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**Europeanisation of foreign policy in the Western Balkans: explaining the
change in North Macedonia's alignment with the EU sanctions against
Russia (2014 – 2022)**

Master's thesis

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Authorship declaration

I have prepared this thesis independently. All the views of other authors, as well as data from literary sources and elsewhere, have been cited.

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the puzzling change in North Macedonia's alignment with the EU's restrictive measures against Russia between 2014 and 2022, which diverged from the stable positions of other countries in the Western Balkan region. Drawing on the Europeanisation literature, the thesis tests three alternative causal mechanisms to explain North Macedonia's change in alignment: external incentives model, role-playing, and thick socialisation. By applying the process-tracing method, the thesis reaches a conclusion that role-playing was the most likely mechanism behind North Macedonia's change in alignment. North Macedonia demonstrated partial ambiguity of alignment process, meaning that no tangible reward was provided by the EU in exchange for sanctions alignment and also no full match in norms and identities was present to support such action. Moreover, the automatic nature of CFSP alignment was found due to previous high rates of alignment, together with political actors' references to North Macedonia's social role as a candidate country in justifying alignment with EU sanctions against Russia. In light of the empirical evidence, this thesis concludes that the role-playing mechanism is the most likely explanation. The findings demonstrate that in the context of foreign policy Europeanisation, role-playing, in a characteristic instrumental form, can drive alignment of candidate countries.

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Introduction

The EU is becoming an increasingly visible actor on the international stage. As one of the main instruments to influence foreign affairs, the EU develops and applies its own restrictive measures, which are adopted by consensus by EU Member States. In parallel, the number of Member States grows as the EU continues to expand geographically, with the Western Balkan countries being the main focus of its enlargement policy for the past decades. In this context, it is becoming increasingly important for the EU to ensure that (potential) candidate countries support its foreign policy objectives, including alignment with restrictive measures, to ensure the smooth functioning of its common foreign policy decision-making.

In 2014, Albania and Montenegro were the only Western Balkan states that joined the EU restrictive measures against Russia, while Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Serbia did not align. When a new sanctions package followed Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2022, the pattern of (non-)alignment remained similar for Albania, Montenegro and Serbia, while North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina went from non-alignment to alignment.

Previous research that explored the alignment of Western Balkan states with EU restrictive measures against Russia focused on the alignment of Montenegro and Albania in 2014.¹ Using process-tracing, Marošková and Spurná uncovered the mechanisms behind their alignment. The findings indicate the prevalence of constructivist explanations: the role-playing mechanism was the most likely mechanism in the case of Montenegro's alignment, while socialisation was responsible for alignment in Albania's case. Somewhat contradictory to previous research, the authors found that the external incentives model did not explain alignment in either case, despite its prevalence in other policy areas.²

While this research has shed light on the reasons for Albania's and Montenegro's alignment in 2014, new dynamics in the foreign policy Europeanisation in the Western Balkan region have emerged since then. The EU's restrictive measures that followed after Russia's full-scale military aggression against Ukraine in 2022 have been adopted not only by Albania and Montenegro, but also by North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, which previously did

¹ Tereza Marošková and Karolína Spurná, "Why Did They Comply? External Incentive Model, Role-Playing and Socialization in the Alignment of Sanctions against Russia in Albania and Montenegro", *Journal of European Integration* 43, no. 8 (2021): 1005–23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2021.1906238>.

² Ibid.

not align, while Serbia refused to align notwithstanding EU's repeated calls to do so. In February 2022, North Macedonia decided not only to align itself with the Council's decision on the newest sanctions packages but also to implement all sanctions that have been in place since 2014, thus achieving a 100% alignment rate. Bosnia and Herzegovina, in its turn, has formally aligned with the Council decisions on restrictive measures, but has since struggled to implement them due to domestic political deadlock. What is more, the Serbian members of the tripartite Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina maintain that no formal decision to align was taken.³

This cross-country and temporal variation in alignment with the EU's Russia-related sanctions in the Western Balkan region is puzzling given that most of the countries are accession candidates or potential candidates and we could expect a similar effect of Europeanisation. We could also expect a similar alignment pattern to persist from 2014 to 2022, but while for some Western Balkan states it remained the same, for others it changed.

In the context where the alignment pattern with sanctions against Russia is stable for the rest of the region, the cases of North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina's variation in alignment between 2014 and 2022 remain unexplained. In this thesis, I focus on the case of North Macedonia as a "more likely" case where Europeanisation effects on CFSP alignment can be traced. Due to its complex decision-making system, Bosnia and Herzegovina presents a "least likely" case, making it more difficult to trace the workings of the causal mechanisms.

Therefore, to complement previous research and shed light on the drivers of foreign policy alignment among EU candidates, this thesis aims to conduct process-tracing on a new case of North Macedonia, uncovering the causal mechanism behind a shift from refusal to align with EU sanctions against Russia in 2014 to a swift decision to align in 2022. Hence, my research question is formulated as follows: *What explains the change in alignment of North Macedonia with regard to the EU restrictive measures against Russia between 2014 and 2022?*

In addressing this research puzzle I draw inspiration from the research design adopted in the study by Marošková and Spurná,⁴ however, I consider a new case, take into account a more

³ Aleksandar Ivković, "What Is the State of the Implementation of the Sanctions on Russia in the Western Balkans?", *European Western Balkans*, 4 June 2022, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2022/06/04/what-is-the-state-of-the-implementation-of-the-sanctions-on-russia-in-the-western-balkans/>; Sarajevo Times, "Cvijanovic Denies That BiH Has Joined the Countries That Have Imposed Sanctions against Russia", *Sarajevo Times*, 12 April 2023, <https://sarajevotimes.com/cvijanovic-denies-that-bih-has-joined-the-countries-that-have-imposed-sanctions-against-russia/>.

⁴ Marošková and Spurná, "Why Did They Comply? External Incentive Model, Role-Playing and Socialization in the Alignment of Sanctions against Russia in Albania and Montenegro".

extended timeline, and trace the change of alignment pattern in a case where it went from non-alignment to alignment. Moreover, I uncover new causal dynamics that highlight the importance of the communicative function of alignment and its strategic use. To do so, I use Europeanisation literature to derive three causal mechanisms and test them by applying process-tracing to the evidence collected in relation to North Macedonia's alignment with sanctions against Russia.

It needs to be noted that the aim of analysis is not to explain non-alignment of North Macedonia in 2014, when sanctions were first imposed against Russia, but rather to account for the transformation from non-alignment to alignment that happened in February 2022 as the main outcome of interest.

This thesis is structured as follows. In the first chapter, I build a theoretical framework for the study. The chapter consists of three elements: the overview of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and third-country alignment practice, the overview of the Europeanisation literature and the three mechanisms that explain CFSP alignment, and the theoretical expectations. In the second chapter, I lay out the methodology, focusing on explaining case selection, the process-tracing method, and the main propositions and data sources used. The third chapter is devoted to the empirical analysis of North Macedonia's change in alignment with Russia-related sanctions within the framework of the three causal mechanisms, with each mechanism analysed in a separate subsection. Finally, in the conclusion section, I present the main findings of this thesis and suggest steps for future research.

1. Theoretical framework: Europeanisation of EU candidates' foreign policy

Alignment of the Western Balkan countries with EU Common Foreign and Security Policy, and EU's sanctions in particular, is part of broader Europeanisation processes that take place among accession candidates and countries in the wider EU neighbourhood.

In this chapter, I begin with an overview of the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy and the alignment of third countries, including EU candidate states, with it. Then, as EU candidates' alignment with EU's foreign policy falls within Europeanisation processes, I overview the Europeanisation literature to explain what Europeanisation is, how it affects foreign policy and through which mechanisms it can operate, focusing on three Europeanisation mechanisms:

external incentives model, thick socialisation, and role-playing. Finally, I formulate the theoretical expectations based on these mechanisms.

1.1. Common foreign and security policy and third countries' alignment

Europeanisation processes encompass all policy fields, and foreign policy is no exception. Foreign policy of the EU as a collective actor is essentially expressed in the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) framework, alignment with which is the main instance of foreign policy Europeanisation for accession candidates.

The Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) represents the main foreign policy framework of the EU. Through CFSP, the EU funds civilian missions, conflict prevention, peacebuilding, counter-terrorism, non-proliferation and disarmament measures, as well as adopts restrictive measures, participates in international organisations such as UN and OSCE and promotes EU's policies through EU Special Representatives.⁵

CFSP emerged in 1993, with the adoption of the Maastricht Treaty with the goals of “preserving peace, strengthening international security, promoting international cooperation and developing and consolidating democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms”.⁶ It was then modified by the subsequent treaties, especially the Lisbon Treaty (2009). Following the Lisbon Treaty, CFSP is externally represented by the ‘double-hatted’ position of the EU's High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the Commission (HR/VP). In the CFSP framework, the HR/VP acts as a chairperson of the Foreign Affairs Council and is a head of the EU's diplomatic service called the European External Action Service (EEAS).⁷

CFSP decision-making is governed by the intergovernmental (as opposed to supranational) principle, which essentially means that decisions are taken by consensus. Each Member State must agree to the common position for it to be adopted as a common policy. Formally, the

⁵ European Commission, “Common Foreign and Security Policy - European Commission”, Service for Foreign Policy Instruments, accessed 15 January 2024, https://fpi.ec.europa.eu/what-we-do/common-foreign-and-security-policy_en; EUR-Lex, “Foreign and Security Policy - EUR-Lex”, accessed 11 January 2024, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/summary/chapter/foreign_and_security_policy.html.

⁶ European Parliament, “Foreign Policy: Aims, Instruments and Achievements | Fact Sheets on the European Union | European Parliament”, 30 September 2023, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/158/foreign-policy-aims-instruments-and-achievements>; European Commission, “Common Policy: Aims, Instruments and Achievements | Fact Sheets on the European Union | European Parliament”, 30 September 2023, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/158/foreign-policy-aims-instruments-and-achievements>; European Commission, “Common Foreign and Security Policy - European Commission”, accessed 11 January 2024, https://commission.europa.eu/funding-tenders/find-funding/eu-funding-programmes/common-foreign-and-security-policy_en.

⁷ EUR-Lex, “Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) - EUR-Lex”, accessed 15 January 2024, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/EN/legal-content/glossary/common-foreign-and-security-policy-cfsp.html>.

CFSP is managed by the Foreign Affairs Council, which consists of the foreign ministers of each EU Member State.

Due to the unanimous nature of CFSP decisions, it is essential for the EU to ensure that prospective EU members align with CFSP and its underlying values to enable common foreign policy action. Therefore, CFSP is a part of the accession negotiation process for the EU candidates. Foreign, security and defence policy is covered by Chapter 31 of the *acquis communautaire* and prospective members are expected “to progressively align with EU statements, and to apply sanctions and restrictive measures when and where required” to secure EU membership.⁸

More broadly, the practice of alignment of third countries with the CFSP of the EU began in 1994 and entered the everyday practice in 1997, after enlargement negotiations with several CEE began.⁹ Importantly, the EU invites not only the candidate states but also non-EU EEA countries and selected Eastern Partnership countries. Normally, 14 non-EU countries with various degrees of association with the EU are invited to align with CFSP declarations, including those regarding the adoption of restrictive measures. These countries can be grouped into three categories:¹⁰

- *Candidate states*: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Moldova, Ukraine and Turkey
- *Non-EU EEA countries*: Iceland, Lichtenstein, and Norway
- *Selected Eastern Partnership countries*: Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia.¹¹

⁸ European Commission, “Chapters of the Acquis - European Commission”, 6 June 2012, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/conditions-membership/chapters-acquis_en.

⁹ Elisabeth Johansson-Nogués, “The Fifteen and the Accession States in the UN General Assembly: What Future for European Foreign Policy in the Coming Together of the ‘Old’ and the ‘New’ Europe?”, *European Foreign Affairs Review* 9, no. 1 (2004): 67–92, <https://doi.org/10.54648/eerr2004004> cited in Florent Marciacq and Natalia Sanmartín Jaramillo, “When the European Union Speaks on Behalf of Non-European Union States: A Critical Appraisal of the European Union’s Alignment Mechanism in Multilateral Fora”, *European Security* 24, no. 2 (2014): 206, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2014.921617>.

¹⁰ Categorisation based on Elin Hellquist, “Either with US or against Us? Third-Country Alignment with EU Sanctions against Russia/Ukraine”, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 29, no. 3 (2016): 997–1021, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2016.1230591>. The list of countries was adapted based on their current status as of 2023.

¹¹ While Eastern ENP partners are invited to align, Mediterranean ENP countries are not. Barbe et al. explain that this is due to incapacity of the EU to demonstrate enough incentives and legitimacy to the Mediterranean countries. See Esther Barbé et al., “Drawing the Neighbours Closer ... to What?,” *Cooperation and Conflict* 44, no. 4 (2009): 391, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010836709344423>. Moreover, according to the concept of ‘flexible EUropean integration’ introduced by Sandra Lavenex, “Concentric Circles of Flexible ‘European’ Integration: A Typology of EU External Governance Relations,” *Comparative European Politics* 9, no. 4–5 (2011): 372–93, <https://doi.org/10.1057/cep.2011.7>, the intensiveness of relations between the EU and neighbouring countries reduces with the geographical distance from the EU, which is a contributing factor.

Invited non-EU states, including accession candidates, have several venues where they can demonstrate foreign policy alignment with the EU's CFSP. First, they can align themselves with the EU's statements in international organisations, such as the UN General Assembly, OSCE and the Council of Europe.¹² Second, they can align with EU's declarations issued by the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, also referred to as CFSP declarations.¹³ A common feature of all settings where alignment with EU CFSP takes place is that non-EU states do not have a say in formulation or amendment of EU statements and decisions, as they are presented with a "take-it-or-leave-it" choice.¹⁴

There is an important distinction between the types of alignment depending on whether it is a declaratory exercise or whether it requires some action from the aligning state. EU's statements in international organisations and a big share of CFSP declarations are merely declaratory and do not incur high costs on aligning states.¹⁵ Statements in international organisations usually represent the EU's positions on various topics on the agenda. CFSP declarations issued by the HR/VP, in their turn, can be roughly split into two types. The first broad type refers to declarations that are issued in response to some international events to voice the EU's positions. Such declarations cover a broad range of issues and can, for instance, condemn or compliment the actions of third states, commemorate special days (such as International Human Rights Day) or support developments in international institutions (e.g. in the UN).¹⁶ The second type

¹² In 2011 the EU, as an observer, has gained a right to speak on behalf of the EU Member States in the UN General Assembly (UNGA). The High Representative for CFSP, the President of the European Council, as well as the European Commission and the EU delegation can present EU positions in the UN. Non-EU states can align themselves with the statements that the EU presents in the UN General assembly. See: "EU at the UN General Assembly – Consilium", accessed January 13, 2024,

<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/unga/>. In OSCE, EU regularly invites non-EU states to align with declarations issued by the EU delegation. Since 2004, the group of countries invited to align has been expanding. After 10 countries joined the EU in 2004, alignment was offered to Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia (all current EU members) and Turkey. Over the next several years it expanded to include Iceland, Lichtenstein, Norway, Ukraine, Moldova, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Serbia, Montenegro, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Armenia, Andorra and San Marino. As a result, the EU has the capacity to make statements on behalf of two-thirds of OSCE (44 out of 56 states). See Marciacq and Jaramillo, "When the European Union speaks on behalf of non-European Union states: a critical appraisal of the European Union's alignment mechanism in multilateral fora", 209-10.

¹³ Marciacq and Jaramillo, "When the European Union speaks on behalf of non-European Union states: a critical appraisal of the European Union's alignment mechanism in multilateral fora", 203-220; Paul James Cardwell, "The Legalisation of European Union Foreign Policy and the Use of Sanctions," *Cambridge Yearbook of European Legal Studies* 17 (2015): 287–310, <https://doi.org/10.1017/cel.2015.11>.

¹⁴ Marciacq and Jaramillo, "When the European Union speaks on behalf of non-European Union states: a critical appraisal of the European Union's alignment mechanism in multilateral fora", 208.

¹⁵ Barbé et al., "Drawing the neighbours closer... to what? Explaining emerging patterns of policy convergence between the EU and its neighbours", 390.

¹⁶ Paul James Cardwell, "Values in the European Union's Foreign Policy: An Analysis and Assessment of CFSP Declarations," *European Foreign Affairs Review* 21, no. 4 (2016): 605–6, <https://doi.org/10.54648/eerr2016046>.

of declarations are those that are issued specifically to indicate third states alignment with Council Decisions on restrictive measures.¹⁷

The EU's restrictive measures, or sanctions, hold a special place within the CFSP toolkit and represent a very specific form of non-EU countries' alignment with CFSP, as unlike other foreign policy output (e.g. issuing common positions), they are legally binding for the EU Member States. There are different types of restrictive measures implemented by the EU. They can differ by source as well as thematically. The latter type reflects the fact that in addition to transposing or reinforcing sanctions adopted by the UN, the EU can develop and pursue its own sanctions. Then, thematically, sanctions can either target states or be focused on broader issue areas, or thematic areas: terrorism, human rights, cyber-attacks and chemical weapons.¹⁸

The EU started developing and imposing its own restrictive measures in 1980. Gradually, sanctions have become a centrepiece of the EU's CFSP, as the EU utilised it more and more often.¹⁹ For the EU, restrictive measures represent the strongest tool in the CFSP arsenal that can be used to achieve foreign policy goals due to the absence of its own military power, but in the context of a significant economic weight the EU holds. As put by Hellquist, "for a Union that still lacks its own military, sanctions can be seen as a substitute for the use of force [...], and alignment with sanctions draws normative boundaries in ways analogous to military alignment".²⁰

¹⁷ Ibid. An example of such a Declaration: "Declaration by the HR on behalf of the EU on the alignment of certain third countries concerning restrictive measures in respect of actions undermining or threatening the territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence of Ukraine. On 9 March 2022, the Council adopted Council Decision (CFSP) 2022/3971. The Council decided to add 160 individuals to the list of persons, entities and bodies subject to restrictive measures set out in the Annex to Decision 2014/145/CFSP. The Candidate Countries North Macedonia, Montenegro and Albania, the country of the Stabilisation and Association Process and potential candidate Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the EFTA countries Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway, members of the European Economic Area, as well as Ukraine align themselves with this Council Decision. They will ensure that their national policies conform to this Council Decision. The European Union takes note of this commitment and welcomes it". See: Council of the EU, "Declaration by the HR on behalf of the EU on the alignment of certain...", March 15, 2022, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/03/15/declaration-by-the-hr-on-behalf-of-the-eu-on-the-alignment-of-certain-third-countries-concerning-restrictive-measures-in-respect-of-actions-undermining-or-threatening-the-territorial-integrity-sovereignty-and-independence-of-ukraine/>.

¹⁸ Paul James Cardwell and Erica Moret, "The EU, sanctions and regional leadership," *European Security* 32, no. 1 (2023): 1-21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2022.2085997>.

¹⁹ Cardwell, "The legalisation of European Union foreign policy and the use of sanctions", 294-98.

²⁰ Hellquist, "Either with us or against us? Third-country alignment with EU sanctions against Russia/Ukraine", 998.

Over the years, the number of CFSP declarations²¹ that relate to restrictive measures has grown, and such declarations constitute around one-quarter to one-third of all declarations.²² In this thesis I concentrate on examining alignment with EU's restrictive measures as an instance of foreign policy Europeanisation of accession candidates. Alignment with restrictive measures is noteworthy as it not only demonstrates declaratory support for the EU positions but also presupposes implementation of the sanctions regimes, which makes it the most tangible form of alignment and allows to better understand the impact of the EU on third states foreign policies.

1.2. Explaining sanctions alignment of EU accession countries through Europeanisation mechanisms

The Western Balkans' alignment with EU CFSP, and with EU's restrictive measures in particular, constitutes part of broader Europeanisation processes in candidate countries and countries in the EU's wider neighbourhood. Therefore, to explain sanctions alignment, we need to first understand the concept of Europeanisation and the explanations it offers, which I will do in this section.

Europeanisation is arguably the most commonly used concept in European Union studies, with plenty of scholarly contributions made over the last several decades. The notion of Europeanisation originated in the 1980s and gained prominence in the 1990s.²³ It was initially applied to describe and explain the policy and institutional changes that took place in the EU Member States as a result of intensified European integration. Later, the applications of Europeanisation began to include "quasi-member states" such as Switzerland and Norway, as well as EU membership candidate states.²⁴ During that time, Europeanisation processes have been studied in relation to 2004 enlargement countries²⁵ and later to Bulgaria, Romania²⁶ and

²¹ While restrictive measures are adopted via CFSP Decisions, the third countries alignment is made public via Declarations. Therefore, declarations are usually analysed. See Cardwell and Moret, "The EU, sanctions and regional leadership"; Cardwell, "Values in the European Union's foreign policy: An analysis and assessment of CFSP declarations".

²² Cardwell and Moret, "The EU, sanctions and regional leadership", 7; analysed in Cardwell, "Values in the European Union's foreign policy: An analysis and assessment of CFSP declarations".

²³ Johan P. Olsen, "The Many Faces of Europeanization", *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 40, no. 5 (2002): 922, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5965.00403>.

²⁴ Frank Schimmelfennig, "Europeanization beyond Europe," *Living Rev. Euro. Gov.* 10 (2015): 5, <https://www.europeangovernance-livingreviews.org/Articles/lreg-2015-1>.

²⁵ E.g., Frank Schimmelfennig and Ulrich Sedelmeier. "Governance by conditionality: EU rule transfer to the candidate countries of Central and Eastern Europe". *Journal of European public policy* 11, no 4 (2004): 661-679.

²⁶ See, for instance, Aneta Borislavova Spendzharova, "Bringing Europe in? The impact of EU conditionality on Bulgarian and Romanian politics," *Southeast European Politics* 4, no. 2-3 (2003): 141-156.

Croatia.²⁷ Turkey and accession candidates and potential candidates in the Western Balkan countries have been featured in Europeanisation literature as well.²⁸

In the past decade, Europeanisation became an increasingly common framework for studying processes in the broader EU neighbourhood, including states without clear prospects for joining the EU, such as the European Neighbourhood Policy countries in Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean.²⁹

The literature offers various understandings of Europeanisation. In one of the first attempts to unify the diverging uses of this concept, Olsen distinguished five types of Europeanisation, or rather applications of the concept: geographical enlargement of the EU, establishment of supranational European institutions, political integration of Europe, political unification of Europe, and export of EU institutions.³⁰

A definition offered by Radaelli is more precise yet still broad enough to encompass the multifaceted nature of Europeanisation; it presents Europeanisation as:

processes of (a) construction, (b) diffusion and (c) institutionalization of formal and informal rules, procedures, policy paradigms, styles, ‘ways of doing things’ and shared beliefs and norms which are first defined and consolidated in the making of EU public policy and politics and then incorporated in the logic of domestic discourse, identities, political structures and public policies.³¹

Whilst this definition has been developed for studying EU Member States, it can also be applied to candidate states. Radaelli refers to the suitability of such an application by citing a study by Grabbe, who in the same volume applies this definition of Europeanisation to CEE accession candidates by concentrating on its diffusion and institutionalisation aspects.³²

In what is now among the most cited works on the Europeanisation of CEE states, Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier conceptualise Europeanisation as the process of transfer of

²⁷ See, for instance, Jelena Subotic, “Europe is a State of Mind: Identity and Europeanization in the Balkans,” *International studies quarterly* 55, no. 2 (2011): 309-330.

²⁸ E.g., Gergana Noutcheva and Senem Aydın-Düzgit, “Lost in Europeanisation: the Western Balkans and Turkey,” In *From Europeanisation to Diffusion*, 59-78 (Routledge, 2020); Tanja A. Börzel, “When Europeanization hits limited statehood: The Western Balkans as a test case for the transformative power of Europe,” In *European integration and transformation in the Western Balkans*, 173-184, (Routledge, 2013).

²⁹ Schimmelfennig, “Europeanization beyond Europe”, 5.

³⁰ Olsen, “The Many Faces of Europeanization”, 923–924.

³¹ Claudio M. Radaelli, “The Europeanization of public policy,” in *The politics of Europeanization*, ed. Kevin Featherstone and Claudio M. Radaelli (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 30.

³² Heather Grabbe, “Europeanization goes east: power and uncertainty in the EU accession process,” in *The politics of Europeanization*, ed. Kevin Featherstone and Claudio M. Radaelli (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 303-327.

EU governance and associated rules, or simply “rule transfer” to domestic political systems.³³ It comprises an array of changes, including transmission of EU legislation into the domestic law, reform of domestic institutions, and bringing domestic political practices in line with those in the EU.³⁴

In this thesis, I refer to the Europeanisation of norms, policies and institutions, meaning the broader definition suggested by Radaelli. It also needs to be noted that as I concentrate primarily on the Europeanisation of the candidate countries, I therefore do not focus on the literature that examines Europeanisation in the EU Member States and the EU neighbourhood beyond the candidate countries.

Having given an overview of what Europeanisation is, let us now turn to some of the related concepts that allow us to understand how Europeanisation operates. Looking back into the roots of Europeanisation literature, one can find its foundation in the new institutionalism paradigm,³⁵ as Europeanisation approaches shift away from foreign policy analysis with its focus on agency. At some point, three distinct streams of new institutionalism took shape: rational choice institutionalism, sociological institutionalism, and historical institutionalism.³⁶ Rational choice institutionalism and sociological institutionalism in particular provided different angles for Europeanisation scholars to theorise the process of rules, policies, norms and institutions transfer. We can divide these approaches as operating through rationality or socialisation. These two types correspond to two logics of action: the logic of consequences and the logic of appropriateness.³⁷ Within these two broad approaches, I rely on the three distinct causal mechanisms that I am going to use to empirically analyse North Macedonia’s sanctions alignment (see the figure below).

³³ Frank Schimmelfennig and Ulrich Sedelmeier, “Governance by conditionality: EU rule transfer to the candidate countries of Central and Eastern Europe,” *Journal of European public policy* 11, no 4 (2004): 662, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1350176042000248089>.

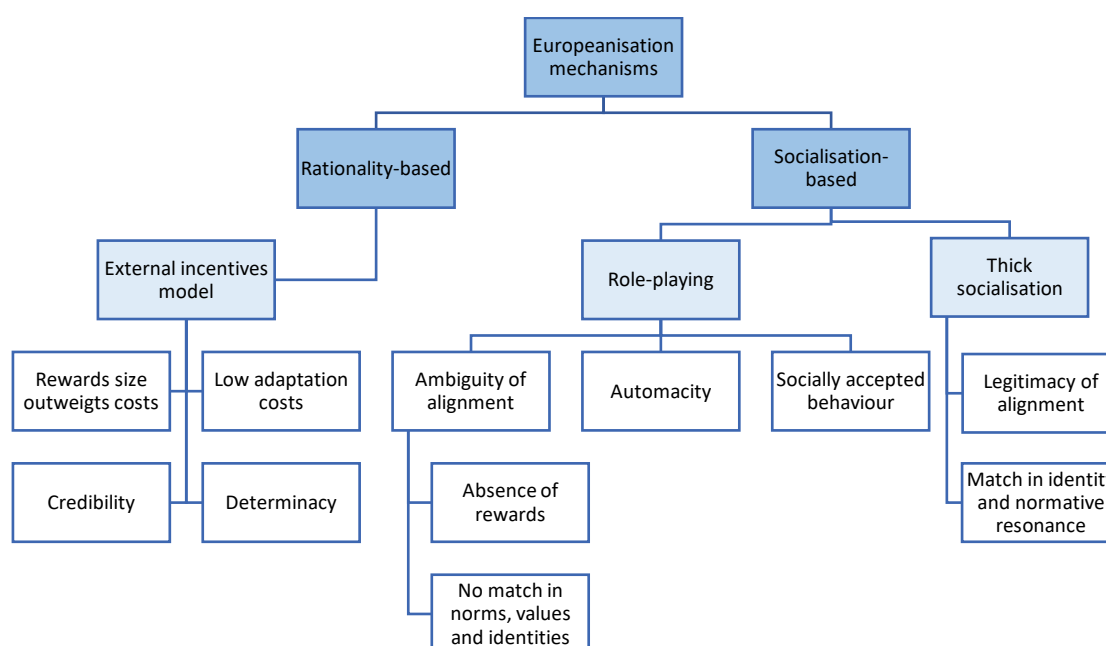
³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Maarten P. Vink and Paolo Graziano, “Challenges of a new research agenda,” in *Europeanization: New Research Agendas*, ed. Maarten P. Vink and Paolo Graziano, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan Europeanization: New research agendas. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2007), 11.

³⁶ Peter A. Hall and Rosemary C. R. Taylor, “Political Science and the Three New Institutionalisms,” *Political Studies* 44, no. 5 (1996): 936–957, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.1996.tb00343.x>.

³⁷ James G. March and Johan P. Olsen, “The institutional dynamics of international political orders,” *International organization* 52, no. 4 (1998): 943-969, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2601363>.

Figure 1. Three Europeanisation mechanisms and their elements



Source: own elaboration based on Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2004), Checkel (2005), Maroskova and Spurna (2021).

Apart from the distinction between rational and socialisation logics of Europeanisation, scholars have also introduced a distinction between direct and indirect EU influence. To account for various pathways and mechanisms of Europeanisation, Börzel and Risse suggested the use of the *diffusion* concept.³⁸ Unlike other concepts, such as external governance, this analytical distinction allows us to differentiate between the direct impact of the EU and domestic factors where the EU's influence is indirect.³⁹ The concept of diffusion in the context of Europeanisation literature encompasses several mechanisms through which EU norms, policies and institutions are transmitted to non-EU states. Börzel and Risse classify diffusion mechanisms into two groups: direct influence and emulation.⁴⁰ When it comes to direct influence mechanisms, the EU directly impacts non-EU states by promoting its norms and rules through capacity-building, conditionality, socialisation or persuasion.⁴¹ In contrast to direct influence mechanisms, emulation does not necessitate the active promotion of norms and institutions on the side of the EU. In emulation processes, the main drivers of policy and institutional change are the non-EU states themselves. Adoption of EU rules and institutions

³⁸ Tanja A. Börzel and Thomas Risse, "From Europeanization to diffusion," in *Domestic politics and norm diffusion in international relations*, ed. Thomas Risse, (Taylor and Francis, 2012), 293-298.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Legal coercion is another direct influence diffusion mechanism, which can only be applied to EU Member States.

happens when non-EU states are in pursuit of suitable institutional solutions or aim to mimic the behaviour of EU states. It functions through several tools: *competition*, *lesson-drawing*, and *mimicry*.⁴² These mechanisms also function according to either rationalist or sociological logics. While these mechanisms were developed to explain broader Europeanisation dynamics, they also can be applied to foreign policy Europeanisation. I elaborate on them in the respective sections below.

In the following sections, I delve deeper into the mechanisms that explain accession candidates' Europeanisation in general and CFSP alignment in particular. I start by presenting rationality-based explanations, concentrating on the external incentives model mechanism in particular. Then, I describe sociological explanations of Europeanisation and two causal mechanisms that are based on this logic: role-playing and thick socialisation.

1.2.1. Rationality-based explanations of sanctions' alignment

For quite some time, Europeanisation literature prioritised rationality-based explanations of non-EU states' adoption of EU rules, norms, policies and institutions. Rational choice institutionalism postulates that actors are rational and their actions are based on the logic of rational choice, or the "logic of consequences",⁴³ following which states act in a way that allows them to maximise their benefits.

Börzel and Risse's concept of diffusion introduced above distinguishes between direct influence and indirect influence (or emulation) as two main sets of tools through which norms, policies and institutions are transferred from the EU to national systems (introduced in the previous section).⁴⁴ Modes of diffusion that function via direct influence and are based on rational logic comprise *capacity-building* and *conditionality*. Both are based on the provision of incentives by the EU in exchange for domestic adoption of EU conditions and operate best in settings where third states are interested in increased cooperation with the EU.⁴⁵

Among the indirect influence diffusion tools, or those based on emulation of EU norms, institutions and policies without the EU's active promotion, *competition* and *lesson-drawing* are the main tools based on the rational logic of consequences.⁴⁶ Competition, as a mode of indirect EU influence, is at play when actors turn to EU rules in search of best practice solutions

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ March and Olsen, "The institutional dynamics of international political orders", 949-951.

⁴⁴ Börzel and Risse, "From Europeanization to diffusion", 293-298.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Mimicry is the third emulation tool and is described in the section on socialisation-based explanations.

to advance their performance in various areas where they compete with each other, be it political, social or economic objectives. The EU encourages the promotion of competition among countries that aspire to closer relations with the EU by establishing regional cooperation frameworks and setting benchmarks. Lesson-drawing is another indirect influence mode that is similar to competition in that actors follow the functional logic of finding the most suitable institutional solutions, however, it is more selective and is the main mechanism for countries outside of Europe.⁴⁷

Lesson-drawing is among the three models alongside the external incentives model and socialisation considered by Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier in the context of Europeanisation in CEE states.⁴⁸ The main idea behind lesson-drawing is that policy convergence occurs when a country looks for a policy solution to solve a domestic issue and adopts rules instrumentally, without any expectations of rewards from the EU, as it occurs without the direct influence of the EU. According to Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, the key conditions that underpin lesson-drawing are policy dissatisfaction, the existence of EU-centred epistemic communities, rule transferability and veto players. For the lesson-drawing mechanism to work it is necessary that due to dissatisfaction with a pressing policy issue a state starts looking for policy solutions abroad, orients itself on the EU's political system and decides to adopt EU's rules/policies due to their appropriateness for the local context.⁴⁹

However, I find the usefulness of this mechanism for explaining CFSP alignment debatable. Firstly, this approach presupposes the lack of direct EU influence (incentives or persuasion).⁵⁰ This is why, in my opinion, this mechanism is not that well suited to be applied to Europeanisation processes in accession candidates, as they are being exposed to the EU's influence. Secondly, for CFSP and sanctions alignment specifically, the procedure through which the states adopt EU sanctions suggests the presence of direct influence on the side of the EU. The EU *invites* states to align with its CFSP declarations, which in itself has an element of persuasion found in socialisation and conditionality mechanisms. In previous research, the lesson-drawing model has been predominantly used to explain the change in domestic policy.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Börzel and Risse, "From Europeanization to diffusion", 293-298.

⁴⁸ Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, "Governance by conditionality: EU rule transfer to the candidate countries of Central and Eastern Europe", 668.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ This is evident from the lack of publications that would apply this approach both in citations of the overviewed literature and demonstrated by the search in publications databases (keywords: *lesson-drawing + foreign policy/CFSP*). Moreover, the article by Marošková and Spurná that explains CFSP alignment of two Western Balkan countries does not use this mechanism in analysis either.

Hence in this thesis I will not consider lesson-drawing as a separate mechanism for explaining North Macedonia's change in alignment.

Lesson-drawing was also not found to be the key explanation of Europeanisation in CEE states, according to research by Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier.⁵² Generally, in Europeanisation literature that focuses on enlargement states, accession *conditionality* and the related external incentives model (EIM) have been most dominant in explaining the EU's influences on candidate states, where the eventual EU membership perspective is the main driver of rules transfer.⁵³

Conditionality is the instrument used by the EU where the EU offers rewards to non-EU states in return for a state following conditions set by the EU. Conditions are applied to diverse spheres requiring domestic political reforms, such as, for instance, reforming the judicial system, developing a functioning market economy, putting stricter border controls, protecting minority rights, and so on.⁵⁴ Rewards are also diverse and range from smaller rewards such as financial aid, to more significant intermediary rewards such as visa-free travel, to the ultimate reward of EU membership, with the latter made conditional on the full adoption of the EU *acquis communautaire* by an accession candidate.⁵⁵

Under EU conditionality, states make decisions about whether to fulfil the conditions set by the EU based on a cost-benefit calculation, taking into consideration provided incentives and disincentives.⁵⁶ Following a rational process of weighing benefits against costs, a state opts to accept EU conditions if the potential benefits outweigh the domestic adaptation costs.⁵⁷

⁵² Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, "Governance by conditionality: EU rule transfer to the candidate countries of Central and Eastern Europe", 668.

⁵³ Ibid, 661-679; Milada Anna Vachudová, *Europe Undivided Democracy, Leverage, and Integration after Communism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Heather Grabbe, *The EU's Transformative Power: Europeanization Through Conditionality in Central and Eastern Europe* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

⁵⁴ Heather Grabbe, "European Union Conditionality and the "Acquis Communautaire",," *International Political Science Review / Revue internationale de science politique* 23, no. 3 (2002): 249-268.

⁵⁵ Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, "Governance by conditionality: EU rule transfer to the candidate countries of Central and Eastern Europe", 663; Gergana Noutcheva, "Europeanisation and the compliance patterns of Balkan States", in *European foreign policy and the challenges of Balkan accession: Conditionality, legitimacy and compliance* (Routledge, 2012), 13-33.

⁵⁶ Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, "Governance by conditionality: EU rule transfer to the candidate countries of Central and Eastern Europe", 661-679; Vachudova, *Europe undivided: democracy, leverage, and integration after communism*; Grabbe, "The EU's Transformative Power: Europeanization Through Conditionality in Central and Eastern Europe".

⁵⁷ Ibid.

Earlier literature has found instrumental motives to be among the explanations for the alignment or non-alignment of non-EU states with the EU's positions in OSCE.⁵⁸ Instrumental motives are “rational responses to structural constraints”⁵⁹ and closely resemble the explanation offered by the external incentives model. According to Marciacq and Jaramillo, in some cases, alignment can be conditioned by the perspective of the EU accession and its perceived benefits, while non-alignment can occur when costs of alignment are higher than potential benefits.⁶⁰ The authors specifically name avoiding “retaliatory behaviours from influent partners” as one example, which is especially relevant in relation to sanctions alignment.⁶¹ In the case of North Macedonia specifically,⁶² instrumental motives were shown to be behind some of its alignment decisions in OSCE, for instance, the decision to join the EU's positions that condemned Russia's conduct with regard to the war with Georgia in 2008.⁶³

The instrument of conditionality is at the core of the *external incentives model* developed by Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier in the context of the 2004 enlargement, which has been the most prominent model of explaining why third states adopt EU rules, policies, norms, and institutions.⁶⁴ I formulate the main elements of this mechanism in the next section.

1.2.1.1. External incentives model

Within the external incentives model, several elements contribute to the success of policy transfer: the size of rewards offered by the EU, domestic adaptation costs, credibility of conditionality, and determinacy of EU conditions.⁶⁵ Let us overview these conditions in more detail.

The *size of rewards* offered by the EU influences the effectiveness of EU conditionality. The size of incentives offered increases the success of conditionality, with full EU membership being the greatest final reward, while intermediate rewards such as signing association

⁵⁸ Marciacq and Jaramillo, “When the European Union speaks on behalf of non-European Union states: a critical appraisal of the European Union's alignment mechanism in multilateral fora”, 203-220.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 213.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² For simplicity purposes, throughout the thesis we use the term “North Macedonia” to refer to the country even in the period before the constitutional name was changed (i.e. it is used to denote FYROM/Macedonia/Republic of Macedonia).

⁶³ Marciacq and Jaramillo, “When the European Union speaks on behalf of non-European Union states: a critical appraisal of the European Union's alignment mechanism in multilateral fora”, 217.

⁶⁴ Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, “Governance by conditionality: EU rule transfer to the candidate countries of Central and Eastern Europe”, 661-679.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

agreements, providing additional funding, or granting visa-free travel have a lesser effect.⁶⁶ At the same time, intermediate rewards have still proved their capacity to act as an effective means of conditionality and enact rules and policy adoption in situations when the final membership reward is distant or uncertain. This was demonstrated in particular by North Macedonia's compliance with the EU's conditions in the early stages of its Europeanisation path, which took place against a background of unclear enlargement prospects. As argued by Trauner, in the case of North Macedonia the EU complemented membership conditionality with policy conditionality, amplifying the value of the visa-free travel intermediary reward and linking it to a broad range of conditions in justice and home affairs.⁶⁷ Building on these findings, in my research I will consider possible intermediary rewards offered in exchange for sanctions alignment as a sufficient reward for compliance, instead of treating EU membership as the only reward.

Then, following the rationalist logic of the EIM, *domestic adaptation costs* must not exceed the offered rewards, otherwise, the decision to comply with the EU conditions would not be beneficial and would not be taken.⁶⁸ Based on the previous research, we can distinguish two types of costs: political and economic. Political costs refer to the existence of domestic veto players that can hinder the implementation of EU conditions.⁶⁹ Generally, the existence of Eurosceptic parties in government and legislature is expected to inflict political costs in case of the adoption of EU policies and rules. In the case of alignment with sanctions against Russia, political costs exist if there are Russia-friendly actors in government and parliament. Moreover, political costs can occur when a sanctioned state is perceived as a strategic partner.⁷⁰ Economic costs are especially relevant in the context of sanctions alignment, as implementation of sanctions can result in losses in trade and foreign direct investment from the targeted state.⁷¹

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Florian Trauner, "From membership conditionality to policy conditionality: EU external governance in South Eastern Europe," *Journal of European Public Policy* 16, no. 5 (2009): 777-778, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501760902983564>.

⁶⁸ Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, "Governance by conditionality: EU rule transfer to the candidate countries of Central and Eastern Europe", 665.

⁶⁹ Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, "Governance by conditionality: EU rule transfer to the candidate countries of Central and Eastern Europe", 666-7; Asya Zhelyazkova, Ivan Damjanovski, Zoran Nechev, Frank Schimmelfennig, "European Union conditionality in the Western Balkans: external incentives and Europeanisation," in *The Europeanisation of the Western Balkans: A Failure of EU Conditionality?*, ed. Jelena Džankić, Soeren Keil, and Marko Kmezić (Cham, Switzerland: Springer Nature, 2019), 29.

⁷⁰ Sebastian Mayer, "Common Foreign and Security Policy Alignment in the Southern Caucasus: Convergence, 'Pick and Choose' or Indifference?" *Europe-Asia Studies* 66, no. 10 (2014): 1679-1702, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2014.967556>.

⁷¹ Marošková and Spurná, "Why Did They Comply? External Incentive Model, Role-Playing and Socialization in the Alignment of Sanctions against Russia in Albania and Montenegro", 1007.

For compliance to be triggered through incentives, a state has to be confident that the EU will provide the offered reward. In this sense, two elements are required for the external incentives model to function: *credibility* and *determinacy* of conditionality.⁷² More specifically, for successful conditionality, the EU's position must be consistent and EU conditions must be clearly set to the non-EU countries that are targets of EU conditionality. Disagreements among the EU Member States regarding the provision of the reward and incoherent demands are detrimental to the conditionality's success.⁷³ Then, the EU should have greater bargaining power than the non-EU state. In other words, the non-EU state should be more interested in accession than the EU, which can be measured by asymmetrical economic dependencies. Finally, there should be minimal cross-conditionality from other actors. If other actors can offer credible rewards at lower domestic adjustment costs, EU conditionality can be weakened.⁷⁴ For the Western Balkan states, China and Russia are generally seen as the main sources of potential cross-conditionality.⁷⁵

I treat credibility and determinacy of conditionality as scope conditions for enabling this mechanism.⁷⁶ It is especially relevant for the Western Balkan region. Compared to the CEE states, which were the main subject of much of Europeanisation literature focusing on the candidate countries, the road towards EU membership is thornier for the Western Balkan states. In contrast to the previous enlargement rounds, EU conditionality in the Western Balkans became more diversified, with more conditions introduced, such as good neighbourly relations and a focus on regional cooperation between the Western Balkan states.⁷⁷ It also includes more steps with intermediate rewards such as visa-facilitation agreements and the introduction of the visa-free regime, as mentioned above.⁷⁸ Given that the capacity of the Western Balkan states to enact change is generally lower than in the previous enlargement countries, reforms in the field of democracy and free market economy proceed much slower and are impeded by internal

⁷² Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, "Governance by conditionality: EU rule transfer to the candidate countries of Central and Eastern Europe", 664-666.

⁷³ Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, "Governance by conditionality: EU rule transfer to the candidate countries of Central and Eastern Europe", 666.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Vuk Vuksanović, "Russia and China in the Western Balkans: The Spoiler Power and the Unexpected Power," in *Peace and Security in the Western Balkans: A Local Perspective*, ed. Nemanja Džuverović, Věra Stojarová (Taylor & Francis, 2022).

⁷⁶ Similarly to Marošková and Spurná, "Why Did They Comply? External Incentive Model, Role-Playing and Socialization in the Alignment of Sanctions against Russia in Albania and Montenegro".

⁷⁷ Othon Anastasakis, "The EU's Political Conditionality in the Western Balkans: Towards a More Pragmatic Approach", *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 8, no. 4 (2008): 365–377, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683850802556384>.

⁷⁸ Trauner, "From membership conditionality to policy conditionality: EU external governance in South Eastern Europe", 777–778.

divisions and contested statehood.⁷⁹ The fulfilment of the EU conditions and the final reward of EU membership are thus much more difficult to attain, affecting the overall credibility of enlargement.⁸⁰

Concerning CFSP, analysis conducted in relation to Montenegro's and Albania's alignment with the EU's restrictive measures against Russia in 2014 did not find that the external incentives mechanism was the cause behind their alignment.⁸¹ According to the authors, the EU did not utilise conditionality in relation to sanctions alignment and the scope conditions of credibility were weakened, therefore the mechanism was largely absent.⁸²

In Montenegro's case, the authors concluded that there were no rewards that the EU could offer in return for compliance. For a long time, Montenegro had already been in the process of accession negotiations, and there was no reward other than the final reward of membership. However, that reward was not achievable in the near future, as Montenegro still had a lot of progress to make. In case of Albania, the authors acknowledged that there granting Albania a candidate status was a possible reward. At the same time, they noted that it was chiefly linked to domestic reforms rather than CFSP.⁸³

1.2.2. Socialisation-based explanations of sanctions' alignment

As time went by and the pool of accession candidates grew, the importance of the context in which the Europeanisation processes operate became apparent. Scholars who studied the effects of Europeanisation in the context of the 2004 enlargement round granted the utmost importance to the rationalist explanations of third states' convergence with EU policy and the EU's use of conditionality in particular. While the normative component had been taken into account by scholars,⁸⁴ its effects were downplayed in such inquiries, owing to the fact that CEE states were oriented at EU's normative system and the EU enjoyed high legitimacy in CEE states.⁸⁵ This made the effects of socialisation more difficult to disentangle. Therefore, the

⁷⁹ Sandra Lavenex and Frank Schimmelfennig, "EU Rules beyond EU Borders: Theorizing External Governance in European Politics," *Journal of European Public Policy* 16, no. 6 (1 September 2009): 791–812, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501760903087696>.

⁸⁰ Anastasakis, "The EU's Political Conditionality in the Western Balkans".

⁸¹ Marošková and Spurná, "Why did they comply? External incentive model, role-playing and socialization in the alignment of sanctions against Russia in Albania and Montenegro", 1014, 1016.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ E.g. Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, "Governance by conditionality: EU rule transfer to the candidate countries of Central and Eastern Europe".

⁸⁵ Noutcheva, *European foreign policy and the challenges of Balkan accession: Conditionality, legitimacy and compliance*, chapter "Europeanization and the compliance patterns of Balkan States", section "EU socialization". (e-book).

external incentives mechanism had been the dominant explanation of policy and institutional transfer in these states.

As the scholarly focus expanded to new geographical spaces, including the Western Balkans, the implications of variations in the normative dimensions of national decision-making became more evident. Literature that studies Europeanisation beyond CEE states paints a more nuanced picture by exploring the significance of normative factors in the Europeanisation process.⁸⁶ These explanations are based on *sociological institutionalism*, which emphasizes the role of social and cultural factors in shaping actors' behaviour.⁸⁷ In this field of International Relations, sociological explanations correspond to the *constructivist* understanding of social reality. This means that states may adopt EU norms and policies following the logic of appropriateness, doing it not to maximise their benefits, but because they perceive it as socially desirable or as normatively appropriate.

As Schimmelfennig aptly summarises, socialisation “comprises all EU efforts to “teach” EU policies – as well as the ideas and norms behind them – to outsiders, to persuade outsiders that these policies are appropriate and, as a consequence, to motivate them to adopt EU policies”.⁸⁸ In this sense, Europeanisation can be seen as a process of learning. A distinction between different levels of learning is helpful to grasp the varying ways in which socialisation can occur. “*Thin learning*” supposes that the behaviour change is driven by a “response to stimulation”, while “*thick learning*” transforms the underlying norms, values and identities of actors, making them “think differently”.⁸⁹

Socialisation can also be conceptualised as diffusion, where EU norms, values, policies and institutions are gradually adopted and internalised by member states and candidate countries through the process of persuasion and communication.⁹⁰ Diffusion mechanisms formulated by Börzel and Risse in the context of Europeanisation include three modes that are based on the logic of appropriateness: socialisation, persuasion and mimicry.⁹¹ *Socialisation* is classified as one of the modes of the EU's direct influence.⁹² Through socialisation, the EU acts as a

⁸⁶ Noutcheva, *European foreign policy and the challenges of Balkan accession: Conditionality, legitimacy and compliance*; Marošková and Spurná, “Why did they comply? External incentive model, role-playing and socialization in the alignment of sanctions against Russia in Albania and Montenegro”, 1005-1023.

⁸⁷ Hall and Taylor, “Political Science and the Three New Institutionalisms”.

⁸⁸ Schimmelfennig, “Europeanization beyond Europe”, 9.

⁸⁹ Radaelli, “The Europeanization of public policy”, 38.

⁹⁰ Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, “Governance by conditionality: EU rule transfer to the candidate countries of Central and Eastern Europe”, 667; Börzel and Risse, “From Europeanization to diffusion”.

⁹¹ Börzel and Risse, “From Europeanization to diffusion”.

⁹² Alongside coercion, capacity-building and conditionality, which are based on the logic of consequences and are therefore described in the section on rationality-based mechanisms presented above.

“gigantic socialisation agency” in that it uses socialisation to promote its norms and values to endorse domestic transformation. Additionally, the authors distinguish persuasion as a distinct mode of diffusion. Through *persuasion*, the EU communicates the validity of its claims to third states. Similarly to socialisation, this tool often complements conditionality. The basis of persuasion is communicative rationality or the logic of arguing. Regarding accession countries, the EU uses persuasion to convince them about the appropriateness of the promoted norms, policies and institutions.⁹³ Finally, socialisation can also occur through the indirect influence of the EU via *mimicry*. Through this mode, norms, policies and institutions are diffused to the third states without a direct influence of the EU; rather, states adopt them on their initiative, led by “normative rationality”, aiming to expand their international legitimacy and be a part of the European community.⁹⁴ This mode is closely related to role-playing, which will be overviewed in the next section.

Socialisation can occur both through intergovernmental interactions (through persuasion or bargaining) and through transnational societal interactions between the EU and a third state.⁹⁵

For the Western Balkan countries, socialisation mechanisms were found to be important in explaining their CFSP alignment. A study on alignment in OSCE shows, based on the interview data, that for diplomats from the Western Balkan region alignment is seen as a way to show a “European way of thinking” and to take part in “European foreign policy”.⁹⁶ Moreover, socialisation mechanisms were found to be the leading explanation of Albania’s and Montenegro’s alignment with EU sanctions against Russia in 2014.⁹⁷

Relatedly, the practice of sanctions alignment can be conceptualised as an instance of “normative boundary-drawing”, which in basic terms means deciding “who is “good” and who

⁹³ Thomas Risse, ““Let’s Argue!”: Communicative Action in World Politics”, *International Organization* 54, no. 1 (2000): 1–39, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2601316>; Thomas Risse, *Domestic politics and norm diffusion in international relations: Ideas do not float freely*. (Taylor & Francis, 2017): 296; Börzel and Risse, “From Europeanization to diffusion”.

⁹⁴ Börzel and Risse, “From Europeanization to diffusion”, 298.

⁹⁵ Frank Schimmelfennig and Ulrich Sedelmeier, “Introduction: Conceptualizing the Europeanization of Central and Eastern Europe” in *The Europeanization of Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. Frank Schimmelfennig and Ulrich Sedelmeier (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 2005), 11-12, 18 cited in Schimmelfennig, “Europeanization beyond Europe”, 10.

⁹⁶ Marciacq and Jaramillo, “When the European Union speaks on behalf of non-European Union states: a critical appraisal of the European Union’s alignment mechanism in multilateral fora”, 212.

⁹⁷ Marošková and Spurná, “Why did they comply? External incentive model, role-playing and socialization in the alignment of sanctions against Russia in Albania and Montenegro”.

is “bad”.⁹⁸ Such normative boundary-drawing forms the communicative function of alignment,⁹⁹ importance of which will also be shown in the empirical section.

In the following subsections, I present two socialisation mechanisms that exemplify different levels of socialisation: *role-playing* and *thick socialisation*. With regard to the two socialisation mechanisms, I should make a terminological note. In their study of sanctions alignment, Marošková and Spurná refer to the mechanism which I denote as “thick socialisation” in this thesis simply as “socialisation”.¹⁰⁰ However, both role-playing and thick socialisation mechanisms represent instances of socialisation. We, therefore, add this additional label to the mechanism to emphasise its main difference from role-playing, which is the distinction between the “thick” learning involving deep transformations of norms, beliefs and identities (thick socialisation) and “thin” learning or behavioural adaptation without norms internalisation (role-playing).¹⁰¹

1.2.2.1. Role-playing mechanism

*Role-playing*¹⁰² (or mimicry¹⁰³) is a socialisation mechanism through which states adapt their behaviour to that of the EU acting under normative rationality, following a desire to be seen as a part of a community “in good standing”.¹⁰⁴ They do so in a “nonreflective manner”.¹⁰⁵ As Börzel and Risse have put it, mimicry is similar to “the automatic ‘downloading’ of an institutional ‘software’ irrespective of functional need, simply because this is what everybody does in a given community”.¹⁰⁶

Whereas in the external incentives model mechanism states act purely rationally and in the “thick” socialisation mechanism they act in accordance with their deeply held beliefs about what is right or wrong, the explanation provided by role-playing is somewhere in between. While the states shift from the logic of consequences to the logic of appropriateness, they do

⁹⁸ Hellquist, “Either with us or against us? Third-country alignment with EU sanctions against Russia/Ukraine”, 3.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Marošková and Spurná, “Why did they comply? External incentive model, role-playing and socialization in the alignment of sanctions against Russia in Albania and Montenegro”.

¹⁰¹ Radaelli, “The Europeanization of public policy”, 38.

¹⁰² Jeffrey T. Checkel, “International Institutions and Socialization in Europe: Introduction and Framework,” *International Organization* 59, no. 4 (2005): 810–12, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3877829>.

¹⁰³ Tanja Börzel and Thomas Risse, “From Europeanisation to Diffusion: Introduction”. *West European Politics* 35, no 1 (2012): 10, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2012.631310>.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Checkel, “International institutions and socialization in Europe: Introduction and framework”, 811.

¹⁰⁶ Börzel and Risse, “From Europeanisation to Diffusion: Introduction”, 10.

not necessarily internalise the norms they follow.¹⁰⁷ To reflect this, Checkel conceptualises role-playing as Type I internalisation (with Type II internalisation being close to what I conceptualise as thick socialisation).¹⁰⁸ Role-playing can therefore be seen as a first level of socialisation, that might lead to deeper “thicker” socialisation in the future.

In relation to CFSP alignment, research that scrutinised motives for alignment of non-EU states with EU statements in OSCE singled out *nonreflexive* alignment as one of the motives, which makes it closely linked to the role-playing mechanism.¹⁰⁹ The basis for nonreflexive motives is “a desire for sheer conformity”, where states tend to emulate the EU, perceiving its opinions “as those “of the civilised world””.¹¹⁰

A good example of role-playing in relation to EU sanctions alignment is presented by Montenegro. Marošková and Spurná find that Montenegro’s decision to align with sanctions against Russia in 2014 is most likely explained by the role-playing mechanism.¹¹¹ They observed that in Montenegro, the process of alignment was ambiguous: the introduction of sanctions against Russia did not match Montenegro’s identity, as considerable shares of population perceived Russia positively and official foreign policy documents mentioned balanced relations with Russia, and at the same time no reward for alignment was available from the EU, as Montenegro was already far in the accession negotiations process. Furthermore, officials referred to Montenegro’s social role to justify the decision to align, and there was a high previous record of alignment.¹¹² Together, these conditions demonstrate the working of a role-playing mechanism that led to the alignment outcome.

Building on previous research by Marošková and Spurná, the main elements of the role-playing mechanism to consider in the context of non-EU states’ sanctions alignment are the *ambiguity of the process*, in which neither a positive reward for compliance is offered by the EU nor shared values, norms and identities are present, the “*automacity*” of the rules’ adoption process, and the fact that alignment represents *socially accepted behaviour*.¹¹³

¹⁰⁷ Checkel, “International institutions and socialization in Europe: Introduction and framework”, 811.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Marciacq and Jaramillo, “When the European Union speaks on behalf of non-European Union states: a critical appraisal of the European Union’s alignment mechanism in multilateral fora”, 214.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Marošková and Spurná, “Why did they comply? External incentive model, role-playing and socialization in the alignment of sanctions against Russia in Albania and Montenegro”, 1014-15.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid., 1008, 1012.

Several expectations regarding observable behaviour stem from this mechanism. First, it is expected that the alignment decision will be accompanied by officials' arguments referring to the social role of a candidate state. Second, we should observe a previous high CFSP alignment record, which would indicate the "automaticity" of alignment. Then, together with a lack of EU incentives offered by the EU, we should observe the lack of identity match regarding CFSP alignment. In their previous research, Marošková and Spurná relied solely on public opinion to determine whether there was no match in identity in relation to Russia-related sanctions alignment,¹¹⁴ I find such an approach limited and potentially skewing the results. As interactions within socialisation shape both governments and societies, in my analysis I consider not only the views of the general public but also those of political elites. Thus, I expect that the lack of identity match would manifest itself in positive attitudes towards Russia and/or disapproval of sanctions against Russia in public opinion and among political elites.¹¹⁵

1.2.2.2. Thick socialisation mechanism

The *thick socialisation*¹¹⁶ mechanism assumes that Europeanisation, including adjustment of national foreign policy in line with the EU's foreign policy, occurs when a state believes that the EU's rules, policies and norms are appropriate. In this perspective, the EU acts as a community that possesses a collective identity, norms and values.¹¹⁷

In the process of thick socialisation, non-EU states are motivated by their identities, values, and norms rather than external incentives to seek rewards and avoid punishment. When change is driven by socialisation, states rely on deeply internalised norms and values in choosing the most appropriate or legitimate behaviour.¹¹⁸ In this case, Europeanisation through thick socialisation is likely to bring about long-lasting changes in behaviour, compared to when behaviour is adopted as an adjustment to rational calculations following transformations in incentive structures.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁴ This approach was adopted by the authors in the role-playing mechanism specifically, while for the socialisation mechanism, they considered both public opinion and official views.

¹¹⁵ Based on Marošková and Spurná, "Why did they comply? External incentive model, role-playing and socialization in the alignment of sanctions against Russia in Albania and Montenegro", 1009, 1013.

¹¹⁶ We refer to this mechanism as "thick" socialisation to underline the main distinction from the role-playing mechanism, which represents the thick learning rather than behavioral adaptation without norms internalisation, as both mechanisms are instances of socialisation.

¹¹⁷ Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, "Governance by conditionality: EU rule transfer to the candidate countries of Central and Eastern Europe", 667.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Hurd 1999 cited in Checkel, "International institutions and socialization in Europe: Introduction and framework", 813.

This mechanism consists of several components: legitimacy, identity and resonance.¹²⁰ Firstly, change in behaviour that leads to the Europeanisation of policy is driven by the perceived legitimacy of the EU. The status of legitimacy can be judged by the absence or presence of domestic political mobilisation against the EU conditions in the studied non-EU countries.¹²¹ When it comes to sanctions alignment, Marošková and Spurná take into account the legitimacy of the sanctions alignment process as a whole, as well as of sanctions against Russia.¹²² I adopt a similar approach and assess legitimacy based on whether domestic political actors and public opinion demonstrate disagreement with two aspects of CFSP alignment. More specifically, following Marošková and Spurná I consider the legitimacy of the alignment mechanism itself, as well as the legitimacy of sanctions against Russia in particular. Then, for this mechanism to work it is crucial that identification with the EU community is present domestically and that EU rules, norms and policies resonate with domestic identities and norms. Concerning foreign policy, resonance can be understood as the closeness of foreign policy orientation, norms and beliefs. Regarding alignment with sanctions against Russia, building on the work of Marošková and Spurná, in case this mechanism is at work we can expect to see that public support for the EU and the restrictive measures against Russia are high, while the perception of Russia is negative, a state has a clear orientation of the foreign policy towards the EU, while Russia is not seen as a crucial partner, and that Russia's actions towards Ukraine are condemned.¹²³

Previous research demonstrated that this mechanism was responsible for Albania's alignment with EU sanctions against Russia in 2014. Albania did not have close relations with Russia and had for a long time shown a strong Euro-Atlantic orientation, with a strong pro-EU preference among the general public and condemnation of Russia's actions on the government level.¹²⁴

1.3. Theoretical expectations: three mechanisms of foreign policy Europeanisation in North Macedonia

Based on the theoretical overview presented in the previous sections, I formulate three theoretical expectations which will be examined in the empirical chapter of the thesis.

¹²⁰ Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, "Governance by conditionality: EU rule transfer to the candidate countries of Central and Eastern Europe", 668.

¹²¹ Noutcheva, *European foreign policy and the challenges of Balkan accession: Conditionality, legitimacy and compliance*.

¹²² Marošková and Spurná, "Why did they comply? External incentive model, role-playing and socialization in the alignment of sanctions against Russia in Albania and Montenegro", 1008-1009, 1013.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 1017-1018.

H1: The change in North Macedonia's alignment with EU sanctions against Russia is explained by the external incentives model mechanism.

If this mechanism was at play, we would expect that the EU had a reward it would promise to North Macedonia in return for its alignment with sanctions against Russia and that it would outweigh the potential costs to align. More specifically, we would see low economic dependence of North Macedonia on Russia in trade and FDI, no pressing domestic issue where Russia would be seen by North Macedonia as an important partner/supporter internationally, the number of domestic political actors that have Russia-friendly attitudes would be lower than the number of pro-EU actors, and support for EU integration would be high. Apart from offering a reward, the EU would have to provide clear rules and conditions and link their successful implementation to receiving the reward. Finally, the EU would need to demonstrate credibility. This means that we would not see an internal conflict within the EU regarding the provision of the reward to North Macedonia, the EU would give high importance to providing the reward, there would be no other international actors that would offer similar rewards at low adjustment costs, the EU would be capable of withholding the reward in case of non-compliance, and North Macedonia was asymmetrically dependent on the EU in terms of trade and funding.

H2: The change in North Macedonia's alignment with EU sanctions against Russia is explained by the role-playing mechanism.

In case the role-playing mechanism was the main explanation, then North Macedonia's alignment with sanctions was an act of following the expectations of the country's social role as a candidate state and a part of the European community, while national foreign policy identity and public opinion would not demonstrate that these norms have been internalised. We would observe that the EU did not offer rewards for alignment with sanctions against Russia, there would be no match in norms, values and identities reflected in positive views on Russia and negative views on sanctions against Russia in public opinion and among political elites, there would be a record of previous high alignment with EU restrictive measures that would indicate an "automatic" manner of alignment, and social role as a member of the European community would be used by officials as an argument for alignment with EU sanctions against Russia.

H3: The change in North Macedonia's alignment with EU sanctions against Russia is explained by the thick socialisation mechanism.

If a change in North Macedonia's alignment pattern is explained by thick socialisation, then this behaviour corresponds to internalised beliefs rather than to acting following the state's social role as a candidate country or due to conditionality from the EU. We would expect to see that, first, the EU rules-making process would have high perceived legitimacy domestically, including the legitimacy of the CFSP alignment mechanism, EU sanctions as a tool in general and sanctions against Russia in particular among the officials and the general public. Second, North Macedonian officials and public opinion would demonstrate identification with the EU community, and Russia would not be seen as a crucial partner and/or be negatively perceived by officials and public opinion. Finally, Russia's actions would be condemned by officials.

It needs to be noted that generally, socialisation and rationalist Europeanisation mechanisms can function in parallel.¹²⁵ This means that in the empirical reality the dynamics might be too nuanced to be explained by exclusively instrumental or normative approach. Nevertheless, using the process-tracing method, it is possible to identify the relative explanatory power of each mechanism to explain the outcome.

In the second chapter, I outline the methodology that is applied to analyse the three mechanisms in the third chapter.

2. Methodology

In this chapter, I first describe the reasons behind selecting the case of North Macedonia's alignment with EU sanctions against Russia. Then I explain the process-tracing method and how I apply it in my analysis. Finally, I present the propositions and data sources.

2.1.1. Case selection

I focus on alignment with EU's Russia-related sanctions in the Western Balkan region specifically as this region offers opportunities for analysing the causal mechanisms behind foreign policy Europeanisation among EU candidate states, as countries of the region have long been potential candidates and candidates for EU membership. In this sense, North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina present the most interesting cases, as these countries went from non-alignment in 2014 to alignment in 2022, while policies of other Western Balkan countries remained continuous. In this thesis, the case of North Macedonia will be examined. I focus on

¹²⁵ Börzel and Risse, "From Europeanisation to Diffusion", 296; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, "Governance by conditionality: EU rule transfer to the candidate countries of Central and Eastern Europe", 662–663; Hellquist, "Either with us or against us? Third-country alignment with EU sanctions against Russia/Ukraine", 3.

the case of North Macedonia as it is a “more likely” case of CFSP alignment, which can better reflect the workings of the various Europeanisation mechanisms compared to the “least likely” case of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Bosnia and Herzegovina, with its complex institutional set-up, finds itself in a rather particular political situation characterised by deadlocks and inconsistencies in decision-making, including in foreign policy. While the EU acknowledged the alignment of Bosnia and Herzegovina with the Council decision on restrictive measures against Russia, Serb members of the tripartite presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina Željka Cvijanović (current) and Milorad Dodik (former) insist that no formal decision to align was made by any authority in the country.¹²⁶ Sanctions have still not been implemented by Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Studying the change in North Macedonia’s alignment with sanctions against Russia specifically can be a particularly useful case for testing dynamics of foreign policy Europeanisation of EU accession states. First of all, it can help highlight the mechanisms behind CFSP alignment in the Western Balkans better than cases of sanctions against other countries where alignment is rather low-cost due to the distance of the sanctions’ target. More specifically, in cases where the interconnectedness and linkages between a sanctioned state and a third state are loose, aligning with the EU bears low to no costs. In other words, if almost no relations exist between an aligning state and a sanctioned state, there is not much to lose, rendering aligning with restrictive measures relatively “cheap”.

The case of Russia-related sanctions is different. The special position that relations with Russia hold in some of the countries that are invited to align makes alignment with Russia-related sanctions a sensitive matter. In the Western Balkan context, in particular, a track record of cooperative relations with Russia has a long history, which in turn serves as a basis for foreign policy pursued by incumbents. For some countries in the region, Russia is (or has been at some point in time) a traditional supporter of incumbents’ positions in the international arena. Examples of such issues are Russia’s backing of Serbia’s position on non-recognition of Kosovo and Russia’s support for North Macedonia’s previous constitutional name Republic of Macedonia (instead of FYROM).

Sanctions against Russia have been a particularly divisive issue both within the EU block and among non-EU states. According to Hellquist, there is no space for third countries’ neutrality

¹²⁶ Ivković, ‘What Is the State of the Implementation of the Sanctions on Russia in the Western Balkans?’; Sarajevo Times ‘Cvijanovic Denies That BiH Has Joined the Countries That Have Imposed Sanctions against Russia’.

in the eyes of both the EU and Russia.¹²⁷ While for the EU, a decision not to align with sanctions can be seen as disloyalty, for Russia, there is no difference in the scale of partial alignment (i.e. aligning selectively with only certain measures is also seen as hostility, as was in the case of Montenegro's partial alignment).¹²⁸

The general pattern of alignment with the EU's restrictive measures demonstrates that for the whole pool of non-EU aligning countries, except for Ukraine and Albania, the overall alignment score is higher when Russia-related sanctions are excluded.¹²⁹ Such a pattern points out how contested Russia-related sanctions generally are. This sensitivity makes Russia-related sanctions a good testing ground for the Europeanisation effect on foreign policy of non-EU states because the decision to align is less likely to be taken in an "automatic" manner.

Restrictive measures against Russia have another peculiarity, related to their type. Frequently, the EU adopts sanctions developed by the UN, but sanctions against Russia represent autonomous EU sanctions.¹³⁰ This makes it an especially appropriate case to test the effect of Europeanisation on candidate states foreign policies, as it singles out the impact of the EU.

2.1.2. Process-tracing method

To answer the research question of why the change in alignment occurred in North Macedonia between 2014 and 2022, I use the process-tracing method and largely follow the widely cited guidelines by Beach and Pedersen.¹³¹

Process-tracing is a case-specific method that is used for single-case or small-n studies. *Causal mechanisms* lay at the heart of process-tracing. According to Beach and Pedersen, "the mechanism composed of entities engaging in activities is theorized to transmit causal forces in an uninterrupted process that links cause(s) and outcome".¹³² Such an approach allows us to look into the black box between causes and outcomes by studying how exactly the causal relationship operates.

¹²⁷ Hellquist, "Either with us or against us? Third-country alignment with EU sanctions against Russia/Ukraine".

¹²⁸ Ibid., 16.

¹²⁹ Cardwell and Moret, "The EU, sanctions and regional leadership", 8.

¹³⁰ Thomas J. Biersteker and Clara Portela, eds., *EU Sanctions in Context: Three Types*, EUISS Issue Brief: No. 26 (Paris: European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2015): 2, <https://repository.graduateinstitute.ch/record/293226>.

¹³¹ Derek Beach and Rasmus Brun Pedersen, *Process-Tracing Methods: Foundations and Guidelines* (University of Michigan Press, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.10072208>.

¹³² Ibid., 64.

Process-tracing is based on set theory and departs from more traditional positivist premises that are usually adopted in large-n studies in several regards. Firstly, process-tracing favours a *deterministic* understanding of causality over a *probabilistic* understanding. Beach and Pedersen argue that for single case process-tracing deterministic ontology is the only one suitable. The main reason behind it is that when process-tracing is used as a within-case method (and not for a cross-case comparison), we cannot make probabilistic claims about whether a certain causal factor increases or decreases the likelihood of the outcome in a population of cases. Instead, we can establish a process that links a cause and an outcome within a selected case. Practically, this means that each causal mechanism should be conceptualised as a set of propositions, formulated in a way that specifies the expected properties of observables that would signify that the mechanism was working and led to the outcome. In other words, we have to specify what empirical fingerprints¹³³ left by the workings of a mechanism we expect to find in empirical reality.¹³⁴ That is why, for instance, I do not formulate the first proposition related to rewards in the external incentives mechanism as a variable, e.g. “the higher the reward from the EU was, the more likely it would lead to an outcome of alignment”, but rather as a condition “the EU offers a reward for alignment with sanctions” (all propositions are presented in the next section). The way propositions are formulated is closely linked to another aspect of process-tracing: asymmetry of causality.

In single-case process-tracing, causality is *asymmetric*.¹³⁵ This means that when we formulate mechanisms that lead to an outcome, we cannot simply reverse the causal relationship to conclude what leads to the absence of the outcome. When we conclude that a certain causal mechanism was at play in a studied case and has likely led to an outcome, we cannot claim that the absence of this causal mechanism would lead to the absence of the outcome, or conclude which causal mechanism would be present in an absence of the outcome, because all propositions are formulated on the “positive pole” of the concepts, following the deterministic logic.¹³⁶

This has important implications for my research design. Due to asymmetric causality, I do not aim to explain North Macedonia’s non-alignment with sanctions against Russia in 2014 with the three Europeanisation mechanisms. Rather, I aim to explain the change from non-alignment

¹³³ The existence of causal mechanisms is traced by their *empirical fingerprints* (in other words, observable manifestations) in Beach and Pedersen’s terms.

¹³⁴ Beach and Pedersen, *Process-Tracing Methods*, 171-172.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 25-27.

to *alignment*, which happened in February 2022, and represent a positive outcome. I treat this point as the final outcome and formulate the mechanisms and propositions, as well as overall assessments of each proposition, in a way that allows us to explain the outcome of alignment (rather than non-alignment).

At the same time, while process-tracing adopts deterministic ontology, its epistemology is probabilistic, as we can assess which of the studied mechanisms were *more or less likely* to explain the outcome based on the strength of certainty and uniqueness of their propositions.¹³⁷ It is important, as due to the complexity of social and political phenomena, it is generally supposed that the studied outcome can be achieved through different causal pathways (a phenomenon that is also referred to as *equifinality*).¹³⁸ As mentioned in the theoretical chapter, Europeanisation literature acknowledges that causal mechanisms can operate in parallel and are therefore not mutually exclusive. This makes it possible that more than one mechanism explains alignment with EU sanctions against Russia in the case of North Macedonia. However, the process tracing will allow us to identify the most likely mechanism that was at play, based on their assessments using different types of tests (described below).

To explain the change in North Macedonia's alignment with the EU's sanctions against Russia, my analysis primarily includes the period from 2014 to 2022. While the focus is chiefly on the 2022 decision to align with sanctions against Russia, I provide an outlook on the whole period from 2014 to 2022 to demonstrate how conditions within each proposition have evolved over time and how the process unfolded. This is conditioned by the fact that different propositions require different types of evidence. Commonly distinguished forms of evidence include *pattern* evidence, *account* evidence, *sequence* evidence and *trace* evidence.¹³⁹ Pattern evidence, for instance, requires analysis of a longer time period to recognise a pattern. In my research, this is relevant for assessing the "automaticity" of alignment in the role-playing mechanism, as the change in the rate of alignment over time is considered.

Moreover, while the period of investigation is 2014 – 2022, I also include observations from February 2022 – November 2023 to account for the evidence from public opinion surveys and official statements, which were made only after the decision to align with sanctions, as they

¹³⁷ Ibid., 15-19.

¹³⁸ Andrew Bennett and Colin Elman, "Qualitative Research: Recent Developments in Case Study Methods", *Annual Review of Political Science* 9, no. 1 (2006): 457; Jacob I. Ricks and Amy H. Liu, "Process-Tracing Research Designs: A Practical Guide", *PS - Political Science and Politics* 51, no. 4 (2018): 845.

¹³⁹ Beach and Pedersen, *Process-Tracing Methods*, 2019, 172.

provide important insight into the attitudes and justifications surrounding this decision and would not be possible to obtain from the earlier period.

In this thesis, the process-tracing follows several steps. I first define the causal mechanisms based on the theoretical expectations and ascribe the levels of prior confidence in the causal mechanisms based on the existing literature. As one previous study on Russia-related sanctions alignment in two Western Balkan countries has demonstrated that the external incentives model was absent in the cases of Albania and Montenegro in 2014,¹⁴⁰ I have lower prior confidence in the external incentives mechanism in explaining North Macedonia's 2022 alignment, and I expect that it will most likely be explained by either role-playing mechanism or thick socialisation mechanism.

Then, following the Bayesian logic of inference, the inferential power of evidence has to be maximized to update our confidence in the hypothesis' validity.¹⁴¹ To do so, each theoretical expectation and each empirical observation has to be assessed for *certainty* and *uniqueness*. Beach and Pedersen distinguish a theoretical and an empirical stage at which evidence should be evaluated. During the theoretical stage, we predict “what fingerprints we would have to find (theoretical certainty), and whether there are alternative explanations for finding a fingerprint (theoretical uniqueness)” for each proposition in the causal mechanism (which we do in the next section).¹⁴² Then, during the empirical stage we evaluate the collected empirical observations based on empirical certainty and empirical uniqueness by examining “whether we have full access to the empirical record if we do not find the predicted fingerprint (empirical certainty) and whether alternative explanations exist for a particular found fingerprint, such as whether we can trust the found observation (empirical uniqueness)”.¹⁴³

The level of certainty of evidence represents its disconfirmatory power in relation to the tested causal mechanism, where not finding highly certain evidence would allow eliminating the hypothesized mechanism. The level of uniqueness, or the probability of evidence to occur, relates to the confirmatory power of evidence. High uniqueness is associated with higher confirmatory power, while high certainty – with higher disconfirmatory power.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁰ Marošková and Spurná, “Why did they comply? External incentive model, role-playing and socialization in the alignment of sanctions against Russia in Albania and Montenegro”, 1005-1023.

¹⁴¹ Derek Beach and Rasmus Brun Pedersen, *Process-Tracing Methods: Foundations and Guidelines* (University of Michigan Press, 2013), 96.

¹⁴² Beach and Pedersen, *Process-Tracing Methods*, 2019, 155.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 180.

Different combinations of high/low uniqueness and certainty form the basis of four tests applied in process tracing: *straw-in-the-wind* (low uniqueness and low certainty), *hoop* (low uniqueness and high certainty), *smoking-gun* (high uniqueness and low certainty), and *doubly decisive* (high uniqueness and high certainty).¹⁴⁵ The logic can be better grasped if we look at an example of how these tests can work. For instance, in the smoking gun test, the certainty is low, but the uniqueness is high. This means that if we find that a suspect is holding a smoking gun next to the victim, we can confirm the suspect killed a victim with a high degree of confidence. However, due to the low certainty, if we do *not* find the smoking gun, it does not mean that the suspect is innocent because we do not *have* to find it (e.g. the victim could have been killed differently or the suspect got rid of a gun). Hence, the disconfirmatory power is low.¹⁴⁶

Building on the previous research by Marošková and Spurná who studied alignment with EU sanctions against Russia in Albania and Montenegro,¹⁴⁷ for most of the evidence that I collect in my case study, *hoop* tests will apply. This is conditioned by the fact that for most of the propositions that constitute the three causal mechanisms (external incentives model, role-playing and thick socialisation), one piece of evidence can be attributed to more than one causal mechanism and that propositions might not serve as an indication of a causal link. For example, North Macedonian officials can voice their support for the EU CFSP because the EU's foreign policy matches their own deeply held beliefs (thick socialisation mechanism), or can do so because they see it as a part of North Macedonia's social role as a candidate country (role-playing mechanism). Hence, the uniqueness of a large part of conditions is low, and so is their confirmatory power. At the same time, their certainty is high. However, the role-playing mechanism contains some highly certain and highly unique propositions, where doubly decisive tests apply.

Using empirical tests enables us to determine the strength of each part of the studied mechanism, as well as of the mechanism as a whole. Passing the hoop test affirms the relevance of the hypothesis, but does not confirm it, therefore somewhat weakening the alternative hypotheses. Failing a hoop test eliminates the hypothesis, and somewhat strengthens the

¹⁴⁵ Ingo Rohlfing, "Frequentist and Bayesian Causal Inference in Tests of Hypotheses", in *Case Studies and Causal Inference: An Integrative Framework*, ed. Ingo Rohlfing, Research Methods Series (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2012), 183.

¹⁴⁶ Based on David Collier, "Understanding Process Tracing", *PS: Political Science & Politics* 44, no. 4 (2011): 827, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096511001429>.

¹⁴⁷ Marošková and Spurná, "Why did they comply? External incentive model, role-playing and socialization in the alignment of sanctions against Russia in Albania and Montenegro", 1010.

alternative explanations. Passing a doubly decisive test confirms the hypothesis and eliminates other hypotheses while failing it considerably strengthens the alternative explanations.¹⁴⁸

I will consider explanations coming from different theoretical perspectives, including those based on rational choice (external incentives model) and constructivism (thick socialisation and role-playing). To reduce the possibility of bias, I will examine three alternative explanations on an equal footing. Each alternative explanation will be analysed separately, with each proposition carefully assessed by its confirmatory and disconfirmatory power.

2.1.3. Propositions and data sources

In the tables overleaf, I present three tables that map each mechanism and the propositions associated with them. These tables correspond closely to the three theoretical expectations that were set out at the end of the theoretical chapter, but details are provided on each proposition's levels of uniqueness and certainty.

For each proposition, I collect evidence relying on various data sources and aim to triangulate it to decrease the risk of bias. For instance, observations from official statements are complemented by domestic and international media to the extent possible. In case several relevant opinion polls are available, I consider each of them.

The data sources used can be generally divided into three major groups: (1) EU and North Macedonia's official documents (EU's Progress Reports and North Macedonia's strategic plans related to CFSP), (2) statements of the EU and North Macedonia's officials¹⁴⁹ (in the media and on the official websites¹⁵⁰), and (3) statistics, including trade data and public opinion polls of Macedonians on the EU, Russia, and the war in Ukraine. For all these data sources, I focus on the period from 2014 to 2022, sometimes taking into account sources from 2023 to catch the fuller picture.

Regarding the media sources used (including EU and North Macedonia's officials' statements), I used the Google News database to search for media sources on North Macedonia's alignment with EU sanctions against Russia, using the search string in English "Macedonia AND Russia

¹⁴⁸ Collier, "Understanding Process Tracing", 825.

¹⁴⁹ Statements were found in the media (the search process described in the next paragraph) and on the government websites (see the footnote below). I aimed to cover the statements of the key officials, including President, Prime Minister, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of Defense, as well as statements by key political parties.

¹⁵⁰ Primarily the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of North Macedonia (<https://www.mfa.gov.mk/mk>) and the website of the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia (<https://vlada.mk/?ln=en-gb>).

AND sanctions” and in Macedonian “Македонија AND Русија AND санкции”, with the search period specified as 2014-2022. These search strings were sufficient to find relevant observations for the propositions, where media sources were necessary. Sources in Macedonian were both scanned by me using my basic understanding of the Macedonian language and translated into English by using Google Translate to grasp the nuances. The relevant sources were also checked for trustworthiness before being used as evidence, which is especially important given that North Macedonia’s media landscape is characterised by a degree of bias.¹⁵¹ Generally, I mostly relied on acknowledged international media such as BBC, Euractiv and Euronews, the regional outlet Balkan Insight,¹⁵² as well as two main domestic media outlets Meta.mk and Fokus. Fokus was assessed by the EU monitoring as “the most popular and influential weekly, keeping a neutral and critical stance towards all governments”.¹⁵³ Meta.mk is a popular Macedonian news agency, the trustworthiness of which is confirmed by the fact that it is one of the main partners of the Media Reforms Observatory project implemented by the Metamorphosis Foundation,¹⁵⁴ supported by the EU, USAID and other international donors.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵¹ Rasto Kuzel, “Baseline Assessment of Macedonian Media” (Transparency International, 2014), <https://transparency.mk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/baseline-assesment-of-macedonian-media.pdf>.

¹⁵² Supported by the EU donors. See “Donors”, *BalkanInsight*, accessed 15 January 2022, <https://balkaninsight.com/donors/>.

¹⁵³ Sanela Hodžić and Brankica Petković, “National data overview: North Macedonia. Sustainability of Professional Journalism in the Media Business Environment of The Western Balkans” (European Union, 2020), 10, <https://tacso.eu/sustainability-of-professional-journalism-in-the-media-business-environment-of-the-western-balkans-executive-report-published/>.

¹⁵⁴ ‘MEDIA REFORMS OBSERVATORY (MRO) - Metamorphosis’, Metamorphosis - Foundation for Internet and Society, 2 March 2018, https://metamorphosis.org.mk/en/proekti_arhiva/media-reforms-observatory-mro/.

¹⁵⁵ ‘About - Metamorphosis’, Metamorphosis - Foundation for Internet and Society, 23 June 2014, <https://metamorphosis.org.mk/en/about/>.

Table 1 below shows two external incentives model propositions related to the presence of the EU reward and costs of alignment, as well as two scope conditions that are necessary for this mechanism to function: credibility and determinacy. The credibility scope condition consists of three propositions related to consistency, cross-conditionality and capability to withhold a reward.

Table 1. External Incentives Model

Proposition		Data sources
Presence of EU rewards (high certainty, low uniqueness)	The EU offers a reward for alignment with sanctions	EU's progress reports and statements of the EU found in media
Low costs of alignment (high certainty, low uniqueness)	Adaptation costs to align with sanctions are lower than the offered reward: - Economic costs: interdependence with Russia measured as the share in trade is low - Political costs: there is no pressing domestic issue, where Russia is seen as an important partner/supporter internationally - Political veto players: the number of domestic political actors that have Russia-friendly attitudes (in government and parliament) is lower than the number of pro-EU actors	National and EU trade statistics Media, government documents and statements*
Credibility (scope condition)	Conditionality is consistent	There is an absence of an internal conflict within the EU regarding provision of the reward and the EU gives high importance to providing the reward
	No cross-conditionality from other actors	Other international actors do not offer similar rewards at low adjustment costs
	The EU is capable of withholding a reward	The EU is capable of withholding the reward in case of non-compliance and a country is asymmetrically dependent on the EU in terms of trade and funding
Determinacy of EU conditions (scope condition)		EU provides clear rules and conditions and links their successful implementation to receiving the reward
		Official documents and statements of the EU

*Note: By "Government documents and statements" North Macedonia's government is meant.

Table 2 relates to the role-playing mechanism and demonstrates three propositions: the ambiguity of the process of alignment, the “automacity” of alignment, and the use of social role to justify alignment with sanctions.

Table 2. Role-playing mechanism

Proposition			Data source
Ambiguity of alignment process (high certainty, high uniqueness)	Absence of rewards	The EU does not offer any rewards for alignment with the EU sanctions against Russia	Official documents and statements of the EU
	No match in norms, values and identities	Public opinion and political elites do not show support for Russia-related sanctions and/or shows a positive attitude towards Russia	Public opinion polls, government documents and statements
Automacity of alignment (high certainty, low uniqueness)	The EU rules and policies are adopted in a nonreflexive manner: there is a record of previous high alignment with EU restrictive measures		Official documents and statements of the EU
Social role used as an argument for alignment (high certainty, high uniqueness)	Social role as a candidate country is used by officials as an argument for alignment with CFSP and EU sanctions against Russia in particular		Government documents and statements*

*Note: By “Government documents and statements” North Macedonia’s government is meant.

Table 3 presents two propositions of the thick socialisation mechanism related to the legitimacy of sanctions alignment and to the match in identity and resonance.

Table 3. Thick socialisation mechanism

Proposition		Data source
Legitimacy of sanctions alignment (high certainty, low uniqueness)	EU rules-making process has high perceived legitimacy domestically, including legitimacy of the alignment mechanism, EU sanctions as a tool in general and of sanctions against Russia in particular: - Public opinion shows support for sanctions against Russia - There is no opposition to the CFSP alignment process in official statements	Government documents and statements*, public opinion polls, media

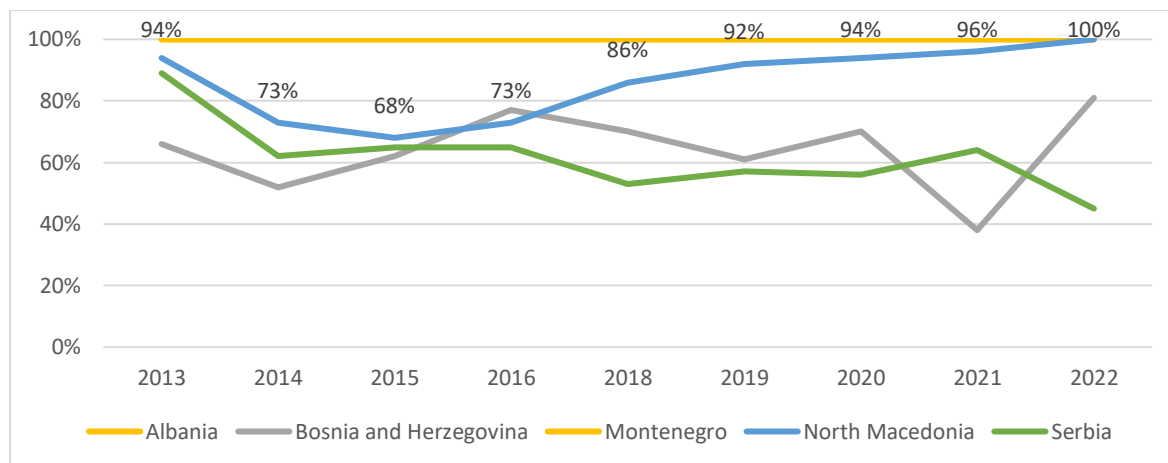
Match in identity and resonance <i>(high certainty, low uniqueness)</i>	• Officials and public opinion demonstrate identification with the EU community (positive attitudes) • Russia is not seen as a crucial partner and/or is negatively perceived by officials and public opinion • Russia's actions are condemned by officials	Government documents and statements, public opinion polls, media
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*Note: By "Government documents and statements" North Macedonia's government is meant.

3. Explaining the change in North Macedonia's alignment with the EU's restrictive measures against Russia between 2014 and 2022

Over the past ten years, Western Balkan states demonstrated variation in their alignment trends. While Albania and Montenegro maintained full alignment with EU restrictive measures throughout the period, North Macedonia experienced a downward trend from 2013 to 2015, mainly resulting from its non-alignment with restrictive measures against Russia introduced in 2014. In 2016, however, a clear and consistent upward trajectory emerged in North Macedonia. Even without alignment with sanctions against Russia, the country managed to achieve a 96% alignment rate by 2021. After the new set of restrictive measures was adopted in 2022, North Macedonia aligned itself with all sanctions against Russia, thereby joining the group of fully aligned Western Balkan states. This dynamic contrasts sharply with Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, where alignment rates have fluctuated and drastically decreased by 2021. By 2022, however, Bosnia and Herzegovina, was able to build up its alignment rate, reaching 81%, while for Serbia it fell even further and became the lowest in the region with 45%.

Figure 2. Alignment pattern of the Western Balkan countries invited to align with CFSP declarations, 2013-2022



Note: Albania and Montenegro both demonstrated 100% alignment during 2013-2022 and are shown in the same colour on the chart. 2017 progress reports are not available; therefore, this year is not presented on the chart. While Kosovo demonstrates 100% alignment with CFSP, it is not included here, as Kosovo is not formally invited by the EU to align.

Source: Progress reports published by the European Commission (available [here](#)); Igor Novaković, *Seven Years of Serbia's Alignment with the Common Foreign And Security Policy of the EU* (ISAC fund, 2020).

If we zoom out even further and look at the whole period of CFSP alignment of the Western Balkans states (from 2004), we will see that in the initial period after the alignment mechanism was introduced, the alignment rates of all countries in the region were very high. Between 2004

and 2007, Western Balkan countries had a rate of CFSP alignment above 80%, and showed a steady growth in this period, reaching over 90% in 2006-2007. From 2008, however, the situation started to change as the Western Balkan countries started to show an overall decreasing rate of alignment (except for Croatia, which joined the EU in 2013 and maintained a 100% alignment rate for the preceding period).¹⁵⁶ One potential explanation for the overall decline in alignment rates among the invited countries is that as the EU began to be involved in more and more contentious issues, alignment became more difficult for non-EU countries.¹⁵⁷

While the deterioration in alignment was a general trend for the region, its magnitude differed between the countries. For Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the drop in alignment was especially noticeable. For North Macedonia, Montenegro and Albania, alignment rates slightly decreased, but generally remained above 90% between 2007 and 2012.

Therefore, we see that for most of the time since the practice of CFSP alignment was introduced, North Macedonia was in a group of high-alignment countries and the drop in its alignment rate was chiefly due to its non-alignment with Russia-related sanctions. This makes the case of alignment with sanctions against Russia especially interesting to explore, as its salience can allow us to better illuminate the workings of the mechanisms of Europeanisation of foreign policy.

The rest of this chapter is structured in the following way. First, the explanatory power of the external incentives model is presented, with the EU reward, costs of alignment and scope conditions assessed in relation to North Macedonia's alignment with Russia-related sanctions. Then, the role-playing mechanism is assessed, including the ambiguity of the process of alignment, its "automaticity", and the use of social role in justifying alignment. Finally, the thick socialisation mechanism is analysed, including the legitimacy of alignment process and the match in identity and normative resonance with Russia-related sanctions. Each section includes an overall assessment of each mechanism.

3.1. Testing the external incentives model

In this section, I first assess the propositions of the presence of EU reward for sanctions alignment and low costs of alignment. I then examine the scope conditions of the credibility of

¹⁵⁶ Based on the numbers on Figure 2 presented in Serena Giusti and Chiara Franco, "The Europeanization of Turkey's Foreign Policy: From Alignment to Misalignment?", ed. Elena Baracani and Merve Çalımlı, *European Perspectives on Turkey's Domestic Politics and Foreign Policy* (Fondazione Bruno Kessler, Trento, 2017), 80, https://www.iris.sssup.it/retrieve/handle/11382/520068/34493/PDF_Cerplic_Studies_2_SJP4tBB.pdf.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

the EU and the determinacy of EU conditions. Finally, an assessment of the whole mechanism is presented.

3.1.1. EU reward

As discussed in the theoretical chapter of this thesis, the rewards that the EU can offer to candidate states are diverse, including not only the ultimate reward of EU membership but also smaller intermediary rewards. While North Macedonia has been among the early Western Balkan candidates for accession, gaining the official candidate status in 2005, the accession negotiations have not been launched for a long time. During the whole period since the adoption of the first sanctions package against Russia, the opening of accession negotiations has been blocked by subsequent vetoes from different EU Member States either due to bilateral disputes (Greece and Bulgaria) or reservations about the enlargement strategy in its current form (France, the Netherlands and Denmark) (the vetoes are described in more detail in the section on “Credibility” below). In the context of constant vetoing that stood in the way of opening the accession negotiations, their start was the main, albeit intermediary, reward for North Macedonia possible to get in the short to medium run, which was relevant throughout the whole analysed period.

However, there was no explicit attachment of opening the accession negotiations to sanctions alignment. During the studied period, the reward in the form of accession progress was mostly tied to reforms in domestic policy areas, especially the rule of law and democratic governance, and especially to solving the bilateral disputes with Greece and Bulgaria was the top priority for the government to unblock the way to the start of accession negotiations.¹⁵⁸

Shortly after the first set of sanctions against Russia was introduced in 2014, North Macedonia endured a political crisis that lasted from 2015 to 2017, making it the most pressing issue on the EU’s agenda regarding North Macedonia’s enlargement. The EU’s Enlargement Strategy 2016 characterised it as “the most severe political crisis since 2001” in North Macedonia and

¹⁵⁸ European Commission, “Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: 2020 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy”, 2020, 22–23, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=COM:2020:660:FIN>; Search by keywords “macedonia AND russia AND sanctions” after 2014 sanctions package was adopted and before February 2022 in Google News does not produce any results of the EU statements that would discuss North Macedonia’s non-alignment with Russia-related sanctions and link it to accession progress. Similar results are rendered via search in EEAS archive (available [here](#)).

described the plethora of political criteria that were challenged,¹⁵⁹ which can explain why the EU did not focus its attention on demanding alignment with Russia-related sanctions in a situation when there were more pressing domestic issues that need to be solved first.

The crisis began with the wiretapping scandal. In 2015, the leader of the opposition party SDSM Zoran Zaev revealed the tapes of conversations of many public officials, which for several years were illegally recorded by the national intelligence service under Nikola Gruevski's government and contained information that could serve as evidence of illegal activities by these officials.¹⁶⁰ This caused a stir in the country, with mass protests against Gruevski's government.¹⁶¹ In 2015, the EU mediated a deal between the major political parties – Przino agreement¹⁶² – to end the political crisis, and made further accession process conditional on the implementation of the agreement. However, its implementation faced serious problems. Marking the end of the political crisis in the country, an interim government was formed after Gruevski stepped down. The interim government was responsible for organising new elections, as a result of which Zoran Zaev's government came into power in 2017. The new government had managed to achieve a compromise with Greece, which lifted its veto in 2020 and made significant steps in regulating the relations with Bulgaria.

Overall, the sequence of events around the change in alignment with Russia-related sanctions could potentially serve as evidence that the proposition of EU reward was met, as the decision to align with sanctions against Russia was taken in February 2022 and the opening of the accession talks happened several months after that, in July 2022. However, we observed that alignment with sanctions against Russia was not explicitly linked to the reward of opening the accession negotiations, evidenced by the lack of references to it in EU's statements. Progress depended mainly on the resolution of bilateral disputes and the subsequent lifting of vetoes by individual member states, as well as on the settlement of pressing domestic issues.

¹⁵⁹ European Commission, "Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: 2016 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy" (2016), 22, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A52016DC0715>.

¹⁶⁰ European Commission, "The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia: Recommendations of the Senior Experts' Group on systemic Rule of Law issues relating to the communications interception revealed in Spring 2015" (2015), 5, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2016-12/20150619_recommendations_of_the_senior_experts_group.pdf

¹⁶¹ 'Macedonia Protests: Anti-Gruevski Rally in Skopje', *BBC News*, 17 May 2015, sec. Europe, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-32771233>.

¹⁶² Przino Agreement, 2015, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/212828/Przino_Agreement.pdf

3.1.2. Costs of alignment

In this subsection I present the analysts of the economic and political costs related to alignment with sanctions against Russia.

3.1.2.1. Economic costs

Based on the statistical data, we can conclude that the economic costs were medium at the moment of alignment with the EU's sanctions against Russia. This assessment is based on two components. On the one hand, the importance of Russia as a trade partner and investor was relatively low, when considered as a share of North Macedonia's total trade and FDI. On the other hand, dependence on Russian gas was high. Below I look into these aspects in more detail.

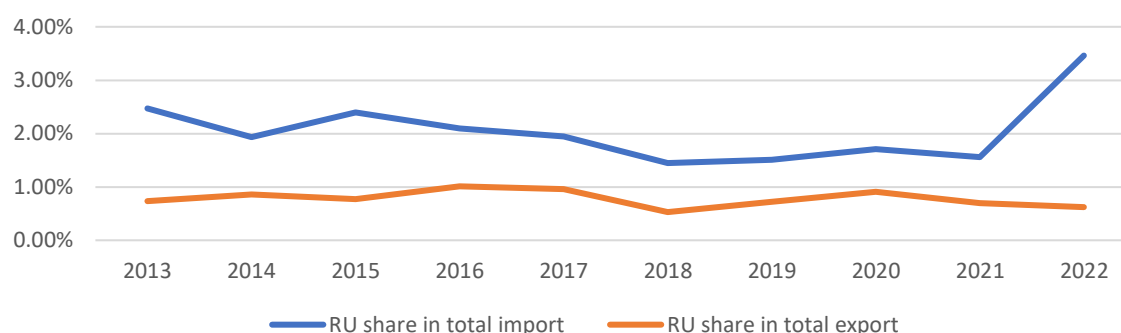
If we compare Russia's place in North Macedonia's foreign trade with that of other trading partners, economic relations with Russia do not seem to be crucial for North Macedonia's economy. In 2021, Russia ranked 20th on the list of the main trading partners, while Germany, the United Kingdom, Serbia, Greece and China were among the top 5. The EU-27 remained North Macedonia's main trading partner, accounting for 77% of its total exports and 46% of its imports.¹⁶³

Throughout the period between 2013 and 2021, Russia's share in total imports and exports remained relatively stable (see Figure 3). Only in 2022 did imports from Russia see a sharp increase from 1.56% to 3.46%. However, this trend started in February 2022, already after Russia began the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and North Macedonia decided to align with sanctions.¹⁶⁴ This indicates that in terms of trade volumes, Russia was not among the top partners of North Macedonia and the economic costs were low.

¹⁶³ Author's calculations based on Republic of North Macedonia State Statistical Office, "External Trade", 2022, 5, https://www.stat.gov.mk/pdf/2022/7.1.22.02_mk.pdf.

¹⁶⁴ As demonstrated by the monthly data: Republic of North Macedonia State Statistical Office, "External trade by countries, monthly data", 2023, https://makstat.stat.gov.mk/PXWeb/pxweb/en/MakStat/MakStat_NadvoresnaTrgovija_MesecniPod/125_zemji_meseci_ml.px/.

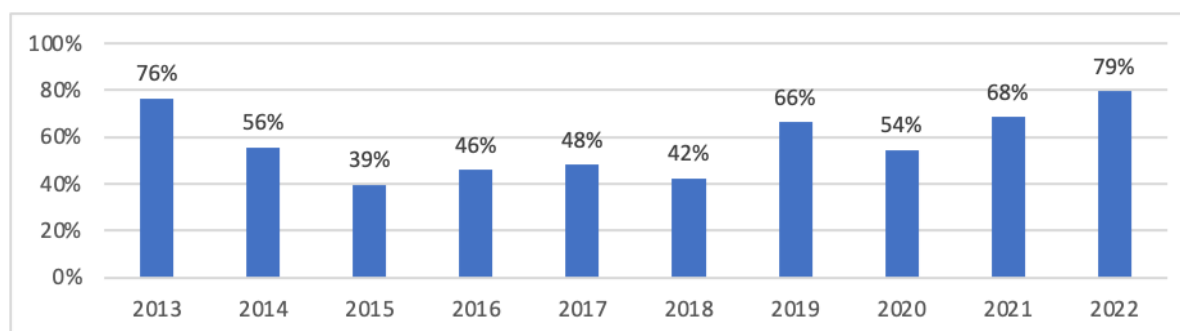
Figure 3. Share of Russia in total imports and exports of North Macedonia (in EUR)



Source: Author's own calculations based on Republic of North Macedonia State Statistical Office, "External trade by countries, cumulative data", 2023.

At the same time, looking at the structure of trade reveals that a significant share of all imports from Russia were mineral fuels, with the share fluctuating between 39% and 79% in the past ten years, reaching 68% in the year preceding North Macedonia's sanctions alignment decision (see the figure below).¹⁶⁵

Figure 4. Mineral fuels, lubricants and related materials as a share of total imports from Russia (in EUR)



Source: Own calculations based on Republic of North Macedonia State Statistical Office, "Export and import according to SITC sectors and countries, cumulative data", 2023.

This is an important aspect to consider, as North Macedonia's relations with Russia are characterised by energy dependency. According to the data for 2021, North Macedonia was among the few European countries that fully relied on Russian gas imports, together with Bosnia and Herzegovina and Moldova, with 100% of all gas supply coming from Russia.¹⁶⁶ In this situation, North Macedonia could expect to incur potential costs in case of sanctions

¹⁶⁵ Republic of North Macedonia State Statistical Office, "Export and import according to SITC sectors and countries, cumulative data", 2023, https://makstat.stat.gov.mk/PXWeb/pxweb/en/MakStat/MakStat_NadvoresnaTrgovija_DetalniPod_DetKum_SMTK/150_SMTK_ZEMJI_ml.px/

¹⁶⁶ ACER, "Estimated number and diversity of supply sources 2021", accessed 15 January 2024, <https://aegis.acer.europa.eu/chest/dataitems/214/view>; Energy and Water Services Regulatory Commission of The Republic of North Macedonia (ERC), "Annual Report on operations of the ERC in 2021", 2022, 109, https://www.erc.org.mk/odluki/2022.06.02_RKE%20GI%202021-FINAL-ENG.pdf

adoption, as retaliatory measures from Russia that would disrupt gas supply could be expected.¹⁶⁷

Finally, while North Macedonia's government had some projects to attract Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) from Russia,¹⁶⁸ the share of Russia in the total FDI in North Macedonia over the past ten years has been negligible (see the table below).

Table 4. FDI in North Macedonia, the share of Russia, EUR million

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
FDI from Russia	12.42	11.37	28.15	39.44	26.82	19.38	31.96	26.28	26.81	24.84
Total FDI	3979.97	4023.64	4400.10	4657.31	4697.82	5307.03	5704.10	5851.66	6298.13	7012.86
Russia in total FDI	0.31%	0.28%	0.64%	0.85%	0.57%	0.37%	0.56%	0.45%	0.43%	0.35%

Source: own calculations based on NB Stat (2023). Stock of Direct Investments in Republic of North Macedonia, by country.

Based on the evidence presented above, we can conclude that direct economic costs from alignment with sanctions against Russia were low; however, when potential costs stemming from North Macedonia's energy dependency on Russia are included, the overall economic costs can be assessed as medium.

3.1.2.2. Political costs and veto players

Political costs can emerge from salient issues in which North Macedonia is supported by Russia and from the existence of pro-Russian veto players.

With regard to veto players, the main foreign policy orientation proclaimed by all governments in power throughout 2014 – 2022 was Euro-Atlantic integration. At the same time, the

¹⁶⁷ These considerations featured in discussions within the EU regarding potential sanctions against Russia in January 2022. See, for instance, 'EU in Touch with Partners to Boost Gas Supplies, Energy Commissioner Says', *Reuters*, 22 January 2022, sec. Energy, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/eu-touch-with-partners-boost-gas-supplies-energy-commissioner-says-2022-01-22/>. An example of analysis of potential effects of retaliatory measures from Russia on the European markets is: Georg Zachmann, Simone Tagliapietra, Ben McWilliams, and Giovanni Sgaravatti, "Can Europe survive painlessly without Russian gas?", *Bruegel Blog*, 27 January 2022, <https://www.bruegel.org/blog-post/can-europe-survive-painlessly-without-russian-gas>.

¹⁶⁸ 'Ставрски: Русија е Еден Од Најзначајните Економски и Политички Партнери', *Министерство За Финансии*, accessed 14 January 2024, <https://finance.gov.mk/ставрески-русија-е-еден-од-најзначајн/>.

development of bilateral relations with other partners, including Russia, was a key part of foreign policy for all governments in the studied period, with regular high-level meetings.¹⁶⁹

In 2014, when North Macedonia made a decision not to align with sanctions against Russia, VMRO-DPMNE was the main party in government. This party and Gruevski's government in general were described by some as Russia sympathisers, based on the closer links that VMRO-DPMNE forged with Russia. At the same time, joining NATO remained a declared priority.¹⁷⁰

The new government that came into power after the end of the political crisis in 2017 demonstrated a strong Euro-Atlantic determination, that resulted in the lift of the multiple vetoes, unblocking North Macedonia's NATO and EU accession perspectives. In relation to Russia, before 2022 the government generally refrained from negative statements and kept an emphasis on strengthening bilateral economic relations. However, after Russia started the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, its actions were condemned by most of the major political forces in North Macedonia, both in government and in opposition (more details are presented in the section on thick socialisation mechanism).

While no strong political veto players who would openly support Russia and oppose European integration were in power in the studied period, several minor political parties with open pro-Russian and Eurosceptic stances exist in North Macedonia. Such parties include United Macedonia, Rodina Macedonia, and Levica. They are similarly critical of North Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic integration plans and support closer ties with Russia, with some of them advocating North Macedonia's integration into Russian-led international structures, such as the

¹⁶⁹ Влада на Република Северна Македонија, "Лавров: Македонија е клучен партнер за стабилизација на Балканот", 2013, <https://vlada.mk/node/5702>; Влада на Република Северна Македонија, "Русите можат да инвестираат во повеќе области", 2012, <https://vlada.mk/node/3639?ln=mk>; Влада на Република Северна Македонија, "Во Москва средба меѓу министрите Попоски и Лавров", 2013, <https://vlada.mk/node/5704?ln=mk>; Влада на Република Северна Македонија, "Средба на премиерот Заев со рускиот амбасадор Шчербак: Поддршка за енергичните политики на премиерот Заев што ја движат Македонија напред и најава за унапредување на економската и културната соработка", 2017, <https://vlada.mk/node/13574?ln=mk>; Министерство за Надворешни Работи на Република Северна Македонија, "Стратешки План 2019-2021", 2019, 77, <https://d1qv8oyeh4usdm.cloudfront.net/images/522575353361475bbcd9153068fd05c.pdf>; Anida Šabanović et al., "Foreign Authoritarian Influence in the Western Balkans". Political Capital, 2020, 34-35, https://europeanvalues.cz/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/foreign_authoritarian_influence_in_the_western_balkans_2020_09.pdf

¹⁷⁰ Maxim Samorukov, "Double or quits: A Russian approach to North Macedonia and NATO", Carnegie Moscow Center, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/05/14/double-or-quits-russian-approach-to-north-macedonia-and-nato-pub-79123>.

Eurasian Economic Union. These parties openly supported Russia's full-scale military invasion of Ukraine in 2022.¹⁷¹

The move by the Popular Movement for Macedonia to rebrand itself as United Macedonia in 2018 was viewed by some as a "tribute" to Putin's United Russia party. The party is critical of North Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic integration plans and supports closer relations with Russia, yet it did not win any seats in parliament.¹⁷² The party Rodina Macedonia (or Motherland Macedonia) is against North Macedonia's membership in NATO and EU and supports integration with the Eurasian Economic Union and other Eurasian structures instead.¹⁷³ Similarly, it did not make it into the parliament. Finally, the far-left political party Levica established in 2015 is another political force in the country that has an openly pro-Russian and anti-Western stance, which persisted even after February 2022.¹⁷⁴ Levica managed to get into the parliament, however, it has marginal influence with only 2 seats in the parliament of 120.¹⁷⁵

Concerning highly important issues supported by Russia which could be a source of potential political cost, Russia has been a long-time supporter of North Macedonia's position on the international arena regarding the use of the country's constitutional name. In practice, this manifested in Russia's use of "Republic of Macedonia" instead of "FYROM" in international fora and bilaterally,¹⁷⁶ thus backing North Macedonia's stance in the name dispute with Greece (discussed at length in the section on credibility below). During Gruevski's government, Russia has been named an important *political* partner by Macedonian officials.¹⁷⁷ Therefore, aligning

¹⁷¹ Žarko Trajanoski, 'Pro-Russian Political Party "Rodina Makedonija" – Disinformation, Conspiracy Theories and Inciting Hatred', *Truthmeter*, 19 May 2022, <https://truthmeter.mk/pro-russian-political-party-rodina-makedonija-disinformation-conspiracy-theories-and-inciting-hatred/>; Sinisa Jakov Marusic, 'North Macedonia's Left Condemned for Aligning with Russia on Ukraine', *Balkan Insight*, 18 March 2022, <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/03/18/north-macedonias-left-condemned-for-aligning-with-russia-on-ukraine/>.

¹⁷² Zoran Nechev and Igor Nikolovski, "North Macedonia: A fertile ground for external influences", in *The Western Balkans in the World*, ed. Florian Bieber and Nikolaos Tzifakis (Routledge, 2019), 126-145.

¹⁷³ Родина Македонија, <https://rodina.org.mk/>.

¹⁷⁴ 'Пратениците на Левица остварија средба со рускиот амбасадор Баздникин - Левица', 16 March 2022, <https://levica.mk/pres-centar/soopshstenija-reakcii/pratenitsite-na-levitsa-ostvariya-sredba-so-ruskiot-ambasador-bazdnikin/>.

¹⁷⁵ Република Северна Македонија Државна Изборна Комисија, "Заклучок за објавување на конечни резултати и распределба на мандати за избор на пратеници во Собрание на РСМ", 2020, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1WU-xSUKFCM_Zn66fBhtUmeE86Txcjn2s/view.

¹⁷⁶ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Response by Russian MFA Spokesman Andrei Nesterenko to a Media Question Concerning Greco-Macedonian Dispute over the Republic of Macedonia Name", 2008, <https://mid.ru/en/maps/mk/1620730/>.

¹⁷⁷ Република Северна Македонија Влада на Република Северна Македонија, "Ставрски: Русија е еден од најважните економски и политички партнери", 2015, <https://vlada.mk/node/10367?ln=mk>.

with sanctions against Russia could be seen as a potential political cost by the government of Gruevski, which held a firm stance against changing the constitutional name of the country.¹⁷⁸

However, the new government led by Zaev which came to power in 2017 was determined to resolve the dispute with Greece to unlock the path to EU accession for North Macedonia, and the Greek government was also ready to compromise to finally solve the issue, resulting in the Prespa Agreement that lifted Greece's veto. As the issue was solved, Russia's support on that matter became irrelevant automatically.

Therefore, we can conclude that at the moment when the decision to align with EU sanctions against Russia was made in 2022, there were no significant political costs.

3.1.3. Scope conditions

Overall, while EU rules regarding CFSP and alignment with Russia-related sanctions have been clear (determinacy was in place), the scope conditions have been significantly violated by the lack of EU consistency and lowered overall credibility as a result. I present the scope conditions in detail below.

3.1.3.1. Credibility

The credibility scope condition consists of consistency, cross-conditionality from other actors, and capabilities and costs on the EU side. I overview these dimensions below.

The first credulity dimension is consistency. Vetoes on the start of accession negotiations, successively put first by Greece, then by France, the Netherlands and Denmark, and then by Bulgaria, have caused the EU's stance to be highly inconsistent. Disputes between North Macedonia and the two neighbouring EU Member States Greece and Bulgaria have dealt a particularly severe blow to the EU's credibility in North Macedonia, and in particular to the accession process.

The Greek-Macedonian dispute has been long stalling North Macedonia's progress in the Euro-Atlantic integration, lasting for over 25 years. The dispute started almost immediately, as in a process of the dissolution of Yugoslavia, North Macedonia¹⁷⁹ seceded in 1991 under the constitutional name Republic of Macedonia. Greece, which has a region named Macedonia,

¹⁷⁸ Filip Rudic, "Gruevski Slates Greece-Macedonia Name Deal as "Scam"", *Balkan Insight*, 18 February 2019, <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/02/18/gruevski-slates-greece-macedonia-name-deal-as-scam/>.

¹⁷⁹ For simplicity purposes, throughout the thesis we use the term "North Macedonia" to refer to the country even in the period before the constitutional name was changed (i.e. it is used to denote FYROM/Macedonia/Republic of Macedonia).

immediately raised concerns over the country's name, fearing that it might serve as a basis for irredentism. Moreover, North Macedonia's use of symbols such as the Star of Vergina on its new flag and appeals to the heritage of Alexander the Great were perceived by Greece as a symbolic threat to its national identity.¹⁸⁰ When in 1992 North Macedonia applied to UN membership under its constitutional name, due to Greece's strong discontent in 1993 it was decided to accept the country to the UN under the provisional name Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM).¹⁸¹ With mass protests in Greece and the Greek embargo on North Macedonia, the situation continued to cause a stir, and in 1995, an interim agreement was signed, ending the Greek embargo, changing the flag of North Macedonia, and setting the conditions for peaceful resolution of the dispute in the future under UN's mediation.¹⁸²

Greece vetoed North Macedonia's accession to NATO and the EU since 2008 and until the name issue was resolved. Both Greece and North Macedonia had strong positions on the dispute, which for a long time was essentially a stalemate. At some point, both the Greek and the Macedonian side were ready to compromise and put an end to the protracted dispute. Building on the years of previous negotiations, during the Zaev's government term the Prespa agreement was signed in 2018, ending the dispute and opening the way to NATO and EU accession.¹⁸³

Not long after the Greek-Macedonian dispute was settled in 2018, and the veto was lifted in 2020, new obstacles came in the way. First, in 2019 France, supported by the Netherlands and Denmark, vetoed the start of accession talks before the enlargement process would be reformed, insisting on a more cautious approach to potential new members.¹⁸⁴ As a result, the enlargement approach has been reformed to "enhance credibility on both sides" and was applied to North Macedonia and Albania.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸⁰ Nikos Kalampalikis, "A Lasting Symbolic National Threat: The Dispute Over the Name Macedonia", in *Societies Under Threat*, ed. Denise Jodelet, Jorge Vala, and Ewa Drozda-Senkowska, vol. 3, *Frontiers in Sociology and Social Research* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020), 101–12, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-39315-1_9.

¹⁸¹ Petros Sioussiouras, 'The Process of Recognition of the Newly Independent States of Former Yugoslavia by the European Community: The Case of the Former Socialist Republic of Macedonia', *Journal of Political & Military Sociology* 32, no. 1 (2004): 12, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45371632>.

¹⁸² Matthew Nimetz, 'The Macedonian "Name" Dispute: The Macedonian Question—Resolved?', *Nationalities Papers* 48, no. 2 (March 2020): 205–14, <https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2020.10>.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ 'EU Leaders Give Final OK To Begin North Macedonia, Albania Membership Talks', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 06:14:45Z, sec. North Macedonia, <https://www.rferl.org/a/eu-leaders-give-final-approval-eu-membership-talks-macedonia-albania/30512156.html>.

¹⁸⁵ European Commission, "Revised Enlargement Methodology: Questions and Answers", Text, European Commission - European Commission, accessed 14 January 2024, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/qanda_20_182.

After the previous issues were resolved, yet another veto came from Bulgaria in 2020. Bulgaria was concerned with protecting the rights of the Bulgarian minority in North Macedonia, but also made claims that Macedonian language and identity were based on Bulgarian legacy, which on the Macedonian side were not easy to accept. The negotiations resulted in a highly unpopular agreement, the French proposal, according to which North Macedonia would amend its constitution to include the Bulgarian minority as one of the constituent peoples and open the way to accession talks.¹⁸⁶ At the moment when the decision to align with sanctions against Russia was made in 2022, Bulgaria's veto was still in place, and it was lifted later in the summer of the same year, finally enabling North Macedonia to progress with its accession. In July 2022, the Intergovernmental Conference on accession negotiations was held with North Macedonia and the European Commission started the screening process.¹⁸⁷

Such inconsistent stance regarding North Macedonia's accession has found a reflection in public opinion. The attitudes towards EU membership have been progressively declining over the past years, going from 80% in 2014 to 64% in 2022.¹⁸⁸ In 2021, the majority of respondents attributed the lack of progress in North Macedonia's accession to the EU or the neighbouring countries. Particularly, 43% of respondents stated that the lack of progress in North Macedonia's accession was due to obstructions from the neighbouring countries and 17% believed that the main reason was that the EU was not ready to accept North Macedonia as a member.¹⁸⁹ We can infer that by the neighbouring countries, the majority of the respondents meant specifically Greece and Bulgaria.

Bulgaria and Greece have featured prominently when public opinion polls asked to identify countries that posed threats to North Macedonia. The peaks in perceiving Greece and Bulgaria as threats to North Macedonia occurred during the most active phases of the disputes. In 2018, only less than one percent perceived Bulgaria as a threat; in 2019, this number rose to 23%. After the Bulgarian veto that once again blocked the country's way to accession in 2020, a vast

¹⁸⁶ Alice Taylor, 'French Proposal Vote to Be Restructured in Macedonian Parliament Vote', *Euractiv*, 15 July 2022, https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/french-proposal-vote-to-be-restructured-in-macedonian-parliament-vote/.

¹⁸⁷ European Commission, 'First Intergovernmental Conferences with Albania and North Macedonia to Kick-Start the Accession Negotiation - European Commission', accessed 14 January 2024, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/first-intergovernmental-conferences-albania-and-north-macedonia-kick-start-accession-negotiation-2022-07-19_en.

¹⁸⁸ Ivan Damjanovski, "Analysis of public opinion on North Macedonia's accession to the European Union (2014-2022)", *Public Opinion Analysis Paper 3/2023*, Konrad Adenauer Foundation in the Republic of North Macedonia, Institute for Democracy "Societas Civilis" – Skopje, 2023, 13, https://idscs.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/analiza2_B5ENG.pdf.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.

majority of respondents (77.88%) believed that Bulgaria posed a threat to North Macedonia. After the deal was struck between North Macedonia and Bulgaria, who accepted the French proposal, the perception went back to the previous levels (23% perceived Bulgaria as a threat in 2021). In the case of Greece, around 24% of respondents perceived the country as a threat in 2018 and 2019, and over time the share of negative perception shrank, reaching 1.9% in 2021.¹⁹⁰

The second credibility dimension is *cross-conditionality from other actors*. Prime Minister Zoran Zaev has drawn attention to the declining support for the EU and its lack of credibility among North Macedonian citizens, making references to the possibility of growing influence from other actors, including Russia and China due to the EU's inability to make progress in the accession process.¹⁹¹ In the same vein, President Stevo Pendarovski claimed that Russia and China might “come instead of the EU”.¹⁹²

A speech given by Artan Grubi, the First Deputy of the Prime Minister and Minister of Political System and Relations between Communities during the Congress of the Socialist Party in Albania in September 2022, highlights the mainstream view among the major political forces – that there is no alternative to European integration for North Macedonia, stressing the importance of EU's engagement in the region. Grubi voiced his concerns over the possibility of Russia's influence in North Macedonia and the region more broadly: “The further away Brussels is, the closer Moscow is. The less Europe in the Balkans, the more space for Russia”.¹⁹³

This reflects that cross-conditionality from other international actors, especially Russia and China, was framed as a persistent risk by the officials in the North Macedonian government. According to official discourse, public opinion in North Macedonia is susceptible to external influences. For instance, North Macedonia's Prime Minister Kovacevski framed enlargement as a matter of security and pointed out that:

¹⁹⁰ The survey was conducted in November 2021, had a representative sample of 1001 respondents and the margin of error of +/- 3 %. Димитар Николовски, “Упорно кон ЕУ? Извештај од анкетното истражување Еврометар есен 2021 година – Северна Македонија и Европската Унија, очекувања и ставови на граѓаните”, ЕВРОТИНК - Центар за европски стратегии – Скопје, 2021, <https://shorturl.at/hFH69>.

¹⁹¹ EWB, ‘Zaev Warns about Increasing Euroskepticism in North Macedonia Due to EU Accession Impasse’, *European Western Balkans*, 19 May 2021, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2021/05/19/zaev-warns-about-increasing-euroskepticism-in-north-macedonia-due-to-eu-accession-impasse/>.

¹⁹² ‘North Macedonia Warns EU Not to Disengage from Western Balkans’, *Euronews*, 30 April 2021, <https://www.euronews.com/business/2021/04/28/north-macedonia-warns-eu-not-to-disengage-from-western-balkans>.

¹⁹³ Влада на Република Северна Македонија, “Груби со порака до ЕУ: Лозинката за интеграцијата на Северна Македонија и Албанија е Украина”, 2022, <https://vlada.mk/node/28395>.

the absence of a credible European and Euro-Atlantic perspective for the Western Balkans has multiple negative tendencies for the malicious influence of third parties, which increases uncertainties in the region and creates doubts that result in a reduction of citizens' trust in the EU.¹⁹⁴

However, the tangible possibility of successful cross-conditionality from Russia (or any other actor) was low. When it comes to vulnerability to foreign influence, according to the GLOBSEC Vulnerability Index which focuses specifically on China's and Russia's activities, in 2021 North Macedonia was "moderately vulnerable", scoring 40 out of 100. With regard to China, regardless of considerable investments in the economy of North Macedonia, experts consider China's influence to be minor or almost absent.¹⁹⁵

A potential reward that Russia could use as a basis for cross-conditionality could have been the prospect of joining the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). However, this perspective did not feature in the official political discourse on foreign policy, which strongly revolved around Euro-Atlantic orientation, even in times when the EU and NATO accession progress was minimal. To illustrate, in 2019, after France blocked the start of the accession negotiations, a Russian representative suggested North Macedonia join the EEU.¹⁹⁶ However, Prime Minister Zaev later issued a statement saying that the country did not receive an official invitation and was not looking to receive it either.¹⁹⁷ Furthermore, the societal attitudes are only moderately receptive to such potential cross-conditionality. The majority of North Macedonia's citizens prioritize EU integration over EEU integration: public opinion polls show that 39% of Macedonians would choose to join EEU at the expense of harming relations with the EU in 2021 (going up from 22% in 2019).¹⁹⁸

The third credibility dimension is *capabilities and costs on the EU side*. Given the background of North Macedonia's accession process, the EU was fully capable of withholding the reward in case of non-compliance. The relationship between the EU and North Macedonia has been

¹⁹⁴ Влада на Република Северна Македонија, "Ковачевски: Едногласни сме за заеднички регионален одговор на кризата и во поддршката за Украина", 2022, <https://vlada.mk/node/28238?ln=mk>

¹⁹⁵ GLOBSEC, "Globsec Vulnerability Index 2021: North Macedonia", GLOBSEC, 2021: 40-41, https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2021-11/Vulnerability-Index_North-Macedonia.pdf

¹⁹⁶ EWB, 'Russian Representative to EU Invites N. Macedonia and Albania to Join EEU Instead', *European Western Balkans*, 30 October 2019, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2019/10/30/russian-representative-to-eu-invites-n-macedonia-and-albania-to-join-eeu-instead/>

¹⁹⁷ 'Zaev: North Macedonia is not looking for an invitation to join EAEU', *Независен Весник*, 30 October 2019, <https://nezavisen.mk/zaev-north-macedonia-is-not-looking-for-an-invitation-to-join-eaeu/>

¹⁹⁸ USAID, NDI, "Public Opinion Research: Democracy, Geopolitics, Disinformation, North Macedonia", 2021: 29-31, <https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/MK%20REAPPS%20%202021%20public.pdf>

largely asymmetrical, with the EU being the largest trading partner for North Macedonia,¹⁹⁹ and there were no restrictive factors that could have stopped the EU from applying conditionality in relation to sanctions alignment. This capability is exceptionally well illustrated by the history of multiple vetoes effectively withholding the reward, overviewed above.

Overall, we can observe that while cross-conditionality was minimal and costs and capabilities on the EU's side made it easy for the EU to withhold the reward in case of non-compliance, during the whole studied period, the EU's stance was *highly inconsistent*, negatively impacting its credibility.

3.1.3.2. Determinacy of EU conditions

Overall, the EU's expectations regarding alignment with CFSP have been clearly communicated by the EU in the official documents, the yearly progress reports being the most important of them. The EU has been continuously tracking North Macedonia's alignment record, alongside its progress in other areas of the *acquis*. In Annex 1, the excerpts from the European Commission's progress reports on North Macedonia's alignment are presented. Alignment with restrictive measures against Russia was singled out in the sections of the progress report devoted to CFSP and directions to increase the overall alignment level were given.

The EU's expectations regarding CFSP and sanctions alignment in particular have been reiterated during meetings between the EU's and North Macedonia's officials.²⁰⁰ Yet, in its speeches and statements, the EU has no clear-cut and explicit instructions that would ask North

¹⁹⁹ Delegation of the European Union to North Macedonia, 'The European Union and North Macedonia | EEAS', accessed 14 January 2024, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/north-macedonia/european-union-and-north-macedonia_en?s=229.

²⁰⁰ Republic of North Macedonia, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "State Secretary Viktor Dimovski – host of EEAS meeting of political directors from Western Balkan countries", 2018, <https://www.mfa.gov.mk/en/page/1759/post/1315/drzhavniot-sekretar-viktor-dimovski-domakjin-na-sostanokot-na-evropejskata-sluzhba-za-nadvoreshni-rabo>; Republic of North Macedonia, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "State Secretary Viktor Dimovski participates in the third meeting of the European External Action Service with political directors of Western Balkan countries (WB6)", 2018, <https://www.mfa.gov.mk/en/page/1759/post/1570/wb6>; Council of the EU, "Fifteenth meeting of the Stabilisation and Association Council between the Republic of North Macedonia and the European Union", 2019, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2019/03/19/fifteenth-meeting-of-the-stabilisation-and-association-council-between-the-republic-of-north-macedonia-and-the-european-union/>; Republic of North Macedonia, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Fifteenth meeting of the Stabilisation and Association Council between the Republic of North Macedonia and the European Union", 2019, <https://www.mfa.gov.mk/en/page/1759/post/1740/15-3>.

Macedonia to align with Russia-related sanctions and link it to the accession progress.²⁰¹ Thus, the scope condition of determinacy was met.

3.1.4. Overall assessment of the external incentives mechanism

Based on the evidence overviewed above, and as summarised in Table 6, we can conclude that the mechanism of external incentives was not likely to be responsible for the change in North Macedonia's alignment.

While both economic and political costs to align were relatively low compared to the long-awaited reward of opening the EU accession talks, we observe low credibility of the EU reward, as well as the absence of an explicit linkage between sanctions alignment and opening of the accession negotiations, rendering the workings of this mechanism, in this case, to be unlikely.

Hence, I confirm the proposition of low costs of alignment and partially confirm the proposition of the presence of EU rewards. However, the scope condition of credibility was not met, which impairs the functioning of the external incentives mechanism as a whole. Given that the propositions have low uniqueness and low prior confidence in this mechanism, I conclude that it was unlikely that it led to change in North Macedonia's alignment with sanctions against Russia.

Table 5. Assessment of the external incentives model propositions

Proposition		Empirical findings
Presence of EU rewards <i>(high certainty, low uniqueness)</i>		The EU had a reward (opening of accession talks) at its disposal; however, it did not tie it directly to CFSP alignment, but rather to domestic reforms. Provision of the reward also depended on solving bilateral disputes with Greece and Bulgaria.
Low costs of alignment <i>(high certainty, low uniqueness)</i>		Potential economic costs for alignment were moderate during the whole studied period (2014-2022), due to energy dependency. At the same time, with the new strongly EU-oriented government coming to power and resolving the name dispute (in which Russia supported North Macedonia), political costs were reduced and can be assessed as low during the period directly preceding the decision to align in February 2022.
Credibility <i>(scope condition)</i>	Conditionality is consistent	While there was no credible cross-conditionality from other actors and the EU was capable of withholding a reward, conditionality was highly inconsistent due to multiple vetoes

²⁰¹ Search by keywords "Macedonia AND Russia AND sanctions" after 2014 sanctions package was adopted and before February 2022 in Google News does not produce any results of the EU statements that would discuss North Macedonia's non-alignment with Russia-related sanctions. Similar results are rendered via search in EEAS archive (available [here](#)).

	No cross-conditionality from other actors	on the start of the accession talks from several EU Member States, rendering the overall credibility low.
	The EU is capable of withholding a reward	
Determinacy of EU conditions (scope condition)	EU provides clear rules and conditions with regard to CFSP alignment	The EU's documents clearly outlined the expectations regarding CFSP alignment, and sanctions alignment in particular.

Note: propositions coloured in green were confirmed, propositions in light red were not confirmed, and propositions in yellow were partially confirmed.

3.2. Testing the role-playing mechanism

In this section I assess the propositions related to the ambiguity of the process of alignment, its “automacity”, and the use of social role in justifications for alignment. Finally, an evaluation of the mechanism as a whole is presented.

3.2.1. Ambiguity of the process of alignment

The proposition of ambiguity of the process of alignment consists of two elements: absence of the reward for alignment and absence of match in norms, values and identities. The process of alignment with sanctions against Russia in 2022 demonstrated an overall ambiguity. While no reward was offered by the EU for alignment, there was also no strong match in norms values and identities with alignment with sanctions against Russia, as demonstrated by the public opinion on Russia and government documents. Below, I present the evidence for both elements.

When it comes to a reward for alignment, while the EU offered an intermediary reward of opening the accession talks, there were no direct rewards that would be directly linked to alignment with restrictive measures against Russia (as shown in the external incentives model section). Progress in North Macedonia's accession process, principally meaning the opening of the accession negotiations as the most tangible next step, was linked to completing necessary domestic reforms and depended on the resolution of bilateral disputes with Bulgaria and Greece. Alignment with Russia-related sanctions did not explicitly feature as a condition for receiving this intermediary reward.

When it comes to match in norms, values and identities, the identity of North Macedonia can be inferred from official foreign policy documents, statements of government officials, and public opinion.

In the official foreign policy documents, the EU and NATO membership remained the main foreign policy priorities for North Macedonia, but strengthening bilateral relations with other partners was also among the priority areas mentioned in the official strategies. In the Strategic Plan 2019-2021 adopted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, EU and NATO countries are singled out as the key strategic partners. In addition to that, relations with “other key actors on the global scene” are underlined, among them the USA, Russia, China, and Canada are mentioned as being of “exceptional strategic interest” for North Macedonia.²⁰² In the same document, Russia features as one of the “key partners” for the promotion of political dialogue alongside the USA, China, Japan, Canada, Australia and India.²⁰³ In the Strategic Plan 2020-2022, the promotion of relations with China, Russia, Japan and Australia as “key actors of the global scene” is mentioned.²⁰⁴ Russia is also mentioned alongside China, Japan and Middle Eastern countries in a priority area related to economic cooperation.²⁰⁵ Hence, we observe that Russia is mentioned among the key strategic partners, however, it is not given a primary role and is only mentioned alongside other partners.

Based on the statements of government officials, North Macedonia’s identity can be summarised as a “small, friendly country” that wants to keep balanced relations with all partners, at the same time having a strong determination for Euro-Atlantic integration. Reflected in the foreign policy strategic documents overviewed above, this is well illustrated by Zaev’s statement from 2018:

We are a small country, a friendly country, a positive country, we want to build relations with everyone, and of course we want to improve our relations with Russia. But for the Republic of Macedonia, there is no alternative but full membership in NATO and the EU.²⁰⁶

Yet, after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, all major political actors voiced their strong condemnation of Russia’s action (overviewed in detail in the thick socialisation section). Therefore, we generally see a partial match of the sanctions alignment policy with identity, norms and values of North Macedonia’s government and broader political elites.

²⁰² Министерство за Надворешни Работи на Република Северна Македонија, “Стратешки План 2019-2021”, 77.

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Министерство за Надворешни Работи на Република Северна Македонија, “Стратешки План 2020-2022”, 2020: 16, <https://d1qv8oyeh4usdm.cloudfront.net/images/a3cd419b2cd54a39b8bab8ba51d51c00.pdf>.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 8.

²⁰⁶ Влада на Република Северна Македонија, “Премиерот Заев и канцеларката Меркел на заедничка прес-конференција: Република Македонија има стабилна влада и реформски политики во интерес на граѓаните и членството во ЕУ и во НАТО”, 2018, <https://vlada.mk/node/14128?ln=mk>. Translated from Macedonian.

At the same time, analysis of public opinion data demonstrates that Russia was not perceived negatively by the majority of the population both before and after February 2022. Below I present available public opinion data on general perceptions of Russia, perceptions of Russia as an ally and as a threat, popularity of ideas of Slavic unity, as well as public opinion on Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and economic sanctions against Russia.

According to a public opinion poll conducted by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) in 2018, during that time sympathetic perception of Russia stood at 32%, while half of the population held favourable views towards the EU. With time, perceptions have shifted: in 2021, almost half of Macedonians perceived Russia favourably (49%), while public opinion towards the EU was less positive, with 45% of the respondents having a favourable view.²⁰⁷

With the general favourability of Russia increasing, support for Russia-led international structures has amplified over the years as well. Whereas in 2018, 28% of respondents would support North Macedonia's membership in the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union, in 2021 it was supported by more than half (53%) of respondents. However, if that would mean spoiling relations with the EU, only 39% would vote in favour of such a decision in 2021 (going up from 22% in 2018), while 41% would vote against it.²⁰⁸

Moreover, ideas of Slavic unity had some footing in North Macedonia, based on the latest available data for 2020. More than half of North Macedonia's citizens (66%) perceived Russia as a traditional Slavic brother/sister nation in 2020.²⁰⁹

Furthermore, in 2020, more than half of Macedonians (56%) disagreed with a statement that Russia is aggressive towards its neighbours and seeks to weaken the EU and NATO.²¹⁰ Yet, the narrative of Russia being unjustly accused by the Western countries did not receive strong support in North Macedonia, where only 35% agreed with this statement.²¹¹

While Russia is seen positively by a considerable share of the population, it rarely takes the first place when it comes to naming North Macedonia's greatest allies, with the EU dominating.

²⁰⁷ This survey was conducted in March-April 2021, had a representative sample of 2410 responses and a margin of error +/-2% (see <https://www.ndi.org/publications/north-macedonia-public-opinion-research-democracy-geopolitics-disinformation>). USAID, NDI, "Public Opinion Research: Democracy, Geopolitics, Disinformation, North Macedonia", 25, <https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/MK%20REAPPS%20%202021%20public.pdf>.

²⁰⁸ Ibid, 29-31.

²⁰⁹ GLOBSEC, "Globsec Vulnerability Index 2021: North Macedonia", 49.

²¹⁰ Dominika Hajdu et al., "Globsec Trends 2020: Central Europe, Eastern Europe & Western Balkans at the times of pandemic", *GLOBSEC*, 2020: 40-41, https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/GLOBSEC-Trends-2020_read-version.pdf.

²¹¹ Ibid.

In 2017, only 13.8% named Russia as the greatest ally, whereas 41.8% named the EU. At the same time, interestingly, USA was singled out as the greatest ally only slightly more often than Russia (16.6%), which is interesting given that on the level of official policy the country follows a Euro-Atlantic orientation.²¹²

According to a different survey conducted in 2021, only 2.8% perceived Russia as the greatest friend/partner of North Macedonia, with Serbia, the USA and the EU being the most common responses.²¹³ In 2022, after Russia began the full-scale war against Ukraine, this percentage remained roughly the same – 2.5%.²¹⁴ This indicates that the perception of Russia as the primary partner did not change after February 2022 among the most avid Russia supporters, but such views were spread only among a marginal share of the population.

In attitudes towards Russia ethnic divisions exist, and for some groups, Russia used to be a more desired ally than the EU. In 2016, 29.9% of ethnic Macedonians believed that Russia would be the best ally for North Macedonia, while only 24.7% thought the same about the EU. Among the ethnic Albanian respondents, Russia was seen as the best ally only by 9%, with a majority preferring the EU (32.2%) and the USA (28.3%).²¹⁵ In 2017, these perceptions shifted. Russia was perceived as the greatest ally only by 18% of ethnic Macedonian respondents but still was the second most common response after the EU. Among ethnic Albanians, a similar percentage chose the USA (21.3%) as the best ally, while the EU was the most chosen answer.²¹⁶

Additionally, Russia was not perceived as a threat by the overwhelming majority before the full-scale invasion, according to a survey conducted in 2021 (receiving less than 1% of responses).²¹⁷ After Russia started the full-scale war against Ukraine in 2022, this share of those

²¹² Zoran Nechev, Nenad Markovikj and Ivan Nikolovski, “The European Union on the Verge of Bouncing Back in Macedonia”, Konrad Adenauer Foundation and the Institute for Democracy “Societas Civilis”, 2018: 11, <https://idscs.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/WEB-THE-EUROPEAN-UNION-ON-THE-VERGE-OF-BOUNCING-BACK-IN-MACEDONIA.pdf>

²¹³ Николовски, “Упорно кон ЕУ? Извештај од анкетното истражување Еврометар есен 2021 година – Северна Македонија и Европската Унија, очекувања и ставови на граѓаните”, 17.

²¹⁴ Димитар Николовски, “Евроентузијазмот во Слободен пад Анкетно Истражување: Еврометар, Декември 2022”, 2023: 29, <https://eurothink.mk/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Evroentuzijazmot-vo-sloboden-pad-Evrometar-2022.pdf>

²¹⁵ Zoran Nechev and Hristijan Petrushev, “The EU’s credibility at stake in Macedonia”, Konrad Adenauer Foundation and the Institute for Democracy “Societas Civilis”, 2017: 5, 16, <https://idscs.org.mk/en/2017/02/21/the-eus-credibility-at-stake-in-macedonia/>.

²¹⁶ Zoran Nechev, Nenad Markovikj and Ivan Nikolovski, “The European Union on the Verge of Bouncing Back in Macedonia”, 11.

²¹⁷ Николовски, “Упорно кон ЕУ? Извештај од анкетното истражување Еврометар есен 2021 година – Северна Македонија и Европската Унија, очекувања и ставови на граѓаните”, 17.

who perceive Russia as a threat has only risen to 4%, still representing a minor share of answers.²¹⁸

Two surveys conducted by the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung in 2022 are among the few available data sources on how North Macedonia's citizens perceive Russia in the context of the war in Ukraine.²¹⁹ According to the first survey, in August 2022, 50.4% of Macedonians believed that Russian military aggression was unjustified and unacceptable when shares of those who responded "agree" (38.8%) and "rather agree" (11.6%) are combined.²²⁰ A quarter disagreed with the statement about the unjustifiability and unacceptability of Russian military aggression, believing that it was justifiable and acceptable. At the same time, there is a considerable share of those who are undecided, as almost a quarter of respondents did not voice an opinion on that matter.²²¹ Another survey conducted in November 2022 demonstrates that only 21.9% of respondents put responsibility for the outbreak of the war exclusively on Russia, while 37.8% believe that "someone else" was responsible and 19.4% did not have a formed opinion on that matter.²²²

Available public opinion data on the perception of sanctions reveals that in November 2022, a majority (61.6%) of Macedonians did not support economic sanctions against Russia, while only 22.5% expressed support for the restrictive measures.²²³

Based on the evidence presented above, it can be concluded that negative perceptions of Russia were not a prevailing sentiment among Macedonians. Ideas of Slavic brotherhood were held by major parts of the population, but there was no strong support or preference for Russia as

²¹⁸ Николовски, "Евроентузијазмот во Слободен пад Анкетно Истражување: Еврометар, Декември 2022", 26.

²¹⁹ The first survey was conducted in August 2022, has a representative sample of 1111 respondents and a margin of error of +/- 2.9 %. Александар Спасеновски, "30 години надворешна политика и одбрана (Анализа и истражување на јавното мислење)", Фондација Конрад Аденауер во Република Северна Македонија, 2022, <https://www.kas.de/documents/281657/281706/Analysis+and+Survey+30+Years+of+Foreign+and+Defense+Policy.pdf/f0b10c08-eddb-11ae-4d97-54fe353eb922?version=1.0&t=1663579296682>; The second survey was conducted in November 2022, has a representative sample of 1121 respondents and a margin of error of +/- 2.9 %. Александар Спасеновски, "Ставови и перцепции за војната во Украина (Анализа и истражување на јавното мислење)", Фондација Конрад Аденауер во Република Северна Македонија, 2022, <https://www.kas.de/en/web/nordmazedonien/single-title/-/content/attitudes-and-perceptions-about-the-war-in-ukraine>.

²²⁰ Спасеновски, "30 години надворешна политика и одбрана (Анализа и истражување на јавното мислење)", 36-37.

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Спасеновски, "Ставови и перцепции за војната во Украина (Анализа и истражување на јавното мислење)".

²²³ Ibid., 25.

the main ally for North Macedonia, as the EU remains a preferred partner. Furthermore, economic sanctions against Russia were not supported by the majority of Macedonians.

Together, the public opinion and government documents data demonstrate that alignment with sanctions against Russia did not fully match the foreign policy identity of North Macedonia. Therefore, we can partially confirm the proposition of ambiguity.

3.2.2. Automacity of alignment

In 2014, North Macedonia did not align with sanctions against Russia, which indicates that at that time the practice of alignment was not non-reflexive, but rather contested. Starting in 2016, the situation began to change, with the government led by Zaev taking a course to reach full alignment with CFSP. Since 2016, North Macedonia has been steadily increasing its overall alignment rate, joining *all* new declarations and restrictive measures of the European Union.²²⁴ Due to the previous decision not to align with sanctions against Russia, the alignment rate peaked at 96% in 2021 and had not reached 100% until 2022, when the government decided to align both with the old sanctions packages against Russia and with the new ones (to see change in the alignment rate over time, see Figure 2 at the beginning of the chapter).

Once Russia began the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the EU announced a new sanctions package, North Macedonia almost immediately decided to align, joining them on February 24th with a recommendation from the government to align with all upcoming restrictive measures.²²⁵ In this sense, due to the previous record of alignment, the decision to align with sanctions against Russia in 2022 can be considered “automatic”.

The high rate of alignment taken by the new government as a new foreign policy course, together with officials’ references to alignment rates (covered in the next subsection) can be understood as evidence of a certain degree of “automacity” of this process. This does not mean that the decision was taken without any discussion or thought. Rather, it indicates that the pattern of high alignment in some way “locked-in” alignment for the upcoming restrictive measures, and the government acted according to it, following its role perceptions about what constitutes appropriate behaviour for a candidate state.

²²⁴ For example, Prime Minister Zaev noted that North Macedonia joined declarations/restrictive measures regarding downing of the Malaysian plane, Russia-Georgian conflict, Transnistria, elections in the self-proclaimed “Luhansk People’s Republic” and “Donetsk People’s Republic”, and poisoning of Alexei Navalny. See [here](#).

²²⁵ Макфакс, ‘Македонија се придружува кон ЕУ за санкциите кон Русија’, *МАКФАКС*, 24 February 2022, sec. Македонија, <https://makfax.com.mk/makedonija/македонија-се-придружува-кон-еу-со-сан/>. Translated from Macedonian.

Automacity is also demonstrated in an interview for a local Macedonian news portal in April 2022, where the Foreign Affairs Minister Osmani replied to a question on whether there will be new sanctions against Russia saying that it depends on the decisions taken by the EU, as North Macedonia decided to fully comply with the EU CFSP, “which means that in the future we will adhere to all decisions, whether it is a matter of taking restrictive measures against any country, RNM will join those sanctions”.²²⁶

Thus, we observe evidence of not only automacity based on the previous record of alignment but also “prospective” automacity, where it is clearly stated that North Macedonia is determined to follow all future CFSP decisions of the EU regarding Russia.

As shown in the literature, non-reflexivity of alignment can also be characterized by perceiving EU foreign policy positions as those “of the civilized world”,²²⁷ which I overview in the next subsection on alignment as socially accepted behaviour.

3.2.3. Social role in justifications for alignment with sanctions against Russia

North Macedonia’s understanding of the “rules of the game” regarding CFSP alignment has been formed well in advance of its non-alignment with the EU’s restrictive measures against Russia in 2014 and eventual alignment in 2022. In a study on non-EU countries’ alignment with EU’s positions in OSCE, an interviewed North Macedonia representative shared that it is known that non-alignment should be an *exception* among the EU candidates (with the interview dated 2011).²²⁸ While the study examined a different setting of alignment (OSCE), it is nevertheless useful to consider in a broader picture of CFSP alignment and associated candidates’ role expectations. This observation suggests that North Macedonia perceives alignment with CFSP as desirable and expected behaviour within the EU community. Alignment is, therefore, “prescribed” by the social role of being an aspiring member of the community of EU states.

²²⁶ Meta.mk., ‘Bujar Osmani: Our Country Is in Coordination with NATO and EU Countries to Prevent Russian Disinformation in North Macedonia’, 8 April 2022, <https://meta.mk/en/bujar-osmani-our-country-is-in-coordination-with-nato-and-eu-countries-to-prevent-russian-disinformation-in-north-macedonia/>; Portlab, ‘Bujar Osmani: RMV Është Në Koordinim Me Vendet e NATO-s Dhe BE-Së Për Parandalimin e Dezinformatave Ruse Në Vend - PORTALB’, 6 April 2022, <https://arkiv.portalb.mk/794859-bujar-osmani-rmv-eshte-ne-koordinim-me-vendet-e-nato-s-dhe-be-se-per-parandalimin-e-dezinformatave-ruse-ne-vend/>.

²²⁷ Marciacq and Jaramillo, “When the European Union speaks on behalf of non-European Union states: a critical appraisal of the European Union’s alignment mechanism in multilateral fora”, 214.

²²⁸ Marciacq and Jaramillo, “When the European Union speaks on behalf of non-European Union states: a critical appraisal of the European Union’s alignment mechanism in multilateral fora”, 209.

Mention of the social role as an EU candidate was made in the Strategic Plan (2022-2024) issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of North Macedonia when referring to alignment with CFSP in the context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine:

In the new strategic reality for European and transatlantic security, North Macedonia as a member of NATO and *as a credible and reliable candidate country for the EU*,²²⁹ fully aligned with the Common Foreign and Security Policy of the EU, accordingly joined the significant package of sanctions introduced by allies and partners against Russia, closed the airspace, provided military and humanitarian aid to Ukraine and accepted Ukrainian refugees.²³⁰

Likewise, references to the social role came up in officials' statements in local media. Answering the journalist's question about the future of Russian-Macedonian relations, Foreign Affairs Minister Osmani mentioned that bilateral relations of North Macedonia are defined by the country's status as an EU candidate (as well as a NATO member):

Our bilateral relations are defined within the NATO Alliance, but also *within our status as a candidate country in the European Union and these views are coordinated*. I cannot predict how the situation will develop there, but what the Russian Federation must do immediately is to stop the invasion and bombing of Ukraine for this negotiation process to get an epilogue. After that, naturally, *the democratic world will decide what to do next concerning the Russian Federation and these actions that are contrary to the basic rules of international law*.²³¹

Moreover, official statements related to the decision to align with sanctions against Russia in 2022 have been supplemented by references to the CFSP alignment rate.

During the press conference on 23 February 2022, when the decision to join the EU's restrictive measures against Russia had not yet been taken by North Macedonia's government, the question of whether North Macedonia would join sanctions was raised. The spokesperson replied that North Macedonia is on its path to 100% alignment with the EU's CFSP, and said that the government will soon make a decision, which will be announced to the public.²³²

The next day, North Macedonia announced the decision to align with the EU sanctions against Russia. Apart from joining the newest sanctions package, North Macedonia has simultaneously aligned with the previous set of sanctions that was introduced against Russia in 2014 and

²²⁹ In this and the following citations, italics were added by the author to emphasize the most relevant parts.

²³⁰ Министерство за Надворешни Работи на Република Северна Македонија, "Стратешки План 2022-2024), 2022: 1, <https://d1qv8oyeh4usdm.cloudfront.net/images/0d2ec78a44bc4516bddba8c553b72758.pdf> . Translated from Macedonian.

²³¹ Meta.mk, 'Bujar Osmani', 8 April 2022.

²³² Макфакс, 'Отворени сме да ѝ помогнеме на Украина, за санкции кон Русија дополнително ќе одлучиме, велат од Владата', МАКФАКС, 23 February 2022, sec. Македонија, <https://makfax.com.mk/makedonija/отворени-сме-да-ѝ-помогнеме-на-украина/>.

prolonged ever since. The official press release of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs provided several justifications for the decision to align with the newest set of sanctions. It highlighted the “gravity of the situation and the depth of violation of rule-based international order”, indicating normative claims.²³³ At the same time, in justifying this decision, the statement referred to the Euro-Atlantic orientation of the country and its “strategic and national interests”.²³⁴ Finally, the press release underlined that with this decision, the country achieved a 100% rate of alignment with CFSP.

Overall, we find that officials used a mix of justifications, ranging from strategic orientation to the the social role of the candidate country to purely normative references to rules-based international order (the latter are presented in more detail in the thick socialisation mechanism section below).

After determining that North Macedonia knew what the expectations of its role were and that officials made references to it when speaking about alignment with Russia-related sanctions, I now turn to some other findings that emerged during data collection. More specifically, I suggest looking at how alignment with CFSP could be used as a signalling tool by North Macedonia’s government.

In August 2021, the new Foreign Affairs Minister Bujar Osmani²³⁵ announced that North Macedonia had reached a 100th alignment with CFSP in less than a year after his appointment. The speech that Osmani gave to mark this achievement is a great source to reveal what role alignment with CFSP plays in North Macedonia’s accession process.

First, it demonstrates that competition among candidates (described in the theoretical chapter as one of the tools of Europeanisation) was in place. Not only references to the alignment rate as benchmarks tracked by the European Commission were made but also the special role of North Macedonia in the region was mentioned:

Thus, the rate of alignment in the aforementioned period rose to over 95%, which is an increase of three percentage points in comparison with the last report of the European Commission when it was 92%. My intention is for this percent to soon reach 100% as

²³³ Republic of North Macedonia, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Press Release”, 24 February 2022, accessed 14 January 2024, <https://www.mfa.gov.mk/en/page/8/post/2862/press-release>.

²³⁴ Ibid.

²³⁵ In 2020, Bujar Osmani took office as a new Foreign Affairs Minister of North Macedonia. Bujar Osmani strongly favours Euro-Atlantic foreign policy orientation and has been an avid supporter of achieving a 100% alignment of North Macedonia’s with the CFSP. Before becoming a Foreign Affairs Minister in 2020, Osmani served as a Deputy Prime Minister for European Integration and the Head of the National Delegation and Chief Negotiator for accession talks with the European Union. See: Republic of North Macedonia, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Bujar Osmani”, accessed 14 January 2024, <https://mfa.gov.mk/en/page/300/bujar-osmani>.

*an expression of our clear foreign policy orientation towards European and Euro-Atlantic structures.*²³⁶

The Republic of North Macedonia is becoming the *strongest point in the protection and promotion of the Euro-Atlantic values in the region* and therefore, we rightfully think that *it is time for the European Union as well to demonstrate its principledness* when it comes to our European integration. *We are delivering, and the European Union should deliver too.*²³⁷

Most importantly, it hints at the signalling function of alignment. In the context of the protracted accession process, alignment with CFSP is framed as a sign of the strong determination of North Macedonia to complete the steps needed to become an EU member. In return, North Macedonia expects the same determination from the EU (as demonstrated in the excerpt above):

At a time when the European Union itself cannot secure a consensus to continue our European integration, *we are clearly showing* that we are a *strong and principled partner*, and that in terms of our European orientation *we have no dilemma that we are a part of Europe and that we belong in the Union.*²³⁸

Overall, the speech clearly demonstrates that by aiming to be fully aligned with CFSP, North Macedonia strives to be perceived as a legitimate member of the community of European countries, which shares the same values and norms of the European Union and expects to be treated as such, with the main expectations being that the EU should support North Macedonia on its path towards EU membership.

To give a broader context, the attitudes towards European integration have been declining in North Macedonia, and the EU was losing credibility (as demonstrated in the corresponding section on the external incentives model mechanism).

In an interview given in May 2021, Prime Minister Zoran Zaev openly linked the growing Eurosceptic attitudes in North Macedonia to the EU's failure to deliver on its promises after North Macedonia had made a lot of concessions (implying the major compromises made to resolve the disputes with Greece and Bulgaria):

²³⁶ Republic of North Macedonia, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "100 alignments with the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy in less than a year", 2021, accessed 14 January 2024, <https://www.mfa.gov.mk/en/page/13/post/2676/100-alignments-with-the-eu-common-foreign-and-security-policy-in-less-than-a-year>.

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ Ibid.

So many sacrifices. And after that, the EU doesn't deliver? That is a problem. We show more European values and European manners than the EU.²³⁹

The way in which Zaev mentioned European values may reveal something about the motives for CFSP alignment. In the context of hindered accession progress, alignment with EU's CFSP could have been used by North Macedonia as a way of *signalling* to the EU that it was both a "good student" and that it belonged to the European community, acting continuously in accordance with the EU norms and values, and that the behaviour of the EU was problematic. Alignment with CFSP could therefore have been used instrumentally to achieve advancement in the accession process.

Finally, a recent initiative launched by the four Western Balkan states highlights similar dynamics once again. In 2023, Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Kosovo launched the "Western Balkans QUAD - 100% Alignment with EU Common Foreign Security Policy (CFSP)" platform. Notably, the first founding meeting marking the launch of the initiative took place in Skopje, North Macedonia, and the key statements that explain the rationale of the platform were made by the Bujar Osmani.²⁴⁰ His speech illuminates the motives behind alignment:

After the Russian aggression on Ukraine, alignment with the CFSP, but even beyond that, with the positions and values of the democratic world, has become one of the most important priorities of the aspiring EU member states, but also as a clear message for where these countries belong.²⁴¹

Essentially, alignment with CFSP is framed as alignment with the "values of the democratic world" and a signal for the EU about the strategic orientation of the aligning countries. On the one hand, this illustrates the "automatic" nature of the role-playing, as perceptions of EU foreign policy positions as those "of the civilized world" were previously classified in the literature as characteristic of non-reflexive alignment of non-EU countries with EU's CFSP.²⁴² On the other hand, references to sending the "clear message" demonstrate that alignment with

²³⁹ EWB, 'Zaev Warns about Increasing Euroskepticism in North Macedonia Due to EU Accession Impasse'.

²⁴⁰ EWB, 'Four Western Balkan Countries Launched "100% Alignment with CFSP" Platform', *European Western Balkans*, 29 March 2023, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2023/03/29/four-western-balkan-countries-launched-100-alignment-with-cfsp-platform/>.

²⁴¹ Alice Taylor, "Four EU hopefuls, except Serbia, create group to align with EU security policy", *Euractiv*, 30 March 2023, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/four-eu-hopefuls-except-serbia-create-group-to-align-with-eu-security-policy/>.

²⁴² Marciacq and Jaramillo, "When the European Union speaks on behalf of non-European Union states: a critical appraisal of the European Union's alignment mechanism in multilateral fora", 214.

sanctions against Russia and CFSP declarations in general is consciously utilised as a signalling tool, underlining the communicative function of alignment.

We can assume that by emulating the EU's CFSP even in the absence of a credible reward directly linked to foreign policy alignment, together with complying with the EU's conditions in pressing areas related to domestic reform, North Macedonia might have aimed to create a situation similar to "rhetorical entrapment".²⁴³ By demonstrating its best efforts and proactively aligning with CFSP, simultaneously making claims to normative closeness, North Macedonia could try to put the EU, and especially its member states who were blocking progress, in a position where stalling accession progress of North Macedonia any further would be seen as normatively inappropriate.

All in all, we see that the process of North Macedonia's alignment is somewhat ambiguous, as neither the clearly articulated offer of EU's reward for alignment, nor full match in norms and identities are present. Moreover, North Macedonia is acting in accordance with its social role and mentions it in justifying alignment with Russia-related sanctions. However, some evidence points that North Macedonia does so strategically rather than non-reflectively, as opposed to the standard role-playing mechanism conceptualisation.

3.2.4. Overall assessment of the role-playing mechanism

Based on the evidence presented above and summarised in Table 7 below, two strongest propositions of the role-playing mechanism were confirmed, and one proposition was confirmed partially.

Table 6. Assessment of the role-playing propositions

Proposition		Empirical findings
Ambiguity of alignment process <i>(high certainty, high uniqueness)</i>	Absence of rewards	There is a reward of opening the accession negotiations, but it was not directly linked to sanctions alignment.
	No match in norms, values and identities	In public opinion, negative perceptions of Russia were not prevalent both before and after February 2022, and majority do not support sanctions against Russia. Government documents underlined Russia as an important partner, but after the February 2022 invasion, all key

²⁴³ Frank Schimmelfennig, "The community trap: Liberal norms, rhetorical action, and the eastern enlargement of the European Union", *International organization* 55, no. 1 (2001): 47-80, <https://doi.org/10.1162/002081801551414>.

		officials condemned Russia. Political elites generally showed match in identities, values and norms.
Automacity of alignment <i>(high certainty, low uniqueness)</i>		North Macedonia demonstrated a trend of rising alignment rates, aligning with all new declarations since 2016 and declaring 100% alignment as a goal.
Social role used as an argument for alignment <i>(high certainty, high uniqueness)</i>		References to the social role as an EU candidate country were made in foreign policy documents and official's statements in the context of alignment with CFSP and sanctions against Russia in particular.

Note: propositions in green were confirmed, and propositions in yellow were partially confirmed.

More specifically, we observed “automacity” of alignment based both on the high previous alignment record and on the government’s determination to uphold all future CFSP declarations. We also found references to the social role used by officials in justifications for alignment with sanctions against Russia. Hence, these propositions were fully confirmed.

The ambiguity of the alignment process proposition was only partially confirmed, conditioned by the fact that both parts of the proposition were partially confirmed. Firstly, the EU reward was present, but not tied to sanctions alignment directly. Secondly, we do not see a full match in norms, values and identities with alignment with sanctions against Russia, but we also cannot completely reject this part of the proposition if both public views and views of the political elites are taken into account. On the one hand, the public opinion demonstrated a lack of support for sanctions and no strong negative perceptions of Russia, which indicates that alignment with sanctions against Russia does not match norms, values and identity of North Macedonia’s society. On the other hand, the views of political elites and government documents show that alignment with Russia-related sanctions generally matches the norms, values and identities of the state.

3.3. Testing the thick socialisation mechanism

After analysing the external incentives model and the role-playing mechanism, in this section I examine the thick socialisation mechanism. I first present an assessment of the legitimacy of the process of sanctions alignment. Then, I overview the proposition of match in identity and resonance. Finally, assessment of the mechanism as a whole is presented.

3.3.1. Legitimacy of the process of sanctions alignment

The overall direction taken by the government towards CFSP as per the official documents contains several measures aimed at improvement of North Macedonia's performance in that area. The "National Program for the Adoption of European Union Law (NPAA) for 2015 – 2017" adopted in December 2014 contains a chapter devoted to CFSP. As a short-term goal, continuing to align with the EU's declarations and restrictive measures is mentioned. Among the medium-term goals, training on CFSP and study visits to the EU for officials are envisioned, specifically with the goal of learning experiences on efficient implementation of sanctions.²⁴⁴ Since 2016, the government has taken a course on reaching full alignment with CFSP, which it largely followed (see the section "Automaticity of alignment" above for more information).²⁴⁵

When it comes to the legitimacy of sanctions against Russia, after the first set of sanctions against Russia was introduced by the EU in 2014, the decision whether to align or not was not a visible part of public discussion. Since 2016, North Macedonia has continuously increased its CFSP alignment rate, but nevertheless, the issue of sanctions against Russia has largely remained off the table. This is evidenced by the lack of media coverage and official statements on the issue, both from North Macedonia and the EU, demonstrated by search of media posts and official statements on the topic of Russia-related sanctions alignment.²⁴⁶ During this period, there have been only occasional appeals to join the EU restrictive measures from domestic actors in North Macedonia and few questions from the media.²⁴⁷

Non-alignment with sanctions has been justified by North Macedonia's interests in good relations with other countries. In December 2020, Prime Minister Zoran Zaev made a statement explaining the motives for not joining the EU's sanctions against Russia. The main justifications revolved around significant economic interests that North Macedonia had in its

²⁴⁴ Влада На Република Македонија, Секретаријат За Европски Прашања, "Национална Програма За Усвојување На Правото На Европската Унија (НПАА) Ревизија 2015 – 2017", 2014: 285, https://www.sobranie.mk/content/%D0%9D%D0%A1%D0%95%D0%98/00%20NPAA2015_narativen_objavu_vanje.pdf.

²⁴⁵ Meta.mk, 'Ukraine Urges North Macedonia to Join EU's Economic Sanctions for Russia', 21 February 2022, <https://meta.mk/en/ukraine-urges-north-macedonia-to-join-eus-economic-sanctions-for-russia/>.

²⁴⁶ Search of the official website of the Ministry of the Foreign Affairs, Google News and the popular news agency Meta.mk with the following search keywords: In English (1) "Macedonia AND Russia AND sanctions", and (2) in Macedonian "Македонија AND Русија AND санкции". Time period: 2014 – 2022.

²⁴⁷ TV21, "Надворешната Политика Неусогласена Со ЕУ", *Таравари Бара Македонија Да Воведе Санкции За Русиј*, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6lvQ9MAoAsY>; Фросина Димеска, 'Зошто Македонија не се приклучи кон ЕУ санкциите кон Русија поради Крим?', *Радио Слободна Европа*, 25 December 2020, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.mk/a/македонија-русија-санкции-крим-украина/31017471.html>.

relations with Russia and a general foreign policy stance of “being a friend to the rest of the world”²⁴⁸:

*We are a candidate for EU membership, but not a member yet. It is in the interest of the citizens and the state to avoid doing something that we are not obliged to do. And therefore, in addition to all the things I have mentioned, we have not joined the economic measures against Russia, because we have serious interests for economic cooperation with Russia. We are a member of NATO and for us there is no alternative to the EU, but our country has interest in being a friend to the rest of the world.*²⁴⁹

However, after the decision to introduce sanctions against Russia was made in 2022, this measure did not receive wide support from the general public, as shown in the role-playing mechanism section (61.6% did not support it). At the same time, there were no disagreements on the use of sanctions among the major political forces (shown in the following section).

Given that the legitimacy of CFSP and sanctions was high among the political players and societal acceptance of sanctions policy against Russia was relatively low, the overall legitimacy of the measures in 2022 was mixed, and I only partially confirm this proposition.

3.3.2. Match in identity and resonance

To assess the proposition related to match in North Macedonia’s identity and resonance of Russia-related sanctions alignment with the state’s policy, I follow two steps. I first overview the public opinion about European integration and Russia. Then, I analyse the governments’ positions on relations with Russia from 2014 to 2022, as well as political elites’ reactions to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Public support for EU membership has been deteriorating steadily from 2014 to 2021, although the general level of support remains high. If in 2014 80% of Macedonians would support North Macedonia’s membership if a referendum were held next week, in 2021 this number decreased to 68%).²⁵⁰ The proportion of those with openly Eurosceptic views has been slightly rising

²⁴⁸ ‘Ukraine Urges North Macedonia to Join EU’s Economic Sanctions for Russia’, 21 February 2022.

²⁴⁹ Фокус, ‘Заев: Не Се Приклучивме На ЕУ Санкциите Кон Русија Зашто Имаме Сериозен Интерес За Економска Соработка’, Фокус, 30 December 2020, sec. Актуелно, <https://fokus.mk/zaev-ne-se-prikluchivme-na-eu-sanktsiite-kon-rusija-zashto-imame-seriozen-interes-za-ekonomska-sorabotka/>. Translated from Macedonian.

²⁵⁰ Based on the survey conducted by Konrad Adenauer Foundation in the Republic of North Macedonia and Institute for Democracy “Societas Civilis. The survey was conducted in November 2021, had a representative sample of 1000 respondents and the margin of error of +/- 3 %. Ivan Damjanovski, “Analysis of public opinion on North Macedonia’s accession to the European Union (2014-2021)”, *Public Opinion Analysis Paper 4/2022*, Konrad Adenauer Foundation in the Republic of North Macedonia, Institute for Democracy “Societas Civilis” – Skopje, 2022, https://idscs.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/A5_Analysis-of-public-opinion-on-North-Macedonias-accession-to-the-European-Union-2014-2021ENG-1-1.pdf.

from 2014 to 2020 but has sunken in 2021. In this context, the lowered support for the EU integration had been to some extent replaced by the rising number of undecided voters (the shares of those who answered that they would not vote or that they did not know rose from 1% and 6% in 2014 to 12% and 11% in 2021 respectively), as well as increased support for Russia (as demonstrated in the section on role-playing).²⁵¹ Results of a survey conducted by Eurothink propose a more positive outlook. In autumn 2021, 74% of respondents would vote in favour of EU membership.²⁵²

Public opinion towards the EU has been ethnically divided for the past decade, with ethnic Albanians traditionally demonstrating higher support for the EU membership and more optimistic attitudes on these prospects in comparison to ethnic Macedonians. In 2021, 82% of ethnic Albanians and 63% of ethnic Macedonians supported North Macedonia's EU membership.²⁵³

In general, perceptions of Russia were not negative among the general public throughout the whole studied period. As demonstrated in the role-playing section, the idea of Slavic brotherhood with Russia was held by major parts of the population, the responsibility for Russia's war in Ukraine was put exclusively on Russia by less than a quarter of the population, and Russia was generally not perceived as a threat. Therefore, the part of the proposition that relates to public opinion is not confirmed.

When it comes to the political elites, both before and after 2014, when Russia illegally annexed Crimea, North Macedonia's relations with Russia have been characterised by the aspiration to increase economic cooperation. North Macedonia's governments hoped to increase trade, place more of its agricultural products on the Russian market, intensify energy cooperation, increase tourism and attract more Foreign Direct Investment from Russia.²⁵⁴

²⁵¹ Ibid.

²⁵² The survey was conducted in November 2021, had a representative sample of 1001 respondents and the margin of error of +/- 3 %. Николовски, "Упорно кон ЕУ? Извештај од анкетното истражување Еврометар есен 2021 година – Северна Македонија и Европската Унија, очекувања и ставови на граѓаните", 6.

²⁵³ Damjanovski, "Analysis of public opinion on North Macedonia's accession to the European Union (2014-2021)".

²⁵⁴ Влада на Република Северна Македонија, "Лавров: Македонија е клучен партнер за стабилизација на Балканот", 2013, <https://vlada.mk/node/5702>; Влада на Република Северна Македонија, "Русите можат да инвестираат во повеќе области", 2012, <https://vlada.mk/node/3639?ln=mk>; Влада на Република Северна Македонија, "Во Москва средба меѓу министрите Попоски и Лавров", 2013, <https://vlada.mk/node/5704?ln=mk>; Влада на Република Северна Македонија, "Средба на премиерот Заев со рускиот амбасадор Шчербак: Поддршка за енергичните политики на премиерот Заев што ја движат Македонија напред и најава за унапредување на економската и културната соработка", 2017, <https://vlada.mk/node/13574?ln=mk>.

After the annexation of Crimea, Gruevski's government retained friendly relations with Russia. An illustrative example of the state of North Macedonia-Russia relations in that period is a publication in a new issue of the Macedonian Diplomatic Bulletin published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In June 2014, already after Russia annexed Crimea and the first restrictive measures against Russia were introduced by the EU, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs published a new issue of the Macedonian Diplomatic Bulletin with the headline "*Russia and Macedonia: 20 years of true friendship*".²⁵⁵ The article describes the official reception devoted to the 20th anniversary that took place a month before Russia annexed Crimea. The speech of the Ambassador of the Republic of Macedonia to the Russian Federation printed in the article refers to cultural and historic ties between North Macedonia and Russia and the importance of Russia as an international actor. It is mentioned that Russia has supported North Macedonia in the United Nations in relation to its constitutional name, territorial integrity and sovereignty.

In March 2015, at the 10-year anniversary of the Macedonian-Russian Chamber of Commerce event, Vice Prime Minister and Minister of Finance Zoran Stavreski said that economic relations between Russia and North Macedonia should be intensified. He claimed that Russia was among the main economic and political partners of North Macedonia.²⁵⁶

In June 2015, the Foreign Affairs Ministries of North Macedonia and Russia held political consultations in Moscow, during which the focus was placed on economic and cultural cooperation. According to the official press release of North Macedonia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, both sides emphasised success in "positive development of the traditionally friendly relations... with expectations for further improvement, especially in the economic sphere, the promotion of trade and enlargement of the level of Russian investments in the Macedonian economy".²⁵⁷

Statements highlighting traditionally friendly relations, cultural and historical ties, and plans to promote economic cooperation printed in the official media of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs demonstrate that back at that time, North Macedonia's government perceived Russia as an important partner.

²⁵⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Macedonia, "Macedonian Diplomatic Bulletin", no 80, January 2014, <https://d1qv8oyeh4usdm.cloudfront.net/images/images/stories/MKD-BILTEN/MDB-80-mnr-web.pdf>.

²⁵⁶ 'Ставрески: Русија е Еден Од Најзначајните Економски и Политички Партнери'.

²⁵⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Political consultations between the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Macedonia and the Russian Federation", 8 June 2015, accessed 14 January 2024, <https://www.mfa.gov.mk/en/page/385/post/381/2015-06-08-14-09-24>.

Marking the end of the political crisis (2015-2017), North Macedonia experienced a major change in government. The newly elected government activated transformations in North Macedonia's path to EU integration and relations with Russia. The new Prime Minister Zoran Zaev and his party SDSM expressed a much more pronounced pro-European orientation than Gruevski's government. However, all the time up to February 2022, the government continued to work towards strengthening economic ties with Russia, did not condemn its actions towards Ukraine, and mentioned it in the foreign policy documents among important partners for cooperation.²⁵⁸

In June 2017, Nikola Dimitrov took over as the new Minister of Foreign Affairs. In the same month, a meeting between Dimitrov and Russia's Ambassador to North Macedonia was held, where the Minister indicated willingness to continue strengthening bilateral cooperation between Russia and North Macedonia.²⁵⁹

Same year during the meeting between Zaev and Russian Ambassador Scherbak, the latter expressed that the Euro-Atlantic integration of North Macedonia is not an obstacle to maintaining good relations between the two countries. Zaev in his turn has stated that:

The Government of the Republic of Macedonia is dedicated to achieving the *strategic goals of the EU and NATO states, as well as to building friendly relations with all countries, including the Russian Federation*, on a principled democratic level. We are focused on providing a good standard of living for the citizens, more jobs, higher salaries, reducing the cost of living, Macedonia is an agricultural country, therefore also for the agricultural development of the country and *in that direction is interested in deepening the relations with the Russian Federation*.²⁶⁰

²⁵⁸ Влада на Република Северна Македонија, "Лавров: Македонија е клучен партнер за стабилизација на Балканот", 2013, <https://vlada.mk/node/5702>; Влада на Република Северна Македонија, "Русите можат да инвестираат во повеќе области", 2012, <https://vlada.mk/node/3639?ln=mk>; Влада на Република Северна Македонија, "Во Москва средба меѓу министрите Попоски и Лавров", 2013, <https://vlada.mk/node/5704?ln=mk>; Влада на Република Северна Македонија, "Средба на премиерот Заев со рускиот амбасадор Шчербак: Поддршка за енергичните политики на премиерот Заев што ја движат Македонија напред и најава за унапредување на економската и културната соработка", 2017, <https://vlada.mk/node/13574?ln=mk>; Министерство за Надворешни Работи на Република Северна Македонија, "Стратешки План 2019-2021", 2019, 77, <https://d1qv8oyeh4usdm.cloudfront.net/images/522575353361475bbcd9153068fd05c.pdf>; Anida Šabanović et al., "Foreign Authoritarian Influence in the Western Balkans". Political Capital, 2020, 34-35, <https://europeanvalues.cz/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/foreign-authoritarian-influence-in-the-western-balkans-2020-09.pdf>

²⁵⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Foreign Minister of Macedonia H.E. Mr. Nikola Dimitrov Meets Russia's Ambassador to Macedonia, Oleg Shcherbak", 16 June 2017, <https://www.mfa.gov.mk/en/page/1759/post/1091/16-2017>.

²⁶⁰ Влада на Република Северна Македонија, "Средба на премиерот Заев со рускиот амбасадор Шчербак: Поддршка за енергичните политики на премиерот Заев што ја движат Македонија напред и најава за унапредување на економската и културната соработка", 2017, <https://vlada.mk/node/13574?ln=mk>. Translated from Macedonian.

The first noticeable shift in North Macedonia – Russia relations was a decision to expel a Russian diplomat in 2018. Following the Skripal poisoning, North Macedonia decided to expel a Russian diplomat in solidarity with the UK and also citing internal security concerns. Some small-scale pro-Russian rallies protesting against this decision followed.²⁶¹

Nevertheless, North Macedonia's government continued to refer to relations with Russia as being friendly and kept the focus on economic cooperation. For instance, in 2019 an Intergovernmental Commission for Cooperation was held between North Macedonia and the Russia, where “traditionally friendly” relations with Russia were underlined in Zaev's speech.²⁶²

In 2022, all key officials in North Macedonia have been united in their unequivocal condemnation of Russia's actions and support of Ukraine from the very beginning of the full-scale war. Negative perceptions of Russia's actions were evidenced by statements from key political figures, including both the government and the opposition, as well as the parliament. Only small political parties did not condemn Russia's aggression and even openly supported it; nevertheless, only one of them is in parliament, where it holds modest positions.

The President of North Macedonia Stevo Pendarovski has strongly condemned Russia's actions and referred to it as “a serious violation of the basic principles of international law, a blow to the democratic order and a threat to the stability of Europe”.²⁶³

The Prime Minister Dimitar Kovachevski expressed similar views:

I condemn the act of open military aggression by Russia against Ukraine. War is the worst way to resolve misunderstandings, and aggression against Ukraine is a threat to European and world peace.²⁶⁴

²⁶¹ ‘Собир За Поддршка На Протераниот Дипломат Пред Руската Амбасада Во Скопје’, *Сакам Да Кажам*, 3 April 2018, <https://sdk.mk/index.php/makedonija/sobir-za-poddrshka-na-proteraniot-diplomat-pred-ruskata-ambasada-vo-skopje/>.

²⁶² Влада на Република Северна Македонија, “Премиерот Заев: Новата динамика на работата на Меѓувладината комисија за соработка меѓу Северна Македонија и Руската Федерација е добра основа за оптимизам за продлабочување на односите”, 2019, <https://vlada.mk/node/19493?ln=mk>.

²⁶³ Meta.mk, ‘Пендаровски со осуда за руските воени дејствија, свикан Совет за безбедност’, 24 February 2022, <https://meta.mk/pendarovski-so-osuda-za-ruskite-voeni-dejstvija-svikan-sovet-za-bezbednost/>. Translated from Macedonian.

²⁶⁴ Влада на Република Северна Македонија, “Ковачевски: Силна осуда за чинот на отворена воена агресија од страна на Русија врз Украина”, 2022, <https://vlada.mk/node/27890?ln=mk>. Translated from Macedonian.

Kovachevski justified North Macedonia's alignment with the EU's CFSP regarding Russia by saying that it is the right thing to do and that the country has aligned with economic sanctions against Russia to protect international values of territorial integrity and sovereignty:

Even though we are not members of the EU, we have fully aligned our foreign policy with the policy of Brussels because *that is the right side of history in the fight against autocracy*.²⁶⁵

We are on the side of the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine and *in the name of the protection of those international values* completely harmonized in relation to the economic sanctions that the EU has introduced on Russia in order to prevent further escalation of this war.²⁶⁶

Support for Ukraine and disapproval of Russia's action were also expressed by the Minister of Defence Slavjanka Petrovska, both before the conflict escalation in January and after the full-scale military invasion of Ukraine by Russia began in February.²⁶⁷ Similarly to Kovachevski, Petrovska has referred to being "on the right side of history" and to the European values and international rules:

The fight in Ukraine is a fight for Ukraine's internationally recognised sovereignty, but also for *our European value system*, which is based on respect for the territorial integrity of all states, respect for peace, democracy, and the need to resolve all issues exclusively with mutual respect and open and honest dialogue. With all the decisions made so far, North Macedonia has shown that it always gives priority to diplomacy and conversation and that *everything we do is in the spirit of international principles and rules*. That is how we will continue because we know that *we are on the right side of history*.²⁶⁸

In his condemnation of annexation of four Ukrainian regions the Foreign Affairs Minister Osmani used similar references to the international rule as the President, the Prime Minister and the Minister of Defence did:

Condemn in the strongest possible terms the illegal annexation of Ukraine's regions of Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson by Russia as a *blatant breach of rules*-

²⁶⁵ Влада на Република Северна Македонија, "Ковачевски: Заедно со САД и ЕУ избравме да бидеме на вистинската страна на историјата", 2022, <https://vlada.mk/node/29064?ln=mk>. Translated from Macedonian.

²⁶⁶ Влада на Република Северна Македонија, "Премиерот Ковачевски: Војната во Украина е огромна опасност за европската и светската безбедност и треба веднаш да престане", 2022, <https://vlada.mk/node/27978?ln=mk>. Translated from Macedonian.

²⁶⁷ Zarko Nastoski, 'We Support the Territorial Integrity of Ukraine, Says Slavjanka Petrovska - Free Press', Слободен печат, 23 January 2022, <https://www.slobodenpecat.mk/en/go-poddrzhuvame-teritorijalniot-integritet-na-ukraina-veli-slavjanka-petrovska/>; Meta.mk., 'Defense Minister: North Macedonia Supports Ukraine's Territorial Integrity', 25 January 2022, <https://meta.mk/en/defense-minister-north-macedonia-supports-ukraines-territorial-integrity/>.

²⁶⁸ Jovan Gjorgovski, "North Macedonia Has Made a Clear National Decision", New Eastern Europe, 4 May 2023, <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2023/05/04/north-macedonia-has-made-a-clear-national-decision/>.

based international order. Full support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity.²⁶⁹

These statements demonstrate normative convergence between political elites in North Macedonia and the EU, as alignment is seen as “the right thing to do”. Major opposition forces had shown similar views. On the day of the full-scale invasion, the leader of the main opposition party (in government before 2017) VMRO-DPMNE Hristijan Mickoski clarified his position on Russia's aggression against Ukraine, saying that the territorial integrity of Ukraine must be respected and that diplomatic means should be used to resolve all disputes.²⁷⁰

Smaller political parties, such as the Besa opposition movement, have also condemned Russia's violation of the sovereignty of Ukraine.²⁷¹ This is best illustrated by the fact the Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia has adopted a declaration that condemned Russia's military aggression and required coordination of diplomatic measures with NATO and EU members almost unanimously, with the overwhelming majority of votes in favour. Out of 104 votes, 100 voted in favour and only 3 parliamentarians voted against, while 1 abstained; only members of the far-left Levica party and DPSM party did not support the declaration.²⁷²

In sum, the overviewed evidence related to identity and resonance indicates that within North Macedonia's political elite, strong condemnation of Russia's actions and support for Ukraine were the dominant sentiments, cutting across state institutions and the government/opposition divide. Only marginal political forces, such as the far-left Levica party were supportive of Russia's actions. Yet, public opinion demonstrated a far less pronounced match.

3.3.3. Overall assessment of the thick socialisation mechanism

Based on the presented data, both propositions of the thick socialisation mechanism can be confirmed only partially due to discrepancies between public opinion and elites' perceptions, as summarised in Table 8. Generally, we can say that while elites show a greater proximity to EU's norms and values in relation to Russia's aggression in Ukraine, the general public is much

²⁶⁹ ‘Moldova, North Macedonia Condemn Russia's Annexation of Ukrainian Territories’, accessed 14 January 2024, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/russia-ukraine-war/moldova-north-macedonia-condemn-russia-s-annexation-of-ukrainian-territories/2699574>.

²⁷⁰ Hristijan Mickoski, ‘Me Прашуваат За Став За Руската Агресија - | Facebook’, accessed 14 January 2024, https://www.facebook.com/MickoskiHristijan/posts/507430617405536?ref=embed_post.

²⁷¹ Фросина Димеска, ‘Состојбата во Македонија стабилна, осуда за руските дејствија во Украина’, *Радио Слободна Европа*, 24 February 2022, accessed 14 January 2024, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.mk/a/состојбата-во-македонија-стабилна-осуда-за-руските-дејствија-во-украина/31720998.html>.

²⁷² Спасеновски, “Ставови и перцепции за војната во Украина (Анализа и истражување на јавното мислење)”, 14.

more distant. As evidenced by the numerous public opinion surveys, the perception of Russia was not negative among large shares of the population in North Macedonia even after Russia's start of the full-scale war in Ukraine, while sanctions against Russia were not supported by the public. The elites, at the same time, largely condemned Russia's actions and almost unanimously supported joining the restrictive measures against Russia.

Table 7. Assessment of the thick socialisation propositions

Proposition	Empirical findings
Legitimacy of sanctions alignment <i>(high certainty, low uniqueness)</i>	The process of alignment and sanctions against Russia were not contested by the political elites.
	Sanctions against Russia were perceived negatively by the public.
Match in identity and resonance <i>(high certainty, low uniqueness)</i>	Strong Euro-Atlantic orientation and condemnation of Russia's actions on the side of political elites.
	Russia is not perceived negatively by the majority based on public opinion.

Note: propositions coloured in green were confirmed, propositions in light red were not confirmed, and propositions in yellow were partially confirmed.

Because a stronger explanation exists (role-playing), it is unlikely that thick socialisation was behind North Macedonia's alignment with sanctions against Russia.

3.4. Selecting the most likely explanation

In summary, we can conclude that the role-playing mechanism is the most likely explanation for North Macedonia's change in alignment with sanctions against Russia.

The evidence collected to test the external incentives model confirmed the proposition of *low alignment costs*, as North Macedonia did not have to lose much both economically and politically in case of alignment with Russia-related sanctions, relative to the expected reward of EU accession progress. However, the *reward* was not tied directly to alignment or CFSP in general, as the focus of the EU was on ensuring that North Macedonia concentrates on domestic reforms and solves bilateral disputes. The proposition of EU reward was only partially confirmed. Finally, while credible cross-conditionality from other actors was minimal and determinacy of EU conditions was met, the scope condition of *credibility* was significantly violated by individual EU MSs that vetoed North Macedonia's progress.

When it comes to the thick socialisation mechanism, both of its propositions – *legitimacy of sanctions alignment* and *match in identity and resonance* – were only partially supported by

the evidence. In relation to both propositions, elites showed normative convergence, while the general public was more sceptical about EU's policy. The overall mechanism is partially confirmed. As, it consists of propositions with low uniqueness, the evidence collected for the role-playing mechanism offers stronger support for the latter.

Out of all mechanisms, only the role-playing mechanism has propositions to which a double decisive test applies – both *automaticity of alignment* and *social role as an argument* propositions were highly certain and highly unique. Therefore, by confirming them, we significantly reduce our confidence in alternative explanations offered by the other two mechanisms. Given that one proposition that is highly unique and highly certain was confirmed (social role), and another highly certain and highly unique proposition was partially confirmed (ambiguity), I conclude that the role-playing mechanism was the most likely mechanism to explain North Macedonia's change in alignment with sanctions against Russia.

Conclusion

In this thesis, my main goal was to solve the research puzzle presented by the change in North Macedonia's alignment with Russia-related sanctions in 2022 in the context of stable alignment behavior of other Western Balkan countries. This puzzle was summarised in the following research question: *What explains the change in alignment of North Macedonia with regard to the EU restrictive measures against Russia between 2014 and 2022?*

To answer the research question, I used the three causal mechanisms derived from Europeanisation literature and applied process-tracing to determine which of the mechanisms best explains North Macedonia's change in alignment.

Europeanisation literature that elucidates the transformation of states norms, policies and institutions in line with those of the EU offers three causal explanations that can be applied to foreign policy Europeanisation, and alignment with EU's restrictive measures in particular. These mechanisms are the external incentives model, the role-playing, and the thick socialisation. The external incentives model is rooted in rational-choice institutionalism and operates through EU's use of conditionality towards candidate states. In this mechanism, the EU demands compliance with certain EU policies, norms, or rules, offering a reward in exchange. The highest reward is full EU membership, but intermediary rewards such as opening of the accession talks are used as well. A state follows EU policy if it is interested in the reward and if adjustment costs are lower than the expected benefits. For the mechanism to

function, it is crucial that the scope conditions of credibility and determinacy are met, as the complying state has to be sure that the EU will provide the reward and know what conditions need to be fulfilled to achieve it. Two other mechanisms are based on sociological institutionalism. Role-playing occupies a place between the external incentives model and the thick socialisation mechanism. States do not behave purely rationally, nor do they act according to deeply internalised beliefs and identities. Instead, the process of policy convergence is non-reflective, as states do what is perceived to be appropriate behavior. In case of sanctions' alignment, role-playing occurs when the process of alignment is also characterised by ambiguity, where no reward is offered nor match in norms and identities is found. The thick socialisation mechanism represents internalisation of EU norms and values. The process of sanctions' alignment is perceived as legitimate and matches the state's identity.

This thesis tested these three causal mechanisms as alternative theoretical explanations for North Macedonia's change in alignment. Each mechanism was formulated as a set of propositions, or expectations of what traces the operation of the mechanism would leave in the empirical reality.²⁷³ Each proposition was assessed on their uniqueness and certainty, which was used to choose the appropriate test, with most of the propositions falling under the hoop test and two propositions corresponding to the doubly decisive test. They were subsequently assessed based on the empirical evidence as either confirmed, partially confirmed or not confirmed.

In light of the evidence presented in the empirical chapter, I conclude that the role-playing mechanism was the most likely mechanism to explain North Macedonia's change in alignment with sanctions against Russia. The evidence suggests that the process of alignment with sanctions against Russia was marked by ambiguity, meaning that there was no tangible reward from the EU that would explicitly be linked to sanctions alignment, nor was there a full alignment of norms and identities among the general public to support such an action. The elites, however, showed normative convergence, which is why we only partially confirm the ambiguity proposition. In addition, the automaticity of CFSP alignment due to previous high rates of alignment, combined with references to the social role of Northern Macedonia as a candidate country made by political elites to substantiate alignment with EU sanctions against Russia, was observed. This, together with highly inconsistent EU's approach to North Macedonia's accession, made the external incentives mechanism and thick socialisation

²⁷³ Following Beach and Pedersen, "Process-Tracing Methods: Foundations and Guidelines", 2019.

unlikely to be responsible for change in alignment. Because one of the role-playing propositions – the use of social role as a justification – passed the strongest doubly decisive test (being highly unique and highly certain), and the other highly certain and highly unique proposition – ambiguity of the alignment process – partially passed, the confidence in other mechanisms was weakened, leading to a conclusion that role-playing is the most likely explanation.

However, some of the evidence gathered demonstrated that instrumental motives may have been part of the reason for the change in alignment, which cannot be fully explained by the non-reflexivity assumption of the role-playing mechanism. While the rate of alignment of North Macedonia has been rising since 2016 and reached almost 100% before alignment with sanctions against Russia took place, as North Macedonia has been aligning with all CFSP declarations and decisions as a matter of a clearly defined goal to reach 100% alignment, alignment with Russia-related sanctions should not be seen as “automatic” (or non-reflexive). While we observe automacity in the sense that each CFSP declaration and decision has been aligned with, the motives behind alignment should be taken into account in order to better grasp the outcome. It appears that the way role-playing was conceptualised previously²⁷⁴ is overly reliant on the *non-reflexivity* assumption, whereas we can in fact observe a quite deliberate *instrumental* use of CFSP alignment practice. While the role-playing mechanism in general is the most fitting one among the three to explain the change in the alignment of North Macedonia, the in-betweenness of role-playing in relation to the logic of appropriateness and the logic of consequences in cases such as North Macedonia’s alignment with Russia-related sanctions does not become fully visible in the previous conceptualisations of the mechanism, which treat role-playing as the first step of socialisation and exclude instrumental motives from consideration, describing in as non-reflexive behaviour.

As part of the broader literature, the findings of this thesis suggest that socialisation-based motives are best suited to explain why EU candidates align with EU’s CFSP. However, it is necessary to incorporate strategic consideration into socialisation explanations to bridge the two approaches. North Macedonia’s alignment is currently positioned between instrumental adaptation and genuine socialisation, as the public attitudes, in contrast to elites, do not yet show a strong match with EU’s norms and identities.

²⁷⁴ Checkel, “International Institutions and Socialization in Europe: Introduction and Framework”; Marošková and Spurná, “Why did they comply? External incentive model, role-playing and socialization in the alignment of sanctions against Russia in Albania and Montenegro”.

In the context of growing geopolitical instability and the EU's increased use of restrictive measures as a tool to influence international affairs, alignment with EU's CFSP among candidates becomes a way to signal their strategic orientation and dedication to EU path. In relation to highly contested issues, such as sanctions against Russia, (non)alignment becomes a matter of choosing the "side of history" and, as argued by Hellquist,²⁷⁵ is similar to military alignment, making research on this topic highly relevant to understand the geopolitical dynamics and assist in developing suitable strategies for EU enlargement. In practical terms, this means that EU enlargement policies should aim to support candidate states in building and deepening common value systems.

The key limitation of this research design is that as a single-case study, its' potential for generalisability is rather narrow. Yet, the findings contribute to the already existing literature on explaining CFSP alignment in the Western Balkans, enriching our understanding of foreign policy Europeanisation in the region, which stands at the forefront of the next EU enlargement. To address the limitations of a single case-study and to arrive at more generalisable conclusions, future research could focus on a comparative analysis of sanctions' alignment in the wider pool of candidates from the Western Balkans and beyond. Furthermore, in future studies, interviews could be used to build a more context-sensitive approach and help disentangle rational and normative motives of alignment.

Moreover, as we found instrumental motives underpinning the decision to align alongside role-playing, we suggest following the process-tracing literature recommendation of engaging in a round of theory-building, which is advised in cases when the tested mechanisms do not *fully* explain the outcome.²⁷⁶ Therefore, for future research, I suggest constructing and testing a new causal mechanism that neither relies on the EU's direct and explicit use of conditionality to achieve the outcome of alignment, as in the external incentives model, nor is based on a purely normative logic. As this thesis demonstrated that role-playing is the most suitable mechanism to explain the case of North Macedonia's alignment, I believe that an updated mechanism should build on its propositions, substituting non-reflexivity with a dimension of instrumental and rhetorical motives.

²⁷⁵ Hellquist, "Either with us or against us? Third-Country Alignment with EU Sanctions against Russia/Ukraine."

²⁷⁶ Beach and Pedersen, "Process-Tracing Methods: Foundations and Guidelines", 2019.

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Annex 1

Table 1. Mentions of CFSP alignment in EU's progress reports on North Macedonia

Year ²⁷⁷	CFSP alignment assessment ²⁷⁸
2011	“As regards the common foreign and security policy (CFSP), during the reporting period, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia has aligned itself, when invited, with 66 out of the 67 relevant EU declarations and Council decisions during the reporting period (99% alignment)”. “With regard to sanctions and restrictive measures the country aligned itself with the restrictive measures introduced by the Council's Decisions. Implementation of restrictive measures is ongoing. The Law on international restrictive measures was enacted. It includes more detailed provisions on financial measures and introduces a system for monitoring of the implementation of restrictive measures by a national coordination body, operational from September 2011”.
2012	“As regards the common foreign and security policy (CFSP), during the reporting period the country aligned itself, when invited, <i>with all EU declarations and Council decisions</i>”. “With regard to sanctions and restrictive measures, the country aligned itself with the restrictive measures introduced by Council decisions. Implementation of restrictive measures continued during the reporting period. The coordination body for monitoring implementation of international restrictive measures, which was recently established under the relevant law, met regularly. The register of international restrictive measures was established and is kept within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with sub-registers at the competent institutions”.²⁷⁹
2013	“As regards the common foreign and security policy (CSFP), the country aligned itself, when invited, with 33 out of 35 EU declarations and Council decisions (94% alignment)”. “The country also aligned itself with sanctions and restrictive measures introduced by Council decisions and continued to implement restrictive measures during the reporting period. There were regular meetings of the relevant coordination body”.²⁸⁰
2014	“As regards the common foreign and security policy (CFSP), the country aligned itself, when invited, with 33 out of 45 EU declarations and Council Decisions (73% alignment)”. “The country did not align itself with the Council decisions introducing restrictive measures in response to Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and events in eastern Ukraine. The country voted in favour of the UN General Assembly Resolution on the territorial integrity of Ukraine”. “<i>The country's alignment with EU declarations and Council decisions in the field of foreign and security policy deteriorated as compared with previous years and needs to be improved.</i> Overall, preparations in this area are on track”.²⁸¹
2015	“On the common foreign and security policy, the country aligned itself, when invited, with 27 out of 40 EU declarations and Council Decisions (68% alignment). On the illegal annexation of Crimea by Russia and events in eastern Ukraine, the country aligned its foreign policy in broad

²⁷⁷ The 2017 progress report is not available. See [here](#).

²⁷⁸ Italics added by the author.

²⁷⁹ European Commission, “Commission Staff Working Document The Former Yugoslav Republic Of Macedonia 2012 Progress Report Accompanying The Document Communication From The Commission To The European Parliament And The Council: Enlargement Strategy and Main Challenges 2012-2013”, 2012, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2018-12/mk_rapport_2012_en.pdf.

²⁸⁰ European Commission, “Commission Staff Working Document The Former Yugoslav Republic Of Macedonia 2013 Progress Report Accompanying The Document Communication From The Commission To The European Parliament And The Council: Enlargement Strategy and Main Challenges 2013-2014”, 2013, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2016-12/mk_rapport_2013.pdf.

²⁸¹ European Commission, “The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia Progress Report”, 2014, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2018-12/20141008-the-former-yugoslav-republic-of-macedonia-progress-report_en.pdf.

	terms with the EU's stance but not with the Council Decisions introducing restrictive measures over those issues". "In the coming year, <i>the country should in particular improve its alignment</i> with EU declarations and Council Decisions on foreign and security policy".²⁸²
2016	"On common foreign and security policy the country aligned, when invited, with 30 out of 41 EU declarations and Council decisions (73 % alignment). The country did not align its foreign policy with certain Council decisions including EU restrictive measures related to Russia and Ukraine". "In the coming period, the country should: → <i>continue improving its alignment</i> with EU declarations and Council decisions on foreign and security policy".²⁸³
2018	"On the common foreign and security policy (CFSP), the country supported the Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy. The country aligned, when invited, with 53 out of 65 EU declarations and Council decisions representing an alignment rate of around 83 % during the reporting period. <i>The country did not align with, inter alia, EU restrictive measures related to Russia and Ukraine</i>". "In the coming year, the country should in particular: → <i>improve alignment</i> with EU declarations and Council decisions on common foreign and security policy".²⁸⁴
2019	"On common foreign and security policy (CFSP), North Macedonia supports the Global strategy for foreign and security policy of the European Union. During the reporting period from beginning of March 2018 to end of February 2019, the country aligned, when invited, with 75 out of 87 relevant High Representative declarations on behalf of the EU and Council decisions representing an alignment rate of around 86 %. <i>The country did not align with EU restrictive measures related to Russia and Ukraine among others</i>". "In the coming year, the country should in particular: → improve alignment with EU declarations and Council decisions on common foreign and security policy (CFSP)".²⁸⁵
2020	"On common foreign and security policy (CFSP), the country aligned - when invited - with 84 out of 91 High Representative declarations on behalf of the EU and Council Decisions, representing an alignment rate of 92% in 2019. While <i>the country continues not to align on restrictive measures against Russia, it did align with all other restrictive measures and</i>

²⁸² European Commission, "Commission Staff Working Document The Former Yugoslav Republic Of Macedonia Report 2015 Accompanying The Document Communication From The Commission To The European Parliament, The Council, The European Economic And Social Committee And The Committee Of The Regions: EU Enlargement Strategy", 2015, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2018-12/20151110_report_the_former_yugoslav_republic_of_macedonia.pdf.

²⁸³ European Commission, "Commission Staff Working Document The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia 2016 Report Accompanying the document Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions 2016 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy", 2016, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2018-12/20161109_report_the_former_yugoslav_republic_of_macedonia.pdf.

²⁸⁴ European Commission, "Commission Staff Working Document The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia 2018 Report Accompanying the document Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions 2018 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy", 2018, <https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2019-05/20180417-the-former-yugoslav-republic-of-macedonia-report.pdf>.

²⁸⁵ European Commission, "Commission Staff Working Document North Macedonia 2019 Report Accompanying the document Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions 2019 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy", 2019, <https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2019-05/20190529-north-macedonia-report.pdf>.

	declarations, including with those in view of Turkey's unauthorised drilling activities in the Eastern Mediterranean in December 2019". "In the coming year, the country should in particular: → continue to improve alignment with the EU common foreign and security policy".²⁸⁶
2021	"On the common foreign and security policy (CFSP), the country's alignment rate with relevant High Representative statements on behalf of the EU and Council Decisions was 96% as of August 2021 (compared to 92% in 2019 and 94% in 2020). <i>This shows a positive trend, reflecting the country's choice of strategic orientation.</i> While the country continues not to align on restrictive measures against Russia related to the situation in Ukraine, it did align in March 2021 with those related to serious human rights violations in Russia and Alexei Navalny". "In the coming year, the country should in particular: → further improve alignment with the EU common foreign and security policy".²⁸⁷
2022	"On the common foreign and security policy (CFSP), the country's alignment rate with relevant High Representative statements on behalf of the EU and Council Decisions reached 100% in February 2022 (compared to 96 % in 2021). <i>This clearly confirms the country's strategic orientation towards the EU.</i> Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the country immediately aligned fully with the EU restrictive measures on Russia and Belarus, including the outstanding sanctions imposed following the illegal annexation of Crimea. The government continues to implement the EU restrictive measures. North Macedonia expelled eleven Russian diplomats and on at least two occasions refused overflight permission to 106 Russian government planes. North Macedonia also aligned with all the EU statements submitted at international organisations (UN, OSCE and Council of Europe), including the EU position in UNGA when voting on resolutions regarding Russia's aggression against Ukraine and its humanitarian impact. North Macedonia voted for suspension of the Russian Federation from the UN Human Rights Council". "<i>Very good progress</i> was made during the reporting period, as the country aligned fully with the EU common foreign and security policy following Russia's invasion of Ukraine". "In the coming year, the country should in particular: → <i>Maintain full alignment</i> with the EU common foreign and security policy".²⁸⁸

²⁸⁶ European Commission, "Commission Staff Working North Macedonia 2020 Report Accompanying the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions 2020 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy", 2020, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2020-10/north_macedonia_report_2020.pdf.

²⁸⁷ European Commission, "Commission Staff Working Document North Macedonia 2021 Report Accompanying the document Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions 2021 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy", 2021, <https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2021-10/North-Macedonia-Report-2021.pdf>

²⁸⁸ European Commission, "Commission Staff Working Document North Macedonia 2022 Report Accompanying the document Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions 2022 Communication on EU Enlargement policy", 2022, <https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-10/North%20Macedonia%20Report%202022.pdf>

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