

THE WESTERN BALKANS - AN AREA OF GEOPOLITICAL COMPETITION

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ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the strong interdependencies and vulnerability of the EU, especially when in competition with other external actors. On the other hand, the slow pace of reforms and the increasingly uncertain domestic context, coupled with the growing influence of external actors and the EU's own internal difficulties and divergent positions of the Member States have complicated the enlargement environment.

However, starting with the “geopolitical Commission” led by President Ursula von der Leyen and in light of so many challenges, the Western Balkans are in the spotlight again, for both the EU and other external actors, such as Russia and China.

The paper focuses on the political and economic implications of the actions of two external actors (Russia and China) in correlation with the process of strengthening EU strategic autonomy, taking into account the complementarity between the security and the economic dimensions, as well as the impact of the war in Ukraine and its spill over effect in the Western Balkans that need to be approached separately, considering the vast implications and potential disruptive effect on the security and stability of the region.

On the EU side, starting with the revised enlargement methodology (2020), aimed at boosting the enlargement process more predictably and dynamically, a credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans has been re-established, even more so, that the revised methodology was followed by a series of processes aimed at promoting investment and socio-economic integration for the region, Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans alongside with its Green and Digital Agenda being among them.

Keywords:

■ Geopolitics ■ Western Balkans ■ EU ■ China ■ EU ■ Russia

Introduction

The three decades of protracted transition were meant to transform a region of instability, multi-dimensional conflicts and potential crisis into a European best practice of multiculturalism and resilience.

Placed in the waiting room for so much time, numerous speeches were heard about the EU's desire for enlargement and greater integration of the Western Balkans, but concrete results have been long overdue and the uncertainties have turned the region into an area of geopolitical competition. In the absence of significant progress and the presence of *Enlargement fatigue*, regional security of the Western Balkans was negatively influenced while the EU's leading role in the region and credibility have been placed under a question mark, not only by societies in the region but also by the external actors which, in the pursuit of their interests are prone to use all EU's vulnerabilities and indecisiveness for their advantage.

In light of more recent challenges, the Western Balkans (WB6) are in the spotlight again, for both the EU and other external actors, such as the US, Russia, China, and the Gulf States, with the Covid-19 pandemic highlighting the strong interdependencies and vulnerability of the EU, especially when in competition with other external actors.

On one hand, the Western Balkans' role in China's geopolitical agenda is also increasing alongside the offensive Chinese investment in what is set out to be an important corridor and the gateway to Europe for its new Silk Road (Belt and Road Initiative). And this is precisely the reason why, unlike Russia, China does not appear to hinder the accession path of the Western Balkans, at least not directly, for now.

Even though economic by their nature, investments in infrastructure, underpin China's geopolitical interests in the region by building increased trust and economic dependency in the long term.

On the other hand, even if the Belt and Road Initiative constitutes a core component of China's foreign policy, the Chinese approach in the region is revolving more around economic objectives, while the EU has a more ambitious plan for the Western Balkans region. Thus, alongside investing billions of euros in the region in the coming years, mainly through the Economic and Investment Plan and IPA III multi-annual budget, with a strong focus on long-term strategic investments in the key sectors, such as energy, the EU objectives are mainly political: to foster peace, stability, democracy and the rule of law in the Western Balkans.

Even though the ties and strings attached to the WB6 relations with China might have implications for the EU enlargement process environment, since the investment needs are quite high in the region, the EU should take advantage of these investments, while supporting the countries from the region to pursue European values and standards in the process of public procurement (environmental standards, state aid, transparency, conflict of interest, economic debt, etc.). This can be done and is already implemented through various institutional and multi-level dialogues between the EU and the WB6.

Since both EU and China will remain significant economic actors in the Western Balkans region, as economic and infrastructure development is a common objective, the EU and China are poised to work together for the development of the region, with more efforts being done by the EU to ensure that all investments are sustainable and compatible with EU interests, standards and values.

Although less involved in WB6 economies (according to the European Commission (2019), only 6.6% of the foreign direct investment in the region comes from Russia, whilst the EU accounts for 61%), Russia has created for itself the image of both an alternative and a protector and main supplier of gas and energy.

As Russia remains the most challenging actor for the EU, on all levels, where the strategic autonomy concept must rely on the “act (...) with partners wherever possible” part of the definition, this can be seen rather as an opportunity for EU’s strategic autonomy, as there is no better incentive to increase EU’s capabilities. As there is no better argument for a balanced partnership with the US than the risk of an increased Russian influence and threat.

Hence, rebalancing transatlantic relations will benefit both the EU on its path to increased strategic autonomy and a stronger position in the WB6 and US in keeping in check the Russian aggressiveness and advancement in the political and economic realms.

In 2017, ahead of a European Council meeting, speaking about the correlation between the EU’s impact in the Western Balkans region and the credibility of the enlargement process, HR/VP Mogherini pledged for a stronger determination from the Member States in this process stressing that “the Balkans can easily become one of the chessboards where the big power game can be played” (Mogherini, 2017).

After the financial crisis (2008), China’s global and regional presence has been developing at a very high pace - the bigger picture and the long-term implications should always be kept in sight. Especially after the Covid-19 pandemic, when global dependencies became more evident than ever.

Leveraging on the increasingly uncertain context and the EU's internal difficulties, China took the opportunity to strengthen its influence and image in the region through "health diplomacy" (Fazal, 2020), a newly discovered soft power tool shared with Russia in the Western Balkans.

Having had a centuries-long constant presence in the region, Russia could not shy away from such an opportunity presented by the Covid-19 pandemic, to increase their bilateralism and ultimately weakening the international institutions and solidifying their relations with the WB countries.

Internally, the considerable length of the EU decision-making process and divergent positions of the member states and hence the inability to reach a consensus, represent a struggle and an obstacle for both EU's strategic autonomy and the enlargement process.

While for both strategic autonomy and EU accession, political consensus among the Member States is needed, the causal link between the stabilization, accession and EU integration of the Western Balkans and the achievement of the European Union's strategic objective of becoming a global player is very clear. Thus, the EU must show both the ability and that it has the means to provide stability and security in its immediate vicinity if it wants to be credible in being able to project these at a global level.

Moreover, being a global player with strategic autonomy means that it would be able not only to protect but also to promote its values, standards and interests at a global level and be able to act autonomously when and where necessary and with partners whenever possible (European External Action Service (EEAS), 2016) to obtain the security in all its forms, the EU must show that it has the power of doing so firstly in the Western Balkans, the most advanced countries on the accession path.

The result of not being able to provide security and stability in the WB6 and of not being able to promote its values and standards in these countries would not only result in a delayed integration process of these countries but would also have a negative effect on the EU's credibility and ability to be a global actor.

It was the wars in Yugoslavia that triggered a shift from declarations to concrete actions in the field of strategic autonomy. That missed „hour of Europe" (Luxembourg Foreign Minister, Jacques Poos, 1992), which showed the entire world the European gap between capabilities and expectations, a clear image of the fact that achieving a credible EU foreign and security policy relies also on appropriate military capabilities, as stated in the St. Malo declaration (signed in December 1998 by British prime-minister Tony Blair and French President Jacques Chirac, who met to advance the creation of a European security and defense policy. It was issued as a response to the armed conflict in Kosovo in the late 1990s, in which the international community, and especially the European Union and its member states, were perceived to have failed to intervene to stop the conflict).

Federica Mogherini (2019), former High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, emphasized that to achieve its goal of stabilizing the European continent and making war impossible within it, the European Union must unite Europe by integrating the states of the Western Balkans, stating that “the European Union will become a strong global player only if it integrates the Western Balkans”.

The need to ensure security and stability, where the security challenges and negative influences of external actors are highly visible, is one of the strong reasons for revitalizing the enlargement process. On the other hand, security and stability are also at the core of the new “Europe’s moment” (European Commission, 2020), underpinning strategic autonomy, a process being led by the Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign and Security Policy and the EU Strategic Compass for Security and Defence (General Secretariat of the Council, 2022).

As in 2021 strategic autonomy cannot be limited only to security and defence, the paper is not addressing directly the complementarity with NATO and the defence and security dimension of strategic autonomy but rather its political and economic implications and its connection with the enlargement process. As the concept of strategic autonomy, in 2021, could be defined as the EU’s capacity to act autonomously when and where necessary and with partners wherever possible in order to achieve security in all fields of action and all its forms (economic security, security of the critical infrastructure, digital security, etc.), dissemination of EU standards and promoting the EU values globally, while acting on previously agreed goals and commitments.

Moreover, reducing dependencies and vulnerabilities, and counteracting possible actions delaying both the enlargement process and the strengthening of the strategic autonomy of the EU are only possible through an increased resilience of the EU and of the WB6 region.

By increasing resilience, the EU is not only targeting the ability to meet current and future challenges, within and outside its territory, but is also creating a space for its autonomy to grow and this is recognized also by the EU Strategic Agenda 2019-2024, where the need for EU autonomous action is highlighted, in expressing its ambitious: industrial and commercial policy, green and digital transition and neighbourhood policy (European Council, 2019).

The High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy / Vice-President of the European Commission, Josep Borrell (2020) gave a clear direction for a broader understanding of the concept and its economic and political implications, expressing the need for a more effective strategic autonomy “widened to new subjects of an economic and technological nature”. This was also emphasized by the President of the European Council, asserting the need for stability and

dissemination of the EU standards in order to achieve „less dependence, more influence” (Charles Michel, 2021).

In the pursuit of attaining all its ambitions, enlargement and strategic autonomy included, the EU has tried consistently to reconcile the many ethnic, religious and cultural differences in the Balkans, while its stabilisation efforts are encountering an ever-growing influence from Russia and China, leading to continuous tensions in the region.

The Dragonbear strategic alliance, coined by Velina Tchakarova (2016), while pursuing its strategic interests and tackling their shared threats is also particularly being used for antagonizing the population in a said country or region and creating tensions in the society, through political interference, disinformation, propaganda and FDI (The Kremlin Playbook, n.d.).

Whether a non-ideological, pragmatic alliance or a new model of systemic coordination, the Dragonbear is here to stay and most likely will further shape the international environment in the years to come (Liliana Popescu & Răzvan Tudose, 2021).

Nonetheless, this alliance has a friction potential lying in the geopolitical interests of third countries, with Russia fearing Chinese penetration in its traditional spheres of influence, such as the Western Balkans. This trend was also visible during the Covid-19 pandemic, with disruptions in the supply chains and closed borders between Russian and China (Ellyatt, 2020), the competition on the ground in the Western Balkans between the two, trying to dispatch as many medical supplies as propaganda, constantly increasing.

Part one of this research paper aims to review the means of cooperation and the means of the influence of both Russia and China and how these are influencing the Western Balkans region and the enlargement process.

Part two focuses on the needed course of action for the EU in the coming years from the perspective of strengthening its strategic autonomy and revitalising the enlargement process and the impact of these processes on the Western Balkans countries.

From a methodological point of view, the paper has a constructivist approach which aims to offer a better understanding of the geopolitical environment and its dimensions and implications for the Western Balkans countries, based on three principles: personal experience, active learning and social interactions (Richey et al., 2010). Even though an exhaustive and in-depth analysis of all the elements of the multilevel research on the proposed subject goes beyond the scope of this paper, focusing on the bigger picture and following a constructivist design (Lunenburg, 1998), can bridge the research-practice gap. According to constructivist design theory, learners actively construct their knowledge,

rather than simply absorbing ideas spoken to them by teachers based on their background, experience and skills. Hence, making connections with previous experiences and constructing knowledge based on these experiences creates an active learning environment. Critical thinking skills and social interactions allow for new understandings based on personal experiences and the exchange of ideas which can shape perspectives and consolidate the new information.

The methodology of the paper is based on the empirical review of the available primary literature and analysing of the relevant contexts, focusing on the practical implications and future perspectives of the increasingly harmonized new forms of Russian-Chinese operations, as these may influence both the process of enlargement and the strengthening of EU's strategic autonomy.

The limitations of the present paper are driven by the analysed period, which ends prior to the start of the war in Ukraine (24th February 2022) and concerns specific areas of analysis as well as other key actors influencing the Western Balkans region. While acknowledging the influence of the US, Turkey, and the Gulf States, the paper restricts itself to China and Russia and the EU cooperation and competition in the Western Balkans, with a focus on the latter objectives of strategic autonomy and enlargement.

I. EU chessboard in its quest for Strategic autonomy

In times of crises, be it economic (in 2009), migration (in 2015) or the Covid-19 pandemic (ongoing), all eyes were on the EU's capacity to adequately respond, and find solutions and political and financial resources. Therefore it is only normal that the Geopolitical Commission, the term itself implying a new level of engagement of the EU in the global realm, acting in a geopolitical rapidly evolving environment, needs to find those partners and those alliances which will help not only protect the EU's values and interests but also promote them and work for their advancement.

Broadening the understanding of the concept of strategic autonomy from defence and applying it as a horizontal principle underpinning the EU's recovery after the Covid-19 pandemic, steering the EU towards a more resilient, sustainable and fair Europe, is key in the coming years, in order to strengthen EU multilateral action and its position in relation to the external actors.

The new international competition is increasingly basing itself on digital and technological supremacy. The digital transition and the European data and technological sovereignty, alongside critical infrastructure resilience and security of supply chains, are key economic and political objectives, as relevant to the EU's autonomy as to the enlargement policy. Investments are required not only in capability-development, cutting-edge research and innovation but also in increasing independency in critical technological sectors and securing the technology space from cyber warfare.

The President of the European Council, Charles Michel (2020) stated on Twitter that “European strategic autonomy is goal #1 for our generation. For Europe, this is the real start of the 21st century” which is also recognized in the 2019-2024 Strategic Agenda, where EU’s need to “act autonomously” is also being highlighted, together with its ambitions - industry and trade policy, green deal, digitalisation, neighbourhood policy, just to name a few.

In order to reach all its ambitions, the EU must have both the means and the money, while the entire process may be hindered by internal and external factors.

Internally, the considerable length of the EU decision-making process and divergent positions of the member states and hence the inability to reach a consensus, represent a struggle and an obstacle to increasing the EU’s strategic autonomy, such as the case when Eastern and southern EU member nations were threatening to blockade sustainable finance taxonomy (Simon, 2021) and for pursuing enlargement policy objectives, that have been obstructed by Hungary (Brzozowski & Makszimov, 2021).

As an example of the EU’s struggle to reach a consensus, the Carbon Adjustment Mechanism, proposed by President Ursula von der Leyen at Davos in January 2020 (Khan & Rachman, 2020), meant not only to deliver the objectives of the green transition but also to ensure a level playing field between EU producers and non-EU countries, which do not share the same climate ambitions, such as China, the world’s largest emitter of carbon that has committed to reducing its carbon emissions by 2060 and India, the world’s third-largest carbon emitter, by 2070 (Simon, 2021), was not adopted by the EU by January 2022.

Concerning the enlargement policy consensus, the veto of France in 2019 (Gotev, 2019) and Bulgaria in 2020 (Rettman, 2020) caused not only a delay in the process and distrust at the level of the WB6 societies, that the accession process is not only merit-led but also political-led by Member states individual approaches and interests (Institut Jacques Delors, 2021), but also had a potential impact on the security of the region and that of the EU. Speaking about Bulgaria’s veto on accession talks with North Macedonia, the German minister for European Affairs, Michael Roth considered that “anything else [than a swift IGC] would be a very severe political mistake at the expense of stability and security in the Western Balkans, and that ultimately would massively endanger the security of Europe as a whole - and all should be aware of that”.

Also, as all global actors are reviewing their dependencies and trying to identify alternatives, especially after the Covid-19 crisis, a more in-depth analysis and a multi-angle approach needs to be done in relation to the external actors’ geopolitical interests and their impact on the EU integration of the

Western Balkans countries and strengthening EU's strategic autonomy. Hence, deviating from the EU standards (environmental, procurement, transparency, etc.) and values (human rights, democracy, etc.) when implementing investment projects with external actors' financial resources might impede the accession process and hinder it. Likewise, entering into a debt trap, which might translate into economic leverage and coercion, as well as having strategic and critical infrastructure investments done in the WB6 by external EU actors, might create a gap between EU expectations in the accession process and the actual progress of the region. All of these have a negative impact on the EU's objective of achieving strengthened strategic autonomy. As explained at the beginning of this paper, not being able to export its values and standards into its neighbourhood and not being able to support the needs of the region in order to wean off its dependency on the external actors' investments, might lead to a loss in EU credibility and in its means to deliver on its objectives.

While for both strategic autonomy and EU accession political consensus among member states is needed, the causal link between the stabilization, accession and EU integration of the Western Balkans and the achievement of the European Union's strategic objective of becoming a global player is very clear. Even more so, for both processes, the EU has to face the challenges posed by both Russia and China, from arm-struggling Member states for health supplies to energy blockades and from politically motivated investments to bribery and media manipulation.

In more recent years, other challenges were added to the context and a need for the strategic autonomy concept to evolve once again was clear. The increased influence and interference within the EU and in its immediate neighbourhood (Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership countries) of the external actors, such as China and Russia have brought the subject back on the European agenda, but this time even more multifaceted.

In *A New Industrial Strategy for Europe* (2020), it is mentioned that „Europe's strategic autonomy is about reducing dependence on others for things we need the most: critical materials and technologies, food, infrastructure, security and other strategic areas”. They also provide Europe's industry with an opportunity to develop its own markets, products and services which boost competitiveness” (Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, 2020). Moreover, throughout 2020, the European Commission incorporated the strategic capacities, capabilities and responses in several of its initiatives, with the aim of indirectly defining strategic autonomy in the sense of autonomy to do something, rather than autonomy from something. The focus is placed on increasing the resilience of the European economy and industries and their capacity to respond to the needs of EU citizens by themselves and on the strategic assets crucial for EU security, hence for its autonomy.

Thus, in key blueprints for the digital transition, the European Commission speaks about achieving more and better strategic capacity while investing in the strategic sectors and capacities enabling the development of digital solutions at scale with interoperability and connectivity being key building blocks of the digital transition (*Shaping Europe's digital future*, 2020; *A European strategy for data*, 2020; *On Artificial Intelligence - A European approach to excellence and trust*, 2020).

In other policy papers, such as the *EU Foreign Investment Screening Mechanism*, *Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism*, and *Communication on the Trade Policy Review*, more emphasis is placed on the economic transformation, geopolitical instability and the need for an “open strategic autonomy”, namely increasing EU’s ability to make its own choices and shape the world according to its strategic interests and values (Valdis Dombrovskis, 2020).

While both the EU and the Western Balkans should remain open to foreign investments, they should do so while safeguarding the strategic assets, critical infrastructure, critical technologies and inputs which are essential for security or public order. The European Commission Vice-President stated that “If we want to achieve an open strategic autonomy, having an efficient EU-wide investment screening cooperation is essential. We are now well equipped for that” (Valdis Dombrovskis, 2020. And when speaking about the “equipment” to do so, we are considering the 18 projects and programmes which are of essential interests for the EU and which could be affected by an inefficient screening system of FDIs and these are: European GNSS programmes; Copernicus; Preparatory Action on Preparing the new EU GOVSATCOM programme; Space Programme; Horizon 2020 including research and development programmes and joint undertakings or any other structure including actions therein relating to Key Enabling Technologies such as artificial intelligence, robotics, semiconductors and cybersecurity; Horizon Europe, including research and development programmes and joint undertakings or any other structure; Euratom Research and Training Programme 2021-2025; Trans-European Networks for Transport (TEN-T); Trans-European Networks for Energy (TEN-E); Trans-European Networks for Telecommunications; Connecting Europe Facility; Digital Europe Programme; European Defence Industrial Development Programme; Preparatory Action on Defence Research; European Defence Fund; Permanent structured cooperation (PESCO); European Joint Undertaking for ITER; EU4Health Programme.

If between 2013 and 2015 the concept of strategic autonomy was almost exclusively linked to the defence industry, it was later defined as an ambition to reach “an appropriate level of strategic autonomy” to “ensure Europe’s ability to safeguard security within and beyond its borders” (EU Global Strategy, 2016).

In order to seize this new “Europe’s moment”, three objectives are placed at the core of the EU strategic actions: security, dissemination of EU standards and promoting of the EU values, and all three are just as valid when speaking about enlargement and strategic autonomy and all of them highly impacted by both Russia and China or by their joint cooperation (European Commission, 2020). Both countries seem to complement and support each other in their actions concerning the EU and the Western Balkans, while both are in a frontal collision in terms of strategic interests, but also in terms of values with the EU and both threatening the security and stability of the EU and its immediate neighbourhood.

In terms of security, the focus is placed on technology, defence, economic, and energy security. This is due to the advancement of new technologies and ever-increasing digitalization, which has been experienced more than ever during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Moreover and just as important in the processes of enlargement and strategic autonomy, is the EU’s capacity to export and impose its values and standards globally, and this ranges from data protection to the newly introduced climate standards that can be summed up to „the lower your compliance with standards, the more restricted your access” (President Charles Michel, 2020).

While increasing its international influence and presence, the EU has to show firstly the ability to infuse its values and its standards in its immediate neighbourhood, as these are also meant to strengthen the resilience of its Western Balkans partners and ensure full adherence to EU’s objectives along the accession path.

While greater political commitment is required from the EU Member States, the entire enlargement process is meant to guide the needed reforms as the Revised Enlargement Methodology and Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans countries are key blueprints in the policy dialogues and implementation processes. Effective and strong strategic autonomy means more than climate neutrality, digital sovereignty and EU standards and values and its implementation in various dimensions requires more than clear objectives and political declarations.

EU competencies backed up by the financial means to deliver are the key tools for promoting the EU values globally. According to the *Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA III) – Performance* (2021), the EU is set to spend 1.074,3 billion euros for its objectives to be fulfilled in the Multi-Annual Financial Framework 2021-2027, having an envelope of 14,16 billion euros, to which amounts from Recovery and Resilience plans (723,8 billion euros) and Economic Investment plans (9 billion euros) dedicated to the Western Balkans are added, with a potential to mobilise up to 20 billion euros in public and private investments in the next decade. Thus, the EIP will deploy significantly more investments in the region than China has done since 2012.

From the Thessaloniki European Council Summit (2003), which set EU enlargement as a priority for the integration of the Western Balkans, to the statement ahead of the EU-Western Balkans summit on 6th of October 2021 “the Western Balkans belong to the European Union. It is in our common interest, but I also believe, it is our destiny” (European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, 2021), the EU has had a compelling leading role in the region, protecting and promoting its values and interests and addressing the geopolitical challenges over the years.

Reflecting on Bulgaria’s veto to approve the opening of the intergovernmental conference [IGC] with North Macedonia, the German minister for EU Affairs stated that it was a “very severe political mistake at the expense of stability and security in the Western Balkans and that ultimately would massively endanger the security of Europe as a whole”, acknowledging thus the role the Western Balkans are playing in the security field for entire Europe.

The Central and South Eastern Europe energy connectivity, the Green Agenda, and the Energy Community are not just tools for energy transition and climate action in the Western Balkans but also tools for EU strategic leadership.

This is why the Next Generation EU (NGEU) recovery instrument and all EU-funded programmes, from the mainstream in the member states to Economic Investment Plan in Western Balkans, have clean energy and green deal as central instruments, with concrete actions and intermediary milestones.

As the coronavirus pandemic brought along an economic crisis and disruptions in the supply chains, the focus on building a stronger, sustainable and more resilient economy in the EU increased. And this is not something to address in the short term, only through NGEU, as a temporary measure after the pandemic, as the perspective of the EU on the global market faces increased weaknesses if something is not changed in its longer-term economic growth. From research and innovation, SMEs, and digitalisation to space projects, all fields could benefit from more investments and ultimately from the benefits of strategic autonomy.

Along with increasing and protecting its domestic production, a strong trade policy could deliver the set objectives, by using for example the border carbon adjustment mechanism. This would ensure that the carbon content of the goods imported at a lower price than the one on the domestic market of the EU does not lead to unfair competition for its producers and will also force the trading partners to pursue the same ambitious goals in the field of climate change. Also, when discussing the EU’s strategic autonomy in the context of trade policy, the focus should be placed on multilateralism and on defending its interests.

As the EU is a strong defender of multilateralism, hence in strong interdependence with other global actors, it must also ensure that its strong strategic autonomy is expressed in a well-functioning multilateral international economic system. That is precisely why, along with the economic measures, the external actions of the EU are of paramount importance in building a stronger strategic autonomy, which can further defend multilateralism. As the former HR/VP Mrs. Federica Mogherini (2017) stated: “We achieved security through cooperation. We built peace with multilateralism. This is the strength of the European Union” and this idea is followed-up by the European Commission in its priority - stronger Europe in the world”.

As addressed from the very beginning of this paper, the concept of strategic autonomy is also about the EU’s capabilities to pursue common goals in relation to the main external actors. And these efforts may be hindered by the new bipolarity in the international system US-China and by the bilateral relations of the Member States with the external actors.

The 2021 Strategic Foresight Report, released by the European Commission in September 2021 is tackling all the key challenges and global order shifts in direct correlation with the opportunities for the EU’s global leadership. What can be delivered and by when remains to be seen.

II. Russian headache

Since the Agreement on Trade and Economic Cooperation between the Soviet Union and the European Communities (1989), the cooperation between the two was marked by several EU enlargements (2004, 2007, 2013), among other challenges, with security, energy and of all sorts, being at the core of this relation.

Even though not directly opposing the enlargement process, Russia openly recognizes through Ambassador Vladimir Chizhov that “we want to be sure that whatever they do with the EU, be it accession, or association, or whatever, doesn’t infringe on our traditional relations” (Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the European Union, 2017).

While the role and intentions of Russia in the Western Balkans are well known (Secieru, 2020), since it has been strongly involved in the region since the 19th century, so is its inability to offer an economic perspective and a real alternative to the EU (EU Trade Relations With Western Balkans, 2020). However, the threats it poses to the region’s and EU’s stability and security should not be underestimated. While pursuing its “near abroads” and restoration of its sphere of influence foreign priorities, Russia is able to deploy in the Western Balkans all the soft power tools and skills aimed at disrupting, disordering, weakening and dividing the societies and their relation with the EU, creating thus a zone of hybrid warfare and instability.

Thus, Russia uses the Western Balkans as a tool to dissipate the “West’s” attention from its “near abroads” policy and divide their stabilization efforts between the former USSR space and the WB6 region.

As a traditional regional actor in the Western Balkans, and its third largest trading partner, accounting for 4,7% (EU Trade Relations With Western Balkans, 2020) and 6.6% FDI, in 2018, Russia’s influence in the region, however, is measured as well through its historical cultural and religious ties (Zeneli, 2020).

Nevertheless, even if its economic engagement is limited, it should be emphasized that it’s focused on strategic sectors, such as energy, with Gazprom the main gas supplier of the region and massive purchases of local refineries, metallurgy and banking. While some Western Balkan countries are 100% dependent on Russian gas such as Serbia (Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V., 2018), North Macedonia and Bosnia & Herzegovina (Statista, 2022), these countries are also “benefiting” from profound political influence - for example, the constant undermining of US and EU attempts to provide solutions on Kosovo, the political crisis in North Macedonia underpinned by the “wiretapping scandal”, encouragement of the secession rhetoric for Republika Srpska or even allegedly covert actions for the attempted coup in Montenegro during its 2016 elections (Higgins, 2016).

This business-political partnership Russia is nurturing ensures that the strategic political objectives are underpinned by economic leverage and coercion (Bechev, 2019).

Moreover, as stated at the beginning of this paper, Russia remains the most challenging actor for the EU both with regard to its internal affairs and with regard to the enlargement policy, as political consensus among the Member States is needed for both strategic autonomy and the enlargement process and the Russian influence projected also on the EU member states can dramatically hinder it.

Thus, with very high capital flows abroad, growing consistently since 2005 to around 1 trillion USD (Conley et al., 2019) and large shares of European companies’ exports and profits made in Russia, it can not only influence but also block and distort entire markets and industries, through an extensive network of companies and subsidiaries throughout EU. Some of the countries particularly exposed are those where the Russian FDI increased exponentially, from 5.4 billion euros in 2006 to close to 160 billion euros at the end of 2017, such as Italy, Austria, and the Netherlands, where the assets of Russian companies rose from 13.2 billion euro in 2007 to around 96 billion euro in 2017 which are in fact the countries gaining more profits from their relation with Russia. Here, the best example is the Austria Raiffeisen Bank, with more than 78% of its 2014 profits made in Russia (Conley et al., 2016).

Another growing way of exercising its influence in the EU is through high-level political figures, such as Former German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder, who joined Gazprom at the end of his mandate, Former French Prime Minister François Fillon, who recently joined the board of Russian giant Sibur, Austrian chancellors and foreign ministers, who supported Russian gas pipeline projects opposing the application of EU market rules, such as Former Austrian Foreign Minister Karin Kneissl, appointed in the board of directors of the Russian oil company Rosneft or Former Austrian Chancellor Christian Kern appointed in the board of directors of the Russian railway company or Former Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel, board member of Lukoil, just to name some of the most prominent. Unlike China, which in pursuit of its foreign policy objectives deploys economic and financial resources in the region, Russia is not aiming at constructing anything.

With a myriad of tools from disinformation, fake news and propaganda to politically motivated investments and political interference aimed at eroding democratic institutions through bribery and corruption, Russia seems committed to destabilizing the Western Balkans region, exploiting its weakness and undermining its European path, while not having the means or resources to become a real alternative to the EU.

III. China: systemic rival or EU partner in the Western Balkans

While in economic terms the EU was the main partner of the Western Balkans, for both exports (81 %) and imports (58 %) in 2021 and only 3.2% of export and 11.6% of imports with China (Eurostat, 2021) in 2021, 61% of the FDI is coming from EU (The Regional Cooperation Council, 2022) and less than 10% from China (Zweers et al., 2020), the economic alternative provided by China in the region, with huge loans provided by Chinese banks is creating a financial dependency leading to an environment of an increased political influence (Stojkovski et al., 2021). And this process entails also the abandonment of the EU values and standards, such as environmental and good governance (Rankovic, 2021).

Taking advantage of the opportunities existing in the 2010s, with Chinese increased economic development, manufacturing capacity, big investment needs in the Western Balkans, China's investments in the Western Balkans can be easily transposed into foreign policy objectives, with the Land–Sea Express Route (LSER), as a component of the Belt and Road Initiative, playing the central role in strengthening the capacity of the port of Piraeus to act as a hub for EU–China trade (World Markets Daily, 2021).

Moreover, acknowledging Serbia's role in the region it should be said that China did not take a particular interest in the development of all WB countries at the same pace, but rather focused its

investments and loans where political gains were in sight and all WB countries have a certain degree of diplomatic and economic relations with China and correlated loans attached to this relationship, with the majority of the Chinese investments contributing to LSER. Activities focused on building motorways, resource extraction and steel production, are all part of a strategic network of investments supporting Chinese interests in Europe.

While pursuing its interests, China made a tempting offer for the Western Balkans countries, an alternative to the more rule-based investments of the EU in the region, with promising commitments of 2.4 billion US dollars in FDIs alongside 6.8 billion US dollars in infrastructure loans, without taking any interest in transparent tendering, economic benefit and environmental impact (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2020).

With a total of 32 billion euros estimated to have been invested by China in the WB6 during 2009-2021 (Branislav, 2022) and with the Belt and Road Initiative serving as the main framework for these investments, China has increased its presence in the region giving rise to concerns regarding EU standards and values (environmental and public procurement standards, human rights, etc.).

Chinese offensive in the region, with its complementary initiatives and investments, culminating with the launch of the '16+1' initiative in 2012 (now known as the "17+1" with Greece joining in 2019), created also a source of political leverage over national governments in the region while placing itself at the EU doorstep, with countries like Greece, Italy and Hungary joining the BRI (Hillman, 2021). The high-speed railway linking Budapest to the Port of Piraeus via North Macedonia and Serbia, which is also part of LSER, is just one step clear in this direction and is being built by a consortium of Chinese state-owned company alongside a Hungarian company, with a 2.1 billion US dollars loan from Export-Import Bank of China (Frese, 2019). Not only that these connectivity networks are facilitating exports from China to the EU and decrease the time in which these are available on the EU market (Wang, 2022), but they are also important in supporting Chinese investments in the EU which have considerably increased (Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, 2020).

Nevertheless, the future of Chinese investments in the Western Balkans, relies however on its relations with the EU, as all these are meant to facilitate access to the European market.

On the EU side of things, there are 103 product categories in electronics, chemicals, minerals/metals, and pharmaceutical/medical products in which the EU has a critical strategic dependence on imports from China, however, China's overall importance for the EU in investment and trade, is still relatively minor (Policy Department for External Relations Directorate General for External Policies of the Union, 2020), when compared to the US, for example. China would have much more to lose from a

deteriorating relationship with the EU, which is not only a half of billion-people market but also one of the largest foreign investors (Zenglein, 2020) even though rather concentrated at a small number of member states and companies (Kratz et al., 2022).

In 2003 China and the EU agreed on the establishment of a strategic partnership, issuing policy papers laying down expected goals (Callahan, 2007), with culminated with the European Commission adopting policy paper “A maturing partnership: shared interests and challenges in EU-China relations”, in which the goal of assisting China in its transformation as a reliable partner in the international realm, incorporating EU values of good governance, accountability, transparency and human rights is set.

While the European Commission’s Joint Communication on the Elements for a new EU strategy on China (2016) remains the cornerstone for EU engagement, it was the EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation which presents the full potential for enhancing cooperation and the shared responsibilities for promoting peace, prosperity and sustainable development, consolidating and deepening the strategic partnership based on the principles of equality, respect and mutual trust.

The comprehensive strategic partnership from the EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda was complemented by the Joint communication of the European Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy EU-China – A strategic outlook (2019).

In this paper, the EU defined China for the first time as being a “systemic rival”, joining the US on this view and posing many questions on the future of the relations and their global impact. Underpinning this consideration is a series of factors which caused the deterioration of the EU-China bilateral relations, such as trade measures against the single market, as pointed out in the Strategic outlook. Hence, considering the impact on the EU’s set of values and standards of the alternative models for governance promoted by China, based on which the status of a systemic rival was considered, the EU position requires a “whole-of-EU” approach, requiring full unity in all formats of cooperation with China, ensuring consistency with EU law and policies.

Moreover, in the strategic outlook a 10 points plan was set out, in order to find the right balance of policy approaches for the relationship of EU-China in the current global context. Moreover, the objectives embedded in the strategic outlook are also reflected in the EU’s vision for strengthening its strategic autonomy in the years to come and the correlation between the two will be further elaborated.

Just one year after the strategic outlook was issued, the EU concluded the 7 years long negotiations on the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) between China and the EU, which is still pending for ratification in the European Parliament.

If and when the implementation of CAI will be effective, it is set to be the most ambitious Agreement with China, which will guarantee an unprecedented level of access to EU investors and EU companies in China and commit China to rules on state-owned enterprises, transparency, labour and environment, etc.

On the other hand, China's economic activity in the Western Balkans, while opaque and ecologically questionable, has contributed to the growth of many economies in this region, at the cost of socio-economic and fiscal sustainability. Even if Chinese investments in the Western Balkans can serve a political role (Newton, 2022), China's growing ability to engage in economic and political coercion has mostly taken the form of possibility rather than concrete action so far (Zeneli, 2019).

The strong dependencies on China shown more than ever by the EU and WB6 during the Covid-19 pandemic require fast responses not only in terms of reducing them but also in terms of swift and clear steer in the EU political dimension.

Since the very beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, China tried to position itself as a leading global actor in the response actions, having been the first country to experience the outbreaks and the lockdowns, having a strong manufacturing position globally for healthcare supplies and ultimately being the first to roll out the "vaccine diplomacy". It seems that China fully understood the meaning of "In the midst of every crisis, lies great opportunity", since it was precisely in the aftermath of another crisis (financial) in 2008 when it asserted itself as a strong global actor, Western Balkans included.

The already highly asymmetrical relationship between the Western Balkans and China has become even more multi-dimensional with the COVID-19 pandemic (Vangeli, 2021), with "mask and vaccine diplomacy" added to the Chinese support for the region, the pandemic was in fact an enabler of more influence in the WB6 countries.

Even though much less than the support from the EU dedicated to the fight against the coronavirus pandemic in the region, the medical supplies coming in as early as the 21st of March 2021, reinforced China's position in the region, showing that now more than ever, a common stance on China is needed among all member states, as they can no longer afford to remain divided on all China issues (Chrzová & Čermák, 2020).

And this coordination was already enabled at the level of EU Member States, while they addressed the need for coordination safeguarding the green transport corridors and the coordinated movement of persons through the Covid green pass.

Thus, while looking for new ways for deterring the influence of external actors in this area of so many competing interests, the EU should also take advantage of the pandemic crisis lessons and build further on them.

Hence, as climate challenges have no borders, pretty much as Covid-19, this might be the next common goal, on which member states could work together without divergent positions, showing both political will and strategic vision, in supporting non-EU member states decarbonising their economies and invest in climate change measures, while tackling also the challenges posed in this field by the external actors, such as China.

Moreover, in order to show its commitment and that it has the necessary means for addressing investments needs in building resilient, smart and quality infrastructure while observing all EU values and standards, the European Commission and the EU High Representative launched the Global Gateway (2021), aimed at boosting smart and clean investments in sectors as digital, climate and energy, transport, health, education and research, mobilising up to 300 billion euro.

Conclusions

Defending multilateralism over the years brought the EU into a position of increased economic interdependence which now also has high political stakes. EU's capacity to act autonomously is deemed effective when the decisions and their implementation do not depend on the external actors, with which the EU may choose to cooperate in the attainment of its objectives, but rather depend on the EU's capacity to act, in a unanimously and strategically manner. Therefore, the entire process of strengthening the strategic autonomy and WB6 integration is underpinned by the political will of the Member States and their capacity of pursuing common goals, applying the whole-of-Europe approach in relation to the external actors and in pursuing its interests globally.

China's economic activity in the Western Balkans has contributed to the growth of many economies in this region, truth be told, at the cost of neglecting socio-economic and fiscal sustainability. Moreover, China's investments in the Western Balkans can serve a political role, influencing these countries towards a path farther from the EU's objectives in the region, and hindering their road towards accession. But China's growing ability to engage in economic and political coercion has mostly taken the form of possibility rather than concrete action so far.

However, this influence will quickly diminish with the implementation of the Chinese "dual circulation" economy strategy, triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic, at a time when the EU is revitalising the accession process, through the Revised Enlargement Methodology, designed to jump-

start the enlargement process in a more credible, predictable and dynamic way. Moreover, with the Brdo Summit Declaration, “The EU reconfirms its commitment to the enlargement process and its decisions taken thereon, based upon credible reforms by partners, fair and rigorous conditionality and the principle of own merits” (European Council, 2021).

Thus, in order to bring peace, prosperity and stability to the region, the European Commission proposed a process based on mutual trust and clear commitments from both sides, with a focus on implementing fundamental reforms in the field of rule of law, democratic institutions and economies.

With a consensus among the member states and a whole-of-EU approach, the EU can take things to a whole new level in its relation with China, having already created the tools working across different policy areas and sectors, as shown above. Moreover, strong cooperation with China in order to promote common interests at the global level can only be beneficial for both parties.

Unlike China, the political influence of Russia in the region and at the level of the EU has only a destructive purpose, fuelling nationalist tendencies, “anti-“ sentiments and disruptions, horizontally, at the level of the entire society (Bechev, 2019). As an example, by fuelling the nationalist and secessionist current in Bosnia & Herzegovina, Russia shows once more that it is using Republika Srpska as a lever in its strategy to destabilize the Western Balkans. And the pro-Putin protests organized in many cities of Republika Srpska, including Banja Luka, Trebinje and Bratunac, heavily publicized by the Kremlin-served media, are yet another proof of Russia's instrumentalisation of this entity. For its eternal conflict with the West, the Balkans represented a space where Russia tried to divert and divide the energy of its rival from the scene of the main battle for its interests, namely the eastern space.

In essence, Russia has no direct interest in any of the Balkan countries, except as a market for its energy sources, but there is plenty of room there to spread and maintain instability, sowing mistrust in Western structures, constantly working to maintain tensions, primarily ethnic and religious.

In 2019, Vladimir Putin’s adviser put this approach in brief and blunt words: “Russia interferes in your brains, we change your conscience, and there is nothing you can do about it” (Maza, 2019).

Strategic partners of the EU or not, systemic rivals for the EU or not, the EU needs to find common solutions rather than diverging visions and approaches for its engagement with external actors (Mogherini, 2014; European Commission and the EU High Representative of the Union for Foreign affairs and Security policy, 2019).

Rather than just preventing disruptions and deepening fragmentation, the EU should rapidly find ways to adapt to a swiftly changing global environment and enhance its efforts to infuse its rules, standards

and values in a more pragmatic manner in its relations with the external actors, as this is rather a question of survival of the European project. Otherwise, the EU is running the risk of becoming irrelevant in the new global order.

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