

“NEVER LET A GOOD CRISIS GO TO WASTE”: STRENGTHENING EU ACTORNESS AMID INCREASED COMPETITION OF EXTERNAL ACTORS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

Abstract. In this article, we argue that while examining the Western Balkans' integration process during the Covid-19 crisis we must take into consideration not only the EU's influence but that of other powerful external actors as well. Based on the external incentives model, Russia, China and Turkey are thus analysed as competing external actors to the EU's enlargement policy in the WB. We establish that during the Covid-19 crisis these actors have been increasingly competing with the EU especially with respect to the determinacy of conditions via state propaganda and by attacking the EU's credibility with disinformation campaigns. Nevertheless, their influence in terms of the size of the rewards and domestic adoption costs has dropped in comparison to the EU as the latter has increased its rewards, strengthened conditionality and regained some of its lost credibility capabilities. The most significant change visible during the Covid-19 crisis is a further fragmentation in addressing individual WB states by Russia, China and Turkey, whereas the EU remains the only external actor capable and willing to address the entire WB region.

Keywords: *European Union, enlargement policy, Western Balkans, Russia, China, Turkey, Covid-19 crisis*

Introduction

The Covid-19 crisis calls for a re-evaluation of the Western Balkans' integration process based on Europeanisation as its main driver and calls for more “power-based explanations” of the integration process (Richter and Wunsch, 2020; Chrzova et al., 2019; Lavenex and Schimmelfennig, 2009: 792) with a consideration of the linkages of WB states with other powerful

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international actors. Namely, the crisis presents both opportunities and constraints for all external actors to consolidate their influence in the region. As previous and at times coinciding crises have shown, such as the global financial crisis of 2008, the migration crisis, Brexit and the rise of nationalism and Euroscepticism, a crisis holds the potential to challenge or even derail the European integration project. These crises not only showed the limits of solidarity and effective coordination between European Union (EU) member states but also disrupted the EU's relations with the WB. The EU's dominant partnership with WB states was somehow unchallenged in the early 2000s, but the above-mentioned internal and external challenges to the EU and WB states allowed other external actors to quickly use this opportunity to (re)introduce their presence in the region. At the same time, these crises have also partially reinforced the integration process by leading to internal economic and political reforms in the EU and reaffirmed the geopolitical importance of the WB for the EU for tackling common problems (such as migration, rise of authoritarianism etc.). In this respect, the Covid-19 crisis could either open up "the window of opportunity" (Bieber, 2020; Tocci, 2020) for both the EU and the WB to maintain the momentum of European integration; or, on the contrary, additionally limit the EU's influence in guiding political transformation in the WB by further allowing the greater engagement of other external actors like China, Russia and Turkey.

Conceptually, we build on the external incentives model by Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2017) that was primarily designed to analyse the effects of EU conditionality on non-members. Given that the EU is no longer "the only game in town" (Börzel and Schimmelfennig, 2017) and that the WB has become "a playing ground" for other powerful external actors as well, we apply this model to test its analytical power also for the relations between the region and Russia, China and Turkey. The limitation of this approach is thus its focus on the application of a conceptual model originally designed for the EU as a global actor to other external actors in the WB and not vice versa, i.e. the use of a broad, IR-originating external actors-in-a-region model (e.g. interest sphere or (inter)regionalism) applied to the WB in order to among others address the EU. The external incentives model stipulates conditions that influence the cost-benefit calculations of a target state's government and impact the effectiveness of conditionality (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2005). First, *the size and distance of EU rewards*, where membership is the highest reward that the EU can offer and the closer the date of accession moves the stronger is the 'compliance pull'. Second, *the determinacy of conditions* understood as clarity of what non-members need to do in order to meet the conditions and obtain the reward. At the same time, determinacy also depends on the relevance of conditions for the EU where certain conditions are considered as *sine qua non* and

therefore a priority for the non-members. Third, conditionality depends on *the credibility of the EU* to grant membership if conditions are met or to withhold the reward in case of non-compliance by target states. Accordingly, the EU's promises and threats depend on internal as well as external factors. Internally, credibility depends on the EU's coherence and consistency as capability elements (Bretherton and Vogler, 2006) in applying conditionality over time and with different target states. Externally, the EU's credibility increases if non-members face fewer alternative options to the EU, i.e. if there is less "cross-conditionality" by other international actors offering similar rewards at lower costs (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2020: 817). It is worth mentioning that credibility significantly depends on the perceptions held by non-members about the EU and the alternatives offered by other external actors. Last, *the size of domestic adoption costs* in non-member states determines whether (and how fast) EU conditions can be met. These costs depend on the extent to which the adoption of the EU's norms and rules endanger the hold on the power of domestic political/economic elites, on the number of veto-players that possess the capacity to block their adoption and on domestic capabilities to implement them (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2020: 818). Deriving from this and for analytical purposes, we assess the above-mentioned conditions for influence by introducing the variable of competition between external actors on a continuum from low to medium and high competition. Low competition denotes little or no effect caused by the influence of external actors to the WB's EU integration process. Medium competition denotes a minor or limited effect, while high competition determines the effect of external actors on the WB's EU integration process as significant by both acting as an external spoiler or by offering a viable alternative to the WB's accession process.

The article first discusses the EU's approach to the region and examines some recent changes made in its approach to the WB. It then turns to empirical analysis by examining the roles of China, Russia and Turkey in the region and their influence on the WB's integration process prior to the Covid-19 crisis. The methods applied are content analysis of relevant primary sources, such as the EU's strategic documents on enlargement policy and European Council Conclusions, empirically rich policy papers and official news publications of EU institutions and the governments of WB states. A similar analysis is then performed for the period since the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak until October 2020. Based on this assessment, the article concludes with a discussion to answer the research question: to what extent and how has the influence of Russia, China and Turkey in the region during the Covid-19 crisis affected the WB's integration process.

Pitfalls in the EU's approach to the Western Balkans: internal divisions and external challenges

The EU's approach to the WB has built on the premise that the prospect of membership would enable the EU to exert an influence on the political transformation of the region similar to the positive experience with the Europeanisation of Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries (Ker-Lindsay, Armakolas, Balfour and Stratulat, 2017; Grabbe, 2006; Schimmelfennig et al., 2006). However, "copy-pasting" with stabilisation additions (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2017; Richter and Wunsch, 2020; Griessler, 2020) is leading the EU's enlargement policy in WB into serious troubles, referred to as the three Cs problem; namely, stricter Conditionality, lost Credibility and rising domestic Costs. These developments have also negatively influenced the overall effectiveness of the EU's enlargement policy to the extent that the WB states have started questioning both the *size* and *distance of the reward* (full membership). The lack of a clear and consistent membership perspective from the EU has left the WB trapped "in a constant process of negotiation and reform that lacks a clear timeframe for their possible accessions" (Griessler, 2020: 2). Additional and stricter conditions for membership coupled with the EU's two-pronged strategy (simultaneous stabilisation and integration) have led to "an inconsistent application of conditionality that has thwarted its effectiveness, resulting on lower overall degrees of compliance" (Richter and Wunsch, 2020: 46). This was further exacerbated by diverging interpretations between the European Commission (EC) and the EU Council regarding *the determinacy of the conditions* and the progress made by the Western Balkan states. This has led to the problem of the perception of the EU's *lost credibility* in the eyes of the WB states. Not only have these developments cast doubt on whether the EU is eventually willing to grant membership, but they have also severely challenged the perception of the EU as a transformative power in the region. As noted by Szpala (2018), the relatively poor record in promoting pro-democratic reforms in WB may be attributed to the EU itself for often "turning a blind eye" in the case of the authoritarian and undemocratic regimes of some WB states in exchange for regional stability, which further weakens the EU's credibility (Griessler, 2020: 4). The effects of this are visible in the increasing opposition to EU accession in the region (International Republican Institute, 2020; Cameron and Leigh, 2020) and the weak compliance behaviour of the WB states (Börzel, Dimitrova and Schimmelfennig, 2017).

The most recent major setback in EU-WB relations came just a couple of months before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic at the EU summit in October 2019, where France, Denmark and the Netherlands blocked

the start of the accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia. While the reasons for this decision cannot be solely attributed to the weak performance of the two WB states, this once again confirmed what was feared by many in the WB that the EU is not yet ready to fully commit. EC President Juncker found this to be “a grave historic mistake”, while the EU’s Enlargement Commissioner Hahn stressed that this “was not a moment of glory for the EU but a matter of deep disappointment”. Reactions from the region were similar, North Macedonia’s Foreign Minister Dimitrov emphasised that “/t/he least that the European Union owes to the region is to be straightforward /.../ If there is no more consensus on the European future /.../ the citizens deserve to know,” while the Prime Minister of Albania Rama spoke of a “heavy psychological shock in the country” that has further harmed the EU’s credibility.

In February 2020, just before the actual start of the Covid-19 pandemic, the EC issued a new communication on EU policy towards the WB with the title “Enhancing the accession process – A credible EU perspective for the WB”. Some authors label this as a “face-saving exercise” (Vurmo, 2020) in order to try to regain some lost credibility after the long-stagnant accession process (Strømmen, 2019; Cameron and Leigh, 2020). The document specifically addresses some of the shortcomings of the EU’s existing approach to enlargement with regard to the credibility, conditionality and dynamics (speed) of the process. To regain credibility, the strategy calls for clear commitments on both sides – WB leaders must deliver on implementing the fundamental reforms, while the EU shall remain committed to move forward once countries meet the conditions. A re-organisation of the negotiation chapters in thematic clusters was proposed, which “will allow stronger focus on core sectors in the political dialogue”.¹ This would give EU member states’ governments more say in assessing the progress towards meeting EU standards. Also, the strategy introduces the ability for the EU to use negative conditionality, i.e. halt or even reverse the process if candidate countries stagnate or slip back in their efforts to Europeanise. At the same time, conditionality must become clearer, more transparent and focused on incentives of direct interest to citizens. More than before, this revised accession methodology emphasises the WB’s geostrategic importance and links the effectiveness of its approach to strategic communications where the EU must “raise awareness in the region of the opportunities closer integration and reforms entail, and to tackle malign third country influences”.² This indicates that the EU has started to consider other external actors in the WB as competitors or as a counter-weight to the Western dominance (Chrzova

¹ EC communication 2020: 4

² EC communication 2020: 2

et al., 2019) and perceives their interference as malign or even threatening. Many supporters of the enlargement process have thus feared that “another negative decision /on further accession negotiations/ would pave the way for Russia and Turkey to increase their influence” (Barigazzi, 2020).

The influence of external actors in the WB prior to the COVID-19 crisis

According to a recent study, the “diminishing US involvement in the region and the EU’s failure to replace it, along with EU enlargement fatigue and shifts in the global geopolitical balance of power, have created a space for non-Western actors to step in and strengthen their presence in the region” (Chrzova et al, 2019: 1). Particularly Russia, China and Turkey have recently started to challenge the pro-EU orientation of the WB by more assertively using their economic, political, historical, cultural or religious leverage. Since these states have not based their co-operation with the region on any EU-like reform conditions, their emergence and assertiveness have further diminished the symbolic meaning of the EU for the WB. With the EU no longer being the only option, it has become even more difficult for the EU to push through with its own reform agenda. The pragmatic decision of WB states to seek support elsewhere at lower costs has considerably lowered aspiring members’ motivation for reform, causing the effect of “reform fatigue” (Griessler, 2020: 4). While existing studies differ in their assessment on how significantly the scope and nature of external actors’ engagements represents a real alternative to Europe for the WB, they do agree that these powers challenge the predominant role and determine the pace of European integration in the region (Chrzova et al., 2019; Cameron and Leigh, 2020).

Our analysis looks at the engagement of three main external actors in the WB – China, Russia and Turkey – which have all demonstrated a continued determination to not only increase their presence but also that they possess the ability to act as “external spoilers” for the WB’s integration process (Reljić, 2019). While Russia and Turkey have built their relationship on long-standing historical, cultural, religious and political ties with certain countries, China is a recent actor in the region, mainly using its economic and political leverage. China, Russia and Turkey all represent autocracies that “promote an alternative economic or even ‘civilizational’ model, using all means at their disposal – from investments to soft power and coercion – to stabilize their neighbourhood and challenge Western hegemony” (Nelaeva and Semenov, 2016: 58). This is particularly relevant for WB states since they are already in the ‘grey zone’ between democracy and authoritarianism, and now have to manoeuvre between rival centres of power.

Russia: meddling with domestic politics

Russia exerts a limited economic presence in the region, mainly as an energy provider and investor in heavy industry and banking and counts on its political power to interfere in domestic affairs, e.g. objecting to Montenegro's accession to North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), supporting nationalist organisations in North Macedonia in fuelling protests. Nevertheless, its presence in the region has received strong popular support and the perception of a "friendly state" (Nelaeva and Semenov, 2016) especially in countries with a large Slavic and Orthodox population (such as Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (B&H)) where it plays the card of "the protector of Orthodox Christianity" (Chrzova et al., 2019: 11). One of the main features of Russian foreign policy in the region has been to position itself as an alternative to the Western dominance and, although it does not directly oppose EU enlargement, it has contributed to confusion and disenchantment with the EU in general. As noted by Larsen (2020: 2), "Russia appears to have embraced the role of a spoiler against Western interest in the region and views obstacles to /.../ EU integration as opportunities that it can exploit". While Russia does not perceive the WB as a sphere of privileged interest (such as Ukraine or Southern Caucasus) and has little to offer in the long term, it does take a particular geopolitical interest in using the region "in order to install a great powers 'directoriate' that will manage regional competition and cooperation" (Secieru, 2019: 1). Russia's recent more assertive posture in the WB can therefore be attributed to its regional policy of driving the EU from the Eastern Neighbourhood in order to focus on and provide stability in the WB. In this respect, Russia's pre-Covid-19 engagement in the WB has been somewhat self-constrained; there have been no signs that Russia is "willing or able to invest enough political and financial capital to match the region's already existing level of integration with the EU" (Reljić, 2019: 191). Russia also does not pose a threat to the EU's capability to determine accession conditions as EU members and WB states are quite consistent in applying foreign policy towards Russia (e.g. ongoing economic and political sanctions against Putin's regime) (Galeotti, 2019; Gould-Davies, 2018).

China: strategic encroachment through loans and infrastructure

China's engagement in the region is quite a recent phenomenon and mainly driven by its exponential economic growth. Unlike Russia, China had no previous ties with the WB with the exception of having had diplomatic relations with the communist regimes in Yugoslavia and Albania. However, since the 2000s China has become more actively engaged in the WB and

used economic diplomacy and its investment potential in order to gain an influence in the region. The creation of the '17+1'³ initiative in 2012 and the launch of its Belt and Road initiative in 2013 have further accelerated China's involvement not only in big infrastructural projects in the region (most notably in Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia and B&H) but also politically (Pavličević, 2019). These initiatives have opened new possibilities for the WB states for economic development through modernisation and access to additional funds. The Chinese model (a combination of capitalism and a political dictatorship) has been welcomed by WB leaders and relatively positively received by the population. Yet, China's involvement in the construction of critical infrastructure has also raised fears that China is deliberately creating a debt-trap for financially weaker states (e.g. Montenegro) and that it is spreading opaque business practices that only accentuate the existing problems with corruption in the region (as was the case with the construction of two highways in North Macedonia) (Chrzova et al., 2019: 4). Such Chinese foreign policy in the region holds two main implications for the EU. It has further complicated the EU accession process by decreasing the motivation in the region for the comprehensive reforms that the EU requires. This is mainly because China is free of conditionality (e.g. it neither requires nor promotes EU norms and rules regarding public tenders, transparency and anti-corruption measures). The second implication is geopolitical and is linked to China's efforts to improve its international image by buying off a group of states (and increasing their economic dependence) that are, in return, less critical of China on certain global issues (such as human rights, 5G technology, trade) (Larsen, 2020: 3). Still, given the current level of integration of the WB with the EU, China is already facing constraints on certain trading and investment arrangements that were prioritised by the EU in order to counter China's influence in the region (Pavličević, 2019: 460). Like in the case of Russia, despite being feared by other external actors in the region, China lacks both the willingness and capability to divert the WB away from the EU (Jian, 2018). Occasionally, it seems that China affects the EU more in terms of an internal actorness factor, namely capacity, as diverging standpoints towards its 17+1 economic initiative have sprung up among Northern-Western and Central-Eastern EU member states.

Turkey: asserting influence through soft power

Unlike Russia and China, Turkey has used a more soft-power approach in order to consolidate its influence in the WB (Hake and Radzyner, 2019).

³ Due to the non-recognition of Kosovo's independence, China has not included Kosovo in this regional initiative.

During the 1990s, Turkey was amongst the biggest contributors to international peacekeeping operations in the region, which also gave it a certain political leverage, especially among the Muslim population (most notably in Albania, B&H, North Macedonia and Kosovo). Turkey initially developed its WB policy in a way that demonstrates its own strategic value to Europe (Krastev, 2018), but its stalled accession negotiations with the EU have made the independent character of its policy much more visible. Namely, since the 2000s Turkish foreign policy has gained further momentum by building on its historical ties emanating from the Ottoman rule over the region and considering the WB as a “natural hinterland” for Turkish influence (Dursun-Özkanca, 2016: 35). Turkey has mostly focused on developing close cultural and economic ties through numerous institutions such as the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon İdaresi Başkanlığı – TİKA), Yunus Emre Institutes, universities and Turkish media outlets. Several scholars (see Reljić, 2019; Kočan and Arbeiter, 2019; Dursun-Özkanca, 2016; Tanasković, 2013; Hake and Radzyner, 2019) identify this as neo-Ottomanism – an ideological (religious and cultural) element in Turkish public diplomacy directed at the WB. Turkey has also strengthened its economic presence and is, after the EU, China and Russia, the fourth biggest trading partner in the region (Reljić, 2019: 188) and one of the leading investors (especially in Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia). Nevertheless, its 2015 ‘authoritarian turn’ tarnished the international image of Turkey and prevents it “to act as an example of modernization and development in the eyes of majority of the population in WB” (Larsen, 2019: 191). The increased engagement of Turkey in the region can also be seen as a direct response to its deteriorating relations with the EU and an attempt to establish itself as a regional power pursuing a pragmatic and interest-based foreign policy (Dursun-Özkanca, 2016: 43), thereby representing a constraint on EU enlargement policy towards the WB.

In Table 1, we summarise findings of the above analysis. The assessment of each element of the external incentives model (left column) for an individual external actor is additionally weighed from the perspective of how much their influence competes with the WB’s integration process led by the EU.

Table 1: INFLUENCE OF EXTERNAL ACTORS ON THE WESTERN BALKANS' INTEGRATION PROCESS PRIOR TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

	European Union	Russia	China	Turkey
size and distance of EU rewards	<i>EU membership prolonged due to EU internal and external crises</i>	<i>medium competition</i> (weak democracy based alternative model of regional governance)	<i>medium competition</i> (large economic modernisation projects)	<i>low competition</i> (economic and cultural investments)
size of WB states' adoption costs	<i>getting larger due to WB governments' political costs of domestic reforms</i>	<i>high competition</i> (political incentives for authoritarian style-friendly WB entities)	<i>high competition</i> (no conditionality for economic investments)	<i>medium competition</i> (no conditionality for cultural donations to Muslim communities)
determinacy of EU conditions	<i>clear: EU values, acquis-based and region-specific conditionality</i>	<i>low competition</i>	<i>low competition</i>	<i>low competition</i>
credibility of the EU	<i>high coherence but low consistency led to the losing of credibility</i>	<i>high competition</i> to EU's external credibility (alternative to Western liberal democracy)	<i>low competition</i> to EU's external credibility (authoritarianism, dubious business practices and disrespect of labour rights)	<i>low competition</i> to EU's external credibility (lacks legitimacy due to authoritarian turn)

Source: own empirical analysis.

The influence of external actors in the WB during the Covid-19 crisis

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic somewhat unexpectedly turned the tables and brought the WB to the very forefront of the EU's foreign policy, at least declaratorily. On 25 March 2020, North Macedonia and Albania received the green light to open accession talks from the Council. In addition, on 6 May 2020 the leaders of the EU and its member states, in consultation with WB leaders issued the Zagreb Declaration and once again affirmed the EU's "unequivocal support for the European perspective of the WB".⁴ While this came as no surprise, two important observations can be drawn from the declaration concerning the future of the WB integration process. First, the document purposely leaves out the words "enlargement" and "accession" and omits making any reference to a tangible time frame for the WB's integration into the EU. Instead, the Declaration mainly focuses on cooperation for tackling the Covid-19 outbreak and the post-pandemic recovery, coupled with the need for continued reforms and "tangible

⁴ Zagreb Declaration, 2020

progress” of the WB region. While the summit was praised for its show of strong solidarity with the WB that was backed by a EUR 3.3 billion worth recovery package⁵, some commentators (Vurmo, 2020) fear that this could reinstate the EU’s old enlargement modus of committing to the region by focusing on stability at the expense of supporting democracy.

Second, for the first time in EU–WB relations, the declaration directly refers to third-state actors “seeking to undermine the European perspective of the region”.⁶ It also calls on all of the WB’s partners to “progress towards full alignment with EU foreign policy positions, notably on issues where major common interests are at stake, and to act accordingly”.⁷ This indicates that the EU perceives the Covid-19 outbreak as having significantly increased the competition for influence in the region, with other powerful international actors stepping in and using the crisis to increase their influence.⁸ Despite the fact that the EU’s “support and cooperation goes far beyond what any other partner has provided to the region,”⁹ this reference also indicates that the EU has become more aware of potential risks to its regional prevalence, especially if WB countries align themselves too closely with other external actors that challenge western interventionism or advance their own geo-political interests (Visoka, 2019; Griessler, 2020).

The first weeks of the EU’s Covid-19 crisis response were foremost characterised by internal dysfunctionalities – a clear lack of solidarity among EU countries, unilaterally closed borders and disputes over the (financial) vision for common measures – that hindered the idea of ‘being in the same boat’. In addition, the initial response did not consider the needs of the WB states as the EU banned exports of medical supplies to the WB countries and excluded them from its own recovery package. Although this changed in the course of the pandemic, when the WB were included in the EU joint procurement of personal protective equipment¹⁰ and the “green lane” border crossing arrangements (Cameron and Leigh, 2020), it has left enough space for other external actors to increase their outreach to the region (Emmott, 2020) and further undermined the EU’s credibility in the WB states.

The EU’s most recent Economic and Investment Plan for the Western

⁵ *Zagreb Declaration, 2020*

⁶ *Zagreb Declaration, 2020*

⁷ *Emphasis in the original*

⁸ *Historical reminder is in place of ‘balkanisation’ – a term coined by external Great Powers’ meddling in the Balkans area since the second half of the 19th century by trading with territories and alignments of small local political entities which were unable to provide for their own stability or regional security (Bojinović Fenko, 2010: 73).*

⁹ *Zagreb Declaration, 2020*

¹⁰ *This decision was corrected on 14 April 2020 when the EC narrowed down export authorisation requirements to protective masks only and extended geographical and humanitarian exemptions (European Commission, 2020).*

Balkans – EUR 9 billion in funding for investment in the areas of transport, energy, green and digital transition, to create sustainable growth and jobs – is the latest example of the EU trying to reiterate its position in the WB by investing more than others and tailoring its activities to the region’s needs. As noted by Cameron and Leigh (2020), this plan was “needed to tackle decades of underinvestment in infrastructure, an area in which China is particularly active”. In the words of Joseph Borell, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, the EU is finally backing its “Enlargement Package assessment with action” (European Commission, 2020: 1).¹¹ This clearly links the increased funding and investment opportunities for the WB with progress in fundamental reforms that are in line with European values.

Contrary to the EU’s slow and lukewarm initial crisis response, Russia, China and Turkey attempted to fill this broadening geopolitical gap (Keil and Stahl, forthcoming) from the very beginning in two defining ways.¹² First, China, Russia and Turkey immediately offered the WB medical assistance (masks, personnel/doctors, respirators), which helped them consolidate their media image as trustworthy partners (Cameron and Leigh, 2020). Second, China, Russia and Turkey also engaged in a number of negative reporting, fake news and disinformation activities that aimed to portray the EU as a selfish actor that is exploiting the crisis to advance its own interests (EEAS Special Report, 2020) and to criticise the EU’s assistance for being (too) late. This has, according to several practitioners, experts and academics (Alexandris, 2020; Bieber et al., 2020; Cameron and Leigh, 2020; Ivković, 2020; Griessler, 2020; Prelec, 2020), further dulled the EU’s image in the WB.

China: implementing mask diplomacy

From the very onset of the Covid-19 crisis (and since it was the first country to be hit by the coronavirus), China attempted to conduct a region-wide policy with Serbia as the focal point of its “mask diplomacy” in the WB (Vladisavljev, 2020). China has heavily relied on its economic influence in Serbia and been able to further consolidate the narrative of its role as a big power in the region. At the same time, Serbian political leaders have reinforced this narrative and engaged in aggressive propaganda¹³ that has

¹¹ The EC also adopted the 2020 Enlargement Package, its annual assessment of the implementation of fundamental reforms in the Western Balkan partners and Turkey, presented guidelines for the Green Agenda in the WB, and created the WB Guarantee facility (EC, 2020: 2).

¹² According to Cameron and Leigh (2020), China and Russia were quick to offer not only assistance and investment but also used this as an opportunity for “negative reporting, fake news and disinformation aimed at the EU”.

¹³ A good example is the decision made by Aleksandar Vučić’s ruling Serbian Progressive Party (Srpska napredna stranka – SNS) to replace a banner called “The Wall of Tears”, which is an important

portrayed China as the only country able to provide substantial aid to Serbia during the unravelling of the corona pandemic (ECFR, 2020; Cameron and Leigh, 2020). China as “Serbia’s great friend” and Xi Jinping as a “brother” are some of the many catchwords that were heavily present on Twitter.¹⁴ At the same time, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić branded the EU’s claim about European solidarity “a fairy tale on paper”. Further, China has consolidated its influence during the Covid-19 crisis with ongoing investments in the region.¹⁵ Two of the most prominent examples are Huawei, a Chinese technological company, that opened its Innovations and Development Centre in Serbia in September 2020, and the agreement between the China National Biotech Group and Sinovac Biotech for participation in the third phase of clinical trials for coronavirus vaccines (Dragojlo, 2020; EWB, 2020).¹⁶ However, China’s involvement in the WB has stretched beyond using only economic or investment opportunities and included a military and security dimension as well (Larsen, 2020). In October 2020, Serbia tested Chinese combat drones (Vasović, 2020) which was the first such deployment of Chinese unmanned aerial vehicles in Europe (ibid.). Apart from China’s strong involvement in the Serbian political and economic landscape via medical equipment, critical infrastructure, medical teams, masks and ongoing investments, China is also present in B&H and Albania with its financial support (Belt and Road News, 2020; Xinhua, 2020). However, while media monitoring of Serbian news articles during the Covid-19 crisis showed that news about China has become much more positive, reactions in other WB states differ (CRTA, 2020). B&H, Kosovo and Albania, despite economic support from China, remain less inclined towards China and more pro-EU (International Republican Institute, 2020: 69).

Russia: embracing anti-EU propaganda

During the Covid-19 crisis, Russia seems to have embraced the role of an external spoiler against EU interests in the region (Larsen, 2020). This has been particularly evident in using and supporting negative reporting

part of the Belgrade material environment as it carries anti-NATO messages alongside images of Serbian casualties from the Kosovo war, with banners thanking China for its support (ECFR, 2020).

¹⁴ *The Digital Forensic Centre reported that 71.9% of all Twitter posts (more than 21,000 posts) in the period between 9 March and 9 April, which included the keywords “Serbia” and “China”, were posted by both accounts (Vladisavljev, 2020).*

¹⁵ *A study by the US Center for Strategic and International Studies showed that 93% of China-funded projects in the Western Balkans had Chinese suppliers or Chinese companies as subcontractors, which demonstrates the logic of China’s economic involvement in the region (Bjelotomić, 2020).*

¹⁶ *Chinese technology companies have implemented 18 projects in the WB in the past years and 14 of them were located in Serbia (Bjelotomić, 2020).*

and fake news about the EU via media propaganda.¹⁷ Russia was heavily involved in anti-EU disinformation efforts in both the WB and the Eastern Partnership region. Sputnik, which is the main source of Russian disinformation in the WB, successfully penetrated mostly the Serbian public sphere by “warning” about the “lack of sustainability and stability of their Western partners” during the Covid-19 crisis (Necsutu, 2020). In a similar vein, Cameron and Leigh (2020) note that pro-Russian media portrayed EU assistance as belated and reported about the EU’s possible collapse due to its failure to deal with the crisis. At the same time, Russia and China were portrayed “as the only trustworthy powers in the crisis, and as saviours who helped Italy and Serbia while the EU dithered” (ibid.). In terms of direct assistance, Russia was primarily focused on providing Serbia and Republika Srpska with humanitarian aid, doctors and medical supplies (Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2020; Samsó, 2020; Reuters, 2020; Balkan Insight, 2020). In addition, as the Covid-19 crisis coincided with a more prominent role of the USA in Kosovo–Serbia peace talks, Russia became more active, e.g. Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov visited the Serbian capital Belgrade on his first foreign trip since the start of the crisis (Samsó, 2020). Stradner and Frost (2020) assess that Russia’s engagement in the region during the Covid-19 crisis has also been an attempt to reaffirm the role it once held in other WB countries, such as Montenegro¹⁸ and Northern Macedonia. In the latter, Russia used VMRO-DPMNE, a pro-Russian nationalist party, to provide propaganda against a sizable Albanian minority in North Macedonia that allegedly wants to merge the country into a “greater Albania”. However, Russian anti-EU propaganda has only had a limited effect in the region. While Russia remains perceived by the public as the most important partner of Serbia, sentiment in other WB countries has not changed considerably. According to a survey by the International Republican Institute (2020: 69), Montenegro, Kosovo and B&H still remain more pro-EU than pro-Russia.

Turkey: trapped between high ambitions and futile engagement

While Bechev (2020) argues that “Turkey aimed to join the soft power race in the WB during the Covid-19 crisis”, we emphasise that this approach has followed the kin-state logic and Turkey primarily engaged in B&H, Northern Macedonia and Albania. Most of the humanitarian help was delivered in terms of medical supplies such as masks, test kits and protection wear (Bayar, 2020; Daily Sabah, 2020). An important dimension of this aid

¹⁷ *The Kremlin has earmarked EUR 1.3 billion for media spending in 2020 (Necsutu, 2020).*

¹⁸ *Bečirević (2020) argued that we should not neglect the new parliamentary dynamics in Montenegro as the new coalition of three political blocs is overwhelmingly pro-Russian.*

in all of the cases was its explicit highlight that the help was sent by Recep Tayyip Erdogan himself (N1, 2020). The most important factor in Turkey's 'passiveness' in the region during the Covid-19 crisis compared to Russian, Chinese and EU involvement lies in the instability in its immediate neighbourhood that is diverting its attention away from the WB. Besides having to deal with the subsequent refugee crisis, Turkey is currently engaged in illegal drilling activities in the Mediterranean and heavily affected by the outbreak of the proxy conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh (Cookman, 2020; Erbay, 2020). Turkey's track record in the region during the Covid-19 crisis therefore remains suboptimal and limited to isolated initiatives in order to keep one foot in the doorway, such as the most recent working lunch organised by Turkish President Erdogan with Serbian President Vučić on 25 September 2020 where the leaders further consolidated the need for friendly relations (Ozturk, 2020). On this occasion, Vučić confirmed that "Turkey is among the most important regional powers in the WB" (ibid.).

We summarise the findings on external actors' influence in the WB during the Covid-19 crisis in Table 2. Like for the period prior to Covid-19 (Table 1), we also assess the extent to which the influence of Russia, China and Turkey competes with the WB's integration process led by the EU.

Conclusion

We set out to investigate to what extent and how the influence of Russia, China and Turkey in the region during the Covid-19 crisis has affected the WB's integration process. We established that although the crisis has increased the competition between external actors (Russia, China and Turkey) and the EU, the effects of external actors on the WB integration process differ significantly between the two periods (pre- and during Covid-19).

First, the empirical evidence for the pre-Covid-19 period shows that the EU was facing medium (Russia and China) to low competition (Turkey) with regard to the size and distance of membership as the ultimate reward of the accession process. However, in terms of domestic adoption costs, external actors have increased the costs of the EU's accession process for WB states. Unlike those of the EU, the Russian political incentives to friendly authoritarian WB entities, Chinese economic investments and Turkish cultural donations to Muslim communities were not made conditional upon values, democratisation efforts and structural economic reforms. The adoption costs of the WB's EU accession further increased when external actors (especially Russia and Turkey) started working against these democracy and free-market-related conditions in the WB. Prior to Covid-19, only Russia had managed to undermine the EU's external credibility in the region by

directly targeting its close WB entities with an alternative regional governance model to that promoted by the EU.

Table 2: INFLUENCE OF EXTERNAL ACTORS ON THE WESTERN BALKANS' INTEGRATION PROCESS DURING AND AFTER THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

	European Union	Russia	China	Turkey
size and distance of EU rewards	<i>focus on the process rather than the reward (membership); high economic recovery Covid-19 donations</i>	<i>low competition (medium Covid-19 medical and humanitarian aid donations limited to Serbia and Republika Srpska)</i>	<i>low competition (large Covid-19 medical equipment donations but focused primarily on Serbia)</i>	<i>low competition (small Covid-19 medical equipment donations to limited recipients: B&H, Northern Macedonia, Albania)</i>
size of WB states' adoption costs	<i>no adoption costs for all-encompassing a EUR 3.3 billion Covid-19 recovery package for all WB states; demand for full alignment with EU foreign policy positions</i>	<i>low competition (focused on Serbia: adoption costs of Covid-19 aid relate to foreign policy; pro-Russian domestic parties' support in all WB states)</i>	<i>low competition (focused only on Serbia: adoption costs of Covid-19 aid relate to foreign policy)</i>	<i>low competition (adoption costs of Covid-19 aid in kin states/entities relate to foreign policy)</i>
determinacy of EU conditions	<i>solidarity-based Covid-19 recovery package exempt from conditionality; a EUR 9 billion Economic and Investment Plan for the WB based on renewed conditionality</i>	<i>high competition; condition for Covid-19 aid indirectly linked to Russian foreign policy support on global issues (e.g. self-determination) and the domestic struggle for power</i>	<i>high competition; condition for Covid-19 aid: China's positive propaganda - "mask diplomacy" and entry into the military market</i>	<i>medium competition; condition for Covid-19 aid: propaganda of Turkey's President</i>
credibility of the EU	<i>higher internal credibility after the initially slow reaction; lack of strong public diplomacy capabilities</i>	<i>high competition to EU's external credibility (Serbia-Kosovo peace talks; strong disinformation campaign directly targeting the EU)</i>	<i>high competition to EU's external credibility (strong propaganda outweighs de facto extent of Covid-19 aid; strong disinformation campaign directly targeting the EU)</i>	<i>low competition to EU's external credibility (Erdogan lacks legitimacy, Turkey's foreign policy capabilities limited due to the Mediterranean crisis)</i>

Source: own empirical analysis.

After the Covid-19 crisis outbreak, the competition with respect to the size of EU rewards decreased as none of the three external actors have offered comparable Covid-19 related aid to that offered by the EU. This holds both in terms of the financial extent of the aid, where the EU has by far

outweighed external actors altogether, as well as with respect to the structure of the aid. Russia, China and Turkey mostly targeted particular states with short-term medical equipment while the EU focused on the whole region via a long-term economic and investment recovery package. A new element in the EU's post-Covid-19 (accession) conditionality is the demand for the full foreign policy alignment of the WB states with the EU's positions, which we assess is a direct response to the greater geopolitical competition among external actors present in the region (already prior to the Covid-19 crisis). Moreover, while the adoption costs for WB states have not changed during the crisis in the case of Russia, China and Turkey, the EU has successfully managed to lower the WB's domestic adoption costs by not using conditionality for Covid-19 related aid. This leads to the conclusion that while the crisis has not caused any major change in the foreign policy strategies of the three external actors in the WB, it has altered the EU's approach to the region and thereby diminished competition with other actors.

Another element of the external incentives model where a significant change has occurred during the Covid-19 crisis is the determinacy of EU conditions. Although the EU has not used conditionality for Covid-19-related aid, it has kept the WB's EU accession-process aid linked to conditions. The latter is not directly linked to the Covid-19 crisis, but is a result of the EU's prior engagement in the WB that is now taking place in the context of a global pandemic. Nevertheless, it is highly relevant to note that the implementation of the EUR 9 billion worth Economic and Investment Plan for the WB is to be carried out according to a renewed methodology of conditionality in the accession process. The most obvious constant of the pre and post Covid-19 crisis is however the fact that the EU is the only external actor that is systematically targeting the entire WB region. On the contrary, Russia, China and Turkey offer cooperation mostly to individual WB states, entities or even domestic political parties. Given that they often target similar states, this could produce a potential clash between these actors in the future (e.g. Russian vs. Chinese engagement in Serbia or Russian vs. Turkish engagement in B&H and North Macedonia), although this aspect exceeds the framework of this article.

A final empirical observation relates to the last element of the external incentives model: the EU's credibility. We assess that the EU has, after its initially slow reactions, increased its internal credibility by formulating clear common positions, policy aims and instruments for their implementation. Yet, compared to other external actors, the EU still lacks the capability to perform public diplomacy in the WB region. During the Covid-19 crisis, Russia and China in particular have been directly targeting the aid-recipient states with state propaganda which has (in the eyes of the public exposed to state media) distorted the public perception of the extent of Covid-19 aid given

to the WB states by the EU to the favour of China and Russia. Turkey's outreach in this respect was negligible due to its comparatively limited foreign policy capabilities and the simultaneous problems in its own neighbourhood. However, China and Russia have seized the Covid-19 crisis to launch additional and strong disinformation campaigns in the WB by directly targeting the EU with fake news and negative reporting, which has diminished the effect of the aid given and further damaged the EU's credibility in the WB. Since the EU has already developed foreign policy capabilities to counterbalance the Russian fake news propaganda mainly in Eastern Partnership countries, it should add this instrument to its foreign policy assortment in the WB as well, especially since the Covid-19 crisis has made it clear that the WB's EU orientation should not be taken for granted.

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