

**National University of Political Studies and Public Administration**

**Multidisciplinary Doctoral School - Political Studies**



**SUMMARY**

**DOCTORAL THESIS**

**BUCHAREST**

**2023**

**National University of Political Studies and Public Administration**

**Multidisciplinary Doctoral School — Political Studies**

**SUMMARY**

**Building security in the Western Balkans in the context of strengthening the  
strategic autonomy of the European Union**

**Scientific coordinator:**

**Prof. Univ. Dr. Ioan Mircea PAȘCU**

**Doctoral student:**

**Oana - Veronica ANDRONESCU**

**BUCHAREST**

**2023**

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**  
**DOCTORAL THESIS**

<b>INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>CHAPTER I.....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Methodological considerations.....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>1.1 Delimitations in the analysis of the security concept: realism <i>versus</i> liberalism .....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>1.2 Research design .....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>1.3 Research methodology .....</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>1.4 Interpretation of results.....</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>CHAPTER II .....</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>Security challenges in the Western Balkans .....</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>2.1 The evolution of security and stability in the Western Balkans.....</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>2.2 Security cooperation in the Western Balkans.....</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>2.3 The need for security and stability - the driver of the enlargement process .....</b>	<b>50</b>
<b>CHAPTER III.....</b>	<b>61</b>
<b>Strategic autonomy of the European Union – the horizontal approach shaping the future of the EU.....</b>	<b>61</b>
<b>3.1 The EU’s emerging strategic autonomy .....</b>	<b>65</b>
<b>3.2 The new horizontal approach shaping the future of the EU .....</b>	<b>83</b>
<b>CHAPTER IV .....</b>	<b>93</b>
<b>Western Balkans – an area of geopolitical competition.....</b>	<b>93</b>
<b>4.1 The Balkans chessboard .....</b>	<b>97</b>
<b>4.2 The Russian headache.....</b>	<b>101</b>
<b>4.3 China: systemic rival or EU partner in the Western Balkans .....</b>	<b>111</b>
<b>4.4 Ghosts of Ottoman Empire.....</b>	<b>116</b>

<b>4.5 The influence of Gulf states .....</b>	<b>120</b>
<b>4.6 USA – Guarantee of stability and security.....</b>	<b>122</b>
<b>CHAPTER V.....</b>	<b>132</b>
<b>The impact of the war in Ukraine on the Western Balkans .....</b>	<b>132</b>
<b>5.1 Resilience in the Western Balkans .....</b>	<b>133</b>
<b>5.2 Regional reactions .....</b>	<b>137</b>
<b>5.3 The war in Ukraine and the strategic autonomy of the EU.....</b>	<b>145</b>
<b>CHAPTER VI.....</b>	<b>152</b>
<b>What does the European perspective of the Western Balkans mean? .....</b>	<b>152</b>
<b>6.1 Status of the European Roadmap of the Western Balkans states.....</b>	<b>155</b>
<b>6.2 Challenges of the European perspective .....</b>	<b>165</b>
<b>6.3 The Europeanisation process and its limits .....</b>	<b>171</b>
<b>CHAPTER VII .....</b>	<b>179</b>
<b>Research conclusions.....</b>	<b>179</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY .....</b>	<b>194</b>

**Table of contents**

**SUMMARY**

**INTRODUCTION ..... 6**

**1. Structure of the doctoral thesis ..... 10**

**2. Research Methodology ..... 12**

**3. Synthesis of the doctoral thesis..... 16**

**4. Main conclusions of the doctoral thesis ..... 45**

**SELECTIVE BIBLIOGRAPHY ..... 60**

## INTRODUCTION

The doctoral thesis “Building security in the Western Balkans in the context of strengthening the strategic autonomy of the European Union” is enrolled in the priority research field “European Union as an international actor — from normative power to strategic autonomy”.

Through a multidisciplinary approach, combining information from political science, international relations, economics and history, applied to the analysis of the roles and objectives of the main external actors, including the integration efforts of the European Union, Russia’s political and security interests, the growing economic presence of China and the involvement of other regional powers such as Türkiye and the Gulf states, the whole research aims to contribute to a thorough understanding of the complex dynamics shaping the geopolitical landscape of the Western Balkans, as well as the strategic autonomy of the European Union.

The research also raises the need to reform the EU’s decision-making process, the diverging positions of the Member States and the inability to reach consensus as an obstacle not only to the EU’s enlargement and foreign policy, but also to issues related to increasing the EU’s strategic autonomy.

At the same time, the research aimed to provide valuable information to policy makers, academics and other stakeholders on the stability and security of the Western Balkans region, in close connection with the process of strengthening the EU’s strategic autonomy.

Never in its history has the European Union (EU) been more exposed to as many major challenges and crises as in recent years. The financial crisis (started in 2007), the migrant crisis (perceived as a major event since 2015), Brexit (started in 2016), the “rebel” positions of Visegrád countries overlapped with other crises in the EU’s neighbourhood: annexation of Crimea (2014), crisis in Belarus (2020), protests in Serbia and Montenegro (2020), war in Ukraine (started in 2021).

In the face of these unprecedented events, both in terms of impact and frequency, the European Union has been forced to find quick and creative solutions, indirectly fuelling a number of positions by some Member States that have urged a re-settlement and internal reform of the EU before a new enlargement.

Certainly, the future enlargement, the one to the Western Balkans, will be accompanied by new challenges, but also with the major advantage of the contribution these states will make to European stability and security.

At the same time, the EU has the obligation and responsibility to close this "open wound" in the "heart of Europe"<sup>1</sup> in order to ensure security and stability, as well as to strengthen its credibility as a global leader. The region is characterized by numerous challenges and vulnerabilities that affect the overall stability and security of Europe, such as political and ethnic instability, corruption and weak governance, organized crime, poverty and economic instability, as well as the potential export of conflicts and extremism.

The determined and efficient involvement of the European Union, along with its strategic partners, in resolving regional conflicts, such as the Serbia-Kosovo conflict, represents a major strategic opportunity for the EU to consolidate its global role. Thus, through this demonstration of its capacity and ability to mobilize the necessary resources and exercise diplomatic influence, the EU supports the advancement of accession processes and contributes to the consolidation of peace and stability in the region.

The causal link between the stabilisation, accession and integration into the European Union of the states from the Western Balkans region and the achievement of the strategic objective of the European Union to become a global actor was explicitly expressed by the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini in her speech at the University of Oxford in October 2019: *The European Union will only become a powerful global player if it integrates the Western Balkans.*<sup>2</sup> But the course of integration is long and full of challenges and their analysis in the doctoral thesis occupies an important place, along with the challenges of the process of strengthening the EU's strategic autonomy.

In her speech "The European Union as a Global Actor", the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy stressed that in order to achieve its goal of stabilising the European continent and making war impossible, the European Union must unite Europe by integrating the Western Balkan states.

---

1 French President, Emanuel Macron, "The Western Balkans are more than just Europe's neighborhood; they are at the heart of Europe" December 12, 2022, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2022/01/12/western-balkans-and-the-eu-in-2022-resolution-of-problems-or-escalation-of-crises/>

<sup>2</sup> European Western Balkans, "Mogherini: EU will become a strong global actor only if it integrates WB", 16 October 2019, retrieved 20 May 2021, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2019/10/16/mogherini-eu-will-become-a-strong-global-actor-only-if-it-integrates-wb/>

In its demarches, the EU is not only faced with the challenge of not being able to build a strong and sustainable foreign policy in the light of Member States' veto rights, but even faces the challenge of maintaining its own stability. Hence the need to address marginally and punctually the factors affecting the EU stability.

The fact remains that the enlargement process has lost popularity in the Western Balkans, on the one hand due to the lack of concrete results in the short and medium term and on the other hand, because the enlargement process is an attractive tool for Member States to drive policies and changes to their non-EU neighbours and to obtain bilateral concessions.

Moreover, the lack of concrete results for candidate countries and the lack of progress expected from them by the EU Member States have led to a fatigue (*enlargement fatigue*), which on the one hand led to disappointment and on the other hand left room for the influence in the region of other international actors with a high degree of assertiveness and interests diverging in relation to the EU's legitimate interests.

The entire process of strengthening strategic autonomy can also be delayed by both internal and external factors. Internally, the considerable length of EU decision-making and the diverging positions of the Member States, and therefore the inability to reach consensus, represent a constant fight and obstacle in many areas including the EU's strategic autonomy and enlargement. At the same time, the external actors will use all EU vulnerabilities and indecision to act swiftly and strengthen their position in pursuing their own interests.

The need to ensure security and stability, where security challenges and negative influences of external actors are present, is one of the strong arguments for revitalising the enlargement process and also one of the objectives of strategic autonomy. Hence, the actions of the external actors, their influence, as well as the corresponding impact have been analysed in a separate chapter within the doctoral thesis.

As far as the EU's strategic autonomy is concerned, it can be assumed that never in its history has the European Union needed more than now the implementation of the concept of strategic autonomy as a horizontal objective of its becoming. From this perspective, the doctoral thesis aims on the one hand to address this concept in terms of the contribution that a climate of security and stability in the Western Balkans can make to achieve this goal and on the other hand to analyse how this concept shapes the future of the EU and what the EU needs to do in the short and medium term in order to achieve and strengthen this strategic autonomy.



Thus, the doctoral thesis assumes that in 2023 strategic autonomy cannot be limited to security and defence alone, nor can it exclude alliances or partnerships, as all global actors are reviewing their dependencies and trying to identify alternatives, especially after the coronavirus pandemic and its correlated crisis.

Climate change, economy and energy, the EU's role in the world, digitalisation, migration, all represent current EU challenges that must incorporate the concept of strategic autonomy to build a strong EU profile in the new global context.

In times of crisis, all eyes have been and are directed towards the EU's ability to respond adequately and find solutions. Therefore, it is normal for a "geopolitical commission", as President Ursula von der Leyen defined her mandate, acting in a rapidly evolving geopolitical environment, to find those partners and alliances that will help her not only protect its values and defend its interests, but also to promote and implement them.

Therefore, broadening the understanding of the concept of strategic autonomy beyond the notions of security and defence, as well as its application as a horizontal principle underpinning the EU's recovery after the coronavirus pandemic, and the EU's orientation "*to a more resilient, sustainable and fair Europe*", are essential to strengthen the EU's multilateral action and its position vis-à-vis external actors.

As President of the European Council, Charles Michel stated in September 2020 "European strategic autonomy is the #1 goal for our generation. For Europe, this is the true beginning of the 21st century."<sup>3</sup>

This is also recognised by the Strategic Agenda 2019-2024, which highlights the EU's need to "act autonomously" and its ambitions in terms of public policies: industry and trade policy, Green Deal, digitalisation, neighbourhood policy.

Not only will the European Union lack the ability to fulfil its global ambitions without strategic autonomy, but there is also concern that the EU's strategic autonomy is even a matter of survival of the European project.

In this context, it should be stressed that in order to achieve all its ambitions, the EU must have both the necessary means and financial resources, and these issues have been analysed and assessed throughout the research, both in terms of strengthening strategic autonomy and in the light of the enlargement process to the Western Balkans.

---

<sup>3</sup> Charles Michel, President of the European Council, Twitter, [@eucopresident], #EUBEF20 [TWEEET], 8 September 2020, retrieved 20 May 2021

While not yet offering a clear prospect of accession, the EU has always been committed in the region in order to foster the progress towards integration and thus to support regional cooperation, the normalisation of intra and inter-state relations and the implementation of reforms aimed at ensuring stability and security of the region. All these aspects have been translated into the doctoral thesis both in the security dimension, including by limiting the influence of external actors in the region, as well as in the dimension of the enlargement process and the strengthening of the EU's strategic autonomy.

On the other hand, even when the prospect of accession seemed to take shape<sup>4</sup>, the enthusiasm of the political class was flattened by the scepticism of the people believing that the problems facing their country are so profound that even EU membership cannot solve them, and these issues have been analysed in Chapter VI.

While the coronavirus pandemic has highlighted the strong economic interdependencies and vulnerabilities of the EU, how this multiple crisis will be overcome, as well as the lessons learned, will shape its future.

From this perspective, increasing the EU's ability to act autonomously when and where necessary, as well as with partners whenever possible, focuses on increasing its ability to respond swiftly to the challenges.

Given the importance of creating a climate of stability and security, both within and outside its borders, decisive for shaping the future of the EU and representing as a strong reason for revitalising the enlargement process, the subject of the EU's strategic autonomy has been a central element of the research.

Moreover, the strengthening of the EU's strategic autonomy has been addressed in close connection with the accession process of the Western Balkan countries and the topics such as the green transition (Green Agenda for the Western Balkans), the digital transition (Digital Agenda for the Western Balkans), the Common Regional Market, the Economic and Investment Plan have been addressed in the doctoral thesis, given their transformative potential for the region, as well as their major contribution both to the Western Balkans accession process to the EU and to the process of strengthening the EU's strategic autonomy.

## **1. Structure of the doctoral thesis**

---

<sup>4</sup> In February 2018, the European Commission announced that Serbia could join in 2025.

The doctoral thesis was structured in seven chapters, each of which has an adequate share in the overall research, ensuring a balanced organisation of the content, as well as a coherence and cohesion of the entire text.

Moreover, the organisation of the text into chapters highlights a well-structured, logical, and progressive sequence in the development of arguments

Also, for a balanced and systematic approach, the chapters are of relatively similar sizes and each chapter reflects the same structure, with an introductory part, analysis of key documents and the most recent developments, and preliminary conclusions.

The structure of the thesis is balanced, having an introductory chapter, one that details the methodology used, five chapters that form its core, and a final chapter dedicated to conclusions.

Also, the doctoral thesis represents a component of a communication process, where hypotheses, ideas, and conclusions were presented in the form of articles published in internationally indexed academic journals, with the purpose of receiving feedback from representatives of academic structures involved in the peer-review process, and aligning the thesis with the current scientific trends in the field.

At the same time, all chapters aimed to highlight the links between the two processes, the enlargement and the strengthening of strategic autonomy, following the *red line* of the most relevant documents at European level on the two levels, starting from the assumption that the EU's strategic autonomy can only be strengthened by accelerating the enlargement process in the Western Balkans.

Thus, after establishing the relevant conceptual framework for the research theme, the relevant information was analysed within each chapter, with the objective of providing a broad perspective on the processes and dynamics of these processes, in close connection with the historical and political context.

At the same time, the structure of the thesis reveals that the research aims to verify whether the two processes are interconnected, including from the perspective of counteracting the influence of external actors and weakening the stability and security environment, if they pursue the same objectives, as well as the role of the Western Balkans in strengthening the EU's strategic autonomy.

Starting from the conceptual delineation presented and taking into account the objectives of the research, the focus was placed on identifying the level of interdependence between the

process of building security in the Western Balkans and strengthening the strategic autonomy of the European Union. Specifically, the aim was to determine to what extent the EU's enlargement to the Western Balkans can be postponed without affecting its credibility, as well as to assess the possibility of the European Union becoming a global player with strategic autonomy in the absence of enlargement in the Western Balkans region. Moreover, the doctoral thesis sought to highlight the evolution over time of the factors influencing these processes as well as to establish the relationship between them by analysing key documents and relevant texts.

The research objectives were formulated on the basis of research questions, which guided the entire scientific approach. Therefore, each research question was addressed in a separate chapter and the research methods used sought answers reflecting the current context. In this direction, a question on the impact of the war in Ukraine on the Western Balkans was added to the research questions set out at the beginning of the scientific research, addressing its implications for the security dimensions and possible effects on strengthening the EU's strategic autonomy.

## **2. Research Methodology**

In order to highlight the developments in the area of security building in the Western Balkans in the context of strengthening the strategic autonomy of the European Union, the application of the content analysis has been considered as an appropriate tool in the detection of the substantive aspects contained in all key documents at EU level (speech, releases, press briefings, posts on the European Commission's media channels, the European Parliament, the European Council, the European External Action Service) addressing the research aspects.

The methodology of the doctoral thesis was focused on studying the relevant documents and texts in the field, both from the European security perspective, beyond its military and defence dimension, as well as from the perspective of analysing the accession process of the Western Balkan states. At the same time, the developments of the situation in the region were analysed and from this perspective the analysis of both the capacity and consistency of the EU to honour its commitments to the candidate countries, as well as the analysis of the dynamics of the enlargement process in the Western Balkans and the one related to strengthening the strategic autonomy were considered.

The analysis of relevant information covers the period 2008-March 2023, covering the Berlin Process, the latest developments that contextualise the European perspective of the

Western Balkan states, as well as the enlargement processes and those related to the strengthening of the strategic autonomy. The evolution of European security and stability was also analysed for the same period of time, in close connection with the accession processes and the challenges and opportunities they bring from the perspective of the new global context.

Therefore, the research examines two seemingly separate processes, highlighting the interconnection between them and the need to establish complementarities in order to achieve the European Union's objective of becoming a strong international actor with strategic autonomy.

The research hypotheses from which the research started were:

- *The EU's transformation into a strong global actor is dependent on its enlargement to the Western Balkans.*
- *The credibility of the EU as an international actor is determined by its capacity and consistency to honour its commitments, including with regard to candidate and potential candidate states in the Western Balkans.*
- *European security and stability cannot be achieved without enlargement to the Western Balkans.*

Examining and validating these hypotheses involved taking into account several variables, both dependent and independent from each other. Thus, the scientific research included a sequence of test actions that led to the validation of research hypotheses and was carried out on the basis of a plan whose intermediate results were summarised in the published research papers, as well as presented at the international academic conferences.

The key to validating the hypotheses formulated at the beginning of the scientific journey also lies in the intensification of public discourse and a favourable position on promoting security in all its dimensions, correlated with the ambition of EU strategic autonomy that allows the promotion of peace and stability, and ultimately, the integration of Western Balkan states.

In conclusion, the obtained results, relative to the research questions, have provided conclusive answers and were able to validate the hypotheses in the context in which this scientific journey was conducted. That is, security, strategic autonomy, and the EU's expansion to the Western Balkans are interdependent and interconnected processes, influencing each other on multiple levels.

Taking into account the objectives of the scientific research, it was necessary to collect data to provide answers to research questions, as well as for the objectives of the research itself.

This allowed the attention of the scientific approach to focus on the issues that interconnect the two processes: the accession of the Western Balkans to the EU and the strengthening of the strategic autonomy of the European Union.

Thus, as regards the security concept, it should be noted that the doctoral thesis does not directly address the complementarity with NATO and the defence dimension of the concept but rather proposes a multidimensional approach to the concept of security in terms of political and economic implications, which underpin the concept of strategic autonomy and the basis of the integration process of the Western Balkan states.

Also, in order to facilitate the understanding of the security concept and to be able to analyse the implications of the developments of the relevant areas for research, it was considered necessary to present briefly the evolution of the security concept in two schools of thought, the realist one (hard) and the liberal one (soft approach), which in the current global context are intertwined and create complementarities.

Therefore, in order to ensure a climate of stability and security, one cannot speak of exclusively pursuing realist or liberal ideas, but rather a complementarity between these two approaches. This is also highlighted in the messages and documents of the European institutions, such as the European Security Strategy, the Strategic Compass, the Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy, only to name some of the latest.

It is also important to note in the context of this research that this complementarity is becoming apparent both in the process of strengthening the EU's strategic autonomy and in the EU enlargement process. None of these processes can achieve the objectives using only the mechanisms and paradigms specific to one of the approaches.

It should also be noted that the computer-assisted content analysis, which combines quantitative and qualitative analysis, has results superior to classical analysis, in which the human factor intervenes through subjectivity over the obtained results. Thus, through its consistency and reliability, with an increased processing speed, one can perform *text mining*, classifying messages automatically with a high degree of precision, objectively applying the criteria of all the data analysed, eliminating the inconsistencies, prejudices and subjectivity of the human factor. Also, the use of *CAQDAS* — *Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software* for content analysis has the great advantage of efficiency and time savings over traditional, manual analysis, because identifying patterns and creating frequency tables requires significant time resources when performed manually.

It is also true that the use of computer-assisted content analysis cannot replace critical thinking and interpretive skills of the human factor, which is why it has been complemented by direct observations and constructivist approach.

Also, through advanced analytical tools, the software used enabled the identification of patterns, trends and relationships between documents and texts subject to analysis that could be difficult to detect through manual analysis. Moreover, due to its flexibility and scalability, the software was able to manage different types of data, including multimedia messages and surveys, which complemented the information provided by the official documents analysed.

In this respect, files were imported from both own resources and online resources and social media platforms, according to the pre-mentioned parameters, which were organised and classified using a coding system. Subsequently, by using the system's analytical tools, it was possible to visualise the frequencies of code and the relations between the codes, allowing the visualisation of patterns, trends and relationships within the analysed data.

On the basis of these coordinates and in view of the objectives of the research, recurrent ideas were identified in the analysed texts, the main lines of action were highlighted and characteristics of the messages were extracted which allowed projections to be made regarding the evolution of the themes subject to research.

Also, the messages were analysed not only in terms of the frequency of the appearance of text elements, but also in relation to the relationships that these elements establish. The analysis was directed by a number of factors, such as the context of messages, common themes, ideas and arguments used, that complement or contradict each other, as well as the impact of messages on citizens' perception and the formation of public opinion on research-related topics. By aggregating the data, the identification recurring themes was possible, quantifying the number of appearances, based on the assumption that it is in direct proportion to the importance of the topic on the EU agenda, namely the agenda of the Western Balkan states.

At the same time, this was complemented by the direct observation from the discussions with citizens and representatives of some relevant institutions from the Western Balkan states, on the occasion of visits to the region or participation in various discussion formats, working groups, conferences, Taiex events, etc.

The relevant information, obtained through content analysis, and the knowledge gained as a result of direct interaction with the citizens of the Western Balkan states, was examined in

complementarity and in a synergistic manner, in order to ensure a mutual validation of the results.

Thus, the research also has a constructivist approach that aims to provide a better understanding of the processes under analysis, based on three key principles: personal experience, active learning and social interactions. According to constructivist theory, learners actively build their knowledge rather than simply absorb ideas that are addressed to them by teachers based on their knowledge, experience and skills. Therefore, making connections with previous experiences and building knowledge based on these experiences creates an active learning environment. Critical thinking skills and social interactions enabled the new insights based on personal experiences and the exchange of ideas that shaped perspectives and strengthen new information.

The research methodology is also based on the analysis of relevant contexts, focusing on the practical implications and future perspectives, while developments are presented chronologically to explain and show how the related concepts and processes have evolved over the years and how they interconnect.

### **3. Synthesis of the doctoral thesis**

Throughout the research, both the complexity and importance of the two processes analysed and their impact on the future of the EU were considered, while the interpretation of the results highlighted that the EU's strategic autonomy and the strengthening of security in the Western Balkans are interlinked in several ways. The key points that demonstrate the relationship between the two are ensuring regional stability, strengthening economic and energy security, counterbalancing the influence of external actors and the success of the enlargement policy. All these dimensions interconnecting the EU's strategic autonomy and strengthening security in the Western Balkans were addressed in distinct chapters in the doctoral thesis.

Thus, the chapter dedicated to the analysis of security challenges in the Western Balkans area addressed both the evolution of the security and stability processes of the region and the need for cooperation in this field in order to advance the entire enlargement process.

At the same time, given the topic of research and the interdependence of the integration processes of the Western Balkans and the strengthening of the EU's strategic autonomy, the need for security and stability as drivers of the enlargement process was also analysed.



Therefore, the current understanding of the concept of strategic autonomy of the European Union is based on security, in all its aspects, on the EU's ability to set standards and promote its global values, objectives subsumed also to the enlargement process. Thus, creating a stable security environment in the Western Balkans region serves both the EU's goals, both enlargement and strengthening strategic autonomy. The multiple challenges facing the Western Balkans also require a comprehensive approach to the political, economic and security dimensions aimed at revitalising the transatlantic partnership in their approach to EU stability.

Geographically, the countries of the Western Balkans form a bridge connecting the western core and the south-eastern flank of the EU, the region being extremely important in terms of trade and transit routes. From a security perspective, this space, right in the heart of Europe, raises many questions that await the appropriate responses from the European Union.

In a region of conflict and still persistent effects of the wars of the 1990s, the EU cannot adopt a strategy other than stabilisation through integration, helping to resolve bilateral disputes across the area and preventing potential future conflicts that might result from inadequate management of instability. In essence, as highlighted in the doctoral thesis, the EU's credibility to exercise its means and capabilities to ensure stability and security in its neighbouring regions is at stake, before asserting itself as a global actor in the field. It is precisely this concept of credibility which underpins the European Commission's Communication "*A credible enlargement perspective for the Western Balkans and an increased EU engagement with the Western Balkans*"<sup>5</sup>.

The document presented in 2018 outlines the European Union's strategy for the Western Balkans, emphasising the significance of the European integration of the region and the EU's commitment. The Communication highlights the strategic relevance of the Western Balkans, stating that the region's security, stability and prosperity are directly interlinked with those of the European Union and states, inter alia, that the future of the Western Balkans lies within the EU and that the region faces similar opportunities and challenges to those of the EU Member States.

The Communication sets out a reinvigorated strategy for stepping up the EU's engagement with the Western Balkan countries, providing them with a credible perspective of

---

<sup>5</sup> The European Commission. *Communication from the commission to the European parliament, the council, the European economic and social committee and the committee of the regions A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans*. 6 February 2018. [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:d284b8de-0c15-11e8-966a-01aa75ed71a1.0001.02/DOC\\_1&format=PDF](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:d284b8de-0c15-11e8-966a-01aa75ed71a1.0001.02/DOC_1&format=PDF)

EU membership, focusing on six key areas of cooperation and common challenges, which need to be addressed for successful integration.

Thus, the importance of respect for the rule of law and fundamental rights as preconditions for EU membership is underlined. Western Balkan states are encouraged to improve their judicial systems, fight corruption and organised crime and guarantee fundamental rights and freedom of expression, with the European Union providing funding to meet European standards.

At the same time, acknowledging the need for a comprehensive approach to security and migration, the importance of enhanced cooperation in areas such as border management, countering terrorism and violent extremism and addressing illegal migration is underlined. In this respect, the European Union aims to strengthen its collaboration with the Western Balkan states on information exchange, joint operations and capacity building in these areas.

Furthermore, while stressing the need for socio-economic reforms to ensure convergence with EU standards, create a competitive market economy and promote inclusive growth, Western Balkan states are encouraged to invest in education, research and innovation, digitalisation and connectivity, and the European Union is committed to providing support through funding and policy guidance. The same support is also envisaged to strengthen connectivity within the Western Balkans region but also with the European Union in the areas of transport, energy and digital infrastructure, as these fields are being considered vital areas for economic growth, economic market integration and regional cooperation.

Recognising the history of conflicts in the region, the EU underlines the need to reconcile, resolve bilateral disputes and promote good neighbourly relations. By renewing its commitments and reaffirming its support, including through increased funding, enhanced monitoring and closer engagement with states in the region, the European Union aims to address the major challenges facing the region and build a stable, prosperous and fully prepared Western Balkan region for integration. However, the pace of progress depends on each country's efforts and political will, as well as on the EU's ability to maintain a coherent and credible enlargement policy.

In the chapter dedicated to the analysis of the process of strengthening the EU strategic autonomy, as a horizontal approach shaping the future of the EU, the analysis of recent processes aimed at strengthening the strategic autonomy of the European Union was carried out, alongside with an analysis of how this concept will shape the future of the EU in the coming years.

While in the first part of the chapter an overview is given on the development of the concept of strategic autonomy and an analysis of its objectives, as they are currently formulated (security — in all its forms, the EU’s capacity to set standards and the promotion of EU values), the second part of the chapter aims to analyse the recent actions of the EU to strengthen strategic autonomy as well as the current challenges of this process.

Developments are presented concisely and in chronological order to illustrate how the idea of strategic autonomy has developed over the years, focusing on its integration as a cross-cutting theme today. The main aim is to highlight both the complexity and significance of the concept and its impact on the future of the European Union. Building on the idea that the EU will not be able to maintain its relevance in the global context in the coming years without a strong strategic autonomy, it is essential to underline that this is also vital for achieving its objectives, including strengthening security in the Western Balkans region.

On this line, it is also addressed the fact that the strategic autonomy might be the only solution for maintaining the viability of the European project. Without this, the European Union could become irrelevant in the future global context, especially if its influence and economic strength in the world would reach alarmingly low levels. If the EU accounted for 25 % of global GDP thirty years ago, it is estimated that in the next 20 years the EU will not make up more than 11 % of it, far behind China and the United States<sup>6</sup>.

Also, the doctoral thesis is addressing the idea of the decisive role that the European Union must assume as a global leader, in order to protect and promote its values and interests worldwide and to effectively manage the current geopolitical challenges.

Given the paradigm that strategic autonomy can no longer be limited to security and defence, the doctoral thesis addresses its political and economic implications in the new global context and proposes a multi-dimensional analysis of the concept, as presented in the relevant EU documents.

Thus, three objectives are placed at the heart of all EU strategic actions aimed at strengthening the EU’s strategic autonomy, namely: *security* (i.e. in all its forms and in all areas), *dissemination of EU standards* and *promotion of EU values* globally.

---

<sup>6</sup> The European External Action Service of the EU. Josep Borrell, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the European Commission — Blog. “*Why European strategic autonomy matters*”. 3 December 2020. [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/89865/why-European-strategic-autonomy-matters\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/89865/why-European-strategic-autonomy-matters_en).

### *Security*

Beyond its defence dimension, this objective must be seen in terms of economic security and stability, namely through the objectives of identifying and reducing strategic dependencies, increasing the resilience of ecosystems to external shocks (health, defence industry, space, digital technologies, energy and raw materials). At the same time, no less important is the digital technology dimension of the security objective. From digital and technological supremacy, new technologies and increasing digitalisation, experienced more than ever during the Covid-19 pandemic, are the new main drivers of globalisation and international competition, swiftly shaping the global order.

Thus, the digital transition, European technological and data sovereignty, together with the resilience of critical infrastructure and the security of supply chains, are key objectives to be achieved. However, in order to strengthen its independence in critical technological areas and to protect the EU's economic and strategic interests, a more integrated and coherent approach is needed for the: investment in capacities development, state-of-the-art research and innovation, and of course a consensus among Member States committed to meeting the new set of objectives.

### *EU standards*

This objective builds on existing expertise in the EU, from the Data Protection Regulation to the newly introduced new climate standards. It is precisely this area of climate change and environmental protection where the European Union intends to become a global leader. The ability to set standards and apply them globally will be crucial to achieving both strategic autonomy and climate objectives. Finally, commercial and market conditions will be based on a simple rule: the lower the compliance with standards, the more restricted the access.<sup>7</sup>

### *Values of the EU*

The core values of the European Union, such as human dignity, human rights, freedom, democracy, equality and the rule of law, are at the heart of its internal and external policies. To promote these values, the EU needs to strengthen and expand its influence and presence on the international scene, taking advantage of the effective toolkit already in place and already proven efficient. Its entire foreign policy architecture, with more than 140 EU Delegations across the

---

<sup>7</sup> Charles Michel, President of the European Council, *Speech to the Bruegel think tank*, 28 September 2020, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/09/28/1-autonomie-strategique-europeenne-est-l-objetif-de-notre-generation-discours-du-president-charles-michel-au-groupe-de-reflexion-bruegel/>

globe, ensures its influence and a reliable presence on the ground and is designed to promote EU values.

The Revised Enlargement Methodology and the Economic and Investment Plans for the Western Balkans<sup>8</sup> and the Eastern Partnership countries<sup>9</sup> are part of an extensive rethinking process, also aimed at improving the use and efficiency of the tools that the EU already has at its disposal to promote values and standards beyond its borders.

In the light of these considerations, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell gave a clear direction to the new broad concept of strategic autonomy, expressing the need for a more effective strategic autonomy “*extended to new economic and technological issues*”<sup>10</sup>. The President of the European Council, Charles Michel, also stressed the need for stability and dissemination of EU standards in order to achieve “less dependency, more influence”.<sup>11</sup>

The new *Geopolitical Commission*<sup>12</sup>, the term itself involving a new level of commitment of the European Union at global level, acting in a rapidly evolving geopolitical environment, also aims to find those partners and alliances that contribute not only to protecting the EU’s values and interests, but also to promoting them globally.

This means, in fact, that the European Union’s strategic autonomy could now be defined as the ability to act autonomously when and where necessary and with partners wherever possible<sup>13</sup>, in order to achieve security in all areas of action, disseminate EU standards and promote its values globally, while acting in line with previously agreed objectives and commitments and in accordance with international law.

Developing the idea of strategic autonomy and implementing it in a cross-cutting, cross-

---

<sup>8</sup> Montenegro, Albania, Serbia and the Republic of North Macedonia, Bosnia & Herzegovina and Kosovo\*.

\*This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UN Security Council Resolution 1244/1999 and the Opinion of the International Court of Justice on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence.

<sup>9</sup> Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.

<sup>10</sup> The European External Action Service of the EU. Josep Borrell, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the European Commission — Blog. “*Why European strategic autonomy matters*”. 3 December 2020. [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/89865/why-European-strategic-autonomy-matters\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/89865/why-European-strategic-autonomy-matters_en).

<sup>11</sup> President of the European Council. Charles Michel. [@eucopresident] 10 February 2021, #ACFrontPage [TWEET], Twitter.

<sup>12</sup> Ursula von der Leyen. *Speech by President-elect von der Leyen in the European Parliament Plenary on the occasion of the presentation of her College of Commissioners* *this is the geopolitical Commission that I have in mind, and that Europe urgently needs.* [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech\\_19\\_6408](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_19_6408)

<sup>13</sup> The European External Action Service of the EU. “*A Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign and Security Policy*”. June 2016. [https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top\\_stories/pdf/eugs\\_review\\_web.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top_stories/pdf/eugs_review_web.pdf)

sectoral way, supporting the European Union’s recovery from the coronavirus pandemic, moving towards a more resilient, sustainable and fair society, could be crucial in the coming years to strengthen the EU’s multilateral action and its position vis-à-vis international actors.

The President of the European Council, Charles Michel, stated in September 2020 that "European strategic autonomy is the No. 1 goal for our generation. For Europe, this is the true beginning of the 21st century<sup>14</sup>. This is also recognised in the EU Strategic Agenda 2019-2024<sup>15</sup>, where the need for the European Union to increase its capacity to “act autonomously” in expressing its ambitions on industrial and trade policy, the transition to a green and digital future and neighbourhood policy is also highlighted.<sup>16</sup>

The European Union’s Strategic Agenda for 2019-2024 adopted by the European Council in June 2019 sets out the main priorities and objectives in order to address the current challenges facing the EU, as well as those that are expected in the near future. The strategic agenda is built around four main pillars, closely linked to the concept of strategic autonomy.

Thus, as regards the protection of citizens and freedoms, the Strategic Agenda focuses on ensuring the security, the well-being and the rights of the EU citizens. Thus, the Council committed itself to strengthening the EU’s external borders and improving the management of migration flows, including strengthening cooperation with non-EU countries and supporting legal migration pathways.

At the same time, the fight against terrorism and cross-border crime is also addressed under this objective, as the European priority that strengthens the internal security and resilience of the EU.

Defending the rule of law, fundamental rights and democratic values within the European Union, including by supporting independent judicial systems, promoting media freedom and combating disinformation and hate speech, are also priorities for the above-mentioned time horizon.

By effectively implementing the measures related to these priorities and effectively managing the challenges in this sphere, the European Union can reduce its dependence on

---

<sup>14</sup> President of the European Council. Charles Michel, [@eucopresident]. 8 September 2020. #EUBEF20 [TWEET], Twitter.

<sup>15</sup> European Council, “A new strategic agenda” <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/39914/a-new-strategic-agenda-2019-2024.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> Council of the European Union. “A new strategic agenda 2019-2024”, 20 June 2019 <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2019/06/20/a-new-strategic-agenda-2019-2024/>.

external actors and affirm its own approach to security and migration policy.

By developing a strong and dynamic economic base, essential for strategic autonomy, the European Union aims to also improve its economic competitiveness and promote a sustainable growth. This subsumes the objectives of deepening the Single Market by optimising the functioning of the services sector, stimulating the digital transformation and guaranteeing a level playing field for businesses. Also, pursuing an ambitious industrial strategy that promotes innovation, digitalisation and decarbonisation involves investments in key technologies such as Artificial Intelligence, 5G and green energy, which the European Union has marked as funding priorities through the 2021-2027 multi-financial framework. Thus, by investing in key sectors, the European Union will reduce its vulnerability to external economic pressures.

At the same time, enhancing social inclusion and promoting fair working conditions, equal opportunities and social protection for all citizens will strengthen the Economic and Monetary Union and ensure the stability of the euro, leading to a more robust and resilient economy.

With its objective of building a climate-neutral, environmental, equitable and social Europe, the European Union aims to be a global leader in combating climate change and promoting sustainable development. In this respect, the successful implementation of the European Green Deal, which includes a commitment to achieving climate neutrality by 2050 and reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 50-55 % by 2030, compared to 1990 levels, will strengthen the EU's leadership in sustainable development and environmental-friendly technologies.

The transition to a circular economy, with a focus on sustainable consumption, waste reduction and recycling, can also help the EU reduce its dependence on fossil fuels and increase its energy security, positioning it as a global leader in the area of sustainability.

It should be noted that in its objective of building a climate-neutral Europe, the EU does not neglect investments in a just transition, meant to support the regions and sectors most affected by the transition to a green economy.

Last but not least, it should be noted that by promoting European interests and values on the global stage, the European Union seeks to assert its global influence and uphold a rules-based international order, thereby strengthening its role in promoting peace, security and human rights throughout the world.

As highlighted in other strategic documents of the European Union, deepening

partnerships with key allies such as the US, can help it pursue its comprehensive trade policy that supports the EU's values and interests, including sustainability and digitalisation.

By pursuing the objective of strengthening its capacity to act as a global actor and defend its interests and values, the European Union can strengthen its influence and promote a rule-based international order, contributing to global governance and strengthening the multilateralism framework.

Thus, the European Union's Strategic Agenda (2019-2024) serves as a roadmap for the European institutions and Member States to work together in key areas, addressing the most pressing challenges and pursuing a common vision for a stronger and more united Europe. Also, by addressing the priorities and objectives that will strengthen the economic, political and environmental resilience of the European Union, it aims to achieve the objective of strengthening strategic autonomy, enabling it to act independently at global level in the long term and can promote its standards, interests and values.

However, in order to achieve all these objectives, the European Union must have both the means, the resources and the capacity to cope with internal and external factors that could make the entire process more difficult.

Internally, the length of the EU decision-making process and differences of opinion between Member States, which hinder consensus, constitute an important obstacle to the process of strengthening the EU's strategic autonomy, as well as for the achievement of other objectives, such as enlargement. In addition, external actors, pursuing their own political and economic interests, can exploit the EU's vulnerabilities and indecision to strengthen their positions and promote their interests.

Taking these aspects into account, it can be concluded that a strong strategic autonomy of the EU is beneficial not only for the Union but also for the overall architecture. While there are still internal challenges to address — such as slow decision-making and diverging positions of Member States — strengthening the EU's position as an autonomous global actor will reduce the vulnerabilities and dependencies of its members. From ensuring the protection of citizens through medical supplies to diminishing dependencies in the energy sector, the EU has a duty to instil confidence both within and beyond its borders and to discourage any attempt to undermine it.

At the same time, equipping the EU with the tools to maintain unity and improve its capabilities to act effectively within the emerging bipolarity of the international system can help



it negotiate effectively in an interdependent system, act against those who disrupt the international rules-based system, and pursue its legitimate interests in a competitive geopolitical environment. As highlighted in the doctoral thesis, the EU has already proven that it has the political will and the strategic vision to complete this process. Given the agreements on the Multiannual Financial Framework and the economic recovery instrument, it is clear that the EU also has the necessary financial resources to meet its objectives and to overcome the lack of capacities blocking the progress towards enhanced strategic autonomy. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has had effects in many areas and has generated geopolitical implications, highlighting both the vulnerabilities of multilateralism and the need to respond to global challenges. As a summary, the EU cannot enjoy security in the absence of a stable, predictable and secure neighbourhood.

In the current global context, the European Union must promote security and prosperity both within and beyond its borders. German Minister for European Affairs Michael Roth, reflecting on Bulgaria's veto on North Macedonia's accession talks, said that "*anything [other than a rapid intergovernmental conference] would be a very serious political mistake at the expense of stability and security in the Western Balkans, and would ultimately seriously endanger the security of Europe as a whole — and all should be aware of this.*"<sup>17</sup>

As shown during the doctoral thesis, all three main objectives of the EU on its path to strategic autonomy and enlargement (security, dissemination of EU standards and promotion of its values) are challenged by external actors in different ways and to different extents, and the concept of strategic autonomy cannot be synonymous with independence but rather with the chosen interdependence. In this regard, within the specific chapters of the doctoral thesis, the influence of external actors on the research processes was also analysed, the new global order forcing a change in the positioning of the EU between the two global actors — the US and China — and safeguarding its independence and values vis-à-vis other regional actors, such as Russia.

The new German government, together with the French Presidency of the Council of the European Union (1 January 2022-30 June 2022), considered the instruments and elements necessary for convergence on strategic autonomy. Thus, the tripartite programme of the SPD, the FDP and the Greens explicitly contains this new level of ambition "*we want to increase*

---

<sup>17</sup> I Observer. "Germany apologises to Skopje for Bulgaria fiasco". 9 December 2020. <https://euobserver.com/foreign/150323>

*Europe's strategic sovereignty (...) First of all, this means restoring its own capacity to act in a global context and to be less dependent and vulnerable in important strategic areas*<sup>18</sup> and the French Presidency of the Council had as central element on its agenda “*strengthening the European independence and the strategic autonomy of the European industries*”<sup>19</sup>.

In the chapter dedicated to the analysis of the geopolitical competition taking place in the area of the Western Balkans, the influences of the main external actors were analysed with an emphasis on the correlations between their influences and the strengthening of the security and stability of the Western Balkans region.

Thus, the complex interaction between local dynamics and external influences shaping the future prospects of the region was examined.

The entire scientific endeavour was also aimed at analysing the historical context of the geopolitical significance of the Western Balkans, tracing the region's trajectory from the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia to its current position in the European and global strategic landscape. The entire research process took into account the current challenges of the modern states building, democratisation and regional cooperation, as well as the persistence of ethnic tensions, organised crime and corruption.

In addition to assessing the impact of external actors, the political, social and economic factors, both internal and external, have also been examined, as they are contributing to the region's vulnerability in the context of the geopolitical competitive pressures to which it is subject.

At the same time, the Western Balkans have become an area where the EU's pursuit of strategic autonomy, an increasingly important objective in the field of international relations, intersects with wider geopolitical competition between various global and regional actors.

An essential aspect of this aspiration is the European Union's desire to develop its capacity to make decisions and to act autonomously in promoting its own interests in various policy areas, such as security, defence, economy and foreign policy. The doctoral thesis aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the current geopolitical competition in the Western

---

<sup>18</sup>Bruno DUPRÉ. The Robert Schuman Foundation. *European sovereignty, strategic autonomy, Europe as a power: what reality for the European Union and what future?*, European issues n°620 25 January 2022, <https://www.robert-schuman.eu/en/doc/questions-d-europe/qe-620-en.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> Council of the European Union. *Stronger industry for a more independent Europe conference*, 11 January 2022, <https://presidence-francaise.consilium.europa.eu/en/news/stronger-industry-for-a-more-independent-europe-conference/>

Balkans, examining the complex interaction between local dynamics and external influences, as well as their implications for the EU's strategic autonomy ambitions.

As a global actor with strategic autonomy, the EU not only protects but also promotes its values, standards and interests globally, in order to achieve security in all its forms. Thus, it must demonstrate that it has the power to do so firstly in the Western Balkans, the most advanced countries on the path of EU accession.

Not being able to ensure security and stability in the Western Balkans and promoting its values and standards in these countries would not only lead to a delayed integration process for these countries, but would also have a negative effect on the EU's credibility and ability to assert itself as a global player.

Achieving strategic autonomy also requires the EU to ensure a stable and secure environment in its immediate neighbourhood, which is a prerequisite and essential for the European Union to assert itself as a strong global actor and to protect its broader strategic interests.

Identifying opportunities for the EU to deepen its engagement in the Western Balkans and strengthen its strategic autonomy, for example through capacity building, technical assistance and targeted investments, is also based on assessing the impact of external actors on stability, security and integration prospects in the EU, as well as exploring potential risks to the EU's strategic autonomy stemming from unresolved disputes in the region, fragile national institutions and weak governance.

The dedicated chapter addresses not only ensuring stability and security in the Western Balkans, but also delves into the EU's efforts to secure the Western Balkans, the implications of these efforts for achieving strategic autonomy and the various challenges and opportunities stemming from geopolitical competition in the region.

Thus, elements such as Russia's strategic interests in the region were addressed, including energy security, military cooperation and cultural and religious ties, China's growing economic presence through the BRI initiative and the 16+ 1 cooperation platform, with a focus on investment in infrastructure, telecommunications and energy.

At the same time, the role of other regional actors, such as Türkiye and the Gulf States, in shaping the political, economic and security landscape in the Western Balkans was also addressed.

Last but not least, by examining the various aspects of the EU's efforts to secure the Western Balkans and the implications of these efforts for achieving strategic autonomy, it is also aimed at identifying trends and measures that can be envisaged to further develop the European Union's capacity to act as a strong and autonomous global actor.

The EU's inability to prevent wars in the Western Balkans has left room for the intervention of other external actors in the region. The US presence in the region at that time showed that the "hour of Europe"<sup>20</sup> had not yet come and that region was to be divided under the spheres of influence of the various actors.

The influence of external actors in the Western Balkans, whether political, economic or cultural, cannot and should not be overlooked. In some circumstances it fills a gap, in other cases it is both complementary and competing with the EU's influence in the region.

It should also be noted that this influence of external actors, in itself and the challenges it poses on the EU, keeps the prospect of accession alive and maintains a high level of interest of the Member States to bring the region into a climate of stability.

If the circumstances and means available differ from one external actor to another, there is a common denominator, namely the tendency of influence vectors to fold on the distinct needs and receptors of each container. Thus, the ways of exerting influence were analysed for each external actor individually.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted strong interdependencies and the vulnerability of the EU, especially when competing with other external actors. In addition, the slow pace of reforms and the increasingly uncertain internal context, together with the increasing influence of external actors and the EU's internal difficulties, such as the diverging positions of the Member States, have complicated the situation in the EU's immediate neighbouring region.

Placed in the EU's antechamber for so long, Western Balkan states have heard numerous speeches about the EU's desire to integrate their region, but concrete results have been expected and uncertainties have turned the region into an area of geopolitical competition.

In the absence of significant progress and in the presence of *enlargement fatigue*, the regional security of the Western Balkans has been negatively influenced, while the EU's leading role in the region and its credibility have been questioned, not only by the citizens of the

---

<sup>20</sup> Jacques Poos, Luxembourg Foreign Minister, "Press statement from 28 June 1991, in the wake of the cease fire arrangement, asserting that the European Union would take the lead role in addressing the Balkan conflicts", <https://www.nytimes.com/1991/06/29/world/conflict-in-yugoslavia-europeans-send-high-level-team.html>.

countries of the region, but also by external actors who, in pursuit of their own interests, use the vulnerabilities and indecision of the European Union to their advantage. Therefore, in light of these challenges, the Western Balkans are once again in the spotlight, both for the EU and for other external actors — the US, Russia, China, the Gulf States, for different reasons and purposes.

In 2017, ahead of a European Council meeting, speaking about the correlation between the impact of the EU in the Western Balkans region and the credibility of the enlargement process, former HR/VP Mogherini stressed that “*the Balkans can easily become one of the chessboards on which the game of the great powers can be played.*”<sup>21</sup>

While China’s increased interest is seen in its investment offensive for the new Belt and Road Initiative, Russia’s constructive aspect of its increased interest in the region is questionable. The European Union is faced with the challenges posed by external actors, from the struggle to supply medical supplies, to politically motivated investments and media manipulation, and finding appropriate solutions depending on the impact of their actions on the security and stability of the region. Thus, the EU-Western Balkans cooperation process is part of the series of investments in Europe’s security, being the EU’s responsibility to ensure peace and stability in the region.

The security of the Western Balkans is not a matter strictly related to this region but is linked to economic stability and prosperity in the EU as a whole.

Therefore, not addressing the security problems in this region and maintaining it in an area of instability, accentuated by external actors only interested in promoting their own interests and gaining advantages in the region, could make the area a risk factor for EU security, beyond the internal problems generated. The renewed European strategy for the Western Balkans includes security as one of its six flagship initiatives, offering the opportunity to step up security cooperation between the EU and the states in the region.

If the causal link between the stabilisation, accession and integration of the Western Balkans into the EU and the achievement of the European Union’s strategic objective of becoming a global player is very clear, it must be stressed that both processes need political consensus from the Member States. Achieving this consensus, however, is also influenced by

---

<sup>21</sup> The European Western Balkans. “*Mogherini: Balkans can easily become one of chessboards where big power game can be played.* 7 March 2017. <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2017/03/07/mogherini-balkans-can-easily-become-one-of-chessboards-where-big-power-game-can-be-played/>

the action of external actors in their bilateral relations with EU Member States.

Thus, the current developments and challenges of the Western Balkans region have been reviewed, with the approach of both Russia and China's instruments of influence in the region, considering a focus on the practical implications and future prospects of the new forms of Russian-Chinese cooperation, which can influence both the enlargement process and the consolidation of the EU's strategic autonomy.

At the same time, within specific areas under analysis, the influence of other key actors that are active in the Western Balkans region, namely Türkiye, the Gulf States and the USA was also addressed.

From the European Council Summit in Thessaloniki (2003), which set European enlargement in the Western Balkans as a priority, to the statement of the European Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, ahead of the EU-Western Balkans summit on 6 October 2021 "*The Western Balkans have a place in the EU. It is in our common interest, but I believe it is also our destiny.*"<sup>22</sup>, the European Union has acted convincingly as a leader in the region, protecting and promoting its values and interests, and constructively addressing geopolitical challenges over the years in search of predictability and security.

In its attempt to achieve its objectives, the EU has constantly tried to reconcile the many ethnic, religious and cultural differences in the Balkans. During this time, its stabilisation efforts meet with vectors of influence, increasingly projected by the Russian Federation and China, raising the level of complexity and strategic interactions in the region.

The *Dragonbear*<sup>23</sup> Alliance, while pursuing its strategic interests and addressing common challenges, is also used to antagonise the population of distinct states or the wider region and/or to create tensions in society through political interference, disinformation, propaganda and foreign direct investment<sup>24</sup>.

On the opening day of the Winter Olympics in Beijing, Russia and China declared a partnership "without limits"<sup>25</sup> with mutual support in climate change, artificial intelligence,

---

<sup>22</sup> European Western Balkans, *Von der Leyen wraps up visit to the Western Balkans*, 30 September 2021, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2021/09/30/von-der-leyen-wraps-up-visit-to-the-western-balkans/>.

<sup>23</sup> Velina Tchakarova, "*The Russia, China Alliance: What Does 'The Dragonbear' Aim To Achieve In Global Affairs?*", 24 November 2016, <https://medium.com/@vtchakarova/the-russia-china-alliance-what-does-the-dragonbear-aim-to-achieve-in-global-affairs-e09b1add1c4a>.

<sup>24</sup> Heather A. Conley, James Mina, Ruslan Stefanov & Martin Vladimirov. *The Kremlin Playbook. Understanding Russian Influence in Central and Eastern Europe*, Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2016, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/kremlin-playbook> (vol. 1)

<sup>25</sup> Russian Presidency, "*Joint statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the*

information security, internet control, conflicts in Ukraine and Taiwan, with the promise to work more together to build a new international order based on their own vision of human rights and democracy. On the occasion of the official visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping to Moscow in March 2023, the two agreed that “*at this point, there are changes that the world has not experienced in the last 100 years, and we are the ones who drive these changes together*”<sup>26</sup>.”

However, this alliance also has a potential for friction that lies precisely in the different geopolitical interests of the two in third countries. This trend was also visible during the COVID-19 pandemic, with disruptions in supply chains and the closed border between Russia and China<sup>27</sup>. Also, in the Western Balkans competition between the two countries has steadily increased, each using their own *soft power* tools by providing their own medical supplies, vaccines and propaganda. The symmetrical nature of their actions in the region is given by common actions against the values and principles specific to European democracy.

As happened after the 2008 financial crisis, China’s global presence and implicitly in the Western Balkans region has grown at a sustained pace and the new strategic reality and long-term implications should be carefully considered.

Using the new context of increased uncertainty and the EU’s own internal difficulties, China has seized this opportunity to strengthen its influence and image in the region through “health diplomacy”<sup>28</sup>, a carefully calibrated *soft power* tool implemented in competition with Russia in the Western Balkans.

In turn, Russia has not missed such an opportunity, in a pandemic context, to intensify its “bilateralism of the Sputnik vaccine” in an effort to strengthen its relations with the countries of the Western Balkans, in an attempt to dissolve credibility and trust in European and international institutions.

As the former High Representative, Federica Mogherini, stated in October 2019, “*the European Union will only become a strong global player if it integrates the Western Balkans*”, the idea that the EU must reunite Europe through integrating the Western Balkans, in order to

---

*International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development*”, 4 February 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5770>.

<sup>26</sup> Al Jazeera, “*China’s Xi tells Putin of ‘changes not seen for 100 years’*”, 22 March 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/3/22/xi-tells-putin-of-changes-not-seen-for-100>.

<sup>27</sup> The Diplomat, *COVID-19: Trouble on the China-Russia Border*, 5 May 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/05/covid-19-trouble-on-the-china-russia-border/>;

<sup>28</sup> Tanisha M. Fazal, “*Health Diplomacy in Pandemical Times*”, International Organisation Foundation, Volume 74, Issue S1, December 2020, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/international-organization/article/health-diplomacy-in-pandemical-times/A82469023B94AA29F23A52AF0C4B3F27>

achieve its goal of stabilising the European continent and making war impossible within it, needs to be stressed.

The need to ensure security and stability, where security challenges and negative influences of external actors are highly visible, is one of the strong reasons for revitalising the enlargement process. On the other hand, security and stability are also at the heart of the new ‘Europe’s moment’<sup>29</sup>, which also underpins the European Union’s strategic autonomy.

To take advantage of this new ‘Europe’s moment’, economic recovery and resilience, three objectives are placed at the heart of the EU’s strategic actions: security, dissemination of EU standards and promotion of EU values. All three are equally valid when it comes to enlargement and strategic autonomy and all are also heavily affected by Russia’s and China’s actions or cooperation. Both countries appear to complement and support each other in their actions relating to the EU and the Western Balkans, while both are at odds with strategic interests, but also in relation to the standards and values of the European Union.

Globally, it is becoming increasingly clear that the new international competition is increasingly based on digital and technological supremacy. Also, in terms of security, the focus is on technology, along with economic and energy security, and this is due to the progress of new technologies and the deepening digitalisation of all sectors of society.

Every two days humanity creates as much data as it created from its beginnings until 2003. And the amount of data created continues to grow rapidly. It is estimated that by 2025 so much data will be created that if stored on DVDs, it would be enough to circle the Earth 222 times.<sup>30</sup>

The digital transition and European technological and data sovereignty, together with the resilience of critical infrastructure and the security of supply chains, are key economic and political objectives relevant to both the EU’s strategic autonomy and its enlargement policy. Investments are not only needed in capacity development, research and innovation, but also in order to increase independence in critical technology sectors and secure the European technological space.

Moreover, and equally important in the processes of enlargement and strategic

---

<sup>29</sup> European Commission, "*Europe’s moment: Repair and Prepare for the NextGeneration*, 27 May 2020, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_20\\_940](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_940).

<sup>30</sup> Bernard Marr, "*Data Strategy — How to profit from a world of Big Data, analytics and artificial intelligence*", 2nd edition, Kogan Page, (2022).



autonomy, is the EU's ability to export and enforce its values and standards globally, and this ranges from data protection to climate standards.

While increasing its international influence and presence, it is essential for the European Union to demonstrate first and foremost its capacity to promote and protect its values and standards in its immediate neighbourhood, which are also aimed at strengthening the economic development and resilience of its Western Balkan partners.

Beyond the fact that the EU's enlargement policy is an instrument for modernisation, democratisation and stabilisation, it also serves to strengthen the Union both internally and as a global actor.

It is clear that it is not only the Western Balkan states that would benefit from membership of the EU, which can ensure their stability in an international environment in a process of accelerated change. The prospect of European accession and integration of the countries of the region provides the prerequisites for social development and prosperity also for the already member states of the Union. Thus, the enlargement process can help strengthen the European Union's global influence and its role, including supporting the promotion of stability and prosperity.

Representing a long-standing strategic interest, although the accession process may entail significant costs and be difficult, ultimately the long-term benefits of accession are often substantial on both sides. A process of calibration of expectations and a realist approach to accession and integration processes, given the considerable cost and duration of these processes, which represent a soft but ultimately essential competence of the European Union, is essential.

While greater political commitment by EU Member States is needed, the whole enlargement process is meant to guide the necessary reforms. In this respect, the revised Enlargement Methodology and the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkan countries are key elements for the coming years.

Therefore, the entire process of strengthening the strategic autonomy and integration of the Western Balkan states is supported by both the political will of the Member States and their capacity to pursue common objectives and to have common positions in relation to external

actors. Strategic partners<sup>31</sup> of the EU or not, systemic rivals<sup>32</sup> for the EU or not, the European Union is obliged to find common solutions, rather than fragmented visions and approaches in its relationship with external actors.

The Western Balkans remain a central challenge for the EU's external relations. Just as the creation of a stable and prosperous region poses a challenge to the EU's credibility. Whether it is a non-ideological, pragmatic alliance or a new model of systemic coordination, *Dragonbear is here to stay* and will most likely further shape the international environment in the coming years<sup>33</sup>. Rather than just preventing disruptions and deepening fragmentation, the EU needs to quickly find ways to adapt to a rapidly changing global environment and step up its efforts to infuse its rules, standards and values in a more pragmatic way in its relations with external actors.

The European Union's pursuit of strategic autonomy has become a central objective in its attempt to strengthen its capacity to take decisions independently and act unified on decisions in different policy areas, such as security, defence, economy and foreign policy. Achieving strategic autonomy requires securing the immediate neighbourhood of the EU, especially in the Western Balkans, a region of crucial strategic importance. Ensuring stability and security in the Western Balkans is an essential prerequisite for the EU to assert itself as a strong global player and to protect its broader strategic interests. In the context of research, it was intended to provide a comprehensive analysis of the EU's efforts to secure the Western Balkans and the implications of these efforts for achieving strategic autonomy and strengthening the EU's position at global level.

The analysis also covered the roles and objectives of the main external actors in the region, including the efforts of the European Union and the US, Russia's political and security interests, China's growing economic presence through the BRI initiative, and the involvement of other regional actors such as Türkiye and the Gulf States. In this regard, the EU's comprehensive approach to the Western Balkans, comprising political, economic and security initiatives aimed at promoting stability and regional cooperation, was examined and analysed

---

<sup>31</sup> EurActiv, 'Mogherini: Russia is no longer the EU's strategic partner', 2 September 2014, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/mogherini-russia-is-no-longer-the-eu-s-strategic-partner/>

<sup>32</sup> European Commission, "Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council EU-China — A strategic outlook", 12 March 2019, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52019JC0005 &from=EN>

<sup>33</sup> Romanian Journal of European Affairs, Liliana Popescu, Răzvan Tudose, "The Dragonbear and the Grey Rhinos". *The European Union Faced with the Rise of the China-Russia Partnership*, December 2021, <http://rjea.ier.gov.ro/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Art.-9.pdf>

the challenges and opportunities presented by geopolitical competition in the Western Balkans to pursue the EU's strategic autonomy.

Last but not least, it has been analysed how strengthening security in the Western Balkans can contribute to the EU's broader foreign policy objectives, strengthen its credibility as a strong global actor and strengthen its capacity to act autonomously on the international scene.

At the same time, in the current context it was considered necessary to develop a separate chapter within the doctoral thesis in which to analyse the impact of the war in Ukraine on the Western Balkans region, with an emphasis on the importance of the region's resilience, as well as the potential influence of this war on strengthening the strategic autonomy of the EU.

Russia's war against Ukraine has taken both the Western Balkan countries and the rest of the world by surprise, and the way it ends can prove decisive for the fate of the Western Balkans.

Stranded in the failure to make the necessary progress in EU accession efforts, the region is now reliving memories of the 1990s — refugees, bombed buildings, corpses in the street.

While the new geopolitical reality of the world as of 24 February 2022 will continue to create economic and political implications, the continuation and increasing of the military, political and economic commitments of both the European Union and the US in the region play a crucial role in defining the future of the Western Balkans.

The EU High Representative, Josep Borrell, stated at a press conference on 27 February 2022 that the EU is concerned that the crisis situation in Ukraine may also extend to the Western Balkans<sup>34</sup>. Thus, regional security and the reactions of the Balkan states to the conflict in Ukraine have become the most recent concern on the EU agenda.

At the same time, the topic was considered relevant from the perspective of the doctoral thesis as the war in Ukraine is having a considerable impact both on the security of the Western Balkans region and on the strategic autonomy of the European Union.

Given Moscow's strong connections in the Western Balkans region, as well as the region's vulnerability to Russian influence, the region quickly turned into a new source of strategic concern for the European Union.

With this conflict, which combines both old and new war methods, there has been a deep

---

<sup>34</sup>Reuters, "EU's Borrell: 'We fear Russia is not going to stop in Ukraine'", 27 February 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/article/ukraine-crisis-eu-region-idINS8N2SV0BJ>.

sense of concern in the European capitals and Washington over the need to deepen stability and security in the region, as well as the need for the Western Balkan states to join the Euro-Atlantic political and security structures.

Although Moscow's attempts to destabilise the region did not begin in February 2022, the commitment of the Western Balkans states to their European path and how they decide to contribute to diplomatic and economic pressure on Russia in the current context is defining their future.

As with Ukraine, Russia sees in the Western Balkans a buffer zone in which it can retain a sphere of influence, repeatedly demonstrating that it could easily destabilise the Balkans, thereby undermining the West. The process of destabilisation is achieved not only through the economic investments of the Russian Federation in strategic sectors such as energy, or through the structural weaknesses generated by the local existence of corruption mechanisms, but also by exploiting the fragility already existing in the region.

The destabilisation of the region takes place openly<sup>35</sup>, including by strengthening military ties with states such as Serbia, to which Moscow has provided weapons, planes and air defense systems<sup>36</sup>, joining these efforts with its ally, China<sup>37</sup>.

As a reconfirmation of the reasons why the Western Balkans region has been stuck in the European Union's waiting room for several decades, one can see the differences between pro-Western and pro-Russian voices in the Western Balkans about Russia's invasion of Ukraine. While NATO members, namely Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia, as well as the aspirant of Kosovo, have aligned themselves with EU sanctions, Serbia while remaining on the "European path", it continues to "prioritise" its strategic friendship ties with the Russian Federation.

If Russia's influence in the region has an eminently destructive purpose, fuelling nationalist tendencies, "anti-" sentiments and horizontal disruptions across society, the way in which each of the Balkan countries copes and responds to Russia's actions is related to both the institutional resilience and to the cultural and societal norms.

---

<sup>35</sup>Vladimir Putin's adviser Vladislav Surkov said in 2019 "*Russia interferes in your brains, we change your conscience, and there is nothing you can do about it*", <https://www.newsweek.com/russia-president-vladimir-putin-election-americans-1327793>

<sup>36</sup>Defense News, "*Serbia praises another arms shipment from Russia*", 3 January 2022, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2022/01/03/serbia-praises-another-arms-shipment-from-russia/>

<sup>37</sup>AP News, "*China makes semi-secret delivery of missiles to Serbia*", April 10, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-europe-china-serbia-nato-682ab79c4239f14ecc1133ff5c7addc9>

In February 2022, Russia's war in Ukraine gave a new impetus to the idea of strategic autonomy of the EU, precisely during the French Presidency of the Council of the EU, the strongest advocate of reducing the EU's dependence on other states.

Thus, a European Union dependent on Russian gas and on various imports, from defence to semiconductors, is now being pushed to reduce interdependence and create European independence, according to Clément Beaune, the French EU affairs minister, who stressed that “*if this is the result of this crisis, it will be a success for Europe*<sup>38</sup>.”

In fact, other European leaders<sup>39</sup>, who have been skeptical some time ago, now more than ever support the EU's open strategic autonomy, stressing that NATO and the US are vital to the protection of Europe. Namely, Germany which abandoned decades of reluctance to commit to a substantial increase in military spending, being the best example.

Thus, with the Versailles Declaration<sup>40</sup> of 11 March 2022, EU leaders committed to increasing defence spending, eliminating dependence on Russian fossil fuels and designing a new 2030 growth and investment model, implicitly reducing the EU's strategic dependence (critical raw materials, semiconductors, sanitary materials, digital technologies, agricultural products and food) on imports from third countries.

In practice, both the coronavirus pandemic and the war in Ukraine have boosted the EU to take the necessary decisions to strengthen its strategic autonomy beyond defence. Thus, the “energy sovereignty” obtained by removing fossil fuels, imported in their vast majority, will give the European Union sovereignty in its foreign policy<sup>41</sup>, as stated by the German climate and economy minister Robert Habeck, along with “*food sovereignty*”, which includes reducing dependence on fertiliser imports from Russia and Belarus.

Another objective, given the recent crises, is to strengthen the security and resilience of the EU's digital systems, which are increasingly facing cyber-attacks from Russia. In view of all these, the statement made by the Trade and Economic Policy Commissioner, Valdis

---

<sup>38</sup> Mardis du Grand Continent@GC\_Mardis, “*Événement spécial consacré à l’invasion de l’Ukraine*”, <https://twitter.com/i/broadcasts/1djGXPZqOReGZ>

<sup>39</sup> Government of the Netherlands, Speech by Prime Minister Mark Rutte at Sciences PO University, 9 March 2022, <https://www.government.nl/documents/speeches/2022/03/09/speech-by-prime-minister-mark-rutte-at-university-sciences-po-paris>

<sup>40</sup> European Council, ‘*Information meeting of the Heads of State or Government- Versailles Declaration 10 and 11 March 2022*’, 11 March 2022, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/54773/20220311-versailles-declaration-en.pdf>

<sup>41</sup> Xinhua, “*Germany's energy policy must become more independent*”, 2 March 2022, <https://english.news.cn/20220302/04a64a23c91c4201bb3f63a058c69bb6/c.html>

Dombrovskis “*the more diversified EU trade flows, the more resilient they will be (...) Therefore I insist on this point of open strategic autonomy to diversify supply chains that need to be open*” is an echo of the statement by European Council President Charles Michel, who stressed the need for stability and dissemination of EU standards in order to achieve “*less dependency, more influence*”<sup>42</sup>.

In no other region of the world, values and standards are disseminated and implemented more effectively than in the Western Balkans, an area that has been preparing for this moment for decades. The European Union is also not investing more in any other region of the world compared to the Western Balkans, in order to promote socio-economic and environmental convergence with the EU and thereby strengthen its strategic autonomy.

Summarising, the European Union needs to integrate the Western Balkans to ensure stability and security for the entire Europe.

One of the reasons why funding under the IPA III<sup>43</sup> for 2021-2027, amounting to EUR 14.16 billion, and the EUR 9 billion of the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans, which is estimated to mobilise another EUR 20 billion in investment, is to make long-term strategic investments in key sectors such as energy. These investments aim to achieve political objectives such as promoting peace, stability, democracy and the rule of law in the Western Balkans.

In addition, IPA III ensures complementarity and coherence with other investment programmes in the region and a wide range of EU internal policy programmes to maximise impact on priority sectors such as security, illegal migration, research and innovation, environment and climate action, transport and energy connectivity.

By applying the methodology, *soft* and *hard power* elements have been identified and contextualised in order to highlight the critical points where EU strategic action is needed to mitigate the effects of the war in Ukraine on the Western Balkans.

In addition, the analysis of the texts addressing the subject of the EU’s strategic autonomy in the context of the strategic objectives for the coming period resulted in the

---

<sup>42</sup> President of the European Council, Charles Michel, [@eucopresident], 10 February 2021, #ACFrontPage [TWEET], Twitter

<sup>43</sup>European Commission, *Overview — Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance*, [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/overview-instrument-pre-accession-assistance\\_en#:~:text=The%20general%20objective%20of%20the,Union%20rules%2C%20standards%2C%20policies%20and](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/overview-instrument-pre-accession-assistance_en#:~:text=The%20general%20objective%20of%20the,Union%20rules%2C%20standards%2C%20policies%20and)

establishment of direct links between increased threats and diversification of the means of achieving this objective.

The results of the content analysis, against the background of the principles of constructivism theory applied in the elaboration of the doctoral thesis, lead to the identification of the key factors that influence both the future of the EU and that of the Western Balkans. Thus, if the US, through NATO, has long been responsible for EU security, in the current global context, only through cooperation and complementarity of actions security and stability can be achieved and maintained in the area of the Western Balkans and the European Union.

It can also be concluded at a preliminary stage that the re-emergence of the security theme in public space messages was not supported by an intensification of efforts in this area, and also that stepping up efforts for EU security in all its forms will automatically lead to a spill-over effect in the Western Balkans.

In the light of current developments, two possible scenarios for the medium-term perspective have been identified.

Thus, if things go increasingly unfavourable for Russia in Ukraine, the Kremlin could use tactics not to let a good crisis go to waste<sup>44</sup> and “spread the front” to divert attention from what is happening on the Eastern front, creating a new crisis, right in the “heart of Europe”<sup>45</sup>.

No other region would be more at hand to the Kremlin like the Western Balkans are, where for years they have been engaged in an extensive process of destabilisation and Moscow, with fewer and fewer options to preserve even the appearance of a consolidated state, may desperately need this option.

Such a move aims not only to divert the attention of the EU (and NATO) from Ukraine, but also to dissipate the energy of their efforts on both “fronts”. It even has the potential to create new cracks in the cohesion of Western actors and diminish enthusiasm for the Revised Enlargement Methodology by generating a new crisis designed to throw the region into a new stage of instability. Thus, any stable government, with a pro-European majority and leadership in the Western Balkans region, is a great loss for the Kremlin, in the pursuit of its interests and a great gain for the EU.

---

<sup>44</sup> Winston Churchill “never let a good crisis go to waste”.

<sup>45</sup> President of France Emmanuel Macron “*The Western Balkans are more than Europe’s neighbourhood because it is at the heart of Europe*”, 12 December 2022, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2022/01/12/western-balkans-and-the-eu-in-2022-resolution-of-problems-or-escalation-of-crises/>

There is no need to doubt Russia's willingness to provoke a crisis and even a conflict in the Western Balkans to remind us that the historic West is forced to find the fastest way to integrate the states of the region into the European Union, the first stage being their inclusion in a security zone where Russia's negative influence is drastically diminished. Beyond the availability and means, which it has proven so far, the Kremlin becomes all the more dangerous the more failures in Ukraine, and the need for favorable narratives to be disseminated to the internal public is increasing.

For its eternal conflict with the West, the Western Balkans was a space where Russia tried to divert and divide its rival's energy from the main battle scene for its interests, namely the Eastern partnership countries.

In essence, Russia does not have direct interests in the Balkan countries, except for the market for its energy resources. However, the region provides enough space to cultivate and maintain instability, planting seeds of distrust in Western structures and constantly working to exacerbate pre-existing tensions in the Western Balkans, which are primarily based on ethnic and religious differences.

The second scenario would be based on the assumption that things take a favorable turn to Russia in the war in Ukraine and the West fails to support Ukraine to the end. In this case the Kremlin will have the chance to strengthen the narrative that the force is stronger than the arguments of public international law, and the echoes will create strongly unfavourable consequences for the Western Balkan states.

In terms of security spectrum, the West seems aware of the danger of a new crisis in the Western Balkans. This is shown also by the doubling of the EU stabilisation force in Bosnia and Herzegovina<sup>46</sup>, as well as the new NATO defence capacity building package for BiH, announced in April 2022<sup>47</sup>. In the same line is the deployment by the EU of additional police forces in Kosovo, announced in March 2022<sup>48</sup>, to support the local police as well as NATO troops.

However, it is essential that the measures to strengthen traditional security are matched by strong support for the rule of law and additional measures to counter Kremlin disinformation

---

<sup>46</sup> EUFOR ALTHEA a growing up de La a personal de 600 de people La 1.100 in 2022; <https://euforbih.org/index.php/newsroom/2952-eufor-reserve-activation>

<sup>47</sup> N1 Sarajevo, "NATO chief announces steps towards providing support to Bosnia and Herzegovina", 7 April 2022, <https://ba.n1info.com/english/news/nato-chief-announces-steps-towards-providing-support-to-bosnia-and-herzegovin/>

<sup>48</sup> EurActiv, "EU to almost double its police force in Kosovo", 15 March 2022, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/eu-to-nearly-double-its-police-force-in-kosovo/>



campaigns. Moreover, Russian disinformation remains extremely active in the countries of the European Union, aimed at manipulating and polarising the population, as well as making the public opinion hostile towards the victims of the conflict. While the invasion of Ukraine has the potential to generate the largest wave of refugees in Europe since World War II<sup>49</sup>, the Russian propaganda is trying to manipulate the subject, as it did in 2016 during the Syrian migrant crisis, when Dmitri Medvedev said that "*among these people, there are also many, perhaps hundreds, or even thousands, of bandits who came to Europe on a countdown mission. Now they are waiting to be called and then they will act as robots against Europe*"<sup>50</sup>. This time, Dmitri Medvedev announced on 17 April 2022 that "*Ukrainian refugees in Europe could unleash a wave of violent crimes*", while on social networks fake stories and news<sup>51</sup> are distributed, as in 2016, with the frenzy characteristic of Russian bot farms<sup>52</sup>

As regards the economic spectrum, the EU needs to increase its financial assistance to support these states' European path, including mitigating the effects of the shock wave felt by the region due to the war in Ukraine, and this support should also be extended to the communication level, by supporting independent media to disseminate EU actions and support to the population.

While the European Union previously invited the Western Balkan countries to join the joint procurement of COVID-19 vaccines<sup>53</sup>, EU Member States' agreement was reached in March 2022 to allow Western Balkan countries to participate in joint gas procurement to limit energy costs<sup>54</sup>. Similar actions will most likely follow to address a possible food crisis, all of which are additional measures to the investments supported by the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans, where the focus will be mainly on infrastructure and energy

---

<sup>49</sup> Atlantic Council, "*UN: Ukraine refugee crisis is Europe's largest since WWII*", 20 April 2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/un-ukraine-refugee-crisis-is-europes-biggest-since-wwii/>

<sup>50</sup> World Bulletin, "*Medvedev warns of 'World War' if peace talks fail*", February 12, 2016, <https://worldbulletin.dunjabulteni.net/europe/medvedev-warns-of-world-war-if-peace-talks-fail-h169354.html>

<sup>51</sup> The Lisa case" dominated the German media space in January 2016. A 13-year-old girl had disappeared from home and had been raped by Arab immigrants, according to Sputnik or RT Germany. Intensely distributed on social networks by far-right groups, even generating demonstrations, the story turned out to be completely false, with German police showing that the young woman had not suffered anything at all.

<sup>52</sup> Security Service of Ukraine, "*Since war started, SSU shuts down 5 enemy's bot farms with over 100,000 fake accounts*", 28 March 2022, <https://ssu.gov.ua/en/novyny/z-pochatku-viiny-sbu-likvidovala-5-vorozhykh-botoferm-potuzhnistiu-ponad-100-tys-feikovykh-akauntiv>

<sup>53</sup> European Commission, "*Signing ceremonies for Joint Procurement Agreement*", April 2020, [https://ec.europa.eu/health/health-security-and-infectious-diseases/preparedness-and-response/signing-ceremonies-joint-procurement-agreement\\_ro](https://ec.europa.eu/health/health-security-and-infectious-diseases/preparedness-and-response/signing-ceremonies-joint-procurement-agreement_ro)

<sup>54</sup> Balkan Green Energy News, "*EU to allow Western Balkans to take part in joint gas purchases*", 29 March 2022, <https://balkangreenenergynews.com/eu-to-allow-western-balkans-to-take-part-in-joint-gas-purchases/>

diversification as a way to reduce the region's dependence on Russia.

In the context of the energy diversification and independence of the European Union and of the Western Balkans, the role of Romania can be underlined, as it has a balanced electricity production based mostly on domestic energy resources and also the determination to become an energy security provider in the region<sup>55</sup>.

In addition to the fact that the share of renewable energy is expected to increase in the coming years, gas in the Black Sea deserves special attention. Romania, Türkiye and Serbia (as a transit route to the EU) as well as North Macedonia position themselves as key regional actors in this context. Through the political instrumentalisation of energy, Moscow has created an opportunity to reconfigure energy supply chains in European states. At a time when economic interdependence no longer translates into cooperation, there is a need to diversify solutions and partnerships, and the Western Balkans is right in the midst of these systemic changes, with the stakes for the region being enormous.

In other words, a crisis in the Western Balkans area can be prevented by the European Union only by effectively supporting the region in its European path, by creating mechanisms and tools calibrated to the current needs and context, aimed at stimulating the resilience of the institutional architecture in the states of the region.

At the same time, the enlargement process itself requires attention and revival, given that the international involvement was the basis for stabilising and increasing the resilience of the Western Balkans region after the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia and that the decrease in interest for the accession of these states, due to the various crises crossed by the EU, has in recent years been a double source of instability and insecurity in the region. Thus, within the doctoral thesis the European perspective of the Western Balkan states was also analysed, as well as the challenges of this process.

In the chapter dedicated to the analysis of the European perspective of the Western Balkan states, the perceptions of the citizens on the European Union were also analyzed.

The way the EU is perceived by the citizens of the Western Balkan countries is a crucial issue for both the EU and these countries, and the central elements in shaping this perception are the Europeanisation and impact of EU policies implemented in the region.

---

<sup>55</sup>The Ministry of Economy, Energy and Business Environment, “*Romania's Energy Strategy 2020-2030, with the 2050 perspective*”, [http://www.mmediu.ro/app/webroot/uploads/files/Strategia%20Energetica%20a%20Romaniei\\_aug%202020.pdf](http://www.mmediu.ro/app/webroot/uploads/files/Strategia%20Energetica%20a%20Romaniei_aug%202020.pdf)

The enlargement of the European Union is a particularly important process and can be assessed as a success story for the whole of Europe, helping to overcome the division that followed the Cold War, contributing to maintaining peace, stability and prosperity.

As a result, the enlargement process has not only contributed to conflict prevention, but has also stimulated reforms and strengthened fundamental European values while supporting sustainable economic development. All these elements are part of the process of strengthening resilience, stability and security. It can be seen that enlargement is eminently an instrument by which the European Union builds security around it, in all its forms and in all its dimensions.

At the same time, the enlargement of the European Union was the most effective tool to produce democratic developments and economic prosperity. The enlargement process is an opportunity for candidate countries to integrate into a democratic and stable framework, to develop their economies and to strengthen their institutions, all of which contribute to building a security environment.

Over the past decade, the European continent has faced three major crises — the economic crisis, the refugee crisis and the coronavirus pandemic, all with present echoes. The consequences of these crises were the grinding of the existing socio-economic order, the disruption of the economy, security and thus the dynamics of trust between citizens and institutions, whether national or EU level. At the same time, technological developments in internet and communications have completely changed the architecture, dynamics and information flow across all societies. In the new reality, in which the state institutions have lost the monopoly on information and each individual is able to acquire tools to design and emit information, we note that the messages which have the potential to threaten, provoke indignation or anger, are consumed with priority<sup>56</sup>.

In this context, there have been voices criticising the EU's ability to adequately respond to the needs of its citizens. At the same time, in European countries outside the European Union, against the backdrop of the legitimate feeling of dissatisfaction and frustration in society, the space for the voices and influence of external actors was created, which are exacerbating these eminently negative feelings.

In electoral periods, the parties, acting as vectors of national values, sometimes extremist and anti-European, have found a large number of supporters promoting populist rhetoric and

---

<sup>56</sup> Berger, J., & Milkman, K. L. “*What makes online viral content?*”, *Journal of Marketing Research*, 49(2), <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1509/jmr.10.0353>. (2012).

message elements about the EU's lack of legitimacy, its threat to national identity and values, and the lack of effectiveness of the European institutions in managing subsequent crises.

Regardless of the methodology used or the time of measurement, citizens' perception and trust in the EU is largely driven by the perceived benefits of belonging to the EU, both in terms of the national economy, as a whole, and for individual well-being in particular. If the elements of individual perception are formed from exposure to narratives built with information at hand or from citizens' everyday interactions with the economic or social environment, often conveyed by media and less by institutions, the objective ability of the citizen to fully assess the benefits of belonging to the EU remains rather a desiderate.

There is an asymmetry between the objective benefits and the subjective perception of citizens also in some Member States, such as Hungary and Poland, which have largely benefited from EU funds and thus from strong economic growth. However, these countries have developed an eurosceptic attitude within their society and the political class. Given that the existence of economic benefits alone does not necessarily trigger the same positive response in the overall public perception of the EU, other elements, such as the implementation of the Union's fundamental values beyond its borders, which could contribute to a more favourable attitude alongside economic benefits, are worth assessing.

The public perception of the European Union also plays an important role in this process. This can be analysed in a number of dimensions, but the infusion of the EU's fundamental principles, how institutions manage current crises and their performance are of paramount importance to the assessment of the EU's mission and the effectiveness of its fulfilment.

EU performance assessments by measuring "trust" in its institutions and the level of "satisfaction" of respondents with the EU, as well as the approval or disapproval of the results of political processes, are relevant in view of the fact that institutional trust is closely linked to the subjective likelihood that a citizen will believe that the political system will produce the intended outcome.

Thus, the approach to perceptions and the importance attached to this concept are based on the tradition of a political culture that assumes that a policy can function effectively in the long term only if it has the support of a consistent majority or of the whole of society. Without such support, it is hard to imagine how it can be considered legitimate.

The ability of the European Union to respond to the needs of citizens outside its borders, through its instruments, mechanisms and funds, together with information and awareness

campaigns, are most likely the essential ingredients for forming a positive public opinion about the European project.

Citizens' expectations evolve around the idea that the EU should act in their best interests, including in areas where the instruments of national institutions would be insufficient, such as threats to security, environment and climate change, but also poverty and social exclusion, protection of human rights and gender equality. It is equally true that the perceptions of the citizens of the Western Balkan countries depend on the socio-economic context and how EU reforms and funds are implemented. However, perceptions also depend on security threats and country-specific challenges and the EU's responsiveness to address such challenges.

At the same time, it is worth stressing that the enthusiasm of what the EU can bring can be flattened by the skepticism of the population who might consider the problems facing their country to be so complex and deep that even accession to the EU cannot solve them.

Having to face the challenges of the future without the EU can be a daunting feeling for the citizens of the Western Balkans, especially in the current context of multiple crises and conflicts.

#### **4. Main conclusions of the doctoral thesis**

By correlating and interpreting the results obtained through the content analysis, a non-linear pattern has emerged regarding the evolution of building security of the Western Balkans area and strengthening the strategic autonomy of the European Union, as well as highlighting the interconnections between the two processes.

Thus, if 2016 was a key milestone, through the adoption of the EU Global Strategy, whose implications for researched topics have been extensively analysed, the whole process took a different scale after the coronavirus pandemic highlighted the strong dependencies of the European Union and gained an accelerated pace with the beginning of the war in Ukraine, whose implications for the region were also analysed in detail.

The doctoral thesis, which addresses building the security of the Western Balkans region in the context of strengthening the strategic autonomy of the European Union, is based on the statement of the former EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini: *“The European Union will only become a strong global player only if it integrates the Western Balkans”*.

In other words, the process of integrating the Western Balkans into the EU and the process of strengthening the strategic autonomy of the European Union are closely interconnected and interdependent and in the new global context the European Union is obliged to achieve its objectives in both processes, the future of the bloc being at stake.

Thus, achieving strategic autonomy requires the European Union to ensure stability and security in its immediate neighbourhood, in a region that has experienced political conflicts and turmoil throughout its history. By engaging in efforts to strengthen security and promote stability in the Western Balkans, the EU contributes to a more stable environment that benefits its strategic and security objectives, both internally and globally.

At the same time, the development of a stable and secure environment in the Western Balkans can also contribute to the economic security of the European Union, a key aspect of strategic autonomy. A stable region of the Western Balkans can promote economic growth, infrastructure development and regional cooperation, which in turn can create new markets and investment opportunities for the European Union. In addition, diversification of energy sources and transit routes in the Western Balkans can contribute both to the energy security of these countries and to the EU's energy security, another key aspect of strategic autonomy.

Strengthening strategic autonomy also involves reducing the European Union's dependence on external actors and preventing potentially harmful external influences both in its internal environment and in its neighbourhood. By promoting security and stability in the Western Balkans, the EU can limit the influence of external actors who might try to exploit the region's vulnerabilities for their own purposes. This allows the EU to reduce potential threats to its own security and to export its values and standards as part of its enlargement policy.

Moreover, the enlargement policy of the EU, as a whole, is an essential tool for promoting stability and prosperity in the Western Balkans. By supporting the integration of the Western Balkan countries into the European Union, the EU not only strengthens its strategic autonomy, but also ensures that these countries adopt European values, standards and norms that ultimately create a safe and stable environment in the region, benefiting the EU's security.

It is also worth mentioning that the events of recent years have caused fluctuations in both processes, but even more importantly, they have highlighted the need to reform the institutions and decision-making processes of the European Union. In the absence of these reforms, it can be assumed that the failure is certain.

Therefore, the strengthening of the EU's strategic autonomy can only be achieved by accelerating the enlargement process in the Western Balkans and integrating them, and both objectives require consensus according to the current voting system. Fluctuations and divergent positions of Member States in both processes have a direct impact on achieving the desired results.

At the same time, this reform of the European Union can be considered one of the main sources of internal tension. Therefore, until we reach a common vision between the 27 Member States, which coincides with the vision of the EU institutions, seems to be a long way to go. However, counterintuitively, there does not seem to be a stronger incentive for EU internal reform, strengthening security in the Western Balkans, accelerating the enlargement process and strengthening the European Union's strategic autonomy, than weakening the security environment, context in which the outbreak of the war in Ukraine seems to be the culmination of this fragility.

It is important to note that the European Union and the Western Balkans face the same security threats and challenges, being subject to the influence of the same external actors, mainly Russia and China, which require coordinated efforts and resources to counter them.

Thus, adopting a multidimensional approach in working with the Western Balkans ultimately contributes to strengthening the EU's strategic autonomy. It enables it to protect its interests and promote its values more effectively both in and outside its immediate neighbourhood. Starting from the premise that the Western Balkans region plays a significant role in pursuing the objectives of strategic autonomy by the European Union, it must be said that strengthening the security of the region lays the foundations for this process. Thus, building a stable security environment in the Western Balkans region serves both the EU's objectives of enlargement and strategic autonomy strengthening.

As emphasized earlier, the Western Balkans represent a strategically important area for the European Union, a region that, unfortunately, continues to face numerous political, economic, and social challenges.

In the current geopolitical context, a worrisome trend has begun to emerge in the Western Balkans, where public perception is sometimes guided by feelings of disappointment, largely due to an endless accession process and a diffuse sense that the EU has not fulfilled its commitments, which can lead over time to eroding trust in European institutions and creating a

state of instability and insecurity.

This instability not only threatens the harmony and sustainable development of the region but further complicates the efforts of these states towards European integration.

In this regard, a fundamental review of the EU's approach is needed, reaffirming in clear and convincing terms its commitment to integrating the Western Balkans region, as well as concrete measures to facilitate the accession process and flexibility of requirements, without compromising the fundamental principles of the Union.

Furthermore, the EU needs to strengthen its dialogue with the governments of the Western Balkans to address structural issues, governance, corruption, and human rights compliance. This involves providing technical and financial assistance, as well as conditioning EU aid on concrete progress in key areas, such as resolving bilateral conflicts in the region.

As previously stated, the conflict between Serbia and Kosovo remains a major source of instability in the Western Balkans and a considerable impediment to European integration aspirations.

The proactive and effective involvement of the European Union (EU), along with the US/NATO, in resolving this conflict is a major strategic opportunity, including for consolidating the EU's global role.

This demonstration of the EU's capacity and ability to mobilize the necessary resources and exert diplomatic influence to address disputes would enhance its credibility and prestige, amplifying its perception as a global leader.

Moreover, resolving the Serbia-Kosovo conflict would allow the EU to advance the accession processes for both parties and contribute to the consolidation of peace and stability in a key area for European security.

Additionally, intensifying dialogue with the citizens of the Western Balkans to ensure effective communication of the values and benefits of EU accession is crucial, alongside consistent actions to dismantle falsehoods and combat disinformation that have infiltrated public discourse about the EU.

It should be underscored that the European Union has the obligation and responsibility to intensify its efforts to close the "open wound" of the Western Balkans. While it represents a considerable challenge, these efforts are vital for ensuring long-term stability, security, and prosperity, and by assuming a more decisive and active role in managing regional conflicts, the



EU can strengthen its position in international relations.

Moreover, as shown in the doctoral thesis, both processes, the enlargement and the consolidation of strategic autonomy, are based on the same objectives: security — in all its forms, the EU's ability to set standards and promote EU values globally.

The cultural and historical links of the Western Balkans region with the EU allow for strengthening the common European identity and common values, which in turn support the EU's strategic autonomy by promoting unity and cohesion.

As shown during the research, the European Union's strategic autonomy could now be defined as the EU's ability to act autonomously when and where necessary and with partners wherever possible<sup>57</sup>, in order to achieve security in all areas of action, disseminate EU standards and promote its values globally, while acting in line with previously agreed objectives and commitments and in accordance with international law.

In this respect, the Western Balkans is an expression of the EU's ability to act autonomously, when necessary, to take decisions in defence of its own interests, values and standards. The region also highlights the importance of combining the EU's efforts with the chosen partners, wherever possible, to achieve common objectives. Also, by exporting and promoting the adoption of democratic values and the rule of law, the EU aims to support the Western Balkans in implementing those reforms aimed at making it a more stable and prosperous region. This alignment of values and standards contributes to the EU's strategic autonomy by creating a more predictable and favourable environment in its immediate neighbourhood.

The Western Balkans have faced various challenges throughout their history, including political instability, ethnic tensions and organised crime, and the European Union has not only the interest but also the obligation to promote stability and security in the region in order to prevent negative spillover effects on its Member States.

The failure to achieve these goals will not only affect the process of enlargement or the strengthening of strategic autonomy, the survival of the European project itself being at stake. In addition, promoting the accession of the Western Balkan countries strengthens the EU's position on the global stage and strengthens its geopolitical influence.

The research also focused on the economic aspects of enlargement, on the one hand because the enlargement process is usually expressed in its economic rather than security

---

<sup>57</sup> EU External Action Service, “*A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy*”, June 2016, [https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top\\_stories/pdf/eugs\\_review\\_web.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top_stories/pdf/eugs_review_web.pdf)

dimension, and on the other because the economic integration of the Western Balkans can strengthen the EU's strategic autonomy by strengthening its economic influence and reducing its dependence on external economic actors.

At the same time, the integration of the Western Balkans into the EU's single market strengthens economic ties, interdependence, increased trade and investment opportunities in the region contribute to the overall growth and competitiveness of the EU economy, strengthening its strategic autonomy. Also, through sustained involvement in the region and supporting its integration, the EU can counterbalance the influence of external actors and maintain its strategic autonomy by securing its neighbourhood.

By investing in the region's economic development, the EU can help these countries meet the necessary accession criteria, such as the existence of a functioning market economy and the ability to assume the obligations arising from EU membership.

At the same time, by investing in the Western Balkans, the EU can strengthen its strategic autonomy and geopolitical influence in the region. This is particularly important in the context of increasing competition with other actors, such as China and Russia, who have also increased their engagement in the region through various investments and projects, as shown in the thesis.

An important dimension in strengthening the security of the region is energy. By diversifying energy sources and routes, the European Union can not only reduce its dependence on external actors and strengthen its strategic autonomy, and the Western Balkans play a crucial role in ensuring the EU's energy security.

EU is also investing in projects aimed at improving energy infrastructure and inter-connectivity, such as gas pipelines and electricity grids. By encouraging diversification, emphasising renewables and energy integration, the EU can reduce its own dependence and that of the Western Balkans on a single source or route, increasing its strategic autonomy and energy security.

In this context, the role that Serbia can play in the region must be highlighted. With the largest gas network and with the greatest interconnection possibilities, Serbia has the potential to become a genuine energy hub, representing the convergence point of the various continental energy routes. Currently, the most important pipelines for the Western Balkans region are TurkStream, TAP, IAP, TANAP, and expanding connections will allow energy to become the common challenge that will coagulate the positions of governments in the region to achieve common European integration goals.

From a regional perspective, it should also be stressed the role that Romania and Black Sea gas play in creating the energy independence of the Western Balkans.

*Romania is the fourth largest producer of natural gas in Europe, after Norway, the Netherlands and the UK, and with the closure of gas operations in Groningen, Romania will become the largest exporter in the EU and rival the UK in terms of exports when the Neptune Deep project is completed.*<sup>58</sup>

Thus, beyond its role in supporting the European integration processes of the region, Romania will become, with the exploitation of gas from the Black Sea, an energy supplier for the Western Balkans region, freeing it from Russian domination.

Also, in the context of the war in Ukraine and its energy ramifications, the interconnection of the energy security of the EU and the Western Balkans with the security of the Black Sea, will be at the heart of the EU and the US/NATO agenda for a long time.

If, by releasing from the Russian gas monopoly, the region will, with the help of the EU and its Member States, achieve much desired energy independence by promoting democratic values, good governance and the rule of law through the Economic and Investment Plan, the EU can shape the political landscape of the region in a way that aligns with its own interests and values.

This can further strengthen the EU's strategic autonomy by strengthening its political and economic model for neighbouring countries, and is designed to show the whole world that the EU has the capacity to export and implement its standards and values beyond its borders.

As shown in the PhD thesis, the process of integrating the Western Balkans into the EU is interconnected with the EU's strategic autonomy in several ways. By encouraging these countries to join the bloc, the EU aims to strengthen its capacity to act independently and protect its interests, values and objectives.

Firstly, the accession process encourages the implementation of democratic reforms in candidate countries, including the promotion of freedom of expression, the protection of human rights and the encouragement of political pluralism.

Strengthening the rule of law and improving governance are also key aspects of the accession process. This means that the legal and administrative institutions of the candidate countries are strengthened and modernised to comply with European standards. Implementing

---

<sup>58</sup> New Strategy Center, “*The Wider Balkan Region At The Crossroads Of A New Regional Energy Matrix*”, October 2022, <https://www.newstrategycenter.ro/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Joint-Study-NCS-BCSP-FINAL.pdf>

these reforms can contribute to the fight against corruption, organised crime and human trafficking, as well as to ensuring respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.

A more stable and secure region of the Western Balkans resulting from these reforms is expected to strengthen and support the EU's strategic autonomy. Reducing potential risks to EU security, such as armed conflicts, terrorism or humanitarian crises, will allow the Union to concentrate its resources and efforts in other areas of strategic interest.

In addition, the integration of the Western Balkans into the EU can create new economic and investment opportunities, given that the region will join the European single market. This can contribute to economic growth, job creation and infrastructure development, both in candidate countries and in other EU Member States.

In conclusion, the integration of the Western Balkans into the EU is beneficial for both the region itself and the European Union as a whole, having a positive impact on the stability, security and strategic autonomy of the EU. Regional and global geopolitical tensions can affect the EU's ability to maintain a coherent and united front to the same extent as significant economic disparities can hamper the implementation of joint projects and initiatives and slow integration efforts.

It should also be stressed that the region still faces numerous security challenges, such as unresolved conflicts, which require coordinated efforts and resources to be addressed. At the same time, slow progress in reforms and the fatigue of enlargement can negatively influence integration prospects, generating frustration and political instability in the region.

It is important to note that the European Union mitigates security risks by strengthening cooperation with the region in the field of migration and improving border management. These measures contribute to the fight against terrorism and organised crime, thus protecting the security of both the region and the EU as a whole. While the European Union aims to promote political dialogue and ensure adequate responses to global challenges, strong engagement in its partnerships is needed to promote its values and interests, such as peace conservation, conflict prevention, ensuring an adequate response to new challenges, supporting economic cooperation and development.

In order for all its objectives to be achieved in a coherent and comprehensive manner, complementarity of the instruments used in its external action, a continuous and rapid adaptation to the needs of the Western Balkan states and a strong commitment by the latter, by taking over European practices and values at all levels of society, is essential.

At the same time, the prospect of accession has a major, transformative impact on the political and socio-economic landscape of candidate countries and acts as an incentive for further necessary reforms and for strengthening peace, stability, reconciliation and good neighbourly relations. This soft component is the very essence of the enlargement process, since it is primarily in the interest of candidate states and their citizens.

On the other hand, it is just as true that a new enlargement would also have a significant impact on the EU and its proven capacity to integrate new members is both a condition for the sustainability of enlargement policy and an incentive for the transformation of the structures and decision-making processes needed not only in terms of the integration of new members, but also for achieving the goal of strategic autonomy.

The EU's capacity to integrate new members as a condition for the sustainability of enlargement policy requires four key issues to be addressed.

Firstly, candidate countries must contribute positively to the achievement of the EU's objectives, supporting the momentum needed to achieve them.

Secondly, the EU institutional framework needs to be adapted to ensure effective governance in the context of the accession of new members.

Thirdly, the Union's financial resources must be sufficient and adequate to meet the additional challenges of economic and social cohesion.

Last but not least, the EU's capacity to accept new members must also be assessed in the light of its ability to communicate the implications of enlargement globally, thus ensuring that it remains a credible policy, supported by public opinion in both EU and candidate countries. Achieving this objective requires effective and transparent communication as well as a coordinated effort by all EU institutions, Member States' governments and parliaments, as well as civil society. This will help to recognise the benefits of enlargement by all citizens of Europe and strengthen support for this policy. Thus, providing clear and concrete information on how the accession process supports economic investment, job creation and access to the single market, together with aspects of strengthening stability and security, such as conflict prevention and strengthening their peaceful settlement, are components for all sectors of Western Balkan societies.

On the other hand, it is crucial to inform EU citizens that climate change challenges do not stop at the Union's external borders and that it is important to also improve the living conditions of non-EU citizens. This awareness will facilitate understanding and support for the

enlargement process as a whole, as well as for other vital processes in building the future of the European Union, such as strategic autonomy. It should also be said that the evolution of European security and stability in the Western Balkans area is closely related to the accession process and its challenges and opportunities.

Although they seem to be two separate processes, enlargement and strengthening the EU's strategic autonomy, with the three common dimensions: *security* — in all its forms, the EU's ability to set *standards* and promote EU *values* globally, the research highlights the need for their complementarity, with the ultimate aim of strengthening the role of the European Union as a strong global actor.

Although the situation has improved significantly since the 1990s, in addition to the challenges faced by the region 30 years ago, new challenges and risks are now emerging, requiring appropriate EU approaches. In the accession process, some regions (such as rural, peripheral or industrial transition regions) and their population felt marginalised and left behind in terms of economic and social development, fuelling dissatisfaction and offering opportunities to external actors.

Moreover, many regions face difficulties, despite the assistance received, and continue to notice the stagnation or even regression of their levels of development compared to the European average.

The new challenges, associated with the ongoing transition process, raise questions about the validity, for the post-2027 period, of the methods used in three generations of European development programmes dedicated to this region.

It is also necessary to assess how the priorities of EU policies dedicated to the region can be adapted in order to allow the Western Balkans to reflect their needs, taking into account their endogenous development capacities, which are not and cannot be uniform throughout the European Union.

The European Union is striving to strengthen its strategic autonomy by trying to gain more control over its destiny, including by reducing its dependence on external actors. From this perspective, building security and strengthening stability in the Western Balkans region, a region with a history of political instability, is crucial. The region has attracted significant interest from external actors, such as Russia and China, whose influence may exacerbate the fragility of the security environment and undermine the objectives of the European Union.

Thus, counteracting the influence of external actors in the Western Balkans can

contribute to achieving the EU's strategic autonomy, as has been shown in the research.

If the EU's strategic autonomy depends on the stability of its neighbourhood, through counterbalancing external influences, which have the potential to exacerbate political and ethnic tensions in the region, the EU can create a more stable environment, reducing the risk of conflict and migration crises that could have an impact on the internal stability of the EU. The influence of external actors can also slow down the process or even compromise the achievement of the accession criteria, and by actively countering these influences the EU can protect the integrity of its enlargement policy.

By investing in strategic sectors and infrastructure projects, external actors seek to offer alternatives to the European project. However, by promoting economic integration, the EU will not only reduce the influence of these actors, but will also strengthen economic ties with the Western Balkan states, thereby helping to strengthen strategic autonomy. Moreover, the EU not only provides funds and foreign direct investment, but is also infusing the values and standards aimed at increasing the resilience of the region and strengthening democratic institutions and the rule of law.

As the external actors take advantage of the fragile democratic institutions and the dysfunction of the rule of law in the Western Balkans to advance their interests, by supporting the development of strong, transparent and accountable institutions in the region, the EU will limit opportunities for external actors to exert negative influence.

In turn, this will increase the region's resilience to external interference and help strengthen the EU's strategic autonomy. At the same time, by reinvigorating its enlargement policy, an essential tool for promoting stability, democracy and prosperity in the Western Balkans, the EU ensures that the countries of the region align themselves with EU values and standards, which will also contribute to the EU's strategic autonomy.

Strengthening strategic autonomy is a complex and multidimensional process for the European Union, which involves strengthening cooperation in the field of security and promoting EU values and standards globally. From this perspective, the Western Balkans play a crucial role as the EU's immediate neighbourhood, where it has a responsibility to demonstrate its vision, capabilities and skills, which would enable it to act as an influential global actor.

By countering the influence of external actors, the EU can foster stability, economic development, energy security and the rule of law in the region, while facilitating closer integration and cooperation with its Western Balkan partners. In order to achieve strategic

autonomy, the EU needs to adopt a comprehensive approach, combining diplomatic efforts, investment in strategic areas, security cooperation and support to democratic institutions. This will ensure that the Western Balkans remain anchored in European values and standards, which will contribute not only to the long-term stability and prosperity of the region, but also to achieving the EU's strategic autonomy in the new volatile geopolitical landscape.

Thus, it is not only in the interest of the European Union to proactively address external influences in the Western Balkans, but it is also its obligation to address with maximum attention and responsibility an aspect that may endanger its very existence in the coming decades.

The EU can create a more stable, secure and prosperous neighbourhood while moving closer to achieving its strategic goals of autonomy, and this will allow it to take control of its destiny and shape the international scene according to its values rather than being shaped by the new global bipolarity.

The research examined the different aspects and dimensions of the process of strengthening EU strategic autonomy, highlighting the need for a comprehensive approach to achieving this ambitious goal. As a complex and multidimensional effort, strategic autonomy encompasses the EU's ability to act independently and assertively in areas such as foreign policy, defence, economy, energy and digital technology.

Achieving strategic autonomy is vital for the EU, as it faces a rapidly changing global landscape marked by emerging powers and changing alliances. By strengthening its capacity to act autonomously, the EU can better protect its interests, values and citizens while affirming its global leadership on the global stage.

In order to successfully achieve strategic autonomy, the EU needs to focus on several key areas, including reforming internal institutions and decision-making processes, strengthening the foreign and security policy to allow for more unified and assertive positions. Of particular importance are the strengthening of European defence industry and capabilities through investment, research and development, promotion of a competitive and innovative defence market, as well as reducing economic dependence on external actors by diversifying supply chains, promoting economic resilience and strengthening the international role of the Euro.

In addition to these specific areas, the pursuit of strategic autonomy must also be supported by a firm commitment to multilateralism and a rules-based international order. While seeking to strengthen its capacity to act independently, the EU must also continue to intensify



and strengthen its collaboration with international partners and its immediate neighbours. This balanced approach will allow the EU to maintain its global influence and contribute to the stability of the entire international system.

In view of all these considerations, the path to the EU's strategic autonomy is a difficult and long-term effort. However, with a clear vision, concerted efforts and a commitment to multilateralism, the European Union can successfully achieve strategic autonomy and secure its position as a key global player. By doing so, the EU will be better prepared to face the complex and interconnected challenges of the 21st century and to ensure the prosperity, security and well-being of its citizens for future generations.

In 2007, during his speech at the Munich Security Conference, Vladimir Putin announced, to some extent, his intentions for the coming years and how Russia wanted to shape the future of humanity. At the 2023 edition of the same event, Vladimir Putin was no longer invited, but his place at the conference was dedicated to analysing what he said 15 years ago and his actions since then, with a focus on the events triggered by the invasion in Ukraine, which began on 24 February 2022<sup>59</sup>.

From the perspective of the research findings, it is necessary to analyse the conclusions of the Munich Security Conference in 2023, focusing not only on the evolution of the security landscape but also on climate change, cyber threats and the role of multilateralism in addressing global challenges.

Thus, in the light of the evolution of the security environment, beyond highlighting changes in the global security landscape, the need for a renewed commitment to dialogue and the identification of new ways of cooperation on common security challenges becomes increasingly evident in order to mitigate conflict risks and maintain global stability and order.

Direct implications for the security environment in the Western Balkans can be seen in terms of increasing rivalry and increasing competition between the main external players exerting influence in the region. In this context and in an ever-changing landscape, the Western Balkan states must remain vigilant in monitoring the evolution of the security landscape and be proactive in working with key regional and international partners. This will enable them to address potential threats to their security and ensure that the region remains anchored in European values and norms.

---

<sup>59</sup> DW, *Putin's shadow looms large at Munich Security Conference*, 18 February 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/putins-shadow-looms-large-at-munich-security-conference/a-64753075>

Another major topic at the Munich Security Conference in 2023 was the impact of climate change on the security environment, an important dimension of the theme of the strategic autonomy of the European Union. From this perspective, the importance of a comprehensive approach, which takes into account all the implications of climate change and environmental risks on global stability, including its potential to exacerbate existing conflicts and create new ones, must be considered as part of developing multi-dimensional responses. Beyond investing in sustainable development and integrating climate security into national and regional security frameworks, it is necessary to emphasise the need to improve cooperation aimed at both mitigating the effects of climate change and setting adaptation frameworks and addressing its wide-ranging implications.

Thus, the Western Balkans, like other regions of Europe, will face significant challenges stemming from climate change, such as resource scarcity, environmental degradation and natural disasters, which can have a major impact on the political and economic stability of the region and contribute to exacerbating social unrest.

At the same time, the 2023 edition paid particular attention to cyber threats and the role of emerging technologies in shaping the global security environment. Thus, the need to develop international norms and regulations to govern cyberspace, as well as to encourage cooperation between states to combat cyber threats, which has been growing progressively in recent years, is crucial to ensure digital security. From this perspective too, one can assume the important role of the conclusions of the Conference on strengthening the EU's strategic autonomy. In this respect, as cyber threats continue to evolve and become more sophisticated, there is an urgent need for a coordinated international response that can also facilitate the exchange of knowledge, best practices and resources to combat cyber threats and protect critical infrastructure. In this context, the Western Balkan states need to strengthen their cybersecurity capabilities and strengthen regional and international (EU and NATO) digital security cooperation to tackle increasingly frequent cyber-attacks and disinformation campaigns, often aimed at undermining political stability and exacerbating social divisions.

Finally, the role of multilateralism in addressing the innumerable global challenges facing the international community, as well as the role of regional organisations in conflict prevention, peacekeeping and capacity building efforts that ensure states' resilience, has been reaffirmed on this occasion. For the Western Balkans, multilateral institutions such as the EU and NATO play an essential role in promoting stability, democracy and economic development,

and cooperation in regional formats (e.g. the Regional Cooperation Council) is complementary to efforts that contribute to promoting stability and security of the region and not least to its Euro-Atlantic integration.

The research aimed to analyse the latest developments of the researched themes and, through the multi-thematic approach, highlighted the interdependence and interconnection of the security-enhancing processes in the Western Balkans region, the enlargement of the EU and the strengthening of the strategic autonomy of the European Union.

At the same time, the research results can be a starting point for the deepening of many research-related topics starting from the evolution of the security landscape, the impact of climate change on security, cyber threats and the importance of multilateralism as a way forward to address the challenges of the 21st century.

Also, the novelties brought through the doctoral thesis can contribute to the formulation of measures ranging from the need for a comprehensive, cooperative and inclusive approach to security processes, enlargement and strategic autonomy, to the awareness and information that could lead to changes in the perceptions of the citizens of the Member States and those of the Western Balkan states about the European Union.

Finally, the success of all these efforts, to which the research has contributed, will depend on the willingness of nations to cooperate in order to address emerging challenges and to share the responsibility to ensure global peace, security and prosperity.

In conclusion, the Western Balkans, a region with a complex history and continuous challenges, has the potential to achieve sustainable stability and security through concerted efforts of regional actors and international partners. The doctoral thesis highlighted the key measures needed to strengthen security in the Western Balkans, from strengthening regional cooperation, promoting political stability and democracy, investing in economic development, addressing climate change and environmental challenges, and strengthening cybersecurity.

In order to successfully strengthen security in the Western Balkans, it is imperative that regional actors work together, as well as with international partners such as the EU and NATO. This partnership will allow for the exchange of resources, knowledge and best practices, while promoting a sense of shared responsibility for the security and prosperity of the region.

In addition, the Western Balkan countries must continue their efforts to promote political stability and democracy, ensuring that there are strong, transparent and accountable institutions. This will not only contribute to a stable environment, but will also help to strengthen resilience

against external influences that may seek to exploit the fragilities in the region's political landscape.

Investment in economic development, in particular in sectors that promote sustainable growth and create employment opportunities, is another key measure to strengthen security in the Western Balkans. A thriving economy will contribute to social cohesion and reduce the potential for unrest, while reducing the region's vulnerability.

Addressing the security implications of climate change and environmental challenges is essential for the long-term stability of the Western Balkans. This involves the development of broad strategies to strengthen resilience to and adaptation to climate change, as well as investments in sustainable infrastructure and renewable energy sources.

Finally, the future security and stability of the Western Balkans depends on the commitment and cooperation of regional actors and their international partners. By focusing on the measures presented in the doctoral thesis, the Western Balkan states can build a safer, more prosperous and resilient region that is better prepared to meet the complex and interconnected challenges of the 21st century.

The way forward can be a challenge, but with commitment and cooperation, the Western Balkans can overcome their historical obstacles and move towards a safer future, while by fostering a spirit of cooperation and shared responsibility, the states of the region can navigate effectively through the complexity of the contemporary security landscape, laying the foundations for a more stable, secure and prosperous future.

## **SELECTIVE BIBLIOGRAPHY**

✚ AP News. Dusan Stojanovic. (10 April 2022). *China makes semi-secret delivery of missiles to Serbia*. <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-europe-china-serbia-nato-682ab79c4239f14ecc1133ff5c7addc9>.

✚ Al Jazeera. (22 March 2023). *China's Xi tells Putin of 'changes not seen for 100 years*, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/3/22/xi-tells-putin-of-changes-not-seen-for-100>.

✚ AP News. (10 April 2022) *China makes semi-secret delivery of missiles to Serbia*. <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-europe-china-serbia-nato-682ab79c4239f14ecc1133ff5c7addc9>.

✚ Bernard Marr. (2022). *Data Strategy — How to profit from a world of Big Data, analytics and artificial intelligence*. 2nd edition. Kogan Page.

- ✚ Bruno DUPRÉ. (25 January 2022). *European sovereignty, strategic autonomy, Europe as a power: what reality for the European Union and what future?* European issues n°620. Robert Schuman Foundation. <https://www.robert-schuman.eu/en/doc/questions-d-europe/qe-620-en.pdf>.
- ✚ Council of the European Union. (20 June 2019). *A New Strategic Agenda 2019-2024*. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/39914/a-new-strategic-agenda-2019-2024.pdf>.
- ✚ Charles Michel, President of the European Council. (8 September 2020). [@eucopresident], #EUBEF20. Twitter.
- ✚ The European Commission. *Overview — Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance*. [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/enlargement-policy/overview-instrument-pre-accession-assistance\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/enlargement-policy/overview-instrument-pre-accession-assistance_en).
- ✚ The European Commission. (February 6, 2018). *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of Regions: A Credible Enlargement Perspective for and Enhanced EU Engagement with the Western Balkans*. [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:d284b8de-0c15-11e8-966a-01aa75ed71a1.0001.02/DOC\\_1&format=PDF](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:d284b8de-0c15-11e8-966a-01aa75ed71a1.0001.02/DOC_1&format=PDF).
- ✚ The European Commission. (February 6, 2018). *Communication from the commission to the European parliament, the council, the European economic and social committee and the committee of the regions A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans*. [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:d284b8de-0c15-11e8-966a-01aa75ed71a1.0001.02/DOC\\_1&format=PDF](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:d284b8de-0c15-11e8-966a-01aa75ed71a1.0001.02/DOC_1&format=PDF).
- ✚ The European Commission. (28 April 2020). *Signing ceremonies for Joint Procurement Agreement*. [https://ec.europa.eu/health/health-security-and-infectious-diseases/preparedness-and-response/signing-ceremonies-joint-procurement-agreement\\_ro](https://ec.europa.eu/health/health-security-and-infectious-diseases/preparedness-and-response/signing-ceremonies-joint-procurement-agreement_ro).
- ✚ Council of the European Union. (20 June 2019). *A new strategic agenda 2019-2024*. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2019/06/20/a-new-strategic-agenda-2019-2024/>.
- ✚ Charles Michel. President of the European Council. (28 September 2020). *Speech to the Bruegel think tank*. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/09/28/l-autonomie-strategique-europeenne-est-l-objectif-de-notre-generation-discours-du-president-charles-michel-au-groupe-de-reflexion-bruegel/>
- ✚ Council of the European Union. (11 January 2022). *Conference "Stronger industry for a more independent Europe*. <https://presidence-francaise.consilium.europa.eu/en/news/stronger-industry-for-a-more-independent-europe-conference/>
- ✚ The European Commission. (27 May 2020). *Europe's moment: Repair and Prepare for the Next Generation*. [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_20\\_940](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_940).

- ✚ The European Commission. (12 March 2019). *Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council EU-China — A strategic outlook*. [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52019JC0005 &from=EN](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52019JC0005&from=EN).
- ✚ The European Council. (11 March 2022). *Informal meeting of the Heads of State or Government — Versailles Declaration 10 and 11 March 2022*. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/54773/20220311-versailles-declaration-en.pdf>.
- ✚ Defense News. (3 January 2022). *Serbia praises another arms shipment from Russia*. <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2022/01/03/serbia-praises-another-arms-shipment-from-russia/>.
- ✚ DW. (18 February 2022). *Putin's shadow looms large at Munich Security Conference*. <https://www.dw.com/en/putins-shadow-looms-large-at-munich-security-conference/a-64753075>.
- ✚ The European Western Balkans. (October 16, 2019). *Mogherini: EU will become a strong global actor only if it integrates WB*. <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2019/10/16/mogherini-eu-will-become-a-strong-global-actor-only-if-it-integrates-wb/>.
- ✚ EurActiv. (15 March 2022). *EU to almost double its police force in Kosovo*. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/eu-to-nearly-double-its-police-force-in-kosovo/>.
- ✚ I Observer. (9 December 2020). *Germany apologises to Skopje for Bulgaria fiasco*. <https://euobserver.com/world/150323>.
- ✚ The European Western Balkans. (7 March 2017). *Mogherini: Balkans can easily become one of chessboards where big power game can be played*. <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2017/03/07/mogherini-balkans-can-easily-become-one-of-chessboards-where-big-power-game-can-be-played/>.
- ✚ The European Western Balkans. (30 September 2021). *Von der Leyen wraps up visit to the Western Balkans*. <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2021/09/30/von-der-leyen-wraps-up-visit-to-the-western-balkans/>.
- ✚ EurActiv. (2 September 2014). *Mogherini: Russia is no longer the EU's strategic partner*. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/mogherini-russia-is-no-longer-the-eu-s-strategic-partner/>.
- ✚ Government of the Netherlands. (9 March 2022). *Speech by Prime Minister Mark Rutte at Sciences PO University*. <https://www.government.nl/documents/speeches/2022/03/09/speech-by-prime-minister-mark-rutte-at-university-sciences-po-paris>.
- ✚ Heather A. Conley, James Mina, Ruslan Stefanov & Martin Vladimirov. (2016). *The Kremlin Playbook. Understanding Russian Influence in Central and Eastern Europe*. Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2016, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/kremlin-playbook> (vol. 1)

- ✚ Heather A. Conley, Donatienne Ruy, Ruslan Stefanov & Martin Vladimirov. (2019). *The Kremlin Playbook 2 — The Enablers*. Center for Strategic & International Studies. <https://www.csis.org/features/kremlin-playbook-2>,
- ✚ Julian Vierlinger. (20 April 2022). *A: Ukraine refugee crisis is Europe's biggest since WWII*. Atlantic Council. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/un-ukraine-refugee-crisis-is-europes-biggest-since-wwii/>.
- ✚ Jacques Poos, Luxembourg Foreign Minister. (1991). *Press statement from 28 June 1991, in the wake of the cease fire arrangement, asserting that the European Union would take the lead role in addressing the Balkan conflicts*. <https://www.nytimes.com/1991/06/29/world/conflict-in-yugoslavia-europeans-send-high-level-team.html>.
- ✚ Liliana Popescu and Răzvan Tudose. (December 2021). *The Dragonbear and the Grey Rhinos. The European Union Faced with the Rise of the China-Russia Partnership*. Romanian Journal of European Affairs, <http://rjea.ier.gov.ro/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Art.-9.pdf>.
- ✚ Mardis du Grand Continent. (8 March 2022). *Événement spécial consacré à l'invasion de l'Ukraine*. <https://twitter.com/i/broadcasts/1djGXPZqOReGZ>.
- ✚ Mihajlo Vujasin. (29 March 2022). *I to allow Western Balkans to take part in joint gas supplies*. Balkan Green Energy News. <https://balkangreenenergynews.com/eu-to-allow-western-balkans-to-take-part-in-joint-gas-purchases/>.
- ✚ Ministry of Economy, Energy and Business Environment. (2020). *Romania's energy strategy 2020-2030, with the perspective of 2050*. [http://www.mmediu.ro/app/webroot/uploads/files/Strategia%20Energetica%20a%20Romaniei\\_aug%202020.pdf](http://www.mmediu.ro/app/webroot/uploads/files/Strategia%20Energetica%20a%20Romaniei_aug%202020.pdf).
- ✚ New Strategy Center. (October 2022). *The Wider Balkan Region At The Crossroads Of A New Regional Energy Matrix*. <https://www.newstrategycenter.ro/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Joint-Study-NCS-BCSP-FINAL.pdf>.
- ✚ President of the European Council. Charles Michel. (10 February 2021). [[@eucopresident](https://twitter.com/eucopresident)] #ACFrontPage [TWEEET]. Twitter.
- ✚ President of the European Council. Charles Michel. (8 September 2020). [[@eucopresident](https://twitter.com/eucopresident)]. #EUBEF20 [TWEEET]. Twitter.
- ✚ President of France Emmanuel Macron. (12 December 2022). *The Western Balkans are more than Europe's neighbourhood because it is at the heart of Europe*. <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2022/01/12/western-balkans-and-the-eu-in-2022-resolution-of-problems-or-escalation-of-crises/>.
- ✚ The Russian presidency. (4 February 2022). *Joint statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development*. <http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5770>.

- ✚ Reuters. (27 February 2022). *EU's Borrell: 'We fear Russia is not going to stop in Ukraine*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/ukraine-crisis-eu-region-idINS8N2SV0BJ>.
- ✚ Security Service of Ukraine. (28 March 2022). *Since war started, SSU shuts down 5 enemy's bot farms with over 100,000 fake accounts*. <https://ssu.gov.ua/en/novyny/z-pochatku-viiny-sbu-likvidovala-5-vorozhykh-botoferm-potuzhnistiu-ponad-100-tys-feikovykh-akauntiv>.
- ✚ The European External Action Service of the EU. (3 December 2020). *Why European strategic autonomy matters*. <https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/89865/why-european-strategic-autonomy-mat>.
- ✚ The European External Action Service of the EU. (20 July 2017). *Speech by the High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini at Hessian Peace Prize Ceremony*. [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/30201\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/30201_en)
- ✚ The European External Action Service. (June 2016). *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe — A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy*. [https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top\\_stories/pdf/eugs\\_review\\_web.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top_stories/pdf/eugs_review_web.pdf),
- ✚ The European External Action Service of the EU. (3 December 2020). *Josep Borrell, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the European Commission — Blog. "Why European strategic autonomy matters"*. [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/89865/why-european-strategic-autonomy-matters\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/89865/why-european-strategic-autonomy-matters_en).
- ✚ The Diplomat. (5 May 2020). *COVID-19: Trouble on the China-Russia Border*. <https://thediplomat.com/2020/05/covid-19-trouble-on-the-china-russia-border/>.
- ✚ Ursula von der Leyen. 27 November 2019. *Speech by President-elect von der Leyen in the European Parliament Plenary on the occasion of the presentation of her College of Commissioners and their programme — This is the geopolitical Commission that I have in mind, and that Europe urgently needs*. [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech\\_19\\_6408](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_19_6408).
- ✚ Velina Tchakarova. (8 September 2015). *The Russia, China Alliance: What Does "The Dragonbear" Aim to Achieve in Global Affairs?* <https://medium.com/@vtchakarova/the-russia-china-alliance-what-does-the-dragonbear-aim-to-achieve-in-global-affairs-e09b1add1c4a>.
- ✚ Vladislav Surkov. (2019). *"Russia interferes in your brains, we change your conscience, and there is nothing you can do about it."* <https://www.newsweek.com/russia-president-vladimir-putin-election-americans-1327793>.
- ✚ World Bulletin. (2 February 2016). *Medvedev warns of 'World War' if peace talks fail*. <https://worldbulletin.dunyabulteni.net/europe/medvedev-warns-of-world-war-if-peace-talks-fail-h169354.html>.
- ✚ Xinhua, "Germany's energy policy must become more independent", March 2, 2022, <https://english.news.cn/20220302/04a64a23c91c4201bb3f63a058c69bb6/c.html>