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the Western Balkans (2014-2021)**  
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## **List of acronyms**

1. CFSP – Common Foreign and Security Policy
2. EC – European Commission
3. EEAS – European External Action Service
4. EU – European Union
5. IMF – International Monetary Fund
6. NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
7. OECD – Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
8. SAP – Stabilisation and Association Process
9. UN – United Nations
10. US – United States of America
11. WB – Western Balkans
12. WTO – World Trade Organisation

## **Abstract**

This thesis critically examines the European Union's response to Russian engagement in the Western Balkans between 2014 and 2021, a period characterised by the intensification of Russian influence in the region and heightened concern among EU policymakers. While existing scholarship has extensively documented Russia's activities, a significant gap exists in understanding the EU's countermeasures and the underlying rationale behind its actions. This research addresses this gap by answering two principal questions: How did the EU respond to Russian involvement in the Western Balkans during this period, and what factors influenced this response?

Employing Wigell's democratic deterrence theory and the Risse-Babayan triangular framework, this study conducts a thematic analysis of elite and expert interviews and EU policy documents. The findings indicate that, despite recognising the growing threat of Russian influence, the EU's response was predominantly reactive and lacked a comprehensive strategic vision. Initiatives such as funding civil society organisations and countering disinformation were often criticised as superficial and inadequate in addressing Russia's multifaceted challenges.

The analysis identifies several critical factors that shaped the EU's response. Internally, the EU was preoccupied with crises such as the refugee influx and institutional challenges, which impeded formulating a cohesive and proactive foreign policy. Externally, the EU's complex and often ambivalent relationship with Russia, particularly in economic and energy dependencies, contributed to a cautious and inconsistent approach to Russian activities in the Western Balkans. Moreover, the EU struggled to effectively counter the indirect and hybrid nature of Russian influence, a challenge compounded by the actions of local political elites in the Balkans who leveraged their relationships with Russia to undermine EU initiatives.

This thesis concludes that the EU's response to Russian engagement in the Western Balkans was shaped by internal distractions, external pressures, and the complexities of managing its relationship with Russia, resulting in a largely reactive and insufficient strategy. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the EU's role in international relations, particularly in the context of external interference in its neighbouring regions.

*Keywords:* European Union, Western Balkans, Russian influence, EU response, hybrid warfare

## Introduction

Since the 2014 crisis in EU-Russian relations over the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas, academics, analysts, and politicians have never spared a word to describe the deteriorating Russian role in the Western Balkans, specifically for the EU policies in the region. Ivan Krastev, a Bulgarian political analyst, famously proclaimed that ‘the Balkans are the underbelly of Brussel’s diplomacy’, and ‘this is the place to apply pressure if Moscow wants to make Europeans feel uncomfortable’ (Krastev, 2015). The analysts warned about the ‘coming Russian storm’ in the region (Galeotti, 2018), the ‘re-enactment of the Great Game in the Western Balkans’ (Bershidsky, 2017), and Russian ‘organised chaos’ (Duffy & Green, 2020), which were commonly met with ‘eyes wide shut’ (Centar za evroatlantske studije CEAS, 2016).

Namely, between 2014 and 2021, many concerning events stemming from the Russian presence directly undermined the EU and US efforts in stabilising and rebuilding the region. In the summer of 2014, when the South Stream project was terminated due to a lengthy legal dispute between the EC and Gazprom, Russia launched a broad campaign to mobilise politicians and civil society activists in almost all Western Balkan countries to discredit the EU and NATO (Bieber & Tzifakis, 2019b). In Montenegro, Russia was considered to be involved in the 2016 coup attempt against Milo Đukanović and his Democratic Party of Socialists (Bajrovic et al., 2018). Russia worked to weaken the sanctions regime: in 2014, Serbia, North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina refused to support the EU’s policy in this area, undermining the CFSP alignment as a condition for successful EU accession (Avdiu, 2019; Bieber & Tzifakis, 2019b). Russia also amplified its regional information presence - in 2015, the Sputnik agency opened a radio station (30 regional stations) and a website that operates in Serbia and broadcasts the official position of the Russian authorities (Duffy & Green, 2020). Finally, Russia invested billions in an almost monopolistic presence in the energy sectors of some Western Balkan countries and accelerated the weaponry supplies to its allies, specifically Serbia (Bieber & Tzifakis, 2019b).

The signs of discomfort from the West with these developments were manifested in public political communications – German Chancellor Angela Merkel, in an interview with ‘Welt am Sonntag’, said that Russia was trying to make certain states in the Western Balkans politically and economically dependent (Alexander, 2014). The US Secretary of State John Kerry suggested that ‘Russia might focus on countries that are not NATO members, Montenegro for example, some of the smaller countries, and attempt to create instability, to use some of the information operations and techniques we have seen them using in Ukraine’, as ‘Serbia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Macedonia and others - they are in the line of fire’ (Radio Slobodna Evropa, 2015). Finally, at the EU level, concerns have also been voiced: in response to the question about the Russian engagement in the Western Balkans, Federica Mogherini, then High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, said that ‘the Balkans can easily become one of the chessboards where the big power game can be played’, and ‘the concern is there and is profound’ (E. W. B. Archives, 2017).

Considering these numerous facts of expanding Russian presence in the Western Balkans, verbally and publicly expressed concerns about these developments not only by the journalists, experts but also the officials, **the following research puzzle** emerges:

*If the Russian presence in the Western Balkans was growing since 2014, and the EU political leaders were concerned about these developments, then what was done to counter Russian actions in the region?*

While academia is replete with studies enunciating the Russian presence in the region and the substantive (or potential) threats it presents to EU policies in the Western Balkans (Bechev, 2018; Brailian, 2023; Hajdari, 2018; Panagiotou, 2021; Samokhvalov, 2019), the question of the EU’s countermeasures has not yet been addressed. Thus, this thesis attempts to answer two **research questions**:

1. *How did the EU respond to Russian engagement in the Western Balkans between 2014 and 2021?*
2. *What were the reasons behind the EU response to the Russian engagement in the Western Balkans between 2014 and 2021?*

**Chronologically**, this thesis is set **between 2014 and 2021**, where the 2014 crisis in EU-Russian relations, in line with existing literature, serves as a primary trigger and watershed moment for the Russian activation in the Western Balkans, while 2021 serves to separate the discussion from the developments taking place after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, which, by almost universal recognition, drastically changed the international environment and stands in contrast with the 2014 events, specifically in terms of the response of the international community.

In addition to the apparent research gap within the academic literature, which will be explored in detail in the literature review, this thesis is specifically interested in a **unique triangle of interaction** between the EU, Russia, and the Western Balkans, which generates a sophisticated complex of relations and practical inferences – while the academic literature is almost unanimous in recognising the Russian actions in the Western Balkans as a function of its relations with the EU (Bechev, 2017; Samokhvalov, 2017), the issue of **local agency** in this process and substance of the **EU's response** has been overlooked. In addition, this question formulation presents an interesting perspective of the **EU's actorness in international relations**, specifically through countermeasures (not) taken in response to the third actor's actions. Moreover, this thesis has **relevance** in the context of **Russia's continued presence in the Western Balkans**, especially after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, whereby the question of the EU's response and key rationales behind it is an ongoing, vibrant discussion (Anghel & Džankić, 2023; Asllani, 2023; Brailian, 2023; Zweers et al., 2023), which benefits from a retrospective view of the EU actions.

To tackle the research questions, with a particular emphasis on numerous aspects of this topic's relevance, this thesis employs a combination of two theoretical perspectives – a democratic deterrence theory by Wigell (Wigell, 2021) to generate expectations about the substance of the EU's response and a triangular framework of the interaction of a democracy promoter, an illiberal regional power and a target country by Risse and Babayan (Babayan & Risse, 2017), to generate expectations about the reasons and conditioning factors behind the EU response. While Wigell's democratic deterrence theory expects the EU response to be formulated in normative terms in line with its core values, the Risse-Babayan framework claims the response will happen only if the further democratising efforts do not threaten the stability of the Western Balkans and Russia is not considered a major strategic partner for the EU. To test these research expectations, a combination of fifteen elite and expert interviews and the EU official documents is analysed through thematic analysis to establish the substance of the EU response towards the Russian engagement in the Western Balkans and the reasons behind it.

This thesis argues that while the EU recognised the increasing presence of Russia and the potential threats to the stability and integration of the Western Balkans, the measures adopted were frequently reactive and lacked a coherent strategic vision. Although the EU attempted to address the threat by funding civil society organisations and countering disinformation, these efforts were often criticised as inadequate and not part of a comprehensive, long-term strategy. The EU's inconsistent focus on Russian activities, particularly when compared to its approach to other external actors like China, diluted the specific attention needed to counter Russia's unique methods of influence. Strategic initiatives by the EU were seen as superficial, failing to address the region's core issues, and the EU's support for local autocrats in the name of stability further undermined its efforts to build resilience against external interference, including that of Russia.

Additionally, the thesis presents several reasons for the EU's response to Russian influence in the Western Balkans, which was shaped by internal challenges, external pressures, and its complex relationship with

Russia. The EU grappled with multiple internal crises, such as the refugee crisis and institutional dynamics, that hindered a unified foreign policy, leading to the deprioritisation of the Western Balkans and a focus on crisis management over proactive engagement. The EU's cautious reaction to Russia, influenced by economic and energy ties, translated into unclear regional policies as it struggled to balance its economic interests with geopolitical concerns. The nature of Russian influence, characterised by indirect and hybrid methods, posed significant challenges that the EU was not well-equipped to counter. Local political elites in the Western Balkans exacerbated the situation by leveraging their relationships with Russia and other powers to manipulate their ties with the EU, further weakening the Union's influence and complicating its efforts to promote stability and democracy. As a result, the EU's response to Russian interference remained largely reactive, situational, and insufficient to effectively counter the challenges posed by Russian engagement.

This thesis shall proceed as follows: **Chapter 1** will discuss the existing literature on the three broad topics, which formulate the intersection where the research puzzle emerges – namely, literature about the EU as an actor in international relations, EU's policies in the Western Balkans and Russian presence in the Western Balkans. **Chapter 2** will detail the theoretical framework employed to address the research puzzle: the Risse-Babayan triangular framework on the interaction between democracy promoters, illiberal powers and target countries, and Wigell's theory of democratic deterrence. **Chapter 3** will describe the methodology of this thesis, including its ontological and epistemological positionality, as well as the key method employed – thematic analysis based on elite and expert interviews and EU official documents. **Chapter 4** will be dedicated to the key findings based on an analytical framework from thematic analysis and a chosen theoretical framework organised around respective themes. **Chapter 5** will answer the research questions of this thesis and provide theoretical inferences stemming from the case study under consideration.

## Chapter 1. Literature Review

This chapter will review the existing literature on three broad fields of studies, at the intersection of which lies the thesis research puzzle: the EU as an actor in international relations, the EU policies in the Western Balkans, and the Russian influence in the Western Balkans. This chapter sets an essential background for a general understanding of the topic and guides the choice of theoretical framework and methods to answer the research questions.

### 1.1. EU as an IR actor

In European studies, one of the significant contention questions is the EU's essence as an actor in IR. While the definition of actorness suggests 'the extent to which the Union has become an actor in global politics' (Bretherton & Vogler, 2005, p. 13), one should also consider the ontology behind its foreign policy and its influence on the EU's foreign policy goals and means. In turn, these are essential for understanding the EU's potential or actual response towards the Russian influence in the Western Balkans. In this respect, discussion oscillates between the two leading positions: the EU as **a *sui generis* IR actor** or a **'normal' Westphalian actor in the IR** (Nissen & Dreyer, 2024).

In the early stages of its existence, the EU was seen through the lens of traditional IR paradigms, considering states as the main actors in IR, like **realism** (Wright, 2011). In the case of the EU, the discussion commonly revolved around the deployment of military capabilities as a condition for the EU's status as a truly international actor and the EU's inherent inability to achieve this (Wright, 2011). The initial realist position used the coercive aspect, or rather its absence, as a defining factor for the EU's actorness—without an effective military, Bull argued, there would be no effective European Community as an international actor (Bull, 1982). The inherent inability stems from the specifics of the integration, which imposes consensus in decision-making as inalienable, aggravated by the deficit of common foreign policy objectives among the Union's Member States (Wright, 2011).

However, the EU's attempts at formulating an all-Union foreign policy agenda, undertaken after the end of the Cold War, undermined the 'hard power' argument (Nissen & Dreyer, 2024), and the realist critique shifted from security and military domain to structural deficiencies and primacy of Member States interests over supranational institutions. Namely, Hill argues that the EU's foreign policy endeavours are impeded by a 'Capabilities-Expectations Gap' – a discrepancy between the EU's claims about actions it can undertake and limitations stemming from its actual capability to reach decisions along with the instruments and resources it wants or is able of employing to this end (Hill, 1993). Toje reformulates this phenomenon as a 'Consensus-Expectations Gap', under which the EU Member States proceed with action by deliberately choosing issues where consensus is achievable rather than where the action is needed (Toje, 2008). Outcomes, therefore, fall victim to the process. Unanimity is more critical than the issue per se, which leads to inherent conservatism, and the EU is rather reactive than proactive in formulating the international agenda (Toje, 2008). Kagan suggests that the EU mechanism is not only doomed to look for the lowest common denominator but also makes any military component build-up and, hence, a global role impossible (Kagan, 2003).

With the EU's advancement in foreign policy coordination, expansion of the traditional realms of foreign policy, and the emergence of new theories and approaches in IR comes a wide range of *sui generis* conceptualisations of the EU actorness. Among the existing concepts are 'civilian power' (Orbie, 2006), 'global conflict manager' (Whitman & Wolff, 2012), 'transformative power' (Grabbe, 2015), 'quiet superpower' (Moravcsik, 2009), 'postmodern power' (Caporaso, 2000), 'soft power' (Nye, 1990), 'soft imperialist' (Hettne & Söderbaum, 2005), 'ethical power' (Aggestam, 2008), 'Kantian power — by choice or by necessity' (Kagan, 2003; Nicolaidis, 2004), 'market power' (Damro, 2012) and the most popular – 'normative power' (Manners, 2002). Despite such heterogeneity, all these concepts share a

similar pretext of the European project as a one-of-a-kind IR actor based on its history, supranational structure or legislative setup, and specifics of instruments used (Nissen & Dreyer, 2024).

**Supranational structure and institutional setup** are usually a starting point for *sui generis* arguments. What was an impediment in the eyes of the realist critique — the EU as ‘neither a state nor a non-state actor... neither a conventional international organisation nor an international regime’ (Ginsberg, 1999, p. 432), became a basis for the appreciative position of *sui generis* authors. Keil and Arkan point out that the Union is a ‘complex multilayered political system, which simultaneously bore the characteristics of an international organisation, a state and a supranational institution’ (Arkan & Keil, 2016, p. 56). Smith focused on the EU’s institutional structure, arguing that the multilayered governments (governments, parliaments and courts of law of the Member States, the EU supranational institutions and public opinion) create constraints that make it less likely that the EU will pursue realist, interest-driven policies (H. Smith, 2015), while other scholars have emphasised how the EU institutions act as a filter to the interests of its members, moulding the EU foreign policy in normative spirit (Lavenex, 2004). Other scholars suggest that the EU’s internal governance is extrapolated outwards, shaping the nature of its foreign policy through contractual relations with third parties (Tocci & Hamilton, 2008).

Another argument stems from the EU’s **lack of traditional coercive instruments** as a precondition for its ‘unique’ nature. What realists use to dismiss the EU’s international actorness entirely is what the *sui generis* proponents put forward as the foundation of EU power. The concept of ‘**civilian power**’, coined by Duchene in 1973, acutely represents this position. For Duchene, the European project’s military weakness is a virtue, laying down the basis for its status within the international system and ability to exert influence (Wright, 2011). Originating in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century wars, the European project is defined in opposition to its violent past (Nissen & Dreyer, 2024). It now safeguards continental peace via domesticating relations between Member states and reshaping power sources by relying on economics and diplomacy (Wright, 2011). Further developing the notion of civilian power, Maull described it as combining three components: cooperation in pursuit of international goals, using non-military instruments to this end, and establishing supranational structures to deal with global issues management (Maull, 1990). This non-military status is also central to discussions about the EU’s role in international relations (Manners, 2002).

Another *sui generis* argument is that the **EU is unique as an entity**, regardless of the material instruments it resorts to or the peculiarity of its structure. Namely, the concept of ‘**normative power**’ emerged in the debate between Manners and Bull on the ‘civilian power’ of the EU (Bull, 1982; Manners, 2002). While both concepts accord considerable meaning to the EU’s reliance on soft power assets and the formative nature of tragic historical experiences for the EU actorness and identity, normative power is not defined by means per se, unlike realist and civil interpretations (Wright, 2011).

Namely, while civilian power defines the EU’s nature via instruments at its disposal (or rather the absence of coercive instruments), normative power suggests that the EU’s role in the international system derives from its very existence in this system. The reason why the EU acts in a fundamentally different way, according to Manners, is that the Union is ‘different to pre-existing political forms, and that this particular difference pre-disposes it to act in a normative way’ (Manners, 2002, p. 242). The idea that ‘the most important factor that defines the EU’s international role is not what it does or says, but what it is’ (Manners, 2002, p. 252) reinforces this statement. Thus, the EU’s normative power lies in ‘the ability to shape conceptions of normal (Manners, 2002, p. 249). In his later publications, Manners explicitly pointed out that the EU’s normative power lies in its ability to ‘lead by example’ and to directly influence the rules of the game in the international system (Manners, 2010, p. 97).

The issue of norms and principles is central to the normative power concept. Manners argued that the EU can influence international relations by promoting its values and norms, such as peace, freedom,

democracy, the rule of law, human rights, social progress, non-discrimination, sustainable development and good governance (Manners, 2002, p. 239). These values are the basis of interstate relations, including the peaceful resolution of disputes and source of legitimacy for the EU's external actions, constitutive factors for the EU's international identity, and formative for the nature of its relations with the world (Wright, 2011).

However, the presence of norms is not the only component; the means of their dissemination are equally important. Manners argued that a crucial part of the process is 'the absence of physical force in imposing norms and the cultural means of dissemination that transform the EU into a different type of international actor' (Manners, 2002, p. 245). Among such non-physical means, one finds the spontaneous diffusion of norms in third countries; communication strategies (information activities, new policy initiatives, and declarative communications); procedural activities (institutionalising relations with the EU through agreements or membership); transfer of mutual benefits through technical cooperation based on EU legal and administrative standards; activities in third countries, including peacekeeping, human rights and diplomatic efforts; and cultural diffusion (learning European norms by third states through socialisation) (Manners, 2002). The effectiveness of the strategy pursued by a normative actor is thus measured by an indicator of the degree of transposition of the European model (or ideological/normative standards) in the states targeted by this strategy (Skolimowska, 2015).

However, the criticism of the normative power concept is almost as replete as that of its praise. It revolves around interconnected notions of the EU's uniqueness as a normative power, universalist normative claims, external perception of normative power, norms and values dichotomy, etc.

First, the authors question the **uniqueness of the EU as a normative actor**, or rather, the EU as the *only* normative actor. Kagan and Hyde-Price debate whether this concept can be applied to other actors or if the EU uniquely wields it – and argue that the USA possesses similar qualities (Hyde-Price, 2008; Kagan, 2003). In addition, different organisations, such as the UN, World Bank, IMF, WTO, and OECD, which promote norms identical to those of the EU, undermine the EU's unique normative actorness (Diez, 2005).

Second, researchers question the EU's **normative positions as a universal 'force for good'**. Namely, scholars ask whether there is a legitimate foundation for the EU's claim to be a universal force for good or merely reflects a European conception of 'good' (Aggestam, 2008, p. 8; Sjørnsen, 2006). This issue is closely connected with the EU's status as '**normative imperialist**', which imposes its values under a universalist pretext and uses them to achieve material policy goals (Del Sarto, 2016). In this respect, the problem of external perception as a necessary condition for the EU normative legitimacy arises (De Zutter, 2010). Harpaz and Shamis argue that most works on normative power are Eurocentric and abstract and that academic discourse does not give due importance to how non-Europeans perceive normative power (Harpaz & Shamis, 2010). Larsen demonstrates that perceptions of the EU as a normative force vary significantly across different regions. Even if the EU attempts to promote its norms globally, it does not function as a global normative power. The EU's image as a normative power is strongest in countries seeking closer ties with the EU and potential membership (Larsen, 2014).

Third, many authors also question the **nature of the EU's instruments** as normative. Empirical studies indicate that normative power largely relies on material incentives, such as the prospect of EU membership or trade agreements – while the ideal type form is spontaneous diffusion – hence, in practice, no different from other instruments. Structural realism critiques normative power by highlighting the EU's inability to persuade third states to adopt the European normative model without additional economic or military incentives (Pollack, 2010). Regarding the contextual use of instruments, the criticism is directed at the EU's indifference to the specifics of the objects of force and the local context, in other words, adherence to the 'our size fits all' principle, which ties us back to the 'normative empire'

notion (Del Sarto, 2016). The EU also tends to reproduce itself in its relations with non-members (Bicchi, 2006; Bretherton & Vogler, 2014, p. 249).

Fourth, a **dichotomy of interests and norms** is also a common critique of normative power. Jørgensen and Laatikainen criticise the normative approach for disregarding the EU's material interests. They argue that the EU's portrayal of itself as a force for good while claiming indifference to its interests leads to inconsistencies in the application of norms and damages the Union's international reputation as a values-based actor (Jørgensen & Laatikainen, 2004). This clash of norms and interests undermines the EU's ability to influence the behaviour of other actors in four ways: by depriving it of the ability to 'levy a penalty' for non-compliance with its norms; by reducing the effectiveness of its normative power; by leading to inconsistencies in the application of its norms; and by damaging the Union's international standing as a values-based actor (Noureddine, 2016).

However, some scholars take this dichotomy further and argue that the EU is a 'realist actor in normative clothes' that uses normative means to achieve geopolitical goals (Seeberg, 2009). Hyde-Price famously argued that universalist claims often mask particularistic interests (Hyde-Price, 2006). He proposes a neorealist alternative, according to which the EU is, in fact, simply an 'institutional repository for the "second-order" concerns of its member states', according to which ethical and normatively sound policies should not be attributed to the EU itself, but should be pursued only if they do not contradict the material interests of the member states (Hyde-Price, 2006, pp. 222–223), much in line with 'Consensus-Expectations Gap' concept (Toje, 2008). Many scholars contend that the EU readily sacrifices normative principles for material interests (Del Sarto, 2016; Petrovic M, 2019; Seeberg, 2009; Skolimowska, 2015). Finally, a part of academic literature is critical of the 'normative power' viability as a **proper scientific concept**, seeing it as truly 'normative', representing the desirable rather than actual reality. Sjørnsen highlights the risk of this academic concept being too closely tied to the EU's founding documents, potentially limiting the critical analysis (Sjørnsen, 2006). Hyde-Price underscores the difficulty of maintaining critical distance with concepts like normative power, where the research object emanates the core values of a researcher himself (Hyde-Price, 2006). Nikolaidis and Howse argue that the perception of the EU's international policy is a product of European image-making and does not accurately reflect reality but is an ideal Brussels aims to achieve. These authors use the concept of Euro-utopia, i.e. the utopian image of the EU that it has created on its own (Nicolaidis & Howse, 2002). Skolimowska adds that the EU does not export its normative power but rather a representation of what it aspires to be (Skolimowska, 2015), which undermines its credibility and international trust.

It is safe to assume that the debate on EU actorness remains vibrant and primarily aligned with the current political context. For instance, the discussion became relevant again in the context of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine when the EU started reconsidering the continent's security at the level of individual Member States and the Union (Nissen & Dreyer, 2024). Even before 2022, one of the latest trends in academia was conceptualising the EU's potential (or actuality) as a **geopolitical power** (Bastian, 2021; Beshku, 2021; Lehne, 2020; Lonardo, 2023; Middelaar, 2021). As Helwig rightly points out, despite becoming a buzzword since the arrival of the 2019 Commission as 'geopolitical', the term 'geopolitics' remains undefined but commonly associated with a more interest-driven, power-based and pragmatic approach, with great emphasis on space and military prowess (Helwig, 2024).

While critical geopolitics studies of the EU have been replete (Nitoiu & Sus, 2019), the realpolitik notion has been primarily confined to the claims regarding the EU's deviation from the normative mission (Bicchi, 2006; Harpaz & Shamis, 2010; Hyde-Price, 2006, 2008; Seeberg, 2009; Skolimowska Anna, 2015) or a call from the epistemic and analytical community to adopt one (Beshku, 2023; Middelaar, 2021). Some authors suggest that the EU has already been actively acting as a geopolitical actor, as it prioritised deepening internal integration over global power projection while also managing the tensions between geopolitics and geoeconomics by moving away from market openness towards competitive

interdependence and selectively supporting the liberal-democratic order amidst the global competition between the United States and China (Youngs, 2020). However, one hardly can ascertain whether the EU may be presented as a geopolitical actor – Helwig conceptualises this as ‘accidental geopolitics’ – a series of ad hoc instances rather than deliberate strategy, which, in turn, is born out of inherent dichotomies of norms vs. interests, supranational vs. intergovernmental institutional design, and defensive vs. offensive policies (Helwig, 2024).

The debate on the EU actorness also takes place in the **Western Balkans**. Namely, Beshku explores the EU’s ability to turn into a geopolitical power via enlargement to the Western Balkans, deconstructed via pragmatic enlargement perceptions of France and Germany (Beshku, 2021). Following the invasion of Ukraine, the Western Balkans are considered the immediate case of geopolitical transformation, whereby accelerated enlargement is perceived as an ultimate geopolitical move (Anghel & Džankić, 2023; Beshku, 2023; Mats Braun et al., 2024). On the other hand, the Western Balkans have always been a litmus test for the sui generis conceptualisations, like transformative (Börzel, 2011; Džankić et al., 2019; Elbasani, 2013; Giandomenico, 2015) and normative power (De Iacovo, 2019; Heikkinen, n.d.; Nitoiu, 2009; Noutcheva, 2009; Zupančič & Pejič, 2018), primarily demonstrating discouraging results.

## 1.2. EU and the Western Balkans

The EU’s engagement in the Western Balkans has an **unprecedented character** compared to other external regions – to the extent that the term ‘Western Balkans’ was coined in Brussels (Nitoiu & Sus, 2019). Understanding this unprecedented Brussels’ role in the region is an essential background for the thesis’s central question – the EU’s response to the third actor’s involvement in the area, which is practically shaped by the EU’s presence and policies. Moreover, the overall course of action, strategy, and instruments used in the Western Balkans by the EU determine the basic expectations of the EU’s response to Russian engagement.

A usual starting point for almost all accounts of the EU policies in the Western Balkans is their **qualitative difference** from other regions in which the EU is actively present – mainly due to the region’s complicated past and its lingering effects (Börzel & Grimm, 2018; Grimm & Mathis, 2015; Kartsonaki & Wolff, 2023; Zupančič & Pejič, 2018), but also novel roles the EU had to undertake in the region. Most importantly, the EU was there to rebuild the region (physically and metaphorically) after the wars that followed the demise of Yugoslavia. Thus, compared to the Central European accession process, the EU not only prepares the region’s countries for accession but essentially builds up the state structures of the Western Balkans from the very beginning, supports their economies and essentially does what needs to be done before any accession talks – builds a state (Arkan & Keil, 2016, pp. 16–17; Bieber, 2011; Börzel, 2011; Börzel & Grimm, 2018). At the same time, the **legacy of post-Yugoslav conflicts** remains a determinant in the EU policies.

On the one hand, Brussels aims to keep peace and stability and bring prosperity to the Western Balkans. Moreover, the EU is much involved in overseeing the implementation of post-conflict settlement treaties, like the Dayton Accords in Bosnia and Herzegovina via the ALTHEA mission or supporting state enforcement of the law, like via the EULEX Kosovo mission (EEAS, 2024a, 2024b). Still, on the other hand, structural post-conflict vulnerabilities, ranging from weak state structures to lingering societal cleavages, undermine the EU’s efforts (Džankić et al., 2019). This dilemma is reinforced by the EU’s lack of experience in matters of state building, which leads to a paradoxical situation where the EU’s efforts to stabilise the region are undermined by the problems it aims to solve (Börzel, 2011). Moreover, as Tocci argues, the EU’s approach often addresses only the symptoms of conflict rather than its root causes and ignores the complex dynamics of post-conflict societies (Tocci, 2007).

Turning to concrete examples of **state-building**, Bieber identifies three forms of EU state-building in the Western Balkans – first, direct intervention in political systems, such as in Bosnia and Herzegovina,

where the EU Special Representative has influenced decision-making since 2011, leading to significant political impacts like the police reform crisis. Second, coercion and close monitoring, where pressure from Brussels and EU member states pushes local actors to implement reforms, as seen in the Serbia-Kosovo negotiations and the Concordia mission in Macedonia. Third, ‘state-building at a distance’, where EU conditionality stimulates reforms to improve public administration and democratic accountability, exemplified by the EU-sponsored state union of Serbia and Montenegro and constitutional reform support in Bosnia after the Sejdić-Finci judgment (Bieber, 2011).

State building, as complicated as it is, happens in the Western Balkans in parallel with **Europeanisation** and **democracy promotion**, to the extent that sometimes these processes are conflated or explored simultaneously (Börzel & Grimm, 2018; Grimm, 2015; Grimm & Mathis, 2015). Almost all academic accounts of these processes in the Western Balkans are critical to the EU efforts and explore the reasons behind the EU’s failures to enforce required reforms (Barbulescu & Troncota, 2013; Ciceo, 2022; Džankić et al., 2019; Grabbe, 2015). Many explanations exist, mainly divided into intra-regional factors and the Union’s specifics. For instance, among the issues, one finds local structural post-conflict conditions (weak and limited statehood, lack of institutions, the rule of law, civil society engagement, etc.) (Börzel & Grimm, 2018; Grimm & Mathis, 2015; Kartsonaki & Wolff, 2023; Zupančič & Pejič, 2018), complex interactions between the EU, Western Balkan governments, and domestic third-party actors (Bieber, 2018; Emini, 2023; Hasanbegovic, 2020), a lack of consensus among democracy promoters about policy objectives and hidden agendas, authoritarian leaders’ adaptability to threats and resistance to democratisation, and the influence of adverse external actors supporting autocracy and undermining democratic transitions (Börzel & Grimm, 2018; Prelec, 2020; Richter & Wunsch, 2020).

In all of the above processes, however, **conditionality** is one of the main instruments at the EU’s disposal in transforming the Western Balkans (Anastasakis, 2008; Bieber, 2012; Džankić et al., 2019; Glüpker, 2013; Grabbe, 2015; Limante, 2021; Richter & Wunsch, 2020). Among the critical issues with these instruments, one finds prioritising the accession process over outcomes, blending normative and *realpolitik* conditions, and inconsistent compliance assessments (Anastasakis, 2008). Noutcheva discusses ‘fake, partial and imposed compliance’, where states superficially adopt EU-mandated reforms to gain benefits without genuine implementation (Noutcheva, 2009). Limante highlights specific trends in the EU’s use of political conditionality, where the EU often adds additional political conditions and criteria for weaker or more resilient partners. It combines normative, functional, and fundamental political requirements in selecting conditions, affecting the clarity of its intentions (Limante, 2021). Additionally, the EU sometimes conducts thorough compliance assessments and, at other times, adopts a more flexible and pragmatic approach to preserve peace and prevent security risks, affecting the process’s consistency (Limante, 2021). Petrović attributes the slow adoption of EU standards to inconsistent and weak policy implementation rather than structural inability. He points out that the EU’s toughened accession conditions and new criteria since the mid-2000s often reflect the short-term interests of influential EU member states rather than universally recognised norms (Petrovic M, 2019). Consequently, Džankić et al. argue that EU conditionality has failed to drive social change in the Western Balkans due to local veto players, state capture, and historical legacies (Džankić et al., 2019).

A peculiar issue in this respect is **state capture**, which hampers democratic transition (Bartlett, 2021; Prelec, 2020). Richter and Wunsch reveal that Western Balkan countries are trapped in a hybrid status quo on their path to democracy, where traditional explanations fail to account for the gap between formal EU membership compliance and declining democratic performance. The limited impact of EU political conditionality is linked to rampant state capture, as conditionality has reinforced harmful governance patterns. Simultaneous economic and political reform pressures have enabled business actors to form clientelist networks infiltrating politics, weakened political competition, and diminished internal accountability. High-level EU interactions have legitimised corrupt elites, with the Serbian case

illustrating how EU conditionality can entrench state capture rather than promote genuine democratic reforms (Richter & Wunsch, 2020).

Recent literature suggests that the EU's democracy aid and accession progress have paradoxically legitimised political regimes despite democratic backsliding, including Serbia and North Macedonia, where the EU acts as both a legitimising actor and a democracy promoter (Gafuri & Muftuler-Bac, 2021). In their interactions with local political actors, EU policies in the Western Balkans have led to the emergence of a new concept: the **stabilitocracy** (Bieber, 2018; Kmezić, 2019; Kovačević, 2018; Pavlović, 2017; N. R. Smith et al., 2021; Zweers et al., 2022). This term means 'governments that claim to secure stability, pretend to espouse EU integration and rely on informal, clientelist structures, control of the media, and the regular production of crises to undermine democracy and the rule of law' (Bieber, 2018, p. 176) and broadly reflects the EU's main priority in the region – peace and security, even at the cost of democratic transformations – 'stability first, development second, democracy - third' (Grimm & Mathis, 2015). Zweers et al. identify eight flaws in the EU's strategies and policies contributing to stabilitocracy in the Western Balkans. These include an overly technical approach to enlargement that fails to drive profound societal change, unclear rule of law definitions, and inadequate reporting that obscures political realities. The EU's silence on stagnation and autocratic tendencies, coupled with its inability to reward progress due to internal disagreements, undermines its credibility. The focus on political elites strengthens their grip on power, while party-political ties lead to undue support for undemocratic behaviours. Lastly, the lack of interim timelines hampers effective monitoring and accountability for necessary democratic reforms (Zweers et al., 2022). At the same time, from a long-term perspective, favouring stability over democracy will likely bring further instability (Kovačević, 2018) – 'by offering stability externally and reforms domestically, the aforementioned parties are in the business of promising stability, not delivering' (Bieber, 2018, p. 183).

At the same time, the primary process and reform incentive led by the EU in the Western Balkans — **enlargement** — has been repeatedly criticised (Besimi, 2016; Bonomi, 2020; Economides, 2020; Mtchedlishvili, 2021; O'Brennan, 2014). The literature contrasts the EU enlargement strategy during the 2004/2007 Eastern enlargement with the current approach for Western Balkan countries, highlighting factors that have slowed the accession process over the past decade (Nitoiu, 2009). In addition to the lessons of the previous enlargement sessions and 'enlargement fatigue', the past decade of the EU was aptly nicknamed a poly-crisis (Nicoli & Zeitlin, 2024) – a series of consecutive crises, including the Eurozone crisis, refugee influx following the Syrian civil war, Brexit, followed by the COVID-19 pandemic, and finally – Ukrainian invasion. A string of crises, combined with dubious reforming processes in the Western Balkans, prompted the arrival of a 'fundamentals first', with its particular emphasis on the rule of law and resolution of bilateral disputes (Miš, 2017; Rant et al., 2020).

On the **EU side**, recent literature on EU enlargement highlights a shift from 'enlargement fatigue' (Bonomi, 2020; O'Brennan, 2014) — where the EU and its members felt unprepared to absorb new members due to institutional and economic concerns—to 'enlargement resistance' (Economides, 2020). This resistance arises from worries about 'absorption capacity', internal EU fragmentation, and the inability of candidate states to meet accession requirements. Europe's crises have intensified populism, nationalism, and debates over European integration, further hindering the enlargement process. Additionally, candidate states struggle to implement necessary reforms for accession. The literature suggests that EU enlargement faces dual challenges: internal EU fragmentation and the external incapacity of candidate states to comply with criteria, indicating a likely stall in the process, even for Western Balkan countries nearing the requirements (Economides, 2020; Elezi, 2023).

Džankić revisits Hill's 'capability-expectation gap' concept from EU foreign policy studies and applies it to the accession of the Western Balkan states. This reinterpretation broadens the 'capability' aspect to encompass the EU's interests and strategies for regional accession. It highlights the EU's challenges in

presenting a credible enlargement agenda, particularly considering internal tensions post-Brexit and maintaining its role as a democratising force amidst rising illiberal politics within member states. The expectations of the EU among Western Balkan stakeholders reveal that normative expectations about the EU's role have led to a flawed perception of EU conditionality. This has allowed domestic elites to exploit the situation, further entrenching their control over the weak and captured states in the region (Džankić, 2023).

On the **Western Balkan side**, Teokarević underscores a shift in the EU's image in the Western Balkans over the past two decades, transitioning from an initial optimistic perception to a significantly more negative one due to crises in the EU enlargement process. Early in the EU integration efforts, the Union was viewed as an essential problem-solver, reform anchor, and development facilitator. At the same time, it is now perceived as a metaphorical and literal ATM that provides financial support. Recent analyses and public opinion polls highlight a decline in this positive image, shaped by a '3D phenomenon'—disappointment, disillusionment, and disenchantment with the EU. Despite its status as the most influential external actor in the region, the EU's current image is unlikely to improve substantially shortly, reflecting broader challenges in the effectiveness and appeal of its enlargement strategy (Teokarević, 2023). Barbullushi explores elite and public perceptions of the EU in the Western Balkans, focusing on two paradoxes: the gap between regional expectations and declining faith in the EU's commitment and the tension between the EU's demands for regional cooperation and its limited support (Barbullushi, 2023).

A **full-scale invasion of Ukraine** brought a new stream inside the EU enlargement in the Western Balkans – namely, the impact of the 2022 invasion on the EU policies vis-à-vis this process (Anghel & Džankić, 2023; Beshku, 2023; Dopchie & Lika, 2024). While some argue that the EU should be more geopolitical – in this case – offer a fast-track accession to the Western Balkan states (Beshku, 2023), others warn about concerning tendencies of crippling geopolitisation of enlargement, including the transformations and reforms, compliance with the EU entry requirements, etc. (Anghel & Džankić, 2023).

The **presence of non-Western actors** like Russia, China, and the UAE in the Western Balkans has garnered attention as a factor for weakening the EU's leverage over the region, including in conditionality compliance, as well as numerous impediments to the regional countries' strategic orientation and transformation process (Anđelić, 2020; Bieber & Tzifakis, 2019a, 2019b; Chrzová et al., 2019; Vulović, 2023). While the leverage of these numerous actors should not be overestimated to an extent where they are presented as outright alternatives risking inflicting a U-turn in the Western Balkans' strategic orientation (Bieber & Tzifakis, 2019a), their presence certainly undermines the democratisation and enlargement process, particularly with respect to adopting the EU standards. Prelec discusses how these actors exploit governance weaknesses through 'corrosive capital', fostering illiberalism and state capture (Prelec, 2020). Markovic Khaze discusses how perceptions of Russia and China as 'less demanding' partners, alongside a slow EU enlargement agenda, have diminished the EU's 'power of attraction' (Markovic Khaze, 2022). At the same time, the academic literature largely neglects the issue of the **EU's response** towards these actors' actions in the Western Balkans. The only notable exception is a study by Bošković, who explores the EU's response towards the increased Chinese presence in the Western Balkans (Bošković, 2020).

### **1.3. Russian influence in the Western Balkans**

While the literature has been concentrated on various countries projecting their power in the Western Balkans, including China, Turkey and UAE (Bieber & Tzifakis, 2019b; Gardner, 2023; Hajdari, 2018; Panagiotou, 2021), particular emphasis has always been placed on Russia (Bechev, 2018; Bechev & Radeljić, 2018; Branislav & Caprile, 2023; Hajdari, 2018), which will be discussed next. A nuanced understanding of Moscow's motives, interests, instruments and impact in the Western Balkans is required

to comprehend the scale of the Russian presence in the region, its impact on the EU's strategic perception and the potential instruments it is likely to use to counter these actions.

The academic and analytical record on the reasons, instruments, and efficiency of Moscow's policies in the region is replete; the **first wave** of interest was triggered by the first phase of Western-Russian estrangement after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 (Babić et al., 2014; Bajrovic et al., 2018; Bechev & Radeljić, 2018; Bershidsky, 2017; Clark & Foxall, 2014; Galeotti, 2018; Jagiełło, 2021), while the **second wave** of attention came immediately after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 (Asllani, 2023; Brailian, 2023; Branislav & Caprile, 2023; Brey, 2022; Centre for Strategic Communication and Information Security, 2023; Fruscione, 2023; Maliqi, 2023; Zweers et al., 2023). The majority of papers on the matter have been positioned in the field of **policy papers** (Anastasakis, 2022; Bechev, 2019; Galeotti, 2018; Zweers et al., 2023) and highlight the detrimental nature of Russian activities in the Western Balkans after the annexation of Crimea, either in individual instances, like the attempted coup in Montenegro (Bajrovic et al., 2018) or support for Republika Srpska's secessionist aspirations from Bosnia and Herzegovina (Solik et al., 2022; Turcalo & Becirevic, 2020), or more broadly, as a destabilising force of the regional calibre (Bechev, 2019; Galeotti, 2018). The works also differ in measuring the salience of the Russian threat – while for some, Russia has been a 'receding power' (Keltikli, 2021), others highlight that it is a 'troubling actor' (Stronski, 2022) and a 'spoiler' (Samorukov, 2019) that manages to 'play the weak hand well' and should not be dismissed in the overall assessment of external actors (Bechev, 2017; Bieber & Tzifakis, 2019b; Zweers et al., 2023), as its influence has 'little substance, but considerable impact' (Zweers et al., 2023).

Many scholars consider **Russian motivations vis-à-vis the Western Balkans** as pragmatic and secondary to the primary vein of relations with the EU (Babić et al., 2014; Bechev, 2017; Samokhvalov, 2019; Zweers et al., 2023). Scholars argue that the Russian perception of the Western Balkans as a 'soft underbelly' of Brussels is not a strategically important region per se but rather through its meaning for and proximity to the EU (Bechev, 2017; Krastev, 2015). As Samokhvalov writes, Russian relations with the Balkan states have historically served its foreign policy goals of imperial expansion and geopolitical confrontation in Europe. Russia's interest in the Balkans fluctuates with its relations with the West—limited when Western powers are disengaged from the region but assertive when the West is active. The main goal for Moscow is to be an equal participant or a veto player in regional affairs. If excluded from decision-making regarding the fates of the region among great powers, Russia resorts to undermining Western policies in the Balkans to force recognition of its influence, demonstrating that Western strategies formulated and implemented without Russian involvement are destined to fail (Samokhvalov, 2017, 2019). Babić also argues that analysing Russian influence in the Western Balkans is impossible without modelling the EU-Western Balkans-Russia triangle, where weakening relations with the EU lead to increased Russian interference (Babić et al., 2014).

In light of the primacy of broader EU-Russian relations, Russian **interests** in the Western Balkans are considered malignant and obstructive to the Western countries but deeply tactical (Bechev, 2018; Keltikli, 2021; Secrieru, 2019). According to academic literature, Russia's policy in the Western Balkans aims to divert the EU's focus to regional issues, reducing Brussels' attention to its 'near abroad'. This strategy includes acting as a spoiler to trigger Western actions while diminishing the effectiveness of European responses. Russia deliberately obstructs conflict resolution and European integration in the Balkans to challenge the unipolar order and promote a multipolar 'concert of states' with Russia as an equal participant. These tactics are part of a 'zero-sum game' strategy, serving as retaliation for EU involvement in Eastern Europe and as a tool in international arenas, such as UN votes and blocking sanctions (Secrieru, 2019). Russia is also considered to have been impeding the transformation and European integration of the Western Balkan countries (Avdiu, 2019) or conceptualised as a 'black knight' - an external actor countering democratisation (Kalezic, 2022).

The Russian **instruments** in the region are usually characterised as subtle, informal and cost-effective. Numerous scholars highlight the Russian ability to wield the minimum resources for the maximum benefit — to quote Talbott on the nature of Primakov's foreign policy strategy, Russia can mobilise limited resources to make the most out of them (Samokhvalov, 2017) and ‘play a weak hand well’ (Bieber & Tzifakis, 2019b). At the same time, its influence has ‘little substance but considerable impact’ (Zweers et al., 2023). Almost all Russian means of power stem from the internal vulnerabilities of the regional countries — Russia does not export instability per se — it exploits the already existing systemic problems and societal cleavages, including state and media capture, corruption, clientelism, weak rule of law, traumatic historical memories of conflicts in the 1990s, interethnic and religious feuds and grievances against the Western powers and their policies (Bechev, 2018; Dolan, 2022; Zakem et al., 2017).

Bechev proposes to classify Russian instruments in the Western Balkans according to the following categories: coercion (use or threat of force, either militarily or in the form of economic sanctions), co-optation (provision of preferences, rewards and other types of incentives to representatives of political and business elites), subversion (deteriorating activities aimed at societies at large — disinformation campaigns, support for anti-Western actors such as political parties or NGOs) (Bechev, 2019). The main share of Russian instruments falls within the second and third categories, with particular emphasis on disinformation campaigns in the local media. The numerous analyses of critical narratives promulgated by the Russian press highlight the anti-Western narratives about the aggressive and exploitative nature of the EU and NATO, active use of historical parallels with conflicts of the 1990s and exacerbation of existing ethnic, religious and societal cleavages within and between Western Balkan countries (Asllani, 2023; Centre for Strategic Communication and Information Security, 2023; Duffy & Green, 2020; Maliqi, 2023; Metodieva, 2019).

However, scholars are mindful of many **reservations** as to the degree of Russian instruments. Analysts agree on the specifics of Russian economic presence in the region – while it is insignificant compared to the EU presence in terms of FDI, import and export relations and capital flows, the Russian economic influence is strategically positioned (energy, critical infrastructure, real estate, banking) and highly targeted to local vulnerabilities (Ilić, 2023; Keltikli, 2021). Another vital tendency highlighted by the scholars is the geographically uneven nature of Russian influence – namely, while Moscow looms large in primarily Orthodox Serbia, Bosnian Republika Srpska and Montenegro, its impact and instruments are limited in Kosovo, North Macedonia and Albania (Keltikli, 2021; Zweers et al., 2023). Moreover, academic literature highlights the highly transactional character of relations between the local political actors and Moscow. As Samokhvalov writes, Russia's Western Balkan allies are happy to use Moscow's funds and separatist slogans to gain popularity. Still, they are not ready to destroy their political capital and lose control over their own countries for the sake of Russia's great-power ambitions (Samokhvalov, 2019, p. 198).

While all scholarly works and policy papers on Russian politics in the Western Balkans highlight its deteriorating nature to the EU policies in the region, almost none of them consider whether Brussels took any steps to **counter the Russian malignant presence**. The only exception is Behbudzada's work on the EU's actions to counter Russian disinformation in the Western Balkans through the prism of the democratic deterrence theory (Behbudzada, 2020). While bringing a fresh theoretical perspective to the counter-disinformation studies, this paper is limited to one, although undeniably crucial, dimension of Russian influence in the Western Balkans – the media influence, while omitting the other sources of Russian power. Moreover, Behbudzada relies on the document analysis of the EU official communications concerning the Western Balkans and counter-hybrid activities, describing the EU policies at the declaratory rather than practical level (Behbudzada, 2020). Apart from the described work, the literature has not considered the EU response towards the Russian influence in the Western Balkans, which constitutes a research gap this thesis aims to address.

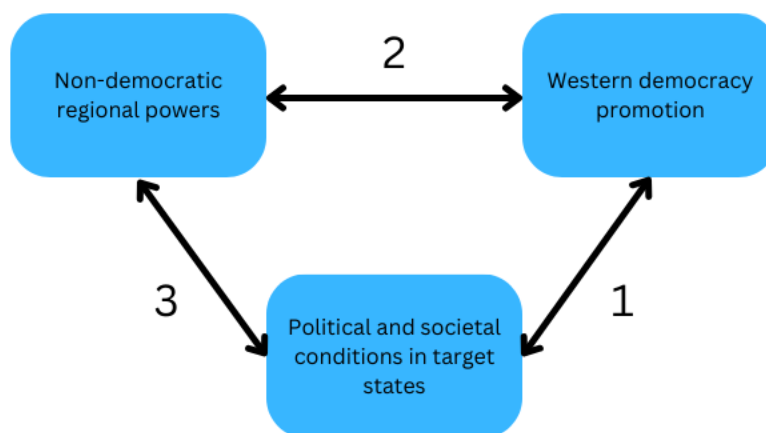
## Chapter 2. Theoretical Framework

As demonstrated in the literature review, the issue of the EU's response towards the Russian influence in the Western Balkans has been largely unexplored in academic research. Thus, to address the identified research gap, this chapter introduces the theoretical framework that will be used to formulate the primary research expectations of this thesis. Namely, emphasis is placed on providing a credible explanation for the EU's response to Russian influence in the Western Balkans and the substance of the potential or actual response.

### 2.1. Triangular Framework: Determinants for Response

This thesis requires a peculiar theoretical setting, accounting for the presence of three separate actors in their complex interactions, as the research puzzle sets in one question: the EU, Russia and them both – in the Western Balkans. Moreover, the theoretical perspective should not only present a credible interaction logic between the three but also pay keen attention to their respective agencies in the process, specifically for Western Balkans, which cannot be disregarded as the mere background for EU-Russia relations. Considering these determinants, a Risse-Babayan triangular framework of relations between democracy promoters, illiberal powers, and target countries has been chosen for this thesis. This theoretical framework has already been applied to the EU response to the increased Chinese engagement in the Western Balkans and has provided fruitful insights into the matter (Bošković, 2020).

The Risse-Babayan theoretical perspective explores the complex interactions between democracy promoters, illiberal powers, and target countries where the first two actors operate. As explained by Risse and Babayan, they are interested in the entire triangle of relations between these actors. The key interactions at the focus of the theory are presented in Figure 1.



*Figure 1. Risse-Babayan triangular framework for interaction between Western democracy promoters, illiberal actors and target states. Adopted based on (Babayan & Risse, 2017)<sup>1</sup>.*

Namely, theory aims to provide credible expectations on the key interaction lines between the actors and conditions. First, it explores the reaction of non-democratic regional powers to the democratic state's democracy promotion efforts, specifically in interaction with the target country's local specifics. Second, it considers the reaction of democracy promoters to the countervailing policies adopted by the illiberal powers in the target state. Finally, it delves into the effects of these efforts from democracy promoters and illiberal powers on the ground, as well as how detrimental the countering efforts by the illiberal regional actors are to democracy promotion (Risse & Babayan, 2015, p. 383).

<sup>1</sup> The numbered double-edged arrows indicate the relations considered by the framework:

**Arrow 1.** Interactions between Western democracy promoters and socio-political conditions in target states;

**Arrow 2.** Interactions between non-democratic regional actors and Western democracy promoters;

**Arrow 3.** Interactions between non-democratic regional actors and socio-political conditions in target states;

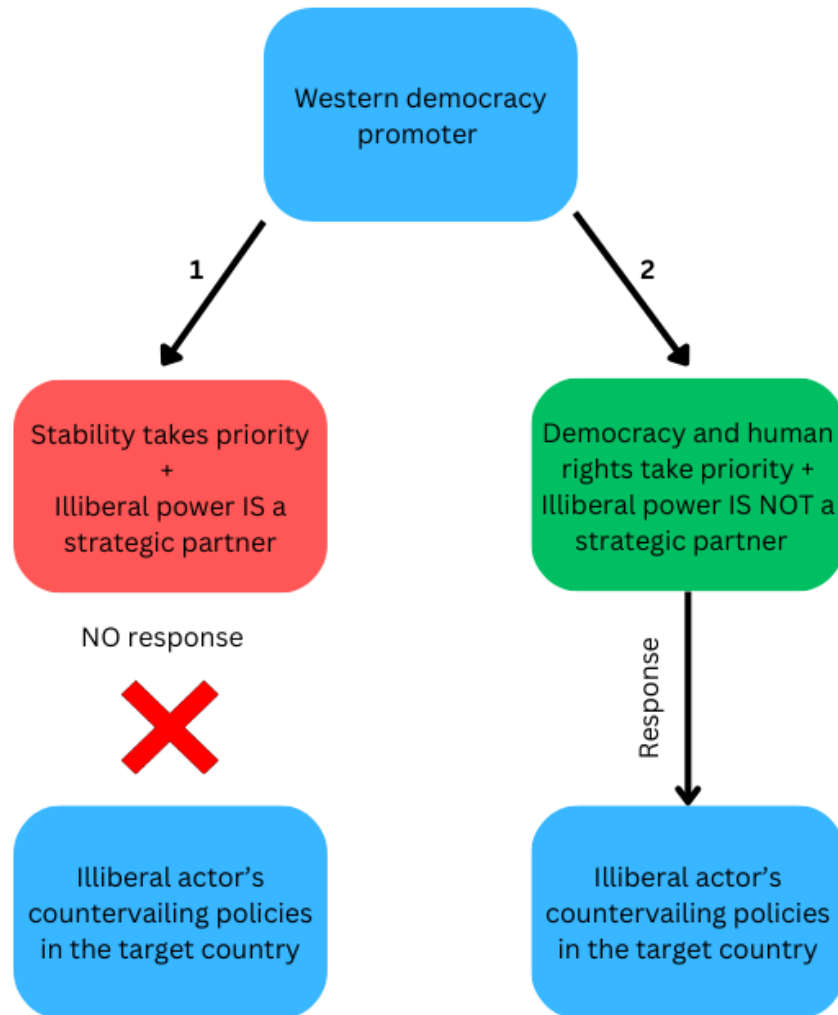
Regarding the first question, as the framework argues, non-democratic regional powers will counteract the Western democracy promotion efforts in third countries only if these are considered challenges to their regional strategic interests or a threat to their regime survival. Their counteractions, however, are unlikely to be an outright promotion of autocracy. In response to the second issue, Risse and Babayan argue that Western democracy promoters will respond to the non-democratic countervailing policies in the third countries if they prioritise human rights and democracy promotion over stability and security goals within a broader context of target country conditions. Another determinant for a response is the overall relations between a democracy promoter and illiberal power. Finally, the local implications of external powers' countervailing policies depend on the domestic configuration of forces, including government and civil society. Western democracy promoters tend to empower liberal actors in third countries, while the non-democratic powers support their opponents. These processes, in turn, depend on relative leverage, defined by the credibility of commitment, legitimacy, and resources possessed by democracy-promoting states and illiberal regional powers in the target country. Another conditioning factor is the economic and security linkages between the target country and democracy-promoting state on the one hand and between a target country and the illiberal regional power on the other (Risse & Babayan, 2015, p. 384).

For this thesis, the author is interested in the second issue theorised in the framework, namely, the democracy promoter's response to the illiberal policies of the non-democratic regional actor within the target country, as it provides research expectations under the puzzle of this thesis. Namely, Risse and Babayan argue that Western democracy promoters will likely respond to a non-democratic action by an illiberal actor in the target country, depending on their perception of stability and security within the targeted country and its strategic relations with the illiberal power (Risse & Babayan, 2015, p. 384).

Regarding the first determinant, Risse and Babayan suggest that Western democracy promoters are likely to relinquish human rights and democracy promotion if increased democratisation efforts are likely to challenge the target's internal stability (Risse & Babayan, 2015, pp. 387–388). Even though human rights and democracy promotion may be an integral part of a Western country's foreign policy agenda, one should not expect them to be the primary consideration in reacting to the non-democratic practices of illiberal powers (Risse & Babayan, 2015, p. 387). One of the brightest examples in this respect is the EU and the US policies in response to the counter-democratic actions of Saudi Arabia in Egypt after the Arab Spring. Although both democracy promoters had the leverage to support further democratisation, the counter-revolution happened rather quickly, with implicit support from the Western powers (Hassan, 2015). This hypothesis by Risse and Babayan broadly aligns with the broader literature on the democratisation-stability dilemma, where democracy promotion entails power transition, imbued with uncertainty over outcomes and conflictual processes (Börzel, 2015, p. 526). The stability-democracy dilemma has been particularly well-explored in the context of the Western Balkans (Gafuri & Muftuler-Bac, 2021; Grimm & Mathis, 2015; Kovačević, 2018; N. R. Smith et al., 2021).

Regarding the second conditioning factor, Risse and Babayan suggest that the overall context of relations between the Western democracy promoter and an illiberal regional power is an essential factor shaping the former's response to the latter's actions —namely, the Western perception of an illiberal power, the degree of mutual dependency, and various interests at play determine the scale of the democracy promoter's reaction (Risse & Babayan, 2015, p. 388). The Western response is unlikely if these relations bear strategic significance and extend beyond a clash of countervailing policies within a target country. Babayan illustrates this statement with the US and EU's policy vis-à-vis Russia after the annexation of Crimea (which in itself is far beyond hampering democracy promotion), which abstained from cutting all ties with Moscow, precisely due to economic relations and energy dependence (Babayan, 2015).

Considering these two conditions, a Western democracy promoter will respond to the non-democratic practices of an illiberal power in a target country or region. Figure 2 gives a graphic representation of scenarios of Western democracy promoters' response to illiberal power policies.



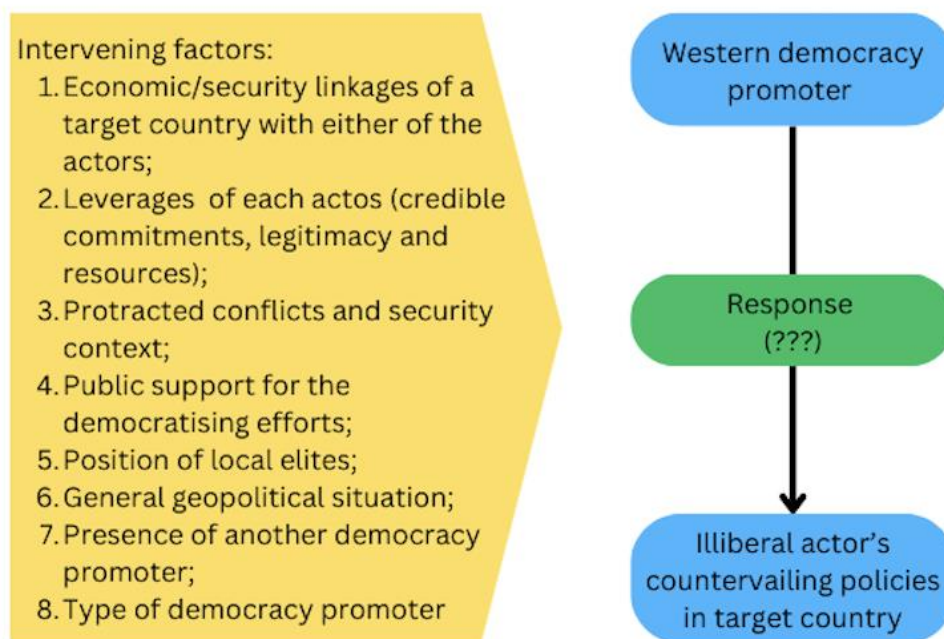
**Figure 2.** Two basic scenarios of the democracy promoter's response to the illiberal actor's countervailing policies in the target country, based on (Babayan & Risse, 2017)<sup>2</sup>

The actual substance of the Western democratic response, however, remains vague. Risse and Babayan suggest that Western democracy promoters will likely support the local liberal actors (Risse & Babayan, 2015, p. 384). However, there is a tricky factor of the existence of these actors who internalised the democracy promoter's practices and are formidable enough to push for democratic changes (Börzel, 2015, p. 526). Risse and Babayan also recognise the paradoxical effects of potential response by a democracy promoter, where one might unintentionally facilitate illiberal practices (Risse & Babayan, 2015, p. 384). Namely, Western democracy promotion can be utilised by local non-democratic regimes for their gain, which tends to calibrate their political survival strategies with democratisation demands, meeting them at least partially while cementing their power by abusing the benevolent instruments for their purposes (e.g. corruption fighting for political opposition) (Börzel, 2015, p. 526).

<sup>2</sup> **Scenario 1** indicates non-response conditions in which the democracy promoter prioritises security over further democratisation and strategic relations with illiberal power. **Scenario 2** presents the opposite course of events, where the democracy promoter prioritises further democracy promotion and does not regard an illiberal power as a critically important partner.

While not describing the response per se, authors highlight several intervening factors, namely, the economic or security linkages of a target country with either of the actors, leverages of a Western democracy promoter and illiberal regional power over the target country (credible commitments, legitimacy and resources) (Risse & Babayan, 2015, p. 390). The authors also pay particular attention to protracted conflicts and the overall security context within the democracy promoter-illiberal power-target country triangle (e.g. ambiguity of borders or political authority) (Risse & Babayan, 2015, p. 390). Finally, Western-promoted democratic change requires legitimacy and public support. If these efforts are met with local resentment over a clash with religious beliefs or nationalist views, democracy promotion and counter-illiberal actions will likely fail (Börzel, 2015, p. 526). The salience of these factors is particularly pronounced – they influence how the local political regimes respond to the external, either democratic or illiberal actors’ incentives to change the regime, democratically or otherwise. Moreover, they determine the likelihood of local elites turning to illiberal powers for opposition suppression and set the context for illiberal countries undermining efforts and the Western response. Finally, local factors determine the ultimate impact of democratising and undermining efforts on the ground (Börzel, 2015, p. 520)

Another set of intervening factors has been established from the practical application of the theoretical framework (Bošković, 2020). Namely, Bošković found the favourability of a general geopolitical situation, the presence of another democracy promoter in the same region and its relations with the democratic actor under consideration, and the type of a democracy promoter should be accounted for (Bošković, 2020, p. 82). The intervening factors influencing the democracy promoter’s response to the illiberal actor’s actions in the target country are presented in Figure 3.



**Figure 3.** Intervening factors shaping the Western democracy promoter’s response to the illiberal actor’s countervailing policies in the target country, based on (Babayan & Risse, 2017; Bošković, 2020)

Therefore, based on the theoretical framework put forward by Risse and Babayan, one may generate the following expectations for this thesis:

1. *The EU will respond to the Russian illiberal policies in the Western Balkans provided the two conditions are met:*
  - a. *The EU democratising efforts are not challenging the internal stability and security of the Western Balkan countries;*

- b. Russia is not a critically important strategic partner to the EU beyond the Western Balkans;*
2. *The potential response is shaped by economic/security linkages of the Western Balkans with Russia and the EU, the EU's and Russian leverage over the Western Balkans, the legacy of conflicts and ongoing bilateral disputes, support for the EU democratising efforts in the Western Balkans, favourability of the geopolitical situation and uniqueness of the EU as an actor in IR.*

Thus, the Risse-Babayan framework encapsulates the triangle of relations this thesis aims to uncover and sets several research expectations for further inquiry, especially regarding the reasons behind the potential response. It also provides for the proper accentuation of the Western Balkan context to determine any interactions of external powers. In addition, democracy promotion as a primary object of inquiry synchronises with the EU actorness, at least as presented by the EU.

At the same time, the phenomenon of democracy/autocracy promotion at the centre of the Risse-Babayan framework is hardly synonymous with foreign policy in its entirety, especially for the EU. This thesis almost inevitably extends beyond this phenomenon, which will manifest in the data analysis stage. Moreover, Risse and Babayan do not tackle the issue of response itself, its form and means. Hence, for this thesis, to complement the Risse-Babayan trilateral framework, the theory of democratic deterrence has been chosen, as it suggests the form of a democratic response to the illiberal actor's practices while accounting for a specific nature of democracy promoter (Wigell, 2021).

## **2.2. Democratic Deterrence: Substance of Response**

As mentioned in the previous section, while the Risse-Babayan trilateral framework puts forward the triggers and conditioning factors for the Western democracy promoter's response, it does not provide a clear understanding of the substance of the response. Given the explicit emphasis on democracy promotion and implicit juxtaposition of democracy promoters and illiberal powers, one might expect that the substance of the response, should it happen, will entail enhanced democracy promotion or other measures in line with this phenomenon. Nevertheless, clarity is needed regarding the concrete responses and instruments wielded to counter illiberal actor's actions.

In addition, given Bošković's suggestion to account for the type of democracy promoter, in our case, the EU, one needs to remember the academic debate and strong arguments about the EU as a *sui generis* actor who has a different foreign policy identity, outlook and preferable instruments at its disposal, which should not compromise its unique position in the international relations to be able to 'lead by example' (Manners & Diez, 2007).

In light of these considerations, for this thesis, Wigell's theory of democratic deterrence was chosen to formulate research expectations about the substance of the EU's response to Russian policies in the Western Balkans (Wigell, 2021). The theory of democratic deterrence explicitly condones the necessity of countering threats to existing democratic regimes. However, it does not suggest that compromising democratic values is the 'necessary evil' to counter illiberal practices (Wigell, 2021, p. 54). Thus, the theory of democratic deterrence legitimises the response to the threats coming from third actors, including hybrid ones, and puts forward a philosophy and a set of instruments behind such a response that do not undermine the values on which democracy is built.

Wigell states that democratic deterrence is a twofold concept encompassing deterrence by denial (or democratic resilience) and deterrence by punishment (or democratic compellence). These two components are presented as mutually reinforcing rather than self-sufficient – Wigell explicitly states that building resilience is crucial to democratic deterrence. However, *per se*, it is insufficient to counter the malign activities of non-democratic actors; hence, a credible deterrence by denial shall be established in parallel (Wigell, 2021, p. 55).

The first part of the concept, deterrence by denial, is designed to discourage illiberal actors from employing malign actions by conveying the perception of their imminent failure due to the target's civil preparedness. Metaphorically, this concept is envisioned as a societal immune system that prevents malignant intentions or actions or eradicates them swiftly. Such immunity, however, cannot be imposed top-down and entails the whole-of-society approach, meaning that deterrence by denial is achievable only if all levels of society, including autonomous civil society, independent media, and state actors, converge their efforts at shielding democratic structures (Wigell, 2021, pp. 55–56).

In turn, democratic deterrence by denial entails three main components or strategies: activating civil society, increasing transparency, and broadening inclusion. First, activating civil society means encouraging civil society agents' actions to detect and counter hybrid threats and supporting the open media environment and investigative journalism. Other means of civil society activation should include rapid alert systems, media literacy programs, and training for media professionals to recognise fake news (Wigell, 2021, pp. 56–57).

Second, increased transparency, among other things, suggests creating registries for foreign influence transparency, requiring individuals and entities acting on behalf of foreign principals to register and criminalising unregistered foreign interference. Economic transparency, particularly regarding money flows, involves updating regulations on ownership disclosure, screening foreign investments, and invoking national security considerations in investment procedures, especially for strategic resources and critical infrastructure. Stronger regulations blocking acquisitions on national security grounds and mandates for investigating financial networks to prevent economic interference are also necessary. NGOs, political parties, media, research institutes, and think tanks should publicly report funding sources (Wigell, 2021, pp. 57–59).

Finally, broadened inclusion suggests raising public awareness of hybrid threats and involving citizens in resilience-building efforts, including increased societal cohesion. Policies should focus on social cohesion and welfare, particularly integrating diasporas and minorities vulnerable to external malign influences. Elections require updated laws to address meddling tactics, including foreign funding of political parties, transparency of political advertisements, and reforming campaign finance systems to prevent foreign interference, primarily online (Wigell, 2021, pp. 59–60).

Although democratic deterrence by denial is a comprehensive system of measures, Wigell recognises its drawbacks. Namely, any resilience-building measures have a long-term return cycle and may take decades — thus, one should not expect any immediate positive changes. Most importantly, the societal immune system is not self-sustaining or self-sufficient — resilience alone cannot guarantee security against foreign malign interference (Wigell, 2021, p. 55).

Therefore, a second component of democratic deterrence exists - deterrence by punishment, which is equally essential for countering malign foreign activities. While resilience is designed to affect the illiberal actor's cost-benefit calculus by establishing an image of civil preparedness and driving him into relinquishing malignant intentions, punishment aims to change the adversary's behaviour by demonstrating the democratic actor's ability to induce costs in illiberal power for its malevolent actions. For democratic deterrence to be effective, the threat of punishment is crucial (Wigell, 2021, p. 60).

Democratic deterrence by punishment, or democratic compellence, also includes three key components: explicit communication of response thresholds, extensive use of sanctions and democracy promotion. First, clear communication of response thresholds entails existence and transparent communication about the thresholds of unacceptable behaviour by the illiberal powers and the consequences that will follow. While the precise formulation and communication of potential responses is an inalienable but complex

task, the initial tactics should include naming and shaming malign external influences (Wigell, 2021, pp. 60–61).

Second, extensive use of sanctions is called to raise awareness among non-democratic powers about their vulnerabilities in an interconnected world, where all states rely on global flows of goods, resources, data, and capital, primarily controlled by Western democracies. Western democracy promoters should be able and willing to impose targeted sanctions, harden them and introduce retaliatory measures where required (Wigell, 2021, pp. 61–62).

Finally, promoting democratic competence entails challenging hybrid aggressors on their turf. Western democracies can push truth against internal propaganda, expose corrupt practices, use the assets of authoritarian regimes as leverage, and empower adversaries' civil society, political dissent, and diaspora (Wigell, 2021, pp. 62–63). Table 1 presents a structured view of all democratic deterrence components.

Type of democratic deterrence	Themes	Instruments
<b>Deterrence by denial (resilience)</b>	Activation of civil society	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Support for open media;</li> <li>- Support for watchdogs and independent journalism;</li> <li>- Rapid alert systems;</li> <li>- Media literacy programs;</li> <li>- Fake news trainings;</li> </ul>
	Increased transparency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Funding reports by civil organisations;</li> <li>- Money flows and ownership disclosure;</li> <li>- National security clause in investments;</li> <li>- Registries for foreign influence transparency;</li> </ul>
	Broad inclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Public awareness of hybrid threats;</li> <li>- Involving citizens in resilience-building efforts;</li> <li>- Integrating diasporas and minorities;</li> <li>- Updating the electoral procedures to minimise foreign interference;</li> </ul>
<b>Deterrence by punishment (compellence)</b>	Communication of response thresholds	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Clear thresholds of unacceptable behaviour;</li> <li>- Clear consequences following the violation of thresholds;</li> </ul>
	Active use of sanctions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Introduction of sanctions;</li> <li>- Strengthening sanctions regularly;</li> <li>- Introduce counter-sanctions/retaliatory measures;</li> </ul>
	Democracy promotion within adversary's state	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Debunking adversary's propaganda;</li> <li>- Exposing corrupt practices;</li> <li>- Adversary's assets abroad use;</li> <li>- Empowering adversary's civil society, opposition and diaspora;</li> </ul>

*Table 1. Wigell's democratic deterrence framework*

Wigell's framework of democratic deterrence thus complements the Risse-Babayan framework by elaborating on the substance of the potential response. On the one hand, it reinforces the democratic promotion component by conceptualising democratic response with democratic means, thus formulating a relatively coherent research expectation. On the other hand, it helps to account for the EU's sui generis foreign policy conceptualisations as a starting point in this research.

However, one must also account for several reservations with Wigell's framework before further research. First, this framework is 'normative' in the sense of theoretical normativity, as it reflects not

only an ideal-type democratic response but also a normatively acceptable and expected response rather than reality.

Second, the democratic deterrence framework is formulated within categories of intrastate governance rather than foreign policy. Hence, in applying it to the EU, one must account for the externality (or sometimes hybridity<sup>3</sup>) of the EU's presence in the Western Balkans and state governance in the region. This, in turn, leads to further practical calibrations of other conduits and frameworks the EU uses in the Western Balkans, such as the enlargement and commensurate negotiations process and the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP).

Thus, according to Wigell's democratic deterrence framework, one may generate the following research expectation:

*If the EU responds to the Russian policies in the Western Balkans, it will likely resort to instruments affirming its values-based international actorness, particularly democratic resilience and compellence.*

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<sup>3</sup> Refers to the EU's peacekeeping and monitoring missions (EUFOR Althea, European Union Police Mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina) and the High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina, traditionally appointed by the EU Member States, for implementing the Dayton Accords, etc.

### Chapter 3. Methodology

This chapter describes the critical methodological aspects of this thesis and explains the strategies applied. It also presents the data collection and selection process, the workflow of analysis, and the tools used and establishes the reasoning behind the chosen research methodology. The overall approach to exploring the EU's response towards the Russian actions in the Western Balkans is based on the methodological framework applied by Bošković in his exploration of increased Chinese engagement in the Western Balkans and the EU response (Bošković, 2020), combining elite interviews and qualitative content analysis of the EU official communications.

#### 3.1. Qualitative research design and case study

This thesis takes the **constructivist ontological** (Crotty, 2020) and **interpretivist epistemological** (Bryman, 2003) positions, reaffirming reality's socially constructed, intersubjective nature and interpretation as the primary means of understanding the social world (Ritchie, 2014). Thus, it belongs to the **qualitative interpretivist research tradition**.

This thesis also takes a **deductive research approach**, applying the existing theoretical framework to explore the reasons behind the EU response and its substance (or its ideal-type form). A deductive, concept-driven approach enables testing the chosen theoretical framework (democracy promoter-illiberal power-target country by Risse and Babayan and democratic deterrence by Wigell) against the collected empirical data (Graneheim et al., 2017).

Moreover, this thesis employs the **case study approach**, focusing on the EU as a foreign policy actor and a democracy promoter. Given that the thesis's research puzzle was formulated with particular emphasis on the 'how' and 'why' questions, a case study has been chosen as a commonly used method for such research purposes (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2009). It is also specifically convenient for analysing data sources, including interviews and documents (Eisenhardt, 1989). Moreover, a **typical case approach** has been used for this thesis as the selected case (the EU as a democracy promoter, Russia as an illiberal outside power and the Western Balkans as a target region for power projection) is deemed as representative to explore the primary correlation mechanism of the theory (Seawright & Gerring, 2008). While qualitative case study often faces criticism for its potential challenges related to objectivity and representativeness, it remains a valuable method for examining complex phenomena within their specific contexts (Baxter & Jack, 2015). Focusing on a single case allows for a deeper understanding of a particular topic, offering substantial academic value.

While researchers have extensively covered the EU and Russian influence in the region, the EU response to Chinese activities in the Western Balkans (Bošković, 2020) and Russian disinformation efforts there (Asllani, 2023; Behbudzada, 2020; Centre for Strategic Communication and Information Security, 2023; Duffy & Green, 2020; Maliqi, 2023; Metodieva, 2019), this thesis attempts to present a unique triangular perspective and combine existing scholarly insights and collected empirical data to explain the substance and reasons behind the EU response to Russian engagement in the Western Balkans.

The choice of these particular case studies is motivated by numerous reasons. First, as noted in the critique of the triangular framework by Risse and Babayan, in deductive studies employing the framework, one needs to account for the **specific nature of the EU** as a phenomenon and foreign policy actor. More specifically, the EU's self-endorsed status as a normative power ('normative power Europe') extends beyond democracy promotion as a foreign policy goal, instead explaining the nature of the EU as an actor, determining the substance of its foreign policy and means of its execution (Manners, 2002). Theory-wise, the choice of the EU is both affirming and questioning the 'democracy promoter' component – while the EU normative power status does not necessarily clash with democracy promotion,

it indeed introduces a new level of explanatory factors both for substance and reasons for a potential response within the triangular framework.

Second, while the EU's reaction to the external policies in the Western Balkans has been explored through the China case study (Bošković, 2020), this thesis explores **Russia** as an illiberal power operating in the region. Apart from fitting the 'illiberal' typology (Babayan, 2015), the Russian case has been chosen to explore further the strategic character of relations between a democracy promoter and an illiberal power as a conditioning factor for the promoters' response. While the EU, in the period under consideration, was yet to formulate a clear vision of China as a strategic partner, contender or rival, EU-Russian relations have been in a much more confrontational stage since 2014 (Casier & DeBardeleben, 2017). By almost universal recognition, the EU's perception of Russia has been apprehensive and less ambiguous than China's. Hence, it is worth exploring how this crisis reflected in the EU response in their regions of contact, not only directly impacted by the rift (Eastern Europe, or narrowly — Ukraine), but in other areas, particularly in the Western Balkans and registering the potential context-driven differences.

Finally, the choice of Western Balkans as the target region for exploring the EU response towards Russian policies stems from the **region's peculiarity for both actors**. While the Risse-Babayan framework has already been applied to the analysis of the EU foreign policies in the Middle East (Hassan, 2015) or even the Western Balkans (Bošković, 2020), this thesis stresses the need to account for the EU's role in the Western Balkans as not only an external democracy promoter but also the region-shaping, state-building, peace-making actor, whose involvement in the region extends beyond the external power projection (Arkan & Keil, 2016). The Western Balkans, as a term and a region, was forged by the EU policies since the 1990s, and the EU presence there is unprecedented, especially compared with Eastern Partnership countries or MENA, also frequently researched in terms of EU policies (Nitoiu & Sus, 2019). On the other hand, the region does not carry a similar strategic importance for Russia, nor is Russian presence in the Western Balkans embedded and salient to the extent it is in the case of Eastern Partnership countries or other post-Soviet states (Samokhvalov, 2017). The thesis thus aims to delve deeper into a reflection of these differing dynamics in the EU response towards the Russian policies in the Western Balkans.

In addition, the Western Balkans are treated as a **single case study**. While recognising the potential for comparative case studies of the Western Balkan countries under the same theoretical framework (for instance, Serbia and Montenegro or Serbia and Albania, respectively), this thesis opts for a more generalised approach as emanating from the EU regional strategy – while Brussels certainly has a multitude of country or problem-specific policies, the general strategy is formulated region-wise. Moreover, while the Russian influence in the region is uneven and dependent upon many non-material factors, it is still present in all Western Balkan states, albeit to a different degree. Finally, for other case studies, one needs to establish a broader picture of the EU response to the Russian influence in the Western Balkans.

## **3.2. Interviews**

### **3.2.1. Elite and expert interviews**

For data collection purposes, fifteen interviews were conducted in total. Interviews were conducted with two groups of participants: relevant EU officials from the European Commission and the European Union External Service (three interviews) and experts on the research problem and related fields (twelve interviews). The interviews performed two essential tasks: data triangulation with the EU official sources and filling the gaps not addressed explicitly within academia or the EU official documentation (Eisenhardt, 1989). Emphasis has been placed on the **elite interviews** with various EU officials in search

of insights into the EU's perception of Russian actions in the Balkans and the rationale behind the EU response.

While offering unique insights and revelations (Adams, 2015; Tansey, 2007), elite interviews pose several limitations on research. First, the research reliability strongly depends on the potential risks of a researcher's inadequately critical and balanced assessment. Second, validity concerns loom large, as the elite interviewees may tamper with their accounts of events to present a more (or less) favourable picture. In a similar venue, elite interviewees may overcomplicate the representation of a political process or underestimate their role (George & Bennett, 2005; Tansey, 2007). To address these limitations, I interviewed experts from the field, adding a supplementary source to enhance the robustness of the findings. Additionally, I triangulated the interview data with relevant official policy documents and other authoritative sources from the EU (Eisenhardt, 1989).

As for interviewee selection, **purposive sampling** was applied, where a researcher deliberately chose the participants relevant to exploring a research puzzle (Clark et al., 2021). I employed several recruiting strategies for this thesis. Namely, I resorted to the official staff directory of the EU ("EU Whoiswho") to determine the relevant officials within the EC and the EEAS and their official points of contact. The LinkedIn database supplemented the search, and attempts were made to establish a 'warm contact' contrasted with cold emailing. Finally, several interviews were agreed upon via the author's connections in a Brussels-based NGO offering diplomatic representation to non-state actors. In this respect, I must acknowledge the difficulties encountered in the process of elite sampling, namely, the low response rate of interview inquiries both from the incumbent and retired officials, the reluctance of EU officials to engage in any way with a researcher, even with rigorously guaranteed ethical approval adherence and flexibility regarding format; the limited initial pool for sampling, given the timeframe of research and frequent staff rotations. As a result, three elite interviews were conducted for this thesis, complemented by an extensive range of expert interviews and analysis of the EU official documentation.

The **expert** interviewees' recruitment has combined **purposive and snowball sampling** (Clark et al., 2021). After carefully considering existing academic contributions, I reached out to the academics and analysts dealing with issues related to the research puzzle under consideration – namely, external actors in the Western Balkans, Russian influence in the Western Balkans, and the EU in the Western Balkans. While understudied, the topic of the EU's response towards the Russian policies in the Western Balkans lies at the intersection of these broader academic venues, which motivated the choice of experts. The participants were recruited via direct contact through emails and LinkedIn databases and by snowball sampling — participants were asked to share their recommendations for relevant contacts on the research subject matter (Clark et al., 2021). Moreover, I endeavoured to engage the experts from the region itself, trying to gain additional insights and compensate for my lack of access to the resources in the region's languages, as well as recruit experts from several Western Balkan states with various degrees of Russian influence (from Serbia to Albania) to ensure the robustness of findings. Sampling was concluded upon reaching the desired level of **theoretical saturation** – where a researcher assesses whether the interviews conducted have enough data saturation and whether new interviewees are unlikely to enrich the thesis with new insights or dimensions (Clark et al., 2021).

While being the most rational strategy given the research questions under consideration, **purposive (non-probability sampling)** has certain limitations. Namely, the challenges include the correct sample size estimation, limited generalisation potential and strong selection bias (Tansey, 2007). While the minimum interview sample size, according to some estimations, is around six participants (Guest et al., 2006), this thesis went beyond such standards to fifteen overall counts. While the sample could have been more balanced and insightful with more elite participants, its disproportion is mitigated via the extensive use of EU official documents and nuanced reading of the EU officials' accounts collected. Given that the thesis does not aim to make broad generalisations about the EU responses to non-democratic

encroachments either inside the EU or in strategically important regions, the remainder of the limitations do not affect the thesis in any concerning ways.

Code	Type of recruitment	Position	Date	Means of communication	Recording type
ELT-1	Snowball	EEAS	May 27, 2024	Phone	Note taking
ELT-2	Snowball	EEAS (retired)	June 16, 2024	Phone	Note taking
ELT-3	Purposive	European Commission	June 17, 2024	Phone	Note taking
EXP-1	Purposive	Scholar	May 15, 2024	Zoom	Audio
EXP-2	Purposive	Scholar	May 20, 2024	Microsoft Teams	Audio
EXP-3	Snowball	Scholar	May 20, 2024	Microsoft Teams	Audio
EXP-4	Snowball	Scholar	May 23, 2024	Microsoft Teams	Audio
EXP-5	Purposive	Scholar	May 27, 2024	Microsoft Teams	Audio
EXP-6	Purposive	Scholar	May 28, 2024	Microsoft Teams	Audio
EXP-7	Snowball	Scholar	June 3, 2024	Microsoft Teams	Audio
EXP-8	Snowball	Scholar	June 4, 2024	Zoom	Audio
EXP-9	Purposive	Scholar	June 5, 2024	Microsoft Teams	Audio
EXP-10	Purposive	Scholar	June 5, 2024	Microsoft Teams	Audio
EXP-11	Purposive	Scholar	June 6, 2024	Microsoft Teams	Audio
EXP-12	Purposive	Scholar	June 11, 2024	Microsoft Teams	Audio

*Table 2. List of interview participants with their respective codes and positions*

### 3.2.2. Interview Data Collection

As for the type of interviews, I chose to conduct my interviews in a **semi-structured** format, which provides a valuable combination of structure, thus enabling cross-referencing across the sample for processing and some freedom of deviation from the pre-defined set of questions to delve deeper into particular aspects or follow up on the statements made by the interviewee (Adams, 2015; Clark et al., 2021).

When formulating my questions, I tried to combine a set of theoretical underpinnings guiding my research while not imposing these assumptions. Questions were designed to target participants' views on the EU response towards the Russian influence in the Western Balkans, the reasons behind this phenomenon, potential intervening factors or temporal variations within the period under consideration. The key categories and arguments contained in the chosen theoretical frameworks, as well as ample academic literature and EU official documents, guided the questionnaire formulation – as a result, these were structured in line with potential coding categories, known as a **pre-coding process** (Clark et al., 2021). The questions were also formulated as **open-ended** to allow for participants' freedom to express opinions and encourage the conversation. This type of question helps collect robust accounts, thoughts and attitudes regarding central research issues and avoids constraining the participants' responses to fixed categories (Tansey, 2016). Ten open-ended pre-coded questions were prepared and used as starting points to discuss research issues, and they are included in Annex I of this thesis.

For all their advantages, open-ended questions are frequently time-consuming since the participants tend to respond verbosely, complicating the transcribing and coding process. This thesis generated around 15 hours of recordings, which had to be transcribed and proofread several times. On the other hand, using interviews raises reliability and validity concerns precisely due to another researcher's limited replicability of the study results of the same case (Yin, 2009).

### 3.2.3. Ethical Considerations

Under the University of Glasgow regulations, this thesis has been subject to the ethical approval application, which has been obtained both for elite and expert interviews (See Annex II). Two main concerns loomed within the ethical approval process: informed participant consent and data protection. All the participants were provided with a Participant Information Sheet elaborating on essential research purposes and voluntary participation (Annex III), a Privacy Notice (Annex IV), and means of academic and personal data collection, processing and storage. Before the interviews, the participants were provided with the above materials, complemented by a detailed thesis description, preliminary topics, and, upon request, interview questions, before signing the Consent Form (Annex V). Moreover, some participants chose to decline audio recording, and their choice was recorded and implemented accordingly via notetaking. Finally, upon completion of transcribing and editing, the interview transcripts were shared with participants to provide a chance to clarify misunderstandings and elaborate on the views expressed.

### 3.3. EU official documents

For this thesis, the **EU official communications** were chosen as a secondary source to reflect the official position of the EU on the matters under consideration and supplement the findings from elite and expert interviews.

Using official documents as a data source for analysis is an efficient and less time-consuming method, as it entails a data selection process rather than data collection. Given the public and accessible nature of official documents, data availability and research feasibility are also provided for. In addition, inherent disadvantages of qualitative studies, such as reflectivity and subjectivity, are less pronounced with the application of document analysis – while still present in the process, the unobtrusive and non-reactive nature of documents is affected less by the research process. Another added benefit of official documents is the presence of names, references and details, simply put – exactness (Bowen, 2009).

However, the use of documents is not devoid of disadvantages. First, official documents are not generated with a thought of potential academic use in mind. Thus, they do not always answer the research question sufficiently. Therefore, a researcher must possess investigative skills for data interpretation and triangulation. This disadvantage is one of the reasons the official sources are deemed to be supplementing the interviews. Moreover, while less time-consuming, the data selection process poses a high degree of biased selectivity (Yin, 2009). In this thesis, however, this problem is mitigated due to a limited number of documents relevant to the research puzzle at stake. In addition, the advantage of official documents as a data source for this thesis is reinforced by the EU's status as one of the most transparent actors in IR, with documents free from self-contradiction and observable correlation between the EU's official position.

The parameters of **type, time, and scope or purpose** were applied as the criteria of the data selection process. As for **the type of documents**, the basic parameters were official public documents prepared by the EU institution, expressly authorised to reflect the Union's position and deliberately intended to communicate the EU's stance. Given this criterion, many documents prepared by the European Parliament for the deliberations of resolutions were disregarded in analysis. Content-wise, the documents were not expected to cover all the EU positions or actions, as some of them are covert by nature; however, the way the EU communicates about problems at stake is one of the revealing aspects of this thesis. Second, the **proposed timeframe** for the document selection covers the years between 2014 and 2021. The topic formulation dictates such a timeframe and revolves around two watershed moments in EU-Russian relations—a crisis since 2014 after the annexation of Crimea and the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which systemically changed the geopolitical landscape. Due to this parameter, some resolutions of the European Parliament and other communications published in early 2022 were disregarded.

Third, **scope and purpose-wise**, the document’s main categories included the **EU-Russia relations** and the **EU Western Balkan strategy and policies**. However, since the 2014 crisis in relations, no treaties, strategies, or communiques have been issued on the fundamentals of EU-Russian relations from Brussels. Thus, the only applicable category remained the EU communications on its Western Balkans strategies and policies. In turn, this category was confined to comprehensive strategies (issued on an ad hoc basis), annual enlargement communications supplementing individual progress reports for the EU Candidates (issued annually), and declarations of EU-Western Balkans summits (issued regularly since 2018). Given the criteria described above, the complete list of analysed documents is contained in Table 3 below.

<b>EU documents</b>	<b>Document type</b>	<b>Institution of origin</b>	<b>Date of publication</b>
<b>EU policy documents on the Western Balkans</b>			
A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans	Strategy	European Commission	6 February, 2018
Enhancing the accession process – A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans	Strategy	European Commission	5 February, 2020
<b>Annual EU enlargement communications</b>			
Enlargement Strategy and Main Challenges 2014-15	Strategy	European Commission	8 October, 2014
EU Enlargement Strategy	Strategy	European Commission	10 November, 2015
2016 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy	Strategy	European Commission	9 November, 2016
2018 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy <sup>4</sup>	Strategy	European Commission	17 April, 2018
2019 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy	Strategy	European Commission	29 May, 2019
2020 Communication on EU enlargement policy	Strategy	European Commission	6 October, 2020
2021 Communication on EU enlargement policy	Strategy	European Commission	19 October, 2021
<b>EU-Western Balkans Summits Declarations</b>			
Sofia Declaration	Declaration	European Council, Council of the European Union	17 May, 2018
Zagreb Declaration	Declaration	European Council, Council of the European Union	6 May, 2020
Brdo Declaration	Declaration	European Council, Council of the European Union	6 October, 2021

**Table 3.** List of EU official documents analysed

<sup>4</sup> In 2016, the European Commission moved the adoption of the annual Enlargement package from autumn to spring. This is the reason why the 2018 package follows the 2016 one – under the old timing, it would have been adopted in October/November 2017, but in reality was adopted in spring 2018.

### 3.4. Data Analysis and Resulting Analytical Framework

Each interview was recorded for further processing if the participant agreed to it. With elite interviews, no audio recording was conducted upon participants' request, and note-taking was utilised instead. Each recording was transcribed for the initial draft via an online transcribing tool (GoodTape.io) and then manually reviewed for mistakes and punctuation. Upon completion of the review, all transcripts were entirely analysed, and initial **thematic analysis** was conducted manually to distinguish the key thematic blocs of the data collected. The coding process was primarily **inductive**, as the thematic categories were directly derived from the textual material, without pre-conceived codes or categories to filter out the material (Mayring, 2015). However, given that the questions were pre-coded and already contained references to some of the theoretical underpinnings of the research, the coding process, while heavily inductive and open in nature, was a back-and-forth process of consulting the data collected and theoretical framework; hence, a combination of inductive and deductive approaches.

Initial thematic analysis was one of the first stages of coding, breaking down the data into parts and labelling those parts to make the data more manageable for interpretation in the research context (Clark et al., 2021). To conduct the coding, I used the computer software ‘NVivo’, and the initial thematic categories served as parent codes (‘themes’) for a more nuanced system of child codes. The codebook has undergone several iterations, from 79 parent codes and more than 500 coded text particles to three main thematic categories with a corresponding comprehensive yet laconic set of codes, presented in Table 4.

<b>Thematic categories</b>	<b>Codes</b>
EU perception of Russia and its policies in the Western Balkans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- EU perception of Russia after 2014;</li> <li>- Russian challenges to the EU policies in the Western Balkans;</li> <li>- Changes in perception over the period;</li> <li>- Russia vis-à-vis other external actors in the Western Balkans (China, Türkiye, UAE);</li> </ul>
The EU response to the Russian influence in the Western Balkans (actual/possible)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Response yes or no;</li> <li>- Counter-disinformation efforts;</li> <li>- EU credible membership perspective;</li> <li>- Resilience building and bilateral disputes resolution;</li> <li>- Other steps (raised by interviewees);</li> <li>- Recent milestones in the EU WB policies (de facto response?)</li> <li>- 2014 Berlin Process;</li> <li>- 2018 EU Credible Enlargement Perspective;</li> <li>- 2020 EU Credible Enlargement Perspective + new enlargement methodology;</li> <li>- Other policies (raised by interviewees);</li> </ul>
Factors contributing to the EU response	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- EU’s specific nature as an actor;</li> <li>- Specifics of Russian influence;</li> <li>- Other policy priorities or crises (+ in the Western Balkans);</li> <li>- Stability/democracy nexus;</li> <li>- Member States/institutional dynamics;</li> <li>- EU’s strong presence in the Western Balkans;</li> <li>- EU-Russian relations after 2014;</li> <li>- Target region perspective;</li> </ul>

*Table 4. Aggregate framework for thematic analysis based on interviews and document data*

The themes and codes generated by elite and expert interviews served as a framework for analysing the EU official documents. First, this choice is motivated by the nature of the documents considered – as they contain much information about the enlargement process in its various aspects and emanations, an inductive approach to their analysis could have generated many unnecessary themes, which is not useful for this thesis. In contrast, the elite and expert interviews were conducted with pre-coded questions, which narrowed the content of the conversation down to the main aspects of the research puzzle under consideration, preventing generating unnecessary codes via inductive analysis. Finally, while the codebook generated from the elite and expert interviews has been applied in its entirety, the overarching theme sought during the document analysis was the reference to the external actors in any form.

After completing the coding procedure for both interviews and official documents, with 800 text particles structured by the corresponding codes and thematic categories, I wrote up the findings that had been collected. To ensure robustness and accentuation, I reviewed the interview recordings and checked the context for each text particle and the broader context for the text particles of official EU documents. The thematic categories for the interviews were generalised and comprehensive. They served as a basic analytical framework for the findings once the themes and codes from the official EU documents were integrated. Thus, the following chapter on findings is structured under identified thematic categories and combines analysis from both data types.

## Chapter 4. Findings

This chapter presents the key findings from the elite and expert interviews and the official EU documents via the thematic analysis. The subchapters are organised following key themes and categories identified in the previous chapter. The first part describes the EU's perception of Russia and its influence in the Western Balkans, including key points of concern, time temporal variations and comparison with other external actors. Secondly, it elaborates on the substance of the EU's response, including countering disinformation, resilience building and resolution of bilateral disputes, credible membership perspective and other policy initiatives. Finally, it presents a set of reasons and condition factors behind the EU's response towards the Russian engagement in the region, including internal and external crises, EU's institutional dynamics, its relations with Russia and specifics of Russian influence, EU's exceptional position in the region, its foreign policy identification crisis and Western Balkans' specifics.

### 4.1. EU perception of Russia and its policies in the Western Balkans

#### 4.1.1. The overall perception of Russian influence in the Western Balkans

The experts characterise the EU's perception of Russian policies in the Western Balkans as **deteriorating**. Namely, the characteristics of the EU's view of Russia in the Western Balkans range from 'challenge' (EXP-2, personal communication, May 20, 2024) and 'non-constructive actor' (EXP-7, personal communication, June 3, 2024) to the 'key irritant' and 'troublemaker' (EXP-1, personal communication, May 15, 2024), 'spoiler' (EXP-12, personal communication, June 11, 2024) and even 'threat' (EXP-1, personal communication, May 15, 2024; EXP-10, personal communication, June 5, 2024).

The EU officials share this apprehensive perception of Russia (ELT-1, personal communication, May 27, 2024; ELT-2, personal communication, June 16, 2024; ELT-3, personal communication, June 17, 2024). They highlight that Russia identifies weaknesses that stem from ethnic and national conflicts and previous conflicts in the region (ELT-1, personal communication, May 27, 2024; ELT-2, personal communication, June 16, 2024; ELT-3, personal communication, June 17, 2024). Specifically, Russia exercises the leavers of the stability/instability (ELT-1, personal communication, May 27, 2024). Nevertheless, Russian interference has not been strategic, targeted, or systemic in all these cases (EXP-9, personal communication, June 5, 2024).

However, the EU's apprehensive perception came from the **broader EU-Russia relations** rather than the latter's specific actions in the Western Balkans (ELT-1, personal communication, May 27, 2024; ELT-2, personal communication, June 16, 2024). As the EU officials pointed out, Russia does not see the Western Balkans as strategic per se; instead, it sees their destructive value, which can be exploited to generate turmoil in the EU's immediate neighbourhood and keep its seat at the table (ELT-2, personal communication, June 16, 2024; ELT-3, personal communication, June 17, 2024). As a development of this statement, another interviewee raised an interesting point regarding Russian actions in the Western Balkans: a passionate desire to be recognised and reckoned with – 'I am projecting something in the Balkans; therefore, I am', meaning the Russian destructive actions in the region give it a specific sense of actorness vis-à-vis the EU (ELT-2, personal communication, June 16, 2024). For EU officials, Russian actions in the Western Balkans are thus a logical continuation of the traditional foreign policy strategy vis-à-vis the EU, specifically since 2014.

#### 4.1.2. Key points of concern over the Russian influence

While experts and EU officials have unanimously described Russian policies in the region as deteriorating for the EU Western Balkan strategy, they highlight various aspects where the disruptive course of Russian actions is more pronounced vis-à-vis European interests.

First, some scholars highlighted that Russia's role in the Western Balkans is ontologically opposite to whatever policies the EU pursues. In any case, Russia aims to be a **spoiler vis-à-vis the EU and NATO** (EXP-12, personal communication, June 11, 2024). Moreover, Russia opposes the values and principles promoted by the EU in the Western Balkans, including the democratisation process (EXP-8, personal communication, June 4, 2024). One of the interviewees even mentioned that countering NATO expansion has never been a Russian priority, contrary to the EU enlargement and its axiological and institutional components (EXP-4, personal communication, May 23, 2024; EXP-5, personal communication, May 27, 2024).

Most specifically, **Russian media and narratives** play a crucial role in formulating anti-European and anti-Western perceptions among the populations of the Western Balkan countries, lowering societal support for European integration (EXP-4, personal communication, May 23, 2024). This aspect of Russian interference is explicitly addressed in the EU communications – and is one of the main dimensions of malign third-country influence described in the documents. Without mentioning Russia, the Zagreb Declaration of the EU-Western Balkans Summit dated 6 May 2020 mentions ‘disinformation and other hybrid activities originating in particular from third-state actors seeking to undermine the European perspective of the region’ (European Council & Council of the European Union, 2020). Disinformation is disseminated ‘to challenge the EU’s credibility, to undermine public trust in democratic institutions and to deepen polarisation’ (European Commission, 2021).

In addition, according to experts, Russia plays a deteriorating role in the **Kosovo-Serbia dialogue**, which is integral to both countries’ accession to the EU. Experts highlight Russian support as one of the indirect factors undermining the EU efforts to settle the Kosovo issue peacefully and achieve Serbia’s recognition of Pristina (EXP-2, personal communication, May 20, 2024). The same is true about the Russian support for the **secessionist aspirations of a Serbian entity within Bosnia and Herzegovina**, specifically vocal support for Milorad Dodik (EXP-2, personal communication, May 20, 2024; EXP-6, personal communication, May 28, 2024). The EU officials also highlighted Russian contributions to **hybrid activities and cyber-attacks**, particularly in **Montenegro** (ELT-1, personal communication, May 27, 2024). While the EU documents do not contain specific references to Russia in the case of the Serbia-Kosovo dialogue or Bosnia and Herzegovina, they dedicate keen attention to **hybrid threats and cybersecurity**, among other dimensions of third-country malign influences (European Commission, 2020a, 2020b, 2021; European Council & Council of the European Union, 2020, 2021). Such activities ‘expose the vulnerability of societies and infrastructure to cyber-attacks, cybercrime and hybrid threats’ (European Commission, 2020b).

Moreover, experts and officials agree on Russia's deteriorating role in Serbia and its European integration, particularly in light of **compliance with the EU CFSP** (EXP-8, personal communication, June 4, 2024; ELT-1, personal communication, May 27, 2024). While all EU documents considered highlight the need for Western Balkan countries to align with the EU CFSP as an essential requirement for accession (European Commission, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2018b, 2019, 2020b, 2021), since 2020, particular emphasis has been placed on ‘restrictive measures’ – in this context, the EU sanctions against Russia and Belarus (European Commission, 2020b).

This emphasis on Serbia is prevalent among experts and officials alike. Russian influence in the Western Balkans is considered uneven, with **Serbia and Bosnian Republika Srpska** being ‘the weaker point regarding Russia’s influence’ (EXP-11, personal communication, June 6, 2024). In the analysed EU documents, in line with expert assessment, Russia is mentioned as one of the partners Serbia developed ‘intense relations and strategic partnerships with’ (European Commission, 2020b).

Finally, in the general assessment of the nature of EU concerns, experts highlighted the **EU's fear of Western Balkans per se slipping away from the EU's influence**, regardless of the particular external

actor considered (EXP-1, personal communication, May 15, 2024; EXP-12, personal communication, June 11, 2024). This notion is traceable in the EU communications: the 2015 Communication on Enlargement Policy addressed ‘the risk of countries turning away from the EU’, suggesting that this can be mitigated ‘if the prospect of moving forward on the road to the EU is seen as real and credible’ (European Commission, 2015). Several EU communications also highlighted the need of Western Balkans’ elites to underpin EU strategic orientation – ‘leaders in the region must leave no doubt as to their strategic orientation and commitment’ (European Commission, 2018b) and ‘there can be no ambiguity by leaders about where the Western Balkans belong and the direction in which they are heading’ which ‘must be reflected in leaders’ communications and outreach to citizens’ (European Commission, 2018a). Since 2020, ‘the public political commitment of their authorities to the strategic goal of EU accession will be assessed more clearly in the annual reports’ (European Commission, 2020a). Regarding the relevance and validity of these broad concerns and specifically Russian involvement, one of the experts presented an interesting point of view, suggesting that EU power and agenda in the region would not have such a strong meaning if they were not **juxtaposed against the Russian presence** there – ‘the light put on the relationship between the EU and the Western Balkans concerning Ukraine did not mean that Russia just started its cooperation in the energy industry or army industry in 2014; still, they became more evident because the EU needed to frame itself as opposed to what was happening’ (EXP-11, personal communication, June 6, 2024).

#### 4.1.3. Changes in the perception of Russian presence between 2014 and 2021

Time-wise, several **chronological points** may be identified, signifying changes in the EU's perception of Russian influence in the region. Before the 2014-2021 period, as interviewees suggested, Brussels’ view of Russian engagement in the Western Balkans had a lingering effect of the 1990s, where Russian engagement was sporadic and superficial (EXP-2, personal communication, May 20, 2024). Moreover, before the early 2010s, the presence of third actors as a potential or substantial concern was not a priority for the EU – ‘it was mainly concerned with keeping these countries stable’ (EXP-9, personal communication, June 5, 2024).

The **2014 annexation of Crimea** was a ‘wake-up call’ for Brussels, which also started to act as a new lens for observing Russian actions in the Western Balkans (EXP-10, personal communication, June 5, 2024; EXP-11, personal communication, June 6, 2024). Namely, they used the example of the Podgorica Aluminum Plant (KAP) in Montenegro, which the Russian oligarch Oleg Deripaska acquired. Before the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the crisis in EU-Russian relations, ‘no one cared that the Russian oligarch was buying something in a Balkan country, while Russian oligarchs were buying even bigger property and assets in Western Europe’ (EXP-1, personal communication, May 15, 2024). In contrast, after 2014, the perceptions of every Russian movement in the Western Balkans became negative and would ‘ring the bells’ in Brussels (EXP-1, personal communication, May 15, 2024).

The EU officials agree that **2014 was a moment of clarity** when all sporadic disruptive events and signs finally came together for a broader and more evident picture after the Crimean annexation (ELT-3, personal communication, June 17, 2024). However, in retrospect and contrast with the EU policies post-2022 Ukraine invasion, experts concede that 2014 was still **not influential enough** to spur a change of action from the EU rather than a change of attitude vis-à-vis Russia, including its influence in the Western Balkans (EXP-6, personal communication, May 28, 2024; EXP-10, personal communication, June 5, 2024). The content of EU official communications confirms this assessment. Between 2014 and 2018, EU communications contained **no explicit references to third actors’ interference** in the Western Balkans, negative or otherwise, including Russia (European Commission, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2018b).

While 2014 has been unanimously proclaimed as the turning point in the overall EU perception of Russia, region-wise experts suggested the 2016 coup d’etat attempt in Montenegro and the 2020 Montenegrin crisis over the autocephalous Orthodox Church as moments when EU understanding of Russian malign

influences was acute (EXP-2, personal communication, May 20, 2024; EXP-5, personal communication, May 27, 2024). In the case of the Montenegro attempted coup, the experts suggested it was a primary reason behind Montenegrin's accelerated accession to NATO. The period of 2020-2021, during the global COVID-19 pandemic, has been presented as a moment of final reckoning about the effectiveness and scope of Russia's soft power (EXP-2, personal communication, May 20, 2024).

The document analysis reinforces the latter assessment – the global **COVID-19 pandemic** appears to have **caused a U-turn in European perceptions of third-country influence**. In 2020, the EU-Western Balkans Summit Zagreb Declaration, the EU Enlargement Communication, and Strategy 'Enhancing the accession process' all addressed the issue of **third-country influence as a separate problem** for the first time in the period considered (European Commission, 2020a, 2020b; European Council & Council of the European Union, 2020), with specific emphasis on the fact that 'dis- and misinformation campaigns have been particularly intense during the COVID-19 pandemic' (European Commission, 2021). However, no specific reference to Russia was made – the wording includes 'malign third countries' (European Commission, 2020a) and 'third-state actors' (European Commission, 2020b).

#### 4.1.4. Perception of Russian influence vis-à-vis other external players

This brings us to the EU's **perception of Russian activities in the Western Balkans vis-à-vis other external players**, particularly China. The EU officials suggest it is **crucial to differentiate** between external actors, such as those with interests, goals, tools, and motivations (ELT-1, personal communication, May 27, 2024). They agree that **Russia has been perceived differently** than other external actors in the Western Balkans; however, this perception came from the broader EU-Russia relations rather than the latter's actions in the Western Balkans (ELT-3, personal communication, June 17, 2024).

This apprehensive perception, however, has **not resulted in any practical differentiation** between Russia and other external actors in the Western Balkans. Many experts agree that the EU put Russia in the **same basket as China, Turkey, and other external players** regarding the actual response (EXP-5, personal communication, May 27, 2024; EXP-6, personal communication, May 28, 2024; EXP-9, personal communication, June 5, 2024; EXP-10, personal communication, June 5, 2024; EXP-12, personal communication, June 11, 2024). As one of the experts suggested, 'Russian influence was **considered different but not treated radically differently** from other influences of external actors in the region' (EXP-12, personal communication, June 11, 2024).

The analysed EU documents largely support this conclusion. In most scarce references to external actors in the Western Balkans, the European Commission does not make any notable differences between China, Russia, or other third actors (with one notable exception, addressed later). Namely, in the 2019 Communication on EU Enlargement policy, a generalising notion of '**EU's geopolitical competitors**' is used, which potentially 'root themselves on Europe's doorstep' unless the EU 'locks in the long-term positive momentum across the region' (European Commission, 2019). The first instance of apprehensive third actors' perception appeared in the Zagreb declaration, where the EU pledged to 'reinforce our cooperation on addressing disinformation and other hybrid activities originating in particular from third-state actors seeking to undermine the European perspective of the region' (European Council & Council of the European Union, 2020), later repeated in Brdo Declaration (European Council & Council of the European Union, 2021). The 2020 and 2021 Communications on EU Enlargement Policy remain **implicit about particular states**, referring to them as 'third-state actors', but **explicit – about challenges** coming from them, namely 'hybrid activities..., including disinformation around COVID-19', which 'expose the vulnerability of societies and infrastructure to cyber-attacks, cybercrime and hybrid threats' (European Commission, 2020b) and 'spread disinformation to challenge the EU's credibility, to undermine public trust in democratic institutions and to deepen polarisation' (European Commission, 2021).

Moreover, some experts suggest that **Chinese influence was more prominent** from the EU perspective than the Russian (EXP-7, personal communication, June 3, 2024; EXP-8, personal communication, June 4, 2024; EXP-12, personal communication, June 11, 2024). Strong supporting evidence for this is found in the EU's 2019 Communication on Enlargement Policy, where China is mentioned explicitly as a foreign actor in the Western Balkans (European Commission, 2019). This is the **first instance of a concrete third actor mentioned in the EU official documents on the Western Balkans**—at least within the documents analysed in this thesis. Namely, 'China's business and investment activity in the Western Balkans has been on the rise and can, in principle, offer opportunities for the region; however, these investments very frequently neglect socio-economic and financial sustainability and EU rules on public procurement, and may result in high levels of indebtedness and transfer of control over strategic assets and resources' (European Commission, 2019). At the same time, even during the COVID-19 pandemic, China garnered more attention than Russia, as 'Serbia's cooperation with China increased during the COVID-19 crisis and was marked by pro-China and EU sceptical rhetoric by high-ranking officials' (European Commission, 2020b). Russian activities in the region have not been addressed in the same explicit way at the all-region level.

## 4.2. The EU Response

### 4.2.1. Overall Assessment of the Response

Expert interviewees are almost unanimous in considering the **EU response to Russian interference** in the Western Balkans **weak or non-existent**. Some scholars described the EU response as 'weak', 'indifferent' (EXP-4, personal communication, May 23, 2024), 'situational' (EXP-2, personal communication, May 20, 2024), 'reactive' (ELT-2, personal communication, June 16, 2024), or absent (EXP-6, personal communication, May 28, 2024). A consensus has also been established regarding the **absence of a clear-cut, formulated strategy** to combat the Russian interference in the Western Balkans (EXP-2, personal communication, May 20, 2024; EXP-3, personal communication, May 20, 2024; EXP-4, personal communication, May 23, 2024), with **preponderance to rely on the already available instruments** (e.g. additional funding, counter-disinformation efforts) or to continue with the **rhetorical support** for the local actors (EXP-2, personal communication, May 20, 2024; EXP-3, personal communication, May 20, 2024; EXP-7, personal communication, June 3, 2024; EXP-11, personal communication, June 6, 2024).

While supporting the overall notion but using moderate rhetoric, EU officials condone this assessment. One interviewee suggested that in the Western Balkans and elsewhere, the EU tends to be **reactive** and likely to **respond to individual instances** of Russian detrimental influence rather than formulate a full-fledged strategy for countering Russian influence. Moreover, the EU responses tend to be **country-specific**, depending on the individual context; however, the **EU instruments remain the same** as elsewhere (ELT-2, personal communication, June 16, 2024). Another EU official also said the EU tends to respond to particular cases on the ground rather than act pre-emptively (ELT-1, personal communication, May 27, 2024, personal communication, May 27, 2024).

Turning to concrete responses, experts and officials highlighted numerous actual and possible actions the EU took (or could have taken) vis-à-vis the Russian influence in the Western Balkans. These, among others, include countering disinformation, resilience building, resolution of perennial disputes, strategic communications, accelerated enlargement, stabilitocracy promotion, and other policy initiatives. As of official documents, in line with the generalised presentation of third countries' malign influences in the EU communications, Brussels proposes solutions that are also **universal and not country-specific** – namely, resilience-building, strategic communications and cyber security (European Commission, 2020a, 2020b, 2021; European Council & Council of the European Union, 2020, 2021).

#### 4.2.2. Countering Disinformation and Strategic Communications

Experts and EU officials have repeatedly described **disinformation** as one of the main instruments of Russian influence in the Western Balkans. Accordingly, in the context of external actors, disinformation is one of the primary malign phenomena identified in EU official communications, detrimental to the EU's credibility and perspective in the region (European Commission, 2020a, 2020b, 2021; European Council & Council of the European Union, 2020, 2021).

Among the responses, experts highlighted the EU **funding for civil society organisations** and think tanks **dealing with propaganda and disinformation** and conducting fact-checking (EXP-4, personal communication, May 23, 2024; EXP-12, personal communication, June 11, 2024). The EU official documents mention '**deepening policy dialogue** with enlargement partners on ... addressing disinformation' (European Commission, 2021). Another response was **establishing the Stratcom East Unit** within the ranks of EEAS in 2015 (EXP-3, personal communication, May 20, 2024; EXP-7, personal communication, June 3, 2024), with further development of **strategic communications** 'to focus on thematic communication campaigns highlighting the benefits of the EU support for citizens and for economies, and on public diplomacy actions with direct outreach to citizens, notably the youth, to stimulate debate about the common European future' (European Commission, 2021).

However, these responses have been assessed unfavourably. Namely, funding for NGOs countering Russian propaganda was not considered part of a broader strategy to counter Russian actions and the most effective means to that end (EXP-3, personal communication, May 20, 2024; EXP-12, personal communication, June 11, 2024). Moreover, experts question the **correctness of identifying disinformation as the key source of Russian influence** in the region and the sufficiency of such a response. As one expert suggested, 'You cannot battle these with fact-checking; it is only one step, and it is not enough. You can fact-check whatever you want, but if a lie has been spread to 5 million people and your fact-checkers can reach 10,000 people, you can prove whatever you want and not have a meaningful impact' (EXP-12, personal communication, June 11, 2024). The EU officials have a similar perception – 'countering disinformation does not work – you try to convince the already convinced people' (ELT-2, personal communication, June 16, 2024). Instead, as some experts suggested, **imposing the EU sanctions** on the physical and legal persons involved in the proliferation of Russian narratives in the Western Balkans would have been a sufficient response (EXP-4, personal communication, May 23, 2024).

As for **strategic communications**, the EU officials underscored that since 2015, Stratcom East has been severely understaffed and has had to deal with many other regions where Russian propaganda was active, as well as with other malign actors, namely ISIS. Hence, as an object of Russian propaganda, the Western Balkans were not a priority (ELT-3, personal communication, June 17, 2024). As experts suggest, the EU could have done more to communicate how much Brussels and individual member states contribute to the Western Balkan economies and development (EXP-1, personal communication, May 15, 2024). While these communication efforts should not be formulated as anti-Russian per se, they should offer a **clear understanding of the EU's unique role in the region**. The same idea was expressed by EU officials, who suggested that the EU could have better presented to the Western Balkans the extent of the support provided to the general public (ELT-1, personal communication, May 27, 2024). Thus, as the experts suggested, the response should have been not more communication per se but rather more **versatile messages**, reaching a **wider stratum of the population**, including those in rural conservative areas, etc. (EXP-1, personal communication, May 15, 2024; EXP-12, personal communication, June 11, 2024).

In this respect, it is worth mentioning that the **EU continuously underscores its contribution to the Western Balkans** in numerous dimensions in the **official documents**. The consistent wording for the

EU's role throughout the documents analysed is 'biggest trading partner for imports and exports', 'biggest investor', 'main external driver of growth and jobs', etc., which are factually correct (European Commission, 2014, 2015, 2016). However, **these representations do not take root at the ground**. As one of the experts suggested, all benevolent actions by the EU are still seen through the lens of **general disillusionment or resentment of the West**. Thus, the EU communication efforts are falling on peculiar soil – as one of the experts described it, 'if the prevailing narrative is that the EU dreams of destroying you as a nation, then this will not be changed by the fact that you financed one road to be built or a school' (ELT-2, personal communication, June 16, 2024; EXP-12, personal communication, June 11, 2024). And, even if the EU tries to promote its contributions to the region, these will not be accepted favourably precisely because the **EU is not perceived as a benevolent actor per se** – 'the 'Donated by the EU' stickers on the buses in Belgrade would be vandalised', as one EU official put it (ELT-2, personal communication, June 16, 2024).

One of the critical junctures within this phenomenon was the **COVID-19 pandemic**. Western Balkan leaders blamed the EU for not supporting the Western Balkans in the initial month of the crisis, particularly in Serbia (EXP-2, personal communication, May 20, 2024; EXP-12, personal communication, June 11, 2024). Since then, a dominant message in the EU official documents has been the EU's status as the '**region's closest partner, main investor and principal donor**', and its 'unprecedented scale and range of this support must be fully recognised and conveyed by the partners in their public debate and communication' (European Council & Council of the European Union, 2021). While the EU communications contain a direct reference to China in this respect (European Commission, 2020b), the idea of highlighting the EU's unique contribution to the Western Balkans exists against the background of all other external players – 'this support and cooperation goes far beyond what **any other partner** has provided to the region' and 'deserves public acknowledgement' (European Council & Council of the European Union, 2020).

#### 4.2.3. Credible EU Membership Perspective

All experts agree that the **best response to the active Russian influence** in the Western Balkans should be a **transparent and credible membership perspective for the Western Balkans**. While the EU official communications unequivocally reaffirm the membership perspective for the region's countries (European Commission, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2018b, 2019, 2020b, 2021), **affirmations have lost their power** long ago, and there is a '**desperate need for a success story**' coming from among the Western Balkans, one of the six countries (EXP-1, personal communication, May 15, 2024). Moreover, one of the expert interviewees suggested that the EU has forgotten the primary meaning of **enlargement as a geopolitical tool**; hence, 'it does not matter whether the cat is black or white, what matters is that the cat catches the mouse' (EXP-4, personal communication, May 23, 2024). The EU officials expressed the same idea of EU integration (or credible membership perspective, with clear conditions, guidelines and deadlines) as the best possible response; however, they highlight its **transformative potential**, not the geopolitical meaning (ELT-1, personal communication, May 27, 2024; ELT-2, personal communication, June 16, 2024; ELT-3, personal communication, June 17, 2024).

Namely, according to the EU official communications, enlargement is presented as having 'a powerful transformative effect on the countries concerned, embedding positive democratic, political, economic and societal change' (European Commission, 2014, 2015). Therefore, 'a credible enlargement process, based on strict and fair conditionality, remains an irreplaceable tool to strengthen these countries and to help support their modernisation through political and economic reforms, in line with the accession criteria' (European Commission, 2016). Moreover, one should not expect immediate results – 'such changes inevitably require time' (European Commission, 2015). Experts and EU officials highlighted that the EU's transformative power and ability to influence the situation is amplified in the membership negotiations rather than after the country has acceded (ELT-2, personal communication, June 16, 2024; EXP-8, personal communication, June 4, 2024). In the context of the topic, one of the interviewees

mentioned the 2018 precedent, when Lithuania blocked the opening of the 31 Chapter (foreign, security and defence policy) for Serbia due to concerns over the latter's close relations with Russia (EXP-7, personal communication, June 3, 2024).

The same idea is expressed by the EU officials, who explained that although EU accession per se is perceived as the ultimate success, the idea about what the EU is and what expects the countries upon successful accession is drastically misinterpreted, mainly in a transactional way. From this misunderstanding, an official argues, comes **frustration and unrealistic expectations**, partially nurtured by the EU itself, as it is cautious to explain what it is and quick to give hope it can't fulfil. As one of the EU officials put it, 'enlargement is never a solution per se, just **a means to consolidate the solution**' — highlighting the essence of transformations the state must undergo before joining the Union and likely would not have undergone without the potential membership incentive (ELT-2, personal communication, June 16, 2024). This notion is widely present in the EU's official communications – as 2016 Communication suggests. 'it is important to recognise that accession negotiations are not – and never have been – an end in themselves. They are part of a wider process of modernisation and reforms. The governments of the enlargement countries need to embrace the necessary reforms more actively and truly make this their political agenda – not because the EU is asking for it, but because it is in the best interest of their citizens' (European Commission, 2016).

Going back to the idea of enlargement as the best response to the Russian actions in the Western Balkans, there is circumstantial supporting evidence for the validity of this argument in the EU's official communications. Namely, the 2015 Communication on Enlargement Policy affirms that 'if the prospect of moving forward on the road to the EU is seen as real and credible, the **risk of countries turning away from the EU will be mitigated**' (European Commission, 2015). In the same venue, the 2018 Communication asserts 'positive momentum across the region', where 'the Union must live up to its commitments and give credit where credit is due', while '**failure to reward** objective progress by moving to the next stage of the European path would damage the EU's credibility throughout the region and beyond' and 'would only **help the EU's geopolitical competitors** to root themselves on Europe's doorstep' (European Commission, 2019). Notably, however, such references belong to the 2014-2019 period, where the issue of third countries' influence was not explicitly addressed in the EU's communications on the Western Balkans.

#### 4.2.4. Resilience-building and Resolution of Disputes

Experts and EU officials have described **resilience building** as a most apparent, comprehensive, yet complex response on behalf of the EU (ELT-1, personal communication, May 27, 2024; ELT-2, personal communication, June 16, 2024; EXP-3, personal communication, May 20, 2024; EXP-5, personal communication, May 27, 2024; EXP-7, personal communication, June 3, 2024; EXP-9, personal communication, June 5, 2024; EXP-10, personal communication, June 5, 2024; EXP-11, personal communication, June 6, 2024; EXP-12, personal communication, June 11, 2024). Resilience building is also listed as a to-go solution to the third countries' influence and was considered as such in connection with this problem (European Commission, 2020a, 2020b).

Going back to the idea of Russian influence as built primarily around the **inherent vulnerabilities of regional countries**, specifically in the state institutions and other political processes, scholars suggest that complex measures aimed at nurturing an immune system against foreign malign interference for the countries concerned are the best response. Among the desirable actions, experts named greater engagement with **civil society organisations and independent media**, increased financial **support and training for watchdogs**, and **dealing with active state and media capture** (EXP-9, personal communication, June 5, 2024; EXP-12, personal communication, June 11, 2024). The EU officials share the same idea about resilience and capacity building as the core response to any foreign malign intervention instead of tackling individual instances. One of the EU officials stressed the direct EU

interest in this endeavour, primarily to **build future EU member states** (ELT-1, personal communication, May 27, 2024; ELT-2, personal communication, June 16, 2024).

Closely connected with resilience-building, the **resolution of perennial, systemic issues** enabling Russia to inflict damage is considered a response. Experts stressed the idea of local vulnerabilities and gaping problems as the primary source of Russian influence—either in terms of a **conducive environment** or an **actual instrument** to wield and spin in the media. Without resolving systemic problems and frozen conflicts, such as the Serbia-Kosovo dispute or the Bosnian state conundrum, all other responses to Russian or any other foreign malign interference are deemed ineffective (EXP-1, personal communication, May 15, 2024; EXP-2, personal communication, May 20, 2024; EXP-3, personal communication, May 20, 2024; EXP-5, personal communication, May 27, 2024; EXP-11, personal communication, June 6, 2024). Contrary to resilience building, mentioned explicitly in the context of third countries’ actions, the EU official communications do not reference external actors’ when discussing bilateral disputes, as the latter is ‘essential for progress on the countries’ respective European paths’; thus, **a problem itself** (European Commission, 2018a).

In addition, the **resilience building** and **resolution of bilateral disputes** are generalised instruments, as they are **not targeted specifically at the Russian policies** in the region. Namely, among the actions listed as potential priorities for resilience building – including civil society support and countering media capture – these are regarded as **necessary steps the Western Balkan countries should implement to proceed with accession successfully** (European Commission, 2019, 2020b, 2021). The same is true about resolving bilateral disputes – this topic remains an absolute priority in all communications analysed – ‘overcoming the legacy of the past and addressing disputes arising from the conflicts of the 1990s remain key’, such as ‘border issues and delivering justice to war crimes’ victims, identifying the remaining missing persons, and establishing an accurate record of past atrocities at regional level’ (European Commission, 2020b). As the 2018 Strategy stated, ‘the EU will not accept to import these disputes and the instability they could entail. Definitive and binding solutions must be found and implemented before a country accedes’ (European Commission, 2018a). Moreover, ‘regional co-operation, good neighbourly relations and reconciliation cannot be imposed from outside. The leaders of the region must take full ownership and lead by example’ (European Commission, 2018a).

Finally, even if implemented successfully, experts concede that resilience building or its components are **a long-term investment with a long return cycle** — ‘if the EU wants to counter Russia through reforms, this cannot happen within the next ten years’ (EXP-11, personal communication, June 6, 2024). Moreover, resilience-building measures per se **cannot be a self-sufficient** and single response to Russian interference in the Western Balkans. Namely, as one of the expert interviewees put it, ‘at the EU member states level, we also have Russian influence — meddling in European elections and the elections of different member states, funding opposition parties, far-right parties in some of the countries, in those countries which are closer ideationally, with Russia. So, what is happening in the Western Balkans is not particular; it is just for the Western Balkans’ (EXP-5, personal communication, May 27, 2024). Supporting this idea, one of the EU officials interviewees said, ‘Malign external influence in Luxembourg and Moldova is different’ – which can be interpreted as a need to account for different contexts or the presence of actual institutional and civil resilience, which **does not defeat but at least contains the foreign malign interference** (ELT-1, personal communication, May 27, 2024; EXP-12, personal communication, June 11, 2024). Moreover, despite all the complications, ‘countering Russia cannot happen by praising local autocrats for reforms that haven’t been conducted’ (EXP-11, personal communication, June 6, 2024).

The idea of cementing the existing hybrid structures and **overt or covert external legitimisation** by the EU for stability maintenance contradicts the idea behind the resilience-building measures, which are likely to undermine the hybrid structures of the local political governance. But, according to experts, in

contrast to the EU's official communications, an actual response by the EU was the opposite of resilience-building – **stabilitocracy as the workable modus operandi** in relations between the Western Balkan hybrid regimes and the EU (EXP-9, personal communication, June 5, 2024; EXP-10, personal communication, June 5, 2024). According to the experts, the EU quietly accepted the non-democratic practices (or stopped pressing the political conditionality) within the Western Balkan countries and their authoritarian tendencies, adopting a **permissive stance** to curb Russian influence's proliferation among the local actors (EXP-1, personal communication, May 15, 2024; EXP-7, personal communication, June 3, 2024; EXP-8, personal communication, June 4, 2024). Experts highlighted that the EU not only neglected the non-democratic practices inside the Western Balkan countries but continued to praise them and allow for a broader political engagement with the Russian Federation. Moreover, countries cultivating more robust relations with Russia, like Serbia, were treated more leniently by the EU than Kosovo, Albania, and North Macedonia (EXP-4, personal communication, May 23, 2024; EXP-6, personal communication, May 28, 2024).

#### 4.2.5. EU Strategic Policy Initiatives between 2014 and 2021

In assessing the rationale behind the recent EU policies concerning the Western Balkans, including the Berlin process, the 2018 Credible Enlargement Perspective Strategy and the 2020 updated methodology for negotiating accession chapters, some of the interviewees suggest putting them in a larger context of Juncker's Commission deliberate denial of any enlargement during their mandate (EXP-1, personal communication, May 15, 2024). **Juncker's 2014 statement** about an **essential embargo on any enlargement** for the next five years was the **most discouraging factor** in the eyes of the Western Balkan states, while all EU initiatives that followed were perceived most and foremost as **an excuse and poor substitute for the actual enlargement** (EXP-7, personal communication, June 3, 2024; EXP-9, personal communication, June 5, 2024). Among others, these developments have been described as the 'rationale why the enlargement is not happening', a shell without a content', 'a waiting room' and 'meant to accelerate the enlargement while slowing it down in practice' (EXP-3, personal communication, May 20, 2024; EXP-6, personal communication, May 28, 2024; EXP-7, personal communication, June 3, 2024).

All experts agreed that these policy initiatives and changes regarding the Western Balkans had a more general meaning of either offering a substitute for enlargement or consoling the disappointments in the Balkan nations. Active **Russian engagement** was described as **a tertiary factor** in the EU's consideration and design of these initiatives (EXP-1, personal communication, May 15, 2024; EXP-2, personal communication, May 20, 2024; EXP-3, personal communication, May 20, 2024; EXP-5, personal communication, May 27, 2024; EXP-7, personal communication, June 3, 2024; EXP-9, personal communication, June 5, 2024; EXP-10, personal communication, June 5, 2024). Thus, these actions are hardly presented as responses to Russian influence.

The **Berlin Process** was described as a benevolent but ineffective initiative (EXP-1, personal communication, May 15, 2024). While experts suggest the primary motivation behind this was to revitalise the reforming processes, facilitate the resolution of disputes, create a common regional market and enhance cooperation between the region's countries, the EU official documents pay particular attention to its role in promoting connectivity, which, in its turn, is 'a key factor for growth and jobs, as it strengthens the countries' backbone of competitiveness' and contributes to 'building bridges in the region, developing good neighbourly relations and promoting peace and reconciliation' (European Commission, 2015).

However, experts suggest that the Process was forgotten shortly after its launch (EXP-1, personal communication, May 15, 2024; EXP-5, personal communication, May 27, 2024; EXP-9, personal communication, June 5, 2024; EXP-10, personal communication, June 5, 2024). The visibility of its deliverables has been modest at best. The comprehensive framework of expected outcomes addresses

some of the **vulnerabilities enabling the broad malign Russian involvement** in the region; however, it is hard to say that Russian influence was the key motivation in the design of the Berlin process (or that the issues at stake are worth dealing with only to an extent Moscow weaponises them) (EXP-1, personal communication, May 15, 2024; EXP-5, personal communication, May 27, 2024; EXP-7, personal communication, June 3, 2024; EXP-10, personal communication, June 5, 2024).

The **2018 strategy ‘A credible enlargement perspective for an enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans’** has also been described in a similar venue as an incentive for the enlargement process (EXP-1, personal communication, May 15, 2024; EXP-5, personal communication, May 27, 2024; EXP-9, personal communication, June 5, 2024; EXP-10, personal communication, June 5, 2024). The strategy also launched six core initiatives ‘representing a significant enhancement of the EU’s engagement with the countries of the Western Balkans, in mutual interest’ (European Commission, 2018a), namely, strengthened support for the rule of law, reinforced engagement on security and migration, support for socio-economic development, increased connectivity, Digital Agenda and support for reconciliation and good neighbourly relations, they were not considered novel, to the extent that some experts did not even consider the strategy a pivotal milestone (EXP-3, personal communication, May 20, 2024; EXP-4, personal communication, May 23, 2024; EXP-6, personal communication, May 28, 2024). The strategy does not reference Russian influence as a rationale; however, the content of the initiatives put forward allows us to hypothesise on **China’s growing economic presence** as one of the influencing factors, given the firm reliance on economy and trade, critical infrastructure, investments, etc. (EXP-7, personal communication, June 3, 2024).

The **new enlargement methodology for 2020** was characterised as a **concession to France**, which demanded clarity and structural changes in accession negotiations. While some experts called these changes cosmetic, others noted that this methodology puts an **additional level of political conditionality** on the Western Balkan countries, thus postponing any enlargement further. There was also the notion of **changing the rules amid a game** and an already unprecedented political conditionality in the history of EU enlargements (EXP-1, personal communication, May 15, 2024; EXP-6, personal communication, May 28, 2024; EXP-7, personal communication, June 3, 2024; EXP-10, personal communication, June 5, 2024). The strategy containing the new methodology presents a less pragmatic interpretation, stressing the need to ‘allow a stronger focus on core sectors in the political dialogue and provide an improved framing for higher level political engagement’, ‘allow the most important and urgent reforms per sector to be identified’ and ‘give overall reform processes more traction on the ground, by better incentivising sectoral reforms in the interests of citizens and business’ (European Commission, 2020a). At the same time, the strategy does not reference the Russian influence as a contributing factor or a reason behind it.

### 4.3. Factors shaping the EU Response

#### 4.3.1. EU’s internal and external crises

Among the most popular explanations for such a response by the EU is **the plethora of internal and external crises** Brussels was experiencing between 2014 and 2021. Namely, during the period considered, as experts claim, the EU has travelled from one crisis to another, each of those risking to shatter the union, which, in turn, did not leave room for active enlargement, not to mention combatting the Russian interference in the Western Balkans. In practice, the Union has been a **permanent state of disarray** since the global financial crisis in 2008-2009, which emanated from the Greek debt problem and eurozone crisis, risking to destroy the Union from the inside, followed by an uneasy absorption of Croatia, 2014 annexation of Crimea and Russian aggression in Donbas, the beginning of Syrian civil war and resulting refugee crisis, Brexit and US Asian turn which left much vacuum and matters unattended, COVID-19 pandemic, etc. As one of the experts put it, the EU was going through **one existential crisis after another** and, before becoming proactive, was first and foremost concerned with its survival and

was ‘inward-looking’ (EXP-1, personal communication, May 15, 2024; EXP-9, personal communication, June 5, 2024; EXP-10, personal communication, June 5, 2024).

Even in the context of the Western Balkans, the main priority, at least in the first few years this thesis considers, was the **refugee crisis** and the so-called Balkan route of illegal migration to the EU (EXP-3, personal communication, May 20, 2024; EXP-5, personal communication, May 27, 2024; EXP-9, personal communication, June 5, 2024; EXP-10, personal communication, June 5, 2024; EXP-11, personal communication, June 6, 2024). The EU official communications confirm this priority – between 2014 and 2018, a migration crisis was consistently considered a **separate and most urgent topic** in the annual enlargement communications and strategies, in dealing with which the EU relied on the Western Balkan governments – ‘former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Serbia in particular proved reliable partners of the EU in this area’ (European Commission, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2018b). Hence, even if the EU was preoccupied with the Western Balkans, the main concerns were the **security and stability** of the union itself, considering refugee flows coming from the region, not the potential enlargement or third actors’ policies.

In this respect, the refugee crisis exemplifies the EU’s continued **security-oriented perception** of the Western Balkans. More bluntly, security concerns have always been and continue to be the primary focus of the EU policies towards the Western Balkans – ‘it is not a priority for the EU unless the 1990s-like conflicts happen’ (EXP-1, personal communication, May 15, 2024). Even after the migration crisis was mitigated, the EU’s Western Balkan agenda has been perceived as security-oriented – the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue, the North Macedonia name deal, and resolving bilateral disputes in general (EXP-2, personal communication, May 20, 2024) – all in either way connected to past conflicts or prevention of potential ones. Another string of Western Balkan systemic issues travels from one annual enlargement review to another, namely, organised crime and corruption, terrorism, violent extremism and radicalisation (connected mostly with ISIS operations and the Syria war, return of foreign terrorist fighters), and irregular migration (European Commission, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2018b, 2019, 2020b, 2021). In comparison, the issue of third actors’ malign influence appeared as a separate problem in EU communications only in 2020 (European Commission, 2020a, 2020b; European Council & Council of the European Union, 2020).

A logical consequence of security risks from the region and more pressing issues was the **deprioritisation of the enlargement process**, which is the key driver of transformations in the Western Balkans. As one of the experts phrased it, ‘when something huge happens, it is also always the enlargement that is put behind in a waiting line for good reason or wrong reason’ (EXP-5, personal communication, May 27, 2024). In light of these numerous crises, including coming from and through the Western Balkans, the overarching narrative behind the EU policies between 2014 and 2021, including in the Western Balkans, had been **crisis management**, not crisis resolution, resulting in a lack of strategic vision and prioritisation of security and stability — some experts called Angela Merkel’s policies an embodiment of this strategy – a guardian of the order (EXP-4, personal communication, May 23, 2024; EXP-7, personal communication, June 3, 2024). One may also conclude that survival and security needs took precedence over development and enlargement needs – as one expert explained, ‘when the EU makes any decision, it has three elements in mind. To maintain peace and stability, to bring economic prosperity, and to democratise the region. So, if you can say we have ticked two boxes, you will be forgiven for the third one’ (EXP-8, personal communication, June 4, 2024). Interestingly, the EU official communications present the enlargement as a ‘key stabilising factor’, while the EU present its crucial role ‘to export stability’ (European Commission, 2015, 2018a). In practice, however, the two do not necessarily collide.

### 4.3.2. EU's (Supra)National Dynamics

**Institutional-Member States frictions** and dynamics also loom large as an explanatory factor for the EU response to Russian engagement in the Western Balkans (EXP-2, personal communication, May 20, 2024; EXP-3, personal communication, May 20, 2024; EXP-5, personal communication, May 27, 2024; EXP-7, personal communication, June 3, 2024; EXP-8, personal communication, June 4, 2024; EXP-11, personal communication, June 6, 2024). Namely, experts stress **internal inconsistencies**, differing **national interests**, institutional **limitations**, and a **lack of a unified approach** in all EU foreign policy endeavours, including countering Russian influence. A prevalent assessment among the experts refers to the unanimity clause in the key decision-making procedures and, therefore, the inherent structural weakness of the Union's system (EXP-3, personal communication, May 20, 2024; EXP-4, personal communication, May 23, 2024; EXP-6, personal communication, May 28, 2024).

Referring to particular bodies, while one might argue that the European Commission communicates the position of the EU, European External Action Service and other bodies, the critical decision-making powers regarding enlargement lie with the **Member States**, sometimes sending confusing messages to the Western Balkans, especially with blocking their accession process (EXP-3, personal communication, May 20, 2024; EXP-5, personal communication, May 27, 2024). In this respect, the EU official documents condone this assessment by stating that 'all parties must abstain from **misusing outstanding issues in the EU accession process**' (European Commission, 2020a) while 'delays in the official launch of accession negotiations are having a **negative impact on the credibility** of the EU' (European Commission, 2021). One of the experts referred to Bulgaria's blocking of the North Macedonian accession process, which broke the unspoken rule not to use the bilateral disputes for extortion in the enlargement negotiation process (EXP-9, personal communication, June 5, 2024). The 2020 strategy also stresses that 'Member States and institutions must **speak with one voice in the region**, sending clear signals of support and encouragement, and speaking clearly and honestly on shortcomings when they occur' (European Commission, 2020a).

The EU officials, however, have a different position. One of the officials even explained that conversations about **unanimity as a bottleneck** in decision-making are 'tiresome', and the magnitude of this problem in academia is **overrated**. For him, the EU is a 'federal system' akin to theoretical conceptualisations or practical examples, like Germany or the USA. Making a decision is a complicated task everywhere; hence, if it were impossible, the EU would not have existed at all; moreover, the degree of actual unanimity is humbling the proponents of the unanimity-as-a-bottleneck argument (ELT-2, personal communication, June 16, 2024).

Instead, EU officials and official communications reveal another internal structural complication: the **absorption capacity** (ELT-2, personal communication, June 16, 2024). A recurring message in the 2018 Communication on Enlargement and Strategy is that 'Union must be stronger and more solid, before it can eventually be bigger' (European Commission, 2018a, 2018b). An essential component is 'a gradual increase in the new Multi-annual Financial Framework of Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance funding before accession, accompanied by a phasing-in of expenditure after accession' – an apparent reference to the costs the EU bears integrating the new Members (European Commission, 2018a). Another essential implication to be addressed before accession is qualified majority voting in the Council of the EU (European Commission, 2018a). In addition, in light of the Polish and Hungarian cases, 'a more effective mechanism needs to be implemented to ensure that effective measures can be taken to tackle a systemic threat to or a systemic breach of these values by any of the EU's Member States' (European Commission, 2018a). Finally, 'special arrangements and irrevocable commitments must also be put in place to ensure that new Member States are not in a position to block the accession of other Western Balkan candidates' (European Commission, 2018a). In light of these pressing reforms, as the

EU official said, ‘enlargement may be suicidal for the EU’ (ELT-2, personal communication, June 16, 2024).

#### 4.3.3. EU’s exceptional position in the Western Balkans

Some experts mentioned the **degree to which the EU has invested in the Western Balkans**, specifically in terms of trade relations and financial aid provision, as well as the idea of accession, as one of the reasons why Brussels was not active in countering foreign influences. Namely, scholars highlighted that Western Balkans have nowhere else to go, encircled by the union’s borders and dependent on the EU regarding trade relations, investments, logistics, etc. (EXP-6, personal communication, May 28, 2024; EXP-9, personal communication, June 5, 2024; EXP-12, personal communication, June 11, 2024). In contrast, other external actors, including Russia, do not propose any **alternative integration project** or development model. As one of the experts described the mode of European thinking, ‘Russia will or can never give what we can provide; we are the pillar for the economy, and Russian influence is a natural thing, and Serbia does not want to be a member of NATO because of that. We should not dedicate ourselves to Russian activities’ (EXP-4, personal communication, May 23, 2024). Even more, the influence of third actors is sometimes inflated and has **no tangible emanations** (EXP-1, personal communication, May 15, 2024; EXP-6, personal communication, May 28, 2024). A version of disregard for the substance of Russian influence is also present in the messages from the EU officials, who claim that it is not systemic, is a function of Russian confrontation with the West and has no future – its energy blackmail is based on fossil fuels, which are the past, in light of the green energy transition (ELT-1, personal communication, May 27, 2024).

A more balanced explanation suggested that the EU did not feel **any immediate threat** in the Western Balkans, in contrast with Ukraine or some Eastern Partnership countries, which conditioned its (non)response and did not comprehend (or did not want to comprehend) the global Russian strategy (EXP-4, personal communication, May 23, 2024; EXP-6, personal communication, May 28, 2024; EXP-9, personal communication, June 5, 2024; EXP-10, personal communication, June 5, 2024). One may hypothesise to the extent of this **false sense of security** and confidence in the region’s pursuit of the European perspective.

The analysis of EU communications somewhat challenges that perception. While the EU truly tends to underscore the magnitude of its presence in the Western Balkans, specifically in trade, investment, and economy (European Commission, 2018a), the communications highlight the enlargement process and relations with the EU in general as a **‘choice’ rather than an imposed policy**. Second, there is a **time temporal variation** - while between 2014 and 2018, the official communications contained no explicit references to external actors' influence in the Western Balkans, potentially signifying confidence, since 2019, this topic started to appear, soon turning into one of the major concerns for the EU in the context of regional strategy (European Commission, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2018b, 2019, 2020b, 2021).

#### 4.3.4. EU-Russian Relations

Another bloc of explanatory factors is the **overall dynamics of EU-Russian relations**. While the 2014 annexation of Crimea was considered a breaking point that led to a crisis in their relations, it did not sever all strategic interactions, specifically in economic and energy affairs. Despite declaratory condemnations and sanctions, the **return to business as usual** in EU-Russian relations happened quickly, and the reaction was not decisive enough (EXP-1, personal communication, May 15, 2024; EXP-2, personal communication, May 20, 2024; EXP-3, personal communication, May 20, 2024; EXP-4, personal communication, May 23, 2024). Some scholars suggested that **Germany** ‘did not want to stir the boat too much’, and Italy, Netherlands, and France had active trade relations with Moscow and that continued relations with Russia reflected the prevailing philosophy of **economy as a best fail-safe mechanism** from conflict (EXP-5, personal communication, May 27, 2024; EXP-6, personal communication, May 28, 2024; EXP-7, personal communication, June 3, 2024; EXP-9, personal

communication, June 5, 2024). Another interviewee also described the EU approach towards the overall Russian foreign policy actions in 2014-2021 as **appeasement** and hope that ‘something will happen from within the regime in Russia’ (EXP-3, personal communication, May 20, 2024). Locally, the Western Balkan actors felt more **emboldened** in their open pursuit of relations with Russia, given almost unperturbed relations between core Member States and Moscow (EXP-8, personal communication, June 4, 2024). Thus, as experts claim, the **complex and confusing dynamics** of EU-Russian relations, where the former perceived the latter as a partner and rival in different spheres, translated into European policies vis-à-vis the Russian influence in the Western Balkans, or rather their absence (EXP-7, personal communication, June 3, 2024).

The experts, however, suggest that the overall dynamics of EU-Russian relations are a more important explanatory factor for Russian policies in the Western Balkans than those in the European ones. Should these relations go awry, experts say, Moscow will become more active and destructive in the region. The EU officials confirm this narrative (ELT-1, personal communication, May 27, 2024; EXP-1, personal communication, May 15, 2024; EXP-2, personal communication, May 20, 2024; EXP-5, personal communication, May 27, 2024; EXP-6, personal communication, May 28, 2024).

#### 4.3.5. Nature of Russian Influence

The **specifics of Russian influence** are another factor for the EU’s response to Russian presence in the Western Balkans. Russia's role in the region is often **indirect** and **informal**, vaguely institutionalised and hybrid, making it difficult for the EU to counter effectively—something described as **‘attributable but deniable’** (EXP-3, personal communication, May 20, 2024; EXP-4, personal communication, May 23, 2024; EXP-9, personal communication, June 5, 2024; EXP-11, personal communication, June 6, 2024; EXP-12, personal communication, June 11, 2024). For instance, the Serbian Orthodox Church considered one of the main pro-Russian narratives’ promoters – is not a Russian minion but a religious organisation with millions of believers. Hence, ‘labelling the entire church and its members as instruments of the Russian state is a serious mistake. Additionally, such actions will backfire, making achieving their goals easier for the Russians (EXP-7, personal communication, June 3, 2024).

Additionally, the EU's engagement with the Western Balkans is further complicated by **historical ties and emotional connections** that some Western Balkans countries have with Russia. The transactional and bureaucratic nature of the EU's relationship with these countries contrasts their more profound, forgiving relationships with Russia (EXP-11, personal communication, June 6, 2024). As one of the experts said, ‘Russia is popular in Serbia not for what it is but for what it is not — it is not the West’ (EXP-1, personal communication, May 15, 2024). Russia is perceived as a power in solid opposition to the West, capable of saying ‘no’ and ‘enough’ to the Western capitals, although at the levels of declarations purely (EXP-1, personal communication, May 15, 2024; EXP-12, personal communication, June 11, 2024). For the local hearts and minds, as the interviewee said, ‘Russia has become this symbol through which you filter out your frustration and anger with the West; sometimes, these grievances can be real, sometimes justified, and sometimes perceived as far-fetched, so it doesn't matter; but Russia is this filter that you can't control, and through it, you go out of these frustrations’ (EXP-1, personal communication, May 15, 2024).

The **multitude of systemic weaknesses and vulnerabilities** in the Western Balkans, including state capture, corruption, organised crime and extremism, ethnic and nationalist divisions and polarisation, lingering conflict effects, and socio-economic grievances, create an environment where pro-Russian narratives can thrive, even without significant economic or military investments from Russia. Instead, Russia relies on **low-cost, high-impact methods** such as cultural investments, media propaganda, and leveraging its historical and emotional ties (EXP-1, personal communication, May 15, 2024; EXP-2, personal communication, May 20, 2024; EXP-3, personal communication, May 20, 2024; EXP-4, personal communication, May 23, 2024; EXP-7, personal communication, June 3, 2024; EXP-12,

personal communication, June 11, 2024). In essence, the primary source of the Russian influence in the Western Balkans is the systemic vulnerabilities and problems present in the region, which remain unsolved.

Another peculiar feature of the Russian influence was highlighted by one of the experts – **whatever turn of events** happens in the Western Balkans, Russia will always **manage to take the maximum benefit** of it – as an example, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs was the first international actor to welcome the Prespa agreement conclusion – theoretically bringing North Macedonia closer to the EU membership perspective, while at the same time again, be the first one to amplify the Macedonian frustration with vetoes by Bulgaria and France. As one expert described, ‘even if they don't get anything material, they only have to point the finger and laugh ‘Aha!’ and essentially still profit’ (EXP-1, personal communication, May 15, 2024).

For the EU, this kind of influence is **ontologically different** (EXP-6, personal communication, May 28, 2024; EXP-10, personal communication, June 5, 2024; EXP-11, personal communication, June 6, 2024). As experts explain, it clashes with the political language and instruments the EU is used to — the EU and Russia essentially **speak different languages** in this respect (EXP-6, personal communication, May 28, 2024; EXP-10, personal communication, June 5, 2024; EXP-11, personal communication, June 6, 2024). Consequently, this translates into the EU's actions in response.

As one of the EU officials described, when it comes to **Chinese influence**, the EU has **a clear *modus operandi***, which is to play in the same sectors – provide more bread-and-butter projects in critical infrastructure and integrate the rules against the maltreatment of competition and transparency standards in the conditionality mechanisms. With Russia, however, the **influence is fluid and vague**, hard to grasp and counter by the material, substantiative means, because at the core lies the structural vulnerability of local context and sheer destruction, which brings **immeasurable impact with minimum efforts** (ELT-2, personal communication, June 16, 2024).

The same idea was put forward by one of the experts – ‘you can tackle economic influence from different angles; for instance, you can increase trade with a specific country to counter other interference or investments from other countries, but with the ideational, cultural, religious, people-to-people impact it is tough to counter’ (EXP-5, personal communication, May 27, 2024). Overall, ‘Russia's role is indirectly in the picture. In many ways, it is the elephant in the room, but it's not exactly straightforward how to deal with it’ (EXP-10, personal communication, June 5, 2024).

This language difference is evident when comparing the EU's solutions to counter Chinese and Russian engagement in official documents. Namely, in the former case, the main solution is ‘the full adherence of any foreign-funded economic activity to EU values, norms and standards, notably in key areas such as the rule of law, public procurement, environment, energy, infrastructure and competition’ (European Commission, 2019) followed with numerous infrastructural and connectivity projects funded by the EU, while in the latter the solutions are kept **generalised and undefined**, like resilience-building, cyber security and strategic communications (European Commission, 2020b).

#### **4.3.6. EU actorness and normative/geopolitical debate**

The notion of the ‘different language’ the EU is used to speaking directly stems from its **self-identification as an IR actor** and its identity in foreign policy, which dictates goals and the means to achieve them (EXP-10, personal communication, June 5, 2024). For the EU, its international actorness is a form of ‘**everyday plebiscite**’, as the debate is ongoing and contradictory in its deliverables. However, this self-identification crisis translates into **unclear external representation and communication**.

Namely, many experts paid peculiar attention to the **overall dichotomy of EU self-perception** and representation as a **normative or geopolitical actor** concerning Western Balkans and non-democratic actors like Russia. Some experts highlighted that the EU remains relatively normative within its borders while becoming increasingly geopolitical outside (EXP-10, personal communication, June 5, 2024; EXP-11, personal communication, June 6, 2024). Specifically, transactionalism and stability as the primary values in relations lead to the **inflation of the EU's norm-inducing credibility** and transformative power in the eyes of countries where the EU aims to project them. Brussels struggles to balance normative commitments with geopolitical necessities or aspires to be a normative power while acting like a geopolitical one (EXP-6, personal communication, May 28, 2024; EXP-9, personal communication, June 5, 2024; EXP-10, personal communication, June 5, 2024; EXP-11, personal communication, June 6, 2024).

The EU's transformative power and incentives are **highly contested and internally undermined** by the undemocratic inclinations of some Member States, whereby the model and values the EU tries to export are losing their credibility (EXP-9, personal communication, June 5, 2024). Acting like a geopolitical power, including in the enlargement process, means **fast-tracked accession** regardless of political conditionality and **sacrifices the core values** and principles of EU foreign policy identity, leading to an existential crisis. The same is true about the instruments used by the EU to counter Russian engagement in the Western Balkans—counter-disinformation and strategic communication are deemed inefficient; however, the EU is confined by its self-proclaimed normative, civilian identity in the range of instruments it can use to counter foreign malign interference (EXP-10, personal communication, June 5, 2024; EXP-11, personal communication, June 6, 2024). In addition, due to the EU's inconsequential enlargement policies, the **EU's leverage** over the candidate countries has diminished and is incomparable to the previous enlargements. The **promise of accession**, previously a to-go incentive to steer the course of policies, **no longer works**, leaving the EU with few, if not no, options (EXP-10, personal communication, June 5, 2024).

The EU is seen as bureaucratic, slow to react, lacking in imagination, and applying a 'one-size-fits-all' approach; hence, even its benevolent initiatives in the Western Balkans are not perceived as such due to insufficient form. Experts argue that the EU's **technocratic nature** disconnects the Brussels institutions and their rhetoric or politics from reality and undermines their effectiveness (EXP-1, personal communication, May 15, 2024; EXP-3, personal communication, May 20, 2024; EXP-7, personal communication, June 3, 2024; EXP-11, personal communication, June 6, 2024). One illustrative case described by the expert interviewee is the strategically placed billboards — Russia placed boards strategically in Belgrade and on the highway, and for several years, it's stayed standing there; they're just renewing it, and then during the pandemic... I mentioned this to the EU delegation, and then a guy from the EU delegation here said, 'Oh yeah, we understand. We will now also rent billboards' (EXP-7, personal communication, June 3, 2024).

#### 4.3.7. Target region determinants

The question of the EU's response towards Russian engagement in the Western Balkans does not exist in a vacuum from the Western Balkan context. This entails strategic vulnerabilities or local problems and local political actors who possess peculiar agency in the process. Namely, the **local political elites** in the Western Balkans benefit from the geopolitical tension, using Russia as **a tool for domestic political promotion** and as **a bargaining chip with the West**.

First, Russia is popular among Western Balkan societies due to its anti-Western position, a powerful instrument that the local political elites use to **boost their internal image** (EXP-1, personal communication, May 15, 2024; EXP-7, personal communication, June 3, 2024; EXP-8, personal communication, June 4, 2024; EXP-10, personal communication, June 5, 2024; EXP-11, personal communication, June 6, 2024; EXP-12, personal communication, June 11, 2024). However, while Russia

occupies the hearts and minds of Western Balkan societies and holds vital emotive, ideational resources, the political elites of the Western Balkans act more **pragmatically**. For instance, as one expert said, ‘If it is not a Russian card, it is a Chinese card then’—despite Serbia's pro-Russian stance, it has also sought to replace Russia with China during the COVID-19 pandemic (EXP-1, personal communication, May 15, 2024; EXP-12, personal communication, June 11, 2024).

In the alternative role, Western Balkans leaders resort to playing the Russian card in their relations with the EU: either directly **enhancing their ties with Moscow**, hoping for Western anxiety over this, or just **threatening such a course of action** (EXP-10, personal communication, June 5, 2024). Such an approach not only wins the local actors new finances but, at minimum, helps them to **avoid EU criticism** for the poor rule of law, corruption, criminality and even sometimes open violations of democratic values (EXP-1, personal communication, May 15, 2024; EXP-3, personal communication, May 20, 2024; EXP-6, personal communication, May 28, 2024; EXP-7, personal communication, June 3, 2024; EXP-8, personal communication, June 4, 2024; EXP-12, personal communication, June 11, 2024). One of the interviewees even claimed that ‘the Russian presence in Serbia has helped Serbia in its European integration path because the EU has somehow tolerated Serbia and the Serbian government on some issues’ (EXP-6, personal communication, May 28, 2024).

Moreover, this demonstrates that **Russian influence has fertile soil** in the Western Balkans thanks to the local systemic vulnerabilities and because the **local political elites have ample demand for it** (EXP-1, personal communication, May 15, 2024; EXP-10, personal communication, June 5, 2024; EXP-11, personal communication, June 6, 2024; EXP-12, personal communication, June 11, 2024). In this respect, Serbia is an interesting case. While Russian media openly professes the anti-Western agenda and has an active presence in the Western Balkan countries, their effects are amplified by the **local state-controlled media**, which remain the primary source of information for most of the population. As one of the experts suggested, ‘The stance about Serbia is, to a large degree, a consequence of a 10-year-long propaganda, which was promoted not so much by pro-Russian media by Russian media or Russian-linked media but promoted by Serbian pro-government press, controlled by the Serbian government’ (EXP-3, personal communication, May 20, 2024). The Serbian case is explicit in this respect, as it spans beyond the Serbian borders per se, specifically in Montenegro, Bosnia, and Herzegovina. Hence, **Serbia is a conduit** for Russian influence in the Western Balkans, especially considering the state of media capture – ‘pro-government Serbian sources, bulldogs of the government, instruments the government uses to bash their political opponents, supporting Russia and attacking the West for the last 15 years’. As one of the experts put it, ‘independent media will resolve 70%, 80% of all the problems ... in Serbia concerning disinformation’ (EXP-12, personal communication, June 11, 2024). The EU official communications also highlight this phenomenon, saying that ‘the bulk of disinformation in the region is produced and disseminated by domestic actors for domestic purposes, although third states’ proxies are also active’ (European Commission, 2021).

This pragmatic approach allows Western Balkan countries like Serbia to play significant powers against each other for their benefit, **balancing relationships** with the EU, Russia, and China to **maximise gains**. The local political elites tend to see the EU as ‘cynical’, based on **bilateralism** (negotiating with individual EU countries rather than Brussels) and **transactionalism** (in this context, described as mutual concessions and favours) (EXP-1, personal communication, May 15, 2024; EXP-11, personal communication, June 6, 2024).

Concerning bilateralism, one of the interviewees stated that Western Balkan states have their answer to the old Kissingerian problem of whom they must call when they want to talk to Europe – they tend to call **individual Member States** (EXP-1, personal communication, May 15, 2024; EXP-7, personal communication, June 3, 2024). The transactional approach manifested in ‘loss-and-gain’ calculations and seeing the EU as a **financial provider**. One of the experts compared the relations between the

Western Balkan states and the EU to a ‘bad parent, a rich and lousy parent; you're throwing money at your kids to solve problems, but you don't have time to speak with them or share with them’ (EXP-3, personal communication, May 20, 2024).

Considering these tendencies, one can hardly expect any potential countering strategies by the EU to succeed. In addition, given the specifics of local political regimes, there is a substantial risk of **benevolently devised actions to subvert the Russian hybrid activities exploited by local actors** for cementing undemocratic practices. One of the experts also highlighted a peculiar case of potentially controversial and paradoxical EU involvement: due to the expulsion of Russian media from certain private Western networks operating in Serbia, accessing these media sources now requires using platforms such as YouTube and other channels. Despite Serbia not being classified as a democratic country in most assessments, it maintains a degree of Internet freedom, as noted by Freedom House. If there were an initiative to encourage the Serbian government to curb Russian manipulations through the Internet, the government, characterised by its hybrid nature, might endorse the idea ostensibly. However, rather than targeting Russian propaganda, the government could exploit this initiative to suppress independent domestic Internet outlets (EXP-8, personal communication, June 4, 2024).

## Chapter 5. Discussion

This chapter will answer the research questions in this thesis based on collected findings from elite and expert interviews and EU official documents. Moreover, it discusses how the selected theoretical framework was applied to the findings presented in the previous chapter, reflects on the validity and compatibility of expectations generated, and suggests further research avenues.

### 5.1. Research Questions Answers

Based on a thematic analysis of the three elite and twelve expert interviews and a set of EU official documents on the EU-Western Balkan interaction, the following responses to this thesis's research questions have been given.

#### 5.1.1. Substance of the EU's Response towards the Russian Influence in the Western Balkans

The EU's response to Russian engagement in the Western Balkans from 2014 to 2021 was characterised by a **lack of strategic coherence and effectiveness**. Despite growing concerns about Russia's influence in the region, particularly following the annexation of Crimea, the EU's actions remained largely **reactive and situational**. The EU's approach primarily involved **using existing instruments**, such as funding civil society organisations and counter-disinformation efforts. However, these measures were often criticised as inadequate and not part of a broader, long-term strategy to counter Russian influence effectively.

Throughout this period, the EU paid uneven attention to the presence of third actors in the Western Balkans until the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. However, even when the topic became relevant, the EU tended to **generalise Russian activities alongside those of other external actors** like China rather than addressing the challenges of Russian interference or, sometimes, **prioritising the Chinese influence** more. This broad-brush approach diluted the focus needed to tackle Russia's unique methods of influence. The EU's response to Russian disinformation was particularly weak, relying heavily on fact-checking initiatives that were not robust enough to counter the pervasive nature of Russian propaganda.

Moreover, the EU's strategic initiatives, such as the Berlin Process and the 2018 Credible Enlargement Perspective, were viewed as **superficial substitutes for real enlargement** rather than substantive responses to Russian influence. These initiatives were criticised for lacking the depth and focus needed to address the core issues in the Western Balkans. The EU's **tendency to support local autocrats** in the name of stability further weakened its position, as this approach was seen as counterproductive to building genuine resilience against external interference, including that of Russia.

#### 5.1.2. Reasons behind the EU's response

The EU's response to Russian actions in the Western Balkans between 2014 and 2021 was shaped by a **combination of internal challenges, external pressures, and a complex relationship with Russia that influenced its overall strategy**. One of the primary reasons for the EU's response was the **series of internal crises** that the Union faced during this period, including the global financial crisis, the Greek debt crisis, Brexit, and the COVID-19 pandemic. These crises demanded significant attention and resources, leading to a deprioritisation of the Western Balkans and a focus on crisis management rather than proactive engagement. The refugee crisis, mainly through the Balkan migration route, further highlighted the EU's **security-oriented approach** to the region, with stability taking precedence over long-term strategic planning.

Another critical factor was the EU's **institutional dynamics**, particularly the unanimity requirement in decision-making processes, which hindered a unified approach to foreign policy and enlargement. The friction between EU member states and central institutions often led to a cautious approach to enlargement, driven by concerns about the EU's absorption capacity and the need to strengthen the Union before expanding. This cautious stance delayed the accession process for Western Balkan countries and limited the EU's ability to counter Russian influence effectively.

The EU's **complex relationship with Russia** also played a significant role in shaping its response. Despite the annexation of Crimea in 2014 being a turning point in EU-Russia relations, the EU's reaction was not as decisive as it could have been. Economic and energy ties between the EU and Russia continued, leading to an ambiguous relationship where Russia was seen as a partner and a rival. This ambiguity translated into a lack of clear and effective policies to counter Russian influence in the Western Balkans as the EU struggled to reconcile its economic interests with its geopolitical concerns.

Furthermore, the **nature of Russian influence in the Western Balkans**, characterised by indirect, hybrid methods that exploited systemic vulnerabilities and historical ties, posed significant challenges for the EU. The Union's traditional tools, designed to counter economic influence, proved inadequate in addressing Russian engagement's fluid and ideational nature in the region. This ontological difference in how the EU and Russia operated further complicated the EU's response, as the Union was not well-equipped to counter Russia's low-cost, high-impact methods, such as exploitation of inherent vulnerabilities and media propaganda.

A related factor was the **EU's identity crisis as an international actor**. It stems from its struggle to balance its normative self-perception with the geopolitical realities it faces, particularly in the Western Balkans. This inconsistency weakened the EU's credibility and effectiveness, as its slow, technocratic approach failed to address real-world challenges. The EU's leverage in enlargement processes diminished, and its efforts to counter foreign influence, like Russian disinformation, were ineffective. Internal challenges, including undemocratic tendencies within Member States, further undermined its ability to project its values abroad.

Lastly, **local political elites** in the Western Balkans played a crucial role in perpetuating Russian influence by balancing their relationships with the EU, Russia, and other powers like China. These elites often used their ties with Moscow to leverage their relations with the EU, exploiting geopolitical tensions for domestic political advantage. This pragmatic approach allowed them to avoid EU criticism and maintain their hold on power, further weakening the EU's influence in the region and complicating its efforts to promote stability and democracy. As a result, the EU's response to Russian interference in the Western Balkans remained reactive, situational, and insufficient to counter the challenges posed by Russian engagement effectively.

## 5.2. Theoretical discussion and additional insights

For this thesis, research expectations were formulated based **on two theoretical frameworks**: the Risse-Babayan triangle of relations between a democracy promoter, an illiberal regional power, and a target country to explain the reasons behind the EU response and Wigell's concept of democratic deterrence to describe the substance of the EU response (Babayan & Risse, 2017; Wigell, 2021). Upon completion of the data analysis, a detailed reflection on the validity of the said theoretical underpinning is possible.

The findings of this thesis have yielded peculiar results for the relevance of **democratic deterrence theory** in explaining the substance of the EU's response. Namely, at the level of EU official communications, the response broadly aligns with the instruments suggested by Wigell, primarily within the scope of **democratic resilience**. Specifically, the EU formulates its response to third-country malign

interference as a combination of resilience building, cyber security and strategic communications, and support for civil society and independent media. These actions largely align with the concept of activation of civil society (support for open media, watchdogs and investigative journalists, media literacy, etc.). At the same time, not all elements of resilience, as presented by Wigell, have been found in the EU response, including **increased transparency** (funding reports, registries of foreign organisations, national security clauses in investments, etc.) and **broad inclusion** (public awareness of hybrid threats, inclusion of minorities, update of electoral procedures, etc.). In this respect, however, one should underline that the concept of resilience by Wigell is multifaceted, while in the analysed EU documents, it is **left without a separate interpretation**. At the same time, the findings present this response as **desirable rather than actual**, especially considering the **emphasis on the external legitimisation of stabilitocracy**, which stands in opposite to the core idea of democratic deterrence – namely, response to the hybrid threats without sacrificing the core values the actor is based on and aims to protect.

On the other hand, the second component of democratic deterrence—**compellence**, comprised of communicating response thresholds, using sanctions, and promoting democracy within the adversary's state — was **not observed in the EU's response** to Russia's engagement in the Western Balkans. Namely, special attention was accorded to **strategic communications**; these were intended to underscore the EU's contribution to the Western Balkans rather than explicitly delineate the red lines regarding Russian interference in the Western Balkans. Moreover, while some experts suggested that the EU should have used **sanctions** against the agents of Russian influence in the Western Balkans, which broadly confirms the premises of compellence, it was not the action the EU implemented practically.

Finally, the assessment of democratic deterrence theory applicability has been limited due to its **intra-state nature**. Namely, the theory has the character of a desirable road map of actions a national government should (aspire) to implement within its national borders. In the case of the EU's response towards the Russian influence in the Western Balkans, one needs to account for the **externality of the EU position** – even if the enlargement process and ensuing reforms are concentrated on internal reforms, the EU has limited capacity to enforce the implementation of required changes, as is demonstrated by the moderate results of conditionality in the past twenty years. In a similar venue, in a case where the essence of response to a third actor's malign interference is preparing the state's immune system to withstand the hybrid threats, especially if the adversary's actions are vaguely attributable or material, democratic deterrence from external actors is unlikely to bear fruit.

The results of this thesis have also yielded engaging implications for the trilateral framework of interaction between the democracy promoter, an illiberal regional power, and the target country by Risse and Babayan, which was used to explore the potential explanatory factors for the EU response.

First, in the case of the EU's response to Russia's engagement in the Western Balkans, **preference for stability over further democracy promotion** did play a role. However, it has been **more nuanced** than the Risse-Babayan triangular framework suggested.

First and foremost, **stability and security** within the Western Balkans have always been a **primary goal** for the EU. In the eyes of the EU, the **local political elites guarantee this stability**. **Enforcing further democratisation** violates the **unspoken contract** between the EU as the external donor and primary collateral in crises coming from the Western Balkans on the one hand and the local political elites interested in keeping their positions of power on the other. This role of **stability-keepers** gives the local stabilitocrats a unique opportunity to **profess illiberal political practices while endorsed and supported by the EU**. The **Russian factor's** presence in this respect **satisfies the electorate and teases the EU with a potential U-turn** should it alter the existing order of operation, and the **EU is not responding to the Russian actions because they are not the source of problems with democracy in the region – the local political elites and conditions are**.

Second, in the period under consideration, due to major intervening factors like the **Syrian civil war** and the refugee crisis, the local political elites gained additional weight in the eyes of the EU, as they presumably not only **safeguarded the inherent regional conflicts and crises** but also helped the EU **deal with refugees and illegal migration** by being a transit point for people aiming into the EU, hence a bottleneck.

Finally, during the period under consideration, the **EU underwent a series of internal crises** (Brexit, right turn in Hungary and Poland, COVID-19, etc.) threatening its **existence and stability**. The issue of its own stability and survival, including the threats coming from the Western Balkans, **conditioned the priorities** regarding foreign policy, including enlargement, democracy promotion, and external outreach in general.

Therefore, theory-wise, the Risse-Babayan theoretical framework could have benefited from the inclusion of **internal democratic actor dynamics** and **security concerns stemming outside the target country** situation.

The second primary trigger for a potential response, namely, **relations between the democracy promoter and illiberal power**, namely, their strategic character, as evidenced by the data analysed, also has demonstrated interesting results. First, the state of relations between the EU and Russia seems to have played **a more substantial role in the Russian actions** in the Western Balkans than in the EU response. Namely, Russia attaches **no significant strategic value** to the Western Balkans, using it as one of the EU's strategic **vulnerabilities**, generating crises and disrupting the EU policies. These actions became particularly prominent since the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the ensuing turmoil in EU-Russian relations; hence, **whatever Russia does in the Western Balkans is the function of its relations with the EU and the West**.

Second, while the EU's dependency on Russia regarding energy and trade has been frequently referenced as an explanatory factor, it seems that the **EU's policies concerning the Russian actions in Ukraine are more revealing** to the extent that this condition is crucial in determining the EU response. In all possible dimensions, the presence of Russia in the Western Balkans is incomparable to its presence and actions in Ukraine. If the EU was unwilling to sacrifice its relations with Russia over blatant violations of international law in Ukraine, one can hardly imagine why it should have responded to Russian media spinning anti-EU narratives in the Western Balkans.

Hence, the Risse-Babayan theoretical framework could benefit from **enunciating the condition of overall relations between a democracy promoter and an illiberal power** by using it not only to explain the democracy promoter's response but also an **illiberal power's motivation** behind anti-democratic practices in the third states.

Turning to second-order conditioning factors, the Risse-Babayan attention to both actors' **leverage over the region** is largely confirmed. Namely, the EU is uniquely positioned in the Western Balkans, being the largest investor, donor, trade partner, state-builder, and region-shaper. This strong presence may have imbued the EU with a false sense of security regarding the strategic orientations of the local political leaders and, hence, calibrated the level of concern attached to the Russian presence in the region. On the other hand, the Russian lack of presence on the ground and its incidental and uneven influence in the region might have also affected the EU's strategic calculations regarding the severity of Russian threats. Another factor directly stems from the need to account for the **nature of illiberal actor's influence in the target country**. As data analysis demonstrates, Russia's instruments in the Western Balkans are not exactly institutionalised and effectively targetable with material means. In this respect, a comparison with China became handy, where the *modus operandi* includes the regulatory part (enforcing EU norms

and standards in Chinese activities, including critical infrastructure, public procurement and finances) and the practical part (enhancing connectivity via infrastructural projects, etc). With Russia, the answer is more complicated, as its sources of influence are **not exactly comprehensible** and stem from the **systemic vulnerabilities** of the region rather than being imported by Russia.

In this respect, Risse-Babayan's attention to the **presence of conflicts and the overall security context** of the region is largely justified and yields two interesting results for this thesis. First, the presence of bilateral conflicts and the lingering effects of the former ones are an **enabling factor** and **conducive environment for Russian influence**. Second, these same conflicts are **security risks for the EU**, and its **persistent support for the local autocratic regimes** lies in their status as '**guardians of order**'. In turn, the primacy of stability and security conditions the EU's enforcement of democratisation and resolution of these conflicts, hence, one of the sources of Russian influence.

Another intervening factor Risse and Babayan identified is **societal support for democracy promotion**, or broadly – democracy promoter as an actor – is also correct. The relatively **low levels of support for the EU's accession in the Western Balkans** and strong Eurosceptical societal views are not selective in their interpretation of various EU activities in the region, including democracy promotion. Moreover, even the EU supporters are primarily disappointed in the EU's **implicit and explicit support for the non-democratic regimes in the Western Balkans**, which is, in essence, a self-defeating practice undermining the EU's normative credibility. In turn, the widespread dissatisfaction with the EU policies is filtered out in **immense support for Russia**, magnified by its cultural and historical links and anti-Western rhetoric. Thus, ironically, **one of the sources of Russian influence in the Western Balkans is the region's dissatisfaction with the EU policies**.

As noted by Bošković in his application of the Risse-Babayan triangular framework, one of the intervening factors in the democracy promoter's response is **the presence of another democracy promoter** within the same target country (Bošković, 2020). In this respect, the US's role in bringing Montenegro to NATO has been referenced numerous times as an example of another actor stepping in to compensate for the EU's policies. On the other hand, the Risse-Babayan framework could also benefit from accounting for **the presence of another illiberal actor within a target country**, in the context of this thesis – China. Namely, the presence of another major illiberal actor has been evident through the EU documents, where, in one case, **China was singled out**, while in the rest of the documents – **all external actors were presented as one group**. This raises a question on the validity of **differentiating between various external actors** in terms of their perception by the EU and instruments used to counter each or all of them. On the other hand, an interesting aspect is the interaction of two or more illiberal actors within the same region and how this impacts the democracy promoter's response.

Finally, the attention Risse and Babayan attach to the **internal conditions of the target country** within their triangular framework is entirely justified by this thesis's findings. Notably, the position of **local elites** is unique in this respect, as they are not only using the presence of third actors, including Russia, for their gain but even **encouraging and benefiting from it** in their relations with the EU. At the same time, given the EU's **prioritisation of stability over democracy**, they manage to stay in the position of power without the need to adhere to the EU's requirements.

Overall, the primary weakness of the Risse-Babayan trilateral framework remains the indefinite nature of the potential response by a democracy promoter and its degree or salience. The framework is formulated as two basic scenarios with two primary triggers and many conditioning and intervening factors. Thus, one must build in a separate conceptualisation of potential response for its effective employment. Moreover, one can hardly imagine a situation where the response question has only two options – negative or affirmative. One should account for the presence of 'shades', implicit mechanisms

where the response can be built in or a scenario where triggers do come off, while the response does not happen. All these reservations serve as potential research hypotheses to be tested using other cases.

## **Conclusions**

This thesis explored the complex dynamics of EU-Russian relations in the Western Balkans between 2014 and 2021, focusing on the EU's response to Russian influence in the region. Combining elite and expert interviews with the analysis of EU official communications, this thesis presented a comprehensive picture of the EU response and its underlying rationales.

This thesis argued that while the EU recognised the increasing presence of Russia and the potential threats it posed to the stability and integration of the Western Balkans, the measures adopted were frequently reactive and lacked a coherent strategic vision. Despite recognising the threat, the EU relied on existing instruments, such as funding civil society organisations and countering disinformation. Still, these measures were often criticised as inadequate and not part of a comprehensive, long-term strategy. The EU's focus on Russian activities was inconsistent, particularly when compared to its approach to other external actors like China, which diluted the specific attention needed to address Russia's unique methods of influence. Strategic EU initiatives were seen as superficial and failed to address the core issues in the region, while the EU's support for local autocrats in the name of stability further undermined its efforts to build resilience against external interference, including that of Russia.

This thesis also presented a set of reasons for the EU's response to Russian influence in the Western Balkans, influenced by internal challenges, external pressures, and the complex nature of its relationship with Russia. During this period, the EU grappled with several internal crises, which diverted attention and resources, leading to the deprioritisation of the Western Balkans and a focus on crisis management rather than proactive engagement. The refugee crisis, which heavily impacted the Balkan migration route, further underscored the EU's security-oriented approach, prioritising stability over long-term strategic planning. Additionally, the EU's institutional dynamics, particularly the unanimity requirement in decision-making, hindered a unified foreign policy approach and complicated the enlargement process, limiting the EU's ability to effectively counter Russian influence in the region.

The EU's ambiguous relationship with Russia also played a crucial role in shaping its response. Despite the annexation of Crimea in 2014 being a significant turning point, the EU's reaction remained cautious, influenced by ongoing economic and energy ties with Russia. This ambivalence translated into unclear policies in the Western Balkans as the EU struggled to balance its economic interests with geopolitical concerns. Moreover, the nature of Russian influence in the region, characterised by indirect and hybrid methods that exploited systemic vulnerabilities and historical ties, posed significant challenges for the EU. Traditional tools designed to counter economic influence proved inadequate against Russia's fluid and ideational strategies, including media propaganda and exploitation of local vulnerabilities. This ontological difference in approach further complicated the EU's efforts, as it was not well-equipped to counter Russia's low-cost, high-impact methods.

Local political elites in the Western Balkans further exacerbated the situation by balancing their relationships with the EU, Russia, and other powers like China. These elites often leveraged their ties with Moscow to manipulate their relations with the EU, using geopolitical tensions to their domestic political advantage. This pragmatic approach allowed them to avoid EU criticism and maintain their hold on power, further weakening the EU's influence and complicating its efforts to promote stability and democracy in the region. As a result, the EU's response to Russian interference remained largely reactive, situational, and insufficient to effectively counter the challenges posed by Russian engagement.

The thesis research was based on the Risse-Babayan triangular framework, which examines the interactions between a democracy promoter, an illiberal regional power, and a target country, and Wigell's concept of democratic deterrence, which outlines the substance of the EU's response to Russian influence in the Western Balkans.

The findings show that while the EU's communications align with Wigell's concept, not all aspects were implemented. Key elements like increased transparency and broad inclusion were missing, and the concept of resilience was more aspirational than actual, especially given the EU's practical focus on stabilitocracy, which contradicts democratic deterrence principles. Additionally, the compellence aspect, which involves setting response thresholds and sanctions, was absent in the EU's response. The theory's intra-state focus limits its applicability to the EU's external position in the Western Balkans and should be refined to account for such externality.

The Risse-Babayan framework provided useful insights but required refinement. The EU's preference for stability over democracy was more nuanced than the framework suggested, specifically in the phenomenon of stabilitocracy, leading to support for local elites who maintain order, even if they engage in illiberal practices. The framework would benefit from incorporating the democracy promoter's internal dynamics and crises, broader security concerns, and the overall state of relations between democracy promoters and illiberal powers as a motivation for the latter's actions in the target country. It should also account for the nature of illiberal power's influence and the presence of several illiberal actors within the same region, as well as the effects of this on the potential response policies. The binary nature of responses in the framework should be expanded to include more nuanced and incremental actions, reflecting the complexity of real-world scenarios. These refinements provide a more comprehensive understanding of the EU's response and suggest areas for further research.

Overall, this thesis contributes to the existing literature on the EU external governance and democracy promotion, EU policies in the Western Balkans, and discussion on the EU actorness in the IR by offering a unique perspective of the interaction between EU internal and external dynamics, the complex geopolitical environment of the Western Balkans and a third-party actor. More specifically, it enriches the unexplored field of the EU response towards the Russian engagement in the Western Balkans. Further research could concentrate on applying the formulated theoretical framework to the EU or US actions in other regions or exploring the theoretical additions, such as the presence of two illiberal powers within the same region and its influence on the democracy promoter's strategy. Finally, as the geopolitical landscape continues to evolve, particularly in the wake of the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the lessons drawn from this period will remain crucial for policymakers and scholars alike.

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## **Annex I. List of interview questions**

1. How did the EU perceive Russian policies in the Western Balkans in 2014-2021? Was Russia perceived differently than other external actors (e.g. China, Turkey)?
2. How did Russian involvement in the Western Balkans influence EU strategy and policies in the region in 2014-2021?
3. What were the key concerns related to the Russian presence in the region from an EU perspective in 2014-2021? Which components of EU regional strategy were impacted by Russian actions?
4. Were there any targeted, concrete responses from Brussels concerning Russian involvement? If so, what? If not, why not?
5. Were the broad changes in the EU's Western Balkans strategy since 2014 (the Berlin Process, new enlargement methodology since 2020, 2018 Credible Perspective for Western Balkans, etc.) influenced by Russian engagement in the region? If so, how?
6. What could the EU have done differently vis-a-vis Russian influence in the region in 2014-2021? What were some of the reasons that this approach wasn't taken?
7. What were the key factors shaping the EU response to the Russian activities in the Western Balkans in 2014-2021?
8. How did the relationship between the EU and Russia, or between Russia and certain Member States, dictate the EU's response to its actions in the region in 2014-2021?
9. How did the nature of Russian influence in the region, its approach and tools/methods, and receptivity (or otherwise) of the countries influence the EU response?
10. How did internal EU dynamics (Member State/institutional) or internal issues (Brexit, refugee crisis, etc.) influence the response to Russian actions in the region?

## Annex II. Ethical Approval



College of Social  
Sciences

Ethics Committee for Non-Clinical Research Involving Human Subjects

### Notification of Ethics Application Outcome – UG and PGT Student Applications

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#### Application Details

Undergraduate Student Research Ethics Application  Postgraduate Student Research Ethics Application

Application Number: PGT/SPS/2024/020/IMCEERES

Applicant's Name: Olena Yurchenko

Project Title: Exploring the Reasons behind the EU's indifferent Response towards Russian Engagement in the Western Balkans (2014-2021)

Application Status: Fully Approved

Date of Review: 02/05/2024

Start Date of Approval select date End Date of Approval select date

**NB: Only if the applicant has been given approval can they proceed with their data collection with effect from the date of approval.**

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#### Recommendations (where changes are required)

Where changes are required by reviewers all applicants must respond in the relevant boxes to the recommendations of the Committee and provide this as the Resubmission Document to explain the changes you have made to the application as well as amending the documents. **Changes to the application form or supporting documents should be highlighted either in block highlight or in red coloured text to assist the reviewers.**

All resubmitted application documents should then be provided.

**Approval Subject to Amendments** means that the applicant can proceed with data collection with effect from the date of approval, but amendments must be fulfilled.

**Amendments Subject to SEF** should be submitted to ethics administrator.

**If your application is rejected** a new application must be submitted to the ethics administrator. Where recommendations are provided, they should be responded to and this document provided as part of the new application. A new reference number will be generated.

## Annex III. Participant Information Sheet



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### **PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET**

#### **Title of project and researcher details**

**Title:** Exploring the Reasons behind the EU's indifferent Response towards Russian Engagement in the Western Balkans (2014-2021)

**Researcher: Olena Yurchenko**

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**Supervisors: Anna Dekalchuk, Sead Turcalo, Shpend Kursani**

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**Course:** Erasmus Mundus International Master in Central and East European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies

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*You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted as part of a master's degree thesis project. Before agreeing to participate, you must read the following information about the study's focus and what participation will mean. Please take your time to read it thoroughly and talk it through with others if you would like. If there is anything you are unsure about or if you would like more information, please get in contact with the researcher. Take as much time as you need to decide whether you will participate. Thank you!*

#### **What is the purpose of the study?**

This research explores the policies of the EU regarding Russia's involvement in the Western Balkans in 2014-2021. In addressing this inquiry, the study endeavours to uncover the rationale behind the EU's stance toward Russian engagement in the Western Balkans while using various theoretical frameworks. However, the expertise exhibited by the political analysts and policy-makers dealing with the topic is required to complement the theoretical framework devised by the researcher.

#### **Why have I been chosen?**

You've been selected because of your expertise in EU policy-making and understanding of the Western Balkans' geopolitical dynamics. Your insights into EU strategies and regional developments are essential for grasping the complexities surrounding EU policies in the region and its response to Russian involvement. Your perspective as an EU official or expert will contribute significantly to unravelling the research puzzle regarding the EU's stance towards Russian engagement in the region. Your understanding of regional dynamics, alongside insights into enlargement policies and geopolitical shifts, will help shed light on the intricate dynamics shaping the Western Balkans.

### **Do I have to take part?**

Your participation is completely voluntary, and you may refuse at any time without explaining why you deny participating or continuing to participate in the interview. Even after the interview, you may always contact the interviewer to retract your participation until the 30th of June 2024.

### **What will happen to me if I take part?**

An interview of approximately 60 minutes will be organised online via acceptable online communications tools, like Zoom or MS Teams, approved for research purposes by the University. The interviewer will take notes of your answers and record an audio simultaneously. A transcript will be made of this audio, which you can request and modify at any time until 31 days after your interview. During the interview, you will be asked to share your insights on the EU's response to Russian policies in the Balkans. Specifically, your perspectives on the EU's approach, your observations on the interactions between the EU and Russia in the region, and your analysis of the factors influencing these dynamics will be discussed. After the interview concludes, you will be asked to read and sign a consent form about using your personal information and interview.

### **Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?**

Your personal information, such as your name and contact information, will not be published and will be deleted after the interview. Instead, pseudonyms will be used. The information will be stored on the Glasgow University cloud and password-protected and encrypted, no one but the interviewer will be given access. However, your profession and the geographical area you work in may be identifiable. Your occupation will only be disclosed if you consent to this in writing, and your organisation's name will not be disclosed, only your own role. Furthermore, your information may be legally requested through a Freedom of Information demand. Please note that assurances on confidentiality will be strictly adhered to unless evidence of wrongdoing or potential harm is uncovered. In such cases, the University of Glasgow may be obliged to contact relevant statutory bodies/agencies.

### **What will happen to the project and the results of the research study?**

Upon completion, the thesis will be made available via the intranet (internal network) to the supervisors and reviewers from involved universities – Universities of Glasgow, Tartu and Sarajevo. Upon the defense and award of the degree, the thesis will be published in the online repository of the University of Tartu. The transcripts and recordings of the interviews are confidential and will be saved for the next 10 years after the submission of the project before

being deleted. This information will be stored on a Glasgow cloud, password-protected and encrypted.

### **Who has reviewed the study?**

The study has been reviewed and approved by the School of Social and Political Sciences Research Ethics committee members at the University of Glasgow. The School's Ethics lead can be contacted by email ([socpol-pgt-ethics@glasgow.ac.uk](mailto:socpol-pgt-ethics@glasgow.ac.uk)) if you have any further questions about this study.

# PRIVACY NOTICE

**Privacy Notice for Participation in Research Project:** Exploring the Reasons behind the EU's indifferent Response towards Russian Engagement in the Western Balkans (2014-2021) )

## Your Personal Data

**The University of Glasgow** will be what's known as the 'Data Controller' of your personal data processed in relation to your participation in the research project "Exploring the EU response towards Russian engagement in the Western Balkans (2014-2021): substance and reasons behind". This privacy notice will explain how The University of Glasgow will process your personal data.

## Why we need it

We are collecting basic personal data such as your name and contact details in order to conduct our research. We need your name and contact details to arrange interviews and potentially follow-up on the information you have provided.

We only collect data that we need for the research project. I will de-identify the research data from the interview, such as your name, through pseudonymisation. Your personal data and contact information will be deleted once the research project has been completed.

Please note that your confidentiality may be impossible to guarantee for example due to the size of the participant group, and the location of the interview. Please see accompanying **Participant Information Sheet**.

## Legal basis for processing your data

We must have a legal basis for processing all personal data. As this processing is for Academic Research, we will be relying upon **Task in the Public Interest** in order to process the basic personal data that you provide. For any special categories data collected we will be processing this on the basis that it is **necessary for archiving purposes, scientific or historical research purposes or statistical purposes**.

Alongside this, in order to fulfil our ethical obligations, we will ask for your **Consent** to take part in the study Please see accompanying **Consent Form**.

## What we do with it and who we share it with

All the personal data you submit is processed only by me, while the research data will be available to academic supervisors at the University of Glasgow, Tartu and Sarajevo. In addition, security measures are in place to ensure that your personal data remains safe - the information will be stored on the Glasgow University cloud and password-protected and encrypted, only the interviewer will be given access. Please consult the **Consent form** and

**Participant Information Sheet** which accompanies this notice.

Upon completion of the project and defense of the thesis, it will be published online by the University of Tartu. As a participant, you will be provided with a copy of this research's findings and details of any subsequent publications or outputs on request.

### **What are your rights?\***

GDPR provides that individuals have certain rights including: to request access to, copies of and rectification or erasure of personal data and to object to processing. In addition, data subjects may also have the right to restrict the processing of the personal data and to data portability. You can request access to the information we process about you at any time.

If at any point you believe that the information we process relating to you is incorrect, you can request to see this information and may in some instances request to have it restricted, corrected, or erased. You may also have the right to object to the processing of data and the right to data portability.

Please note that as we are processing your personal data for research purposes, the ability to exercise these rights may vary as there are potentially applicable research exemptions under the GDPR and the Data Protection Act 2018. For more information on these exemptions, please see [UofG Research with personal and special categories of data](#).

If you wish to exercise any of these rights, please submit your request via the [webform](#) or contact [dp@gla.ac.uk](mailto:dp@gla.ac.uk)

### **Complaints**

If you wish to raise a complaint on how we have handled your personal data, you can contact the University Data Protection Officer who will investigate the matter.

Our Data Protection Officer can be contacted at [dataprotectionofficer@glasgow.ac.uk](mailto:dataprotectionofficer@glasgow.ac.uk)

If you are not satisfied with our response or believe we are not processing your personal data in accordance with the law, you can complain to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) <https://ico.org.uk/>

### **Who has ethically reviewed the project?**

This project has been ethically approved via the College of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee or relevant School Ethics Forum in the College.

### **How long do we keep it for?**

Your **personal** data will be retained by the University only for as long as is necessary for processing and no longer than the period of ethical approval from 01/05/2023 to 31/08/2024. After this time, personal data will be securely deleted.

Your **research** data will be retained for a period of ten years in line with the University of Glasgow Guidelines. Specific details in relation to research data storage are provided on the Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form which accompany this notice.

## Annex V. Consent Form



College of Social  
Sciences

### Consent Form

Title of Project: Exploring the Reasons behind the EU's indifferent Response towards Russian Engagement in the Western Balkans (2014-2021))

**Researcher: Olena Yurchenko**

email: [2794928y@student.gla.ac.uk](mailto:2794928y@student.gla.ac.uk)

**Supervisors: Anna Dekalchuk, Sead Turcalo, Shpend Kursani**

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email: [sead.turcalo@fpn.unsa.ba](mailto:sead.turcalo@fpn.unsa.ba)

email: [shpend.kursani@ut.ee](mailto:shpend.kursani@ut.ee)

I confirm that I have read and understood the Plain Language Statement Participant Information for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw at any time without giving any reason.

I acknowledge that pseudonyms will refer to participants.

I acknowledge that there will be no effect on my employment arising from my participation or non-participation in this research.

- ♦ Material likely to identify individuals, such as name and place of residence, will be pseudonymised.
- ♦ The material will always be treated as confidential and kept in secure storage.
- ♦ The material regarding personal data will be destroyed once the project is complete, on the 31st of August, 2024.
- ♦ The material regarding research data will be retained in secure storage for ten years, until 31<sup>st</sup> August 2034, for research purposes on similar topics. Still, only the interviewer will have access to this data.
- ♦ I agree to waive my copyright to any data collected as part of this project.

I acknowledge the provision of a Privacy Notice in relation to this research project.

I consent/do not consent (delete as applicable) to audio-recorded interviews.

I agree/do not agree (delete as applicable) to participate in the above study.

Name of Participant:

Signature:

Date:

Name of Researcher: Olena Yurchenko

Signature:

Date: