptions of Russia, while highlighting Western alleged weaknesses. Galeotti believes this will be an increasingly utilized tactic due to the "disproportionate number" of Muslims from

Bosnia, Albania, and Kosovo travelling to the Middle East as foreign fighters and then returning home. This in turn will also increase the likelihood for “Russia to play the ‘Orthodox Christian solidarity’ card” (Galeotti 2018), and is therefore a means for Russia to exert security influence and portray itself as a viable alternative to the West.

Russia is a contributing factor to the spreading of nationalist extremism in the northern area of Kosovo, since it employs a variety of instruments aiming at the aggravation of tensions between the Albanian and Serb communities (Prague Security Studies Institute 2019d, 8). According to some interviews, Russia is functioning via Belgrade and mainly the Serbian political parties in Kosovo, and allegedly some leaders are highly supported by the Russian agents who guard them as well as collect votes for them. The local population, but also some Serbian politicians, presumably support Russia due to intimidation and fear. Interviews do not overrule that if exposed that they work against Belgrade/Moscow, they can be assassinated either by the Russian individuals living in the northern area or Serbs (Anonymous Interviews, Political Officials, Fall 2018, Kosovo). In fact, a recent voice recording was leaked to the press between a close friend of Oliver Jovanović, who was killed in North Mitrovica and the leader of the Serbian Republican Party. The phone call reconfirms our interviews. According to him, Jovanović was killed by people of Vucic because he (Jovanovic) rejected to join Lista Srpska, which is directly instrumentalized by Belgrade and Russia (Insajderi 2019). Russian involvement in Kosovo can also be linked to a few far-right radical organizations operating in the North, although direct links are often difficult to establish and prove.

In May 2019, the Kosovo police launched an operation in the Serb majority town of Mitrovica, to detain suspects who have been involved in organized crime, smuggling, misuse of official positions and other crimes of similar severity. The Prime Minister, Ramush Haradinaj, stated that the raid has been executed so that the rule of law is upheld. However, the Head of the Serbian Government Office for Kosovo, Marko Djuric, has stated that the goal of the operation has been to cause fear and panic among the Serbian population (Balkan Insight, 2019). Media reports state numbers between 7 and a dozen arrested individuals. Among these, a Russian UN employee was detained. Mihail Aleksandrovich Krasnochekov was soon released due to immunity claims. His release had been demanded by both UNMIK where he worked as well as the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Based on an investigation by INDOKS Krasnochekov reported directly to the Russian Intelligence, while UNMIK was merely a cover for his operations. Kosovo authorities have declared him “*a persona non grata*” and his entrance to Kosovo became forbidden indefinitely. Moscow has denounced these events as a “provocation”. As such, this is another example of Russian influence meddling in the security sphere, and an example of utilization of intelligence operatives under the auspices of an international organization.

It is observed that the Russian practice of deploying hybrid threats will likely remain. considering both the phenomena of support, financing and training of “patriotic” and/or paramilitary organizations, the presence through private military companies as well as influence meddling in local and national politics all across the Western Balkans. This will undoubtedly strengthen Russian influence in the security sphere, with effects on the political sphere, especially if the EU and NATO accession processes are slowed down or stopped for any of the Western Balkans’ states.

In sum, Russia is an important actor in the military and security sphere in Western Balkans. In Serbia and the Republika Srpska of Bosnia and Herzegovina, there is more overt military ties and partnerships, ranging from supplying weapons to providing training in centers with a visible Russian presence. There are also less overt actions utilizing non-state private paramilitaries and cyber actors which also impact security in the region. However, “(o)ne should not overstate the influence” of the paramilitary groups or “their connections to the Russian government ((Stronski and Himes 2019). Their actions are not coordinated by the Kremlin, but via proxies and their membership largely consists of disenfranchised fringe elements” (Stronski and Himes, 2019). This being said, though they are “ready-made tools that Russia has used to stoke anti-EU and anti-NATO sentiment and work against reform-minded political actors in the region” (ibid). Therefore, non-state actors, even when not directed by the Russian state, are working to increase Russian interests. Lastly, Russia’s security and military presence in the region also seeks to present the country as a strong force protecting their Orthodox Christian brothers from Islamic fundamentalism, and this is likely to grow as it sees the opportunity to (appear to) be a viable alternative to the West on security issues. Local media in Serbia announced that by next year Serbia and Russia would start building a nuclear technology and innovation research center. The decision itself was made public by the Serbian Minister of Innovation and Technological Innovation (Tanjug News 2019). Moreover, Russian influence is present in Kosovo, mainly in the Serbian inhabited areas as well as in North Macedonia, which raises fears that it is spreading violent extremism in both areas via Russian agents, and attempting to destabilize the countries via proxies. Moreover, there are commonly held perceptions among the Serbian minority in Kosovo that the local Serbian elite, which is pro-West, does feel under threat due to recent intimidations and assassinations (Anonymous Interviews, Fall 2018, Spring 2019, Kosovo, North Macedonia). In Montenegro, the last attempt failed, hence their capabilities still seem limited.

## Conclusion

This section uncovered that the Russian economic influence is largely tied to energy and real estate, and is at times instrumentalized to increase political influence. The political influence is exerted through high level visits but also the co-optation of political leaders, which represents one of the techniques of hybrid warfare. Undercover tactics to create instability are employed as well. The primary political aim is to undermine the West and its appeal to countries in the region, while simultaneously portraying Russia as an appealing alternative. For instance, a bailout was offered to Serbia that attempted to undermine the West, as the timing coincided with the IMF’s negotiations. This, in turn, was used to strengthen the pro-Russian sentiments among the population.

The biggest influence is traced to the ethnically-Serb populated areas of the region (Serbia, RS in BiH, the northern area of Kosovo and, to a lesser extent, Montenegro and North Macedonia). Albania may have been also impacted by Russia if the legal case against Lulzim Basha, a member of parliament from the Democratic Party, is confirmed. It is very important to note that while some argue that as much as Serbia feels affinity with Russia, they don’t want to become ‘little Russia in the region’, while others argue that Russia’s influence is deep in the state and therefore the EU

should be cautious with Serbia as a 'trojan horse' may enter through the backdoor. Moreover, Russia is one of the most important external influencers in Bosnia and Herzegovina, largely due to the Republika Srpska region, which may destabilize the country as a tit for tat strategy to the West. Undercover operations are also conducted in the northern area of Kosovo.

Religious and cultural activities are also conducted with these ends in mind, as their historic ties in these spheres are key tenets which Russia shares with the region that the West lacks. The religious institutions, specifically the Serbian Orthodox Churches are used to further their strategic objectives across the region. Moreover, disinformation is a central tool that strengthens perceptions of Russian influence in society and culture.

Finally, Russia is highly influential in the security sphere attempting to sway the region away from the West through military partnerships, supporting paramilitary and far right groups, strengthening the anti-EU and anti-NATO sentiments and attempting to portray the Western allies in the region who are Muslims as terrorists. Russian security influence is believed to also be geared toward strengthening perceptions of Russia as a strong actor while undermining the West, both through overt military ties (Serbia), covert operations (i.e. North Macedonia, Kosovo, RS) and shady non-state actors. This demonstrates that Russia is waging hybrid warfare in the region, while employing mainly the political, religious, cultural and security tools in parallel. This enhanced perception of Russia's strength may be attributed to the Western Balkans media and disinformation campaign, which other external powers do not pay as much attention to. This might be the area where Russia has had the most success, as Bechev argues "Russia's principal achievement is that it appears as a co-equal competitor of the West" (Bechev 2018). This is impressive given that they hold less influence in real terms, in the economic and political realms at least, and it is therefore a noteworthy takeaway when assessing Russia's influence in the Western Balkan region. As Alex Klimburg argues, disinformation warfare will dominate the future of war as the difference between the truth and propaganda will be difficult to uncover. This, combined with news amplification, poses threats not only to Western Balkan but to Europe as a whole as it may stall the NATO and EU accession processes, as well as an attempt to manipulate the diaspora to incite further polarization within the EU. These processes have been experienced in other parts of the world, especially in the developed countries, i.e. Netherlands which has been "influenced by Russia" as well (Anonymous Interviews, Political Officials, Spring 2018, Netherlands). Therefore, the Western Balkan region is experiencing Russia's foreign policy process like in the other countries.

## 5: Turkey

### Introduction

The relationship of Turkey with the region is based on two core elements: Islam, the kinship with many of the Muslim communities in these countries, as well as the Neo-Ottoman narrative that combines Islamic narratives and narratives of kinship with historical and cultural ties in the region. Overall, Turkey is not “shying away from taking initiative” when pursuing their foreign policy (MFA Turkey). This so-called ‘Enterprising and Humanitarian Foreign policy’ is guided by the objective of achieving peace at home and in the world. Globally, the Turkish diplomatic network is the 5<sup>th</sup> largest one, which enables the country to employ political, economic, humanitarian and cultural cooperation in complementary fashion (MFA Turkey). Turkey’s foreign policy reiterates the strong, close ties to the Western Balkans, among other regions (ibid).

The Ottoman Empire has been the ruling empire of the region for centuries. Therefore, the existence of a relationship across different matters between the states of the region and Turkey is not entirely unexpected. Strong economic, socio-cultural and religious ties exist. After the Balkan wars, Turkey’s intent with Western Balkans was mostly in line with NATO and the EU, favoring Atlanticism and Europeanism. This did not change after the currently governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in 2002 (Aydıntaşbaş 2019). Besides the historical ties, Turkey regards the region as a gateway to continental Europe.

Erdogan has pragmatically reset the diplomatic ties with the Western Balkans region, by fostering great personal relationships with the Western Balkan leaders (Balkan Insight 2018). Currently, the region is seen as a “breathing space” for Turkey’s foreign policy. With unrest at its eastern borders and rising tensions at home and with the US, the Western Balkans countries are friendly neighbors (ibid). Over the past five years, Erdogan has been depicting the global West, most notably NATO, the US and the EU, as unfavorable towards Turkey (Jan Zürcher 2018). This is predominantly due to the divergence in policies towards the Syrian conflict. However, the Turkish relationship with the Eastern Powers has also deteriorated, due to lack of mutual support on internal questions, such as the Uyghur and Kurdish minority issues (Ahval News 2019). Euro-Asianism is on the rise in Turkey urging the country to leave NATO and end its bid for the EU (Colakoglu 2019). Their aim seems to be aligning Turkey with Russia and China, also in terms of security, in order to render it less pro-Western and less democratic. Recently also, most political leaders in Turkey have increased their anti-Western discourse (Jan Zürcher 2018). This represents a disconnect regarding the foreign and security policy of Turkey, as Euro-Asianism contradicts the spirit of NATO which Turkey is crucially a member of.

Turkey has national interest to protect the Turkish minority, since people of Turkish ethnicity and heritage are living in Western Balkans. In North Macedonia, Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Turkish citizens enjoy the status of a national minority, protected by either the Law on Minorities or by the Constitution (Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia). In Serbia, Albania and Montenegro, the Turkish do not enjoy the status of a constitutionally recognized or a national minority recognized by law. According to the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “[t]he Balkans is a priority for Turkey not only from the political, economic and

geographical perspectives, but also due to its historical, cultural and human ties with the region. The Balkans, being the geographical connection of Turkey with the rest of Europe, bears great importance with the special place it had in the historical process that shaped the Turkish nation and the future potential it carries within the context of regional integration and the EU accession objective which we share with all the countries of the region” (MFA Turkey). They point out that they maintain good relations with all countries in the Western Balkans region and aim to promote: “High level political dialogue, security for all, utmost economic integration and the preservation of the multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious social structures” guided by the principles of “regional ownership” and “inclusiveness” (ibid).

Turkey is considered a traditional external influencer in Western Balkans, pursuing an independent, ‘Neo-Ottoman’ foreign policy. The relationships between Turkey and the states in the region predominantly focus on soft power. Interestingly, Turkey has kept on fostering fruitful relationships with the Western Balkans states that do not have a Muslim-majority population, such as Serbia, through diplomatic and economic activities. Turkey seems to employ security, political, economic and cultural tools as part of its foreign policy in the region.

A complicating factor is that, until a few years ago, schools supported by the Gülen movement were also an important element of Turkey’s soft power policy (Anonymous Interviews, Spring/Summer 2018/019, Turkey, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Albania). Nevertheless, this has become a source of discord, both within Turkey and in the region, following the fallout in the wake of the 2016 coup attempt. Moreover, it is possible that Ankara’s recent rapprochement with Moscow means that Turkey will tend towards pursuing a less aggressive approach towards Slavic interests and concerns in the region, thus ceding some ground to the Kremlin. This may manifest in a reduction of support towards the Albanians, a shift that would be counter intuitive considering the established Turkish foreign policy interests. Turkey’s interest in the region is likely motivated by making sure that it maintains leverage vis-à-vis the EU and NATO. After all, most Western Balkan states aspire to become EU and NATO member states one day.

Turkey portrays itself as a regional player in the Western Balkan and can also be viewed as a reactionary strategy due to the lack of EU membership, using the Western Balkan as a leverage tool toward the EU. In fact, such tensions could affect the continued implementation of the EU-Turkey deal regarding the returning of migrants that seek to cross into Greece to use the so-called ‘Balkan route’. Lastly, it can be questioned whether Turkey’s lurch towards authoritarianism will increase its standing as a model to be emulated. Many leaders in the Western Balkan may be attracted to the authoritarian model at first, but it is not likely to help their aims to join the EU and NATO. In order to address these questions, the following sections will outline the influence trends in Turkey as well as Turkey’s influence in each sphere: economic, political, security and cultural/religious.

## The Influence Trends in the Western Balkans



Figure 26: Influence of Turkey in Western Balkans from 1984-2016 (FBIC Index)

The long-term trends show a significant increase of the influence of Turkey in all Western Balkans states. In Kosovo, the sharpest rise has been observed, increasing from 8.67% in 2012 to 16.18% in 2016. This renders Turkey the most influential international actor in Kosovo for 2016. Turkey is also highly influential in Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Albania, representing 3.27%, 3.35%, and 4.86% in 2016, respectively. The lowest influence is observed in Serbia and Montenegro, with 1.99% and 2.36%, respectively. The steady increase of Turkey’s influence after the 90’s is likely due to high historical, religious and cultural connections with these states in the past, which serve as a basis for strong economic, political and military relations as well.

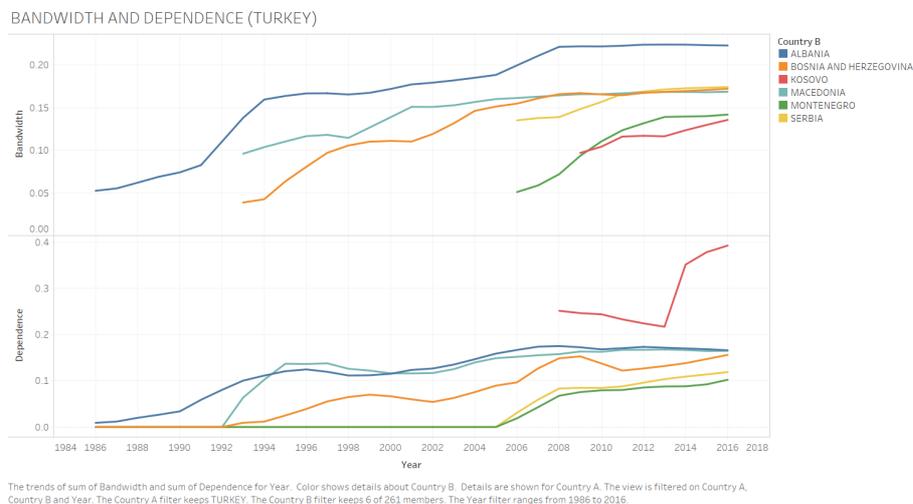


Figure 27: Bandwidth and Dependence (sub-indices of Influence) of Turkey in Western Balkans from 1984-2016 (FBIC Index)

Figure 27 shows that the high level of influence that Turkey exerts in Kosovo does not translate into high Bandwidth, due to its lowest score among all Western Balkans countries in 2016. However, their dependency score remains the highest, which is because Kosovo has a smaller economy than the other Western Balkans countries, and given that many of the other international powers (China and Russia) do not recognize Kosovo, Kosovo is able to become more reliant on Turkey for economic, political, and security support. Turkey has concluded free trade agreements with all states in the region (with the exception of Kosovo, the trade agreement of which is in the process of ratification) (Ministry of Trade, Turkey 2018). Trade between Turkey and the region has been clearly increasing over time as well, reaching over \$2.5 billion in 2016, with nearly half of this amount resulting from trade with Serbia (WITS 2016). In terms of security, Turkey has strong connections to Albania, as both are members of NATO and Albania’s army is using Turkish imported weaponry (Ministry of Defense Albania 2013). Additionally, Serbia, North Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina (Capital.ba) trade arms with Turkey (Savic 2018). In terms of political influence, all countries have substantial levels of representation and shared membership of IGOs, except for Kosovo, which is not a member of several IGOs.

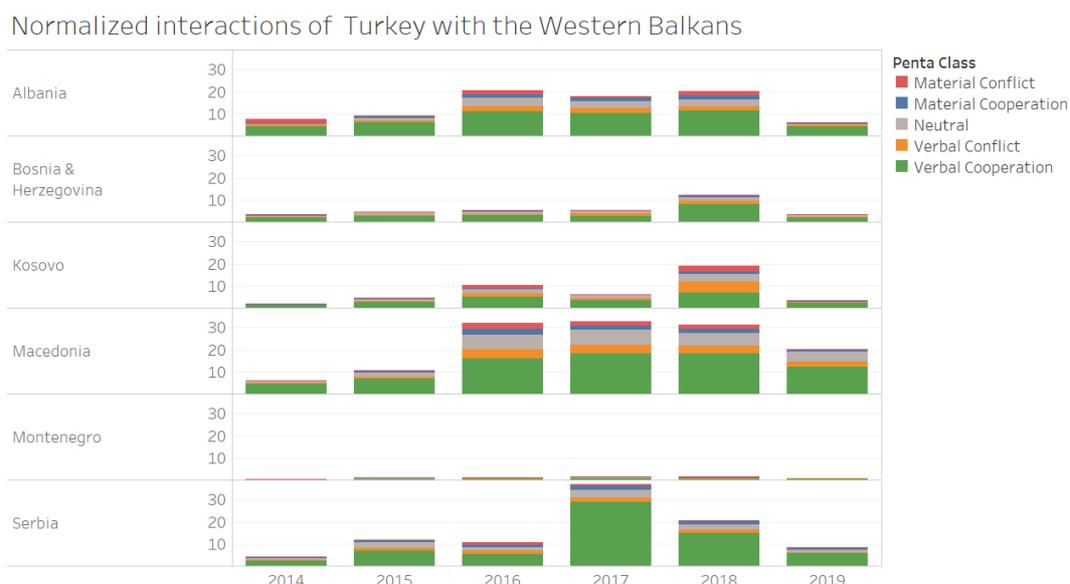


Figure 28: Normalized and categorized events between Turkey and Western Balkans, 2009-2018 (HCSS Datawarehouse)

Figure 28 shows the recent interactions between Turkey and Western Balkans over the past five years. When analyzing the past ten years, it is revealed that from 2014 onwards Turkish interactions with Western Balkans states have risen substantially. This is particularly visible for North Macedonia, Albania, Serbia and Kosovo, while Bosnia and Herzegovina has seen an increase but to a lesser degree. Montenegro does not have a noteworthy number of interactions with Turkey. Interestingly, Kosovo shows increasingly negative tones in relation to Turkish interactions in 2018. This is largely due to Turkey’s controversial actions in extraditing teachers with suspected links to the Gülen movement from Kosovo, the legality of which has been questioned in the media and by political figures (Naddaff 2018). The peak in interaction with Serbia in 2017 has various underlying reasons, mainly due to economic cooperation. The negative interaction with North Macedonia is mainly

related to the unrest caused by Turkey's request to extradite Gülen movement's members.

## The Economic Influence Trends

As elaborated above, Turkey is exerting influence in all spheres, including the economic one. When it comes to economic cooperation, there is an upward trend of economic cooperation between Turkey and the six states, predominantly fueled by private consumption and investment (Center of Excellence in Finance 2018). In particular, Ankara has committed to steadily improving its trade relations with Western Balkans. Notable projects include construction, commissioning and the management of the international airports of Skopje and Pristina, the creation of Albania's national airline, the construction of the Belgrade-South Adriatic Highway, and the purchase of local firms such as the Albanian telecommunication company ALB telecom (Savic 2018). Turkey has also been among the top ten donors of development aid to Kosovo, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina (Kelkitli 2013). Despite the increased Turkish economic influence in the region, a local researcher argues that Turkey's influence, including economic, is non-existent in comparison with Western influence (Anonymous Interview, Academic, Spring 2017, Kosovo).

There are positive trends in trade and foreign direct investment in all countries, which shows that Turkey's economic relationship with the region is quite strong. Its involvement is cross-sectoral and cross-regional. Despite not being in the top of the charts when it comes to investment on a country basis (with the exception of Albania and Kosovo), Turkey and Turkish companies explore all the possibilities for business involvement in the region (Çakir 2014). The strong economic cooperation is based on "win-win" strategy due to the geographical location and proximity of the six states with both Turkey and the rest of European states, as well as the alignment with the EU membership aspirations (ibid). The liberalization processes in line with the EU accession requirements have proven to be particularly beneficial to Turkey's economic growth.

Turkey's economic influence in Western Balkans should be seen in the context of its domestic economy. The Turkish economy has boomed and slumped often in the past 15 years with a general trend of substantial growth. Recent trends, such as the depreciating currency, high inflation, high debts and the sanctions imposed by the US show that the Turkish economy is in a "danger zone" (VOX 2019). This makes trade with Western Balkans more attractive, while also being able to distract the Turkish population from internal struggles (Phillips 2018).

Albeit still being overshadowed by its European counterparts, Ankara has been steadily improving its trade relations with Western Balkans (European Parliament 2017). Compared with the numbers in 2002, Turkey's trade volume has improved by 373 percent until 2012 (ibid, 20). Especially, in Kosovo, Turkey has consolidated its economic power, securing 8 percent of the countries' imports (ibid), and exhibiting the third largest FDI (ibid), which has primarily flown into the telecommunication, banking, transportation or construction sector (ibid, 20). Since 2008, when the Kosovar-Turkish Chamber of Commerce began its work, €327 million of Turkish investment has flown into Kosovo (ibid). Turkish-Kosovar bilateral trade volume was around \$289 million in 2013 and 2014, and amounted to \$248.750 million in 2015. A major proportion of this mutual trade volume is the Turkish exports to Kosovo (\$279, \$276 and \$240.8 million in 2013, 2014 and 2015 respectively) (ibid). The Free Trade

Agreement between Turkey and Kosovo was signed in Ankara on 27 September 2013, which is the first FTA Kosovo has ever signed with a second party. In addition, an approximate number of 500 Turkish companies operate in Kosovo. The total value of their investment is around EUR 340 million. Turkey, currently the third foreign direct investor in Kosovo after Germany and the UK between 2007-2013, was the biggest investor in Kosovo in 2012 and 2013. Significant opportunities for investment are present in Kosovo, especially in the sectors of contracting, mining and banking. The total amount of projects that have been undertaken by the Turkish contractor companies up to the year 2016 has reached an approximate EUR 1 billion. Moreover, the highway is being constructed by a joint consortium of Turkish - US investors. Kosovo and Turkey will extend their economic cooperation in the field of agriculture (Insajderi 2019).

In Serbia, Turkey has invested particularly heavily in the textile industry, especially in Sandzak area inhabited by Muslims, and Turkish companies are the main job creators in this region. Serbia has also sought investments from Turkey, due to the disfranchisement from the European Union on economic matters (Daily News 2018b). The target for the trade volume is \$2 billion (Daily News 2018a).

In Montenegro, the Turkish company Toscelik has bought the struggling ironworks in Niksic, one of the country's few large industrial complexes (Konrad Adenauer Stiftung 2018).

In Albania, Turkey assisted in Albania's national airline, and the purchase of local firms such as the Albanian telecommunication company ALBtelecom (ibid, 2). Issues of transparency have been raised since a suspicious private company, the MND Investment, was formed a few days before the inauguration of Air Albania who became a shareholder upon PM Edi Rama's decision (Exit 2018). Moreover, public information lack regarding the project (ibid). Moreover, questions transparency issues were raised regarding the planned construction of the airport in Vlora. Nonetheless, the project stopped for unknown reasons and is open to new bidders. This shows that Turkey's investments in Albania implemented with a lack of transparency, and thus exploits the wider trend of corruption in these countries. However, Turkey is considered a strategic partner and fourth largest investor in Albania (Konrad Adenauer Stiftung 2018).

Moreover, a multi-billion investment in a key motorway connecting Belgrade and Sarajevo has been promised by Erdogan in Bosnia and Herzegovina. A project estimated to cost €3 billion (\$3.5 billion) involving credits from Turkey's Exim Bank. So far it has been blocked by the Bosnian Serbs, who dispute the road route (Sito-Sucic 2018b).

Turkey's economic influence is also demonstrated in the health sector. A number of private hospitals have been acquired or are managed by Turkish companies. For example, the Turkish Acibadem Grotup is operating in North Macedonia (Acibadem Sistina), Serbia (Acibadem Sistina) and Bosnia and Herzegovina (Acibadem), whereas Aksoy Group is operating the Millennium hospital in Kosovo. The International Turkish Hospital is operating in Albania. Montenegro is the only country without a hospital that is operated by a Turkish holding or parent company. However significant donations by Turkish donors have been made towards state hospitals (CrnaGoraTurska 2019). Cooperation in the sector is very prominent for Western Balkans since the early 2000s (Raxhimi 2011), especially when it comes to

cancer care and serious illness treatments. Medical tourism is also present, especially in the sphere of corrective and plastic surgery, as well as hair transplants.

Another industry in which the region is fostering strong ties with Turkey is tourism. Turkey is a highly popular tourist destination for the region. The close proximity on land, multiple direct and chartered flights from Turkish Airlines and Pegasus Air, and the appeal of all-inclusive and ultra-all-inclusive offers at reasonable prices make Turkish sea-side resorts appealing for many from North Macedonia, Kosovo, Serbia, Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

## The Political Influence Trends

Nearly a century after the retreat of the Ottoman Empire from Western Balkans, Turkey is experiencing a new “golden age” (Ugur Ekinci 2013) in its relations with the states and communities in Western Balkans. Turkey views “the Balkans part of its natural sphere of influence as a former imperial power, with the Ottoman Empire famously stopping only at the gates of Vienna at its peak” (Weise 2018). This has led to claims that Turkey is pursuing “Neo-Ottoman” (i.e. imperialist) aspirations. Several interviewees reaffirm that view as it is illustrated below:

“Religion has been promoted from Turkey. 10-15 times higher and it popularized Erdogan. It is a danger to Albanians. It is a neo-Ottomanism. He sees the Albanians as his subjects, like the Commonwealth of the Ottoman Empire” (Anonymous Interview, NGO Official, Spring 2018, Kosovo).

While this assessment is debatable, it is clear that Turkey’s involvement in the region is increasing across all spheres of influences. Turkey utilizes their historical, geographical and socio-cultural proximity to the region to advance their political agenda (Dursun-Ozkanca 2013).

Much of Turkish policy towards Western Balkans has been shaped by the former Turkish Prime Minister Davutoglu, who in the conference Ottoman Legacy and Balkan Muslim Communities Today, justified this increased focus on the region with his country’s “aims to establish order in ... the Balkans, the Caucasus, the Middle East... [making] these areas with Turkey ... the *centre of world politics* in the future,” (Coşkun 2015), reflecting Turkey’s desire to be viewed as *a power of its own*, rather than a “perennial [persistent] candidate knocking on Europe’s door” (Archives 2016). In fact, Turkey seeks to maintain the right to act as ‘protector’ of Muslims in Western Balkans (Vračić 2016), in contrast with Russia’s role in safeguarding pan Slavic interests, combined with abrogating rights to ‘intervene’ (i.e. through mediation).<sup>11</sup> The “zero problems” policy implies that Western Balkans would be seen as part of Turkey’s ‘zone of influence’ in which it would seek to keep geopolitical rivals, such as the US, Russia, China, Iran and the GCC countries (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman), at bay. Turkish foreign policy in Western Balkans seems to fall on four pillars: transatlantic institutions, trade, Muslim communities, Erdoganism and the battle with Gülenism (Aydıntaşbaş 2019).

<sup>11</sup> This somewhat constitutes a reversal of earlier Christian -chiefly French and British- rights to protect the Christian millets in the old Ottoman Empires under the ‘capitulations.’

Some argue that Neo-Ottomanism is overstated. The European fears of Turkish expansion have little basis in reality and are thus exaggerated (Aydıntaşbaş 2019; Zivanovic 2019). There is a separate reality between the real Turkish power in Western Balkans and the domestic rhetoric of Turkish leaders, which is mainly used for domestic consumption (Aydıntaşbaş 2019). In addition, Western Balkans is not perceived as a priority for Turkish foreign policy, as Turkey is predominantly focused on the Syrian conflict and relations with Europe. Lastly, Turkey's capacity to truly carry out an expansionist strategy in the region is non-existent (Aydıntaşbaş 2019, 3). This criticism will be refuted below.

Turkey uses various political tools to exert influence. It derives from the country's adoption of a mediator role in the post-2000 period in facilitating trilateral meetings between (among others) Serbia and BiH, Serbia and Kosovo, and Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia (ibid). On top of its mediating efforts, Turkey has also encouraged the integration of Western Balkans states into the international community, most prominently Kosovo, despite sensitivities owing to Turkey's position towards its own Kurdish minorities. Turkey has had an active role in the process of capacity building and stabilizing the region throughout the turmoil in the 1990s, through NATO, the Southeast European Cooperative Initiative, Stability Pact, and the South-East European Initiative, to name a few. Additionally, the Embassies and Consulates are utilized across the region to represent Turkish political views and lobby accordingly. The Turkish Adalet ve Kalkınma (AK) Party's assertiveness and active diplomacy assisted in improving the relations between Western Balkans and Turkey (ibid, 1). In addition, the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) is also active within this realm, as the Agency is, in their own words "[...] an implementing intermediary of Turkish foreign policy, particularly in the countries with whom we have shared values, as well as in many other areas and countries" (TIKA). Yunus Emre Institut is active as well on the cultural sphere. This has been confirmed also by our interviewees in Turkey as well (Spring 2019).

In the processes of assessment of its political influence in Western Balkans, Turkey's complex relationship with the EU is to be considered as well next to its relationship with the US, Russia and China (Ducourtieux and Stroobants 2018). Turkey has applied for EU membership in 1987 and has formally entered negotiations in 2005. Throughout this period, their policies vis-a-vis Western Balkans reflected their own European aspirations and strategic values (Krastev 2019; European Parliament 2018). However, this has changed with President Erdogan's anti-European sentiments. The concerns of the Union with regard to Turkey's attitudes towards European values, next to the ways in which Turkey has handled the Migration Crisis, the Syrian Conflict, as well as their relationships with Russia have undermined the belief that Turkey is committed to pro-Western values (European Parliament 2018). In fact, Turkey is shifting away from the EU, as seen with the violations of human rights at home and abroad, violations of the NATO principle of interoperability by purchasing missiles from Russia, and fighting against the US allies in Syria (D. L. Phillips 2019b).

Parallels can be drawn between the soft power exerted by Turkey and Russia. Both countries similarly rely on cultural and religious ties, as well as its historical affinities (Sadriu 2019; Bechev 2019). However, Turkey is not as external to the region as Russia is. Its history and location make it part of the region and legitimizes its presence (Bechev 2015). In a scenario where the EU withdraws from Western Balkans, the latter countries may shift their orientation more towards Turkey than towards other countries that have exerted some type of influence, despite the strong religious ties, as the case with the Gulf states, or strong economic relationship, as the case with

China. The strong historical ties render Turkey as one of the most important international influencers in Western Balkans. This has been reaffirmed by the recent statements by Macron, illustrating the European suspicions towards Turkey's intentions in Western Balkans, pointing out that he does not want Western Balkans "to turn towards Turkey or Russia" (Weise 2018). While some authors argue that there is no Turkish-Russian coordination in Western Balkans (Aydıntaşbaş 2019), the interviews indicate that Turkey's policy regarding security has been aligned more with the Russian one, and it is perceived to also collaborate with Serbia. Counter intuitively, the interview data also suggests that religious radicalisation is being supported by Turkey-Russia alliance (Anonymous Interviews, Imams, NGO Officials, Journalists, Spring 2017/18, BiH, NM).

It is important to note that most of the Western Balkans states have explicitly and implicitly shown support toward Turkey, Erdogan and his policies (Balkan Insight 2018; Colborne and Edwards 2018), be it for their management of the Refugee Crisis or for showing support in the aftermath of the attempted 2016 coup (Weise 2018). In addition, it is simpler to spread influence over the former "Ottoman heartland" (Ugur Ekinci 2013), also due to the *creation of new independent states*, and the *power vacuum left by the EU's* dwindling attention for the Western Balkans states (Vračić 2016). While the arguments above show that Turkey is shifting away from the EU aspirations, this may as well attract the region to shift away from the EU accession processes as well.

While the nostalgic *desire to revive the Ottoman Empire's old geography* as a power center of contemporary world politics may play a role in Turkey's involvement in Western Balkans, the greater motivation thereof may perhaps be Turkey's desire to *strengthen and integrate* its political, economic and cultural position in the region, as part of its quest to become *the leading external actor* with strong social and cultural ties to Western Balkans people (Ugur Ekinci 2013 14). In fact, Erdogan aims to become a leading external actor in Western Balkans but through utilizing pan Ottomanism. Janusz Bugajski, a senior fellow at CEPA, argues that "Turkey's president portrays himself as a protector of Muslims in former Ottoman dominions" (Kljakic 2016). He also uses this image in domestic politics, as millions of Turkish citizens have Bosnian or Albanian backgrounds (Deutsche Welle 2018). Since 2009, Turkey has *greatly increased its visits by both high and low government officials to Western Balkans states*. These visits have been accompanied by an ever-growing number of *bilateral agreements* as well as the establishment of regional organizations (Ugur Ekinci 2013 9-10). Strikingly, Vucic and Erdogan have strengthened their relations due to frequent visits, despite the lack of religious commonalities (Bjelotomic 2018). Interviewees view this as a part of long-term strategy in Western Balkans of Russia-Turkey re-approachment (Anonymous Interviews NGO Officials, Academics, Spring 2019, Serbia, North Macedonia and Kosovo). As a fully pledged NATO member state, Turkey has openly expressed its commitment toward North Macedonia's accession to the organization (Marusic 2019b). The Turkish Deputy Foreign Minister, Faruk Kaymakci, said Turkey is North Macedonia's "biggest supporter when it comes to NATO Membership" (Altiparmakova 2019). Lastly, NATO and the EU representatives view the role of Turkey as un-problematic since they are supportive of EU and NATO integration for the Western Balkan countries, and Turkey is already a member of NATO (Anonymous Interviews, International Officials, Spring 2019, Belgium).

The statement supporting the North Macedonia's membership by the Turkish Deputy FM has come at an interesting time. North Macedonia's newly elected President, Stevo Pendarovski, confirmed the request by Turkey to North Macedonia for the extradition of 15 individuals allegedly linked to the Gülen Movement. Some are Macedonian citizens, whereas some are Turkish citizens (Turkish Minute 2019). The

extradition has not taken place yet, however, relevant judicial authorities have been weighing in on the situation. The “hunt for Gülenists has been a hot topic in the bilateral relations between the states” (Apostolov 2019). The extradition request has been previously made by the Turkish Minister of Defense, Hulusi Akar in April 2019, who, upon his meeting with his Macedonian counterpart, Radmila Shekjerinska, has stated that the terrorist calamity [of the Gülenists] harms bilateral relations (Marusic 2019a). Interviewees indicate that Erdogan asked Bosnian political elites to close Gülen-affiliated colleges and schools (Anonymous Interview, Academic, BiH, Spring 2019). The Gülenist movement - the so called Fethullahist Terrorist Organization (FETO) has caused a great stir in the relationship between the leaders in the region and the Turkish political establishment. While some states, like Kosovo, have complied with the extradition requests by Turkey (Zogiani 2018; Mingardi 2018), Bosnia and Herzegovina has rejected the extradition of a suspected Gülenist and the crackdown on education facilities related to the movement (Sito-Sucic 2018a; Deutsche Welle 2016). Despite close leadership ties, Albania has been pronounced a haven for Gülenists (Michael 2019).

The political leaders of various political parties in the region have very close ties with Erdogan. Some parts of the Albanian political elite views Turkey as ‘brothers’ (Anonymous Interviews, Spring 2018, North Macedonia). Interviewees indicate that the political party BESA has close ties with Turkey (Anonymous Interviews, Political Officials, Academics, Spring 2019, North Macedonia). Moreover, several elite members are invited for official visits to Turkey. However their influence efforts have also caused resistance. For example, an interviewee representing a common perception among the elites, refused to travel to Turkey since “the Ambassador wanted to redact the speech to make it more ideological” (Anonymous Interviews, Fall 2017, North Macedonia). Another interviewee presenting some perceptions among elites points out the Islamization challenge posed by Erdogan: “It is important to understand the intention. How to spread Islamization not Islam. This [Erdogan’s agenda] is an ideological agenda, not religious. It is to spread the anti-West sentiment through religion” (Anonymous Interviews, Academics, NGO Officials, Fall 2017, North Macedonia). It is interesting to note that Turkey backed and recognized the Prespa Agreement.

Turkey’s role seems prominent also in Albania. Interviewees point out that the Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama has good connections with Erdogan (Anonymous Interviews, NGO Officials, Spring 2018/2019, Albania). This reflects the recent placement of the memorial in the capital. Recently, a memorial commemorating the victims of the failed coup has been set with the backing of the Albanian PM and Erdogan’s support as seen with the presence of the representatives of the Turkish Embassy. The has been viewed as being controversial as it has not been announced publicly and no similar memorial from another country seems to exist in Albania. This raises issues of transparency as well as political influence inside Albania into high levels as the memorial was introduced three days before PM Rama traveled to Turkey for a visit into Erdogan’s summer residence (Exit 2019). Several interviewees point out the links between the political elites and Turkey and the potential negative impact, respectively moving away from the EU, as illustrated by one of the interviewees: “There is a law stopping the establishment of political parties on religious grounds. These parties close their eyes for votes. Erdogan’s pressures are really high. There is no plan B. If the EU enlargement is rejected then Balkans will be placed in a quarantine” (Anonymous Interview, Journalist, Fall 2018, Albania). Moreover, some institutions are known to be supported by Gülen, which the state allows to function.

However, the government seems to be fractionalized towards Turkey. An investigation by Balkan Insights shows that regardless of the close relationship between the Prime Minister Rama and Turkish President Erdogan, Albania was one of the many countries in which Turkish citizens affiliated with the Gülen movement have sought refuge since 2016. However, not all of them have officially applied for asylum. One of the main reasons for not doing so is the persistent fear considering the close relationship between Turkey and Albania and especially the economic influence that Turkey yields through investments. Politically, Erdogan has invited Tirana authorities to shut down all Gülen related schools in Albania which is considered a terrorist organization allegedly affiliated with planning the coup d'état of July 2016. So far, no Turkish citizen was extradited to Turkey and it is estimated that around 60 families are residing in Albania after the crackdown by the Turkish government was unleashed. Nevertheless, the recent visit of Rama in Turkey might change the turn of events. According to media reports, Turkish interior minister is happy with Rama's approach towards Gülen movement and that "serious decisions have been taken during these meetings" (Gazeta Tema 2019).

Moreover, Erdogan is using the Marif Foundation to promote its national interest in Albania through schools and kindergarten to counter the Gülenist movement groups (Mejdini 2019). Ermir Hoxha, an Albanian journalist argues that "more than educational intervention, Maarif is political [and] Now it needs to be seen whether education will prevail over politics in these schools" (ibid). On the other hand Genc Pollo, an opposition member said that rules regarding international schools are well outlined: "It is emphasized that schools should demonstrate a national and secular nature, not engage in politics, not incite racism, terrorism, anti-Semitism etc,... guarantee pro-European and Western orientation and values, promoting democracy and individual freedoms"(ibid). However, since he claims that there is a lack of political will to enforce them, then the burden is placed on the student to be resilient from "the *political and cultural spirit* of today's Turkey" and engage only within the education (ibid). This is also viewed as 'cultural aggression' as Marif Foundation is attempting to buy all Albanian schools (ibid).

The following quote from an interviewee shows the intricacies of the Turkey relations with Albania but which reflect authoritarianism-democracy, East-West dilemma processes across the region, preferring the former rather than the latter due to familiarity with the former, perceived to care more and provide socio and economic rights, such as the right to food, work and so on:

"In the Balkans, there was never democracy in history, so there will always be a dictator leading. Why do we need democracy? Look what we have now here in Albania. All elites trying their best to maintain themselves in power. This is a reality. And we learn fast so Erdogan is doing well. He is a great leader, can push back the Europe to the place where it needs to be. And also we follow more Erdogan type of democracy or authoritarianism, and this suits more to us in Albania rather than democracy. What is also better in democracy? The elite gets everything and workers nothing, can barely make it to feed themselves, here in Albania. There is nothing, no jobs, nothing. Everyone wants to migrate. At least people in Turkey have to eat, have dignity, have respect. Erdogan is great. He thinks about his people. US and other people never think of us." (Anonymous Interview, Governmental Official, Spring 2018, Albania).

In Kosovo, Turkey's influence among many interviewees is viewed as very dangerous: "Turkey's influence is more worrisome rather than terrorism" (Anonymous Interview, NGO Official, Fall 2019, Kosovo). PM Thaci in Kosovo is as well viewed to have close relationship with Erdogan since 90's (Anonymous

Interviews, NGO Officials, Academia, Fall 2018/Spring 2019, Kosovo). Several other interviewees argue that 'Vetvendosja' in Kosovo is influenced by Turkey as well. While Vetvendosja members were interviewed, they diverted the questions toward Serbia representing the problem rather than Turkey (Anonymous Interviews, Political Officials, Spring 2019, Kosovo).

The consequences of these influences can be seen now for instance in the society. For instance, some argue pointed out that the Ottomans were not repressive, as illustrated by one of the interviewees: "all documents existed in Albanian, thus we could learn freely Albanian" (Anonymous Interview, NGO Official, Spring 2019, Kosovo). Inquiring on Turkey's role among the political elites is usually encountered with hesitance in Kosovo, and some argue that the focus of the political debate should lie on Serbia rather than Turkey, as illustrated by one interviewee saying "Serbia is the real problem for Kosovo" (Anonymous Interview, Political Official, Spring 2019, Kosovo). The interviewees hesitancy suggests that Turkey's role in the Balkans is apparently a delicate subject, one that merits further inquiry. Other political party members on the other side argue that Turkey represents a long-standing ally with historical and cultural ties, and should therefore be endorsed fully by Kosovo.

Moreover, history is attempted to be changed by some political party members but it is noticeable also among the ordinary citizens. The following interview demonstrates it. For example, a political party member, claimed that youth is turning toward Turkey since Albanians are closer to them culturally and historically. He considered himself more Turkish than Albanian, as he believes that Albanians are originally Turkish. Moreover, Turkey was seen by the interviewee as an ally rather than occupier historically. The close connections are desired and he foresees that it will increase in the future (Anonymous Interview, Political Official, Spring 2019, Kosovo). The Turkish influenced political parties are seen to portray religion as crucial for the development of the Albanian identity, providing a different interpretation from the Albanian Rilindja, such as Sami Frasheri, who was one of the prominent leaders working on the Albanian national awakening. Their struggle led to the creation of the state Albania in 1912. Moreover, an interviewee notes that a pro-Ottoman version of history is being distributed, as Turks emancipating Albanians and strengthening them is being distributed among the media and population (Anonymous Interview, Governmental Official, Spring 2018, North Macedonia). Moreover, scholarships are given to historians to conduct PhDs on the role of the Ottoman Empire, especially in Kosovo (Anonymous Interviews, Fall 2017, Imam, North Macedonia).

Another example illustrates also the polarization in the society. In a death in a town, men were talking about politics and many said that Erdogan is their leader and without him, Albanians in Kosovo would still be occupied. Interestingly, the role of the US was never mentioned in the humanitarian intervention (Anonymous Interview, NGO Official, Spring 2019, Kosovo). Lastly, interviewees emphasize the negative impact of the domestic politics, as illustrated by the following quote: "votes are the most important thing, so they [political parties] are compromising [with religion]", such as VV and BESA (Anonymous Interview, Governmental Official, Spring 2018, North Macedonia). This shows the depth of the Turkish influence, not only among elites but also the ordinary population whose perceptions seems to be altered gradually towards Turkey.

Vucic and Dodik similarly maintains close relationship with Erdogan as well, as seen in the number of frequent state visits. Interviewees point out that the autocratic tendencies of these leaders, alike with Erdogan, provide a closer understanding amongst each other and assist in maintaining the relationships, except

for the Sanjak region which provides additional similarities on religious grounds (Anonymous Interviews, NGO Officials, Spring 2019, Serbia). Moreover, Vucic may foster this relationship to maintain a leverage in the region with existing problems between Serbia and other areas, such as Kosovo, Sandjak, Vojvodina, RS. Several interviews uncover that there is a perception that Turkey operates through the SDA party (Anonymous Interviews, Academia, Spring 2018, BiH). Turkey allegedly fosters relations with providing cash, and the Bosniaks are believed to have more sympathy towards Erdogan than Turks themselves (Anonymous Interviews, NGO Officials, Spring 2019, BiH). With the lack of prosperity regarding NATO and the EU membership, Turkey for them is rendered as the first ally.

Gülen movement has been very active in Bosnia and Herzegovina since 1997, mainly in the field of education. According to a media report by Radio Free Europe, there are several hundred kindergartens, high schools and universities who are part of the Gülen network. It is dedicated to investing in education for the lower and middle classes. Gülen schools are present in all major centres in the Muslim-Croat Federation, including Sarajevo, Mostar, Tuzla, Zenica and Bihac (Knezevic 2016). However, most of the news on the Gülen movement after the coup d'état in Turkey in 2016 include Turkey's demand for the extradition of Turkish citizens residing in BiH suspicious of collaborating with the Gülen movement. This request was also discussed during the last meeting between Erdogan and Dodik which took place in July 2019 (Dragojlovic 2019). Local media such as N1 and Independent Balkan News Agency, have also reported that the Ministry of Security of BiH received a list with names of supports of Fetullah Gülen from Ankara (N1 Sarajevo 2019); (Dragojlovic 2019). However, Bosnian authorities have rejected Turkey's request to extradite one of the eight citizens wanted by Turkey due to lack of legal grounds as of July 2019 after ongoing request from the Turkish government. This can possibly set a strong precedent for other Turkish citizens currently living in BiH.

## The Security Influence Trends

The relationship between Western Balkans and Turkey in terms of security should also be seen through the lens of NATO membership and accession (MFA Turkey). Officially, all countries want to join, or are members to NATO, and officially Turkey's goal for the region is accession for all. Regarding NATO, the current purchase of S-400 missile systems from Russia raises questions regarding its NATO membership. The improving ties with Russia, while also being in the process of acquiring F-35s from the US, makes the relationship complex. The US has currently withheld its delivery of the stealth fighters while the Turkish Minister of Defense claims that the S-400 sale is a done deal (Yegin 2019). This violates the NATO agreement of interoperability. This geopolitical change is mirrored as well in the Western Balkan region as there is a common view among interviewees that "Russia is deployed via Turkey" (Anonymous Interviews, Spring/Fall 2018/2019, North Macedonia).

Additional drivers of a rift between Turkey and NATO is Turkey's involvement in Syria, with regards to arming ISIS, and with regards to its war crimes against the Kurds in Syria (D. L. Phillips 2018). David Philipps argues that a break between Turkey and NATO is possible, Turkey is Islamist, anti-American and anti-democratic (D. L. Phillips 2019a), even though its membership has many benefits for Turkey (ibid). Current tensions with the de facto leader of NATO, the US, complicates

this situation and it is currently unclear regarding the path forward, mainly because there is no procedure for removing a country from NATO.

During the 1990s, Turkey became involved in supporting Muslims in the region. This represented an alignment with NATO at a time when Turkey was looking westward toward an EU accession. Such support took the form of military and peacebuilding activities as Bosnian Muslims were given covert military support through the provision of arms (Ugur Ekinci 2013), the smuggling of weapons into Bosnia and Herzegovina, and participation in NATO airstrikes in FRY (Vračić 2016). At the same time, Turkey participated in NATO's Stabilization Force in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Turkey also partook in *humanitarian intervention* in Kosovo through the peacekeeping Kosovo Force (KFOR) (European Parliament 2017), along with its military and peacebuilding efforts, since the early 1990's. Kosovo also allowed the extradition of teachers (one being wrongly identified and extradited) with suspected links to the Gülen movement, which resulted in a controversial situation and a lack of credibility of the state of Kosovo, who has been declared independent on the basis of systematic human rights violations. The legality of extraditions has been questioned in the media and by political figures (Naddaff 2018). This incident resulted in strained bilateral relations with various countries. Moreover, several interviewees claim that the extradition has been organized by allegedly both Turkish and Serbian intelligence with the permission of the PM Hashim Thaqi. Some interviewees claim that it is a money driving extradition, while other interviewees point out that this extradition aims to damage politically Kosovo in front of the international community (Anonymous Interviews, NGO Officials, Spring 2019, North Macedonia, Kosovo).

In the military sphere, Turkey has provided training and given grants to officers of Western Balkans states, especially from Bosnia and Herzegovina in order for them to attend Turkish military schools (Ugur Ekinci 2013, 167). Similarly, the Kosovo Security Force members went for a training in Turkey (ibid). Likewise, Turkey has donated military equipment and has commanded the Albanian contingent in Afghanistan (European Parliament 2017). Additionally, according to an interviewee, in the Ministry of Defense of Albania, there is permanent Turkish mission for cooperation between the two countries. This is viewed positively by interviewees, since the Turkish army is not politicized and very professional (Anonymous Interviews, NGO Officials, Spring 2019, Albania).

Turkey, namely Erdogan, is viewed by many interviewees as maintaining a key role to counter violent extremism through Hanefi ideology, which is viewed as closer to the Islam that Albanians follow (Anonymous Interviews, Imams, NGO Officials, Spring/Fall 2018, North Macedonia and Kosovo). Therefore, Turkey is viewed as an actor that could counter Wahabi influence in the region due to the cultural similarities.

However, several interviewees also uncover a different role of Turkey regarding terrorism, as a country being used as a transit route for terrorists traveling to Syria, preparatory training/brainwashing ground as well as a ground for illegal trafficking of terrorists and victims (Anonymous Interviews, Spring/Fall 2018, Spring 2019, Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia). To illustrate this, the following life-story told by a member of a family will be explained. His cousin, a young gay, who was a

good student has followed training in Struga, North Macedonia. His cousin claims that his brainwashing process began there, and after two weeks, he went to Turkey, where he remained for three months for another training, labeled as financial training. However when the youngster returned, he was incapable to interact, except saying “Good will save us” and reciting the Quran all day, which indicates trauma and brainwashing. He stays alone in this room and only prays all day (Anonymous Interview, Family member, Spring 2018, North Macedonia). This view was common story among several interviewees across the Western Balkan region, which indicates that Turkey has been used as a training ground for religious violent extremism.

Moreover, some interviewees view Turkey’s accession in NATO as peculiar due to their religious affiliations, as illustrated by one of the interviewees: “Turkey is unnaturally integrated in NATO because NATO is a sort of a Christian-Judaism alliance, there are no Muslims or Orthodox there” (Anonymous Interview, Political Official, Fall 2018, Kosovo). Moreover, with their recent withdrawal from the Western values, some countries in the NATO are questioning internally their right to remain a member (Anonymous Interviews, Political Officials, Spring 2019, Belgium). For greater detail regarding the political-security nexus, please read the Turkey’s political sub-section.

## The Cultural and Religious Influence Trends

First, it is important to note that Turkey has a political interest to promote their cultural ties due to elections. In fact, Turkish people living abroad can vote in elections (Firat Buyuk, Clapp, and Haxhijaj 2019). Therefore, there is a high amount of diaspora in Western Balkans that will be targeted for this purpose. Family relations are crucial but they will wane through time (Anonymous Interviews, NGO Officials, Fall 2018, Kosovo).

In terms of economic aid for cultural activities, 18 percent of the global aid budget goes to Western Balkans, which is a comparatively large part of the total aid budget, but not enough to make a substantial difference in these economies (Aydıntaşbaş 2019). This aid is focused around Turkish language classes, renovating Ottoman mosques and in general on the Muslim population. It more specifically reconstructed objects related to the Ottoman period (Anonymous Interviews, Imams, Fall 2007/2018, Kosovo, Albania, North Macedonia). Following the end of the war, Turkish investment increased, with large amounts being provided for the (re-)building of Islamic educational institutions across the region (Birnbaum 2013; Türbedar 2010). Moreover, Turkey acted as a mediator, and has attempted to reconcile the division between the two main Islamic Religious Communities organizations in the Sandzak region of Serbia (Barlovac 2011). Turkey has been reaching out to Balkan Muslims through the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) for decades (Bechev 2019). Interviewees explicate that Diyanet pays imams to serve in North Macedonia (Anonymous Interviews, Fall 2018, North Macedonia). Currently, Erdogan uses the Balkans to make the case that he is the leader of the wider (Sunni) Muslim community (ibid). However he also built relations with majority non-Muslim countries, such as President Vucic of Serbia. Some argue though that that Turkish Islamic NGOs are perceived as positive as they promote *a more tolerant interpretation of Islam* when compared to the Arab-led Wahhabism that has also penetrated Western Balkans (Ugur Ekinci 2013, 11). However, precaution is raised since Turkey supports Islamism

as in terms of ideology rather than religion, which poses challenges for the region and the world (D. L. Phillips 2019b).

Turkey employs *cultural* measures to increase its influence in the region, through restorations of old Ottoman buildings, cataloguing of Ottoman manuscripts in libraries, providing public courses on Islamic art and painting, the provision of scholarships to study abroad (Ugur Ekinci 2013, 23), establishing numerous Turkish-language schools, universities and mosques (ibid, 2), and instituted visa-free travel for Western Balkans citizens (ibid, 166). But perhaps Turkey's greatest *soft power tool* manifests in its ability to nurture demographic and cultural linkages – a phenomenon that has been reinforced considerably through the popularity of Turkish pop culture (e.g. Turkish TV shows) (European Parliament 2017). In addition, Diyanet (Turkey's ministry of religion) and (TIKA) have channeled the majority of their efforts into populations with which Turkey shared an intrinsic relationship, and have (in doing so) made Muslim the privileged beneficiaries of Turkish soft power (ibid, 6). Marif Foundation is also used to promote Turkish policies. Scholarships across the region are offered. In this case, 300 EUR students have received to study in Turkey (Anonymous Interviews, Family members, Spring 2018, North Macedonia, Albania, Kosovo).

The expansion of cultural ties is also due to the growing Turkish diaspora (Firat Buyuk, Clapp, and Haxhiaj 2019) in the states of the Western Balkans region. Throughout the 1990s, migration trends showed that many people, especially from Muslim communities, moved to Turkey due to economic possibilities and higher standard of living, whereas in the late 2010s, the trend is reversed, with many Turkish moving to Western Balkans, basing their families and businesses there (ibid). Moreover, an estimate of 10 million Turkish citizens are of Western Balkans descent (Petrović and Reljic 2011), while more than one million Turkish minorities are believed to be living in Western Balkans (Birnbaum 2013), and 300.000 Turkish-speaking people live in Kosovo (MFA Turkey). Turkey's Ministry of Foreign Affairs explicitly mentions the "existence of the Bosniaks, Montenegrin Muslims and Albanians comprising 17% of the population of Montenegro" (MFA Turkey), as a motivation for the intensification of bilateral relations. Similarly, it states the "Sandzak region, where Bosnians having many relatives in Turkey live, is viewed as "a bridge of friendship" by both countries. Therefore, the region plays an important role in the context of bilateral relations (MFA Turkey).

Despite a recent EU report concluding that "Turkey's influence in the Western Balkans remains mainly based on cultural and educational programs offered to those countries with a large Muslim community and steadily developing trade" (European Parliament 2017). Ankara's multi-pronged approach towards the region has provoked public debate between few journalists (Vračić 2016).

Turkey has been viewed with skepticism, and has been accused of pursuing "Neo-Ottoman" (i.e. imperialistic) aspirations (Ugur Ekinci 2013, 24). In order to portray the Ottoman Empire in a better light, the Turkish government has requested the revision of history textbooks in which the Ottoman Empire is often portrayed as a brutal occupier instead of a liberator actor, not only in Western Balkans states, but also in EU member states such as Bulgaria (ibid, 17). Sometimes, Turkish leaders even consider some countries in the region to be 'Turkish' (Vračić 2016, 10, 15). Interviewees point out that polarization among the society is being created from some individuals viewing themselves as Turks rather than Albanians. This may be a minority of

individuals however some interviewees were part of the political elite, resulting in a higher potential to amplify such sentiments through political decision making and intensify the impact on the society.

Moreover, attempts to destroy the archives in Kosovo have been observed, meaning that attempts to erase the Albanian history and culture are present. Even digitalization of books has been rejected, as that would cement the current history portraying Turkey as an occupier (Anonymous Interview, Academia, Political Official, Fall 2018, Kosovo). In addition, cultural and religious ties are strengthened through bottom up societal activities such as holding an iftar (the meal eaten by Muslims after sunset during Ramadan) in the city center of Pristina. This resulted in criticism from some interviewees which is illustrated in the following: “It is strange. All roads were blocked. This is a big problem and no one reported it. It never happened before. I lived in this neighborhood for decades before the war. How do you do this?” Moreover, in the university, students that speak only Turkish follow Albanian courses and Professors are reported to be told by students to speak to the Dean of the University in order for them to pass exams. This illustrates the Turkish influence not only in religious aspects but also on education in higher level (Anonymous Interview, Academia, Spring 2019, Kosovo).

However others view the Turkish influence as ‘no harm to the national Albanian identity’. However, an imam illustrated the attempts to re-engineer the identity through modifying history which represents a common picture in the Albanian inhabited territories: “imagine now, it turns out that the allegiance for the establishment of the Albanian state between Eqerem bej Vlora, Ismail Qemali, Hasan Prishtina, Esat Pashë Toptani who did the agreement inside the Eqerem Bej Vlora’s Residence in Taksim neighborhood in Istanbul did so while swearing in Quran” and they are denying the Albanian origin to Mother Tereza calling her a Turk (Anonymous Interview, Imam, Spring 2018, Albania).

Another technique that is used to promote cultural links is the renaming of streets. The renaming of certain streets is taking place in Bosnia from Serb/Yugoslav names into Ottoman names (Zavod za Informatiku i Statistiku), which, according to an interviewee is due to Turkey’s influence in the area (Anonymous Interview, Spring 2019, Bosnia and Herzegovina). Another example is the Sultan Murad I shrine complex in Kosovo, which has recently turned into a significant attraction for Turkish state visits and tourists, creating a Turkish historical landmark outside of Turkey (Sadriu 2019).

Turkey is also exerting influence through media content, which best portrayed by the expansion of Turkish soap operas on a multitude of TV channels in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Montenegro (European Parliament 2017). Not do they only serve as a booster of the Turkish image in the eyes of the local population, but they also have a historical revisionist penchant. Over the past ten years, almost every TV outlet in Western Balkans has broadcasted at least one Turkish soap opera (Ely 2019). Turkey is the 2nd biggest exporter of televised content in Western Balkans, trailing behind the US. North Macedonia is at the forefront of “consuming” Turkish Soap Opera content – they are the second most watched type of program (Macedonian Institute for Media, 2017), after news casts. Despite the fact that such TV content is not an official product of the Turkish government, Ankara is appreciative of it and assists the production houses to disseminate their products.

This type of portraying soft power by Turkey is not only prominent in Western Balkans: the same is done in North Africa and in the Middle East (Arab Weekly 2018).

Religious schools have been as well built from various Turkish foundations, i.e. Istanbul Foundation, Marif Foundation and so on (Anonymous Interviews, NGO Officials, Imams, Fall/Spring 2018, Western Balkans). Interviewees outline the main media outlets used for propagating pro Erdogan content are Era and Shenja in North Macedonia. Moreover, the International Balkan University is promoting pro-Erdogan content as well (Anonymous Interviews, NGO Official, Spring/ Fall 2018, North Macedonia). Cultural centers, language and computer courses, orphan houses, girls are as well used by the Turkish to promote their agenda, as an imam said: “We provide the religious culture since people do not believe in God” (Anonymous Interviews, Imams, Spring/ Fall 2018, Albania). Al Nun is also believed to promote Turkish pro-Erdogan sentiments. In Northern Macedonia, for instance, Turkey is trying to deepen its ties with the ethnic Albanians by engaging on messaging Albanians. An interview explained how a high number of documentaries are filmed highlighting the significance of cultural buildings and portraying them as part of a joint Albanian-Turkish heritage (Anonymous Interviews, Journalist, Spring/ Fall 2018, Albania). Turkish books are provided to 3500 Albanian children (in NM) to insight the learning of the Quran, which supplemented in the curriculum of Turkish school programs (Anonymous Interview, Imam, Fall 2017, North Macedonia). This shows the increasing importance of Turkey in North Macedonia and it raises questions as to whether this role is positive or negative among the Albanian community, since the cultural and religious ties are not being strengthened with the same method as the Serbian community. On the latter, there is a lack of messaging.

Among the ordinary citizens, dissatisfaction has been uncovered with the usage of religion. The many mosques that have been built have also been described in Kosovo as interfering into the personal life. An interviewee explained that before the war, the mosques were not heard, whereas nowadays, the father that works for the parliament needs to stop the meetings since no one can have a conversation while various mosques are praying at the same time and one cannot hear the other. On the other hand, for the child of the parliamentarian, it is absurd how in the garden, she can be disturbed so many times by both the noises by the church bells and the imam’s prayers. Her desired solution would be to have the noise within the religious buildings, as she is not against religion but that religion should be seen as something private, rather than disturbing citizens in public spaces and private spaces like at home, in the garden and so on. Moreover, since in each neighborhood mosques have been built, with numerous in disuse, then she suggests to make them spaces to organise open activities (Anonymous Interview, Community Observer, Spring 2019, Kosovo).

## Conclusion

Turkey’s resurgence in this region derives from its active employment of a combination in foreign policy tools including: military, political, economic and cultural instruments. This study demonstrates that Turkey has had significant influence in multiple spheres that it has been steadily increasing, due to Turkey rekindling their historical links across the Western Balkan region, which other international influencers lack. Firstly, Turkey has upped its economic investments in

all Western Balkans states, focusing on the sectors of infrastructure, telecommunications, mining, banking, development aid, health sector and tourism. Strikingly, Serbia has been approached for economic investments despite the lack of religious commonalities.

Additionally, the political sway of Turkey in the region has been increasing. The most political interferences are observable in North Macedonia and Kosovo, most notably regarding their domestic conflict with Gülen, which creates security risks in Western Balkans and beyond. Moreover, Turkey's recent rapprochement with Russia heightens the likelihood for the Serbia-Turkey relations to improve, as proven by recent state visits. This political influence may shift the Western Balkans states away from EU norms as Erdogan's rhetoric often targets Europe and the US, which is currently also rethinking its relation with Turkey. Moreover, the changing relations between the US and Turkey and the strengthening of the relations with Russia may violate the interoperability clause of NATO which poses challenges for the future of Turkey to remain a NATO member, compounded by a shift away from Western values. Turkey is also seen as an actor countering Wahabi sects in the Western Balkans.

Politically, Turkey is supporting Islamization of the countries, and attempting to portray themselves as a key regional actor. The long-standing relations can be rationalised by the abundant Turkish diaspora across the West Balkans and, in vice-versa, Turks with Western Balkans descent. Interestingly, some political parties seem to have been influenced by Turkey, namely BESA in NM, Vetvendosje and PM Hashim Thaqi in Kosovo, PM Edi Rama in Albania, SDA in BiH and Vucic seems to have formed strong relations with Erdogan. The leadership styles of both Turkey and Western Balkans states align because of their emphasis on personal relations. Turkey has been mainly focusing on countries with Muslim majorities, along with Serbia. This poses challenges in the long term since the perceptions of ordinary citizens seems to be gradually gravitating towards not only Turkey, but also to the elites who resemble and authoritarian leadership quality. Reasons for this can be apportioned to the lack of EU foresight towards the Western Balkans. Therefore, the Western Balkan states are also beginning to display autocratic tendencies which may further remove the region from the spheres of the EU and democracy. This calls for further engagement with the EU enlargement agenda to connect the Western Balkans region with the rest of Europe in order to bolster European peace and security.

Lastly, yet most importantly, Turkey's religious and cultural influence is being exerted in many ways through restorations of old Ottoman buildings, Islamic building, public courses, scholarships, exchanges, media, diaspora, visas and the renaming of streets. Strikingly, history is attempted to be erased by removing the image of Turkey as an occupier. This revisionist narrative is mirrored by "Neo-Ottoman" aspirations among parts of the Muslim population in the region. As a result, Islamization poses a threat if Erdogan remains in power, since the region has historically been dominated by Turkish culture.

## VI: The Comparative Influence Trends in Western Balkans between the West and the East

The balance of power is changing in the current international global order, shifting from a bipolar to a multipolar world order. This is likely to affect all states in the system, including Western Balkans. Different and new emerging actors will promote different patterns of behavior. Arguments exist in support of both multipolarity and bipolarity, vis-a-vis global security and stability. Nevertheless, there are opportunities for expansionist agendas to emerge and to be used, especially in this complex yet rapidly changing world (Posen 2009). Shifts towards more authoritarian political systems may follow with the rising China in the new global order.

The Western Balkans has been caught in these changes while the region is confronted with domestic challenges: weak political, economic and legal systems, accompanied with rising ethnic and social tensions, shifts toward authoritarianism, and clientelism, and corruption. While the West (under this term, we refer to the European Union Member States, without any prejudice to the outcome of Brexit, as well as Switzerland and the United States of America) lack a coherent policy towards the region's progress, other Eastern powers are using the momentum to promote their foreign policy and shift the region toward their strategic interests. This, in turn, may challenge the current peace in the region that the West contributed to form after the wars in the region in the 1990s.

Compared to the past couple of decades, the West is not as engaged in the Western Balkans as it used to be. This is predominantly due to the fact that during the armed conflicts of the 1990s and early 2000s, foreign presence through peacekeeping missions, NATO missions, as well as missions of other international organizations, institutions and agencies were quite prominent, whereas their presence in times of peace has subdued. On the other hand, the European Union, its members and the USA are among the highest contributors to foreign direct investment and development aid, as well as financial support to the non-governmental and civil society sectors. Therefore, the West remains still engaged into the Western Balkans region.

Therefore, this chapter outlines the role of the West in the region, how it has been perceived from the local community and how it compares to the rest of the Eastern actors, as discussed in previous chapters.

15 most influential countries in the WB

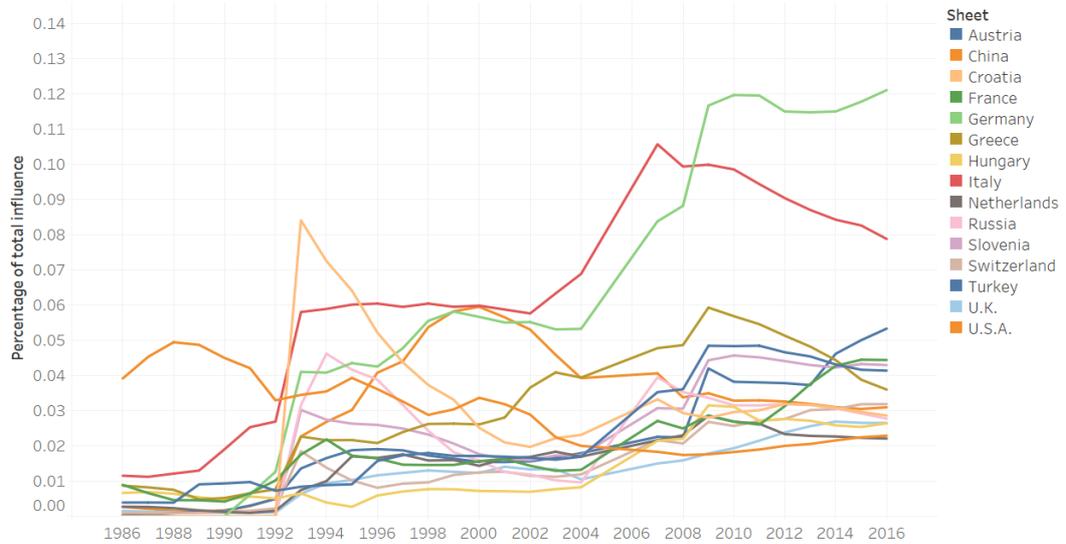


Figure 29: The percentage of total influence of the 15 most influential countries in the Western Balkans, 1986-2016 (FBIC index).<sup>12</sup>

Figure 29 shows the long-term trends of influence of the top 15 influencers, including Great Powers from the Western and Eastern countries in Western Balkans. This yields various interesting results with regards to trends over time in the Western Balkans, with countries' influence changing over time by different countries.

In terms of influences, Western Balkans and the West have had a long standing, albeit troubled, relationship. From the fall of Yugoslavia onwards, different countries have cultivated different types of relationships. Some states have been more inclined towards cultivating economic relationships with the West, whereas others have been more focused on building political and security related connections, on the basis of their short-term and long-term geopolitical aspirations.

In terms of influencers, when it comes to the Western Powers, the following states have exerted the most influence: Germany, Italy, France, the Netherlands, the UK and the US from the West, and the Russian Federation, the People's Republic of China and Turkey from the East. In addition, the European Union is a major “western power player” in the processes of influencing different spheres of economic, cultural, political and security developments. The EU, overall, is a major trading partner for the Western Balkans, as noted through the following figures: in 2017, North Macedonia exported over 80% of its total exports of goods to the EU (€4.0 billion or 81%), followed by Albania (€1.6 billion or 77%), Bosnia and Herzegovina (€4.0 billion or 71%), Serbia (€9.7 billion or 68%), Montenegro (€0.1 billion or 35%) and Kosovo (€94 million or 25%) (Eurostat 2018). This trend is also reflected in the imports of goods, with North Macedonia again being at the forefront of imports (€4.3 billion or 63% of total imports), Albania (€2.9 billion or 62%) Bosnia and Herzegovina (€5.7 billion or 61%) and Serbia (€10.3 billion or 59%). Almost half of all imports to Montenegro (€1.1 billion or 47%) and Kosovo (€1.3 billion or 43%) came from the Union (ibid). These trade

<sup>12</sup> This is the measure of Influence of each influencer, divided by the total Influence that influencer has in each country. This then creates a percentage of total influence enjoyed by each country as a percentage of the world total.

trends have remained stable in the past 10 years (Eurostat 2019). Germany's policies are viewed as consistent, whereas French ones as changing in the Western Balkan region (Anonymous Interviews, International Officials, Spring 2019, BiH, Kosovo).

If the influence of the Western Powers overall is compared, it can be noted that Germany is the most influential state overall towards all the Western Balkans states, with average influence measured at 12,11%. This is due to its strong economic ties, manifested through trade and development aid. Germany is the largest trade partner to all Western Balkans states, with the exception of Albania and Montenegro (for both states, Germany is within the top 10 trading countries). Germany influences mainly North Macedonia, Montenegro, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia. Germany's strong influence is also manifested due to the large diaspora of all Western Balkans states in Germany, its political influence in the process of EU and NATO accession, funding of NGO and Civil Society Organizations through GIZ and organizations such as the Konrad Adenauer Foundation and the Friedrich Ebert Foundation. In addition, interviewees across the region point out that German is among the most commonly learned foreign languages (after English) due to high influxes of migration and the large diasporas from the Western Balkans to Germany (Anonymous Interviews, Academia, NGO Officials, Spring/Fall, 2018, Western Balkans).

The second most influential country in Western Balkans is Italy, with 7.88% in 2016, even though this influence has been waning over time. Italy plays the most influence in Albania, followed by Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro. The influence is most pronounced in Albania, even though it is substantial in all Western Balkan countries and is represented primarily in the economic sphere through trade. Additionally, Italy has political and diplomatic relations with all Western Balkans countries. In the security sphere, Italy only has relations with Albania and North Macedonia through arms trade.

The third state with the most prominent overall influence is Turkey, with an average influence measured at 5,33%, representing not even half of *Germany's influence*. Despite Turkey's influence being elaborated above, it is important to mention Turkey's ranking according to the Index for the overall, bigger influence picture. The lowest influence of Turkey is in Montenegro, whereas the highest impact is in Kosovo, Albania, North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. This is due to similar ideological, historical and religious connections from the past, on the basis of which the inter-state relations have been built upon.

The fourth most prominent overall influence is the French Republic, totaling at 4,44%. France's influence is this high predominantly due to its cooperation with Albania. The influence in the other countries of the region is somewhat negligible. Western Balkan remains a political priority, predominantly from an Euro-Atlantic perspective. It is important that France also has socio-cultural ties to the countries in the region, manifested through education (French bilingual classes in high-schools), the French Cultural Centre which has offices in every country in the region, and French being among the most learned foreign languages (after English, next to German). Similarly to Italy, France also trades arms with Albania and North Macedonia, establishing a security relationship.

From the non-European Union member states, the United States of America ranks ninth with a surprisingly low influence rate averaging at 3,1%. Its influence is lowest in Montenegro, and highest in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. This is partially due to the American interventionist approach throughout the conflicts of the 1990s and onwards. America does not have particularly strong economic ties. Its influence is mostly in the political sphere, with strong emphasis on security and peace

building processes, even though, surprisingly does not trade arms with Western Balkan states. The US influence is manifested through a plethora of development organizations and initiatives, such as USAID, as well as high influx of donations towards democracy initiatives, NGOs and civil society organizations.

However, interviews show that the US had a key role on Western Balkan (except Serbia) on military aspects, while providing legitimacy to various groups to counter instability. The US alongside with EU, are also viewed as being key in maintaining stability in North Macedonia and Kosovo (Anonymous Interviews, NGO Officials, Fall/Spring 2019, North Macedonia, Kosovo). The most common views in the region are that if the US withdraws from the region, the region's political order may change due to the influence of other external powers. The interviewees also argued that the Western Balkans local political elites must follow the "orders" and "listen" to what the US has to say since as "they are weaker". Ultimately, a common view in the region is that the Albanians must be thankful: "It is a big friendship. We owe them for all the life... In Kosovo they supported the humanitarian intervention. Americans support the good [in comparison with evil]" (Anonymous Interview, NGO Official, Fall 2017, North Macedonia). While some view that that the US is countering terrorism, others think that the US 'supports extremism' since, if the contrary was the true motive, it would have been solved. Moreover, the US is viewed by all actors 'unpredictable' under Trump era which makes it difficult to create a common policy from the international community. As an example, their policy on the Kosovo-Serbia border dispute differs from all other international community actors, such as Germany, UK, Switzerland, the Netherlands and so on (Anonymous Interview, International Official, Spring 2019, BiH). Recently, the US deployed a new staff member to deal with Kosovo-Serbia dispute indicating a renewed interest in the Western Balkans region under the Trump era.

The tenth largest influencer in Western Balkans was Croatia in 2016, with 2.86% of total influence exclusively through trade and political relationships. Their impact is particularly pronounced in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Recent reports depict far-right movements in Ukraine cooperating with like-minded politicians and war veterans from Croatia (Colborne 2019). Twenty to thirty Croatians fought against Russian-backed rebels in Eastern Ukraine (ibid). Since it has been documented that there have Serb fighters siding with Russian-backed forces, Croatia and Serbian fighters have been fighting against each other under opposing sides in the Ukrainian conflict. Interestingly, the right-wing Croatian politicians seem to forge ties with these groups. The most 'extreme' representative of the Croatian elite is Dragan Covic (HDZ) known as their most vocal representative (Anonymous Interviews, NGO Officials, Academia, Spring/Fall 2019, BiH, Serbia, Netherlands). The far-right groups in Croatia seem to be linked with others in Europe, such as neo-Nazi National Democratic Party in Germany and Casa Pound movement in Italy. Azov movement is crucial and is planning a conference in Zagreb in September (Anonymous Interviews, NGO Officials, Academia, Spring/Fall 2019, BiH, Serbia, Netherlands). This turn to the far right in Croatia represents risks to the region, since Croatia engages highly with BiH as well as Serbia with hate speech rhetoric from the political elites posing broader challenges to the peace and stability of the EU as well.

While the FBIC index shows that the UK's influence is miniscule (2,65%) in the region, still it plays an important role as uncovered by the interviewees. It is important to note that the UK's role in the region is perceived as positive. It began taking steps to tackle the failed state and peace building processes and violent extremism in the Western Balkan region through fighting corruption and improving rule of law. They pioneered the fight against corruption in a systematic way with publicly condemning

it and in fact distancing themselves from the elites who are corrupt, ie not meeting corrupt ministers and neither shaking hands with them as media may undermine the positive work conducted in the region by the UK (Anonymous Interview, International Official, Spring 2019, BiH). This is a very complex process, however, it is likely that this approach will return legitimacy back to the international community in the eyes of the citizens and may trickle down effects to an improved state and peace building processes, including countering and preventing violent extremism.

The eleventh largest overall influencer is Russia, totaling at 2.78%. The weakest influencers seem to be China (2.29%) and the Gulf states' averages are as well miniscule in comparison to the above-mentioned countries. These are the percentages of total influence per country in Western Balkan in 2016: Qatar with 0.18%, the United Arab Emirates with 0.18%, Saudi Arabia with 0.05%, Iraq with 0.04% and Iran with 0.02%. In conclusion, based on the quantitative dataset, it is notable that the strongest ties with Western Balkans are with countries that have more of a Western outlook, such as Germany, Italy and France, but it is also important to note that Turkey remains to be among the five top influencers in the region. However the chapters above have shown that the influence of the Eastern actors is high as uncovered by the interviewees and other data. Moreover, the EU's role is very high as well, and the US's role as well as revealed from other data sources.

## VII: Conclusion: The Impact of the West-East Competition in the Western Balkans

The dominant perception in the Western Balkans region among the local community revealed through interviews is that the West is more influential than the East, yet there is a gradual rapprochement towards Eastern actors. This is portrayed by the following interviewee pointing out that the influence of the East is exaggerated and disproportionately represented as the West is dominant in the political and economic spheres: “the political and economic investments of Russia, Turkey, Saudi Arabia for one year are equal to the investments of the United States and the European Union for one hour” (Anonymous Interview, Academia, Kosovo, Fall 2017). However, other interviewees point out the contrary, that the Western influence is “weak” due to unclear policies (Anonymous Interview, NGO Official, Kosovo, Fall 2019). Most importantly, they view the Western Balkan region as ‘a new battle due to the weakness of NATO and the EU’, where the US is perceived as a ‘conqueror’, whereas the UK as ‘statebuilders’ (Anonymous Interviews, Journalists, NGO Officials, Spring 2018, North Macedonia). Additionally, the US is considered to have countered terrorism while, the EU remained idle, as one of the interviewee says: “the US fought this phenomena [terrorism], whereas the EU was silent. They did not develop prevention strategies with heart, with pressure” (Anonymous Interview, NGO Official, Spring 2018, Kosovo).

On a societal level, Western influence within the region is perceived as a battle of values between the “traditional and modern, tolerance and the Kanun values. It is a global phenomena” (Anonymous Interview, Political Officials, Spring 2018, North Macedonia). Another interviewee argued that there is a conflict on a personal level between ‘calmness and ego-passion’ (Anonymous Interview, Imam, Spring 2018, Kosovo).

There is also a common perception among the local communities, particularly ethnic Albanians, that the Eastern powers are attempting to shape their identity. Interviewees argue that Serbia and Russia play an important role in inducing the societal challenges among the Albanian communities through the use of religion and violent extremism in order to render them terrorists. In turn, this would necessitate an end of Western support provided to the Albanian community. Some highly intellectual Albanians across the region view the Eastern influences as the biggest threat to the Albanians, as one of them pointed out: “someone wants to destroy us” (Anonymous Interview, Political Official, Spring 2018, Kosovo). In addition, another interviewee noted that “historically, Serbs built mosques to maintain Albanians uneducated” (Anonymous Interview, Political Official, Spring 2018, Kosovo). Other interviewees also raised concerns regarding the role of Serbs in using imams as Serbian or Russian spy agents (Anonymous Interview, Political Official, Spring 2018, Kosovo). This report has presented how Serbia is heavily reliant on Russia for economic prosperity, having additional ramifications in the political sphere of influence. This indicates that Serbia is shifting away from the European Union. |

The majority of interviewees argue that the *monetary* incentives are drivers for collaboration with Eastern powers, also marking the diffusion of respective ideologies from the Eastern actors an illustrative example being Turkish influence. The consequences of contending West-East influence is depicted by the following quote: “We had so many rulers here, so whoever comes along, one needs to follow. Now the

West is losing, and we will turn to the East. They give us the money” (Anonymous Interview, Community Observer, Fall 2017, North Macedonia). However, the imams of the suspicious mosques, some political leaders and movement leaders generally claim that they focus on the spiritual part of life aiming to impact the society on long term and specifically the identity, rather than the material gains. Indeed, the imam’s lifestyle also seems to fit with their spiritual rhetoric as they live in very small houses in rural areas (Fieldwork Notes, Spring/Fall 2017/18, Albania, Kosovo, Serbia, BiH, North Macedonia).

In addition, there is a common perception that the West allowed violent extremism to grow in the Western Balkans, and the West has been criticized for the failures in Syria. An imam enforces this point: “We know how it’s happening. We follow the news. It’s all Europe: British, French, Germans. They supported Kurds but then they killed them. They want Israel to rule that area. Simply said. They [meaning West] could have removed Assad like they did with Hussein. Very fast but they did not want too. It’s all politics. Their politics so it’s better to stay out of it.” (Anonymous Interview, Imam, Fall 2018, North Macedonia). In addition, there is a commonly held perception that the West manipulated the region, using it as a location to monitor intelligence to counter the insecurity in Europe, while deepening the insecurity in Western Balkans. The negative consequences are illustrated by an interviewee pointing out that: “Some people identify themselves as Muslim and Albanian secondly. Some do not want to hear about Albanians as only Islam matters to them. This is a big change. No one spoke of Islam before the war. It is killing Albanians. It’s a cancer. Now they then call us an ‘extremist place’. See NYT completely destroying the image of Kosovo. We should have not allowed it. This was because of the internationals [meaning Kosovo is used for intelligence gathering]” (Anonymous Interview, NGO Official, Fall 2017, Kosovo). This in turn has altered the identities of the local population, as these foreign organizations could freely operate in the region. Therefore, the West is seen as well, as contributing to the current insecurity in the region, alike as the Eastern powers.

On the other hand, Serbia’s terrorism topic is seen as a taboo among the Serbian population. An interviewee portrayed this by pointing out: “It is a public secret here that Serbs went to fight into Ukraine. The NGO’s and journalists that research it are intimidated. No one from the state wants to accept it and speak about it” (Anonymous Interview, NGO Official, Fall 2017, Serbia). In fact, there was resistance to expose these crimes as well from the international community as it may harm relations with Serbia (Fieldwork Notes, International Official, Fall 2017, Serbia). This in turn normalized the travel to Ukraine among the local Serbian population, as an interviewee illustrates: “if you want to earn money and go to Ukraine, you can. You just need to call the right people. But deep down in the South, people also go just to fight. What else to do since they are no jobs” (Anonymous Interview, Community Observer, Fall 2018, Serbia). Serbia’s rising far right, in combination with Croatia’s rising far right movements, indicates that the region is shifting towards a violent extremism base, not only for religious violent extremism supported by foreign influences but also far-right/ethno-national violent extremism.

Generally, Western economic powers do not seem effective in winning the hearts and minds of the local populations, as Western involvement is bureaucratic, lengthy, lacks personal ties and incorporates conditionality. For instance, despite the higher economic investments from the West, some local elites view the Eastern

investments as equally important. An interviewee illustrates this by stating “the economic involvement of non-democratic actors to be if not greater than at least equally important to that of the West” (Anonymous Interview, NGO Official, Spring 2018, Kosovo). While the West does not use business and investments for political purposes, Eastern actors use their economic activities for political ends as they develop close ties with local leaders. These alliances between the Western Balkans elites and the Eastern actors exist mainly due to the opportunities of the Eastern actors to conduct business in “non-transparent, shady deals or corrupt[ive deals]” (Prague Security Studies Institute 2019b, 3). Resultantly, this decreases the power of the West which, in combination with the EU’s conditionality in removing the power from the current elites in the long term, weakens the power of the West. The latter point is illustrated by an interviewee, noting that the “EU eliminates the power of the current elites, hence they do not have any interest to reform and move forward the EU [... In addition] reforms in the EU have been more paper driven rather than results orientated” (Anonymous Interview, Journalist, Spring 2018, Albania). While China provides loans which appear to have no strings attached, very fast and informally, the EU’s assistance is lengthy due to bureaucracy. Thus, it presents a less attractive form of cooperation. Therefore, despite the fact that the EU provides grants rather than loans, like China or Russia, the local elites may perceive it simpler to work with the Eastern actors rather than the bureaucratic Western actors. China works directly with elites, and there are fears that in the future, China may use its infrastructure development projects not only for economic expediency but also to create debt traps and eventually secure military bases at the EU border (i.e. Montenegro port).

In addition, promoting the rule of law is not in the interest of the local elites. According to a NATO official, leaders have further incentives to collaborate more with the Eastern actors due to their criminal past, as “many leaders are not interested in reforms [and] prefer the status quo, as they fear ending up in jail” (Anonymous Interview, IO Official, Spring 2019, Belgium). Thus, the local elites are more drawn to the East due to their political agendas, as illustrated by the interviewee: “the rule of law, transparency, accountability and that is not in the interest of the corrupted political elite” (Anonymous Interview, NGO Official, Spring 2019, BiH).

Moreover, the impact of the EU is limited for several reasons: disconnect with rural population, implementation of the wrong policies and prioritizing their security interests over the Western Balkans interests. The EU’s perceived prerogative function is to facilitate aid with the local elites to the respective state, yet the local elites are viewed as corrupt by the local population. Hence, there is a disconnect between the Western powers and the local population. The EU’s strategy is also viewed to be also short term (2-4 years), aiming to transform the society through technology. However, there is a common perception among the local community that it is “the wrong approach” (Anonymous Interview, Journalist, Spring 2018, Albania). Instead, it is suggested that the EU should work on the economic sector and institution building. Moreover, the EU’s focus is perceived as self-interested: the “EU never treated the Western Balkans seriously except for the war and migrations deal(s). They never saw it as their part but as a gun power and backwards” (Anonymous Interview, Journalist, Spring 2018, Albania).

It has been further claimed that EU enlargement has ‘disappeared from the agenda’ in the region (Mujanovic 2019). The EU’s involvement has not been stalled by internal problems, such as foreign influences within the EU and the rise of illiberal

practices, for example in Hungary (Prague Security Studies Institute 2019e). The EU has used enlargement as a tool to counter the role of the other influencers. However, with the current framework, where North Macedonia has changed its name in a historic agreement with Greece, there still remains hesitation about membership, which means that this strategy is likely to be unsuccessful (Mujanovic 2019). The local population perceive the reaction as ‘a betrayal from the EU as Brussels seems unsure whether they want us’, where it is stated that the Albanian minority has been left alone despite having supported the West all the time (Anonymous Interviews, NGO Officials, Spring 2019, North Macedonia). The consequences of this, namely the disillusionment of the local population in the region, is well summarized by an interviewee: “If the EU enlargement is rejected then the Balkans will be placed in a quarantine” (Anonymous Interview, Journalist, Fall 2018, Albania). To sum up, a disillusioned population will be more open to the influence of external actors and may eventually turn towards them.

On the other hand, there is a common perception that the EU has weakened especially due to the EU’s positive feedback on Serbia despite their backsliding. Thus, one of the interviewees summarized the weakening EU and its role in the Western Balkans region as losing legitimacy due to lack of rewards for positive actions (NM opening of negotiations, KS visa liberalization), and the presence of rewards for backsliding (ie Serbia), the paradox delineated below:

“EU needs to understand that conditionality doesn’t work on the back runners. Visa liberalization is a classical example and when you get media freedom, you have to have negative consequences, and MK like Prespa needs to be positively rewarded: doesn’t mean that they join the EU, but to open accession negotiations. This shows that the EU is strict but also rewards. So it is important to not reward backsliding because piles of expectations are different in different levels and the bar is up to ten. Serbia’s case is the most sophisticated, and we [the EU] are in danger by rewarding backsliding and not progress. If the EU gets it wrong then normal people don’t make that difference that Commission or Council said - downside of bureaucracy. People will simplify. France hopefully will change their stance” (Anonymous Interview, International Official, Spring 2019, BiH).

Similar voices have been uncovered among the local citizens that as long as the EU is supporting Serbia, the region will remain backwards as the rest of the countries will regress due to Serbia’s destructive role. To illustrate this, Serbia is believed to have achieved its political aims with Kosovo, as the latter still lacks visa liberalization believed to be due to Islam. The interviewee says: “Why does North Macedonia and Albania have liberalization? Why does NM not suffer this injustice regarding visa liberalization? Why do they [EU] leave Kosovo in this state? Now extremism from religious radicalization is found as a justification for the delay. But individuals from Serbia as well left for the (Ukrainian) war zone” Thus, this is perceived as Serbian success through propaganda to keep Kosovo outside the EU Enlargement Agenda (Anonymous Interview, NGO Official, Fall 2018, Kosovo). Hence, religion and violent extremism may be instrumentalized for intra-regional politics due to the lack of EU prospects.

The above challenges, accompanied with high levels of media coverage, creates misperception that the Eastern actors are investing more, potentially shifting the perception of the local population in their favor over long run. Currently, the polls show a 50-50 split between Eastern and Western preference. In terms of belonging, for example, with the exception of Kosovo, respondents from BiH, North Macedonia or Serbia generally do not feel that they belong to either West or East (Center for Insights in Survey Research 2018). Historically, some interviewees argue that in the Western Balkans, autocracy is the preferred political system since “democracy never prevailed, therefore it is more likely to have dictators leading Balkans” (Anonymous Interview, Journalist, Spring 2018, Albania).

Importantly, *leadership* seems to play an important role in the region. For instance, both Putin and Erdogan share similar traits: they are populist, use simple rhetoric and are inclined to authoritarian styles of leadership. Putin and Erdogan have managed to win the hearts and minds of some groups in the Western Balkan populations. For example, Erdogan is popular among Bosniaks and some Albanians and Putin is popular among some Serbs. This stems from how these leaders engage with citizens, different from the manner of the Gulf states and Western actors, as an interviewee explains that, “the biggest difference between the way Putin is approaching the region and in a sort of a way Erdogan is approaching too, is trying to build constituencies that go beyond elites including the population, whilst the Chinese and Gulf states are only focused on elites” (Anonymous Interview, International Officer, Spring 2019, BiH). With regard to Bosnia and Herzegovina, it is perceived that “Putin has had much more success than Erdogan in developing a fan club” (Anonymous Interview, NGO Official, Spring 2019, BiH). Turkey's role is seen as ‘more ambiguous, considering that (only) until lately, when Turkey's policies started to shift, it was considered a strong ally of the West’ (ibid).

Eastern actors also rely on the cultural sphere of influence for political and security purposes, which in turn strengthens their influence in the region. Russia is feared for its potential to exploit inter-ethnic tensions in the region, especially in Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia. For example, due to pan-Slavism, 300 foreign fighters joined the war in Eastern Ukraine, feeling a moral obligation to back their Russian ‘brothers’ and also return to return the ‘favour’ for participating during the Kosovo dispute (Metodieva 2019), as well as the Bosnian war. Moreover, in 2017, 60 websites in the region spread “the idea of ethnically pure nation states, neo-Nazism, violent homophobia and other radical right-wing policies” (Dzidic et al. 2017) They are run by a new generation of regional extremists who are “even more radical than those who split up the former Yugoslavia” (ibid). While Russians are popular among Serbs, they are unpopular among Albanians, and less so among Bosnian Croats or Bosniaks (Chrzová et al. 2019). A common held perception revealed by an interviewee illustrates that “Russia is using the West against the West”, meaning that Russia is utilizing hybrid threats and techniques to paralyze the Western decision making, creating chaos and confusion in the region (Anonymous Interview, IO Official, Spring 2019, North Macedonia). Other interviewees point out the significance of the disinformation campaign and the need to counter it, as illustrated by an interviewee: “It is a war on the internet. We need to expose them, do debates, discuss openly. We need to break the taboo. Otherwise, it becomes forbidden. It becomes sweeter like the forbidden cherry” (Anonymous Interview, IO Official, Spring 2018, North Macedonia).

Turkey specifically uses soft power to promote strategic interests in the region as it spreads political Islam, reintroduces pan-Ottomanism in the region and uses media information to win the hearts and minds of the local population, alongside with economic investments and cultural and religious activities. This, in turn, gradually altered the identities of the local Muslim population, being reinforced through the political elites that have been de facto influenced by Turkey. The consequences of altering the identities of individuals is eventually likely to result in violence and polarization (Fukuyama 2018) within these societies. While major incidents are yet to occur, in the region there is a gradual shift away from European standards and closer links with Turkey. What is more, the Gülen-Erdogan conflict is being played out in the region, deepening already existing domestic political and security instability. This, overall and in the long run, presents challenges as the shifts of local elites toward illiberal practices could translate into further insecurity at the EU border.

The Gulf states work directly with the elites and rely on the cultural sphere to win the hearts and minds of the local population. The UAE invested a lot financially across the region. Also, the security sphere is very active as well, especially in Serbia where both technology and the arms trade constitute the largest proportion of cooperation. Saudi Arabia and the UAE have promoted violent extremist agendas in the region, targeting mainly the Albanian and Bosnian communities. Thus, a high amount of individuals joined the war in Syria and Iraq. Moreover, Saudi Arabia's investments in the region (and other Gulf states) led to an increase of religiousness among Albanians, who some view as an infringement of Albanian beliefs, practices and traditions. The arms trade with KSA has strengthened the organized crime and seems to violate the EU laws. KSA also uses the cultural/religious sphere of influence highly in the region which resulted in the identity alterations and polarization. These pose challenges in the long run for EU security. Qatar has been reported to further spread Wahhabism by investing in religious infrastructure across the region, perpetuating insecurity. Lastly, Iran also has a presence, and may mirror the MEK-Iranian regime domestic conflict in Albania, and perhaps create instability in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Generally, the Western countries, on the other hand, are portrayed as self-interested and not working as a homogenous group. They are also viewed to have withdrawn due to other priorities areas such as Syria and Ukraine, for example. Also, there is a common perception that Albanians are being excluded from geopolitics, as an interviewee illustrated "all the political calculations are done based on religious beliefs, excluding Albanians" (Anonymous Interview, Governmental Official, Fall 2018, Kosovo). The US is considered to have created the war in Syria but also to have led the counter terrorism efforts in the region. Moreover, the UK is seen as willing "to destroy Islam" (Anonymous Interview, Academia, BiH, Spring 2019). The US in the region is also viewed by religious conservative imams as willing to destroy Islam, being unjust in Iraq, Afghanistan and Kosovo (on the latter referring to uranium usage during '99 bombing) (Anonymous Interviews, imams, Spring/Fall 2018/2019, North Macedonia, Kosovo, Serbia, BiH, Albania). In fact, the US has become much less involved in the region, even though it maintains a very positive image in Kosovo among the Albanians, on the contrary, Serbs view them negatively (Chrzová et al. 2019). The withdrawal of the US and UK may indicate that the region will fall backwards.

Furthermore, the West is perceived to contribute to an image of Kosovo, respectively a Muslim Kosovo, rendering the Western foreign policies on state, nation and peace building abroad as successful. In fact, an interviewee argued that the international community misinterprets the identity of Albanians. He argues that Albanians used to be secular throughout history. However, the lengthy impact of the Eastern influencers after the war resulted in a larger following in religion, which is also perceived to feed into the political interests of the West for their peace and nation building agenda (Anonymous Interview, Academia, Kosovo, Spring 2019).

The lack of a *coherent strategy* by Western powers, most notably the EU and US, creates opportunities for external influencers to fill the vacuum and operate across the region with greater ease. Even though the interviews uncovered that the local population would like to migrate towards the EU rather the East, the stalling EU Enlargement Agenda also opened the door for external influencers within the region (Anonymous Interviews, Fall/Spring 2017/2018, Kosovo, BiH, Albania). The lack of a coherent strategy has been uncovered especially in BiH, as depicted by a local official “if there is one connection between all of the influencers in SEE, that is the vacuum area that has been made with the European Union not being much engaged in the Balkans. The EU and the US are not the only influencers in BiH and their influence is not as homogenous as in the previous 25 years” (Anonymous Interview, Academia, BiH, Spring 2019) In the lack of a coherent strategy from the EU and US, it is believed that Russia is winning due to the inefficient EU and lack of strategy from the US under Trump era (Anonymous Interview, International Official, Spring 2019, North Macedonia).

Lastly, the so called *‘failed’ post-conflict reconstruction* policies may contribute to the rise of external influencers in the region. Unintentionally, international actors have contributed to the rise of violent extremism in the region by promoting failed state and peace building policies (Rrustemi 2016). Therefore, a critical analysis of the so-called failure of Western policies in the region is needed to formulate effective strategies that can counter the rise of external influencers. An international official who worked in BiH from 2006 onwards pointed out that “we should not start by thinking about how to counter Russians or Chinese or Turks but to reflect on our failed policies” (Anonymous Interview, International Officer, BiH, Spring 2019). In fact, some local citizens view some policies as representing top down decision making. An interviewee noted that the EU is *imposing* their ‘attitudes and meddles in national politics, same with the USA’, such as the *name dispute treaty* negating the entire national identity of the Macedonians and the Colourful Revolution, viewed as attempts to *amend history and culture* (Anonymous Interview, Journalist, North Macedonia, Spring 2019). To illustrate this point, an interview from BiH points out that “Everything changed. Bosnia is not the same. Now we all are with headscarves. See this, see that! It's incredible. Croats are so nationalistic. On the other hand, the Bosnians say all the time they are victims. Donno. Everything changed. The place is getting worse. The international community intervened and made a mess. I loved Bosnia. It's not the one that is nowadays. Go into streets and it's so conservative. It used to be so open” (Anonymous Interview, Academia, Spring 2019, Netherlands). Similarly, the role of the West is viewed negatively in Serbia as they are seen as key on maintaining Vucic in power for stability while hindering democracy. Hence the West is not very popular among the pro-democracy elites in Serbia (Anonymous Interviews, Academia, NGO Officials, Spring 2019, Serbia). Arguments have also been put forward by local citizens in Kosovo criticizing the West for maintaining power the corrupt

elites. The international community are also perceived by some to have created Eastern powers, such as China, Russia and Turkey, as an enemy. Thus some citizens view that “the Chinese, Greek and Turkish influence on the Western Balkan is not as dangerous as the USA/EU make it to be” (Anonymous Interview, Journalist, North Macedonia, Spring 2019). This is perceived to have caused citizens to behave with apathy, or to migrate altogether (Anonymous Interviews, International Officials, NGO Officials, Academia, Spring 2019, Western Balkans). While some international officials fear that radicalization does not attract sufficient attention due to the focus on external influencers, it is important also to note that some local citizens identify that the main challenges lie with the local governments, who use nationalism or religion for their own purposes (Anonymous Interviews, International Officials, NGO Officials, Academia, Spring 2019, North Macedonia).

Nevertheless, some attribute the West’s attraction among the local population in the region being “very successful in spreading its influence in mass culture, cultural space and social life in general. Despite traditional cultural and spiritual links to Russia or Turkey respectively, society in the Balkans is, therefore, to a large extent Westernized” (Prague Security Studies Institute 2019c, 3). This condition, as has already been stated, has begun gradually to shift in favor of Eastern actors by means of identity re-engineering and historical revisionism, when taking into account the practices, customs and values of the East. The findings of this study confirm the argument that the growing cultural interest in the East is connected to frustration with Western policies and “closer political and economic relations and also, not less importantly, to investments in the cultural sphere” (Prague Security Studies Institute 2019c, 3). More specifically, Eastern actors are using the weakening of the West to ‘neutralize this effect and “superimpose” their views and standards upon local communities’ (ibid). As a result, some citizens now view themselves as Arab and Turk, whilst some Serbs, who have traditionally regarded Russia as an ally, now think of Putin as their ‘savior’ (Anonymous interviews, Fall/Spring 2018/2019, Serbia, Kosovo, BiH). This development shows that not only soft diplomacy is employed but that forms of hybrid threats are also present in the region based on intentions to impose new perceptions and identities upon local communities.

## VIII: Policy Recommendations

There is a rise of hybrid threats being used by Eastern actors (disinformation warfare, covert operations and so on) spreading violent extremism, potentially debt trapping some Western Balkans countries, violating the EU laws on arms trade and implementing identity reengineering. Eastern actors seem to take a holistic approach and focus on winning hearts and minds, whereas the Western actors do not. The latter aspect are usually used to win the modern warfare without physical war. This poses the possibility of resumed instability in the region over the long term, unravelling all the peace and state building construction achieved by Western actors over the past 20 years.

Furthermore, it has been uncovered that the West is less attractive to the Western Balkans local elites due to the promotion of the rule of law, bureaucracy, lengthy procedures to receive grants, lack of personal ties between the Western Balkans elites and the Western actors, conditionality, disillusioned population, the perception that the West has been unfair to Muslims, the lack of coherent strategy from the West, the failed post conflict reconstruction due to the prioritization of stability over democracy, the lack of a realistic EU engagement agenda, and the lack of engagement with the local population. However, the East is more appealing due to the simplicity of receiving grants or projects, leadership similarities and their potential strengthening of the corrupt local elites to maintain power, thus to secure the maintenance of the status quo.

Considering the revealed security risks of the Eastern actors, and the lack of effectiveness and attractiveness of the West in the region, the following policy recommendations are provided. When devising the counter responses, it is important to note that timing is crucial. Attitudes are changing as we speak and may shift to either the West or the East. For example, Kosovo is 53% pro-West. Polls in BiH, North Macedonia or Serbia generally confirm that populations do not feel that they definitely belong to either the West or the East (Center for Insights in Survey Research 2018). The majority of people in Serbia favor a Russian approach when it comes to 'morality and values'. Regarding issues of employment, healthcare and social benefits, citizens from all four countries (Kosovo, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia) wish to have more in common with the West than, for example, than with Russia (ibid). Generally, respondents in all four countries are in favor of joining the EU, the only exception being Serbia (81% in Kosovo, 72% in BiH, 62% in North Macedonia and 50% in Serbia). Regarding positive perceptions towards NATO, this schism in trend is further expressed (92% in Kosovo, 73% in North Macedonia, 50% in BiH and 9% in Serbia) (Center for Insights in Survey Research 2018). At present, NATO membership still represents one of the main foreign policy objectives of Macedonian, Kosovo and some Bosnian leaders (Metodieva 2019). However, we may be at a turning point in the region where populations that are generally torn between the West and the East may begin gravitating towards the latter. The West, therefore, needs to react now to counter such a trend. For this purpose, it would be crucial to re-establish legitimacy while strengthening the moral authority of the West, speak with one voice in the region, and, crucially, maintain a realistic EU Enlargement Agenda, such as open the membership negotiations for North Macedonia and Albania. It would also be beneficial to award BiH a candidate status and agree to visa liberalization for Kosovo. Generally, the agenda needs to remain proactive and to be

implemented thoroughly. Existing instruments need to be employed with more coverage of the media, reporting the stories as much as possible in order to promote Western interests not only among elites but also to reach the local population.

It is therefore crucial for Western actors to respond fast by promoting democracy rather than instability, which in turn would assist in winning the hearts and minds of the local population and regain legitimacy. This has to be achieved to prevent the insecurity risks caused by debt trap diplomacy of China, Turkish authoritarian propaganda, the violent extremism and identity alternations supported by the Gulf countries and Iran as well as the disinformation warfare conducted by Russia and, lastly, the rising far right violent extremism identified in Serbia, BiH, and Croatia.

The rest of the policy recommendations are grouped around aspects of law, security, economic and social as follows. In the legal sphere, there are calls to implement laws on the transparency of contracts, finances of political parties, NGOs, religious communities and the media, with specific attention to online portals. This can be achieved by strengthening the judiciary while enhancing the rule of law in launching inquiries regarding illegal financing, crime and corruption. Moreover, a law on housing prices would be necessary in areas where large economic investments are taking place in order to prevent the marginalization of the local population. This emulates Danish law whereby each municipality requires 25% of its housing stock be 'Common Housing'. Acting as a regulatory tool, it keeps the lands values down and facilitates integrated cities. This legal change is especially relevant for the cities of Sarajevo and Belgrade. Moreover, a law on building new mosques, where a needs assessment gauging the ratio of mosque to size of Muslim community justifies the construction of new mosque, is essential. If the ratio indicates that it is justified, the disclosure of finances and imams is conducted by the religious communities and state authorities.

In the security sphere, it is crucial to harmonize the security policy of the Western Balkans countries with the EU defense and foreign policy which countervails the negative consequences arising from arms trade. This is important for all Western Balkan countries, and in particular Serbia. Moreover, consider sanctions for arms exports in Serbia, and condition it with the EU funding. Regarding both religious and ethnonational/far right violent extremism, it is key to promote individual responsibility by legal remedies and encouraging whistleblowing to prevent its fervent spread, and also to counter organized crime. In this aspect, it is also imperative to strengthen the border control and stop the informal border passage routes throughout the Western Balkans. Furthermore, it is crucial to limit the appointment of foreign imams in Western Balkans, and if they are appointed with educational experience from abroad, appoint a local imam holding the main powers to prevent violent extremism.

In terms of the economic measures, it is suggested to open the EU Cohesion Fund and investing in rural areas by public and private investors.

In terms of the societal measures, it is important to increase the prominence of public awareness campaigns (i.e. use lifestories as well) to build resilience against fake-news and violent extremism. By creative use of media and local engagement in the Western Balkans countries in order to counter external influences. It is further

proposed that workshops can win the hearts and minds of the populations in the Western Balkan region, incrementally persuading people about the advantages of democratic values. In addition, it is important to increase cultural exchanges and language courses in youth centers, especially support youth exchanges between Western Balkan conservatives and the liberal circles to make the West more attractive. Monitoring the changes of societal values and beliefs in schools, universities, NGOs and foundations through the usage of surveys can be a concise manner in gauging the value and belief orientation of societies. Moreover, supporting independent, critical journalists/academics and spread of information with videos that reach local communities, not only elites. This will be instrumental when it comes to revealing the truth concerning the legitimacy and attractiveness of Eastern actors in the region, achieved by uncovering facts regarding violent extremism in the Western Balkans, their illicit sources of finances, and reporting the court case proceedings against the violent extremist inductees directly within the public eye across the Western Balkans. This, in turn, assists also on with promoting individual responsibility among the society.

A combination of these types of measures may assist in strengthening democracy in the region as well as countering the external influences. The involvement of Western actors in the Western Balkan region so far has been directed at the political elites of the countries to address the reforms necessary in meeting the entry criteria for EU membership. Meanwhile, the manner of how Eastern actors try to wield influence in the region is diverse, employing grander *hybrid* foreign policy strategies to subdue their rivals and extend their interests. As a result, Western actors lack equality in arms compared with Eastern actors, with the former trying to maintain their influence whilst the latter are attempting to assert more. Therefore, these holistic policy recommendations across various aspects of the states may assist to achieve equality of arms in hybrid warfare between the East and the West in the Western Balkans region. This necessitates tailored implementation tracks for each country which requires further in-depth research in how to implement them on a governmental and societal level.

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## Appendix I: General Western Balkans Data Overview

Location		
	Albania	75
	Austria	1
	Belgium	3
	Bosnia Herzigovina	21
	Kosovo	125
	Montenegro	2
	Netherlands	2
	North Macedonia	120
	Serbia	26
	Switzerland	1
	UK	1
	USA	11
Date		
	Fall 2017	15
	Winter 2017-18	16
	Spring 2018	97
	Summer 2018	1
	Fall 2018	133
	Winter 2018-19	8
	Spring 2019	119

<b>Gender</b>	Female	67
	Male	322
<b>Ethnicity</b>		
<b>Ethnicity</b>	Albanian	301
	Bosnian	28
	British	4
	Danish	1
	Dutch	6
	German	3
	Italian	1
	Macedonian	6
	Montenegrin	2
	Polish	1
	Roma	1
	Serbian	21
	Turkish	4
US-American	10	
<b>Religion</b>		
<b>Religion</b>	Atheist	1
	Catholic	17
	Convert from Catholic to Muslim	2
	Muslim	286
	Muslim Bektashi	3
	None	3
	Orthodox	23

	Protestant	2
	NA	52
<b>Type of Interviewee</b>		
	Directly Affected Individuals: Approached Individual	8
	Directly Affected Individuals: Extremist Individual	6
	Directly Affected Individuals: Extremist Individual: Released	4
	Directly Affected Individuals: Former Extremist Individual	18
	Directly Affected Individuals: Former Extremist Individual: Homegrown	6
	Directly Affected Individuals: Former Extremist Individual: Recruiter	6
	Directly Affected Individuals: Returnee: Released	3
	Exposed Individuals: Brother	8
	Exposed Individuals: Children	2
	Exposed Individuals: Community Observer	32
	Exposed Individuals: Cousin	19
	Exposed Individuals: Father	7
	Exposed Individuals: Friend	16
	Exposed Individuals: Mother	7
	Exposed Individuals: Religious Official	55
	Subject Matter Professionals: Academic	17

	Subject Matter Professionals: Governmental Official	38
	Subject Matter Professionals: IO Official	31
	Subject Matter Professionals: Journalist	25
	Subject Matter Professionals: Municipal Official	1
	Subject Matter Professionals: NGO Official	72
	Subject Matter Professionals: Political Party Official	8
<b>Total Number of Interviewees</b>		
	Total	389

ALBANIA		
Date	Spring 2018	4
	Summer 2018	1
	Fall 2018	35
	Spring 2019	35
Gender	Female	16
	Male	59
Ethnicity	Albanian	74
	German	1

Religion	Catholic	5
	Muslim	66
	NA	4
Type of interviewees		
Type of interviewees	Directly Affected Individuals: Approached Individual	1
	Directly Affected Individuals: Extremist Individual	1
	Directly Affected Individuals: Former Extremist Individual	4
	Directly Affected Individuals: Former Extremist Individual: Homegrown	2
	Exposed Individuals: Brother	1
	Exposed Individuals: Community Observer	5
	Exposed Individuals: Cousin	1
	Exposed Individuals: Friend	2
	Exposed Individuals: Mother	2
	Exposed Individuals: Religious Official	21
	Subject Matter Professionals: Academic	1
	Subject Matter Professionals: Governmental Official	7
	Subject Matter Professionals: IO Official	3
	Subject Matter Professionals: Journalist	4
Subject Matter Professionals: NGO Official	20	
Number of interviewees	Total	75

AUSTRIA		
Date	Spring 2018	I
Gender	Female	I
Ethnicity	Albanian	I
Religion	Muslim	I
Type of interviewees	Directly Affected Individuals: Approached Individual	I
Number of interviewees	Total	I
BELGIUM		
Date	Fall 2017	I
	Spring 2018	I
	Spring 2019	I
Gender	Male	3
Ethnicity	Albanian	I
	Dutch	I
	Polish	I

Religion	Muslim	1
	None	1
	NA	1
Type of interviewee	Subject Matter Professionals: IO Official	2
	Subject Matter Professionals: NGO Official	1
Total Number of Interviewees	Total	3
<b>BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA</b>		
Date	Spring 2018	5
	Fall 2018	8
	Winter 2018-19	1
	Spring 2019	7
Gender	Female	4
	Male	17
Ethnicity	Bosnian	12
	British	3
	German	2
	Serbian	3
	Turkish	1

<b>Religion</b>	Catholic	2
	Muslim	14
	None	2
	Orthodox	2
	NA	1
<b>Type of Interviewee</b>		
	Directly Affected Individuals: Extremist Individual	7
	Directly Affected Individuals: Extremist Individual: Released	1
	Exposed Individuals: Community Observer	1
	Subject Matter Professionals: Academic	1
	Subject Matter Professionals: Governmental Official	3
	Subject Matter Professionals: IO Official	2
	Subject Matter Professionals: Journalist	1
	Subject Matter Professionals: NGO Official	5
<b>Total Number of Interviewees</b>		
	Total	21
<b>KOSOVO</b>		
<b>Date</b>	Winter 2017-18	11
	Spring 2018	5
	Fall 2018	56
	Winter 2018-19	11

	Spring 2019	49
<b>Gender</b>	Female	20
	Male	105
<b>Ethnicity</b>	Albanian	109
	Bosnian	6
	British	1
	Danish	1
	Dutch	6
	Serbian	6
	US-American	2
<b>Religion</b>	Catholic	2
	Convert from Catholic to Muslim	1
	Muslim	103
	Orthodox	3
	NA	16
<b>Type of Interviewee</b>	Directly Affected Individuals: Approached Individual	3
	Directly Affected Individuals: Extremist Individual	3
	Directly Affected Individuals: Extremist Individual: Released	3

	Directly Affected Individuals: Former Extremist Individual	4
	Directly Affected Individuals: Former Extremist Individual: Homegrown	2
	Directly Affected Individuals: Returnee: Released	3
	Exposed Individuals: Brother	4
	Exposed Individuals: Children	2
	Exposed Individuals: Community Observer	8
	Exposed Individuals: Cousin	6
	Exposed Individuals: Father	1
	Exposed Individuals: Friend	4
	Exposed Individuals: Religious Official	18
	Subject Matter Professionals: Academic	5
	Subject Matter Professionals: Governmental Official	16
	Subject Matter Professionals: IO Official	8
	Subject Matter Professionals: Journalist	8
	Subject Matter Professionals: NGO Official	24
	Subject Matter Professionals: Political Party Official	3
<b>Total Number of Interviewees</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>125</b>

## MONTENEGRO

Date	Spring 2019	2
Gender	Female	1
	Male	1
Ethnicity	Montenegrin	2
Religion	Orthodox	1
	NA	1
Type of Interviewee	Subject Matter Professionals: NGO Official	2
Total Number of Interviewees	Total	2

<b>NETHERLANDS</b>		
Date	Spring 2018	1
	Fall 2018	1
Gender	Male	2
Ethnicity	Dutch	2

<b>Religion</b>	Catholic	1
	Convert from Catholic to Muslim	1
<b>Type of Interviewee</b>	Directly Affected Individuals: Former Extremist Individual: Recruiter	2
<b>Total Number of Interviewees</b>	Total	2

<b>NORTH MACEDONIA</b>		
<b>Date</b>	Fall 2017	14
	Winter 2017-18	5
	Spring 2018	28
	Fall 2018	32
	Winter 2018-19	2
	Spring 2019	39
<b>Gender</b>	Female	11
	Male	109
<b>Ethnicity</b>	Albanian	107
	Dutch	1
	Macedonian	6
	Roma	1

	Turkish	2
	US-American	3
<b>Religion</b>		
	Catholic	4
	Muslim	87
	Muslim Bektashi	3
	Orthodox	6
	Protestant	1
	NA	19
<b>Type of Interviewee</b>		
	Directly Affected Individuals: Approached Individual	1
	Directly Affected Individuals: Extremist Individual: Released	1
	Directly Affected Individuals: Former Extremist Individual	2
	Directly Affected Individuals: Former Extremist Individual: Homegrown	2
	Directly Affected Individuals: Former Extremist Individual: Recruiter	3
	Exposed Individuals: Brother	2
	Exposed Individuals: Community Observer	15
	Exposed Individuals: Cousin	12
	Exposed Individuals: Father	6
	Exposed Individuals: Friend	10
	Exposed Individuals: Mother	3

	Exposed Individuals: Religious Official	15
	Subject Matter Professionals: Academic	3
	Subject Matter Professionals: Governmental Official	12
	Subject Matter Professionals: IO Official	8
	Subject Matter Professionals: Journalist	11
	Subject Matter Professionals: Municipal Official	1
	Subject Matter Professionals: NGO Official	9
	Subject Matter Professionals: Political Party Official	4
<b>Total Number of Interviewees</b>		
<b>Total</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>120</b>

<b>SERBIA</b>		
<b>Date</b>	Spring 2018	21
	Spring 2019	5
<b>Gender</b>		
	Female	11
	Male	15
<b>Ethnicity</b>		
	Bosnian	10
	Dutch	1
	Italian	1

	Serbian	12
	US-American	2
<b>Religion</b>		
	Catholic	3
	Muslim	10
	Orthodox	11
	Protestant	1
	NA	1
<b>Type of Interviewee</b>		
	Directly Affected Individuals: Approached Individual	1
	Directly Affected Individuals: Extremist Individual	2
	Directly Affected Individuals: Former Extremist Individual	1
	Exposed Individuals: Brother	1
	Exposed Individuals: Community Observer	1
	Exposed Individuals: Religious Official	1
	Subject Matter Professionals: Academic	2
	Subject Matter Professionals: IO Official	8
	Subject Matter Professionals: NGO Official	8
	Subject Matter Professionals: Political Party Official	1
<b>Total Number of Interviewees</b>		
	Total	26

SWITZERLAND		
Date	Spring 2019	I
Gender	Male	I
Ethnicity	Albanian	I
Religion	Muslim	I
Type of interviewees	Directly Affected Individuals: Approached Individual	I
Number of interviewees	Total	I

UK		
Date	Winter 2018-19	I
Gender	Male	I
Ethnicity	British	I
Religion	Muslim	I

Type of interviewees	Directly Affected Individuals: Former Extremist Individual: Recruiter	1
<b>Number of interviewees</b>		
	Total	1
<b>USA</b>		
Date	Fall 2018	1
	Spring 2019	10
<b>Gender</b>		
Gender	Female	3
	Male	8
<b>Ethnicity</b>		
Ethnicity	Albanian	8
	US-American	3
<b>Religion</b>		
Religion	Atheist	1
	Muslim	1
	NA	9
<b>Type of Interviewee</b>		
Type of Interviewee	Exposed Individuals: Community Observer	2
	Exposed Individuals: Mother	2
	Subject Matter Professionals: Academic	3
	Subject Matter Professionals: Journalist	1
	Subject Matter Professionals: NGO Official	3