

The impact of the war in Ukraine in the stability of Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, viewed by young political influencers.

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Mestrado em Estudos Internacionais

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Outubro, 2023

Departamento de História

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Dedication

To our beloved late Mum and Dad, who always fought for peace in the family, and who always supported my choices.

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Acknowledgements

Obrigado to my sister and brother, who gave me my name and always pushed me to study, and to our family.

A special thanks to:

The amazing young people that I met throughout the five months of the interview process, who gave me a feeling of purpose, fulfilment, and the certainty that I was right to choose this perspective. They are committed, intelligent, determined, with beliefs and a purpose, and did not hesitate to participate in my project.

Professor Roxana Andrei, who inspired me and guided me through this journey: *o îmbrățișare*. To the professors at ISCTE whom I discussed my dissertation with.

My many amazing teachers and professors at school and university, namely my teacher of Portuguese in 8th grade who, upon my request, taught me the Cyrillic alphabet, which was so useful now.

The new friends that I made during this two-year master, to my colleagues at work for their patience, and to my friends that accepted my absences during these two years.

Rui Carreteiro, Bének Morais, and Eirik Sunde, who participated in security, peace-keeping, and humanitarian missions in the Western Balkans during and after the war, and to journalists Pedro Caldeira Rodrigues, and Tiago Carvalho. They all enriched my knowledge with their experience in the region.

Resumo

Trinta anos volvidos após as guerras dos anos 1990, os Balcãs Ocidentais enfrentam novos desafios devido ao impacto potencial da guerra da Ucrânia na estabilidade regional. Neste projeto, abordarei os eventos e as razões que conduziram à dissolução sangrenta da Jugoslávia de Tito, procurando demonstrar a co-relação com a dissolução da URSS e a história recente da Ucrânia. Considerarei dois casos de estudo: a Bósnia e Herzegovina, devido à complexa estrutura política resultante dos acordos de paz de Dayton e o frágil equilíbrio entre as duas entidades, com as ameaças de secessão da liderança pró-russa da Republica Srpska, e o risco de divisão dentro da Federação; e o Kosovo, não reconhecido pelas Nações Unidas, e com o processo de normalização com a Sérvia num impasse. Após abordar o seu contexto atual, o foco é em como os jovens políticos, ativistas e analistas veem o risco de contágio da guerra da Ucrânia, e como preveem o futuro da região. Devido à sua influência regional, abordei também influenciadores políticos da Sérvia, Albânia e Croácia. Analisei o conteúdo de 22 entrevistas e as redes sociais de 70 indivíduos, recorrendo a *Framing* (enquadramento) como teoria estrutural de análise, e, esporadicamente, a Balcanismo. Concluí que os jovens influenciadores utilizam a Ucrânia como plataforma para comunicar uma mensagem política local. Apesar de reconhecerem a ameaça, o risco de conflito não é mencionado proativamente ao seu público. O futuro passa, inequivocamente, pela NATO e pela União Europeia, por esta ordem.

Palavras-chave: Kosovo, Bósnia e Herzegovina, Rússia, Ucrânia, Balcãs Ocidentais, jovens políticos, Jugoslávia

Abstract

Thirty years after the 1990s's wars, the Western Balkans face a new challenge due to the potential impact of war in Ukraine in regional stability. In my research, I revisit the events and the reasons that led to the bloody dissolution of Tito's Yugoslavia and seek to demonstrate how they relate to the dissolution of the USSR and Ukraine's recent history. I considered two study cases: Bosnia and Herzegovina, due to a complex political structure issued of Dayton peace agreements and the fragile balance between the two entities, with Republika Srpska's leadership's threats of secession and pro-Russian drive, and the risk of split in the Federation; and Kosovo, unrecognised by the UN, with the normalisation process with Serbia in a deadlock. After contextualising their current situation, I focus on how their young politicians, activists and analysts see the risk of Ukraine war's spilling over, and how they foresee the future of the region. Due to their regional influence, I also approached political influencers from Serbia, Albania, and Croatia. I explored the content of 22 interviews and social media posts from 70 individuals, by engaging with *framing* as a theoretical framework of analysis, and *balkanism*, occasionally. I concluded that young influencers leverage Ukraine to convey their political message locally. Despite considering it a real threat, the risk of conflict in the region is not proactively mentioned to their audience. The future is unequivocally linked to NATO and EU, by this order.

Keywords: Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Russia, Ukraine, Western Balkans, young politicians, Yugoslavia

Glossary of acronyms

ASM: Association of Serbian Municipalities

EU: European Union

EUFOR Althea: European Union Force Bosnia and Herzegovina

EULEX: European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo

FYROM: Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia

FRY: Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (1992-2003)

FSB: Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation

JNA: Jugoslovenska narodna armija (Yugoslav National Army)

NATO: North Atlantic Treaty Organization; Alliance

(O)HR: (Office of) the High Representative

OSCE: Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe

SFOR: Stabilisation Force in Bosnia and Herzegovina

SRFY: Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (1945-1992)

UNMIK: United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo

UN: United Nations

UK: United Kingdom

US (A): United States of America

USSR: Union of the Socialist Soviet Republics; Soviet Union

Introduction

Thirty years have passed since the demise of Yugoslavia and the beginning of the bloodshed that followed: the wars in Croatia (from 1991 to 1995, between the Republic of Croatia and local Serbian forces opposing independence, namely in the self-proclaimed Republic of Serbian Krajina), and Kosovo (from 1998 to 1999, between the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia-FRY and the Kosovo Albanian rebels from the UÇK-KLA). Yet, the bloodiest conflict was the one fought from 1992 until the end of 1995 between the recently independent Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina and its inner proto-states, the Croatian Republic of Herzeg-Bosnia (until 1994) and Republika Srpska, supported by Croatia and Serbia, respectively. The United Nations (UN) estimated that over 100.000 people were killed and about two million took refuge abroad or internally.

The seven countries that emerged from the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY, that lasted between 1945 and 1992) are currently in different grades of statehood maturity, reflected on their relationship with the European Union (EU), whose eligibility for membership requires the fulfilment of the Copenhagen Criteria: democratic institutions, respect for human rights, market economy, and the acceptance of the Union's values. Slovenia and Croatia are EU members, while Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia are recognised candidates. Kosovo submitted its application, but the independence is not recognised by five EU member-states, conditioned by geostrategy and by their own internal secession movements, nor by the UN, let alone by Serbia. In turn, Bosnia and Herzegovina is struggling to find cohesion and commitment amongst its ethnic heterogeneity, within a complex power-sharing between its three constituent peoples and two entities, created by the Dayton agreements, who brought peace to the region in 1995, with the ethnic Serbian entity Republika Srpska, supported by Serbia and Russia, continuously threatening to break away from the central state. Meanwhile, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 set Europe on alert, with most NATO countries supporting Ukraine's war effort, and presented new challenges to the status quo in the Western Balkans: on one hand, Serbia overtly aligns with Russia, despite not supporting the invasion, on the other, we have the other countries supporting Ukraine's resistance, yet not without internal dissension, such as Croatia, or Bosnia and Herzegovina, where Republika Srpska's leader, Milorad Dodik, aligns with Serbia and clearly stands by Russia's endeavours against the power in Kyiv.

Currently, Russia occupies 20% of Ukraine's territory, including Crimea and the separatist regions of Donetsk and Luhansk, which resonates to Western Balkans' own separatisms: Republika of Serbian Krajina, that did not survive and is nowadays part of Croatia, and Republika Srpska, whose nearly radical separation from the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (the other entity) only contributed to increasing the ethnic homogeneity in each of them. A potential Russian victory in Ukraine might empower Republika Srpska to claim independence or to integrate Serbia, due to its support to Russia's *military operation* in Ukraine. There is also the north of Kosovo, with an ethnic Serbian majority, whose tension in the last year can be fueled by either side, depending on how the war in Ukraine unfolds. If we delve further in the former Yugoslav territory, we can see other potential

nationalisms igniting in east Herzegovina or in Montenegro. The EU's openness to accelerate Ukraine's membership without giving similar signs to candidate countries such as Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia may keep this part of the Balkans further away from Brussels influence and push it under the Russian wing, whom they share the Slavic origin with, religion in some countries, and related languages.

In the current context, my project aims at ascertaining the influence of the conflict in Ukraine in the balance and the stability in the Western Balkans. I will focus on two study cases, because of their challenges when compared to the other five countries: Kosovo, still struggling for international recognition and with a difficult relationship with Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, with its complex fabric of power that still does not provide the institutional maturity to negotiate its EU candidacy process. From the beginning, the main idea for my dissertation was to work on the countries born out of former Yugoslavia. The idea developed into focusing on Serbia's foreign policy and to compare it with Yugoslavia's non-alignment. When I started my quest for the relevant literature, the idea to think forward and to focus on emerging political leaders germinated, ultimately identifying a direction that might result from the future insertion of these young political influencers in the political system. In fact, the local context reflects an attempt to promote youth cooperation among different ethnicities to cope with the scars of the past, namely within Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. However, it did not prove to be any easier as far as academic literature was concerned. There is a reasonable interest in young people in the Western Balkans, in how they get together in civil society, namely in NGOs, how they get organised in student and academic associations, or in what (de)motivates them to vote or become politically active. Still, I have not encountered any academic work dedicated directly to young emerging political influencers in Bosnia-Herzegovina, or Kosovo (for clarity, I will consider the Western Balkans as consisting of Albania, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Kosovo, and North Macedonia).

The project is based on the following research question: How is the war in Ukraine reflected in the narratives and political platforms of young political influencers in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo?

This dissertation was composed of two fronts: extensive research on Yugoslavia and how it was created, its demise and the two-phased wars in the beginning and the end of the 1990s, and the current context in the region, as well as the circumstances that led to current war in Ukraine. The second front was the field work and data collection that included interviews to young politicians, activists and analysts, youth section parties' websites, and social media. As the two study cases cannot be isolated from their regional context, I included the views of Serbians, Albanians, and Croats on the two territories, due to their regional influence. My objectives were (a) to identify young politicians' position regarding the impact of the war in Ukraine, (b) how the war impacted their discourse and narratives, and (c), the future outcomes they expect in these countries and the region. Based on the above research question, I formulated three hypotheses:

1. Young leaders capitalise the war in Ukraine as a vehicle to engage youth in their narratives.
2. Ukraine war is perceived as a threat to the balance in the Western Balkans.

3. European integration is perceived by most as the way forward.

In addition to the impact of the war in Ukraine, this research seeks to contribute to the understanding of the current views and trends in the young political generation, and how they are constructing the future political dynamics in the Western Balkans. The argument proceeds as follows: the first chapter features a contextualisation about Yugoslavia's wars, the secessionist conflicts in Eastern Ukraine, and finally, Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The second chapter introduces *framing* as the preferred critical theory, complemented with balkanism and nesting orientalism, in opposition to other possible theories: realism and nationalism. This section also includes a state-of-the-art review of what the academia has written about young politicians. The third chapter offers the empirical analysis of this research, starting with a comparison between the situation in Ukraine and the Western Balkans and the risks of spillover, followed by an approach on the current context in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. The core of the chapter is dedicated to the research process and the analysis and conclusions drawn from the interviews, social media, and briefly on political party youth section websites. The dissertation finishes with an articulation of the findings and conclusions.

Chapter 1 - Contextualisation of the secession wars in post-Yugoslavia and in post-USSR

This chapter focuses on the bloody demise of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, namely on Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, the dissolution of the USSR, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

1.1 Yugoslavia's secession wars

1.1.1 The demise of Yugoslavia and the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Yugoslavia was the only European communist country who reached a high level of social, political, and economic liberalisation. Ironically, it was also the one that fell apart in the most brutal way (Horton, 2010). Before the war started, Lendvai (1991) touched on the eminent disintegration and conflict, which he rooted in the first Yugoslav state, the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, created after World War I in the remains of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Goati (1997) considered that the violence was not inevitable, when compared to the more peaceful dismantling of the Soviet Union (1991) or the separation of Czechoslovakia into two states (1993). Yet, the falling apart of the multiethnic and multi-confessional Yugoslavia (SFRY) was probably inevitable (Goati, 1997).

The first challenge in understanding the war in Yugoslavia is to ascertain how it all started and what happened in the long years of 1992 to 1996. The “Death of Yugoslavia” is an awarded BBC documentary (1995-1996) covering the last years of Josip Broz Tito (President of the SFRY between 1953 and 1980), the war period, and the signing of the Dayton peace agreement. Although one may question the editing or the fact selection, it consolidates images of the conflict, demonstrations, and nearly 80 interviews to the leaders, actors involved, and the impacted population. Far from being an opinionated programme, it is a factual documentary of the chronology of events. The first episode starts with Slobodan Milošević’s manipulation of Kosovo Serbs’ dissatisfaction with the Kosovo Albanians’ influence in the autonomous province of Kosovo, that he later extrapolates to the rest of the Yugoslav Republic of Serbia, by rallying thousands of Serbs under the same protest, ultimately leading him to the Republic’s Presidency, by successfully overthrowing Ivan Stambolić in 1987 (BBC, 1995-1996).

Between 1990 and 1991, in the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the presidents of the six Yugoslav republics met repeatedly to discuss, not the economic or the political future of the federation, but the future of the federation itself (Crawford and Lipschutz, 1994). Goati adds that the elites of the different republics had already been claiming more relevant state responsibilities, regardless of the federation’s interest, to consolidate their own power (Goati, 1997). Tension became clearer when Franjo Tuđman, who related the Croatian state with the ethnic Croatian nation, was elected president of Croatia in 1990. Milošević was adamant not to accept that the Serbs would be separated in different states. By then, the West was concerned with the war in the Persian Gulf and expected that the end of the Cold War would bring ever-lasting peace in Europe. Meanwhile, Croatia and Slovenia, more leaning towards independence, approved legislation to reduce Yugoslav power in these republics. After initial skirmishes, the Yugoslav National Army (JNA) took arms, ultimately urging both republics to declare independence in June 1991. The war started immediately after (Crawford and Lipschutz, 1994).

I will make use of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia's reports (ICTY) to review the events between 1991 and 1995. While the war in Slovenia had minimal impact and only lasted for 10 days, Croatia fought a war with the JNA and Serbia until 1995. There was a large Serbian minority in Krajina wanting to remain in Yugoslavia who rejected the new independent authority in Zagreb and declared nearly a third of Croatia as an independent Serbian state under their control, from where large masses of non-Serbs were violently expelled in a process of ethnic cleansing. After events such as the shelling of Dubrovnik and the siege and destruction of Vukovar by Serbs, an UN-monitored ceasefire was implemented in 1992, but Zagreb was not willing to accept anything but full control over its territory. In the Summer of 1995, the Croat army launched two successful major campaigns to recover all regions under Serbian control that soon ended the war later that year, except for Eastern Slavonia that transitioned to Zagreb in 1998, under UN-administration. Portuguese Major-General Carlos Branco (2016), stationed in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina during the Bosnian War, mentions that the Croats who would have forced 180 thousand Serbs to abandon Krajina amidst assaults, robbery, and massive killings during the five-day Operation Storm, away from the media's eyes.

Macedonia had a peaceful process: Skopje declared independence later in 1991, recognised as the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM). The process in Bosnia and Herzegovina was the opposite: long, bloody, and deadly. At the time, its government mirrored the population's ethnic composition: 43% Bosnian Muslims, 33% Bosnian Serbs, 17% Bosnian Croats, and 7% from other ethnic groups. Its strategic location was the object of Serbian and Croat desire, whose leaders met in 1991 to agree on its partition among themselves, assigning a small portion for Muslims. In March 1992, more than 60% of Bosnians decided for independence in a referendum boycotted by ethnic Serbs, who rebelled weeks later by declaring a Serbian republic in the areas they controlled, the Republika Srpska, with the support of JNA and Serbia. Within a short period of time, they were able to control more than 60% of the now independent Bosnia and Herzegovina, due to the superior military capacity, and the persecution of non-Serbs. Soon after, the Bosnian Croats declared their own republic with Zagreb's support, the Croatian Republic of Herzeg-Bosnia. The war had now three sides fighting for land, with all ethnicities suffering horrific crimes. The UN's estimation is that over 100,000 people were killed and two million (more than half the population) became refugees or were internally displaced during the war, and the atrocities committed by all sides included rape and detention centres for civilians. In the Summer of 1995, the massacre of Srebrenica, an UN-declared safe area, was the bloodiest and more violent event of the war. More than 8,000 Bosnian Muslim men and boys were executed by the Bosnian Serb commander Ratko Mladić's Serb forces. Women and children had been driven out (ICTY). This atrocious event turned the international community in favour of an external intervention in the conflict. Some, though, point out that the Muslims' unreasonable passivity and inaction in the Srebrenica massacre were intentional and a manipulation of international public opinion (Branco, 2016).

Peace was decided in November 1995 in Dayton, Ohio, a small American air base, and formally signed weeks later in Paris by the Presidents of Croatia, of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Yugoslavia

(FRY, then only composed of Serbia and Montenegro), as well as leaders from the UK, France, EU, Germany, Russia, and the United States (US). The Dayton Accords recognised two constituent entities, the Republika Srpska (with Serbian majority) and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (or Federation, with Muslim majority, and Croats), divided by a non-controlled Inter-Entity Boundary. The Accords implied liberal state-building with a constitution, general elections, civil and political rights, and economic liberalisation to reduce social and ethnic tensions. To manage diversity, Dayton did not avoid ethnicity and recognised three equal constitutive peoples: the Serbs, the Croats, and the Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims). The Constitution (Annex 4 of the Accord), written in English, reflected how the international community had interpreted the conflict. The inviolability of the territory was a response to Serbian and Croatian influence, just like the right to return for refugees and internally displaced people and the protection of human rights were the response to ethnic cleansing (Guzina, 2007). Despite the international community's determination to not endorse the ethnic division of Bosnia, Dayton legitimised the ethnic partition that existed on the ground (Hayden, 1996). In addition to the two entities, the district of Brčko was created, and is still under UN administration (Kučukalić, 2022).

1.1.2 Literary review on the reasons for the dissolution of Yugoslavia

Shortly after the end of the conflict, and with the disclaimer that not enough time had passed for an accurate historical narrative, Campbell (1998) reviewed about ten different papers on the Bosnian War and listed the last two years before it started, beginning with fights between Serbs and Muslims near Foča in August 1990, until 6 April 1992. Around this date, the US and the EU recognised Bosnia and Herzegovina's independence declared only a few days before, marking the start of the war. He sees two trends in his reviews: the 'civil war' and the 'international conflict', sometimes overlapping with ethnicity, historical confrontation, and religion on one side, and intense nationalism, genocide, economy, and politics on the other. He confronts incompatible perspectives that attribute the main responsibilities either to Serbia, to Bosniaks, to Croatia, or to the EU's recognition of independence (Campbell, 1998). Žarana Papić (1994), a Yugoslav social anthropologist and feminist theorist, expressed that the dimensions that had been tamed under socialist Yugoslavia were then released and had turned nationalism and religious fundamentalism into their extreme forms. Albeit the negative connotation of *Balkanisation* and the presumption that the different nations were always in conflict, Hayden (1996) counters that ethnic restlessness was not usually in the front pages. Although each of its composing republics was named after the main group inhabiting it (e.g.: Serbs in Serbia), except for Bosnia and Herzegovina where there was no overly dominant group, all of them included considerable minorities. When the communist party collapsed and the first free federal elections were held in 1990, the victorious message was always connected to homogeneity, like Croatia for the Croatian people, opening the way to the independence of each republic. Excluding Bosnia and Herzegovina, the sovereignty was established by the majority. Nonetheless, Hayden emphasises that the Yugoslav Constitution of 1974 assigned the right to self-determination to the nation but not to the republics, which the nationalist

movements merged into a nation-state concept. The solution was to reformulate the republics' constitutions to allocate sovereignty to the determinant nation. By reading Hayden, one may understand that the demise could have, constitutionally, materialised in a Great Croatia and a Great Serbia. Nevertheless, I believe that the Constitution of 1974 considered the republics' borders inviolability, by forcing the nation to respect them when seceding: "The nations of Yugoslavia, proceeding from the right of every nation to self-determination, including the right to secession (...) united in a federal republic of free and equal nations. (...) The working people and the nations and nationalities shall exercise their sovereign rights in the Socialist Republics" (World Statesman, 1974: 53).

Jović (2001) ascertained the validity of seven patterns that he found in his readings on the war. First, nationalism, described as the prevalence of the nation over any other policy or matter, always present in Yugoslavia and stronger than liberalism, blooming easily when communism collapsed. Any opposition to the country's ideology was seen as nationalism which grew as the alternative to Yugoslavia's modus vivendi (confirmed by Crawford and Lipschutz, 1994). Yet, Violante considers that nationalism was used by former communist leaders as a driver to stay in power after the demise (Violante, 2022). Nevertheless, Yugoslavism was growing simultaneously, especially among the new and more educated generation. The second pattern, economy, that Jović is not keen about: despite acknowledging that the gap (intentional, as per Crawford and Lipschutz, 1994) between the different republics may have accelerated the breakup, especially Slovenia and Croatia who wanted to accelerate their development, he considers that Kosovo, the least developed territory, did not see any advantage in being part of the federation either. Furthermore, when the weakened economy started to see the fruition of new policies, the state started to disintegrate. Jović states that the third pattern, ancient hatred, is not more relevant than in other multi-ethnic states, despite the episodic tensions throughout history. In the case of culture (mainly religious and linguistic), he questions how the Yugoslavs were able to cohabitate for 45 years and simply collapse after the fall of the Berlin Wall. He, though, adds that culture cannot be dissociated from the other reasons, and that peoples' beliefs are part of culture and subject to instrumentalisation. The fifth pattern, international politics, since Yugoslavia had lost its strategic power and could not maintain the non-alignment after the fall of the Eastern Bloc, becoming more vulnerable to the West. The nationalist forces in Slovenia or Croatia leveraged the more pro-Western sentiment, but he clarifies that it was not in the international community's interest to see Yugoslavia fall apart. In addition, the Yugoslav leaders did not see the fall of communism as endangering the country's cohesion, but as the end of the threat that the USSR posed to the federation. Jović adds that, despite its incompetence, the international intervention in the conflict was not the reason for the collapse. The sixth pattern was about personality, mainly referring to Tito as the aggregator of different communities, often indistinct from the state itself that crumbled after he died. His reverse was Milošević, the ambitious leader who disturbed Tito's balance and who wanted to replace him, who introduced the masses into politics. In fact, they also needed to find compromises with others and were not, respectively, the sole creator nor undertaker of Yugoslavia. Finally, the comparison of Yugoslavia to a falling empire, but he

disagrees as Tito had forged it as a federation without a dominant nation. Objective factors need to be linked to the actors' subjectivity, adding that one cannot focus on one single root-cause, and that most of the political leadership did not foster nor expected Yugoslavia to fall apart (Jović 2001).

For Mihailo Crnobrnja (1996), Yugoslav ambassador to the then European Community between 1989-1992, it was mostly an ethnic internal conflict between the people of an independent Bosnia and Herzegovina that saw the rise of confrontational nationalism, and not an international war. These ethnic groups had co-existed for centuries, but they were stirred by their ambitious leaders with all having equal responsibility in what happened. Namely, Milošević, Tuđman, and Alja Izetbegović (Bosniak, first President of an independent Bosnia) could have stopped and denounced the ethnic cleansing. Crnobrnja insists on equal responsibilities to outbalance the Western media that usually depicted the Serbs as the prime responsible for the atrocities (Crnobrnja in Campbell, 1998: 272-73). Cornelia Sorabji (1995), who studied terror and territory during the Bosnian War, acknowledged those that considered that the methods resembled ancient mediaeval warfare, such as the long siege of Sarajevo, to justify the war as reminiscences of unintelligible Balkan passions, which Radovan Karadžić (President of Republika Srpska during the war) endorsed as justification for the conflict. Yet, Sorabji counters that it was essentially a very modern war: with brutality at its core to push a specific population out of a territory, and with international organisations and agencies as actors, in addition to the media, with both being instrumentalised by former Yugoslavia leaders. In fact, Papić (1994) portrayed media-war propaganda as irrational, cruel, shameless, and lunatic, with the sole purpose of increasing hostility against the other nation via misinformation. Additionally, Sorabji (1995) considered that the violence that characterised this conflict was not systematised from above, although it was inspired from above. Unlike World War II's genocide, often compared to the 1992-1995 war, violence in Bosnian War was not coordinated: it had regional variations where military and administrative authorities freely and randomly organised and promoted violence, with the perpetrators applying their own sadistic practices. Hayden (1996) counters that ethnic cleansing can take multiple shapes, one of them being legal and bureaucratic, hence organised, with members of minorities being excluded when refusing to be assimilated into the majority, or simply expelled, namely in 1995: when Croatia launched Storm operation to remove the Serbs from Krajina in August, when Serbs took over Muslim safe areas in eastern Bosnia in July, or when in September, Muslims supported by the Croatian army expelled tens of thousands out of west-central Bosnia. In addition to Jović (1997), Bourgarel (1999) advocates that the conflict did not simply result from century-old hatreds between Balkan people, inflicted by uneducated populations from the countryside as depicted by some Western media, which the affected populations described in a similar way. Yet, he adds that there was some connection between the origin of the war and rural and mountain regions. Among the reasons that Campbell (1998) encountered in his review, he refers to Izetbegović's hunger for power, for him and for the Muslims, or that the Bosnians could have come to work it out by themselves, had the conflict not been brought in by Serbia. The ambition for a Greater Serbia would have triggered the bloodshed, prior to the international recognition of the referendum held a few days

before the declaration of independence. Others do not see an ethnic origin in the conflict but the result of the transition from a socialist controlled economy to a democratic market economy that made authority and order fade away (Campbell, 1998). Geography is another relevant aspect to consider. Bourgarel (1999) considered that the complicated and ever-changing relations between states, militias and self-proclaimed republics reflected how unclear the territories, institutions, and boundaries were within Yugoslavia, rooted long before its dissolution. In fact, Hayden (1996) refers to the ‘geography of violence’ as the wars happened in the regions where the various Yugoslav nations were more mixed. He discourages any media or political discourse about the potential repressed nationalism during Tito’s times. On the contrary, he states that violence erupted as the political elites issued from the 1990 elections wanted to unmix those communities whose existence was against the winning ideology.

1.1.3 War returns to former Yugoslavia: the conflict in Kosovo

After Croatia, Slovenia, Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina became independent from the SFRY, Kosovo remained part of Serbia, who had meanwhile formed the SFRY’s successor, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1992, together with Montenegro. The Albanians in Kosovo wanted their independence or regain the autonomy (Yalim, 2022) lost in 1989, when Milošević, then president of Serbia within Yugoslavia, revoked the province’s autonomy as part of his nationalist roadmap (Davies, 2021). He used the ill-treated Serbs in Kosovo to fuel Serbian nationalism. This autonomy had been part of Tito’s venture to diminish Serbian nationalism (Bandow 2009) and had gradually been increasing since 1963 (Yalim 2022). In the interim, the Albanian-speaking majority’s fight for self-determination became more visible, and by the mid-1990s, the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) started a guerrilla war against the Serbian military, to whom Belgrade responded with enormous violence, but also towards the Kosovo Albanians in the territory (Davies, 2021) who rallied massively against Belgrade (Lisibach, 2019). As per Cafruny et al (2023), the US had encouraged Belgrade’s fight against the KLA by having the diplomat Robert Gelbard, their envoy to the region, to name them terrorists, only to praise the KLA scarcely four months later, in the words of Gelbard’s replacement, the banker Richard Holbrooke.

When diplomacy failed (Davies, 2021; Yalim, 2022), NATO started bombing Belgrade in March 1999 without the Security Council’s validation (Davies, 2021), an unlawful and dreadful event (Cafruny et al, 2023), an “act of enforcement” not contributing to a peaceful settlement of the conflict (Dunay, 2015: 63). The Alliance’s increasing power in Europe startled Russia, who felt diminished when it was still adjusting its role in the new world order. In fact, three former Warsaw Pact members had joined NATO less than two weeks before the bombing started: Poland, Hungary, and Czech Republic (formerly part of Czechoslovakia, together with Slovakia). Ultimately, during the Rambouillet talks in Paris in 1999 that aimed at settling peace, the Western wing of the Kremlin (O’Loughlin and Kolossov, 1999) pressured Belgrade to accept the settlement (Davies, 2021), but Milošević was not ready to accept NATO transit rights through Yugoslav territory as if it was a conquered state. Eventually, he did later

accept the West's occupation of Kosovo only. Russia and Serbia's refusal to sign the Accords resulted in the bombing to start a few days later (Bandow, 2009).

The conflict ended with UN's Resolution 1244 (based on the Rambouillet Accords; UN Security Council, 1999) that granted the integrity of Yugoslavia (FRY), with Russian troops participating in the UN's KFOR (Kosovo Force) until 2003. In the following years, Moscow insisted on the Security Council's authority in any matter related to Kosovo's independence while the Western members of the Contact Group (USA, UK, France, Italy, Germany and Russia formed this informal group during the Bosnian War, and kept monitoring the situation in Kosovo, as per the US Department of State) were pushing for independence, with a more 'creative' interpretation of Resolution 1244 on FRY's integrity (Davies, 2021). Rambouillet was an interim agreement to stop violence, the return of refugees and displaced persons, leaving Kosovo's final status undetermined (UN Peacemaker, 1999), without any clause against independence (Yalim, 2022), though it was almost certain and implicit (Bandow, 2009).

According to Bandow (2009), ethnic Albanians led an ethnic cleansing process of their own with the West's acquiescence, right after the war, and again in 2004. When Milošević was removed from the presidency of the FRY, the new democratic government strived to have the West revisit the Kosovo case, yet the West was still adamant in its anti-Serb drive, even when the EU acknowledged that Pristina's government had not matured from its violent past (Bandow, 2009). Negotiations to determine Kosovo's final legal status went on for nine years, while the UN had a mandate over the territory. In 2005, the UN appointed Martti Ahtisaari as Special Envoy: after mediating negotiations between Pristina and Belgrade for fifteen months, the 2007 Ahtisaari Plan proposed independence after a period of international supervision, which Serbia refused to endorse ('Serbia and Montenegro' succeeded the FRY in 2003, but the new state was dissolved only three years later when the Montenegrins voted for independence). The EU, Russia and the US joined the negotiation table, but acknowledged at the end of the year that no part was willing to concede on Kosovo's status (Yalim, 2022). Bandow (2009) adds that, to get their way, ethnic Albanians simply rejected everything that Belgrade proposed, whereas Yalim suggests that Pristina had no other alternative but to declare independence two months later, on 17th February 2008, raising worldwide concerns about self-determination and secession (Yalim, 2022), and causing internal dissension in the EU (Bandow, 2009).

Russia and Serbia rejected it under international law, and Sergei Lavrov (already then Russia's Foreign Minister) warned two days before that the declaration of independence could lead to the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia's independence (Yalim, 2022), with Russian majority, which materialised later in 2008 after the six-day war between Georgia and these two break-away territories. The White House expected that the Kremlin would acknowledge Kosovo easily and that the prospect of joining the EU would convince Serbia (Bandow, 2009). The US recognised Kosovo's independence as *special case* that could not set a precedent, due to Yugoslavia's demise, ethnic cleansing and crimes against Kosovo Albanians, and the UN's nine-year administration (Yalim, 2022). In fact, Bandow accuses the US of allowing itself the right to violate international law by attacking and dividing Serbia,

a sovereign state, only to formally express its support to Georgia's integrity. President George W. Bush considered an attack on a sovereign state to be unacceptable in this century (Bandow, 2009). The bombing of Belgrade had happened still in the previous century, in 1999, so he was not, only apparently, having double-standards. Moscow, in turn, with Beijing's acquiescence who feared an ignition of Taiwan's hopes for secession, used its veto in the Security Council to block Kosovo's recognition (Bandow, 2009). In 2010, the International Court of Justice did not oppose independence, and, despite its mere consultative power, it led to more international recognitions across the world (Yalim, 2022). In addition, the international community agreed upon the inviolability of borders in Helsinki in 1975, not accepting the self-determination of autonomies or entities within federated republics (Matsuzato 2022).

1.2 Secessionist conflicts in Eastern Ukraine and in former USSR

In an article for World Insight, Kimitaka Matsuzato (2022) identifies two moments of secessionist conflicts in former USSR: a first one during its dissolution, with autonomous entities attempting to stay within the USSR by breaking away from within the former Soviet republics during the latter's own independence movements, such as Nagorno-Karabakh (Azerbaijan), Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Georgia), and Transnistria (Moldova). The inviolability of borders decided in Helsinki in 1975 implied that in the USSR (or Yugoslavia), *uti possidetis juris* would prevail: new states should keep the internal borders of their previous states (the united republics as the highest administrative units), not accepting the self-determination of autonomies or entities within these republics (Matsuzato (2022).

The second moment happened after the Euromaidan revolution in Ukraine in 2014, where we can frame the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and the two Donbas republics, Donetsk and Luhansk, who declared independence in reaction to Maidan (Matsuzato 2022). Kudelia (2016) signals that, until then, democratic institutions and dialogue had allowed Ukraine to avoid internal violent conflict, as opposed to other former Soviet republics, including Crimea's separatism tamed with the victory of a pro-Russian government in Kyiv (1994), or the pact between the political elites in the 2004 Orange Revolution when Donetsk accepted the defeat of the candidate it was supporting, Viktor Yanukovich. In 2014, though, everything changed and seemed to lead to a military conflict which, as per Kudelia (2016), many observers attribute to Russian TV propaganda and the Federal Security Service's (FSB, Russia's intelligence) presence in Donbas. Ukraine's internal events also contributed: Euromaidan protesters reacted with violence against Yanukovich's regime; the new cabinet used force to annihilate Donbas's separatists; and Kyiv's decision to involve nationalist groups in the fights, and to allow weapons in some areas. Thus, the majority rejected Kyiv's authority in the region, leading to more militarisation (Kudelia, 2016). Some authors argue that the tension in Donbas goes back in history, namely in the partitions of Poland since 1772 and the borders issued after other conflicts, mirrored in Ukraine's constant choice between Russia and the West, and in the ever-shifting political paths since independence.

Three factors contributed for Kyiv's inability to control Donbas: lower level of integration into the Ukrainian state than other regions, with many advocating the unification with Russia, seeing

themselves as from Donbas before being Ukrainians; the cooperation between local authorities and separatists, especially during the referendum in 2014; finally, a group led by a former FSB agent chose Slavyansk as base, intersecting Donetsk, Luhansk and the Russian border. War emerged as a mobilisation after Euromaidan, with militias spreading around Donbas due to the Ukrainian army's repression (Kudelia (2016). Peace was dependent on Kyiv's political dynamics (confrontation with Moscow is used as a political leverage), on Russia's interests, but also to Donbas leaders' interests, as per Kudelia, who wrote six years before the 2022 invasion that Russia expected secessionist movements to replicate in most of Ukraine, with these areas being successively integrated in the Russian Federation, leaving Ukraine with Galicja only. After realising that warfare would not lead to victory over the rebel republics (Kudelia, 2016), Ukraine signed the Minsk Agreement with Russia and OSCE in September 2014, settling the cease-fire, including some degree of self-rule in Donbas (UN Peacemaker, 2015), that Russia could leverage to influence Kyiv (Cafruny et al, 2023). Both Matsuzato (2022) and Lachert (2019) agree that the international community overlooked these conflicts. Matsuzato (2022) considers that Moscow's recognition of the Donbas republics in February 2022 influenced the invasion of Ukraine three days later, to prevent a similar aggression from Kyiv as retribution for the recognition.

1.3 Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022

On 24th February 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine. Despite the significant initial advances, Ukraine succeeded in defending the capital, Kyiv, and other major cities, and in counterattacking, to Moscow's surprise (Stradner, 2022). The war had, though, started in 2014 when Russian disguised troops occupied Crimea, and later the Donbas region, together with local forces (Michael, 2023). In 2022, though, Russia found a determined Ukraine, resilient democratic institutions (that Kudelia considered to only exist until 2014), media and cyber capabilities (Kico et al, 2022). Stradner warns that we should not take for granted that Putin will fail his objective as he possesses a powerful information machine (2022).

Why did Vladimir Putin, the Russian president, decide on a full-scale invasion in Ukraine? O'Loughlin and Kolossov (1999) said long before that Russians see their country under siege by enemies from the 'other' world. According to Kico et al (2022), Russia sees the West as weak, especially after the mild reaction to the occupation of Crimea, but also after the US's and NATO's cumbersome retrieval from Afghanistan in 2021 when, in a matter of days, the Taliban took power back. The Brexit, the financial turmoil of the 2010s, and the refugee crisis in 2015, amplified this frailty in Moscow's perspective. In parallel, the Kremlin had been moving the needle with military exercises in Belarus and Serbia (e.g., intelligence cooperation), active participation in the Syrian civil war, maneuvers in the Baltic and Black seas, or interference in Balkans' and Caucasus's politics (Kico et al, 2022). Russia is also conducting a hybrid war: a "calibrated approach that employs a range of military and non-military tools to destabilise, influence and subvert in the service of a broader political aim" (Monaghan in Davies, 2021: 2), namely by financing right-wing and nationalist parties and organisations (Zivotić and Obradović, 2022), cyber disinformation, and system hacking (Kico et al, 2022). Moscow is also capable

of exploiting domestic conflicts, by articulating anti-Western narratives with armed groups in the 2016's failed coup in Montenegro (instrumental for Russia to access the Adriatic; Stradner, 2022), and in the riots in Skopje in 2018 against the Prespa Agreement (between Skopje and Athens, leading to the renaming of FYROM to North Macedonia; Fraioli et al, 2022). Together with Stradner (2022), these authors also consider Moscow responsible for the pro-Russian rallies in 2022 in Belgrade, after the invasion of Ukraine. Bargués et al add the linguistic, ethnical, historical, and religious proximity between Russia and the Western Balkans to influence the course of history (Bargués et al, 2022). Religion complements Moscow's narrative and could be one of the reasons for the invasion, since the Russian Orthodox church does not acknowledge Kyiv's patriarchy independence (Kico et al, 2022), initiated in 2019 by the then Ukrainian president, Petro Poroshenko (Michael, 2023). Moreover, the Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine supported the annexation of Crimea alleging that Ukrainians were not a distinctive people from Russians, just like the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro denies Montenegrins the same right regarding Serbians (Stradner, 2022). Zivotić and Obradović (2022) identified 12 false narratives spread in Serbian media about the reasons for the invasion. Some authors argue that most Serbian media is pro-Russian and that most is controlled by Belgrade's government, concluding that the current Serbian President's, Aleksandar Vučić, views are closer to the Kremlin's (Fraioli et al, 2022). Not surprisingly, an opinion poll in March 2022 by Valicon showed that 26% of Serbs blame Russia for the invasion of Ukraine while 60% blame the US. Yet, Belgrade is playing on both sides, with military equipment being acquired to Russia and the West, and with military training both with NATO and with Russia (Fraioli et al, 2022). In addition, Reuters news agency reported in April 2023 that Serbia had agreed to provide arms to Kyiv, according to a leakage from the US Department of Defense, which Belgrade promptly denied (Landay and Vasović, 2023).

NATO expected that Russian military presence in Donbas or along the Ukrainian border would satisfy the Kremlin, turning it into a protracted conflict while the West would proceed its business with Russia, despite alarming signs from intelligence. This was Putin's opportunity to, with China's tacit consent, seize Ukraine, instrumental to fulfil his dream of reviving the USSR as a world power. It certainly is a world power at military, raw materials, and energy levels, but not in economy, finance, or technology, or even in population (Kico et al, 2022). Cafruny et al (2023) refuse the one-sided Western view that only Russia is to blame for the invasion: Moscow's main domestic and foreign policies were aligned with the West during Boris Yeltsin's presidency in the 1990s, but the country could not find its place in the US-led capitalist status quo. The West assumed that it was the Cold War victor and created a new world order without Russia, who wanted to be treated as equal, not anticipating the outcomes, nor learning from history, and fueling the growth of nationalism. Albeit it was Russia who invaded Ukraine, NATO's expansion in Europe contributed to the conflict as the UK and the USA use the Alliance to politically, and militarily control Europe. Furthermore, Cafruny et al (2023) see an intention to diminish Russian and Chinese influence in Western Europe and avoid closer economic and security bonds between Germany, Russia, and China. With the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989 and the consequent

termination of the Warsaw Pact in 1991 (eastern Europe's military bloc created in 1955, after NATO refused to incorporate the USSR, who was startled by West Germany's rearmament), there were discussions around NATO's dissolution as a military alliance. NATO was adamant about its intention not to expand beyond West Germany, which history proved to be a vain promise. Russia signed the Budapest Memorandum (1994) with the UK and the US, that endorsed Ukraine's borders, taking for granted that NATO would not expand to the East. Yet, the refusal to accept Moscow's application and the two major enlargements occurred in 1999 (Czechia, Hungary, and Poland) and 2004 (Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia (NATO, 2023) were humiliating to the Kremlin (Cafruny et al, 2023). The same authors state that NATO is a means for the US to keep controlling the EU (or a "partially American protectorate", according to O'Loughlin and Kolossov, 1999: 10): independent from Russia's energy (with EU countries building gas terminals to facilitate the import of US gas to reduce dependence on Russia, after the invasion), set apart from China's influence, and without its own military alliance (Cafruny et al, 2023).

Since independence (1991), Ukraine has been the object of desire from the US: cheap and skilled labour, strong agrarian and industrial sectors, and a geopolitical advance. Russia, on the other hand, expected Ukraine to be a relevant actor within the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU, between Belarus, Russia, Armenia, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan, according to the EAEU site (www.eaeunion.org), as per Cafruny et al, (2023). After Ukraine's President Yanukovych, unexpectedly, rejected a closer partnership with the EU in 2013 in exchange for Moscow's financial support and a partnership with the EAEU, Ukrainians supported a Western model of in Maidan Square in Kyiv, perceived as US instrumentalisation and a direct threat to Moscow's regime and sphere of influence. As per Cafruny et al (2023) Crimea's invasion can be perceived as Moscow's response to its fear that NATO would establish a base in Sevastopol and that Kyiv would refuse Russia's Black Sea Fleet in its territory. The new Ukrainian President issued of the Maidan Square 'revolution', Petro Poroshenko (2014-2019), and Volodymyr Zelensky, who succeeded him, have been very vocal about the intention to join NATO, stressed by Zelensky's intention to have Crimea back, and the growing partnership with NATO. Together with the unrest in Donbas region, Moscow's concerns about Ukraine's geopolitics grew and so did the fear to have the West at its border (Cafruny et al, 2023). Kico et al (2022) add that Moscow is not interested in having a democratic and functional country at its doorstep. Cafruny et al (2023) add that Putin sees this Western drive as a threat to Russian communities living in Ukraine, but also to the Kremlin's conservative economic, political, social, and cultural politics.

While the Warsaw Pact bordered NATO with a buffer territory until the USSR borders, NATO now includes the Baltic states and Poland, and more recently Finland, all bordering Russia. Should Ukraine join NATO, this border would be larger, in addition to the fact that most of the strategic Black Sea would be patrolled by NATO, since Turkey, Bulgaria and Romania are also members of the Alliance. Stronski adds (2021) that the Black Sea is of the utmost importance to Moscow, as a segway to extend its power to the Mediterranean, ensure commerce with Europe, and make southern Europe

more dependent on Russian energy sources. Losing control would turn Russia more vulnerable to the south (Stronski, 2021), reducing Russia's influence to a small portion of the Black Sea coast, between the Azov Sea and Georgia, hence the invasion of Crimea. Serbia has a similar situation, being surrounded by NATO, except for Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo, both with NATO forces stationed. Moreover, NATO is supporting Ukraine's defence and counterattack, for Russia's surprise, since NATO only intervened very late in the wars in Yugoslavia. Davies adds that the Kremlin considered the Alliance's intervention in FRY in 1999 a violation of International Law (Davies, 2021), which chilled the relations with the US, with the episodic solidarity after 9/11, igniting Russia's worries about the Alliance in Europe but also elsewhere as in Iraq (2003) (Cafruny et al, 2023). Some authors stated after NATO's bombing of 1999 that, in the future, Ukraine (who condemned the bombing as well) would become a zone of confrontation between NATO and Russia (O'Loughlin and Kolossov, 1999).

How relatable are Serbia and Russia, in this geostrategic context? Yugoslavia had a strategic relevance in the Non-Aligned Movement, "sandwiched between two political-military blocs", until 1989, but its "ideological and political equidistance" could not resist the collapse of the world order inherited from World War II (Vilanova and López, 2010: 217). The dissolution of the USSR made Yugoslavia more susceptible to Central and Eastern European states' weaknesses, giving space for nationalisms as a response to a weaker state after the fall of communism (Vilanova and López, 2010). Grigoryan (2012) questions why both Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union had opted for ethnofederal constitutions, considering that both leaderships repudiated nationalism and had a political model of concentration of authority. He argues that this was the only means to ensure their viability and survival because nationalism was "an already unleashed monster" before their foundation and not a result of their foundation (Grogoryan, 2012: 524). The Western Balkans are now the ones *sandwiched* in between NATO and Russia's influence, with Kosovo being the main terrain for proxy confrontation, in a comparable (yet protracted) situation to Ukraine. I add another similarity: with the dissolution of the USSR and of Yugoslavia, Russia and Serbia were accepted in the UN as their successor states. Serbia is now surrounded by NATO (except for Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, despite having NATO's forces indoors) and Russia is surrounded by NATO except for Ukraine in its former Warsaw Pact buffer zone. Furthermore, they share an etymological language origin as both are Slavic languages, and Serbian even uses Cyrillic alphabet still, as Russian, while Croatian and Bosnian use the Latin one. This is naturally due the Slavic origin of both peoples, strengthened by the religious bonds as both countries have majority of Christian Orthodox believers.

In fact, Moscow and Belgrade's proximity is not surprising.

Chapter 2 – Literature review

This chapter encompasses three parts, starting with three potential theories and why they are not the most adequate to my research: nationalism, realism, and neoclassical realism. Secondly, I will explain why I selected *framing* as the theoretical framework, and how it intersects with securitisation. I will briefly elaborate on Balkanism and Nesting Orientalism, which I will occasionally recur to in the empirical chapter. Finally, I will review some studies on young politicians' involvement in politics.

2.1 Theoretical literature review

When having former Yugoslavia as research object, several critical theories arise as a potential lens to one's findings. Nationalism is probably the most obvious one. In fact, after one year of war, Calhoun's first words in 'Nationalism and Ethnicity' (1993) are about nationalism gaining popular and academic interest due the ethnic cleansing in former Yugoslavia perpetrated by the Serbs. He argues that the wars that were ravaging the region were the last evidence needed to validate the connection between ethnicity and self-determination. He sees the nation as a consolidator of people that share the same space or sociocultural features, that build on political and cultural characteristics, in struggles within and between states, with the purpose of state-building. Albeit nationalism became the trigger of claims for autonomy and self-determination in the Modern Era, he adds that it is the modern state that constructs nationhood, and that ethnic relations are adjusted to match its borders, or subsist as movements for the creation of new states, against the state they live in. He concludes that nationalism cannot be dissociated from ethnicity, yet it cannot simply be considered as the extension of ethnicity (Calhoun, 1993).

As per Verdery (1993), nation became the representation and the identity within the system of nation-states, defining the relation between the state and its population (distinguished from the populations of other states), and between states. Nation has been used to justify social actions and movements. It conveys sentiments and dispositions shaped through the long nation-building process. In this lens, nationalism happens when political discourse and activity utilise the symbol nation, but it is also the sentiment that brings the people to respond to the symbol (Verdery, 1993). Nationalism (and ethnicity) are always present when discussing Western Balkans, and it may also be the most empowering differentiator between communities in Kosovo, or Bosnia and Herzegovina, that can be leveraged and intensified locally by political actors in response to the conflict in Ukraine. Nevertheless, the primordial object of the empirical chapter is not to explore if nationalism is still present after the dissolution of Yugoslavia, except when contextualising it, hence not being the right critical theory.

Addressing realism now, Walt (1998) compared it to liberalism and used NATO's expansion in Europe in the late 1990s as an example: from a realist standpoint, this was the West's attempt to expand its influence beyond the Berlin Wall, while Russia was committed to its own domestic matters after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, which he expected to lead to a realist response from the Kremlin in the future. The liberal way would see this as a reinforcement of the newborn democracies in Central Europe

and an extension of NATO's capacity to manage conflict in a still unstable region. In fact, Walt recommends the use of several theories to capture the complexity of geo-strategy (Walt, 1998).

Realism dominated the scholarly approach through the Cold War since it explained the bipolarity between the US and the USSR, translated into conflicts, tensions, and military alliances. Since realism underlines the countries' inclination for conflict between them (Walt, 1998), it could be interesting to apply it to my research, as it will also reflect on Russia and the war in Ukraine, on its influence in the Western Balkans, or on the tensions within Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Nonetheless, the core of this project relies on the views of young political influencers with currently no significant political power, on how the war in Ukraine may impact their realities, how they verbalise it and try to influence others, and not on the nature of the conflict. Walt refers to Barry Posen, who defended a realist perspective on ethnic conflict whereby the breakup of multiethnic states could set "ethnic groups in an anarchic setting, thereby triggering intense fears and tempting each group to use force to improve its relative position" (Posen's, in Walt, 1998: 35). This perspective could be applied to the situation in former Yugoslavia where each group had small enclaves inhabited by other ethnic groups, where ethnic cleansing took place in different forms (Walt, 1998). Although I will look briefly into how the wars unfolded between 1991 and 1995, this will not be the object of this research.

Neoclassical realism, a new perspective on classic realism and neo-realism according to Firoozabadi and Ashkezari (2016), could provide an interesting light, due to the different shapes of analysis on both the international system and the domestic reality, and on how they intersect and interact. If we think about the Republika Srpska, neoclassical realism could reflect on the internal and local factors that connect the domestic and the international, such as the interests of internal groups, what matters for the state, or how the local elites' influence foreign policies. I will dedicate some time to Republika Srpska's positioning within Bosnia and Herzegovina, and in the Ukraine conflict, but not as my research question. What I am interested in is on the views of young politicians and how their narrative is constructed, and not on the dynamics of power between domestic and external actors.

2.2 Theoretical framework

I will engage with *framing* as the critical theory that gives more significantly evidence to the nature of the narratives encountered in my field research. Framing is such a vast and fractured field of study that any definition will always be imprecise, being applicable to numerous fields of knowledge, from sociology to media or psychology (Watson, 2012). Volkmer (2009) assigned this theory's authorship to the sociologist Erving Goffman, who stated that the way interpretation is designed is central in cultural beliefs. These design frames are the lens we use to interpret and reconstruct reality by reducing complexity. Shmueli (2008) complemented that framing is a cognitive process to assess perceptions and interpretations of intricate circumstances, embedded in the individual's or group's own code of perceptions, namely cultural or socio-political or, as he simply puts it, the decoding of behaviours when decisions are necessary. These behaviours are related to *frames* that correspond to our interpretation of

the world, hence the filters through which we interpret challenging situations. The noun *frame* relates to the way we detach something from its reality, while the verb *to frame* implies the construction of a *frame* during communication, that can be used to interpret or to manipulate (Shmueli, 2008). An example of how framing can give us opposing views of reality is the year 1500: for the Portuguese, it marks the year of the discovery of Brazil. For the Brazilians, it marks the finding of Brazil, as the territory already existed before 1500, and hence could not be discovered.

Entman suggested (1993) that framing consists of a selection of aspects of a context or reality and make them salient in a communicating text to foster a specific definition, interpretation, evaluation, and treatment. It depicts the implicit power of a communicating text and the way it may influence the recipient (this power can be exercised by the problem definition, the most relevant feature of a frame; de Vreese, 2012). Framing identifies the agent (and what determines it), the forces behind the context, the moral interpretation, how to mend it, and the effects generated. He illustrates with the Cold War frame example, that emphasised certain civil wars as problems, named their source (communist rebels), provided moral judgements (atheistic offensive), and suggested solutions (US's support to their opponents). This example of a frame also exemplifies the four locations at least that accompany the communication process: "the communicator, the text, the receiver, and the culture" (Entman, 1993: 52). Communicators make their framing judgement according to their frames (or *schemata*) that guide their beliefs (either consciously or unconsciously). The text includes frames that one may perceive due to keywords, phrases, stereotypes, or interpretations. The receiver's perception may or may not be guided by the same frames in the text. Finally, culture is the repository of recurrent frames displayed in discourse and mindset of the majority. Framing functions similarly in these four locations: it uses selected elements to build on a theory about a given circumstance's cause, assesses it, and provides a solution. Framing can highlight parts of information depending on its hierarchy in text or by bridging it with culture symbols, but even an apparently irrelevant piece of a text can become more salient if it can be associated to the recipient's schemata. Framing has a significant role in power, especially when magnified in a news text (Entman, 1993). Framing research needs to consist of two dynamics: the duration of framing effects, and the impact of repeated or challenged frames. When choosing between the question and the design, it should be the former to guide the latter. In journalistic news frames, one must approach all actors involved equally, either how the politicians frame an issue as in how the journalists prioritise and reframe the frames (de Vreese, 2012).

When facing the question of applying securitisation or framing to examine how threats are formulated in the US, Watson (2012) considered that both are compatible since securitisation can be considered a subfield of framing, as it is a distinct master frame, alongside *rights* or *injustice*. Furthermore, framing encompasses a myriad of social fields, processes, and problem statements, while securitisation is limited to security. Master frames as civic rights were employed by movements such as gay or disability rights to fight for their goals. Notwithstanding, the relevance of some frames within a culture or group may differ over time due to contestation or simply tangible developments (Watson,

2012). Pinto finds some complementarity as well, but she argues that framing can be a part of the securitisation theory, and not the opposite (as Watson defended), as its concepts can be relevant in an investigation about ideas behind the construction of threats and in identifying the audience's preferences, and how they relate to it. The message must combine an alignment between the securitising actor's credibility and legitimacy and the way the audience ascertains problems, and the securitising actor must be credible in the eyes of the audience (Pinto, 2014). Albeit securitisation comes across in some of my findings, framing will take the lead as I agree with Watson that it is more inclusive, and it is more relevant to analyse my research elements. Framing is instrumental in disputes since it can be used as an analytical approach for both parties to interpret the origins of their conflicting positions and foster compromise and a solution (Shmueli, 2008). Charnysh et al (2015) elaborate on framing as a decisive instrument to form consensus, using the UN as example of consensus formation. To interpret how issues are framed, acted up, and debated is more effective than convincing others to do things differently.

Media applies framing to construct meaning, particularly in Eastern Europe, according to Szostek (2019), in the way that Russia is supposedly using information as a weapon while the West is supporting the media to counterattack. Shmueli (2008) identifies some commonalities between framing and discourse analysis: text analysis, how language is used, and how narratives are built. Framing works on power relationships between disputing sides, on how information is treated to build opposing perceptions. It contributes to the debate by explicating each side's values and purposes, but also by building on compromise and mutual understanding (Shmueli, 2008). I will occasionally use discourse analysis, especially because, as per Hodges et al (2008), it is the study and the analysis of how language is used in interviews, excerpts of conversations, media, or web materials. My focus is, though, on the ideas and how context is sectioned, rather than how the discourse is built up.

Any research on the Western Balkans would be incomplete if not including 'balkanism' as a complementary critical theory, especially because I often came across this concept throughout my readings of academic papers or news, or even factual historic descriptions. Historian Maria Todorova, invariably associated with balkanism, contextualises *Balkanisation* as "the parcelisation of large and viable political units into small and presumably non-viable ones from an economic or political standpoint". The Balkans became connected to "the tribal, the backward" (Todorova, 1996: 7), among other epithets, not being ruled by the norms and behaviours of civilisation and classified as the *other* of Europe. How comparable are *balkanism* and Saïd's *orientalism*? The Balkans is geographically more concrete while the Orient is more intangible due to its greatness and not so demarcated borders. It has more concrete history records, traced back to Ancient Greece. Despite the several civilisations that were part of Balkan past, it is the more recent Ottoman legacy that is associated with the present assumptions of the Balkans. The Orient was associated with the Eden as opposed to the West's industrialisation that the Balkans were also enduring, but also to sensuality, extravagance, and alienation, while the Balkans suffered from an "unimaginative concreteness, and their almost total lack of wealth" (Todorova, 1996: 12). In both Orientalism and Balkanism, there is an association to the Middle Ages, yet without the

sensuous connotations in the Balkans: arms, intrigue, knighthood. Most references depict the Balkans as a land of transition between the West and the Orient, a mixture of races, but also in different stages of development: “semi-developed, semi-colonial, semi-civilised” (Todorova, 1996: 16). Balkanism also reflects the negative adjectives in opposition to the construction of a positive and praising picture of the *European* or the *West*. As *Other*, the Balkans absorbed the negativity associated with the existing tensions and inconsistencies in the rest of Europe. In sum, Balkanism is incomplete, a receipt about ambiguity, as opposed to Orientalism’s opposition to the West (Todorova, 1996).

Bakić-Hayden presented a variation to this discussion and introduced nesting orientalism, particularly relevant if we want to approach the different sensitivities within the Balkans. The term *Other* attributed to the Balkans or to the Orient is now appropriated from within the Balkans themselves, such as the regions that used to be part of the Habsburg Empire (namely Slovenia and Croatia) as opposed to the ones that were part of the Ottoman Empire. The same concept can be applied to religion: the eastern Orthodox see themselves as more European than those who identify with European Muslims who also feel distant to the non-European Muslims, in a way looking down to the east and the south, replicated from region to region. Former Yugoslavia embodied these tensions, let alone in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as if there was a sub-Balkanism within the Balkans (Bakić-Hayden, 1995).

2.3 Young politicians in academic literature

The topic of young people’s political engagement has received minimal scholarly attention and none of the articles encountered has addressed the core question of my object of study: young political influencers’ views on a particular political subject. Yet, this preliminary review was instrumental to complement my understanding of the research context as some of the articles reflect on youth’s motivations to become politically active and what drives their actorness as young political influencers.

Stanojević and Petrović observed Serbian youth’s political engagement and motivations, based on 20 interviews among young party members and activists. They identified a paradox: despite the high political engagement according to the membership numbers in political parties, one cannot determine a parallel growth of democracy or citizenship, unlike developed democratic systems, due to the frailty of the democratic system and distrust in institutions, unsettled past, and an anaemic civil society. Young politicians from opposition parties more often refer to non-instrumental reasons for joining the party, namely the attractiveness of the party’s programme and ideology, socialisation, and the possibility of internships. In turn, those from parties in power tend to refer to personal interest: help finding a job and meet senior party people who can become helpful in the future (Stanojević and Petrović, 2020).

Pirić et al (2017) delved into young people’s political motivations in Croatia: while politicians seek to engage them, young people feel disconnected, do not believe in, and do not feel represented by the political class. In fact, youth try to find other ways to express their views and concerns, such as protests or more radical initiatives (Pirić et al, 2017). Croatian youth participation in the 2014 European Parliament elections, the third lowest young participation among the EU’s voters, after Slovakia and

Finland, confirm it (Youth 4 Europe, 2018). Yet, the high participation in the 2019 European elections countered that: the Eurobarometer concluded that younger voters were the highest contributors to the increase in turnout, namely under 25 years, the reasons being the Brexit, civic duty, and support for the EU, but economic growth and climate change were the main drivers of the growth (News European Parliament, 2019). Some economic and demographic factors influenced participation: Croatian population was decreasing due to emigration and to more deaths than births on a yearly basis, marriages had reached a lowest in forty years while divorces had reached an all-time high (2010). Another reason for disenchantment was that youth unemployment had increased but the average unemployment had diminished, and salaries had not significantly risen comparing to the cost of living (Pirić et al, 2017).

Shifting to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Musić (2011) approached youth political participation in 2011, or the lack of it. Politicians usually understand youth as part of the problem and not as part of a solution. He considered that in societies in transition, young people are sided-out from political and social life, adding to their frustration: after the peace settlement in 1995, the international community was keen on state-building and on representational democracy, but it overlooked the development of a knowledgeable and engaged civil society that could strengthen the process of state-building, and impacting peacebuilding. Youth have limited political participation as they do not see any prospects of economic development nor of an agreement between the two entities, and they are only integrated in the political discourse in election times since politicians do not consider youth's value in changing the country. Involving them at municipal level could help building a more inclusive society from scratch: although 75% of the country's municipalities had youth officers or commissions, only 23 had youth councils that included youth organisations and leaders. Young people prefer to get together locally in associations to counterbalance public institutions, or other ways to participate in civil society as boycotting, or social media (Musić, 2011). In fact, Godnov and Redek worked on Slovenian political parties' use of social media to engage young voters, namely the nature of political communication to promote political agendas. They analysed the main seven parties' activities in Twitter/X (either party tweets or individual members'), their degree of support and loyalty, and the power of retweets to amplify political communication. Internet added dynamism and instantaneity to politics, yet it did not change the fact that the opposition is generally more negative than those in power (Godnov and Redek, 2014).

Unfortunately, I could not find any relevant literature on Kosovo, apart from polls on young people's aspirations in general. Yet, I found some research on other countries that provide some additional context and background to my topic, and some examples of successful methodology. Janušauskienė's work on youth political organisations in Lithuania in 1999, at the end of the first decade of the country's restoration of independence, underlined the many differences in political socialisation between young people and the older generations that had lived under Soviet rule. When comparing to similar structures that had existed during the Communist times and even during the short pre-Soviet independence (1918-1940), the 1990s youth political structures were voluntary, members were more open to novelty, better skilled to accept changes, and saw democracy as unquestionable with different

ideologies to adhere to. Nonetheless, most of these youth entities saw themselves as social units and the concept *political* was usually absent in interviews or in their statutes. The junior party sections tried to keep some distance and independence from the senior structures, even if they also depended structurally on them (Janušauskienė, 1999).

If the discourse about Lithuania seemed to be of an active and politically involved youth, the usual story told about Africa is the opposite, with youngsters being depicted as lacking engagement and being a source of problems. On the contrary, many young Africans took the lead and occupy positions in different sectors in society, including politics, civil society, and activism. Richard Asante et al (2020) built on the reasons for the participation of young people (18-35 years) in public life, namely in Ghana, Tanzania, and Uganda, where they are key actors in governance, political reform and activism, the common denominator in the 33 leaders interviewed. Just like I aim to ascertain how young emerging political leaders are shaping the future in the Western Balkans, here the focus is on how young African leaders are building the social-political landscape (Asante et al, 2020). If in Lithuania the urge for young people to join young political movements came from the individual or their friends (Janušauskienė, 1999), in these three African countries it is the party leaders who attract young people with goods, nationalism rhetoric, patronage, but mainly with the prospect of future positions in the party's structure. Even if young Africans had grown apart from politics, the authors gathered perspectives on alternatives such as volunteering, protests, and boycotts, and they came up with three main drivers for socialisation and mobilisation: family and education can influence volunteering and voting, a shared ideology or a shared grievance or cause can driver for action, and finally, turning points can mobilise people, such as a regime change to democracy and the social transitions associated, economic growth and urbanization. Quite significantly, this study concluded that none of the individuals interviewed said that ethnicity had pushed them for public engagement, which surprised the authors because Ghana's two main parties have a strong ethnic basis. Even if respondents may have discharged this connection intentionally, it may also convey an attempt to stand apart from the existing ethnic tensions (Asante et al., 2020).

Although these readings were essential to complement my understanding of my research context, none has addressed the same question even if there are similarities with the object of my research in one case: the three selected African countries were part of the British Empire, and I will address Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo who resulted from the dismantling of Yugoslavia.

Chapter 3 - Empirical analysis

This chapter is the core of my project and is structured as follows: in a first instance, I will address the potential impact of the war in Ukraine in the Western Balkans, and how both can relate in the context of post-communist secession conflicts. Secondly, I will delve into Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo's recent history, including potential international alliances. Finally, I will focus on my field work by relying on framing to interpret my interviews to young political influencers, and social media posts.

3.1 Potential impact of war in Ukraine in the Western Balkans

The Western Balkans reacted differently to the war in Ukraine. Moscow's non-recognition of Kosovo gives Russia a special place in Serbians' hearts, hence Belgrade's tacit acceptance of the invasion of Crimea. In appreciation for the Kremlin's support during the 1990s wars (Anastasakis, 2022), Serb nationalists were also aligned, as seen in rallies in Banja Luka (Republika Srpska) and Belgrade (Fraiole et al, 2022), possibly Russia's media manipulation (Stradner, 2022). While Serbia and Milošević had claimed to be protecting the interests of the Serbian people in Kosovo, Croatia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina in the 1990s wars, so is Putin claiming to be protecting Russians in some USSR's former states and now in Ukraine. Bosniaks re-lived the Croatian and Serbian wartime aggressions and aligned with Ukrainians, especially because Luhansk and Donetsk self-proclaimed independences reminded them of Republika Srpska's claims for self-determination, as both Bosnia and Herzegovina and Ukraine still have fragile institutions (Anastasakis, 2022). Kosovo Albanians and Bosniaks feared that a Russian victory over Ukraine would empower Serbian nationalists (Fraiole et al, 2022).

Albeit participating in NATO's exercises and operations (Miroslavljević, 2023), Serbia juggles between Russia (and China; Fraiole et al, 2022) and a potential EU membership, but Kyiv's non-recognition of Kosovo puts Belgrade in an uncomfortable position. Despite being seen as Kremlin's disciple (Fraiole et al, 2022), Vučić's goal is to remain in power and to be seen as a reference for stability in the region. Moreover, any strategy to turn the public opinion against the West's democratic values would fail, regardless of the disinformation orchestrated by Russia. Instead, he blames the West for interference, compares the war in Ukraine to the 1990s' wars, or accuses the West of undermining the Orthodox Church and people's values (Stradner, 2022). Yet, both Serbia and Russia are using their soft-power when setting Russian cultural centres in Belgrade or Banja Luka, Serbian-Russian Orthodox centres and media, or pro-Russian parties. The Church of Serbia, thought to be close to Moscow's Patriarchate, has been a vehicle for the "Russification of narratives and identities" in the region (Kico et al, 2022: 15). Without real democratic narratives to oppose them, both Serbian's political and religious powers can leverage their narratives that Montenegrins or Bosniaks are not separate peoples and that their respective states are pure fiction, comparable to Russia's narrative about Ukraine (Kico et al, 2022). To counter Russian propaganda, the European External Action Service within the European Strategic Communication Task Force created a local unit after conflicts started in 2014 in Donbas. This unit scans through disinformation and false narratives about the EU from pro-Kremlin media (Viceré, 2019).

Since the invasion in 2022, people have questioned its impact on the Western Balkans' fragility, even if not neighbouring Ukraine. Scarcely a month after, the new EU's Strategic Compass stressed the risk of spillover and the need for further cooperation (EEAS, 2022). Sonja Biserko, a Serbian human rights activist attacked in 2008 in Sarajevo due to her unorthodox views on the Serbs' role in the 1990s' wars (Human Rights House, 2008), frames the invasion in Russia's aspiration of a united Russian World, comparing it with Serbia's similar dream of a unified Serbia, especially with Vucić's return to 1980s propaganda (Biserko, 2023). In addition, the Western Balkans are Russia's proxy environment to punch Washington and Brussels by trying to undermine reconciliation or the region's aspirations to join the EU, by supporting Republika Srpska's secession, or by using rhetoric to fuel the tensions in the north of Kosovo (Stronski, 2022), the latter to distract the attention from Ukraine, even if not getting involved militarily (Lachert, 2023; Anastasakis, 2022). Yet, NATO's troops in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo would intervene in case of conflict.

Sarajevans reacted with apprehension to the invasion of Ukraine: long queues for passports and empty supermarket shelves (Brezar, 2023). According to the Belgrade Center for Security Policy (February 2023), two thirds of Serbians believe that the status of Kosovo could lead to a conflict. One third of the enquired were not afraid of a conflict, while in 2020 they were more than half, due to the potential effects of the war in Ukraine and the "incendiary rhetoric used by politicians" (EWB, 2023). There were also comparisons with Yugoslavia's breakup wars: Anastasakis draws a parallel between Krajina and Donbas and considers that both Ukraine and Bosnia and Herzegovina are divided ethnically, fighting to keep the country's integrity. He adds that the war in Ukraine has to do with territory control but also with Russian ethnicity. Despite Tito's non-alignment and the cold relations between Moscow and Belgrade, Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union were both communist federations of republics, run by the central government's firm hand. In both, ethnicity was leveraged to engage support for nationalist leaders in their quest for independence during the post-communism process. Yet, while violent wars occurred during the demise of Yugoslavia, the USSR was dismantled more peacefully, despite episodic wars and protracted conflicts, as in Georgia or Azerbaijan. Since independence, Ukraine's foreign policy and internal political shifts have reflected its geographic position between pro-Europe and pro-Russia inclinations, despite the differences in size, population and influence between Russia and Ukraine, as well as between Ukraine and Croatia or Bosnia and Herzegovina (Anastasakis, 2022).

According to Stradner, Putin is not planning to invade the Western Balkans but rather to promote escalation and then become the mediator (Stradner, 2022). Upon the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Bosnia and Herzegovina was in a more fragile state than ever since the Bosnian War (Fraiooli et al, 2022), due to Dodik's frequent secession threats and actions to undermine statehood. He stated that seven EU countries would support the country's demise, adding that "friends" would come to help Republika Srpska should there be a "Western military intervention" (Gadzo, 2021). Russia is allegedly using the Western Balkans as a hub to bypass sanctions, especially due to the lack of transparent judiciary systems: some sanctioned Russian companies are even moving to Serbia (Stradner, 2022). The question remains

whether Serbia will be as irrational as Russia to promote an escalation of violence and secession movements, like what happened in the 1990s in former Yugoslavia, if we were to accept that only Serbia was to blame, I would say. Further militarisation of Serbia, just like Russia's in Ukraine, is empowering tension. Russian and Chinese armament industries improved Serbia's military capabilities, including significant donations from Russia and Belarus, contributing to Serbia's self-confidence, and negotiating power. In parallel, Republika Srpska is also heavily arming its police force, trained by Serbian and Russian instructors. When Russia was placing troops along the Ukrainian border, Serbia placing its own along the border with Kosovo (Kico et al, 2022), as during the recent troubles in the north of Kosovo, or in the ID and licence matters, or after the local elections. So did NATO, with the decision in May 2023 to deploy an additional 700 KFOR troops in Kosovo (Tondo, 2023). In addition, Pristina acquired Bayraktar drones from Turkey due to the unrest in the north, and Kosovo's Prime Minister Albin Kurti announced that troop numbers had grown 80% in the last two years and doubled the defence budget, according to the local RTK television (2023). Germany was to send up to 50 military for EUFOR for the first time since 2012, and EUFOR will go from 600 to 1.100 troops (Siebold, 2022), yet insufficient to prevent threats to peace, according to Šelo Šabić, international politics expert (Disopra, 2023). Since it would be challenging for Russia to deploy troops to Bosnia and Herzegovina, it could be that Moscow would recognise Republika Srpska's independence: perhaps this is why NATO declared in Madrid in June 2022 that it would support Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, and Moldova's institutions (Fraoli et al, 2022). There are other potentially conflictive territories, as in Western Herzegovina and northern Montenegro. Yet, international sanctions, Ukraine's resistance, and Russia's failure to have a quick and smooth occupation may have contributed to peace in the Western Balkans, as per Kico et al (2022).

3.2 The case of Kosovo's independence

Serbia was startled when Moscow used Kosovo to justify the invasion, since Russia had long been an ally against the recognition of Pristina's *temporary* institutions, but Vučić is consistent, yet uncomfortable, and supports Ukraine's territorial integrity (voting against the invasion in the UN). Despite Serbia's candidacy to the EU (who threatened to freeze negotiations for accession; Arnaudov, 2022), he did not support sanctions to Moscow, satisfying the pro-Russian voters who remember that Yugoslavia suffered from sanctions in the 1990s, undermining the war efforts then (Fraoli et al, 2022).

How different are the cases of Kosovo and Ukraine? In the case of Crimea, there was no UN resolution supporting any solution while in the case of Kosovo, there was UN 1244 that respected the integrity of FRY (Davies, 2021). Kosovo lost autonomy in 1989 from Serbia's Yugoslav republic and had claims on discrimination while Crimea had substantial autonomy, with no real complaints of discrimination from the Russophone population. Kosovo was part of a state and achieved independence (even if not fully recognised) while Crimea was part of a state and was annexed by Russia. Kosovo declared independence after a violent conflict while the integration of Crimea and Sevastopol in the Russian Federation was decided by a referendum (Dunay, 2015), where more than 95% of votes

supported the region's parliament decision to join the Russian Federation. On 17th March 2014, the same parliament declared independence and requested to be part of Russia (Van den Driest, 2015): independent polling data confirm that it was the will of the great majority of the voters (Cafruny et al, 2023). Still, local referenda are not recognised by Ukraine's constitution and the OSCE declared it illegal, and there were no substantial international monitors, except for far-right politicians (Fraoli et al, 2022). Additionally, voters did not represent the entire population, since the Crimean Tatars, an indigenous people who resisted the Russian occupation, were deprived of that right via persecution, murder, torture, imprisonment, and forced transfer and replacement by ethnic Russians (Vishchyk and Moiseieva, 2022).

UN Security Council 1244 Resolution regulated Kosovo's legal status and autonomy as part of FRY (and later Serbia) until Pristina declared independence while Crimea's status was based on being part of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic since 1954. Referendum would not be possible in the case of Kosovo as UN 1244 and UNMIK did not foresee that. When Pristina's parliament declared independence, the UN was administering Kosovo, but did not take a position, which could mean tacit recognition (Dunay, 2015). The ICJ pronounced that Kosovo's declaration of independence did not violate international law, but it did not rule nor was asked to rule if the independence was in conformity with international law. Putin used this unclear decision to show just cause for the annexation of Crimea and for the recognition of the two Donbas breakaway republics, while still not recognising Kosovo's independence (Fraoli et al, 2022). However, the ICJ stated that the principle of territorial integrity only applies to inter-States relations, which excluded a unilateral decision from Kosovo to secede from the FRY. Still, the UN Charter states that a State cannot occupy part of foreign territory nor can support rebels that aim at violating the State's integrity (Driest, 2015). On the other hand, the 1990 Soviet law on secession allowed autonomous territories within the republics to vote to remain in the USSR (Bandow (2009), which would allow Moscow to retrospectively justify its actions in Ukraine, while this law is against what the OSCE determined in Helsinki in 1975. Some clearly consider that Kosovo's independence is a violation of international law and of the UN Charter (Arnaudov, 2022). Others, like Rrahmani and Belegu are adamant that the international law was not violated and that the ICJ confirmed it by expressing their opinion (Rhamani and Belegu, 2022). As a curiosity, some research by the Institute for European Affairs revealed that 49,9% of Serbs believe that Belgrade will not regain sovereignty over Kosovo, while 90% of the Serbian parliament do not recognise Pristina's authorities (Marković, 2023).

3.3 Current context in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo

3.3.1 Bosnia and Herzegovina

In the next lines, I will address some of the events that occurred in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the last years, supported in the International Crisis Group's (ICG) timeline of events.

The last electoral process held in Bosnia and Herzegovina in October 2022 followed three decades of post-Dayton political complexity, in a context of growing secessionist appetite in Republika

Srpska. Together with the Federation, the two entities represent the three constituent peoples (Bosniaks, Croats and Serbs), equally represented in the collective presidency: one president representing each constituent people (International Crisis Group - ICG, 2022). In total, the country is ruled by an intricate web of 13 governments and parliaments, five presidents, and 149 ministries. Other ethnicities, such as the Jews and Roma, cannot run for presidency. Despite this apparently dysfunctional political grid, one can encounter stories of resilience, of private initiative, and of cultural dynamics, but also of governance at canton and municipal levels as per Majda Ruge (2022).

The presidency, the bicameral parliament, and the national government are in Sarajevo. Until 1997, the central cabinet had limited powers while the entities had vast powers on major state functions such as justice or defence, until the High Representative (HR), responsible for the Accord's civil implementation, was assigned more governing authority. These so-called Bonn Powers empowered the Bosnian leaders but also the HR to act solo, such as creating a state court and amending the entities' constitutions. These controversial powers emphasised the divisions between Bosniaks (usually embracing the decisions) and the Croats and Serbs, who tended to be against, or, at least, to have reserves. Consequently, the powers were not used between 2011 and 2021, until the HR, the Austrian Valentin Inzko, imposed criminal penalties to those denying genocide during the war, namely the Srebrenica massacre. Albeit many Serbs recognise the crime but not the genocide, as opposed to those who celebrate it, the reaction was violent overall, with the main Serbian parties boycotting Sarajevo's institutions, and advocating for additional power or even for Republika Srpska's secession (Russia was also against; Kučukalić, 2022). Moreover, disputes in the Federation created tension between Croats and Bosniaks. Croats are not the majority in either entity, making it more difficult to have equal power, namely because Bosniak-majority parties managed to include Croat politicians, not only impacting the entity's governance but also the state's, as Croats and Serbs took similar positions against the central government and helped each other's agendas in the last years (ICG, 2022). In fact, Haseljić (2020) believes that both Bosnian Serbs and Bosnian Croats' leaders constantly promote the country's breakup. Russia (and China, as per the ICG, 2022) does not recognise the current HR, Christian Schmidt, and supports Croats' struggle to split the Federation and create a Croat entity (Stradner, 2022). Moscow also blocked EU's intervention by denying the extension of EUFOR Althea (that worked in partnership with NATO, since 2004, replacing SFOR military troops) in November 2022 (Kučukalić, 2022). Ruge, who participated in the OSCE mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina, concludes that Russia is aware of Althea's deficiencies in security-building and hence does not truly want to end it, but wants concessions to diminish the international community's influence in the country (Ruge's, in Kučukalić, 2022).

The last decade has seen a debate about how the return policies for refugees and internally displaced persons had failed, the Balkan migration route (2015 mainly), and the youth exodus for a better life in the EU (or 'brain drain', widely documented in journals or the press, such as in Kutuk, 2022). In addition, a discussion has been going on since 2018 on potential ethnic line border changes, amplified by the conflict in Ukraine. In 2021, a plot known as 'non-papers' advocating a reshuffle of

borders came out, attributed to the then Slovenian Prime Minister Janez Janša. It drew a Greater Serbia and a Greater Croatia by dividing Bosnia and Herzegovina, leaving a small Muslim state in the middle, and a Greater Albania that would include Kosovo, and with minor impact in North Macedonia and Montenegro. This plan's existence or authorship was never confirmed nor officially discussed (Kučukalić, 2022), yet it goes back to Milošević and Tuđman's plans during the war, that the Dayton Accords may have not subsided (Haseljić, 2020). Despite not having the means to validate the plot's existence, I find it questionable that Slovenia would benefit from gaining three bigger regional powers in its backyard, unless it was candidly expecting to really mend the divisions permanently.

The Bosniak-majority parties try to force more centralisation, as a rupture with Banja Luka could also entail a split within the Federation, but this strategy also drives the other two constituent peoples more against it (Jolicœur, 2022). As per Kico et al (2022), unlike in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the West recognises the Republika Srpska as an integrating entity within Bosnia and Herzegovina, with its war symbols, narratives, and competencies as army or police, leaving room for the entity to question Sarajevo's integration in NATO and in the EU, freezing the conflict, and diminishing Bosnia and Herzegovina's survival as a state. In fact, Kučukalić (2022) advocates that Dayton fostered *stabilitocracy*: a semi-authoritarian Balkan regime, with some undemocratic practices, recognised by the international community to preserve stability in the region, as per Bieber (2017). Dodik uses local media to increase the nationalist sentiment (Stradner, 2022), a feeling he shares with his EU ally, the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán (Jolicœur, 2022). In 2022, he (then the Serbian member of Bosnia and Herzegovina's collective presidency) announced the creation of an army in the Republika Srpska, amidst frequent claims of referenda about independence and for more central powers to be transitioned to Banja Luka (*de facto* capital of the entity since 1998, despite Sarajevo being the official capital of both entities, according to, among other sources, Wagener, 2023), so frequent that stakeholders balance between skepticism, propaganda in light of the 2022 elections, and real concerns (Jolicœur, 2022). It was not simply propaganda since, in 2021, the Republika Srpska's authorities took possession of central state competencies (Kučukalić, 2022), which the UK and the US responded by sanctioning Dodik, who considered Bosnia and Herzegovina an "experiment by the international community" and an "impossible, imposed country" (RFE/RL 2022). In June 2022, Republika Srpska's assembly voted to dismiss any decision from the Constitutional Court of Bosnia, which Schmidt refuted: the Court's functioning had recently been altered to allow it to convene even without Serbian jury present (RFE/RL, 2023). However, Schmidt used his Bonn Powers in April 2022 to overrule a law from Republika Srpska intending to absorb Bosnia and Herzegovina's state assets (Kučukalić, 2022). In an interview to Zrinka Vrabec Mojzeš, he advocates that the country should become a civil state, separating religion, and state, while respecting the three constituent peoples and those self-designated as Others (OHR, 2021).

Notwithstanding, the secessionist whim came to a stand-still when Banja Luka realised the harshness of the sanctions imposed on Russia after the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (ICG). In June 2022, Dodik announced that his plan to initiate the secession in the Summer would be delayed by six months

due to the war in Ukraine, to avoid “further complicating Republika Srpska's geopolitical position in complex geopolitical circumstances”, as stated by the Parliament. Dodik says that the entity remains neutral in the Ukraine conflict (RFE/RL, 2022), yet Euronews reports that he supports Russia’s aggression, and uses Putin’s to leverage his image among voters (Brezar, 2022). In Sarajevo, there was a demonstration headed by the Bosniak member of the country’s presidency in support of Ukraine (Jolicœur, 2022), while Serbian nationalists demonstrated in Banja Luka in March 2022 in support of the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Stradner, 2022). Simultaneously, the EU doubled the troops in the country, fearing an increase in tension. Jolicœur (2022) added that Serbia, to regain the West’s good will, was not fueling Dodik’s whims. Yet, in July 2023, Vučić announced an urgent meeting between Republika Srpska and Serbia’s “state bodies” because he had listened “carefully to President Dodik regarding the events in the Republika Srpska and Bosnia and Herzegovina”. In response, Elmedin Konaković, the state’s Foreign Minister, said that the Republika Srpska did not have “state bodies”, because it is “an entity in the sovereign state of Bosnia and Herzegovina”, and that a visit to Banja Luka would be a visit to Bosnia and Herzegovina (N1 Sarajevo, 2023).

In March 2022, the negotiations for an electoral reform ended without an agreement, fueling fears that the October 2022 elections would be boycotted. In April, Zoran Milanović, the President of Croatia, was ready to veto NATO’s enlargement to Finland, should the electoral law not be changed in Bosnian Croats’ benefit (Kučukalić, 2022). The elections happened, well organised and orderly, transparent, and open, according to the OSCE, not free from challenges in the secrecy in some polling stations and in the counting process, among other recommendations (OSCE, 2023). On the election evening, Schmidt made sudden changes to the constitution and the electoral system, which some Bosniaks did not welcome with pleasure (ICG, 2022), including timelines for the nomination of deputies, that the EU Parliament mission to the elections dismissed as undemocratic (Sito-Sucić, 2022), and seen by some as an “illiberal putsch attempt” (Mujanović, 2022).

Alija Izetbegović’s son and leader of the main Bosniak party, Bakir, lost the election for Bosniak member of the Presidency to a coalition of 11 mainly Bosniak parties led by Denis Bećirović. Željka Cvijanović was elected the Serbian member, succeeding to Dodik from the same party, who returned to the Presidency of Republika Srpska, replacing her (BalkanInsight, 2022), after a recount reconfirmed his victory, with claims from the opposition of ‘plundering the elections’ (Aljazeera, 2022). Željko Komšić kept his mandate as Croat member of the tripartite presidency, highly contested by the Croatian president, who sees him as an illegitimate representative of the Croats, as per the Croat presidency website (predsjednik.hr, 2024). Komšić had already been contested in the previous election in 2018, with many Croats attributing his victory to Bosniak votes. Croatian political analyst, Zarko Puhovski, foresaw at the time that going forward, Croatia would need to rely on Dodik, as both Croats and Serbs were united in the desire to reduce Bosniaks’ dominance in the country. In addition, Komšić had threatened to sue Zagreb for the construction of the Pelješac Bridge that bypasses Bosnia and Herzegovina’s access to the Adriatic, connecting Croatia and its remaining territory bordering

Montenegro (Vladislavljević, 2018). According to Sito-Sucić (2022), Komšić and Bećirović are more likely to preserve Bosnia and Herzegovina's statehood and are seen as a counterbalance to Željka Cvijanović, who has a more Russia and China drive and is pro-secession of the Republika Srpska.

After a campaign polarised between nationalists and economy reformists, nationalist parties dominated in many parliaments at the several levels of the political system, despite Komšić's being non-nationalist (Sito-Sucić, 2022). Yet, some reformist forces gained more representation at nationalist's cost, due to the civic society's growing involvement (Mujanović, 2022). The parties representing the Bosniaks, some with a more pro-Bosnian drive, and the HDZ Bosnia and Herzegovina (Christian democrats) heading a group of Croat parties, agreed on a solution based on common programme ideas and not on maintaining the status quo of the country as in previous solutions, promoting more trust among the peoples (Šilić, 2022). The new state cabinet, led by Croatian Borjana Kristo, the first woman prime minister of Bosnia and Herzegovina, also included the Serbian leading party in the Serbian-majority entity, Dodik's SNSD, leaving the Bosniak nationalist SDA in the opposition for the first time in over 20 years, in what is seen as an approach to the EU and NATO (DN/Lusa, 2022), despite Dodik's alignment with Russia. As for the Federation, the new government formation was not exempted from challenges either, with Schmidt threatening to use his powers to unblock the deadlock (EWB, 2023).

3.3.1.1 Republika Srpska

How did Republika Srpska become a single-constituent-people entity? Radovan Karadžić, its first president, declared independence (initially the Republic of the Serb People of Bosnia and Herzegovina) on 9th January 1992, claiming that Bosnia and Herzegovina no longer existed, while the latter was preparing for a Serb-boycotted referendum on its future in Yugoslavia on 29th February and 1st March.

Its foundation contributed to the eruption of war in the country, only three months later (Wagener, 2023), and it lasted until 1995 when it was downgraded to an entity within the state of Bosnia and Herzegovina, according to the Dayton Accords (Björkdhal, 2018). These cease-fire agreements legitimised the Serbian territory conquests and ethnic cleansing during the war, while other attempts to create states during the wars in Yugoslavia were not successful, such as Herzeg-Bosnia (integrated in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina) and Republika Srpska Krajina, reconquered by Zagreb. Björkdhal advocates that Republika Srpska never had a clear ambition for the territory: either an independent state or a union with Krajina and Serbia proper (Björkdhal, 2018). American diplomat Richard Holbrooke regretted two things about his intervention in the Bosnian war: forcing the Bosniaks to accept the name *Republika Srpska*, and to have forced the Croatian and Bosnian armies not to take Banja Luka, upon Milosević's request, as this would have led the war to have a winner and to create a multiethnic state (Packer, 2019). Björkdhal refers to the entity's name as a token of the ethnic exclusivity of the territory, transcending the imagined *Serb state* to reality (Björkdhal, 2018). The entity is also divided into two parts: the western and the eastern parts are separated by the Brčko District, a neutral district not belonging to any of the entities to guarantee that the Bosnian Serbs would not have control

of a continuous territory. Republika Srpska is “an unusual political entity”, as it is independent in some respects, while still part of a state according to Wagener (2023). Unlike the Federation’s cantons, it is an undivided republic following the Serbian unitarian state tradition, probably aiming at being annexed to Serbia in the future (Keil’s, in Kamil and Haliloğlu, 2022: 87).

The relations between Dodik and Putin have received wide interest and detailed attention among researchers, and some argue that Dodik uses the relations between Banja Luka and Moscow to legitimise the entity in the international scene, sometimes in an improvised manner, rather than an existing geopolitical context (Jackson and Jeffrey, 2021). We can connect it to Björkdahl who mentions that the new states issued of Yugoslavia, including a “state in the making” such as the Republika Srpska, needed to carve new memories, symbols, and traditions for its own constructions, by sorting facts and narratives, by deconstructing Yugoslavia’s own memorabilia and references. The author exemplifies with the entity’s flag which is like Serbia’s, yet without the royal coat of arms in the centre, and adds that until 2008, Serbia and Republika Srpska shared the anthem. Björkdahl is aligned to Keil’s view on the entity’s future and adds that the potential statehood is undermined by the conflicting ambitions of independence versus being part of a Greater Serbia, underlined by the elite’s adoption of Serbian symbols rather than developing its own. In fact, the author adds that Banja Luka tries to leverage its opposition to the OHR, the ICTY, and the international community in general as part of its self-construction (Björkdahl, 2018), yet I see it as another sign of the conflicting ambitions, because a new state cannot be formed against the international community, namely the UN. Björkdahl also refers that the Republika Srpska’s ethnic cleansing past does not foster external recognition, as the international community envisions new states who respect liberal, democratic, and heterogeneous values, and human and minority-rights, and not a mono-ethnic states as Kosovo (Björkdahl, 2018). In fact, it is common to see Serbian flags in Banja Luka, but by personal experience, it is more common to see Albanian flags in the streets of Pristina and even in the border controls, which is more striking than in Republika Srpska because Kosovo declared its independence. Still, it may reflect the same conflicting ambitions: an independent Kosovo or integrating Albania. We can also find similarities with Donbas: as we saw, Bosniaks could relate to the Ukrainians in by comparing Luhansk and Donetsk self-proclaimed secession to Republika Srpska’s claim for self-determination (Anastasakis, 2022). Moreover, Vučić declared that he would disapprove Moscow’s decision to recognise Luhansk and Donetsk if Kyiv would condemn NATO’s bombing of Serbia in 1999, which is not an efficient argument, since Ukraine does not recognise Kosovo (Lachert, 2023). In addition, the two Donbas republics and Republika Srpska have the same conflictive ambitions that Björkdahl mentioned about Republika Srpska (2018): Luhansk and Donetsk declared independence initially, only to be integrated as part of Russia in 2022.

3.3.2. Kosovo

Kosovo’s relations with Serbia have suffered ups and downs, being stalled for most of the time, in matters such as armed forces, religion or imports taxation, with Moscow and Washington taking parts

and interfering. Only three years after Kosovo declared independence, the EU promoted dialogue to normalise relations between Belgrade and Pristina (Davies, 2021), which Mirosavljević (2023) coined as “constructive ambiguity” as it allows some sort of compromise on challenging matters that are framed creatively for domestic understanding by both parts. These negotiations led to the Brussels Agreement, signed in April 2013 (Davies 2021), or initialled only, according to the University of Edinburgh, and not signed, as per Kruijver and Xhambazi (2020), and reaffirmed in August 2015 by both parties, including the rule of law and the competences of the Serb majority municipalities in the north of Kosovo. Davies considers that Moscow has, since then, tried to influence this process of *rapprochement*, as it had already opposed NATO’s intervention in the conflict that ended in Kosovo’s declaration of independence (Davies, 2021). Should Serbia and Kosovo reach and implement an agreement, Russia could no longer instrumentalise Serbia’s reliance on its veto power on Kosovo’s recognition in the UN Security Council, diminishing Moscow’s influence in Serbia and the region (Samorukov’s, in Davies, 2021: 2). Even if Russia had not opposed further judiciary and police forces integration in Kosovo structures, most of the points of the agreement have caused clashes between Brussels and Moscow, and between Belgrade and Pristina. Nonetheless, Russia advocates that the dialogue between a country and a semi-autonomous entity should only exist under the auspices of the Security Council (where Russia has a voice as a permanent member), not leaving it in Brussels’s hands (that Moscow cannot control) who sees Serbia and Kosovo as two independent states in practice. In addition, any process that bypasses the UN would diminish Russia’s role in the Security Council (Davies, 2021).

Serbia was granted EU candidate status in 2012, while Kosovo could only sign a Stabilisation and Association Agreement in 2015 and is still not a candidate (EU website). As per Davies (2021), Brussels uses Serbia’s accession to the EU as a carrot to force normalisation of relations with Kosovo, but he is critical about the EU’s capability to negotiate and enforce the agreements as usually they are “vague”, leaving more “sensitive” matters for later, in continuous re-negotiations. Bargués et al also question that capability since Kosovo’s independence is not recognised by five EU member-states: Cyprus, Greece, Slovakia, Romania, and Spain, due mostly to their internal secession demands, even if they support dialogue and EULEX. This stand-still on recognition is a roadblock in the process, which the long-awaited visa waiver for Kosovars to travel to the EU is an example of: Spain blocked it until right after its Council Presidency (second half of 2023) and will only happen in January 2024. Moreover, the authors advise Brussels not to diverge its attention from the Western Balkans in the current war context, even if EU candidate status should depend on integration of the Serbian minority and upscaling democracy standards (Bargués et al, 2022). Pérez (2023) does not believe that Spain’s presidency will represent meaningful advances on the process, let alone with national elections in the middle.

Reactions against the government and some violence emerged in the streets of Pristina on several occasions until 2019. Davies points out that, while these clashes reflected the country’s ethnic tensions, much of the violence happened between Kosovo Albanians. Despite Moscow’s narrative of an unstable territory and victimisation of Serbs, overlooked by the West, no major violence between

Albanians and Serbs had occurred since 2011. Demjaha counters that most of the minorities are well integrated, but the ethnic tension between the two major groups is central in Kosovo's society (Demjaha's, in Lisibach, 2019: 27). Lisibach adds that the inefficient economy, limited political trust, and foreign influence undermine Kosovo's international recognition and statehood. He stresses the foreign initiative role in the democratic process as opposed to lower commitment from local institutions, going as far as saying that, together with a weak economy, Kosovo is prone to a coup. Furthermore, he says that corruption impacts democracy and is an impediment to a proper management of security organisations. In fact, the events in Donbas and Crimea, in 2014, fueled the debate on establishing an army in Kosovo, but the fact that several NATO members do not recognise the independence does not contribute to a future NATO integration either (Lisibach, 2019), which has been among Pristina's priorities. In fact, the parliament voted in 2018 for the Kosovo Security Force to be transformed into a national army, which divided NATO's opinions. As this measure would imply constitutional changes, the cabinet decided to create a national army and a Ministry of Defence instead. Furthermore, KFOR is still seen by the Serb and Albanian sides as a guarantee of security, and any reduction on its attributions may impact the region's stability (Kruijver and Xhambazi, 2020).

In July 2022, Pristina's decision to implement new rules for Serbian car number plates when driving into Kosovo, as well as additional ID documents to Serbs, aroused reactions in the population and tension escalated. NATO forces reaffirmed their readiness to defend peace and stability (Fraiola et al, 2022) in view of border tensions, shootings, protests, and Serbian air force flying along the border. In November, EU's mediation created the conditions for a partial agreement between both governments (Bargués et al, 2023). This tension would always be serious and concerning, but the fact that it happened during the war in Ukraine increases its relevance. Alongside the EU's inability to fully recognise Kosovo's independence, Bargués et al consider that these events distract actors from a solution, especially as both parts have time for compromise and concessions before the next national and international elections (Bargués et al, 2022). Meanwhile, there were the school shootings in Belgrade in May 2023, to which the government responded by being dismissive and unsympathetic to the victims and by blaming the Western culture. In reaction to Vučić's regime's inadequate response, massive and weekly demonstrations took to the streets of Belgrade asking for more media regulation and for the minister of interior to resign, which shook the Serbian establishment (Cvijić, 2023).

The international community has a strong presence in Kosovo: the US earned a reputation by leading NATO's intervention in 1999 that conducted the territory for self-rule: Pristina was adamant on the licence plates matter until it found considerable insistence from Washington. In September 2020, the White House hosted the two presidential delegations to agree on land swaps (Bargués et al, 2023), which the US had denied earlier that year (RFE/RL, 2020), but it was a Serbian proposal backed by the US according to Viceré (2019). Back in 2018, Paddy Ashdown, former EU envoy to Bosnia and Herzegovina, disagreed with the exchange of north Kosovo for the Albanese majority Preševo Valley in southern Serbia, alerting that it would trigger other border revisions in the region, probably fueling

ethnic tensions, and that could be used by Moscow to justify the 2014 aggressions of Ukraine (Jovicević and Baumgartner, 2018). I believe that if Serbia was to accept this, it would imply that one of its main arguments, the integrity of Kosovo (the heart of Serbia), was not itself so important after all, and that Milošević's dream of uniting all Serbs would be more important.

One of the most sensitive points in the 2015 Brussels Agreement is around the establishment of an association of Serb-majority municipalities in Kosovo, which would have full responsibility over economic development, education, health, planning, and a representative role in Pristina's authorities (University of Edinburgh, 2022). While for Belgrade, *autonomy* means executive power, Pristina wants to implement a *community* as the ones in Kosovo Albanian majority municipalities (Davies, 2021). As per Kico et al (2022), Belgrade and Moscow are trying to undermine Kosovo's possibilities to integrate NATO and the EU: more autonomy for Serb-majority municipalities in the north would become a leverage to influence Pristina's decisions and the country's future into a different direction.

In February 2023, Paris and Berlin, under the aegis of the EU, proposed a model similar to the one that both Germanies agreed on in December 1972, allowing international recognition and an entry in the UN, waiving the need for mutual recognition. It was featured in the negotiations held in Ohrid (North Macedonia) in March 2023, where significant steps were taken towards the implementation of the Brussels Agreement (2013) and the normalisation of relations between Serbia and Kosovo, but it was depicted differently by Belgrade and Pristina as Miroslavjević points out. Facing right-wing opposition, the Serbian president stated that there had been no signature as Kosovo was not independent, but that Serbia was willing to work on the obligations assumed in Ohrid. Yet, one of the compromises is not to oppose Kosovo's membership in international organisations, but Serbia opposes Kosovo's UN membership. Vučić agreed with 2013's clauses about the Association of Serb majority Municipalities (ASM) but added that he had not agreed with Kurti's proposals. In turn, Kurti, initially in stark opposition to the Brussels Agreement, faced internal resistance to the ASM, and said that it did not imply any autonomy. He considered that Ohrid meant a *de facto* recognition of Kosovo's independence, even if the agreement referred to "mutual recognition of Serbia and Kosovo". Josep Borrell, the head of EU's diplomacy, said that the signature was not important but its implementation yes (Miroslavjević, 2023).

Municipal elections were held in April 2023 in the Serb majority municipalities, after the December 2022 elections were postponed due to the tension at the time, with ethnic Serbs blocking roads and borders. Srpska Lista (the strongest Serbian party in Kosovo) boycotted the voting due to the alleged repression of Serbs, and Serbian institutions incentivised voters to do the same: Kurti's party, Vetëvendosje, won in two of the municipalities, and PDK won in the remaining two, in an election with 3,47% attendance (1.567 votes) (EWB, 2023), a "miserable turnout", according to Petar Petković, the head of Serbian Government's Office for Kosovo, who said that the international community had not endorsed the results (N1, 2023). Three of the new mayors (all Kosovo Albanians) took oath in Albanian majority villages and not in the city halls (Kosovo Online, 2023). After the election process, tension inflamed in the north and dozens of people were injured in clashes between local Serbs, the police and

NATO peacekeepers, while the US and the EU kept pressuring on Pristina to pacify the region, amidst criticism by the opposition that Kurti was undermining the relations with Kosovo's allies.

Moreover, the relationship between Kurti and his Albanian counterpart, Edi Rama, who aligns with the international community's criticism of the escalation of violence, keeps deteriorating (Rama has an *entente* with Vučić, and they both created the Open Balkan initiative together with Skopje). Coincidentally (or not), Kurti is backed by the Albanian opposition and Rama by the Kosovar opposition (Beqa, 2023). The opposition was further distressed when the Prime Minister pulled back and announced new municipal elections in the north, accusing him of experimenting and belittling Kosovo's reputation only to revoke his own decisions later. A serious fight broke out among parliamentarians after a deputy from PDK threw a glass of water at Kurti while the latter was delivering his speech (The Guardian, 2023). The AAK promoted a vote of no-confidence to the government, but so far it has not managed to unite the other opposition parties, LDK and PDK, in voting the cabinet out (Isufi and Hoti, 2023).

3.3.3 The Western Balkans in the international scene

Emerging powers have a natural appetite for the region: a new market and energy resources to feed their economic growth, and China, Saudi, and Turkey are searching for their share (Dopchie, 2022). Turkey and the West have similar interests in trade and investment, even if (surprisingly) Ankara does not back the region's authoritarian drive. Beijing has strongest links with Belgrade, supporting its position on Kosovo, in exchange for a similar stance about Taiwan (Bargués et al, 2023). Balkans's communist past was a safety net to spread its tentacles as China had a close relationship with Yugoslavia after Mao died (1976), and with Albania (1960s/1970s). Beijing launched the 16+1 (countries) framework with Central and Eastern Europe (2012), including all Western Balkan countries, except Kosovo, to whom this was an attractive and less bureaucratic source of financing than the EU's strings attached (Khaze and Wang, 2020). When compared to the EU, China represents a modest investment, but its development assistance is quicker, cheaper, and accepted locally (Krstinovska, 2022). Furthermore, China's Belt and Road Initiative is creating economic corridors through the Balkans and reducing internal asymmetries: railways between Croatia's ports and Central and Eastern Europe, or domestic highways, or the Pelješac Bridge that reunites Croatia with its exclave, fostering cohesion within the countries but also within the region. Ruge (2020) alerts to the rising influence of China, Turkey, and the Gulf states that should impel Brussels to re-engage assertively in the region. Moreover, migration routes to the EU cross it, including smuggling routes of illegal goods and weaponry, and criminal groups. Viceré (2019) adds that EU membership would make Brussels dispute Moscow's role in the region.

The last years had seen no major steps towards the region's integration in the Union, who suffers from what Dopchie named *enlargement fatigue*: rise of nationalism in some of its member-states (who fear organised crime and mass immigration due to high unemployment in the Western Balkans) but also Brexit raise some doubts on further expansion. The region also feels a *waiting fatigue* and no tangible progress is leading to a shift to those eager to increase their presence. The austerity after 2008's

economic quake reduced Europe's bandwidth to support their economic or socio-political stability, reducing their capacity to implement Brussels's norms. Finally, the US were also distancing themselves from the region and looking further into Asia (Doptchie, 2022). Some of the new members after the 2004 and 2007 enlargements posed some challenges to the *acquis* compliance (Tüysüzoğlu, 2022). I will add that the Hungarian and Polish civic rights drift does not appease Brussels when considering other formerly socialist countries as members. It was only by 2017 that Brussels started to revisit the Western Balkans enlargement process (14 years after the Thessaloniki Summit that seemed to pave the way for a quicker enlargement). The February 2018's Commission strategy aimed at 2025 at the earliest, but with the caveat that all new members should fix their bilateral problems prior, adding more complexity to the process. In addition, the region was late in development standards, which would probably turn the EU into a "multi-speed" super-region (Tüysüzoğlu, 2022). A 2022 survey concluded that 77% of Bosnians would like Bosnia and Herzegovina to join the EU. In the Federation, more than 90% said yes while in the Republika Srpska only 54,5% embrace it (N1 Zagreb, 2022). Nonetheless, Banja Luka's government website states that Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the Republika Srpska "as its integral part", aim at full EU membership as a confirmation of its "highest democratic standards and reforms", and as a guarantee for security and a lasting "stabilisation and prosperity" in the Western Balkans (VladaRS, 2023), which is rather interesting, bearing in mind Dodik's proximity to the Kremlin and constant threats of secession. In fact, Wagener reiterates this alignment with Putin and considers that the EU is not popular among Bosnian Serbs, while Russia is widely supported (Wagener, 2023). As for Kosovo, a survey conducted in 2022 revealed 93% approval to join the EU (IRI, 2020).

Despite the different speeds, the Western Balkans are all in the Stabilisation and Association Process which started in 2001, a step towards a potential EU membership. Despite some progress in some chapters and in corresponding efforts to get closer to Europe's *acquis*, there are challenges slowing it down in both the Associated Trio (Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova) and the Western Balkans: macro-economy, political systems, human rights, corruption, and the rule of law. Before 2022, the likelihood of the Trio to join the EU was lower than the Western Balkans' (Anastasakis, 2022). To become a candidate, states need to fulfil the Copenhagen Criteria (1993): democratic institutions that foster human rights and the rule of law, and a capable market economy to compete within the EU, and the ability to accept and implement the whole of the EU laws, the *Acquis Communautaire* (EUR-Lex). Furthermore, candidates need to align with the Union's foreign and security policies, represented by the EEAS, even if it is only to be fully fulfilled when becoming member states (Arnaudov, 2022). It is curious that Jović (2001) pointed to the fact that nationalists were alarmed in the 1980s by the prospect of joining the then European Community, as they would become subject to both Brussels and Belgrade.

The geopolitical change after February 2022 led Ukraine and Moldova to apply and to be granted candidate status, even without fulfilling the conditions for it (Fraiola et al, 2022). In March, Bosnia and Herzegovina urged Brussels to adopt a swift membership process (Schmidt considered membership essential for state-building in his interview to Mojzeš, 2021), only to hear President Macron

of France suggesting the opposite two months later and calling for a European political union between the EU and those countries that share the same values (Kučukalić, 2022). The latest EU Report on Bosnia and Herzegovina by Eurodeputy Paulo Rangel urges the EU to accelerate the accession process but warns of the Republika Srpska and its leader's secessionist rhetoric (European Parliament, 2023). Finally in July 2022, Albania, and North Macedonia (with processes linked together) began negotiations, the latter after 17 years of waiting. Austria and Slovenia's ventures in the European Council to include Bosnia and Herzegovina in the candidate status, and preferably Kosovo as well, were unsuccessful (Fraïoli et al, 2022), but later, Bosnia and Herzegovina's leaders were urged to honour the established compromises since the European Council was ready to concede candidate status as soon as the 14 priorities were met (European Council, 2022).

In parallel, NATO could become the other strategic alliance for the region, due to its instrumental role in Western Balkan conflicts according to Stradner (2022): a peacekeeping force of 60.000 was deployed to Bosnia and Herzegovina to ensure the Dayton Peace Agreement's implementation. Despite Russia's disapproval, NATO bombed Serbia and Kosovo (then FRY) in 1999, leading to Milošević's fall and the beginning of Kosovo's self-rule and posterior independence. Stradner considers that this military campaign may have been a humiliation to Russia who has been against any NATO membership of former Soviet republics (which started days before the 1999 bombing), except for the three Baltic states. Serbia and the Republika Srpska have never forgotten the bombing campaign and followed Moscow's anti-NATO discourse. After Croatia and Albania in 2009, Russia's invasion of Crimea in 2014 triggered further enlargements: Montenegro in 2017 (who supported sanctions on Russia), despite Moscow's manipulation to prevent it by attempting a coup in Podgorica on election day (Stradner, 2022). North Macedonia joined the alliance in 2020, after finally settling its 'name' issue with Greece, which Russia also tried to undermine (Anastasakis, 2022).

There have been opposing stances in Bosnia and Herzegovina about NATO, with the central government pending for it, whereas Dodik advocates a closer security partnership with the Kremlin. Less than a month after invading Ukraine in 2022, Kalabukhov, Russia's ambassador in Sarajevo, stated that Moscow would respond should Bosnia and Herzegovina join NATO, despite being an internal matter: "Our response is a different matter. Ukraine's example shows what we expect. Should there be a threat, we will respond" (Euractiv, 2022). Russia aims to increase Republika Srpska's dependence, namely in the energy sector, by investing in their oil industry, but also in training their police or in promoting internal security education, which can be related to the entity's attempt to create its own army and abandon Bosnia and Herzegovina's. These ties create conflicts within Bosnia and Herzegovina, making it more difficult for NATO membership (Anastasakis, 2022).

Military cooperation between Belgrade and Banja Luka increases complexity that Anastasakis (2022) advises the West to consider, when dealing with what happened in Ukraine. Partnership with Serbia should increase, to clean its image after bombing it (which is happening, as we have seen), just like the EU and the US should speak with one voice in all matters and support local independent media.

Stradner (2022) considers that the West acted defensively and did not respond with a similar information offensive, as it did not curb Putin's corruption and illegal manoeuvres. Anastasakis underlines that the Balkans are Europe's most vulnerable area and an easy geopolitical chess between Russia and the West, whose access to the EU and NATO Russia tries to sabotage. Notwithstanding, he stresses that the Western Balkans states are not necessarily manipulated, nor at the same level: the EU seems the obvious path to all, but Russia is also used as a leverage in their negotiation power with the EU, between the Western Balkan states, but also opportunistically with Russia. The war in Ukraine also led Albania, North Macedonia and Greece to play a more significant role, while Sofia's or Zagreb's politicians had discussions around their degree of involvement (Anastasakis, 2022): the Croatian president was against the West arming Ukraine (Aljazeera, 2023), and only in July 2023 did Sofia decide to send weapons from 1980 (Warsaw Pact times), after the appointment of a new pro-Western cabinet (AP News, 2023).

3.4 Field work analysis

My review of academic literature about young politicians' actorness offered some methodological options. Godnov and Redek (2014) explained how to analyse Twitter/X extensively, including a detailed framework for discourse analysis, but their social media sample was massive compared to mine, and I am not focusing on discourse analysis as such. Asante et al (2020) had the help of a local research team to help scan through sources and to conduct interviews, which was not necessary in my case.

My research was based on interviews and social media to answer the question of how young political influencers think individually about the impact of the war in Ukraine in the Western Balkans. I also searched for the parties' youth section websites, but the results were minimal as, for the most part, there are no such sites or tabs, or no political messages, or when they exist, there are no references to Ukraine. The only exception is a centre-left party from Bosnia and Herzegovina with five references, namely "Mostar for Mariupol".

As part of my project, I visited Zagreb, Belgrade, Skopje, Pristina, and Prizren (Kosovo) in 2022, to get to know the Western Balkans better. In 2023, I visited Zagreb and Belgrade again, as well as Banja Luka and Sarajevo, aiming at conducting interviews.

3.4.1 Interview methodology

Interviews were central in my research. I applied Janušauskienė's (1999) method of selecting youth political organisations based on their affiliation to the biggest parliamentary parties.

I initially searched for the parties with seats in the current five state parliaments of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Croatia, Serbia, and Albania. I selected the four parties with more deputies and searched for their websites, trying to identify whether they had an active youth section, with the obvious language challenge. Depending on the case, I emailed the party or the youth section, or registered in their contact section. In the meantime, I also tried to identify individuals that would be in the age range that I had defined: up to 35 years old in Kosovo and 40 in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and up to 40 in the

other countries, as I wanted to focus on those that had lived the 1990s wars as young adolescents, at the most. This was a long process of online investigation, which included searches in parliament deputy listings (no answer) but also think-tanks and young activists. I sent messages via email, Whatsapp, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and LinkedIn to a little over 100 people or institutions or parties, with very limited response. Only two parties answered (from Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Croatia), but one of the positive aspects was that once you start, everyone is willing to recommend someone or a party in another country, which was instrumental, leading my research to more alternative and recent parties.

In total, I collected 22 testimonies between June and September 2023, including two face-to-face meetings (Sarajevo and Zagreb), 13 zoom interviews, and seven written responses (two of them included a brief zoom conversation), in a panel of 11 men and 11 women (intentional at the beginning, and full parity by coincidence in the end). I contacted a young mayor who delegated on a deputy-mayor beyond the age range, which resulted in a very interesting conversation, as it allowed me to interview someone who had lived in Sarajevo as a young adult in the aftermath of war and who is now in power, with a critical perspective on the country's situation. Otherwise, the respondents were between 21 and 35 years old, with an average of 28. The corpus represented 10 parties (three from the left/progressive, four from the centre, and three from the right) and ten think-tanks, NGOs, or institutions, from the five countries (one Kosovo Serb, one Kosovo Roma, three from Albania, four each from Croatia, Serbia, and the Federation, and five Kosovo Albanians). The quickest response was from Croatia, and, initially, the most difficult was Serbia. It was difficult to have a balance between Republika Srpska and the Federation, and between Kosovo Albanians and Kosovo Serbs: the two positive answers from Banja Luka did not materialise: one confirmed a face-to-face meeting in the government headquarters, and the other confirmed that the answers would be in writing, but both decided to ignore me after that. One of the challenges was how to explain my project to Serbs or Bosnian Serbs without being biased about the status of Kosovo. I decided to mention Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina as *territories* in my introductory email and presentation, adding that neither Serbia nor five EU countries recognise Pristina's authorities. Nonetheless, I still had one laconic response: "Kosovo is Serbia".

The semi-structured interviews were based on these questions, according to my project's scope:

1. How do you think the war in Ukraine is impacting or may impact the stability and balance in the Western Balkans, and in Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina in particular?
2. How has the conflict changed young politicians' discourse and narrative?
3. How do you think young people see the conflict, namely in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo?
4. How do you think this will impact the appetite for international alliances: EU or Eurasian Economic Union or Open Balkan, NATO or Russia-oriented, in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo?
5. What future do you see in Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the Western Balkans?

Except for two (technical issues), conversations were recorded and with the interviewees' consent, including an acknowledgement by email or in writing. Question number four evolved through the interview process, as I decided to ask directly what the geostrategic shift in the Western Balkans would be, should Russia win the war, as the initial question was probably too densely formulated. I also intended to touch upon the intra-Balkan relations on this question, but I soon realised in my conversations that relations are usually good and probably even healthy, at least at their level of action. Despite the obvious tension between Pristina and Belgrade, the two societies cooperate organically, with many grassroots initiatives from both the Albanian and Serbian communities in Kosovo, promoting dialogue and partnership. The Open Balkan initiative was also initially contemplated in this question. In July 2023, Prime Minister Rama decided to cancel Albania's participation, saying that the "Open Balkan initiative was born out of the need to push forward the Berlin Process" (platform of cooperation between the six Western Balkan countries and some EU member states, to maintain stability and prepare enlargement, as per its website), "and it has accomplished the mission for which it was born", to which Vučić responded that "The Open Balkan is an autonomous and autochthonous idea of people from the Balkans" (Euronews Albania, 2023). I opted out by not focusing on that topic unless it would become relevant in the flow of conversation.

I divided my analysis into four parts with this order, with the disclaimer that they are not rigid since the topics and questions interconnect immensely: how young people view the influence of the war in Ukraine, how respondents see it, how other young politicians see it, and the future of the Western Balkans. There were several instances where interviewees discussed the origins of Russia's invasion or nationalism, but I will not dwell on them since they are not the core of this dissertation. It is worth noting that written answers were more ideological, formatted, without probing questions of course, but also more factual and less personal ("the commitment to Western democratic values, as we as the nation's alignment with the Western world, remains a pivotal compass guiding Kosovo's path forward"), and more politically aligned with the party ("the fundamental right to self-determination is a universal principle, and Kosovo, in particular, has first-hand experience of the hardships it entails"), probably fearing that I would quote and name the individual. Answers are often framed in the name of the focus group, "we, the young politicians" or "we, young people". To respect confidentiality, I will name each interview R1, and so on. I distinguish between the three constituent groups when referring to Bosnian citizens. The same happens in Kosovo, but I only say Kosovar when they are ethnic Albanians.

3.4.2 How young people see the impact of the war in Ukraine

The most common comment about young people's views on the impact of the Ukraine war in the Western Balkans is that youth are disconnected from politics and have no real interest in it: they are "apolitical and apathetic in the region", according to Croatian R1. This feeling was prevalent in the left and centre parties, with left-wing Croatian R8 blaming the political system for a loss of faith in institutions. Bosniak think-tanker R17 believes that, in general, youth are subject to conspiracy theories

due to political illiteracy, and Bosnian Croat R4 adds that the more educated ones tend to be more concerned. R2, of a Bosniak family but identifying himself as ‘Others’, whom I will refer to as *Bosnian* going forward, adds that the only political participation is in elections and in some demonstrations, but the political system is so stratified that they have no idea whom they are demonstrating against. R17 concludes that there are no real protests, such as those that happen abroad in front of Russian embassies, “which (...) shows the level of citizens”. R1 and R3, from a Croatian centre party, agree that Zagreb does not recognise the mistakes from the past, making youth trust leaders even less, especially considering that many of the politicians of the 1990s are still in power. R3 expresses her frustration by asking “how can we have a reliable political class that is based on not recognising mistakes and these crimes?” and adding that young people do not feel empowered. For R8, politicians that are supposedly in conflict among each other are part of a “very close ecosystem where they feed each other”. These views about the longevity of the political class are mentioned in several interviews, even if not only linked to the youth’s dissatisfaction, and reflect their own vision of political elites, and not necessarily the youth’s perspective, to support their own views, even if they are probably right in their analysis. R2, whose responses had a sociological and even philosophical inclination, added that Bosnian parents that had lived through war expected, without success, a better society than the one they were leaving behind. They transferred their negativity about politicians to their children and their message is to focus on getting a job and ensure the security they used to have in Yugoslavia, and to forget politics and politicians.

Young Albanians see the war as a distant event, according to R6, yet for young Kosovars, war became normalised due to its unexpected duration, according to R14, a Pristina-based think-tanker, due to instability and conflicts being normalised in the Western Balkans, in addition to being “sort of overshadowed by the many challenges and issues with Serbia” in the meantime. The second most frequent comment, though, is about the instability, the worry, the security threats in the region, and the memories of the past that the war in Ukraine generates among them, especially in the case of Kosovar respondents, who mention “the devastating consequences of war and the importance of stability” (R9). This feeling is not exclusive to Kosovo: Serbian R19, who has long worked in the normalisation process between Belgrade and Pristina, said that the only real insecurity is felt among the Bosniak population, since “they have Dodik against them”. On the other hand, R22, from a Serbian left-progressist party, mentions some fear of impact in Serbia, especially when people see what happens in Ukraine or the incidents in Kosovo in recent months. Yet, he attributes it to the regime’s manipulated media, ironically referring to Vučić as a “magician who will bring us stability” who confuses people who are confronted between reality and “mainstream regime media”, in agreement with Serbian think-tanker R21. R22 chose to frame the conflict’s impact in his opposition to the Serbian president, hence giving more relevance to how Vučić orchestrated it, rather than prioritising the conflict in the first place. Croatian R7 adds that the war is fueling tensions in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, being also one of the rare references to the economic impact: considering that R7 is part of Croatia’s ruling party, this is a

way to single out the government's responsibility in the country's economy and a way to bring in the conflict in Ukraine in its defence, framing the war in a new perspective.

If we delve into each country's sentiment, the war in Ukraine resonates a great deal in Kosovo, namely due to the latter's previous aspirations for liberation: right-wing R16 from Pristina says that Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina "empathise with Ukraine's struggle for liberation" as they have "endured invasion and genocide themselves", adding a description of the hardship of war times during "Serbian occupation". It is a very intense discourse to highlight Kosovo's resistance and right for self-determination, focusing on the similarities with Ukraine rather than Ukraine itself, making it 'personal' and serving a political purpose. Serbian R19 takes a more distant approach and says that young people reflect the "mainstream narrative (...) exacerbated by (...) Kurti", echoed in R16. In addition, R19 mentions that the government is comparing their suffering against Milošević with Ukraine's against Putin, but regrets that Kosovo is not in the spotlight anymore ("how come we are not in the centre of the work anymore?"). This reflects the Kosovo Albanian perspective, while a Kosovo Serb activist, R18, refers that there is "a strong feeling of friendship, in general, with the Russian nation", but not verbalised publicly. This originated in the trauma of NATO's bombing campaign in 1999, and she adds that "they are pro-Russian because they are anti-Western", but they would not do anything to support Russia. Kosovar activist R10 stresses that Kosovo Serb youth accept the state of Kosovo, but only in private, as publicly they follow Vučić or their friends.

Serbian think-tanker R21 argues that youth in Serbia are more radical and "Russia's actions are seen much more favourably than the actions of the West concerning the war in Ukraine", as part of the government's plan to increase tensions and "animosity against the West". In addition, Kosovar R14 states that Serbs do not attribute the start of the war to Russia. Serbian political analyst R12 mentions the generation gap between the Millennials who are less nationalistic and "would not say that they are proud Serbs" versus the new generation, who will become more right-wing, do not feel any weight from the past, and is more vocal about being "proud Serbs", even if they simply want peace and progress.

According to Bosniak think-tanker R17, young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina are subject to conspiracy theories, as I mentioned, and see it as NATO/West versus Russia. Bosniak R20 believes that young people do not have a personal perspective, as they are "not loud on whom they are supporting (...) and have their own problems". Croat R1 believes that the constituent peoples follow the ethnic lines, with Bosnian Serbs aligning with Serbia proper in supporting Russia, Bosnian Croats follow Croatia, and Bosniaks share the pro-Ukraine stance. The youngest of our respondents, R3, a 21-year-old Croat, senses a growing resentment among young Bosniaks due to watching videos with "ethnic hate messages, like a jihad". In fact, two of our interviewees point out to a growing nationalism: R8 from Croatia mentions that the way politicians are handling structural and decisive challenges like climate change are driving nationalistic ideologies, while Bosnian R2 believes that "young people are not burdened by nationalism" due to having grown up surrounded by a Western culture via internet, music, television, despite both young politicians coming from similar political spaces. These are disparate views about

ethnic tension and nationalism. In general, R3 was more pessimistic while R2 was more optimistic, but I believe that R2 funnelled his views in a more strategic lens that promotes reconciliation between the constituent peoples. Albeit framing his words to support the focus he wanted his conversation to flow through, he was able to keep a distance from political roadmaps and reflect independently.

3.4.3 How the interviewees see the impact of the war in Ukraine

The most recurrent response was about the destabilisation and escalation of tension because of the conflict in Ukraine. “Everyone’s first thought was the possibility of spillover” due to Russia’s influence in the area, to energy dependence, religion, and its soft-power, according to think-tanker R21 from Belgrade. For Roma R23 from Kosovo, war in Ukraine “could empower nationalist and radical groups (...) especially Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina”, increasing “ethnic divisions and tensions”. Right-wing R5 from Kosovo adds the eternal clash between the West and Russia, reminding the region’s “history of ethnic and political divisions, which may be exacerbated by developments in Ukraine”, namely the tension between Serbia and Kosovo. Still, considering that it was a written answer, I consider that, in her view, it is more of a possibility (“may”) rather than a fact, something that I could have easily clarified, had it been an interview. Croatian R8 is more adamant and sees an influence of war in the rising tension in the north of Kosovo. He states that periodical conflicts are leveraged by politicians, the “same that have led these countries to almost destruction”. Albeit considering that politicians benefit from keeping the wounds of war open (“politically, symbolically and financially”), he believes that it may increase cohesion but also the possibility of conflicts. Croatian R7 sees that Serbia’s support to Russia is fueling tension in Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, while Kosovar activist R10 is clear that “Serbia is trying, through local parties in Kosovo and Bosnia, to raise tensions” in these countries. Kosovar activist R10 is adamant that Serbia continues to “raise tensions through the groups they control in the north of Kosovo”. On the other hand, Kosovar activist R14 considers that there were problems before the war erupted. Still, she says that “we are not in the 1990s anymore when NATO was nowhere to be seen” (referring to the Bosnian War). Now the Alliance is everywhere in the Western Balkans, some countries are in the EU, even Serbia has partnerships with NATO, adding that an intervention in Kosovo would imply NATO’s response to Serbia, even if real war is still possible.

Bosnian R2 believes that the responsibility lies in Bosniaks’ shoulders due to being more numerous in the country, especially if they want a unitary state (too early for that, he adds, otherwise it would end like Yugoslavia when Serbs wanted a more united state), which is incompatible with going through war again. R3 from Croatia is concerned about where the weapons handed to authorities after the school shootings in Belgrade in May 2023 were stored in, adding that the existence of those weapons at home meant that people felt insecure, together with dramas not dealt with. North Kosovo activist R18 states that the war did not impact people’s security, but rather incited political securitisation since Pristina created a police force in the north the same week that war started in Ukraine, without ethnic balance, which intimidated people. Bosniak think-tanker R17 believes that tension in north Kosovo may

increase to a similar level as during the Troubles in Northern Ireland in the 1970s and 1980s, but he does not see that happening in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Kosovo activist R10 only sees conflict starting in the Serbian municipalities in Kosovo, instigated by Serbia. Securitisation was purposely selected by some to frame the impact of war by underlining Belgrade's or Pristina's influence in the region's stability.

Right-wing Kosovar R16 is clear that the Kremlin "sought to divert Western attention away from Ukraine by exerting influence through Belgrade, to destabilise the Balkan region", and adds that the war led to "a surge in Serbian chauvinistic rhetoric", "fueling hate speech, resentment, and even violent protests in northern Kosovo", aligned with Serbian R19 who says that Kurti always blames Belgrade for the escalation. On the contrary, R16 adds that "Serbians in Kosovo have more rights than some minorities in Serbia", avoiding the question of the difference in rights between Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo, by highlighting what happens in Serbia instead, hence framing the topic to pitch her political message through an alternative path. This is a discursive option that I would include in what I coin as *framing in absence*, which happens when someone avoids the obvious and guides the recipient through a topic by simply not mentioning the obvious, even if it is in the back of our minds. We will see more and better examples of this tactic later. As for R19, he acknowledges Serbia's influence in the region (namely due to the number of ethnic Serbs in several countries), arguing that "whatever happens in Serbia in terms of democracy instability can spill over the region", showing the demonstrations after the shootings in May as an example of an event that shook the Western Balkans. R8 argues that, despite Serbia being a traditional Russian ally, it is "not a small thing the way they reacted" as otherwise they would "have to accept Kosovo as well". He also points out that, during wars, there is an increase in right-wing policies that reduce human rights, leading to instability and aggressiveness.

Kosovo Serb activist R18 says that Serbs are not pro-Russia: they are against the West due to NATO's bombing of Serbia in 1999, and the facilitation of Kosovo's independence. There is certainly some truth in it, but it is also a way to show that Serbs are not necessarily against Ukraine, by singling out other factors that may contradict this idea. Serbian analyst R12 states that Serbians are traumatised by 1990s' sanctions, and like Putin because he stands against the West, even if they move to the West and send their children to study in the West. Some respondents signalled some ambiguity in Vučić's positions. He avoids the EU's pressure to sanction Russia due to "strong sentiments in Serbia public", that he also needs to balance with the recent demonstrations in the country, as per left-wing Serbian R22, who states that the cabinet is undecided between the destiny in the EU as opposed to the will to cooperate with everyone. In fact, R12 says that relations with Moscow are at their lowest as the Kremlin is not happy about Serbia's positions about Ukraine. He adds that Vučić cannot be against Republika Srpska, despite his cold relationship with Dodik, just like Tirana cannot be against Pristina. Yet, he sensed a rise in critical opinion in Serbia about Russia, since there is a progressive shift in government-controlled media. As per R3 from Croatia, Vučić will feel empowered to use force in Kosovo if the war in Ukraine escalates in Russia's favour, but she believes that NATO would not intervene as it is not intervening in Ukraine. This was contradicted by R14, who also says that the Serbian president plays a

game with the EU, the West, Russia, and China, pointing out at his meeting with Zelensky in Athens, during the EU/Western Balkans Summit in August 2023. Left-wing Serbian R22 argues that the Serbian president's strategy is to accept partly what the US and EU ask for, to get international support in exchange, so that he is free to rule over Serbia.

This ambiguity is not exclusive to Vučić. Serbian activist R21 stresses that the EU sanctioned Serbia and Kosovo because "some actors are playing with fire". Serbian analyst R12 says that Kurti wants EULEX and KFOR to leave Kosovo, while Serbia is being more constructive in the normalisation talks, but R18, activist from northern Kosovo, says that "space for dialogue reduced due to Kurti's government ideology", also hinted by right-wing R5 from Pristina. Left-wing Serbian R22 accuses Dodik, Kurti and Vučić of using Ukraine to strengthen their positions, by scaring people, suggesting that "Serbia is going to invade Kosovo tomorrow" but "that's not what's really going on". Yet, he considers that the international community would not allow a "snowball effect" in the region. Right-wing R9 from Kosovo suggests that the country should "engage in diplomacy to maintain stability", carefully choosing her words to show the differences with the government's policies.

The war is also impacting Kosovo's process of recognition. Kosovo Serb activist R18 considers that the Franco-German proposal expected to freeze the conflict for a decade, with the hope that some of EU's non-recognisers would change their position in the meantime about mutual recognition when both countries would be ready to join the EU. With the escalation of tension in northern Kosovo, Brussels just hopes that it will not get any worse. Kosovar activist R14 is blunt: "Kosovo is still unfinished business", as opposed to Bosnia and Herzegovina who is internationally recognised, and Kosovo was a "geopolitical win of the West, but the world is multipolar" now. She points out that Kosovo's authorities expected unsuccessfully that the war in Ukraine "would provide an impetus for Kosovo", and that the security alert would increase the possibilities for a solution: "we will have an engaged West sort of trying to fix the Balkans so we can move forward", because the West only looks to the region when there are problems. Yet, that was not the case, and R14 considers that Brussels wants Serbia on its side, but Hungary would always veto whatever can seriously endanger Serbia's interests.

This alleged instrumentalisation of war to benefit Kosovo's international case partly resonates in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Bosniak R17 believes that Russia's invasion had a "traumatising effect on everyone", as it felt "like a scenario of the 1990s, your big neighbour coming to invade us". He argues that there was a "cynical phase" where people expected that the West would betray Ukraine and divide the country, just like it did in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the 1990s", but they are "not a model" for conflicts". For Bosniak R20, people do not feel unsafe but the "political climate has not quite changed since the war": people in power mention the Bosnian War constantly to gain power and destabilise "because if society is (...) more destabilised, it will give more opportunity for the criminal organisations", pointing out at Republika Srpska's potential manipulation of demonstrators. 48-year-old Bosnian Croat R4 said that newspaper headlines from the early 2000s were the same as now, due to the country's situation and slow evolution, and adds that the population's post-traumatic stress disorder "lit

up crazy” after the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, as “wounds are really fresh still”. Each of these respondents refer to the leverage of the war in Ukraine for political purposes, namely left-wing R2 and R4 from Bosnia and Herzegovina, who focus on the need to change, obviously hinting at their platforms.

Croatian R1 mentions some anxiety due to the Bosnian Croats, drawing a parallel between what Russia is doing in Donbas with what the Serbs did with Krajina during the war. He adds that war in Ukraine cooled down intra-Balkan relationship, even if before that it was already difficult to find commitments, “because of war scars” and “predominant nationalisms that lead to conservative governments in most cases”. In fact, R3, from the same party, says that nationalism “exploded” in the 1990s, but it has never been dealt with since then.

3.4.4 How other young politicians see the war in Ukraine

It was a challenge for some interviewees to distinguish between what young politicians think about the impact of Ukraine from what senior politicians think, and from what youth in general consider about the topic, but also from what they think about the topic themselves. Croatian R1 argues that young politicians (and youth in general) and older politicians’ views are not different. He mentions a discussion that started in Croatia after Russia invaded Ukraine, about the reinforcement of defence budgets, including the return of mandatory military service, which he calls “masked nationalism”. This securitisation is not in response to people’s fear, since people do not feel threatened, but rather an attempt to please Brussels and the White House. Left-wing Croatian R8, veers to the debate about “should we be in NATO?” happening in Croatia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina right now, which was not in the open before the war. These two Croats chose an aligned focus with what the traditional fights from the left are, even if R1 is from the centre, framing their answers to reflect their political narrative and causes. For right-wing Kosovar R5, there is no doubt about joining NATO or the EU, pointing out that the war in Ukraine “highlighted the importance of strong defence capabilities and security measures”. Together with also right-wing Kosovar R9, she acknowledges that this war influenced Kosovo’s young politicians’ narrative, and that they emphasise regional cooperation to promote peace and security. Kosovo Serbian R18 states that the war influenced the dialogue within Kosovo, but it did not impact security, confirmed by Roma R23 who mentions that young politicians are “looking for alternatives to resolve conflicts peacefully” to “promote reconciliation and inter-ethnic coexistence”. R5 stresses the need for “responsible use of information in political discourse”, alluding to “attempts to manipulate narratives or exploit the situation in Ukraine for narrow political gain”, clearly pointing to the regime. Namely R5, but also R9, is using war as a political resource to highlight what differentiates her party from the ruling one, with occasional securitisation as part of the framing of discourse. Activist R14 considers this escalation of securitisation as a strategy from Pristina to push the West for a solution for Kosovo’s recognition, especially if picturing Serbia as the source of instability.

Serbian R21 adds the right versus left dynamics by stressing that young politicians can become progress agents, since they are more pro-EU, but there are also the right-wingers who are pro-Russia,

“sometimes even more right-wing than older generations”. Young politicians became more visible and committed due to the “change of generations inside the parties” but also due to the weakening of traditional parties and not to war, in accordance with Serbian political analyst R12, who says that the war did not change positions in who is pro-EU or pro-Russia. This does not seem to be the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina: just like Croatian R1’s opinion about young people in general, Serbian R19 considers that Bosnian Serbian young politicians follow Belgrade and Bosnian Croats’ follow Zagreb, to fit “bigger national agendas” and “nothing goes against the mainstream, at least not in politics”. NGOs do the only differentiating work and resents that youth are not more participative. Kosovar activist R14 adds that when one enters the political system, “the expectation is that you become the system”, and “you are there to serve the party”, which has a “controlled narrative (...) especially when it comes to security issues in Kosovo”. In fact, Bosnian R2 elaborated extensively about betrayal in his country: the pressure from the leadership is for everything to stay as it is. If one tries to consider other constituent people’s views, one is seen as a traitor, adding that this is “a country that tests your principles (...) when we enter the government”. Young politicians from any of the three constituent peoples may think differently but they do not disclose it, which he considers to be more ideological rather than ethnic.

He adds that young politicians talked about war in the beginning due to fears that it would empower the Bosnian Serbs, which may have helped to grow some tension. Albanian R6 refers to her Bosnian acquaintances who shared with her their fear of a new conflict due to Russia and Serbia’s influence, especially those who lost their parents in the 1990s’ war. Bosniak think-tanker R17 believes that the time for the Bosnian Serbs to use the war as a narrative has passed. Due to the 1990s’ war, Bosniaks and Bosnian Croats partly identified with Ukraine, but it also led Serbs “not to be openly supporting Ukraine and running away from using that symbolism for their own political games” (I will come back to this topic when I discuss my research on social media, and that I include in framing in absence). He adds that COVID and the war pushed some young politicians to pay attention to public policies, while others with responsibilities at municipal level went to “the opposite direction, increasingly using nationalistic motives to attract attention”, in agreement with Bosniak R20. The reminiscences of the past are also present in Kosovo, with right-wing Kosovar R5 mentioning the “importance of Kosovo’s borders, given the parallel challenges that Ukraine faces”, isolating the Ukrainian cause to strengthen Kosovo’s narrative for recognition. Serbian R22, who is quite critical about how Belgrade and Pristina are handling the normalisation talks and considers them unconstructive, mentions that more realistic and empathetic Serbian young politicians have a “clear standing on the war in Ukraine as a violation of international law”. Kosovo Serbian activist R18 mentions that there is considerable verbal support for Ukraine, “but not actually anything meaningful” as the intention is to show “that you are on the right side of history”, aligned with Croatian R3 who says that young politicians in Europe post or write that we should help, but these are not actions and are just “fluffy diplomacy”. R18 adds that some use Ukraine’s non-recognition of Kosovo as a political leverage and suggests that

Kosovo should remain neutral. Some parties, she concludes, but mostly the government, also frequently convey that Russia is behind the instability in north Kosovo together with Belgrade.

3.4.5 The future of the Western Balkans

The need for the EU enlargement to the Western Balkans dominated the expectations for the region's future, with Serbian R22 saying that it "deserves the perspective to become part of the European Union". Kosovo R16 bets on EU membership to ensure the future of Kosovo and of Bosnia and Herzegovina, seconded by R5, namely as a "stabilising force and a defender of democratic values". Left-wing Serbian R22 adds that the enlargement will not happen before "media freedom, free and fair elections, and a rule of law". He urges the Serbs and other countries to fight for themselves and create real democracies to promote "real long term and midterm stability". Kosovar activist R14 believes that the Western Balkans will "slip into autocracies", should EU decide not to include the region in the enlargement, especially because of "illiberal actors" such as Turkey, China, Russia, and the Gulf countries, who compete for influence in the local economies. Left-wing Croat R8 is very pessimistic and believes that the EU will not enlarge further in the Western Balkans and will use the region as a "buffer zone between itself and the rest of the world", a "neo-colonial space" with migrants and asylum seekers.

Serbian R19's best case scenario is Montenegro joining by 2033 because it is in NATO already, "has many international friends", "no bilateral issues", and is "easy to digest" due to the size of its population, regardless of the polarisation in the country. Yet, the insufficient institutional capacity does not help, while Serbia could be ready due to a better prepared economy, and the institutions and administration inherited from Yugoslavia. The challenges are the size of its population, Kosovo, and its foreign policy, namely towards Russia, which may block an accession. According to him, all countries in the region have issues to fix before becoming members. He adds that North Macedonia is a challenge to Brussels's credibility, because Skopje checked EU's list by settling the country's name issue with Greece under the Prespa Agreement, and joined NATO, only to have President Macron show his reserves, followed by Bulgaria's blockade. This does not give any incentive for leaders to work together to comply with the Copenhagen criteria. His second scenario is Open Balkan expanding with further economic integration, and a progressive integration with the EU, yet without a political component "which comes at no political price for the EU". This would be in Vučić and Rama's interest: to develop the economy without "key political requirements", in agreement with Serbian think-tanker R21. On the contrary, right-wing Kosovar R5 feels that Open Balkan is unsuccessful because of Serbia, while Albanian R6 believes that it pushed for tension in north Kosovo, since Kosovo refused to be part of an alliance with Serbia. She considers that this initiative will raise the influence of Serbia in the region and is perceived as an agreement between Russia and Serbia.

Bosniak R20 is more optimistic and feels that all countries will "eventually be a part of the European family": Serbia will have to recognise Kosovo, and both will become EU member states, and agrees that Montenegro is more prepared to join the Union, but not before 10 years. Serbian think-tanker

R21 lies between R19 and R20: “partially integrated”, without full membership, not including voting rights, but “anchored to the European Union” as Macron wants, with an acceptable level of rule of law. As per Croatian R1, most Serbs do not feel any ambition to join NATO, but they want to become part of the EU. Serbian analyst R12 counters that Belgrade has military cooperation with the Pentagon, had with Russia and Belarus, and will have with NATO later in 2023. He adds that Serbia’s destiny is in the Union: despite the cabinet being undecided and cooperating with everyone, the economy is dependent on the West and the EU. As for Kosovo, “there is no other position” but to be pro-EU and NATO as per Kosovar activist R10, in agreement with Roma R23 in the case of the Union. Croatian R1 sees a clear ambition to join both organisations, especially because Kosovo adopted the Euro as currency.

Kosovar R5 believes NATO would ensure security and the EU would promote development, “sovereignty and territorial integrity” according to Kosovar R9, and peace and economic growth across the region as per Kosovar activist R10. Croatian R7 believes that NATO and EU would support Kosovo, even without becoming members, in case of trouble. For Croatian R1, Bosnia and Herzegovina is a more complicated case because Republika Srpska is against Western alliances while the Federation is just the opposite, and R3 adds that there is not a deciding central state. Nonetheless, even if Russia would win over Ukraine, Albanian R6 believes that Sarajevo and Pristina would not change their will to join the EU, but NATO membership is “a primary objective regardless of EU enlargement”, especially because that was the path followed by other Balkan countries, but also showing how securitisation is important for these states. Bosniak centre right R20 adds that Bosnians want primarily to join NATO for the stability it promotes. Kosovo Serb activist R18 has a similar perspective, adding that Pristina could become more neutral towards the West should Ukraine lose, but quite unlikely still, and never pro-Russia. She adds that part of society is becoming “somewhat anti-Western” and more pro-American than pro-EU, due to the frustration that the country is still not fully recognised, with Kurti’s government showing “ideas of extreme sovereignty” (even if not anti-Western per se) as we saw with R18, and in Kurti’s opponents. Despite not being a politician, she uses strong words about Pristina’s strategy that directly affects the north of Kosovo where she lives. In case of Russian victory, actors in the Western Balkans would try to balance between the West and Russia, as it is more comfortable, according to Serbian think-tanker R21, while for Serbian R19, it is “realistically only discussed among Serbian Nationalists”, and those discussions do not happen elsewhere, let alone in Kosovo or Bosnia and Herzegovina. Bosnian R2 adds that Albania, with a strong influence in Kosovo, is totally pro-US and would not allow a different direction in Pristina. Right-wing Croatian R7 adds that, unlike West Germany, a defeat would not turn Russia into a democracy, yet it would lead to “the complete end of Russia’s influence” in the region and to political changes in Serbia and in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The dominance of geopolitics over democracy was also mentioned. Left-wing Serbian R22 says that Western Balkan countries will only become part of the EU as “a geopolitical outcome of the war”. For Serbian R21, it is better that geopolitics drives the enlargement rather than nothing driving it. He adds that the EU needs “both sticks and carrots to encourage” dialogue in Kosovo and in Bosnia and

Herzegovina. Kosovar activist R14 considers that the Union and the US are reengaged with the Western Balkans to avoid war “rather than prosperity and democratisation”. Bosnian R2 and Bosnian Croat R4 believe that Bosnia and Herzegovina does not deserve the candidate status that was only given because of the war in Ukraine. R22 questions EU’s pressure on Belgrade to implement sanctions on Moscow (that would impact Serbia due to its dependence on cheap Russian gas, according to R12) and why that is more important than ensuring that Serbia has a democracy, free media, fair elections, and the rule of law. Yet, he is clear that his country should follow the EU path. Serbian analyst R12 adds that the West understands the need for tolerance for what happens in Serbia, to not to push them to Russia.

Just like I saw frustration regarding the West’s hasty support in Ukraine’s defence, there was frustration regarding the red carpet for Ukraine’s accession to the EU, echoed in Serbian R19’s reference to Bosnia and Herzegovina’s resentment about the EU’s speedy response to Ukraine and Moldova’s requests for membership. He adds that the authorities apparently victimised their own suffering in the 1990s: “do we need to kill each other ourselves, or didn’t we bleed enough?”. The feeling in the region, and in Kosovo in particular, is the same, as per Kosovar activist R14, “because they feel that the EU is unfair to have given the candidate status to Ukraine”. She adds that “Kosovo is unfinished” because it is not fully recognised and has the situation in the north unsolved, which do not contribute to a smooth EU path. Furthermore, she believes that Ukraine should join the Union if it does the necessary reforms: “we need the competition, and we need someone to tell us that the EU is not lacking the capacity to absorb. It’s us not being able to catch up with the new values”. Kosovar R16, not a Kurti’s supporter, believes though that the country improved citizens’ well-being, and promoted state-building and judiciary power, yet recognising that “it is undeniable that there is still substantial work to be done”. Bosniak think-tanker R17 sees a hope for the region, should the three countries that do not belong to either alliance (Serbia, Kosovo, and Bosnia and Herzegovina) join the EU, Schengen and the Eurozone: it would make “the borders between the Serbs in the region less visible” and “attempts to withdraw borders (...) become less viable”. I add the fact that there was no border in the last decades between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland tamed the tension, and it only became an issue again with the Brexit negotiations. For Serbian R21, “citizens everywhere, except in Serbia, definitely do want to” according to polls. He believes that Serbians want it too, but they would never say it in polls.

The second dominant topic was Kosovo’s recognition and the integrity of the Bosnian state. Albanian R6 refers to the unpredictability of the region, yet she believes that an agreement between Kosovo and Serbia is the touchstone for the Western Balkans but adding that “Russian influence is not letting Serbia”, and that the matter is determined by Russia and US’s games. Serbian R21 would “love if Serbia and Kosovo have enough political will to resolve all these issues because of their own interest and desire to have peace”, yet he believes that dialogue is very unpopular in both, that only the EU has the capacity to push for. Yet, Roma R23 believes that Kosovo is continuously committed to “improving relations with neighbours”, “political stability and the rule of law”. R1 believes that Kosovo is “mostly a lost cause” for Serbia but argues that we need more stability in the world before it is recognised.

Kosovo Serb R18 considers that Pristina's government will not be replaced so soon, and its rigidity will cause more problems internationally, with Spain being the toughest to convince to recognise independence, unless "there is some territorial adjustment in the new agreement", even after a hypothetical recognition. Serbian R19 adds that Greece is ready to recognise Kosovo. Serbian analyst R12 has the opposite perspective. He sees an increasing radicalisation in Kosovo, "the international community would lose credibility if they cannot sustain a multiethnic state" and does not want a Muslim state. He believes that the country will probably be divided in 10 or 15 years, with the north integrating Serbia and the rest joining Albania. He warns that youth in Albania are not so positive about having one million Kosovars becoming Albanians due to their own already poor economy and unemployment.

Left-wing Croatian R8 believes that the Bosnian state will prevail, because it provided stability despite being a non-sovereign state. The international community would not allow any war or partition, and it would be unrealistic to go into conflict. Croatian R8 says that there are less people, less weapons, and less willingness for a conflict. In addition, Bosnian R2 believes that Dodik is more focused on being against the West than wanting to secede. Serbian think-tanker R21 mentions that the problem is not the type of institutions but the lack of agreement between the leaders on basic things such as the state and the entities' existence and adds "why should you find solutions if you actually prefer things the way they are?". The agreement will only exist if pushed by the prospect of enlargement and he advocates an improvement of Dayton agreement. Kosovar activist R14 states that despite being a "huge mess" politically, the society functions. Left-wing Serbian R22 does not foresee any change in the country's institutions, adding that "there should be a clear principle of their integrity". Bosniak R20 believes that Republika Srpska will go bankrupt within a year or two due to a corruption scandal and adds that the country will not progress with this many ministries and politicians, but no one wants to lose that. Bosniak think-tanker R17 says that this status quo will remain with a consolidation of power of these groups unless the EU has an agenda for Serbia or there is a change in the White House's political direction and priorities. He argues that the future of the country depends on these actors' agendas, individually and as a group, and war is not part of it: violence is not against minority groups, but against different opinions, echoing what R2 said about those who are seen as traitors when having a different opinion.

There were references to the "detrimental role of Croatia" in Bosnia and Herzegovina "that nobody talks about", as per Kosovar activist R14, because they "are not much more different than Dodik". Quite significantly, right-wing Croatian R7 said that "a Croat entity would start a war as it started the previous one", and R1 from the political centre says that he "wouldn't like gaining territory from Bosnia" nor to get back to Tuđman's "Our people" ideology, which he says still prevails in Croatia's extreme right and perhaps in some parts of Herzegovina. Dodik's actions can fuel this, he adds, especially because, in Bosnian Croats' view, they have less rights than Bosnian Serbs, who, nonetheless, still want to join Serbia. In his opinion, the three constituent peoples should start by getting "honest about their crimes and really feel sorry about it", and that the current system is not building a multiethnic society but rather fostering the perpetuation of the ethnic nationalism of the 1990s.

There was a recurrent concern about young people emigrating, the brain drain that is affecting the whole region, due to the uncertainty in his country, according to left-wing Bosnian R2. R4 estimates that one million people left the country in the last seven years and Bosniak R20 predicts that within five years, Bosnia and Herzegovina will have 50% less young people than 20 years ago, adding that youth see EU enlargement as a segway to emigrate. Left-wing Serbian R22 states that thousands of people leave Kosovo annually, and it will not be the recognition that will bring them back, but rather “human rights, political and civic freedoms, economic dignity”, in alignment with Kosovar activist R11 who adds that “development and democracy go hand in hand” as a basis for people to remain in the country. Some respondents connect this exodus to the lack of a new generation of politicians, as a leverage to help stabilise the region more as per R20, who stresses that it is not the age that matters but the responsibility and commitment, “someone who actually wants to do something”. Yet, Bosnian R2 and Bosniak R22 do not believe it and see a pressure for everything to stay as it is. Left-wing Croatian R8 points to green transformation, improved fiscal system, justice, education, social services, and rule of law, being the only one expressing a clear political roadmap, while acknowledging that bias.

It is worth noting that, while we saw a frequent opinion that Montenegro is better prepared to become part of the EU, we also saw several respondents referring to the situation in the country as a sort of “ticking bomb”, with “an instability pocket also installed there”, namely due to the Orthodox Church’s influence, as per Kosovar activist R14. Croatian R3 confirms that tension (including Bosnia and Herzegovina, or other countries), and states that non-pro-Serb Montenegrins are ready to fight for a non-Serb drive, despite having no means to start a war. She adds that the new president, Jakov Milatović, is more pro-Serb than pro-EU, and that the country will become a puppet state, influencing the region. Serbian R19, who works in an international institution, mentions Montenegro and North Macedonia as “hotspots” due to the number of Serbs living in these countries, but also due to Belgrade’s influence through the Open Balkan initiative, as an extension of influence. On the contrary, Bosniak R20 says that Montenegro is more secure due to NATO’s membership and that they do not fear a spillover effect from the war in Ukraine, and Serbian R22 sees even some positive changes in the country.

Balkanism is also in the backdrop of this analysis, yet not having a primordial relevance, starting with the assumption that the Western Balkans will have a different kind of membership within the EU: “anchored to the EU” but not given full membership, according to Serbian think-tanker R21, aligned with Macron’s view of enlargement, or as a “neo-colonial (...) buffer zone” populated by migrants and asylum seekers, as per left-wing Croat R8, as we saw. Kosovo’s activist R14 mentioned the normalisation of conflicts and of instability in the Western Balkans, and Croatian R3 points to the inevitability of a new war in the region. My choice of the word “inevitability” is intentional because I sensed her feeling that the region’s historical circumstances would lead to it, even if left-wing Albanian R6 says that the “Balkans have always been unpredictable”, another characteristic of Balkanism. Kosovar activist R14 added that the status quo in the Balkans “does not mean that you are maintaining the situation, as it is going worse, and it is worse”. Bosnian R2 said that in Switzerland, the different

communities united around their commonalities, while in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the three constituent peoples focus on what divides them, in alignment with Serbian think-tanker R21 who says that the issue is not the Dayton-born political system, but the lack of a culture of compromise. These responses are quite aligned with Todorova's formulations of Balkanism, especially considering that these views come from Western Balkans' respondents. Serbian analyst R12, among others, mentioned that the West tolerates Serbia's deficient democracy to not to push it to Russia, which is stabilitocracy, as we saw with Bieber (2017): a semi-authoritarian Balkan regime recognised by the West to preserve stability in the region. There was only a response that I analyse as Nesting Orientalism (that I would call a *Balkanism subsidiary*): Bosniak think-tanker R17 mentioned that there is a cleavage between the countries that are either part of the EU or of NATO (or of both) and those that do not belong to neither alliance: Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo, who are more sensitive to international geostrategy, namely a Russian victory over Ukraine, or changes of direction in the White House. He formulates this in the reverse perspective, as Nesting Orientalism would usually be seen from a *primary Balkan* side as opposed to a *secondary Balkan*. In fact, I could not see that in any of the Croatian respondents.

It is worth noting how respondents see the future intra-Balkans relationship. Croatian R3 fears a new war, and she would support a "new sort of association, federation, to defend themselves". Right-wingers Kosovar R5 and Croatian R7 believe that young people desire regional cooperation, despite historical tensions, which we saw frequently in posts from Albanian young influencers. Roma R23 from Kosovo believes that regional cooperation is key for EU integration. The young Bosnian that I interviewed in Sarajevo, R2, adds that actions must be looked at in an East/West perspective (I believe that this order, East/West, was intentional), and that a solution must come from the Serbian side as they are more numerous in the region. Collective change can only happen if starting with the individual, but probably only when the generation that lived through the war dies. People need to travel, get an education, see other cultures and be more tolerant. The EU will be determinant, but it is a beginning for change, and not an end itself. He adds: "take out the fact of fear and you will have logic".

3.5.1 Social media methodology

The social media component was based on some of my interviewees, but mostly on those that had not answered my request for an interview. I focused predominantly on Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, in both the Federation (25% of individuals searched for, including Bosniaks and Croats) and the Republika Srpska (10% of individuals). In the case of Kosovo, I included Kosovo Albanians (15%), Kosovo Serbs (4%), and other ethnicities (3%). As in the interviews, it was challenging to identify Kosovo Serbs, due to limited information about the political parties. In addition, I reviewed profiles from Albania (14%), Serbia (21%), and Croatia (8%) which have different weightings for three reasons: in the beginning, it was easier to interview Croatian political influencers when compared to Serbia, so it became necessary to find more Serbian perspectives in social media, and to outbalance some weighting

differences between the Federation and the Republika Srpska. In addition, Serbia is the leading actor since it is more intrinsically connected to both of my case studies: Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo.

In total, I searched for profiles of 73 young activists and politicians. I skimmed through their contributions on LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter/X, by this order. If one of these platforms had a consistent number of posts, I would not search in the other two. I would proceed through the three platforms until I could find a valid profile: I could not identify any profile in six cases, and another six have long been inactive or had a very scarce number of posts. This left me approximately with a corpus of 60 individuals to delve in. I focused on posts that included references to the war in Ukraine and how they built their discourse around it. I started from the most recent (September 2023) to the oldest ones, stopping on the 24th of February 2022, giving particular attention to the first anniversary of the invasion. I will name each individual P1, and so on. I will make the same ethnic distinctions as in the interviews.

3.5.2 Social media

My first remark is about the omission: 31 individuals out of the 60 with consistent social media contributions did not make any reference to Ukraine in their posts throughout a year and a half. This is quite surprising, especially considering that many of them are extremely active, even daily, on social media. My interpretation is that this omission is intentional, especially in the case of Serbia (53% of individuals) and the Republika Srpska (29%), who are openly and traditionally aligned with Russia: I argue that to mention Ukraine and criticise the invasion would be a synonym of a strong position against Russia, which could distress some followers and potential voters. On the other hand, to support Russia would be a strong stance that could impact their political reputation negatively, especially as some of them are clearly looking into the West, and the US in particular, when we consider the nature of many of their posts. The share in Republika Srpska is not as striking, but it refers exclusively to very active young politicians with visible official responsibilities which may have the same explanation: as no one knows the outcome of this war and what the consequent balance of forces will be, it is better not to take a position and ignore it, which is another example of framing in absence. The war is there but they are simply constructing a narrative whereby the situation in their country is all that matters, and conveying the idea that they are fully committed to finding solutions for people's problems.

The share in the Federation is even more striking, as 50% of their individuals did not post any content about the invasion of Ukraine, especially considering the risk that a Russian victory would impose on Dodik's secession plans and the viability of the state and considering the parallel between Republika Srpska and Donbas. Croatia also has 50% of individuals that did not post or repost anything about the war, probably because they feel sheltered by their EU membership. In fact, one may think that the demise of Bosnia and Herzegovina might support the integration of parts of Herzegovina into Croatia, or at least the creation of a Croatian entity, desired by some: being in favour or against Russia's invasion could be seen as one-sided and a waiver of additional electoral support. In fact, most of these

Croatians are from the leading party, which can be connected to left-wing Croatian R8's opinion about Zagreb's mild application of sanctions to Moscow due to Russian oligarchs' interests in Croatia.

Not surprisingly, there was only an 18% share of non-mentions to the war among Kosovo Albanian, especially considering the comparisons that the government make between Russia and Serbia, and Ukraine and Kosovo, also visible in the posts. With the caveat that the sample was limited to three individuals, only one of the Kosovo Serbs did not feature any post about the war, which is in fact quite relevant as the tendency is for Serbs to align with Russia, even if being against the invasion. More than half of the Albanians (60%) did not post anything about the war: Albania is certainly the country where the conflict would have less impact, probably because it was not part of Yugoslavia and had not gone through the same dividing nationalist and ethnic drive, nor through its distressful dissolution.

The other interesting statistics is about the frequency of posts: there are only 10 posts (from seven people in total) from around the date of the invasion (one from Serbia, and six from Kosovo, well-balanced between Kosovo multiethnic, Kosovo Albanians, Kosovo Serbs) and only one (from the Federation) around the anniversary of the invasion. In addition, nine people posted only once about the war in Ukraine, namely two from Albania, one from Serbia, two from Kosovo multiethnic, three from Kosovo Albanians and one from the Federation. It is, of course, relevant that these influencers were vocal about the conflict, but the fact that they only posted once throughout the last year and a half makes me think of a *ticking the box* attitude, which can also be a way of framing their position as being worried about external events and the war in particular, of depicting themselves with the *right side of history*, but not necessarily getting involved further, rather close to the framing in absence I mentioned.

Prior to delving into the posts about the war in Ukraine, I would like to underline the very frequent posts about Women's Day (8th March), even if it may reduce some share of voice to the war, due to the date proximity. Secondly, young Albanian activists and politicians are doing a notable work in engaging in the *rapprochement* within the Western Balkans, namely between the youth, strengthening regional youth cooperation and advocating for youth-related issues, which was also confirmed by Albanian R11, one of my interviewees. There is significant content against hate speech, intolerance, and promoting reconciliation, human rights, and actors for change. Despite their ideology, some deputies and local authorities are very engaged in the communities, and in making a difference to people's lives. Finally, although sometimes the elegance of content may lower beyond reason, there is a visible opposition to the current leaders in power in Serbia, Republika Srpska and Kosovo. Although social media is practically uncontrolled worldwide unless access is blocked, it is significant that there are no reserves (in parallel with the interviews) in expressing opinions in a regime that is seen by some as having some signs of authoritarianism due its control of media, which is, for instance, the case of Serbia. In some posts, there was also a call for reconciliation between Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo, not necessarily based on mutual recognition, but from the grassroots: understanding each other and coming to terms with the past thirty years and their leaders' decisions first.

On a less positive side, there are several individuals who simply repost anything that is related to or from their leader, be it Dodik, Vučić or Kurti, sometimes totally disregarding Ukraine, with a clear worship drive, which I can relate to what Kosovar R14 said in her interview: many young politicians did not reply to my request for an interview because they simply do not have an opinion and are blindly aligned to the way the party frames their messages. Another aspect is that there are constant posts about past dates and events, such as the 1999's bombing of Serbia, Srebrenica massacre, or about national symbols, martyrs or heroes, army days, and other references. The way these are depicted, the images posted, the words and even how capital letters and punctuation are used help frame the event and isolate it from the full context to appeal to the followers' sentiment and engagement. In my view, this insistence on symbols is a way to disengage voters from the vision, ideas, and projects for the society that they probably do not have. On the other hand, except for Albania, these are very recent states, between 30 and 15 years old, and this construction of a past and memories can be considered part of their nation-building process. Finally, while gender is present with Women's Day, there are various posts against LGBTQI+ rights, namely against Europride in Belgrade and smaller similar events in Banja Luka.

A reputed member of Vučić's opposition, P10, alerts to the Russian influence in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in Montenegro. In fact, one of the recurrent post types is about the direct comparisons between the war in Ukraine and the Bosnian War (five times), namely Bosniak R47 who calls it a "déjà vu nightmare", an (external) "aggression" in both cases or establishing a link with Mostar: "If anyone knows what Mariupol is like today, unfortunately, Mostar does". He adds that Karadžić "loved" to use the word 'liberate' to refer to ethnic cleansing and genocide, drawing a parallel with Putin's intention to liberate the Ukrainians. Social media is not used here to drive attention to Ukraine, but rather as a context, if not an excuse, to revisit the differences but also the traumas of the past that oppose the constituent peoples of Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is an example of how an event can be framed to a specific purpose by isolating the context and folding it to a specific direction: alternatively, and in a more constructive way, the writer could have used the events in Ukraine as an example of a country that wants to remain united and independent, regardless of their differences, that could be an example to follow. This reminds me of Bosnian R2, who said that the Swiss united around what they had in common, while the three constituent peoples in Bosnia and Herzegovina focus on what divides them.

As in the interviews, some compare the reaction of the international community to the war in Ukraine to its reaction to the Bosnian War, recalling the arms embargo to Bosnia and Herzegovina, as opposed to the almost unanimous support that the West is giving to Ukraine now: "the proactivity of the international community in the defence of Ukraine, and underlining the fact that unfortunately it was not so united and at all proactive in the defence of Bosnia and Herzegovina", according to Bosniak P7, among several call outs for peace. In fact, Bosniak politician P47 is quite negative about the international contribution, and states that the US is trying to divide Ukraine as it did to Bosnia and Herzegovina. There are also comparisons with Kosovo, saying that Serbia is like Russia and that Kosovo is like Ukraine, especially because "Kosovo knows what war means, Kosovo knows what ethnic cleansing

does to the people” and going further by saying what “massive raping and killing of civilians including children do to a country”, in the words of Kosovar P24, one of the most vocal influencers. One of Kurti’s critics, Kosovar P6, says that “no one knows the price of freedom better than the survivors”, referring to her country. She compares the children killed between 1998 and 1999 in Kosovo “by Serbian war criminals” to the children killed “by Russian war criminals”, and children are mentioned a few more times in other people’s posts. This is another way framing is being used: special facts related to the war in Ukraine are detached from the full context to enhance an aspect from a previous conflict and appeal to the sentiment. This comparison between conflicts, especially with Kosovo, which is not fully recognised, is used to empower the case for its full recognition and for normalisation, by pegging its fight to Ukraine’s fight for independence. Kurti also uses this approach in his declarations, frequently reposted by some of these young politicians and activists. Still, one should not forget that this comparison has its flaws as Russia occupied Crimea and is now occupying Donbas, that Ukraine wants to keep, while Serbia wants to keep Kosovo who declared independence unilaterally. In fact, P3, a Serbian political analyst, clearly not aligned with the regime in Belgrade and a believer of normalisation, points out that “if Serbia supports Ukraine's integrity, why should it recognise Kosovo?”.

Some posts are framed to leverage the opposition to Kurti’s attitude in the normalisation process with Serbia, stating that the government should cooperate with other parties and civic society to build peace, underlining its inability to guide Kosovo through the impact of the war in Ukraine, be it in security as in economy, which is contradicted by other reposts of his declarations on how well the cabinet is handling the situation. Pristina’s authorities’ policy vis-à-vis Kosovo Serbs is also criticised by reminding the followers that Kosovo should not only receive Ukrainian refugees but should also “be consistent” in letting “tens of thousands of Serbs” return home, as per Kosovo Serb P73. In a repost from Kosovar P41, Kurti says that Serbs in north Kosovo vandalise everything that is not Serbian, boasting the ‘Z’ that represents the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

The usage of “Z” is fueling instability and division, but so are the violent actions against Kosovo Serbs in the north, according to a Serbian analyst P23, who says that “the peace between Belgrade and Pristina does not suit Russia” since Moscow influences the Serbian regime’s political and economic decision to keep the “status quo”. We can relate these ties to what I built upon before: Serbia is easily influenced since it needs Russia’s veto in the Security Council to avoid UN’s recognition of Kosovo’s independence. This analyst adds that Serbia “skillfully supported the territorial integrity of Ukraine, without mentioning what is happening in Ukraine” but also says that Vučić’s dual position makes both the West and Russia to distrust him, and that Belgrade should clearly condemn the invasion as it is also damaging its prospects of joining the Union. According to him, the president is responsible for the growth of the three anti-EU parties that now have a seat in the parliament, which would have “used the war in Ukraine to proliferate Russophilia”. This makes me question if the interest in some posts is Serbia, or the suffering of the Ukrainian people. It certainly is the way the context is framed to provoke specific sentiments in the reader, specifically the possibility to join the EU. There are some dissenting opinions

on Serbia's position: Bosniak P47 mentioned that soon after the beginning of the war, Serbia started to take a clearer position in support for Ukraine. In fact, Serbian analyst P3 posted that the conflict cleared the way for further political and economic cooperation between Serbia and the US, confirmed in our interview, but posting that the EU needs to support Serbia's "upcoming decisions rather than ultimata". On the opposite side, Kosovar P58 uses the war to leverage Kosovo's interests, by saying that the EU is sanctioning Kosovo while not having the same position in respect to Serbia's pro-Russian autocracy.

There was only one post from Republika Srpska that I could relate to the war: a clear support to Russia, while not mentioning the war. This post corresponds to P34, a member of Dodik's government who initially agreed to an interview during my visit to Banja Luka but that stopped answering my messages the day before our appointment. As for the Federation, there is clear support for Ukraine, with alerts for the impact of the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina, namely P55 who reposted a statement from the Croat member of the presidency and current chairman, Željko Komšić (who visited Kyiv in August 2023 together with Denis Bećirović, the Bosniak member of the presidency), who calls for the country to remain united. There are some references to the Russian ambassador to Sarajevo's threats should the country join NATO, or to his declarations about the population's support to Russia, namely by Bosniak P47 asking "which Bosniaks does the Russian ambassador to Bosnia and Herzegovina communicate with on a daily basis and who tell him that they support the Russian aggression against Ukraine?". There is also criticism about the international community, since Russia is part of the Security Council, or still part of the Peace Implementation Council while it was suspended from the UN Human Rights Council, and about the fact that sanctions on Dodik did not stop him from supporting the invasion.

I also encountered a few posts about the economic interests in this war: allegations from Serbian analyst P23 that some political leaders and financiers in Belgrade benefit from their support to Moscow, but also from Croatian P69 who accuses the biggest party in the ruling coalition, HDZ, of gaining from the import of uncontrolled low-quality cereal from Ukraine. He is also the most adamant one about the need for peace by saying that NATO's intention to include Ukraine incentivised the war, and that the war effort should be funnelled to stop the military support, implement a cease-fire, and start negotiations.

A final note about the utilisation of photos to convey a political message. I identified Kosovar activist P24 with a Facebook background photo supporting Ukraine, but otherwise there are no pictures of the destruction, people's lives through war, bombings, or of the fighting on the ground. There is, though, a photo about a memorial in Lviv to the children who died in the conflict, posted by Kosovar P6. There are far more hashtags supporting Ukraine than photos, which seems to confirm that war in Ukraine is more used for internal consumption as *ticking the box* to frame a message that they care. The Summit between EU and the Western Balkans, that took place in Athens in August 2023, also received some attention with three posts: one with a picture of Zelensky with Vučić (Serbian analyst P23) and two (Kosovar P41 and Kosovar multiethnic P42) with the Ukrainian president with Kurti, as if framing the latter with the right side of history. Vučić's photo was posted by one of his most serious critics, alongside an explanation of the summit's agenda. There were also a couple of photos of people holding

signs asking people to telephone Ukraine (and Spain, in one of them) to recognise Kosovo. Again, the war is used to promote the party's or the country's agenda, with a conscious choice of facts, words, and arguments to leverage the individual or corporate interests of those who are active in social media.

There are a few Ukraine-related posts about conferences and debates, demonstrations, and other topics but that are not relevant or solid enough to analyse them through the framing lens. Although there is a consistent sentiment against the war and of criticism about Russia's responsibility, most of the content analysed is used by selecting the events, the perspective, the impacts, that more effectively represent the ideology, the political strategy, and national interests. In fact, no message is conveyed naïvely and is always the result of a framing of events, words, or images, that are organised and systematised to cause an impact. We all see what we want to see and what we want the others to see.

Conclusion

This research demonstrated how young political influencers in the Western Balkans view the impact of the war in Ukraine in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and in Kosovo. It was necessary to conduct a thorough research, beginning in the 19th century when the idea of a south Slavic state germinated, the world wars, and how the success of Tito's Yugoslavia crumbled into the bloody wars in the 1990s, leading to seven different countries. Furthermore, I also delved into Ukraine's duality between East and West since independence, and how Russia's invasion can be framed into this dichotomy.

The interview component was instrumental, despite the challenge in having answers and confirmations. This originated some unbalance of perspectives, with a higher focus on centre and left-wing parties, namely new and alternative parties who were eager to contribute and to share their perspectives, versus a lower focus on right-wing, *establishment* parties. In addition, it was impossible to interview young political influencers in Republika Srpska, and only one in the north of Kosovo. Albeit frustrating, it revealed an intention from the non-respondents not to compromise with a sensitive topic as the war in Ukraine and, intrinsically, with Russia's influence in the region, who struggles between the past, geostrategy, and the will to join NATO and the EU.

Social media, due to its conciseness and immediatism, was more strategic, factual (regardless of validation), less opinionated, with stronger and more dogmatic political messages, and audience focused. On the contrary, interviews were more subjective, detailed, elaborate, with contradictory. Despite still being doctrinaire as the interviewees were usually politically committed, and some are even very vocal in their countries, I believe they felt in a closed and safe environment, fostered by confidentiality, which allowed some personal opinions. As for the written answers, the content was very aligned with my comments about social media. I employed framing as the main theoretical framework, that clearly served the purpose of interpreting how Ukraine was instrumentalized, by isolating specific aspects of the conflict to contextualise, justify and promote political directives.

I searched for the validation of three hypotheses. I confirmed that young leaders recur to the war in Ukraine in their political platforms. They include it in social media, yet not extensively, namely because the conflict became normalised due to its longevity, and to the region's own war past. Nevertheless, the conflict is not used proactively as a regional concern. Frequently, in social media, Ukraine was totally absent purposely, or used to tick the box, which I coined as framing in absence: taking a stand, by not mentioning an obvious topic and hence being able to, safely, convey an uncompromising political message. The interviews offered a complementary but a very rich perspective: war in Ukraine was mentioned reactively, due to my questions, but it was intensively and intentionally used as a political leverage in their answers: pro or against the current government, inter-entity relations in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the prospects of EU or NATO enlargement, normalisation of relations between Serbia and Kosovo, Kosovo's recognition, corruption, just to name a few. I confirmed the second hypothesis: while not being obvious in social media, Ukraine is perceived as a threat to the balance in the region, especially because Bosnia and Herzegovina's survival as a state depends on who

wins the war, as Republika Srpska may feel empowered to proceed with secession, but also because Kosovo and Serbia are allegedly letting tension grow in the north of Kosovo to manipulate the international community, with uncertain consequences. Nevertheless, Russia's difficult in smoothly occupying Ukraine may have tamed Republika Srpska's whims for secession. Finally, EU integration is seen as the way forward for progress and stability. Nevertheless, NATO is perceived as essential and a first step before the EU enlargement to promote peace and protect the population.

Nationalism was always seen as a threat to communism and a betrayal of the country during Tito's times. When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, it became the obvious *third way* as opposed to the two previous antagonistic blocks. Thirty years over the 1990s war, I did not perceive nationalism as a dominant ideology nor driver, despite being present and visible, especially in other young politicians with responsibilities whom some interviewees were quite vocal about. What I sensed in the interviewees is that the choice is between nationalism and status quo, or doing something to preserve peace, with the latter taking the lead, so that all countries and communities can coexist. There are significant grassroots initiatives to promote dialogue within and between countries, and societies are more integrated than what politicians and probably the media want us to believe. Progress, and not simply economic development, is essential for communities to coexist peacefully and to reduce differences. A future EU membership is key for this progress to take place, for state borders to be doomed to redundancy after Schengen membership, and for more intra-Balkan partnership. This is not simple, as we see that the EU has its own internal secession threats as well, so progress must help reduce regional disparity and promote integration. The Western Balkans have been in line to join the EU since the Thessaloniki Summit in 2003. The EU still has the financial capacity to build this progress as opposed to China's investments that work fundamentally as loans, or Russia's limited economic bandwidth to level up to what the Union can do.

The war in Ukraine may have been the safe-conduct that the region needed to move on in that direction and so has been the conflict in the Middle East that erupted in early October 2023 between Israel, Hamas, and potentially other regional players. What the EU and NATO do not want is to bring another Middle East closer to its borders: Brussels will not nourish any attempt from Kosovo to create a mono-ethnic state that would be mostly Muslim, and will not allow Republika Srpska to secede or join Serbia, leaving Bosnia and Herzegovina with a Muslim majority (enhanced by the risk of parts of Herzegovina integrating Croatia), even if the EU needs to simply rush enlargement.

Framing this project in young political influencers' views was aimed at contributing to understand how this new generation is constructing the future political dynamics in the region. There is a will and a capacity to compromise but we need time until these new generations are mature to lead these countries to a brighter future that is not subject to the balkanist fate of conflict, faction, rivalries, and no prospects. In 2018's "Balkan Futures", young researchers presented three scenarios for 2025 for the region: the EU, the limbo, and the past. They concluded that "it is time to start making future-oriented decisions now – the Western Balkans have no time to lose" (Čeperković et al, 2018).

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