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The Multidimensional Soft Power of Illiberal States: Russia in the Western Balkans

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Abstract

This article aims to make a threefold contribution to the study of soft power. First, considering that the potential of soft power of illiberal states is both underestimated and distorted, this study presents a two-dimensional conceptualization of Russia's soft power, distinguishing between Russia's posture toward the liberal international order, and sources of Russia's foreign policy. Second, it analyzes whether Russian soft power in the Western Balkan countries remains ideologically relevant beyond its hitherto conceptualizations as either the result of its historic cultural ties with the region, or a reflection of Russian foreign policy strategies. Through an analysis of elite discourses and news media as exemplified in speeches, press releases, and interviews, this article locates, challenges, and develops on Russia's soft power indicators in the Western Balkans. Finally, it contributes to surmounting the residing liberal democratic bias in the study of soft power of illiberal states, showing that not only can they be ideologically attractive but that their scope of influence differs according to the multi-layered nature of soft power.

Keywords: Soft power; illiberal states; liberal international order; Russia; Western Balkans

Introduction

The Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, represents the final stage of the transformation of the global order into a multi-order world,¹ where the liberal international order will continue to exist, albeit no longer with expectations of universality and probably in an adapted form. However, Russia has been working for years to mark itself as a *cultural* beacon in contesting and challenging the liberal international order.

A striking example has been Russia's attempt to expand its political and cultural influence on the Western Balkans (WB).² Although the European Union (EU) has expressed concerns about the increase of external actors' activities in the WB, there is no consensus on how far and deep Russia's influence can reach the region. On the one hand, Western policy makers and experts have warned about the historical danger of Russia's cultural links to the region, particularly Serbia, and its attempts of destabilizing the WB, undermining their democracies, and dividing them from the rest of Europe. On the other hand, when accounted as purely instrumental, Russia's influence in the region has been deemed as either overrated or not attractive enough for the WB.

Despite the fact that scholars have started to recognize that illiberal states³ can actually generate ideological soft power attraction, there is still not enough information about the sources of Russia's soft power (RSP) in relation to the extent other countries receive or reject such influence. By focusing on the role of soft power at the level of foreign policies, we argue that Russia's presence in

the WB should be seen and analyzed as part of a wider conceptual matrix that combines sources (interest vs. values) and posture of Russia's foreign policy (revisionist vs. traditionalist).

The article is divided in two main sections. In the first, we critically examine the liberal democratic bias in studying RSP. As an alternative, we offer a two-dimensional conceptualization of RSP that brings together the political, strategic, and ideological indicators that generate attractiveness to RSP. In the second section, we analyze political actors' discourses and attitudes in the WB toward Russia while centering our analysis around one key event: the international sanctions that were imposed in late February 2014 against Russia and Crimea following the Russian military intervention in Ukraine. In our concluding discussion, we present our findings: we first discuss RSP in the WB and how it has been adapted to local particularity; second, we argue on the basis of our WB case study that our two-dimensional matrix brings together political links, foreign policy interests, and ideological values of RSP, thus adding clarity to both the content and the study of soft power of illiberal states.

Sources and Posture of Russia's Soft Power

Despite the concept of soft power being commonly used in International Relations, it remains fiercely debated (Bakalov 2019). In particular, the issue of power as resources or as a relationship is especially relevant for this article. Most empirical studies differentiate between soft and hard power by explicitly or implicitly linking them to resources. In contrast to that, Feklyunina (2016, 776) conceptualizes soft power "as a relationship between two or more actors instead of seeing as a property of one actor." This view of soft power has significant methodological implications as we shift our attention from resources per se to the "ability to create consensus around shared meanings" (Miskimmon et al. 2013, 72). This insightful perspective on the necessity to examine the capacity of attraction at the level of foreign policies in relation to the ways in which different audience 'read' an actor is a constituent part of the original framework of the concept of soft power (Nye 2005). Nevertheless, it has been rarely applied to the study of illiberal soft power because of two main limitations.

First, the use of soft power attraction in academic and policy-oriented milieus has prevalently promoted an uncritical application of Western liberal tradition. For instance, when speaking about RSP, some scholars have substituted soft power with complementary or alternative terms. Feeling uncomfortable with the term of soft power regarding Russia, Forsberg and Smith employ the concept of "cultural statecraft," which focuses on the influence of cultural techniques and instruments that are available for the leadership (2016, 129). Conversely, others have understood RSP as nothing more than hard power's instrument by employing concepts like "hybrid warfare" (Lanoszka 2016), "sharp power" (Nye 2019), tools of destabilization (Winnerstig 2014), and "soft coercion" (Sherr 2013). Challenging these assumptions, Keating and Kaczmarek (2019, 16–18) demonstrate not only that Russia can generate ideological attraction through the promotion of more conservative values but also that they can be attractive to several groups belonging to the liberal democratic world. However, it is not clear either which are the sources of RSP or to what extent another country receives or rejects such influence. This issue brings us to the second limitation: when addressing RSP, there is the tendency to look at individual sources such as cultural or ideological ones (Aktürk 2019) or purely strategic/instrumental ones (Garčević 2019). Even when it is recognized that RSP is a product of an interplay of sources and behavior (Djokic 2020), it is not clear how such sources and behaviors interact with each other in order to produce foreign policy attraction, which in turn generates legitimacy and followership.

We therefore propose an alternative way of classifying RSP by defining it in relation to non-mutually exclusive categories: Russia's *posture* toward the liberal international order, and *sources* of Russia's foreign policy. In relation to the first category, the Russian vision of world politics tends to impose its own norms by challenging the Western diffusion strategy of the liberal norms rather than replicating it (Parlar Dal and Erşen 2020, 3). Concerning the second category, we can state that Russia's experts are heavily divided on Russia's assertiveness according to two schools of thought:

some pointing to Russia's neo-imperial ideologies and narratives, and others to mere security concerns as explanations for Russia's behavior (Bunce and Hozic 2016; Götz 2016; Sergunin 2016; Kropatcheva 2012; Kuzio and D'Anieri 2018; Tsygankov 2013).

Thus, these are the two dimensions through which RSP can be studied (see Figure 1 below). The first dimension 'posture towards the liberal international order' separates the revisionist posture from the traditionalist posture. The *revisionist* posture, which is "understood as an effort to undermine a 'rules-based' international order" (Allison 2020, 976), argues that Russia constantly demands the revision of the international order with the aim of shaping a conservative interstate order (Kanet 2018). On this perspective, the takeover of Crimea was only the latest, and most extreme, example of a revanchist behavior (Payne and Foster 2017). In contrast, the *traditionalist* posture states that Russia's challenge to the liberal international order is not necessarily aimed at re-establishing a brand new (illiberal) order but rather to gain legitimization for their desired status *within* and not in contrast to it (Clunan 2018; Romanova 2018). In such perspective, Russia is an anti-reformist conservative force seeking to restore order. This would explain why Russia is interested in preserving some of the traditional principles of the existing order outside the post-Soviet space (e.g., balance of power, sovereignty, principle of non-intervention, and sphere of influences) within traditional international institutions that serve Russian interest (Sakwa 2017, 131).

The second dimension of our typology 'source' separates the ideological motive, namely values, from the instrumental motive, namely interests, behind RSP. In Hochschild's account (2006), ideology concerns questions about what the actor considers right or wrong (i.e., morality); who the actor sees themselves to be and how they are related to others (i.e., identity); and in which way they interpret phenomena and processes (i.e., causality) (Hochschild 2006, 287). Several scholars have attempted to link RSP to a particular ideology that would rediscover endogenous norms manifested through the "Russian World" doctrine, moral/religious conservatism (Laruelle 2020), and de facto rehabilitation of the Soviet project (except for the Bolshevik Revolution) in popular and media discourses (Makarychev 2020, 46). From this dimension it emerges that Russia defends policies that reveal more attention to status recognition by the West, rather than to security concerns. While values are about morality and identity, interests are about material or physical desires. Accordingly, Russia is concerned with fundamental problems of European and global security given by a combination of the geopolitical challenge of defending permeable borders of such a vast territory, historical experiences of invasion, and a long-lasting perception of encirclement by Western powers (Rytövuori-Apunen 2019). Within this interpretation, RSP is driven by nothing more than genuine interest-based motivations such as security and counterbalance.

These two dimensions lead to four ideal-type categories of Russia's soft power graphically, illustrated in Figure 1 above, which basically combines sources and postures of Russia's foreign policy. In the top-left corner is *Eurasianism*, which combines revisionist posture and values. The concept of Eurasianism is based on the idea that Russia is not a common state but a civilization in its own right, opposed to that of the West and "the Western system of values, insisting on the cultural superiority of Russia" (Tsygankov 2007, 7). Scholars or intellectuals such as Aleksander Lukin and Aleksander Dugin consider Eurasianism a really distinctive and unifying principle among the peoples of the region, who share common values – commitment to family, traditional morality, a belief in religion, and so on – that contrast markedly with the relativistic permissive values of the West. The rhetoric of Eurasianism has been applied by the Kremlin on the international arena through numerous soft power's instruments, such as the launch of 'sovereign democracy' concept; the building up of the Russian World community; the call for an alliance of faiths between Orthodox Christianity and Islam in opposition to the liberal West, and so on. Interestingly, although Eurasianism could appear as a concept with a geographically limited scope, its appeal as "alternative Europe" to the liberal one (see, for example, White and Feklyunina 2014, 123) has recently trespassed the post-Soviet space by reaching a high degree of admiration and/or followership across many different leaders in the West. This has been possible because Eurasianism can be included in the broader set of realist conservatism, which appears to be a

		RUSSIA'S POSTURE TOWARD THE LIBERAL INTERNATIONAL ORDER	
		<i>REVISIONIST</i>	<i>TRADITIONALIST</i>
SOURCE OF RUSSIA'S SOFT POWER	VALUES	EURASIANISM	WESTPHALIANISM
	INTERESTS	SECURITY CONCERNS	MULTIPOLARITY

Figure 1. Typology of Russia's soft power.

revisionist (anti-status quo), anti-liberal, anti-universalist, and reactive type of thinking (Flockhart and Korosteleva 2022).

Westphalianism, located in the top-right corner, combines traditionalist posture and values. It refers to Russia's attempt to challenge the assumption that the post-Westphalian⁴ liberal world order is synonymous with order itself. At the base of the Westphalian world order there is the state-centered agency of the international society in defending equality among states, territorial sovereignty, and the doctrine of non-intervention. This concept differs from Eurasianism regarding intentions, as the stated goal behind status recognition by the states is *to restore* balance in world affairs through a positive agenda of a more comprehensive and equal system *among great powers* in international relations rather than to revise it. Indeed, after 1989, Russia's main goal was to engage with the global, US-led liberal international order as the co-founders (not a subaltern) of a new political community, what could putatively be called a "Greater West." According to Russia, this "transformed" global order is actually a traditionalist global order, in the sense that it encourages a concert-of-Europe-type of relationship with a mutual recognition of spheres of influence (Radchenko 2020). However, within an unfruitful "recognition game" with the West, Russia, along with China, has been defending the normative structure of international society rather than subverting them. Nevertheless, the lack of substantive theoretical articulation among Russian elites about *how* to implement state-centric world order has led Russia to act as a "spoiler" of liberal values, rather than as a bearer of an intellectually attractive alternative based on Russian particularism.

In the bottom-left corner we locate *Security Concerns*, which combines revisionist posture but with instrumental goals, namely interests. This component holds that Moscow adapts a combative stance not because it is ideologically driven, but in response to external threats such as NATO's eastward enlargement and US-promoted regime changes on the global scale (Shleifer and Treisman 2011). Moscow has consistently voiced its oppositions to NATO's global reach and enlargement, particularly within what it considers Russia's "zone of privileged interest" (Medvedev 2008). The 'broken promise' of not expanding NATO after the Cold War has indeed played an important role in increasing Moscow's feeling of insecurity and in deteriorating West-Russia relations (German 2017; Mearsheimer 2014). At the same time, the US withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile

Treaty and the decision to build a ballistic missile defense, as well as Western military interventionism in former Yugoslavia, Iraq, and Libya— thus seeding chaos and instability – have increased Russia’s insecurity. Within this argument, Russia has not a real grand plan, yet it aims to exercise greater political and military control over neighboring states to counterbalance and, if possible, roll back the growing influence of foreign powers on its doorstep.

Finally, the bottom-right corner contains *Multipolarity*, which combines interests with traditionalist posture toward the liberal world order. Similar to Westphalianism, Multipolarity advocates the multiple centers of political and economic influence on equal basis among states. However, it differs from the previous one on the sources of such attitudes as Westphalianism is guided by the re-establishment of the glorious past, while Multipolarity is driven by pragmatic considerations (Kurowska 2014; Morozov 2015). By adopting a pragmatic stance on the global arena, Russia struggles to reorganize the platform of authority in order to obtain its seat at the table of global decisions (Ikenberry 2011, 452). After the end of the Cold War, Russia sought to join a fundamental partnership with the enlarging EU and the US by negotiating the merger of democratization and geopolitical agenda of expanding West in order to establish a new community (Forsberg and Haukkala 2018). Within this framework, Russia’s stance for multipolarity did not entail some neo-imperialist projects, but it sought to institutionalize the transformation of the traditional Atlantic community into a pan-European security framework (German, 2017). Until the war in Ukraine in 2022, Russia had shifted to a policy of pragmatic realism, finding strategic partnership with the cooperative EU members and with the other regional powers, though resisting the practices of US primacy and globalism. With this aim, Russia has instrumentally supported several normative frameworks of the liberal international order such as the importance of free economic markets and the importance of multilateral organizations, especially the UN. Under the flag of international institutions (notably the UN Security Council, Council of Europe, and World Trade Organization), Russia has often contested the slide toward democratic majoritarian rule in international politics, and thus opposed humanitarian intervention unless sanctioned by the UN Security Council.

Importantly, the proposed four categories are ideal types that can take different forms according to the case under study and that can sometimes overlap. At the same time, we consider this typology of RSP as an important source of categorization of illiberal soft power. Therefore, this typology is our guide in the following analysis on Russia’s influence in the WB.

A Study of Russia’s Soft Power in the Western Balkans

The crisis in Ukraine in 2013 has revived the interest of many scholars on the WB and the potential role of Russia in the region (Deimel 2019). The political fault lines between Russia and the EU have also impacted policies toward the WB. While some scholars have framed RSP in the WB as part of a strategy of “Putinization” of WB (Milic 2016 29), others argue that Russia is rather animated by the goal to push-back the West in the region yet in an opportunistic way (Bechev 2019). Recent studies have put forward efforts to overcome the traditional historical ties, such as the old Serbian-Russian friendship, in assessing Russia’s influence in the WB by including a broader understanding of Russia’s agency in the region (Patalakh 2018).

However, most studies on RSP have addressed RSP as merely instrumental and as the result of Russia’s foreign policy strategies (Bieber and Tzifakis 2019; Stronski and Himes 2019). With this, the liberal democratic bias lingers on. RSP is seen most simplistically as the natural residue of old cultural and historical links between Russia and some WB countries, and more ambitiously as the result of propaganda and manipulation aimed at supporting Russia’s foreign policy. In the next section, we examine the weight of RSP in the WB beyond its historical association and instrumentalist foreign policy toward the region. We do this by locating RSP in the WB within our matrix, which, besides considering values and interests of RSP, brings them together with the aim of overcoming the exclusionary relationship between these elements through approaching them as constitutively linked.

The research design follows a two-step reading of the research material through a combination of deductive and inductive reasoning: first, a deductive investigation is adopted, which begins with locating Eurasianism, Westphalianism, Security, and Multipolarity in the pool of data. These four constitutive components of RSP matrix serve as main conceptual units of analysis reflective of culture, values, and interests. Second, within the four units of analysis we locate sub-units, which expand on and diversify the main conceptual foundations into the local specificity of RSP in the WB and allow for indicators to inductively emerge. These indicators challenge the dominant view on the WB as passive clients of RSP, and rather witness for conscious recipients informed by the multi-layered nature of RSP comprised of its cultural, strategic, and ideological dimensions.

The foreign policy controversial issue in focus is the international sanctions imposed in late February 2014 against Russia and Crimea following the Russian military intervention in Ukraine as a key preceding event to the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. These sanctions serve as the core event around which the selection of the research material is centered and which is constituted of speeches, press releases, interviews, and parliamentary stenographic notes from the six WB countries. Sources include ministries of foreign affairs, governments, assemblies, and parliaments, as well as WB and Western newspapers and news platforms. The insights in this paper derive not only from elite discourses of the particular countries but also from a consideration of the general public opinion in the media. The positionality of WB toward the international sanctions during the Ukrainian crisis is not to be taken as an analogous reflection of the WB countries' general (lack of) attraction toward RSP, as within the individual countries there are oppositional actors to both trends. We capture those variations and nuances through parliamentary notes where debate is present, but also by stretching the temporality of the data beyond 2014 to reflect shifts in the political discourse through time.

Western Balkans: More than a “Battlefield” of Russia’s (Soft) Power

“Russia looks to the Balkans as a *battlefield*⁵ [italics added] in its ‘political war’.... seeking to create distractions and potentially bargaining chips with the EU” says Galeotti (2018), while for Erlanger (2018) “the region is becoming a *battleground* [italics added] in what feels like a new Cold War [as] Russia, they say, is expanding its influence.” An image of the WB in which the region (traditionally referred to as Europe’s “tinderbox”) is incapable of solving its own troubles and hence compels the world powers to step in should not come as a surprise. This image, however, plays a double and self-contradictory function: on one side, it portrays the WB as inherently at fault for being an unceasing source of unrest that calls for global attention, while, on the other, it simultaneously strips the WB away from any agency but the one in providing the stage for the ‘Armageddon’ between the world biggest powers to take place.

If the predominant links between Western liberal democratic soft power and the WB are located in the European geographic position of the region, those between Russia and the WB are traditionally explained through the cultural and historic ties facilitated by the Orthodox religion. Serbia leads in terms of the intensity of such links. This is also seen in the vivid opposition toward the 2014 sanctions against Russia of the political discourse in Serbia. Serbia did not adopt the sanctions against Russia, nor did BiH and North Macedonia, in contrast to Kosovo, Albania, and Montenegro. Furthermore, Serbia and Belarus remain two rare European states not to join a call for Western sanctions against Moscow for its most recent invasion of Ukraine. The four subsections below map the positionality of the six WB countries as located in the RSP matrix under the predominant themes of the sanctions against Russia: Eurasianism, Westphalianism, Security, and Multipolarity. The matrix is then further diversified into indicators that prevail in shaping the specificity of RSP in the WB: *religious uniformity*, *sovereignty* and *territorial integrity*, *Russian superiority*, *anti-NATO sentiments*, *militarism*, *strong leadership*, and *non-alignment* (see Figure 2 below).

		RUSSIA'S POSTURE TOWARD THE LIBERAL INTERNATIONAL ORDER	
		<i>REVISIONIST</i>	<i>TRADITIONALIST</i>
SOURCE OF RUSSIA'S SOFT POWER	VALUES	<p>EURASIANISM</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Religious Uniformity 	<p>WESTPHALIANISM</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sovereignty and Territorial integrity • Russian Superiority
	INTERESTS	<p>SECURITY CONCERNS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anti-NATO Sentiment • Militarism 	<p>MULTIPOLARITY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong and Pragmatic Leadership • Non-Alignment

Figure 2. Typology of Russia's soft power with WB indicators.

Eurasianism

Deriving from civilizational conservatism, Eurasianism is predominantly a civilizational rather than a religious paradigm. The term, however, entails interpretative elasticity which also accommodates religious nuances.⁶ The most successful dimension of Russia's Eurasianist soft power in the WB is the *religious uniformity* of a pan-Slavic and Orthodox community. Eurasianism has been known for rejecting globalization as enabling Western cultural dominance, while offering civilizational diversity as its alternative. This is why at a first glance it appears that Eurasianism, if anything, is an inherent adversary to uniformity. Yet uniformity remains an inseparable component of Eurasianism as long as it remains uniform in its position toward "Russian culture as... the only one that links the different national elements to the whole" (Laruelle 2008, 101). Laruelle (2008, 101) therefore refers to the Eurasianist cult of diversity as "mere rhetoric." In the WB, where not all countries are primarily Orthodox, this is relevant. One must note the case of Albania, Kosovo, the significant portion of ethnic Albanians living in North Macedonia, and those in Montenegro, who represent a mix of Muslim and Catholic denomination. This diverse mix would, at a first glance, appear like a reason for being perceptive to Eurasianist civilizational diversity. However, the WB blend, well-known for its internal antagonistic nature, rather than being perceived as an asset due to its diversity, represents a problematic antithesis to uniformity. As such, a consolidated, uniform, and backboneed actor becomes the cure to confused, disorderly, and unstable actors. It is uniformity as a core Eurasianist value rather than diversity that strengthens RSP leverage in the region.

The soft power nature of Eurasianism's uniformity becomes rather apparent in combination with Orthodox brotherhood in which Russia takes the role of a constant protector, historically uniform and unchangeable *versus* Europe who 'does not speak with one voice.' Unlike Europe and the West, under a Eurasianist lens, Russia is perceived as the Orthodox big brother who is always there, because it is consolidated and uniform in its position toward the WB. The power of this ultimately relies in a sentiment in which the WB are accepted as they predominantly are, Slavic and Orthodox Christians, and are hence liberated from having to prove themselves for promotion under the Eurasianist umbrella. This also acts in contrast to EU's conditionality toward the WB, which compels the countries for a perpetual marathon of fulfilling conditions to prove their "Europeanness."

An embodiment of Eurasianism in the WB is the Balkan Cossack⁷ Army, whose General Viktor Zaplatin, at its founding meeting in Montenegro, said that “the Orthodox world is one world” (Vukicevic and Coalson 2016). Serbian Orthodox priest Momchilo Krivokapic and the Russian motorcycle gang Night Wolves attended the meeting where greetings were passed from Aleksandr Borodai, “a Russian citizen who helped engineer Moscow’s annexation of the Ukrainian region of Crimea” (Vukicevic and Coalson 2016). Though its rationale remains ambiguous, the Balkan Cossack Army was repeatedly mentioned in relation to the alleged *coup d’état* in Montenegro in 2016 (see Higgins 2016; Galeotti 2018; Anderson and Vichová 2019; Hajda et al 2020) due to its links to the Night Wolves. The Night Wolves, whose head was one of the key suspects for the Montenegrin *coup*, are a pro-Kremlin motorcycle gang, which Putin has called “friends” (Popov 2015). They are known to have branches also in BiH, Bulgaria, North Macedonia, and Serbia. Milorad Dodik, the pro-Russian Serb member of the Presidency of BiH is also known to have links with the gang (*Balkan Insight* 2019). The predominant portrayal of the Balkan Cossack Army in the WB has been one of a threat to the vulnerable stability of the region due to its cultural links to the Orthodox Slavs whose purpose is carefully crafted in Russia’s foreign policy.

While such estimations might hold truth, the Balkan Cossack Army in the WB has not been investigated for any ideological values it might hold as attractive to the Orthodox community in the WB. Portraying the Army as a natural reflection of Russia’s historical ties to the region but devoid of any ideological values equals portraying the WB as subjugated recipients of RSP due to their unchangeable history and cultural identity. Further, portraying the Balkan Cossack Army as a foreign policy propaganda tool of RSP in the WB still equals the WB as naïve victims of the same, incapable of making – what outside of a liberal democratic bias might even seem as – wise decisions from the perspective of the foreign policies of these countries. The WB are either a prey to historical cultural links, or a prey to RSP propaganda.

However, pan-Slavic Orthodox links can also convert into the value of (religious) uniformity, which is attractive to some WB countries due to it being materialized into the consistent rather than the fluctuating interest of Russia toward the region. Being united and uniform, pan-Slavic Orthodox brotherhood binds Russia to an unconditional and uninterrupted interest toward the WB, which the EU does not offer. “What, Mr. Pejović, if when we allegedly estimate that we are ready, we knock on the door of Europe, and there is no Europe there?”⁸ (*Parliament of Montenegro* 2016b, 872) asked Emilio Labudović, an official of the New Serb Democracy (NOVA), during one of Montenegro’s Parliamentary sessions as he speaks of a “Europe that, under pressure from America, is forcing us, Russia’s age-old friends, to impose sanctions on them” (*Parliament of Montenegro* 2016b, 871). During the same session, Milutin Đukanović, the President of the Democratic Front, said that “if the Montenegrin government had a nail of morality... it should immediately lift the sanctions against Russia... We do not have, Mr. Popović, in our surrounding and in Europe, greater friends than Orthodox Christians” (*Parliament of Montenegro* 2016b, 919). The EU – as a complex union of different religions and nations, which is further complexifying due to its internal disintegrating tendencies such as Brexit – is perceived as inconsistent and unstable in its relations with the WB. Serbia’s former President, Tomislav Nikolić, called out the EU for its lack of uniformity as he said: “Europe does not have a common foreign policy on any issue... And that is much more serious than imposing sanctions on one state” (*The President of the Republic of Serbia* 2014b). While the EU was converting the sanctions into a condition for the WB countries’ completion of their Euro-Atlantic aspirations, Nikolić was recalling “the support of Russia in the century-long struggle for freedom” (*The President of the Republic of Serbia* 2016), as Aleksandar Vučić was publicly thanking his “friends from Russia, who stood politically by Serbia when no one else did” (*The President of the Republic of Serbia* 2018). Though held by common Orthodox pan-Slavic links, the soft power potential of the “united in Orthodoxy” (*The President of the Republic of Serbia* 2013) “in good and in bad times” vows between Russia and WB countries could be located in the ideologically “united” as much as in the religious and cultural “Orthodoxy” part of Nikolić’s quote.

The soft power potential of the Orthodox uniformity *versus* diversity, multiplicity, or multi-religiosity is best illustrated if observed in anti-Kremlin countries in the region such as Albania and Kosovo: “We do have this incredible national asset, our tradition of respect, understanding and tolerance between faiths” (*Prime Minister’s Office [Albania] 2016b*) said Albania’s Prime Minister, Edi Rama. Rama has many times stressed Albania’s character as “a state whose citizens have different beliefs but coexist in total religious harmony” (*Prime Minister’s Office [Albania] 2016a*) or “a European country with both Muslims and Christians who celebrate Ramadan and Christmas” (*Prime Minister’s Office [Albania] 2014*). Kosovo’s former President, Hashim Thaçi has also stressed that “Kosovo and the entire region is multi-ethnic and multi-religious” (*President of the Republic of Kosovo 2016*), as has Montenegro’s former Prime Minister, Duško Marković, who stated that his country is “proud of its multi-ethnic and multi-confessional harmony” (*Prime Minister of Montenegro 2017*). All three – Albania, Kosovo, and Montenegro – have joined the sanctions against Russia, and while Albania and Montenegro are NATO members, Kosovo aspires to become one.

However, to assume that religious uniformity, due to the lack of historical Orthodox links, has no ideological values in countries such as Albania and Kosovo where the dominant denomination is Islam, or countries such as North Macedonia (NATO member since 2022) where a significant ethnic Albanian and predominantly Muslim population live, would not be entirely true. This is not only because Montenegro as a country where Eastern Orthodox Christianity dominates would challenge this postulate, but also because, Albania and Kosovo for example, though stressing their diversity have also quite often stressed the figure of Mother Theresa or quoted Pope Francis during his visit in 2014 in Albania (*Prime Minister’s Office [Albania] 2016a*; *President of the Republic of Kosovo n.d.*). At the same time, they have accentuated the threatening role of “radical Islam” (*Prime Minister’s Office [Albania] 2016b*) or “fundamental Islamism” (*President of the Republic of Kosovo n.d.*). This is also why Russia’s influence in the WB is often mentioned in conjunction with the threat that radical Islam poses to the region; or in Rama’s own words, “on the one hand, Russia is applying an increasingly aggressive doctrine, with a growing military provision which remains a constant concern. On the other hand, waves of terrorism and violent extremism” (*Prime Minister’s Office [Albania] 2016a*). The ideological value of uniformity in such circumstances is rather seen in these countries’ attempts to associate themselves with a predominantly Catholic Europe through Catholic figures by distancing themselves from both, Orthodoxy and Islam, and precipitating integration into the EU. As such, religious uniformity should not be seen as an ideologically attractive value in and of itself. Rather, as this article maintains, no ideological value of RSP in the WB can be assessed as divorced from the foreign policy interests of the WB countries, even if those interests that do not coincide with those of Russia’s own foreign policy. The WB engage in the adaptation of these ideological values beyond their cultural interest or their propagandist nature and use those to best serve their foreign policy interests. Therefore, rather than the result of a one-directional relationship from Russia and to the WB, RSP is a constitutive rapport in which the WB have agency over what is attractive.

Westphalianism

Values such as *sovereignty* and *territorial integrity* and the persisting Russian superiority are part of RSP politics toward the WB. Russia’s annexation of Crimea has not prevented Russia from calling on both NATO and the EU to respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the WB countries. Two knots where such calls have found expression have been Kosovo and the Republika Srpska in BiH. Putin has reportedly cited the “Kosovo precedent” (Swaine and Yuhas 2014) and the “international law” (B92 2016) demanding international community’s recognition of Crimea’s sovereignty as deriving from the democratic will expressed through a referendum. Calls for secessionism grounded on Russian arguments of the democratic sovereign right for self-determination have been replicated by Dodik in BiH (*Al Jazeera 2020*). Dodik who praised

Russia for being “one of the rare countries that does not interfere in internal affairs in BiH and does not impose solutions” (*Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina* 2019), also declared that he “intend [ed] to achieve recognition of the status of Crimea at the [state] level of Bosnia” (Lakic 2018). Prior to North Macedonia’s change of name in 2018 (see for more Veliu 2018, 2019), the former Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Macedonia, Dragana Kiprijanovska, expressed her gratitude to Russia for “the commitment to the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the Republic of Macedonia” (*Republic of Macedonia Ministry of Foreign Affairs* 2018a). Russia’s Ambassador to Serbia, Aleksandar Bocan Harčenko, stressed that “the Russian Federation respects the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Serbia, as well as that its position on the issue of respect for international law remains unchanged” (*Government of the Republic of Serbia* 2019b) while Serbia’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ivica Dačić, expressed gratitude “to Russia for its firm and consistent support for the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Serbia” (*Government of the Republic of Serbia* 2019c).

Rather than a RSP ideological value attractive in and of itself, the mutual recognition of each other’s sovereign rights is aimed at the completion of political goals of Russia, Serbia, or the Republika Srpska. As such, the WB yet again show themselves to be engaged in a transactional relationship with Russia, beyond the cultural ties between the two or the one-directionality of RSP. Another enabler of transactional incentives is the pragmatic realist approach that Russia adopts toward the WBs’ economic dependency from multiple centers of influence, and vice versa (Standish, 2021). Though Russia’s economic influence in the WB is considered to be limited to the energy sector, and outside of it Russia’s economic influence in the WB is dominated by that of the EU (see Russell 2017), still by 2018 Russia was known to be the single largest direct investor in Montenegro (Center for the Study of Democracy 2018), while Serbia coordinates its foreign policy with Russia with successfully developing relations in “all areas, especially in trade, investment, energy, agriculture, military and military-technical, scientific-technical and cultural areas, as well as in the field of railway infrastructure construction” (*Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Serbia* 2022a). During Putin’s 2019 visit to Belgrade, while thanking him for his “personal engagement” and “Russia’s support for Serbia’s independence and preservation of territorial integrity,” Vučić also pointed out an increase of imports from Russia and exports from Serbia, and cooperation in “all other spheres of social life” (*Government of the Republic of Serbia* 2019a). However, while Vučić expressed feeling “fed up of being lectured” by the West (Jamieson and Kumar 2020), he did not complain of such pressure from Russia. “It doesn’t mean that, even when we become an EU member state, that we will shut all our ties, stop all our links with Russia” (Jamieson and Kumar 2020), said Vučić, and this from a Russian pragmatic perspective seems to not be an issue. This approach, which combines the respect toward the sovereignty and territorial integrity of countries and their right to decide for their own economic affairs, sparks attraction in some WB countries, as it recognizes them as agentic subjects. “Do your job. You are sovereign states. Serbia is a sovereign state. We do everything that is for the best for our people and for our country” (Jamieson and Kumar 2020) had added Vučić, reversing the West’s reprimanding remarks to Serbia.

Though it might seem that attraction for sovereignty and territorial integrity signals a call for non-interference in the internal matters of the WB, it is to be noted that what is considered internal is adjustable depending on the dominant identity marker that defines the relationship between the WB and Russia. If that identity marker is the pan-Slavic Orthodox links between the two, then Russia’s interference is not considered as external but rather intrinsic – and moreover superior – among its Slavic brothers. Under these circumstances, Russian non-interference is put to rest, as is the option for the WB’s non-alignment and self-sufficiency within their territorial boundaries. Therefore, since Russia’s Westphalian soft power is one where the ‘superiority’ of Russia remains intact (thought it aims to restore balance in the international order and not revise it), reflections of this superiority are noted in appreciations where historical cultural links have preceded over the principle of non-alliance engrained in events such as the First World War (for more, see the

section “Multipolarity” below). “Tsarist Russia, led by Nikolai Romanov, entered the First World War as a sign of solidarity with Serbia” (*Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Serbia* 2019), said Dačić, due to “historical ties that no one can break and destroy.” In these circumstances, Russia’s ‘superiority complex’ compensates for Serbia’s rather disadvantageous position or ‘inferiority complex’ in a post-Second World War era, which, as Nikolić states, was supposed “to give a voice to *small* states, the right to *small* [italics added] nations” (*The President of the Republic of Serbia* 2015). The mutually exclusive relationship between small nations and non-alignment is also mentioned in the Parliament of Montenegro (2015, 194) as a pro-NATO argument where it is said that “given that we are so small ... we have no right to say now – we want to be neutral.” Under a Westphalian approach and contrary to a Multipolar one, RSP attractiveness relies on Russian superiority as a great power under the shade of which its smaller Slavic brothers can reside.

Security Concerns

If Keating and Kaczmarek (2019) refer to anti-Americanism as a Russian soft power value, *anti-NATO* sentiments are more suitable to describe as attractive to the WB. Most prone to such sentiments are understandably Serbia and Montenegro (though the latter joined the NATO alliance in 2017), as well as BiH’s Republika Srpska where NATO is seen as the aggressor following the 1990s events elicited by the breakup of Yugoslavia. Serbia’s Government official website refers to “NATO aggression” as “the last great and unpunished crime in the 20th century” (*The Government of the Republic of Serbia* 2020). Nikolić declared that “Serbia will never join NATO” (*Radio Television of Serbia* 2016), as Serbia’s Defense Minister, Aleksandar Vulin, is reported to have said that “Serbia will not join NATO while Aleksandar Vucic is in power” (*B92* 2019). During the official commemoration for the victims of the 1999 NATO bombing in the southern Serbian city of Niš, Dodik claimed that he “cannot and will not allow a ‘NATO border’ to be established on the River Drina” (Rudic 2019), which runs between Serbia and BiH. Montenegro’s parliamentary debate is also revealing of anti-NATO sentiments, among which that of Vladislav Bojović, member of the Democratic Front, who referred to NATO as “an aggressive military alliance,” responsible for clashing Montenegro “with Russia, our historical ally” (*Parliament of Montenegro* 2016c).

These sentiments are further materialized through *militarism* in which cooperation between Serbia and Russia joins the two under their anti-NATO security interests. For the period of 2018 to 2019, Russia is known to be Serbia’s biggest arms supplier (Öztürk 2019), while Vučić complained about the West’s objection to Serbia’s procurement of weaponry from Russia (*Beta Briefing* 2020). In 2013, Russia and Serbia signed a military cooperation agreement. Since then, annual military trainings, parades, and weaponry acquisition inclusive of advanced Russian anti-aircraft missiles systems have taken place. Particularly interesting are the military exercises held under the banner of “Slavic Brotherhood” (Vasovic 2016) in which Serbian, Russian, and Belarus troops participated. “Slavic Brotherhood” is an epitome of the confluence of cultural links of pan-Slavism, anti-NATO sentiments, and the Russian security interests of counterbalancing the West. Disregarding the constitutive nature of the relationship between the three would equal reducing this event into either the result of Serbia’s attempt to balance its “traditionally warm ties with Russia, a fellow Slavic, Orthodox Christian nation” (Vasovic 2016) as *Reuters* does, or into a mere attempt by Russia to “destabilize the region” (Kuczyński 2019) as the former US Vice President Mike Pence did during his visit in Podgorica. In both cases, rather than being treated as active agents of their own anti-NATO sentiments or the pursuit of foreign policy security interest, the WB are portrayed as either incapable to break from cultural links with Russia, or as a passive stage for Russia’s security ambitions of counterbalancing the West.

The below-mentioned policy of non-alignment (see section “Multipolarity”) works in a joint fashion with anti-NATO sentiments in the WB. This relationship is one where non-alignment is the result rather than the cause of anti-NATO stances; a more refined version of anti-NATO sentiments converted into neutral ones where the WB are not *against* but neither are they *for* joining any

alliance. The security concerns of Russia, however, demand for a clearer stance than what its multipolar approach demands. If non-alignment is about “sitting on two chairs,” anti-NATO sentiments are about one of those two chairs being no option at all. Any step toward sitting on a NATO chair, which does not necessarily need to exclude Russia, is perceived as a threat by Russia and is reciprocally responded. Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, considered Montenegro’s accession to NATO a “hostile policy,” and warned that “for every action there is an opposite reaction” (Tomovic 2017). The ‘action causes reaction’ formula derives from the ‘broken promise’ of not expanding NATO after the Cold War, which in turn sparks counterbalancing the West through the WB.

However, to assume that the WB are only used for counterbalancing Russia’s security policy ambitions, is to ignore NATO’s already disputed reputation in the region and to further contribute to the portrayal of the WB as marionettes of the great powers. Though compatible with Russia’s security interests, anti-NATO sentiments have a life of their own, are attractive *per se*, grounded in West’s 1990s interventionist approach toward the WB. It would be understandable to see how from a liberal democratic bias lens this would be ignored: it drives responsibility away from the West and the effects of its interventionist approach toward the WB by either vilifying Russia’s foreign policy, or by incapacitating the WB as unable to take charge of their own foreign policy or ideological interests and hence in need for interventions. However, this would not only lead to partial knowledge with regards to RSP in the WB, but also to an underestimation of the active role that the WB play in juxtaposing the West and Russia for their own interests. To give but an example, while on one hand Putin’s “red carpet treatment” (Santora and MacFarquhar 2019) or the “Slavic Brotherhood” military exercises were occupying the media attention, little did they and Vučić mention Serbia’s military cooperation with NATO which is far more than that with Russia since Serbia joined the NATO Partnership for Peace program in 2006 (Zivanovic 2019). The most recent agreement for mutual consultations on foreign policy matters (also referred to as the “consultation plan” [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Serbia 2022b]) that Serbia and Russia signed in September 2022, indeed, during the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, is yet another reminder that the WB play an active role in juxtaposing the West and Russia for advancing their own interests.

Multipolarity

Under RSP multipolar approach toward the WB, *non-alignment* strikes as a value. In a multipolar world order, RSP success is not mutually exclusive with attraction toward West’s soft power in the WB. “Russia has never imposed any *choice* on these countries” said Russia’s former Permanent Representative at NATO, Alexander Grushko, encouraging the WB to “stay away from geopolitical rivalry NATO is seeking to unleash” (TASS Russian News Agency 2015) as Montenegro was about to become NATO’s member. Russia’s former Deputy of Foreign Minister, Alexei Meshkov, had also complained about rivalry which “attempts to present the Balkans as a sphere of the West’s *exclusive* interests” (TASS Russian News Agency 2017). These objections have found their counterparts in the WB and are ingrained in the value of ‘sitting in both chairs’ rather than an ‘either/or’ approach in which the WB are compelled to choose between the West and Russia. The West is referred to as the advocate of a mutually exclusive approach, as criticized by the Russian Foreign Ministry: “The imposition of a fragrantly destructive choice to be ‘either with the West, or with Russia’ on the Balkan countries inevitably leads to mounting tensions on the European continent” (Interfact 2017). Vučić claimed to be “fed up” from “being lectured” by European leaders over ties with Russia and China, and “expressed anger when asked when he would choose between Moscow and the EU” (Jamieson and Kumar 2020).

More specifically in relation to the sanctions against Russia, non-alignment is invoked as an argument for abstaining from these disciplinary measures, but also always in exchange for favors. Such favors, for example, include Russia’s support for the “territorial integrity and sovereignty of Serbia,” while “*on the other hand*, Serbia is behaving very responsibly, regardless of the fact that we

are a candidate for EU membership as it has not and will not join the sanctions that were passed against Russia” (*Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Serbia* 2019), said Dačić. To further add to this: “we are cooperating with the NATO Alliance, but we are also cooperating with the CSTO (the Collective Security Treaty Organization made by former USSR countries) that do not ask us to give up part of the territory” (B92 2019), had said Serbia’s Defense Minister, Aleksandar Vulin. Along the same lines, as the war in Ukraine was storming and the EU requested countries to adopt sanctions against Russian, Serbia secured an “extremely favorable” (Stojanovic 2022) gas deal with Putin, agreeing to a three-year gas supply deal with Gazprom, Russia’s state energy provider.

The political discourse in Albania and Kosovo stands most vividly at a distance from non-alignment, facing Serbia on the other end of the spectrum, but not only. In other WB countries too, frustration toward an approach which equates an anti-Russian attitude with a pro-Western one (or an anti-Western attitude with a pro-Russian one) are found. An exemplification of these two ends of the spectrum is a dialogue between Rama and Vučić at the Belgrade Security Forum in 2018 in which the former says: “I think we are in a different situation compared to Serbia when it comes to the EU integration path, because we are not in the middle of two possible loves. We have only one, meaning towards West” (*Prime Minister’s Office [Albania]* 2016c), to which the latter replies:

I would like to say that when Edi [Rama] is fighting for biggest Western support, he has no limits for that. He can say whatever he wants against Russia or Moscow, or to undermine them. I don’t do it. I don’t do it with the Western powers, I don’t do it with Russia, I don’t do it with China. (*Prime Minister’s Office [Albania]* 2016c)

Kosovo’s official stance is, if not even more dichotomous, then at least as clearly aligned as that of Albania. Thaçi referred to himself as “the President of the most pro American and pro NATO nation on earth” (*President of the Republic of Kosovo* n.d.), while Kosovo’s former President, Atifete Jahjaga has been very clear in that “what constitutes *multipolarity* [italics added] today are European Union, NATO and the United Nations” (*President of the Republic of Kosovo* 2011).

North Macedonia’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, Nikola Dimitrov, showed a nuanced approach as he claimed that “our path to NATO started in 1993 and for us it is a job that should have been completed earlier.... This does not mean that we want to have tense or negative relations with someone, including the Russian Federation” (*Republic of Macedonia Ministry of Foreign Affairs* 2018b). In Montenegro and Serbia, non-alignment is stronger, though it takes the shape of *military neutrality* (see for more Đokić 2019). BiH’s Serb-dominated Parliament passed a resolution declaring Republika Srpska’s neutrality with reference to military alliances (*National Assembly [Republika Srpska]* 2017). The President of the Montenegrin United Reform Action (URA), Dritan Abazović, stated that they were “not for imposing sanctions on Russia... because we have a foreign policy that has always been based on sitting on two chairs” (*Parliament of Montenegro* 2016a). The clearest however, in both its spoken discourse and official foreign policy, is Serbia as multiple references were made to Serbia’s military neutrality in relation to the sanctions on Russia (see The President of the Republic of Serbia 2014; *The President of the Republic of Serbia* 2015). Nikolić explicitly revealed that under his presidency Serbia needed to renew all the friendships it had lost, citing Josip Broz Tito’s Non-Aligned Movement⁹ as an example, while acknowledging the role of Russia, among others, in vetoing UN’s Srebrenica genocide resolution (*The President of the Republic of Serbia* 2017). “Both the EU and Russia are friends of Serbia” had said Nikolić, “if you are my friend, let me choose my friends” (*Radio Television of Serbia* 2016). It is worth mentioning that Serbia’s non-alignment has extended beyond Russia. Most recent COVID-19 events speak of billboards in Belgrade reading “Thank you, brother Xi” (Chapple 2020) referring to the help China’s President Xi extended to Serbia to cope with COVID-19.

Another attractive component of Russia’s multipolar soft power is the image of a strong and pragmatic leader embodied in Vladimir Putin. During the 2016 Macedonian parliamentary election a song which called for Putin to save the country from the EU, NATO, and the “American devil” (Dzepovski 2016) emerged, while Stanko Lacman-Barić (2014) wrote a poem on the occasion

of Vladimir Putin's 2014 visit to Serbia to welcome "Orthodoxy's Son." Putin is reported to have called the two Montenegrin pro-Kremlin MPs, Andrija Mandić and Milan Knežević, "real heroes," while they in return "pointed out that the majority of Montenegro perceives him as its president" (Danas 2019). Quite vocal in this regard has also been Republika Srpska's former Prime Minister, Željka Cvijanović, who interestingly has shared the value of strong leadership between Putin and the US President, Donald Trump: "People say I'm very pro-Putin. Well, I'm very pro-Trump as well" (The Times 2018). Cvijanović and Dodik have dominated the Republika Srpska's political scene for more than a decade. Dodik's "bromance" with the Russian leader has brought him the sobriquet "Putin's man in the Balkans" (Ilic 2018).

Though such sights of admiration toward Putin as a leader might seem strictly ideological in nature, to cast them as entirely moral would be misleading. Strong leadership just as religious uniformity, sovereignty and territorial integrity, Russian superiority, anti-NATO sentiments, militarism, and non-alignment, is ingrained in foreign policy interests that extend beyond Putin's image as Orthodoxy's son. Vučić, for example, who has in multiple occasions thanked Russia and more specifically "its President Vladimir Vladimirovic," has done this "because he [Putin] is the one who has repeatedly helped Serbia in passing or not passing various resolutions, declarations and other general legal acts" (*The President of the Republic of Serbia* 2019). Further, equating Putin's image of a strong leader with that of Trump serves as an encouragement to transcend limitations of the liberal democratic bias in the study of RSP by locating its attraction not only beyond the Orthodox historical links of Russia with the WB or the propagandist nature of its foreign policy, but also beyond the exclusivity of Russian soft power values *per se* into the status they are given in the West. Though this statement goes well beyond our scope of analysis and the narrower subject of this article, one cannot help but recall here Trump's continuous references to Putin as a "strong leader" (Andrews 2015), or most recently described as "smart" (Cillizza 2022), "strong," and "genius" specifically in relation to the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. That is, the RSP value of strong and pragmatic leadership surpasses the WB right into the heart of West, and one can only hope that the democratic liberal bias will not blindly ignore its proximity nor the threat that it poses.

Conclusion

This article has addressed two main limitations in the study of illiberal soft power by using the case of WB's support for Russian controversial foreign policy decision such as its 2014 annexation of Crimea. First, the inability to see beyond the attractiveness of Western liberal values has hampered the possibility to assess the weight of RSP vis-à-vis other states behind cultural bonds or strategic interests. Second, although at the level of foreign policies attraction, soft power can be potentially explained according to various factors, scholarship halts mainly on the dichotomy of interests vs. ideology.

Alternatively, this study has shown that WB's followership is not merely the result of Russia's historical and cultural links with the predominantly Orthodox and Slavic communities in the Balkans, nor is it solely the end product of Russia's strategic foreign policy interests whose passive clients are the WB. Rather, we argue that the WB identify ideological values in RSP which, in a constitutive relationship with these countries' cultural ties to Russia and their own foreign policy benefits, result in a set of elements such as religious uniformity, sovereignty and territorial integrity, Russian superiority, anti-NATO sentiments, militarism, non-alignment, and strong and pragmatic leadership, that elicit attraction to RSP. Rather than the prey of RSP maneuvers, the WB are not only aware of but also strategic in their decisions of supporting or not Russia's controversial foreign policy. While existing literature debates on who best manipulates the WB, the WB elites set the rules in opposition as they compare and contrast what best serves their interests: Russia, the EU, the US, China, or others.

This might apply also to the current fight over Ukraine, in which the WB is an appropriate space for Moscow's geopolitical ambitions and a proxy for indirect competition with the West. Nevertheless, Russian influence is internalized differently in the various WB states. While all WB states

are tied firmly to the European anchor through EU prospective membership, some states choose to play the Russian card to strengthen their own position vis-à-vis the EU, Russia, or the US, by indicating their proximity or distance to these actors, as well as vis-à-vis each other within the region. Recognizing the WB as active negotiators of their own status in relation to Russia not only magnifies knowledge on the WB as an area where global competing interests reside, not only does it convey the need for the EU membership becoming a real prospect for these countries that are more than capable of utilizing external actors and international crisis for advancing their own interests through any useful ally, but it also carries implications for broader theories on illiberal soft power. In particular, we prioritize the necessity to address the dynamic and relational constitutions of soft power receivers, which may accept, accommodate, and even reproduce or reject RSP ideological values.

Finally, in contrast to the dichotomy of interests vs. ideology as individual sources of illiberal soft power, the complex interrelation between sources (value vs. interests) and posture toward the liberal international order (revisionist vs. traditionalist) of our matrix puts research on a more pragmatic basis with the aim to encourage an engagement with the multi-layered nature of the concept of soft power in general and of RSP in particular. Alongside this conclusion which derives from our empirical analysis on the WB, our two-dimensional conceptualization opens the space for new insights not only into the study of RSP in other regions such as the Middle East or Sub-Saharan Africa, but also into the study of other illiberal states' soft power.

Disclosures. None.

Notes

- 1 On the concept “multi-order world,” see Flockhart (2020).
- 2 The label “Western Balkans” is used to refer to all former Yugoslav countries – that is, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia, excluding Croatia, which joined the EU in 2013, and including Albania, which, though in the Balkan Peninsula, was never part of Yugoslavia. Slovenia was not covered by this neologism coined during the Austrian presidency of the European Council (1998), and since 2004, the country has been a full member of the EU. Finally, Kosovo declared its independence in 2008 even though Serbia, Russia, as well as 5 of 27 EU member states (Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia, Spain) and 4 of 30 NATO countries (Slovakia, Spain, Greece, and Romania) do not recognize it as such.
- 3 Here “illiberalism” is understood “as a form of postliberalism – that is, as an ideology whose exponents are pushing back against liberalism after having experienced it” (Laruelle 2020).
- 4 The concept of Westphalianism refers to the peace settlement of Westphalia at the end of the Thirty Years War in 1648, which has also served for establishing the structural frame for world order that has survived, with modifications from time to time, until the end of the Cold War (Falk 2002 312).
- 5 All emphasis within quotations are our own unless stated otherwise.
- 6 Though Robinson (2020) separates Orthodox/Slavophile conservatism from civilizational conservatism with Eurasianism deriving from the latter, they also recognize that, between the different strands of Russian conservatism that they identify, there is a considerable overlap. Further, Russia is also seen as the savior of white, *Christian*, European *civilization* (Aktürk, 2019). Therefore, rather than a separate thread of Russian conservatism, a pan-Slavic and Orthodox religious uniformity within the frames of this article is a dimension of the Eurasianist civilization, which the WB find attractive.
- 7 Cossacks, initially a self-governing group and later part of Russia's military, have historically played an important role in securing both Russia's and Ukraine's borderlands. The origin of the Cossacks is disputed, oscillating between Slavic and Turkic roots. Hanyes (2016) describes the

- Balkan Cossack Army as “subordinate to the Moscow-based Central Cossack Army... which Mr. Putin established by presidential decree in April 2014.”
- 8 All translations from Albanian, Bosnian, Croatian, Macedonian, and Serbian henceforth are our own.
 - 9 The first summit of the of the Non-Aligned Movement held in 1961 was hosted in Belgrade, largely on the initiative of Tito. Yugoslavia was one of the founding members of this movement, which positioned the foreign policy of the Yugoslav Federation (but not only) during the Cold War as neither aligned with the US, nor with the Soviet Union, but rather as neutral and ideologically guided by non-alignment.

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