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· Themistoklis Tzimas · Vesna Bojičić-Dželilović ·
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Milenko Petrovic
A Broken Promise: EU Enlargement Into the Western Balkans

Biljana Vankovska
Macedonia's Geopolitical Alignment: Navigating Without a Compass in the Multipolar World

Zlatan Begić
Bosnia and Herzegovina: Between the West and the Rest

Oya Dursun-Özkanca
The Western Balkans and Prospects for EU and NATO Accession

George Koukoudakis
Albanian - Greek Relations and Tirana's Quest for the EU Membership

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

9 Aybars Arda Kılıçer
Revisiting Balkans: Between the West and the Rest

12 Milenko Petrovic
A Broken Promise: EU Enlargement Into the Western Balkans

20 Biljana Vankovska
Macedonia's Geopolitical Alignment: Navigating without a Compass in the Multipolar World

28 Zlatan Begić
Bosnia and Herzegovina: Between the West and the Rest

36 Oya Dursun-Özkanca
The Western Balkans and Prospects for EU and NATO Accession

44 George Koukoudakis
Albanian-Greek Relations and Tirana's Quest for the EU Membership

50 Themistoklis Tzimas
Kosovo, the "Four-Pillar" Strategy of Serbia and the Antagonism between the "West" and "More-than-the-Rest"

60 Vesna Bojičić-Dželilović
Western Balkans Regimes that Obstruct, and Their External Contingencies

68 Cristian Nitou & Arbnor Bajraliu
The Western Balkans in an Unstable World Order: The Role of China, the European Union and Russia

76 Gözde Yilmaz
The End of a Fairy Tale, the Start of a New Era? The EU and China in the Western Balkans

84 Samuel Dempsey
NATO Has a Gen-Z Problem

Revisiting Balkans: Between the West and the Rest

The Balkans, a region often caught in the crosscurrents of global power dynamics, stands as a testament to the intricate and evolving geopolitical landscape. Historically a bridge between East and West, the Balkans today are a focal point of strategic interests from major global players, including the European Union, NATO, Russia, and Turkey. The region's journey through the post-Yugoslav era, marked by its aspirations for Euro-Atlantic integration and the persistent influence of external actors, underscores the complexity of achieving lasting stability and development.

Considering recent geopolitical shifts and the region's enduring vulnerabilities, this special issue of TPQ aims to explore the multifaceted realities and future prospects of the Balkans. The contributions in this issue delve into the political, economic, and social dimensions of the region, examining the interplay between internal dynamics and external interventions. The overarching goal is to provide a nuanced understanding of the Balkans' position at the intersection of Western and non-Western influences, and to stimulate thoughtful discourse on the path forward for this historically significant region.

This issue stands out by offering a diverse array of perspectives and articles, featuring prominent voices from academia, bureaucracy, and policy-making. Moreover, this is the first issue in TPQ's recent history, where we provide Turkish and Russian translations for our articles. In the coming months, we are planning to include Spanish and other languages to further expand our reach to the globe.

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to every single author for their invaluable contributions and guidance in shaping this special issue. It has been an honor to collaborate with them, and we are deeply thankful for their unwavering support for our journal. Our contributors hail from a variety of influential countries and regions engaged in the Balkans' discourse, including Bosnia and Herzegovina, Greece, New Zealand, the North Macedonia, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Türkiye, among others. Through this issue, TPQ aims to foster constructive conversations and provide a platform for meaningful dialogue on the future of the Balkans and its place in the broader global context.

Professor Milenko Petrovic's study analyzes the lack of progress in the European Union's expansion into the Western Balkans, comparing it to the successful inclusion of post-communist countries in East Central Europe (ECE) and the Baltics. He argues the EU's actions, or lack thereof, are mostly to blame, even if other academics and EU officials blame the delay on the political unrest and refusal to accept EU norms in the Western Balkans. Despite the initial progress made after the 2003 Thessaloniki agenda, which offered EU membership to Western Balkan states, the EU became less enthusiastic and more cautious due to doubts about its ability to handle new members and a general weariness towards expansion. As a result, the

EU imposed stricter standards for countries seeking admittance. He criticizes the EU's strategy, arguing that it has exploited enlargement pledges as a tool for foreign policy to further the geopolitical objectives of its member states, as evidenced by the unexpected candidate status granted to Moldova and Ukraine amidst the ongoing Russian invasion. Professor Petrovic asserts that the European Union's expansion into the Western Balkans primarily serves the purpose of safeguarding the stability and security interests of its existing member states, rather than solely focusing on granting membership to the candidate states.

Professor Biljana Vankovska asserts that the Macedonian elites have consistently followed the TINA principle (There Is No Alternative) throughout the majority of the state's history as an independent entity. Irrespective of their ideological stance on the issue, they all agreed that the country's future and economic success depend entirely on joining NATO and the European Union. She contends that although full membership in NATO was attained in March 2020, it was accompanied by a significant national cost. Attaining EU membership continues to be as difficult to achieve as it has always been. Meanwhile, the world has undergone a significant revolution characterized by a complicated multipolar shift. She emphasizes North Macedonia's lack of ability to develop a separate and autonomous foreign and internal policy. Professor Vankovska stresses that the fundamental assumption is that the country has positioned itself in accordance with the diminishing and armed Western powers, frequently disregarding its own national interests. She argues that this alliance positions Macedonia in an adversarial position against the Rest, resulting in significant harm to its national interests. According to her, this predicament as a no-win scenario.

Professor Zlatan Begic provides an analysis of the current situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, in the context of the relationships and the influence of the pro-Russian political factor, the hegemonic policies of official Belgrade and Zagreb towards Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as the Western political influence. He focuses on the flaws in the Dayton Peace Agreement and the Bosnian Constitution, which he claims support the hegemonic policies of official Belgrade and Zagreb (Croatia) and Russian influence. Professor Begic also examines the perplexing acts of the Western powers in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which he asserts continue to exert a significant impact on domestic political developments.

Professor Oya Dursun-Özkanca argues that the Western Balkans region holds vital strategic importance for transatlantic security. She holds the belief that after the collapse of the Former Yugoslavia, the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) have played an active role in promoting regional stability. This has been achieved through peace missions and by providing integration opportunities to the countries in the region within the transatlantic structures. In the midst of a long period of exhaustion from expanding, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has emphasized the importance of integrating the Western Balkans into transatlantic

institutions. She looks at current events in the Western Balkans and assesses the likelihood that the countries in the region will integrate into the European Union.

On behalf of Transatlantic Policy Quarterly, I would like to express my gratitude to all the contributors who committed a significant amount of effort and work. Moreover, we are grateful for our Premium Cooparete Sponsor for this issue, Tüpraş. We also like to thank our other sponsors, TEB and Uluslararası İlişkiler Dergisi for their ongoing support.

Aybars Arda Kılıçer

Editor-in-Chief

Research Article

A BROKEN PROMISE: EU ENLARGEMENT INTO THE WESTERN BALKANS

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This article examines the stalled progress of EU enlargement into the Western Balkans, contrasting it with the successful accession of post-communist countries in East Central Europe (ECE) and the Baltics. While EU officials and some scholars attribute the delay to the Western Balkans' political instability and failure to adopt EU norms, the author argues that the EU's actions, or lack thereof, are primarily responsible. Despite initial momentum following the 2003 Thessaloniki agenda, which promised Western Balkan states EU membership, enlargement fatigue and concerns over absorption capacity led the EU to tighten accession conditions. The article critiques the EU's approach, suggesting that it has used enlargement promises as a foreign policy tool, for achieving the geopolitical interests of its member states, as seen in the sudden granting of candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The author concludes that the EU's enlargement into the Western Balkans is more about achieving member states' stability-security interests than ensuring membership for candidate states.

Milenko Petrovic*

Keywords: EU enlargement, Western Balkans,
EU Integration, Stability-Security, Democratization.

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Reviziting Balkans

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There is wide academic and political consensus that the EU enlargement process has decisively contributed to the successful democratization and marketization of the post-communist countries of East Central Europe (ECE) and the Baltics, all of which became EU members in 2004 or 2007. More disputed are the reasons why this process slowed down after 2007 and effectively stopped after 2013 when Croatia acceded the EU.

EU officials and a number of scholars[1] argue that the main causes for the 'enlargement delay' of other post-communist European states should be found in their 'chronic' political instability and structural inability to adopt the core EU norms and values incorporated in the accession conditions. The latter primarily considers the functioning of institutions of democracy and respect for the rule of law. However, the reality appears to be less clear cut, particularly regarding the reasons behind the postponed accession of a small group of the Western Balkan (WB) states,[2] which are geographically surrounded by EU member states (including their Balkan neighbors Bulgaria, Romania, and Croatia) with which they share a lot of common history and values. While it is true that WB states were socio-economically less developed (like neighboring Romania and Bulgaria) than most of the post-communist states that joined the EU in 2004, there were no significant differences in the development of the institutions of liberal democracy and market economy between the latter and the Western Balkan states during their pre-communis and communist past.[3] It is also true that due to the emergence of post-communist nationalist-authoritarian regimes and post-Yugoslav wars in the 1990s, the Western Balkan states were not able to make any significant progress in post-communist reforms before the early 2000s and objectively were not able to apply for EU membership, let alone to meet the Copenhagen accession conditions[4] together with their post-communist counterparts from ECE and the Baltics. However, the reasons why Croatia is the only Western Balkan state to have succeeded in reaching this goal 21 years after the EU stated in the 2003 Thessaloniki agenda[5] that all these states 'will be an integral part of a united

1) Arista Maria Cirtautas and Frank Schimmelfennig, "Europeanisation Before and After Accession: Conditionality, Legacies and Compliance," *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 62, No. 3 (2010), p. 421-441; J. Seroka, "Issues with Regional Reintegration of the Western Balkans", *Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (2008), p. 15-29; Andrew C. Janos, *East Central Europe in the Modern World. The Politics of the Borderlands from Pre-to Postcommunism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

2) The term "Western Balkans" was invented by the EU in the late 1990s when it launched the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP) for post-Yugoslav states (excluding Slovenia) and Albania (see below) in order to make a distinction between them and other two (eastern) Balkan states, Romania and Bulgaria which were by then included in the 2004/07 enlargement process.

3) For more details see Richard. J. Crampton, *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century and After* (Routledge, 1997); M. Petrovic, "The Role of Geography and History in Determining the slower progress of Post-Communist Transition in the Balkans," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 2 (2008), and M. Petrovic, *The Democratic Transition of Post-Communist Europe* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

4) Accession conditions for new candidates for EU membership adopted at the European Council's meeting in Copenhagen of 22-23 June 1993.

5) EU General Affairs and External Relations Council, 2003. *The Thessaloniki agenda for the Western Balkans: Moving*

Europe', are primarily caused by the EU's (in) actions.

Following the successful replacement of post-communist authoritarian regimes with pro-reformist and pro-EU governments in the two largest countries in the region, Serbia (then with Montenegro) and Croatia,[6] and speedy progress in accession negotiations with the ECE and Baltic states, the EU's enlargement promise given in the Thessaloniki agenda (and at several other EU Council and European Council meetings held in the early 2000s) seemed genuine and led to significant acceleration of post-communist political and economic transformation in the Western Balkans (Table). However, the prospects for the accession of the Western Balkan states to the EU began to deteriorate just a few years after the Thessaloniki agenda was issued, and even before the 2004/07 enlargement round finalized. Emerging enlargement fatigue and fears for the EU's 'absorption capacity' in key member states, pressured the Council to 'renew [the] consensus on enlargement' and de facto tighten the Copenhagen accession conditions and make the accession process more demanding and complex for new applicants.[7] From that moment on, the basic objective of EU enlargement policy towards the Western Balkan states was not to speed up the accession of these states, but rather to try to avoid 'mistakes' from previous enlargement rounds, particularly those related to the 'premature' accession of Romania and Bulgaria[8] and use the enlargement promise as a 'carrot' to achieve the goals of its stabstabilizationurity policy in the region.[9]

In addition to the tightened Copenhagen 1993 accession conditions and conditions coming from the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP) for post-war reconciliation and peace-building in the region,[10] the new approach to EU enlargement after 2006 (i.e. after completion of the 2004/07 enlargement) also included the additional conditions related to compliance with the EU's initiatives for resolving

towards European Integration, Council Conclusions, Luxembourg, 16 June 2003, Annex A.

6) After the death of Croatia's authoritarian president Tudjman in December 1999 and the overthrow of Serbia's post-communist dictator Milosevic in October the following year.

7) European Council, 2006a. *Presidency Conclusions*, Brussels, 14-15 December 2006, point 4. For further reading see Petrovic 2013, op. cit and David Phinnemore, "Beyond 25—the Changing Face of EU Enlargement: Commitment, Conditionality and the Constitutional Treaty," *Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (2006), p. 7-26.

8) However, more thorough analyses show that there is no real evidence that the post-accession trajectories of these two countries have significantly differed from those of their post-communist counterparts who joined the EU in 2004. See e.g. G. Pop-Eleches and P. Levitz, "Monitoring, Money and Migrants: Countering Post-Accession Backsliding in Bulgaria and Romania," *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 62, No. 3 (2010), 461-79 and U. Sedelmeier, "Anchoring Democracy from Above: The European Union and Democratic Backsliding in Hungary and Romania after Accession," *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 52, No. 1, (2014), p. 105–21.

9) V. Anghel and J. Dzankic, "Wartime EU: Consequences of the Russia-Ukraine War on the Enlargement Process," *Journal of European Integration*, Vol. 45, No. 3 (2023), p. 487-501.

10) Although necessary for overcoming the negative legacies and consequences of the 1990 wars, the SAP conditions, particularly those related to cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal in The Hague [ICTY] were sometimes very difficult to comply with as they involved 'high political costs of compliance [for] the targeted governments', see Frank Schimmelfennig, (2008).

the contested statehood status of some of the Western Balkan states. In this way, candidates and potential candidates for EU membership from the Western Balkans have had to cope with several sets of additional accession conditions imposed after the EU offered them an 'EU future' in 2003.[11] In comparison, the post-communist states that joined the EU within the 2004/2007 enlargement round had only to meet the Copenhagen conditions defined in 1993.

Although EU officials and a significant number of scholars often use arguments of insufficient democratization, continuously high levels of corruption, and (in more recent EU documents and academic sources) the 'captured state'[12] as the basic reasons for the slow progress of EU enlargement into the Western Balkans, the Copenhagen conditions on democratization or the establishment of a 'functioning market economy' have never been the most important accession requirements for the Western Balkan states. Besides, as Petrovic and Smith argue[13] (and is also visible from the data presented in Table 1), the level of democratization and economic marketization reached by the most advanced Western Balkan candidates for EU membership – Serbia, North Macedonia, and Montenegro - by the early 2010s was not much below that of the neighboring EU member states – Croatia, Bulgaria and Romania.

Table 1. Indicators of Post-Communist Democratization*

Country	2010	2014	2018	2022
Hungary	5.61	5.04	4.29	3.57
Poland	5.68	5.82	5.11	4.54
Slovakia	5.32	5.39	5.39	5.25
Romania	4.54	4.54	4.54	4.36
Bulgaria	4.96	4.75	4.61	4.50
Croatia	4.29	4.32	4.25	4.25
North Macedonia	4.21	4.00	3.64	3.82

11) For more details see M. Petrovic, "Post-Communist Transition under the Umbrella of Univen Europeanisation: East Central Europe, the Baltic States and the Balkans," In Fish, Steven, M., Gill, Graeme and Milenko Petrovic (eds.). *A Quarter Century of Post-Communism Assessed* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 41-74.

12) See e.g. Soren Keil, "The Business of State Capture and the Rise of Authoritarianism in Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia," *Southeastern Europe*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (2018), p. 59–82 and Solveig Richtera and Natasha Wunsch, "Money, Power, Glory: the Linkages Between EU Conditionality and State Capture in the Western Balkans," *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (2020), p. 41-62.

13) Milenko Petrovic and Nicholas Ross Smith, "In Croatia's Slipstream or on an Alternative Road? Assessing the Objective Case for the Remaining Western Balkan States Acceding into the EU," *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (2013), p. 553-573.

Albania	4.07	3.82	3.89	3.75
Bosnia and Herzegovina	3.75	3.57	3.36	3.29
Montenegro	4.21	4.14	4.07	3.82
Serbia	4.29	4.36	4.04	3.79
Kosovo	2.93	2.86	3.07	3.25
Ukraine	3.61	3.07	3.36	3.36
Moldova	2.86	3.14	3.07	3.11
Georgia	3.07	3.32	3.32	3.07

Source: Freedom House, Nations in Transit 2020 and 2022.

The necessity to further consolidate and improve the functioning of the country's democratic institutions, which after 2014 considerably deteriorated in all the Western Balkan states (as well as in many EU member states, particularly in Poland and Hungary – Table 1)[14] certainly exists, but it has never been the main reason for their slow progress in the accession process. Compliance with the SAP conditions and other requirements raised from EU strategic visions on the stability and security in the region (primarily defined by the EU's stances on and incentives for the resolution of the 'hot political issues' in the region)[15] have always been at the core of the EU's accession conditions for Western Balkans candidates. Both the opening of Croatia's accession negotiations in October 2005 and the signing of Serbia's Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) with the EU in 2008 were postponed (and Serbia's SAA also frozen immediately after it was signed in April 2008) due to these two countries' lack of cooperation with the ICTY in The Hague in delivering their citizens accused of war crimes to the Court.

Similarly, the Council postponed its response to the Commission's recommendation to grant official candidate status to Serbia from December 2011 to March 2012 due to Serbia's unsatisfactory progress 'in the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue' on issues arising from its refusal to recognize Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence in 2008.[16] Although the Commission had recommended to the Council to open accession negotiations with North Macedonia already in 2009[17] the Council has continued to block the opening of accession negotiations with this country until the

14) See also S. Keil, (op.cit), and Anna Gora and Pieter de Wilde, "The Essence of Democratic Backsliding in the European Union: Deliberation and Rule of Law', *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (2022), p. 342-362.

15) Most notably the Serbia-Kosovo dispute over the latter's independence, the Bosnia-Herzegovina intra-ethnic disputes regarding the country's constitutional order and North Macedonia's disputes with its neighbours about its name, national identity and language.

16) European Council, 2011. *Presidency Conclusions*, Brussels, 9 December, 2011, point 13.

17) European Commission, 2009. *Enlargement Strategy and Main Challenges 2009-2010*, COM(2009) 533 final, Brussels, 14 October 2009.

present day. The main reason for this was not related to the country's democratization or respect for the rule of law but, it was the Greek veto over North Macedonia's former constitutional name 'the Republic of Macedonia.' However, after officially changing its name in 2019, Bulgaria's veto over North Macedonia's national/ethnic identity and language became the primary obstacle to opening accession negotiations with this country, nearly 15 years after the European Commission declared it ready in 2009.

That the EU has largely prioritized its (leading member states') stability-security goals in the Western Balkan region over advancing democracy standards and other necessary socio-economic reforms that could indeed prepare Western Balkan candidates for membership became obvious after the European Commission began to include requirements related to regional political stability in the accession negotiation process. Although the Commission has traditionally been responsible for carrying out the administrative-technical aspects of the accession process related to the candidates' capacity to meet EU standards and norms defined in the Copenhagen conditions, in the accession negotiations with Serbia (opened in 2014) an additional chapter on the resolution of Serbia's relations with Kosovo was included. This additional 'stability-security' accession condition was later applied to all candidate countries in the Commission's 'new' Enlargement strategy for the Western Balkans of February 2018[18] through the requirement that the Western Balkan candidates have to find 'definitive solutions to disputes with neighbours' (p. 3) and solve them 'as a matter of urgency' (p. 8) as the EU 'will not accept to import these disputes and the instability they could entail' (p.3).

While the insistence on re-establishing good neighborly relations has been at the core of the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP) since its inception, a firm request for the resolution of disputes between candidate countries and their neighbors as a de facto accession precondition had never been imposed on any candidate country in previous enlargement rounds. When Cyprus was admitted into the EU in 2004, it was not asked to solve its (still) unresolved dispute with Türkiye over its partition on the northern (Turkish) and southern (Greek) part, nor was Croatia asked to resolve its (also still ongoing) dispute with Slovenia over their maritime border before it joined the EU in 2013. As Petrovic and Wilson argue, this accession pre-condition has 'in contrast to all other Copenhagen and post-Copenhagen accession conditions, broadened the scope of its fulfillment beyond the capacity and competency of the [candidate] country governments'.[19] In fact, it enables an EU member state that has a bilateral dispute with an EU candidate, to hold up the latter's accession bid until

18) European Commission, 2018. *A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans*. COM(2018) 65 final. EN. Strasbourg, 6 February.

19) Milenko Petrovic and Garth Wilson, "Bilateral relations in the Western Balkans as a challenge for EU Accession," *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (2021), p. 201-218 (p. 202).

their dispute is resolved to the former's satisfaction, even before the Commission's recommendation comes to the Council. Whereas earlier, a member state could have blocked a candidate's accession bid only in the Council, after the Commission had submitted its recommendation about this candidate's progress in accession (as was the case with the Greek veto over North Macedonia's name) the Commission's 2018 Enlargement strategy allows this to happen already during the accession negotiations process. Given the level of difficulty in finding solutions to bilateral disputes in the region (both by the countries involved and by the EU through its incentives that have so far failed to resolve any of the Western Balkans' hotspots), an EU member state can now hold up one's accession negotiations indefinitely.

The current European Commission, formed in 2019 to be, in words of its President Ursula von der Leyen, a 'geopolitical Commission'[20] and the new enlargement methodology adopted in February 2020 have further strengthened the involvement of the Council and individual member states in the accession negotiations process and prioritization of their political preferences in it.[21] Final confirmation that the EU's enlargement into the Western Balkans (and generally Eastern Europe) after 2013 is merely a foreign policy tool for achieving the stability-security interests of EU member states, with no real intention of guaranteeing membership status to candidate states,[22] came with the sudden 'expansion' of the enlargement process after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Only three months after the invasion, in June 2022, the EU granted candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova, irrespective of these two's problematic democratic records and although it had continuously refused to offer to them (and the other four East European post-Soviet states) anything more than expanded cooperation within its Eastern Partnership programme, with no enlargement promise for almost two previous decades.[23]

Following developments, the final opening of the accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania in July 2022 (17 and 8 years, respectively after the EU granted them candidate status), the granting of candidate status to Bosnia and Herzegovina in December 2022, and the European Council's decision of 14 December 2023[24] to grant candidate status to Georgia and (already) open accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova can hardly convince the most naïve enlargement optimists that EU leaders really plan to enlarge the Union with any of these countries. More likely, they will share the fate of the two current 'frontrunners' Montenegro and Serbia, which

20) European Commission. 2019. *The von der Leyen Commission: for a Union that strives for more*. Press release IP/19/5542. Brussels, 10 September.

21) Milenko Petrovic and Nikolaos Tzifakis, "A Geopolitical Turn to EU Enlargement, or Another Postponement? An Introduction," *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (2021), p. 157-168.

22) Compare Anghel and Dzankic, op. cit.

23) See Table 1 and Anghel, V. and J. Dzankic, op. cit.

24) European Commission, 2023. 'European leaders decide to open accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova in a historic summit'. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ac_23_67110

are still negotiating their accession chapters with no sign of closure in the foreseeable future (twelve and ten years, respectively, after their accession negotiations opened).

Research Article

MACEDONIA'S GEOPOLITICAL ALIGNMENT: NAVIGATING WITHOUT A COMPASS IN THE MULTIPOLAR WORLD

DOI: 10.58867/OEQI6417

The Macedonian elites have adhered to the so-called TINA principle (There Is No Alternative) for most of the state's independent existence. Regardless of their ideological position on the specter, they shared a consensus that the country's future and prosperity lie solely in becoming members of NATO and the European Union. While the full membership in NATO was achieved in March 2020, it came at a high national cost. The EU membership remains as elusive as ever. Meanwhile, the world has dramatically changed due to the complex multipol transformation. This article highlights North Macedonia's (hereafter in the text, Macedonia) inability to craft an independent foreign and domestic policy. The key premise is that the country has aligned itself with the declining and militarized West, often against its national interests. This alignment places Macedonia in a confrontational stance toward the Rest, again at a high cost to its national interests. It appears to be a lose-lose situation.

Biljana Vankovska*

Keywords: Macedonia, Geopolitics, Multipolarity, Dependence, West, China.

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Reviziting Balkans

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The most appropriate phrase that captures the current state of global affairs is something Antonio Gramsci wrote in 1929: "The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum, a great variety of morbid symptoms appear."[1] Slavoj Zizek rephrase it in the following (more popular) way: "The old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born: now is the time of monsters." Undoubtedly, after the failure of the peace dividend expected after the fall of the Berlin wall, also the unipolar moment of the only superpower (USA) is far gone. Hegemons have problems accepting reality, and any rivalry (in economic or other field) is seen as an inimical act and threat to national security.

The international relations and the position of certain great powers (notably, China) had already been changing.[2] Still, the Ukraine project was the turning point: first in 2014 (Euromaidan)[3] and then the escalation of a military situation after the failure of the Minsk Agreements. The Euromaidan regime change, inspired by external forces, raised many academic and policy discussions if the world was entering a Second Cold War.[4] But, the aftermath of the 2022 developments in Ukraine (and in addition the growing tensions over the Taiwan Strait) have now raised up global fears of a cloud of a possible nuclear disaster. Looking from the bright side, the decline of the Western dominance is a reason for hope among many nations that suffered under liberal interventionism, neocolonialism, and exploitation.

Although the phrase "the West and the Rest" has entered the vocabulary, the more correct one should read "the West and the Global Majority". Perceptions on what is going on in the West and the Rest differ, as each side see the "monster" in the image of the 'Other'. Hence a Cambridge report[5] shows that among the 1.2 billion people who live in liberal democracies, 75 percent hold a negative view of China, while 87 percent hold a negative view of Russia. However, for those who live in the majority of the world, the perception is reversed: 70 percent feel positive toward China, and 66 percent feel positive toward Russia. Together with the rising influence of the BRICS group of nations, this growing North-South divide is accelerating a shift to a multipolar order. Also, many surveys show that the Western population (especially, the youth) shows signs of pessimism and anxiety, while

1) Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith ed. and trans. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971): 276.

2) China has become the second largest economy next to the United States since 2010. See more in: Huiyun Feng, Kai He and Yan Xuetong (eds), *Chinese Scholars and Foreign Policy Debating International Relations* (London and NY, Routledge, 2019).

3) John J. Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin", *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2014, available at https://www.mearsheimer.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Why-the-Ukraine-Crisis-Is.pdf

4) Richard Sakwa, *The Lost Peace: How the West Failed to Prevent a Second Cold War* (Yale University Press, 2023).

5) Roberto S. Foa et al, *A World Divided Russia, China and the West*, University of Cambridge, Centre for the Future of Democracy, October 2022, available at https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/A_World_Divided.pdf

in the 'East' there is growing optimism about the future and personal wellbeing.

Some scholars rightly argue that the dynamic interplay of multivector factors at the time being call for a careful deliberation and distinction between multipolarism and multipolarity. The number and the size of the new "poles" is still in the making, and it's hard to predict how the world will look like in a decade (if not sooner). Although one could offer historical facts that multipolarity is nothing new in IR, the return of great powers politics looks more like a classical (war-like) geopolitics, bringing a lot of risks and turmoil. However, many scholars and public intellectuals are already engaged in the promotion of cooperative multipolar system and geopolitics of peace. Even if the great rivals manage to avoid nuclear confrontation, this great transformation affects certain unstable regions (faultlines) where these states confront or border. The worst prognosis is related to the regions in which conflict potential already exists. Unfortunately, the so-called Western Balkans is one of them.

The Uncertain Configuration of Western Balkans

In her book "Imagining the Balkans",[6] Bulgarian scholar Maria Todorova de-facto offered a brilliant description of Balkanism (i.e. the Western stereotypes of the region) based on Edward Said's memorable "Orientalism".[7] Unfortunately, the basic conclusions haven't changed despite the alleged Europeanization of the region (through EU enlargement policy). As if echoing an old Baltic German philosopher's phrase ("If the Balkans hadn't existed, they would have been invented"), right after the Yugoslavia's collapse, the West (mostly NATO and EU) practically invented the so-called Western Balkans. This pseudo-region exists only in the political imagination of Brussels and Washington. Still, due to the persistent propaganda and tutoring, it has penetrated the vocabulary of respective political elites, scholars and intellectuals as if has existed forever. The portrait of this region resembles a broken mirror. It represents a series of semi-protectorates that have been following Western medicines for decades in hope that one day they will be welcomed and embraced in the "European family".[8]

Actually, the EU state-building in its 'near neighborhood' is one of the key reasons for the state of affairs at the moment. The fall of Yugoslavia enabled formation of seven (allegedly) independent states, but few of them are "finished" and sustainable. The Balkans (alike the Middle East) used to be and still is a litmus test and a field for various Western-made experiments in state-building. The long-lasting and futile process of EU (non)integration, and the economic needs of the respective states in

6) Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, updated edition (Oxford University Press, 2009).

7) Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (NY: Vintage Books, 1994).

8) Actually, the European Union has the inner tendency to falsely present herself as Europe, which does not fit the facts. But this approach has made a great impact on self-perception of the inhabitants of this region who see themselves as less worthy, not-quite-European, and inferior population that is unable to exercise the right to self-determination and sovereignty, even in constitutional affairs.

the region, resulted in a greater interest for the rest of the world. Obviously, Serbia proved to be a champion in this respect, thanks to her prudent use of the old Yugoslav (diplomatic) traditions and connections with the so-called Third World, but also due to the developed academic and policy-making circles that did not shy away from exploring new alternatives in the era of multipolarity.[9] Gradually, the so-called Western Balkan (an EU ghetto for unwanted neighbors, or a troublesome frontier with the Rest of the world) has become a microcosm of multipolarity, inter alia, because of reciprocal interest by other non-Western powers, such as Russia, China, Emirates, India, etc. Maybe not as stark an example as Serbia, yet many Balkan states have opened the doors for foreign enterprises and projects desperately needing development and infrastructure building. Hungary (seen as an infant terrible in the EU/NATO circles) has decided to protect its own national interests first. Bulgaria, another member state of NATO and EU, goes through internal divisions over the geopolitical decision-making, but still does not close the door of cooperation with non-Western partners. The same applies to Greece. Bosnia and Herzegovina is a special case due to the internal fractures, and the rogue position of Republika Srpska that is willing to cooperate with whoever wants to invest in the impoverished entity. Montenegro and Albania have had quite a lot of experiences cooperating with China, especially.

The Western power centers did not stand still. It did not take long to undertake disciplinary measures in order to secure the loyalty of the Balkan pawns (mis)using their internal or regional disputes and weaknesses. In addition to the traditional "stick and carrot" mechanisms, USA and EU have seen an urgent need to respond to (especially, China's) soft power incursions. The number of NGOs, think tanks, media portals, etc. has exploded in the last few years. The well-known US and European foundations and policy-making centers, embassies, etc. fund the majority of them. The EU's control mechanisms and fact-checkers are particularly influential as they often create regional hubs and networks.[10] Another similar platform is CHOICE. It represents itself in the following way: "CHOICE is a multinational consortium of experts providing informed analysis on the rising influence of the

9) See more: Dušan Prorokovic, *Era multipolarnosti* (Beograd: Sluzbeni glasnik, 2018).

10) For instance, Antidisinfo.net describes its mission in the following way: "The Anti-Disinformation Network for the Balkans (ADN-Balkans) serves as the basis of a cooperation between civil society organizations, media outlets, educational institutions and all other relevant stakeholders with a goal of forming a wide front on countering disinformation through affirmation of the highest standards of fact-checking and all other ethical principles of professional journalism, as well as promoting media literacy and critical thinking." ADN-Balkans brings together the following NGOs from the Western Balkans and neighboring EU countries, Bulgaria and Greece: Metamorphosis, Foundation for Internet and Society from North Macedonia, founder of Truthmeter.mk, Portalb.mk and Meta.mk, Faktoje.al from Albania, JAJ.gr (Journalists About Journalism) from Greece, empowered by News Literacy Center, NGO for Media & News Literacy, Crno beli svet (CBS), organization and online portal from Kosovo, Peace Journalism Lab, School of Journalism and Mass Media Communication, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece, Digital Communication Network SouthEast Europe Hub, Greece, Istinomer from Serbia, Ellinika Hoaxes from Greece, Internews Kosova, founder of KALLXO from Kosovo, BlueLink Foundation, founder of Evromegdan and BlueLink Stories from Bulgaria. It is noteworthy that a group of the same experts often work on multiple similar projects, suggesting a profit-driven engagement rather than a genuinely broad and effective influence of these NGOs.

People's Republic of China within the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. CHOICE provides a platform for discussion, information sharing, best practices, and collaboration for its members monitoring and evaluating Chinese activity in CEE."[11]

It is enough to just look at the titles of the reports/articles, and the conclusion is self-evident: hardly any text is favorable about China's role in the region/Europe. Surely, since February 2022 the main focus is on "Russian influence", but China is mentioned right away, next to Russia. On the other hand, in the public it is hard to detect any particular response to such accusations by China or its officials, embassies, etc. Actually, the public appearances of the Chinese diplomats are rare, while the public has no opportunities to see and hear the Chinese intellectuals, journalists, professors, experts, etc. The Western opinion-makers have total dominance over the public space but it does not satisfy the fact-checkers who want no other influence whatsoever.

The Curious Case of Macedonia's Loyalty to the West

The price that the Macedonian people and state have paid for the sake of NATO (and potentially EU) membership is so peculiar and bizarre that it is hard to explain such a foreign policy that brings more costs than benefits. Bearing in mind that the foreign and domestic policies are deeply intertwined, one could say that Western tutelage stripped away Macedonian statehood and sovereignty, making it even less stateless than it was in 1991. One could use as a metaphor the title of the famous novel of Scott Fitzgerald, The Curious Case of Benjamin Button. In simple words, the longer the Europeanization process takes, the less mature and sustainable Macedonia becomes. Actually, due to the pressures both from the neighboring states (Greece and Bulgaria), who have nothing to do with the Copenhagen criteria but with identity issues and nation's recognition as such, Macedonia gets further away from the final goal – even the start of the negotiation process becomes the unreachable aim. To make things more ironic, Ukraine started the negotiation process in the midst of a war under the martial law. At the same time, Macedonia is still blackmailed to change the constitution (i.e. to include the Bulgarians as a constitutive nation) and to pay respect to the name deal concluded with Greece against the jus cogens norms of the international law.

This particular sui generis case of Westernization/Europeanization has been discussed elsewhere,[12] but the end result is dreadful. To paraphrase brilliant Romanian scholar, Bogdan Stefanescu,[13] Macedonia has also (as some other

11) CHOICE, available at https://chinaobservers.eu/

12) Ristevska Jordanova Malinka and Simonida Kacarska, EU - North Macedonia accession negotiations: the implications of the Bulgarian conditions, Skopje: EPI, 2020, available at https://epi.org.mk/post/team/putting-citizens-first-exploring-public-perceptions-of-administrative-services-in?lang=en; Biljana Vankovska, "Guiding Macedonia to the EU: Walking Over European Values". In: Branislav Radeljic (ed.), *The (Un)Wanted Europeanness. Understanding Division and Inclusion in Contemporary Europe* (Berlin: DeGruyter); Adrian Waters, "The Impact of EU State-Building Policies on the Democratization Process in Macedonia - a Realist Analysis", *Security Dialogues*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (2021).

13) Bogdan Stefanescu, *Postcommunism/Postcolonialism: Siblings of Subalternity*, (Bucharesti, 2012).

postcommunist states) experienced historical vacancy (void of historical action), a significant silence (void of vocality), anonymous Macedonians who must not name themselves as Macedonians (void of personality) and eventually, rigor mortis (void of vitality). All that was accepted through externally imposed treaties and constitutional engineering for the sake of a bright future in an imagined EU, which is now trembling amidst a combination of political, financial, migrant and war crises.

In fact, the previous Macedonian government of Nikola Gruevski (2006-2016) made an attempt to catch up with the changing world and dared 'look eastward'. Gruevski was punished and disciplined rather quickly for his stubbornness (unwillingness to change the name of the state) and for his non-Western initiatives (bringing foreign investors from the non-Western parts of the world, contracting Chinese construction company to build highways, and mostly for the interest to join the Russian pipeline project known as South Stream, which failed due to geopolitical reasons – although not so spectacularly as the North Stream). The culmination of the Western disciplinary power was the so-called Colorful Revolution (2015/2016) that toppled down the government and brought in a more cooperative leader, such as Zoran Zaev). The Chinese projects were immediately framed as corruptive and even substandard. Instead, a few years later, the most expensive construction project was given to Behtel&Enka Corporation against the domestic regulations and EU standards. Geo-economics met geopolitics, but also served well the ethnic Albanian interests in bringing all Albanian-populated areas closer and faster together.

Macedonia celebrated the fourth anniversary of joining NATO in March 2024. However, the illusion of gaining increased security, economic attractiveness for foreign investors and well-being was short-lived. As soon as the Covid-19 anxiety came to its end, the Ukraine war has changed everything. Not only NATO got involved into a proxy war with Russia, but its member-states get engaged into showing full loyalty to Brussels by offering military assistance to a non-NATO state but also followed the Alliance's geopolitical directions both vis-à-vis Russia and China. The negative effects of these currents have affected all sectors: Macedonia's budget allocations have gone beyond 2 percent of GDP,[14] while the economic trends were going downhill. No foreign investors arrived, while the Chinese projects are not quite welcome. Furthermore, the sanctions against Russia had a self-harming effect especially for the agricultural sector. The global politics has become biopolitics, politics of life or death (due to the looming nuclear Armageddon).

Ironically, throughout the years, the Macedonian citizens got persuaded that NATO membership was the only way to reach the more desired goal: the EU membership

14) Out of 32 countries, Macedonia belongs to the group of 18 whose defense budgets went beyond the 2 percent requirement from the Wales summit. This fact gets more importance in one of the poorest and least developed European states.

(or better, the economic and social benefits of EU membership). The examples of a few EU states that are not parts of NATO were not sufficiently persuasive, because the U.S. and NATO experts de facto designed national security model. In mid-2024 one could argue that the EU (the Western Balkan's states dreamt of) has turned into a civilian subcontractor of NATO, also fully focused on security issues (Ukraine and migration, are just two of the most important ones in the long list of insecurities). Even the elections for the EU Parliament proved that the debate focused more on fears from war and the needs for greater security rather than on citizens' well-being, energy security, climate change, etc. Despite all these changes both in NATO and the EU, Macedonia apparently remains one of the most loyal pro-Western states in the Western Balkans. The reason is simple: during the plus three decades of independence, the political elites have never ever discussed any other option for military security, economic development, or cooperation with other parts of the world. Former Vice Prime Minister Artan Grubi spelled this foreign policy in a very illustrious way: "for us in Macedonia, the sun rises on the West".

As seen from the Macedonian perspective, local politicians hardly take these seismic changes seriously. The obsession with fully belonging (politically, militarily, economically and culturally) with the West is a constant for almost three decades. Interestingly, Macedonia (unlike Serbia, and even some other parts of ex-Yugoslavia) did not take advantage of any good experiences that originated with the decades-long affiliation with the Non-Alignment Movement during the Cold War. Bearing in mind that the country had to pay a dear prize for the NATO membership and did not get anything in return, it is strange that the public support for the pro-Western orientation did not fall more than the public opinion polls show today. Yet, the facts speak volumes for a country that cherished up to 80-90 percent approval for NATO and EU, and today the support of approximately 60 percent is celebrated as a success.[15] In fact four years later, the support for NATO has dropped down for more than 10 percent (similar tendencies can be found in Montenegro too).[16] However, the more insightful analysis shows that the figures would have been even more worrisome if the polls focus on the majority of the (ethnic Macedonian and non-Albanian) population. The discrepancies are striking, as the ethnic Albanians in Macedonia still hold highest esteem for NATO (80-90 percent) in contrast to the others with only 30-40 percent support. This is an important indication because the narrative used in the past argued that the membership to NATO/EU is practically the only 'glue' that kept the divided society together.

The latest presidential and parliamentary elections (April/May 2024) displayed a rather monotonous foreign policy perspective offered by the political parties and presidential

15) See, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=33w3JW3bptE

16) Adela M. Gjorgjioska, "Counting the Costs: Macedonia's 4-year NATO Membership in Review", *China-CEE Institute Weekly Briefing*, Vol. 71, No. 4 (March 2024).

candidates[17] – with only one exception.[18] Although some political parties/coalitions from the so-called Albanian block tried to frame the electoral struggle in geopolitical terms such as "either EU or Russia".[19] This approach lacked substance because it did not address the internal divisions (as they do not exist along such geopolitical lines) but were signals sent to the Western power centers, which usually influence electoral outcomes and coalition government formations. Bearing in mind that former foreign minister Osmani, who was a presidential candidate, lost the elections just like his party coalition named "European Front", apparently the citizens chose Russia. However, that does not fit the facts: new president and the government are staunch supporters of the West, including NATO and EU. Nothing new on the foreign policy field.

It is not hard to predict that the newly elected establishment will face dramatic events during its mandate. The rhetoric and the first indications are that the ruling coalition will remain even more loyal to the Western alignment, including the Ukraine policy. One can only wonder if anyone in the country is aware of the tectonic changes that are knocking on the door.

17) Adela M. Gjorgjioska, "Foreign Policy in the 2024 Presidential Election Campaigns", *China-CEE Institute Weekly Briefing*, Vol. 72, No. 4, April 2024, available at https://china-cee.eu/2024/05/14/north-macedonia-external-relations-briefing-foreign-policy-in-the-2024-presidential-election-campaigns/

18) The political party Levica/The Left was the only one to propose abandoning NATO membership and opening a new multivector foreign policy, i.e. developing closer relations with non-Western forms of cooperation in different sectors (BRICS, Non-Alignment Movement, etc.).

19) Глас, „Османи од Минхен: На овие избори граѓаните ќе се одлучат за Европа или Русија", 17 February 2024, available at https://glas.mk/2024/02/османи-од-минхен-на-овие-избори-граѓан/

Research Article

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA: BETWEEN THE WEST AND THE REST

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This paper provides an analysis of the current situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, in the context of the relationships and the influence of the pro-Russian political factor, the hegemonic policies of official Belgrade and Zagreb towards Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as the Western political influence. The paper specifically points out the shortcomings of the Dayton Peace Agreement and the Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which favor the realization of Russian influence and hegemonic policies of official Belgrade and Zagreb (Serbia and Croatia), but recently also the influence of drug cartels in government institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This paper also considers the confusing actions of the Western powers in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which still have a decisive influence on internal political trends.

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Keywords: Dayton Peace Agreement, Russian influence, Western influence, Euro-Atlantic integrations, Hegemonic Policies, Drug Cartels.

TPQ

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Reviziting Balkans

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The United States of America administration, as well as a part of influential Western analysts and theorists, present and perceive the General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina (hereinafter: BH) - known as the Dayton Peace Agreement (hereinafter: the DPA) as a great success of the US administration. However, there are opposing opinions as well.[1] At the same time, it is being forgotten that BH was not a so-called third-world country with a totalitarian or tribal system at the beginning of the aggression in 1992. Still, it was a democratic European state, whose constitutional system was entirely based on generally accepted international democratic standards.

The Road to the West with the Apartheid Constitutional Framework

The rule of law, the European Convention, judgments of the European Court of Human Rights – "It's not for you."

The principle of constituency of peoples – the constituency of Bosniacs, Serbs and Croats, which as a constitutional category is imposed by the DPA – and earlier by the Washington Agreement to some extent (at that time – for Bosniacs and Croats as ethnic groups), produces a situation of multiple discrimination on the ethnic basis of all those BH citizens who do not belong to constituent peoples, but also Serbs from the entity of Federation of BH (hereinafter: FBH) and Bosniacs and Croats from the Republika Srpska entity (hereinafter: RS) as members of constituent peoples – due to the impossibility of candidacy for key positions at the state level – BH institutions - the House of Peoples of the Parliamentary Assembly of BH and the Presidency of BH. There is also discrimination on an ethnic basis regarding elections for the Chair and Deputy Chairs of the House of Representatives and the House of Peoples of the Parliamentary Assembly of BH, as well as at the entity level for the President and two Vice-Presidents of the entities.

Confirming a severe form of ethnic discrimination and establishing a violation of the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental

1) For the different views regarding the Washington and Dayton Peace Agreements, see: Derek Chollet, *The Road to the Dayton Accords: A Study of American Statecraft* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 133-181; Zlatan Begic, "One More Attempt by the US Administration in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Constitutional Reform of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina—Mission Impossible or Back to the Future?", *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (2017), p. 423-427; Florian Bieber, *Post-war Bosnia: Ethnicity, Inequality and Public Sector Governance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 40-86; David Chandler, *Bosnia: Faking Democracy After Dayton* (London-Sterling: Pluto Press, 2000), p. 66-89; Marcus Cox, "The Right to Return Home: International Intervention and Ethnic Cleansing in Bosnia and Herzegovina," *The International and Comparative Law Quarterly*, Vol. 47, No. 3 (1998), p. 603-616; Francine Friedman, Bosnia and Herzegovina: *A Polity on the Brink* (London-New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 60-76; John Graham, "Black Past, Grey Future? A Post-Dayton View of Bosnia and Herzegovina," *International Journal*, Vol. 53, No. 2 (1998), p. 217-220; Paul A. Papayoanou, "Intra-Alliance Bargaining and U.S. Bosnia Policy," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (1997), p. 101-109; Peter W. Singer, "Bosnia 2000: Phoenix or Flames?", *World Policy Journal*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (2000), p. 31-35; Kasim Trnka, *Ustavno pravo/Constitutional Law* (Sarajevo: Fakultet za upravu, 2006), p. 103-106.

Freedoms (hereinafter: ECHR) and its respective protocols, the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg has issued a series of judgments in favor of applicants, and several proceedings are currently underway.[2] However, these judgments of the European Court of Human Rights have never been implemented, even though the first one was passed 15 years ago, and despite the fact that the ECHR and its protocols are part of the legal order of BH by force of the Constitution,[3] and that the ECHR and its respective protocols had been ratified by institutions of BH a long time ago.[4]

Due to extremely undemocratic decision-making procedures (unknown in the democratic World) in the Parliamentary Assembly of BH, implementation of these and numerous other obligations of a legal nature are blocked. On the other hand, the position and role of the Western international community in BH can best be illustrated by a sentence that can be heard in the backrooms of these elites who play a crucial role in the political processes in BH – "Judgments of the European Court and the European Convention – it's not for you."

Not democracy or so-called "sharing of powers", but the absence of democracy and domination of the pro-Russian political minority over democratic majority.

The BH Parliamentary Assembly consists of two Houses, the House of Representatives, and the House of Peoples. The House of Representatives consists of 42 MPs who are directly elected by citizens – 28 of them from the entity FBH and 14 of them from the entity RS – as electoral units. The House of Peoples consists of 15 delegates - five Serbs – appointed from entity RS electoral unit by the Assembly of the RS entity, and five Bosniacs and five Croats appointed from the entity FBH electoral unit by the Bosniac and Croat caucuses in the House of Peoples of the Parliament of the FBH entity.[5]

Thus, the House of Representatives is elected by citizens directly in elections, while the House of Peoples is indirectly appointed, whereby the key role in terms of personnel structure of the House of Peoples is played by narrow party leaderships, first and foremost by presidents of political parties - who play key role in the process of determining of candidates and candidate lists for the House of Peoples. Despite this, in accordance with Article IV 3. c) of the BH Constitution, all acts of law and

2) See, *Sejdic and Finci v BH* (2009) no. 27996/06 and 34836/06 – available at https://www.echr.coe.int; *Zornic v BH* (2014) no. 3681/06 - available at https://www.echr.coe.int; *Šlaku v BH* (2016) no. 56666/12 - available at https://www.echr.coe.int: *Kovacevic v BH* (2023) no. 43651/22 - available at https://www.echr.coe.int; *Pilav v BH* (2016) no. 41939/07 - available at https://www.echr.coe.int; *Pudaric v BH* (2020) no. 55799/18 - available at https://www.echr.coe.int

3) See, Article II/2. of the BH Constitution.

4) See, Article III/3.b) of the BH Constitution; For general principles of international law, especially for the pacta sunt servanda principle and its legal scope in BH constitutional order, see also: Begic, Zlatan, "Legal Capacities of the Dayton Constitution in the Process of Accession of Bosnia and Herzegovina to European Union," *Journal of Politics and Law*, Vol. 9, No 1 (2016), p. 12-15.

5) See, Articles IV/1. and IV/2. of the BH Constitution.

other decisions must be adopted in the same text in both Houses, even though these two Houses do not have nearly the same level of democratic legitimacy and capacity.

Thanks to the mechanism of the so-called entity voting - which represents regular decision-making procedure in both Houses, it is a common phenomenon that acts of law and other decisions that have convincing support that goes beyond the ordinary majority or even goes beyond the two-thirds majority cannot be adopted because they do not have the support of at least one-third of the MPs in the House of Representatives and one-third delegates in the House of People from both entities.[6] Thus, for example any act of law or other decision cannot be adopted if does not have the support of at least five MPs in the House of Representatives elected in the entity RS electoral unit, and at least two delegates in the House of People appointed from the same electoral unit – those who usually use this possibility to block any acts of law, including those whose adoption is necessary for BH to join the EU and NATO. In the indirectly appointed House of People, any act of law adopted in the House of Representatives even unanimously or with a convincing majority can be blocked in the absence of at least two votes of the delegates appointed from the electoral unit of the RS entity. Thus, for example, the result of the voting in the House of Peoples can be nine - IN FAVOUR, four - AGAINST, one - ABSTAINED - and the act of law still cannot be adopted, regardless of the fact that it was previously adopted unanimously in the House of Representatives - with the presence of at least one-third of votes from both entities, and regardless of the fact that there was a convincing majority in the House of Peoples (as was the case, for example, with acts of law that were supposed to be passed for the urgent procurement of vaccines during the coronavirus pandemic, but their adoption were blocked in the House of Peoples in this way).

If there is not at least one-third of votes from both entities in the majority, any act of law or other decision can be passed by consensus of the Chair and two Deputy Chairs - who are elected exclusively from constituent peoples as their representatives.[7] Since three persons take over legislation procedures as well as since they are acting as representatives of three constituent peoples as ethnic communities, this could be considered as a kind of tribal decision-making unknown to the democratic world.

If the Chair and Deputy Chairs do not reach a consensus, a law or other decision can be made by majority vote, with the condition that votes against do not include two-thirds of votes from both entities,[8] but this unblocking mechanism has proven to

6) See, Article IV/3.d) of the BH Constitution.

7) See, Article IV/3.d) of the BH Constitution; The Rules of Procedure of the House of Representatives (Official Gazette of BH No. 79/14, 81/15, 97/15, 78/19, 26/20, 53/22, 59/23, 87/23), Articles 85 and 86, and the Rules of Procedure of the House of Peoples (Official Gazette of BH No. 58/14, 88/15, 96/15, 53/16), Article 75 and 76; e.g. Report on efforts to reach agreement on the Proposal of the Law on Amendments to the Law on Value Added Tax, number 02-50-6-16-10/23 dated 6 October 2023.

8) See, Article IV/3.d) of the BH Constitution.

be useless because if there is not at least one-third of votes IN FAVOUR from both entities in the first round of voting, it will most certainly be two-third AGAINST in the last round of voting - with some/rare exceptions.[9]

Thanks to such Dayton constitutional solutions, in 1997-2007, the adoption of 59.9 percent, i.e. 156 acts of laws in the procedure, were blocked.[10] In the period from December 2018 to the mid-2021, 55 acts of law were blocked due to entity voting - by MPs and delegates from the RS entity, a large number of which were acts of law from the European integration process, and laws that are of interest to all citizens of BH that in no way encroached on the interests of the entities or any constituent peoples (e.g. Law on Traffic Safety, Law on Patents, Law on State Aid, etc.).[11]

The situation is completely identical in other institutions (Council of Ministers, Presidency of BH) where bearers of the pro-Russian influence have in their hands the mechanisms of blocking any decision that leads BH towards the European Union and to the NATO pact. The Dayton Constitution itself establishes some of these mechanisms, and some are established by acts/decisions - which were passed with great pressure and influence of the Western officials in BH (e.g. the Law on the Council of Ministers of BH introduces possibilities of ethnic blockades even though the Dayton Constitution does not recognize them, then the introduction of a coordination mechanism regarding EU integration process where decisions are made - by consensus, etc.).

Therefore, instead of democratizing the decision-making process, Western policy in BH moved in the direction of establishing blocking mechanisms even in those institutions for which the Dayton Constitution does not stipulate such mechanisms. This has further strengthened the privileged political minority in the institutional sense, which leans on the hegemonic policies of Belgrade and Zagreb and openly advocates Russian influence in BH.

9) In fact, due to the simple logic of numbers, blocking the adoption of laws and other decisions of the BH Parliamentary Assembly by a kind of abuse of the so-called entity voting is effective mainly for MPs and delegates - elected and appointed from the electoral unit of the RS entity. See also, Opinion of the Venice Commission, number CDL-AD (2005) 004, 11-12 March, 2005 (paragraph 34, etc.).

10) Kasim Trnka et al., *Proces odlucivanja u Parlamentarnoj skupštini Bosne i Hercegovine/Decision-making process in the Parliamentary Assembly of Bosnia and Herzegovina* (Sarajevo: Konrad Adenauer, 2009), pp. 77-90, http://www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas_17300-544-15-30.pdf

11) Due to the unequal value of votes and the impossibility of candidacy for the position of Chair and Deputy Chairs in the House of Representatives of the Parliamentary Assembly of BH, proceedings were initiated before the European Court of Human Rights in cases no. 34891/21, Begic v. BH and 5067/23, Begic v. BH, and judgements in these cases are expected.

The Final Question: Is Dayton a Process of Restoration of Democracy or a Means of Maintaining the State of the Frozen Conflict?

DPA can be viewed in two ways - as a process of restoration of democracy or as a means to maintain the state of frozen conflict. The first approach implies the full implementation of the DPA, including the implementation of the ECHR and its protocols, as well as the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights and other international instruments and obligations of legal nature from the EU and NATO integrations. The first way, therefore, implies the rule of law and the democratization of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Another way of approaching to the DPA is to understand and accept it as a means of maintaining a frozen conflict, which implies the blocking of its implementation - i.e. violation of the rule of law, non-implementation of obligations of a legal nature from ratified international agreements and international instruments referred to by Annex 4 itself as part of the DPA, as well as the Stabilization and Association Agreement and other obligations of a legal nature from the Euro-Atlantic integration process, etc.

Unfortunately, the Western international community in BH in the last three decades preferred this second approach, rather than observing and working on the DPA as a process that should lead to the revitalization of democratic values and the democratization of society as a whole - which is the only guarantee of removing the malignant Russian influence – that fully coincides with the hegemonic policies of the official Belgrade and Zagreb. There is no conceptual difference between the so-called "Russian world" and the so-called "Serbian world", and currently, in alliance with the holders of these two projects, the concept of the "Croatian world" is being achieved in BH in a more perfidious way under the control and leadership of the official Zagreb and with the help of the international community in BH, in the first place, the High Representative Christian Schmidt. The president of the Croatian Democratic Union in BH (hereinafter: HDZ – "Hrvatska demokratska zajednica") Mr. Dragan Covic even made a statement in 2020 that he regrets that Russia's influence in Bosnia and Herzegovina is not greater.[12]

This is nothing new in BH, because the hegemonic policies of Belgrade and Zagreb have continuity - ever since the Miloševic-Tudman agreement as well as acting of officials of these two neighboring states (Serbia and Croatia) – which the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia adjudged as a "joint criminal enterprises". Tragically, politics and in general, the approach of official Zagreb towards the majority of BH citizens and BH as a state could best be recognized from the statement of the President of Republic of Croatia Zoran Milanovic, which has a terrible overtone of a racist approach. Speaking about Bosnia and Herzegovina and

12) https://n1info.ba/vijesti/a409298-covic-za-rossiyske-gazete-nazalost-ovdje-ima-vrlo-malo-ruskog-utjecaja/

its citizens, Mr. Milanovic in 2020 stated: "First soap, then perfume."[13]

Most of what was done by the international community in BH was more aimed to ensuring official Belgrade's dominance in Bosnia and Herzegovina through the RS entity and this influence at the level of BH State institutions, and less to the implementation of the DPA. Thus, the exact same Decisions of the BH Constitutional Court in the case U-5/98 from 2000 (publicly known as "Decisions on the Constituency of the Peoples") in two entities were implemented in two completely different ways with severe consequences!?

In this way, the entity RS was made into an entity under the complete influence of the ethnic group of Serbs, while in the entity FBH a system of complete equality of all three constituent peoples was established, numerous blocking mechanisms - which even led to the fact that the political party HDZ (Croatian Democratic Union) and other smaller parties gathered around HDZ - with only about 6 percent of votes of citizens of this entity can block the entire system for the purpose of political blackmail. Thus, in the entity FBH, after the general elections in 2018, thanks to the blocking mechanisms, the implementation of the election results and the establishment of the government until the end of the mandate period in 2022 were prevented because the HDZ conditioned the unblocking on the adoption of the Election Law, which would deepen discrimination and the violation of the ECHR, its protocols, as well as existing judgments of the European Court - and thereby the Constitution of BH.

Then, with the adoption of Amendments to the Law on the Domicile and Residence of Citizens of BH from 2015 - on which the Western international community strongly insisted, voting in elections in the RS entity was made much more difficult and even impossible for a significant number of those citizens of BH who were victims of ethnic cleansing, expulsion, genocide etc., which made this part of BH territory additionally "Serbinized" by a some kind of disastrous legalization of ethnic cleansing through this Act of Law.

Finally, by changing election rules imposed by the High Representative for BH Christian Schmidt in election night, which is a scandalous precedent in democratic practice - to vote according to one rule and to distribute mandates according to other rules, the FBH entity was essentially and completely delivered to the official Zagreb and satellites of the hegemonic policy of neighboring Croatia in Bosnia and Herzegovina. After that, High Representative Christian Schmidt suspended the Constitution of the FBH entity in order to enable the bringing to power of political parties as desired by the HDZ in this entity. The BH ruling majority and government at the State level was also formed under the strict control of the Western international community, in such a way that the State government is made up of

13) https://n1info.ba/vijesti/a494602-andquotprvo-sapun-onda-parfemandquot-ostre-reakcije-na-milanovicevu-izjavu-o-bih/

exponents of Russian influence in BH - political parties gathered around Mr. Milorad Dodik, president of RS entity and his political party SNSD ("Savez nezavisnih socijaldemokrata" - Alliance of Independent Social Democrats), then Dragan Covic and political parties gathered around HDZ (Croatian Democratic Union), along with the so-called "Trojka" parties. The coalition of political parties, the so-called "Trojka" was formed under control and with the enormous influence of the Western international community - which is a coalition of the "Social Democratic Party", "People and Justice Party" and "Our Party". Although there was a possibility that the state ruling majority and government could be formed without the bearers of Russian influence in BH and the region – Mr. Milorad Dodik and Mr. Dragan Covic, under the control of the Western international community and through the "Trojka" political parties, they formed the ruling majority/government and in the meantime took control of most of the institutions through their personnel and thanks to concessions of the "Trojka" parties – which is under the complete control of the Western international community. However, in the meantime, this creation of the West in BH – known as "Trojka" coalition through some of their leaders, according to the findings of the FBI, DEA, EUROPOL and other relevant police agencies, are brought into connection with the so called "Tito and Dino" super drug cartel.[14]

So, today Bosnia and Herzegovina is the State where more than two-thirds of the citizens are strongly committed to Euro-Atlantic integrations, but whose vote means nothing, i.e. whose political will is captured by undemocratic decision-making mechanisms, pronounced inequality of votes and discrimination, i.e. in which more than two-thirds of citizens are trapped by an approach that sees the DPA as a means to maintain a frozen conflict, the continuation of the implementation of the hegemonic policies of Belgrade and Zagreb - which corresponds to the expansion of Russian influence in BH and in the region. In fact, Bosnia and Herzegovina is the State where democracy and the rule of law are captured by the interests of expanding Russian influence, hegemonic policies of Belgrade and Zagreb, and the interests of drug cartels, all with the strong influence of the Western international community - including the Office of the High Representative.

14) See, Objavljujemo EUROPOL-ovu shemu koja otkriva: Konakovic se u martu 2021. godine u Dubaiju susreo sa Edinom Gacaninom Titom! - Istraga .ba; Tagesspiegel pisao o kartelu "Tito i Dino" i navodnim vezama s Konakovicem: "Pokušaj inflitracije u drzavu" (klix.ba); Nizozemski list o vezama bh. politicara sa narko kartelom: Da li je Konakovic sa porodicom bio na vjencanju Edina Gacanina Tita u Dubaiju? - Istraga .ba etc.

Research Article

THE WESTERN BALKANS AND PROSPECTS FOR THE EU AND NATO ACCESSION

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The Western Balkans region holds vital strategic importance for transatlantic security. Following the collapse of the Former Yugoslavia, the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) have actively contributed to regional stability both in the form of peace missions and through offering the regional countries integration prospects with the transatlantic structures. Amidst years of enlargement fatigue, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has underlined the significance of the integration of the Western Balkans into the transatlantic institutions. This article examines the recent developments in the Western Balkans and analyzes the prospects for the Euro-Atlantic integration of the regional countries.

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Keywords: Western Balkans, NATO, European Union, European Integration, Enlargement Fatigue.

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Reviziting Balkans

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The Western Balkans region holds vital strategic importance for transatlantic security. Stability in the region has direct implications for European and transatlantic security, stability, and peace. Following the collapse of Former Yugoslavia, the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) have actively contributed to regional stability through peace missions in the region both during and in the aftermath of the civil wars. Since the 2000s, the EU and NATO offered membership prospects to the countries in the Western Balkans. The strategic importance of the region increased in the post-2014 era, against the background of foreign fighters joining the Islamic State terrorist organization (ISIS) from the Western Balkans, raising concerns in the transatlantic circles. Moreover, the region's location on alternative energy routes adds to the region's strategic significance.

However, there has not been much sustained and high-level Euro-Atlantic engagement in the region, as the transatlantic actors' political attention to the Western Balkans has been diverted elsewhere. War in Ukraine served as a wake-up call for the EU and NATO in the Balkans. Following the invasion of Ukraine by Russia, enlargement is back on the EU agenda, as Russian aggression reinvigorated the expediency of transatlantic integration of the Western Balkans. This article examines the developments in the Western Balkans and analyzes the prospects for the Euro-Atlantic integration of the regional countries.

A Historical Overview of the Region's Transatlantic Integration

Historically, the NATO accession of Western Balkan countries has proven smoother than the EU accession. NATO accession helps facilitate the EU integration prospects of Western Balkan countries, as it requires vital structural reforms that are foundational for reforms regarding the EU membership criteria.[1] NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) Program is seen as a waiting room for NATO membership. All Western Balkan countries, except for Serbia and Kosovo, have declared intentions to join PfP or NATO.

At the 2003 Thessaloniki European Council Summit, the EU acknowledged the importance of a European future for the Balkans.[2] From 2003 to 2013, the EU admitted 13 new members, including two from the former Yugoslavia (Slovenia and Croatia), which contributed to EU enlargement fatigue and its reluctance to welcome new members. Critics frequently accuse Euro-Atlantic actors of prioritizing regional stability over democratization and of overlooking democratic practice issues.

1) Oya Dursun-Özkanca, "The Western Balkans in the Transatlantic Security Context," *Insight Turkey*, Volume 21, Issue 2, Spring 2019.

2) European Council, "EU-Western Balkans Summit Thessaloniki, 21 June 2003 Declaration," 10229/03 (Presse 163) 21 June 2003, Thessaloniki.

EU's Stabilization and Association Process (SAP) has three main goals: stability of SAP countries and their swift transition to market economies, enhanced regional cooperation, and eventual membership into the EU. The Instrument for Pre-Accession (IPA) Funding adopted by the EU in 2006 comprised of EUR 11.5 billion in order to assist transition and institution-building, regional integration and development, human resources, and rural development. IPA II covered the period between 2014 and 2020 and had a budget of EUR 12 billion.[3] Different than IPA I, it included regional cooperation initiatives.

In 2010, NATO invited Bosnia and Herzegovina to join the Membership Action Plan (MAP). MAP is designed to give advice and support to countries with a clear goal of joining NATO. Republika Srpska (RS) is against NATO membership of the country, due to recent memories of the NATO-led air campaign against Serbs in the 1990s. NATO membership and the activation of MAP require a successful resolution of the issue of "registration of immovable defense property to the state."[4] Given the structure established by the Dayton Agreement, it is hard to have a centralized governance structure in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which hampers the prospects of engaging in successful reforms towards Euro-Atlantic integration of the country. Despite the continued veto from RS, in December 2018, NATO agreed to activate MAP and invited Bosnia to submit its first annual national program of political, economic, and defense reforms to bring the country in line with NATO standards.

In 2016, there was a Russian coup plot to remove Montenegro's pro-NATO Prime Minister from power. The coup attempt was thwarted, and the country became a NATO member in 2017. Serbia tends to be more pro-Russian and has a recent history of conflict with NATO.

The unresolved bilateral and multilateral conflicts prevented meaningful progress, especially in the region's EU accession. Ever since 2011, there has been the Brussels Dialogue, EU-sponsored normalization talks between Kosovo and Serbia. Normalization of bilateral relations is a prerequisite for both countries' EU membership. The Brussels Agreement, which provided agreement on politically sensitive issues such as security, the rule of law, local authorities in the Serbian-inhabited parts of Kosovo, and the judiciary, was signed in April 2013. However, its implementation has proven to be very difficult.[5]

With the initiation of the Berlin Process in 2014, the EU emphasized the importance of the Western Balkans' EU integration. Under its framework, a total of five

3) European Commission, "Overview: Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance," European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/instruments/overview_en

4) NATO, "Membership Action Plan", 28 March 2024, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_37356.htm

5) Donika Emini and Isidora Stakic, "Belgrade and Pristina: Lost in Normalisation?" *European Union Institute for Security Studies*, April 2018, https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Brief%205%20Belgrade%20and%20Pristina.pdf

conferences were held: the 2014 Berlin Summit, the 2015 Vienna Summit, the 2016 Paris Summit, the 2017 Trieste Summit, and the 2018 London Summit. In February 2018, the European Commission announced its new and ambitious strategy for the region, titled "A Credible Enlargement Perspective for and Enhanced EU Engagement with the Western Balkans," which is also known as the EU Strategy for the Western Balkans, which the European Council adopted in May 2018.[6] The Strategy document set a target date of accession in 2025 for Serbia and Montenegro and reemphasized the EU's commitment to enlargement, including the remaining Western Balkan countries.[7]

Analysis of the Recent Developments

Democratic backsliding is commonplace in the region, as weak judicial systems helped authoritarian-leaning elites consolidate power. Populism, authoritarianism, and nationalism are on the rise. Market inefficiencies too are prevalent due to the legacy of the communist era.[8] High unemployment and brain drain continue, although the World Bank projects that the GDP growth levels will return to pre-pandemic levels in 2024.[9] There are large external deficits, public debt, and infrastructural deficiencies, as regularly noted by the country progress reports the European Commission publishes.

Moreover, the Western Balkan countries are the poorest in Europe. Corruption is especially high in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Albania.[10] State capture in the region meant that the elites benefited from the existing system and became more reluctant to engage in judicial reform. The candidate countries are required to show tangible results to ensure accession to transatlantic institutions, especially regarding the rule of law, the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) of the EU, and the resolution of some long-lasting conflicts.[11]

Having said that, there has been some good progress in the Euro-Atlantic integration process of the regional countries. Slovenia and Croatia are already members of both

6) European Council, "A Credible Enlargement Perspective for and Enhanced EU Engagement with the Western Balkans." Sofia, COM (2018) 65 final, 2 June 2018.

7) European Commission, "Strategy for the Western Balkans: EU Sets Out New Flagship Initiatives and Support for the Reform-Driven Region." Strasbourg, 8 February 2018, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-18-561_en.htm

8) World Bank, "Western Balkans Labor Market Trends 2018," (March, 2018), retrieved January 31, 2019, from http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/565231521435487923/pdf/124354-WP-P158508-PUBLIC-16-3-2018-10-13-39-WBLabormarkettrends.pdf

9) The World Bank Group, "Western Balkans Regular Economic Report", Spring 2024, https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/eca/publication/western-balkans-regular-economic-report

10) Transparency International, "Corruption Perceptions Index", https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2023?gad_source=1&gclid=Cj0KCQjwvb-zBhCmARIsAAfUI2v-QX7GmV_TIvBpOwAOT4e1GeKg48RgLhekaCk-kda27opwaZb244kaAlH7EALw_wcB

11) Charles Brasseur, Vera Pachta and Chiara Grigolo, "Towards an Enlarged Union: Upholding the Rule of Law", *International IDEA*, Policy Paper No. 30, April 2024, https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/2024-04/towards-an-enlarged-union-upholding-the-rule-of-law.pdf

organizations, and Albania, Croatia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Slovenia are members of NATO. Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia are candidate countries for the EU, whereas Bosnia and Herzegovina is an aspirant country for NATO membership.

Montenegro's EU accession negotiations opened in June 2012. Out of the 33 negotiating chapters, three have been provisionally closed. Serbia's EU accession negotiations were opened in January 2014. 22 out of 35 negotiating chapters have been opened, two of which have been provisionally closed. Albania and North Macedonia's accession negotiations were opened in July 2022. Receiving EU candidate status in December 2022, Bosnia and Herzegovina's accession negotiations were formally opened in March 2024. Kosovo applied for EU membership in December 2022 but has not yet received a candidate status.[12] Five EU member states, Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia, and Spain, do not recognize Kosovo's independence. All except for Cyprus are NATO members, presenting a potential barrier against Kosovo's NATO membership in the future.

All Western Balkans, including Kosovo, now have visa-free travel programs with the EU. The EU accession prospects have facilitated economic and political reforms in the Western Balkans and improved regional cooperation and integration, as clearly seen in the case of the visa liberalization process. IPA III covers the period from 2021 to 2027. It has a budget of EUR 14.7 billion and seeks to support "political, institutional, legal, administrative, social and economic reforms … with a view to future EU membership."[13]

The EU nevertheless suffers from a negative image in the Western Balkans. The countries in the region perceive the EU's acceleration of Moldova and Ukraine's accession as unfair and see it as evidence demonstrating inconsistencies in the EU's enlargement approach. To illustrate, the EU did not require Moldova and Cyprus to resolve the territorial conflicts, while requiring Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo, to resolve conflicts. Furthermore, some Balkan EU member countries took advantage of their membership against other Balkan countries such as North Macedonia. Macedonia's EU membership prospects have been stalled due to the name dispute with Greece. In June 2018, the Prespa Agreement was signed with parties agreeing on a new name for the country – The Republic of North Macedonia. With the ratification of the Prespa Agreement, NATO invited North Macedonia to start its accession process on July 11, 2018, and the country and the country joined NATO in 2020.

12) André De Munter, "The Western Balkans", Fact Sheets on the European Union, European Parliament, April 2024, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/168/the-western-balkans

13) European Commission, "Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA) III – Performance", 2024, https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/eu-budget/performance-and-reporting/programme-performance-statements/instrument-pre-accession-assistance-ipa-iii-performance_en#programme-in-a-nutshell

Against the background of years of RS's consistent threats for secession from Bosnia and Herzegovina, NATO is increasingly concerned about "secessionist and divisive rhetoric, as well as malign foreign interference – including from Russia."[14] Adding to the concerns was the renewal of tensions between Kosovo and Serbia. Even though Brussels Agreement and Ohrid Annex was agreed upon in February and March 2023, respectively, there has been "limited" progress on its implementation.[15] Consequently, the Committee of the Permanent Representatives agreed to amend Chapter 35 with Serbia to include the obligations from the Brussels Agreement and its Ohrid Annex.[16]

In fact, 2023 has been the most violent and turbulent year in terms of the normalization process for Serbia and Kosovo. Violent protests against the Kosovo government's decision to bring in special police forces to allow mayors elected on April 23rd into town halls in northern Kosovo, followed by guerilla warfare, required NATO's KFOR mission's involvement in the tensions. In response to the crisis due to the arrest/kidnapping of three Kosovo Police officers by Serbian security services on June 14, 2023, the EU held an emergency meeting with Kosovo Prime Minister Kurti and Serbia President Vucic. The EU imposed "temporary and reversible" measures against Kosovo at the end of June 2023. Tensions further escalated and resulted in casualties as a result of the terrorist attack by 30 gunmen and the response from the Kosovo Police in September 2023 in Banjska.[17] In a region nicknamed the powder keg of Europe, such trends cause serious concerns. Any Kosovo-Serbia border change along ethnically homogenous lines potentially undermines the territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, and Montenegro. There is still uncertainty regarding the transatlantic integration of the region.

Recognizing the challenges of the region's EU future, the European Commission proposed a 6 billion Euros Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans in November 2023, which was approved by the European Parliament and adopted

14) Jens Stoltenberg, "Joint Press Conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg with the Chairwoman of the Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Borjana Krišto", NATO, 20 November 2023, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_220214.htm

15) European Union External Action Service, "Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue: Statement by the High Representative on the anniversary of the Agreement on the Path to Normalisation and its Implementation Annex," 17 March 2024, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/belgrade-pristina-dialogue-statement-high-representative-anniversary-agreement-path-normalisation_en

16) European Western Balkans, "EU Permanent Representatives Agree on Amending Chapter 35 with Serbia to Include Ohrid Agreement", 16 April 2024, https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2024/04/16/eu-permanent-representatives-agree-on-amending-chapter-35-with-serbia-to-include-ohrid-agreement/

17) Federico Baccini, "One year after Ohrid agreement, there is little commitment from Kosovo and Serbia to its implementation", EU News, 18 March 2024, https://www.eunews.it/en/2024/03/18/ohrid-agreement-serbia-kosovo/

by the Council in May 2024, making the Western Balkan countries eligible to reap some benefits of the EU membership prior to accession. The precondition for the eligibility of funding is the implementation of reform agendas for socio-economic and fundamentals reforms they plan to undertake between 2024 and 2027. In case of failure to implement reforms, the Commission "may suspend payments in part or in full depending on the condition."[18] The Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans seeks to close the economic gap between the Western Balkans and the EU and ensure the implementation of wide-ranging reforms.

Conclusion

The Western Balkans "remains the last non-integrated part of Europe" and represents "unfinished business for the EU."[19] The region's integration into the EU and NATO serves as a vital investment in European and transatlantic security. Many unresolved conflicts remain and there is an increasing appetite for irredentism and secessionism. The EU and NATO should improve their coordination in attempts to resolve outstanding issues and reenergize the enlargement process.

If the EU and NATO are unwilling to take on a leading role, other external actors such as Russia, China, or Gulf states might fill the strategic vacuum in the region. As a result of the recent revival of the rivalry between NATO and Russia in the aftermath of its annexation of Crimea in 2014 and full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Russia pays extra attention to the region to preserve its sphere of influence due to the cultural and historical ties it has with Orthodox Slavs and to prevent the Euro-Atlantic, especially NATO integration of the countries in the region.

While Serbia tries to strike a fine balance between its EU accession aspirations and traditional links to Russia, it will have to tackle the difficult issue of choosing one side over the other sooner rather than later. Russia maintains important ties with Montenegro, Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina due to the existence of Serb minorities in these countries. It has also been a key supporter of RS's secessionist aspirations. Russian propaganda outlets frequently engage in misinformation campaigns against the EU and NATO.

The Berlin Process did not have a proper budgetary allocation for covering the Western Balkans Summit costs or for financing its initiatives. Providing a more concrete step towards transatlantic integration, the Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans offers a more structured financial mechanism for the region's EU accession.

18) The European Commission, "Commission Welcomes Political Agreement on the €6 billion Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans", 4 April 2024, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/commission-welcomes-political-agreement-eu6-billion-reform-and-growth-facility-western-balkans-2024-04-04_en

19) Ivan Vejvoda, "The Balkans: No War in Sight." Commentary, The German Marshall Fund of the United States, 17 February 2016, http://www.gmfus.org/commentary/balkans-no-war-sight

This may be the push the political elites in the region might need to work towards reforms for their ultimate transatlantic integration. The Euro-Atlantic integration and enlargement of the EU and NATO are pathways to maintaining stability, peace, and establishing democracy in the Western Balkans. It remains to be seen how decisively the transatlantic actors and their Western Balkans counterparts will commit to making progress on transatlantic integration.

Research Article

ALBANIAN-GREEK RELATIONS AND TIRANA'S QUEST FOR THE EU MEMBERSHIP

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Although Greece and Albania share extensive historical, economic, social, and security ties due to their NATO membership, their bilateral relations from time to time have been problematic, raising concerns for the broader Western Balkans. Several unresolved issues between Athens and Tirana that have their roots in the past prevent the normalization of their relations and, as a result, create obstacles for Albania's EU accession process. The respect of the Greek minority rights in Albania, the delimitation of maritime zones, Greece's Law of War with Albania, the Cham issue, that Tirana unilaterally raise the refusal of Athens to recognize the independence of Kosovo and the arrest of the elected member of the Greek National Minority Mayor of Himare are some of the issues between the two countries. It is the aim of this article to study recent normative and empirical discourse to argue that the normalization of the relations between Albania and Greece is crucial for the EU's enlargement with the countries of Western Balkans and for the stability of the region in general. Within this context, this article analyzes the historical background of the bilateral relations between Greece and Albania, evaluates the current economic, social, and political situation, and presents some policy proposals before reaching a conclusion.

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Keywords: Greece, Albania, Greek Foreign Policy, Albanian Foreign Policy, Western Balkans

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Although Greece and Albania share extensive historical, economic, social, and security ties due to their NATO membership, their bilateral relations from time to time have been problematic, raising concerns for the broader Western Balkans. Several unresolved issues between Athens and Tirana that have their roots in the past prevent the normalization of their relations and, as a result, create obstacles for Albania's EU accession process. The respect of the Greek minority rights in Albania, the delimitation of maritime zones, Greece's Law of War with Albania, the Cham issue, that Tirana unilaterally raise the refusal of Athens to recognize the independence of Kosovo and the arrest of the elected member of the Greek National Minority Mayor of Himare are some of the issues between the two countries. It is the aim of this article to study recent normative and empirical discourse to argue that the normalization of the relations between Albania and Greece is crucial for the EU's enlargement with the countries of Western Balkans and for the stability of the region in general. Within this context, this article analyzes the historical background of the bilateral relations between Greece and Albania, evaluates the current economic, social, and political situation, and presents some policy proposals before reaching a conclusion.

Historical Background

Albanian-Greek relations began in 1912 when Albania established its independence from the Ottoman Empire. The first issue that emerged in the bilateral relations between Athens and Tirana was the faith of the thousands of Greeks who were living within the territory of the newly established state. This implied that the Greek population that was living in Albania had to acquire a national minority status. Athens, from the very beginning of its bilateral relations with Tirana, raised the issue of the protection of its national minority, claiming that Albania was following an expatriation policy against it. It was only in 1922 that Albania recognized the Greek national minority living within its own territory, given that such an act was one of its accession criteria to the League of Nations.[1]

The peak of the deterioration of Greek-Albania relations was reached during the Second World War, when Italy launched its attack against Greece from Albania territory, and as a result, "Greece declared Albania as an enemy state, a status which remains until today."[2] Just after the end of the war, Albania also claims that Greek paramilitary forces expulsed 30.000 Muslim Albanians from Epirus. The Greek state denies the existence of this issue. The Cold War froze relations between the two countries until 1971, when they re-established official diplomatic relations.

1) Glevin Dervishi, "Greek-Albanian Relations, the Past, the Present and the Future," *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, Vol.10, No. 3, May 2019, p. 25

2) Dervishi (2019).

The end of the Cold War signified the beginning of a new era in Greek-Albanian relations. More than 600.000 Albanians became economic refugees to Greece. In that way, on the one hand, Greece became an extremely valuable exit for Albania's extreme isolation during the Cold War but also prevented the collapse of Albania state from a social uprising due to extreme poverty and economic collapse. On the other hand, Greece's acceptance of all these Albanian refugees' flows enabled intense interactions on a societal level, bringing the people of both countries closer to each other.[3] Within this context, in March 1996, Albania and Greece signed the Treaty of Friendship, Co-Operation, and Good Neighborliness, which, in a way, brought an end to the status of the "condition of war" between them.

At the same time, Athens supported Albania's accession to NATO and in the European Union. The EU summit held in Thessaloniki in 2003 concluded that all Western Balkan countries would become members of the union. Also, in 2009, Albania became a member of NATO and at the same year, signed with Greece an agreement on the delimitation of continental shelf. Despite the fact that the Albanian Parliament ratified this agreement, the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Albania rejected it the following year.[4] In 2022, both countries agreed to refer the issue to the International Court of Justice. As far as the Cham issue is concerned, the Greek Foreign Minister of the time, Nikos Dendias stated after his meeting with his Albanian counterpart in 2022 that this is a non-existent issue and that "Greece is ready to discuss only issues that it considers existing."[5]

The Case of Fredi Beleri and the Deterioration of Albanian-Greek Relations

Without any doubt, the case of the imprisonment of the elected Mayor of the City of Himare, Fredi Beleri, on charges of election corruption and vote buying two days before the municipal elections of 14 May 2023, is the most serious crisis in Greek-Albania relations over the last decade. Greece accuses Albania of not adhering to the Rule of Law, a basic criterion for EU accession within the context of the Copenhagen Criteria, and thus is planning to veto Albania's European road if Tirana will not change its position. The situation became more complicated when Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama made a visit in Athens on 12 May 2024, exactly a year after Beleri's arrest, and spoke to Albanians living in Greece. The rights of the National

3) Evelyn Karakatsani, "Greece External Relations Briefing: Relations Between Greece and Albania," *China-CEE Institute*, Vol. 66, No. 4, October, 2023

4) Kasem Cenaj, "Albania-Greece Agreement on Setting Maritime Boundaries, According to International Law, *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, Rome-Italy, Vol. 4, November, 2015

5) Hellenic Republic MFA (2024) "Minister of Foreign Affairs Nikos Dendias,' statement following his meeting with his Albanian Counterpart, Olcha Xhacka (Tirana, 23/05/2022). Available at https://www.mfa.gr/en/current-affairs/top-story/minister-of-foreign-affairs-nikos-dendias-statement-folowing-his-meeting-with-his-albanian-counterpart-olta-xhacka-tirana-23052022.html

Greek Minority that live in Albania, as stated above, are a major concern of Greece and have determined the quality of the bilateral relations with neighboring Albania since its establishment as an independent state.

The Positive Aspect of Albanian-Greek Relations

Despite of this serious deterioration in their bilateral relations because of Fredi Beleri issue, there are still positive elements in their interaction that one should not neglect. It is worth mentioning that "Greece is Albania's main economic partner since the end of the Cold War... and that Greek exports to Albania have increased by 60 percent during the last five years."[6] This implies a great potential for closer economic cooperation with mutual benefits. It is also worth to mention that according to a study conducted by the Open Society Foundation of Albania (OSFA) and the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP), 85 percent of the Albanians believe that Greece has assisted Albania and 60 percent of Albanians have a positive attitude towards the Greeks. At the same time 90 percent of the Greeks believe that Greece has assisted Albania and 47,5 percent of the Greek participants have a positive view towards Albanians in general.[7] Within this context, both governments have to be careful in their conduct of relations.

Albania's Quest for the EU Membership

In 2009, Albania submitted its application for EU membership, and in 2014, it was awarded a candidate status. As mentioned before, Greece is a champion of the enlargement of the EU with the Western Balkans countries provided that they fulfill the Copenhagen Criteria. The "Beleri Issue" in Athens's view, constitutes a violation by Albania of the rights of the Greek National Minority and the rule of law. As a consequence, Greece puts the resolution of "Beleri's Issue" as a precondition to give its consensus for initiating the negotiations process for Albania's accession in the EU.

In October 2023 while attending the meeting between the EU and Western Balkan Leaders, the Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis stated that: "the resolution of the issue is a necessary condition for Greece to take the next step and agree to start Albania's negotiation process with the EU."[8] Most recently, in a highly symbolic movement, the governmental party "New Democracy" has included in its ballot the imprisoned Fredi Beleri as a candidate member of the European Parliament elections. Fredi Beleri was elected with a great number of votes. In other words, Athens

6) Karakatsani (October, 2023).

7) Ioannis Armakolas, Giorgos Siakas, Alketa Bezani, Klodjan Seferaj, (2021), "Relations between Albania and Greece," published by OSFA and ElIAMEP, available at https://www.eliamep.gr/wpcontent/uploads/2021/06/Public-Opinion-Greece-and Albania-Relation-ENG.pdf

8) Quoted in Karakatsani(October, 2023).

believes that the "Fredi Beleri" issue is, without doubt, a European issue and that the advance of the accession negotiations between Tirana and Brussels sets its resolution, in accordance with the respect of human rights and the rule of law, as a prerequisite.

Geopolitical Imperatives

At the same time moreover, Greece and Albania, as NATO members, have to bear in mind that they have to contribute to the wider policies of the Alliance. Consequently, they have to be more co-operative within the context of the emergence of a multipolar structure of the international system and the competition at all levels that this development implies for NATO in general and the U.S. as its leading state in particular. States like Russia and China are already trying to expand their regional influence. As a result, the EU prospect for Western Balkans seems to be as imperative as ever before. "Notwithstanding current obstacles, the shifting global order and the influence of external actors in the region make the WB6 inclusion within the EU of vital importance for the European security and stability at large."[9] This fact however should not send the wrong message to candidate countries that there are "shortcuts" to accession. This implies that Albania has to make sure that it complies with the Copenhagen Criteria as soon as possible. Simultaneously, Albania's entrance to NATO should not create conditions of "reverse institutionalism" similar to these emerged following the entrance of Greece and Türkiye in the 1950s.[10] That means, as soon as Tirana became member of the Alliance and felt secured towards Russian re-activation in Western Balkans, it will be able to raise issues against other countries of the region Greece included.

Policy Proposals and Conclusions

As was argued above, gradually, due to Albania's economic development, its bilateral trade with Greece is increasing for the benefit of both countries and their people. There are already relations of economic interdependence between them. On the one hand, thousands of Albanian citizens are employed in Greece in a period that Greece really needs more workforce. On the other hand, the income that this fact implies for Albania through the remittances that its nationals are sending to its Banks is also very important. As was also stated above, the increased social interaction over the last 35 years between Albanians and Greeks have brought them closer to each other creating conditions of mutual understanding and co-operation. At the same time thousands of

9) Eleonora Poli, "Embracing the Western Balkan Countries' EU Accession at Present," Foundation for European Progressive Studies, *Policy Brief*, August 2023, p. 1

10) See, Crebs, R. (1999). "Perverse Institutionalism: NATO and the Greco-Turkish Conflict," *International Organisation*, Vol. 53, No. 2, Spring, pp. 343-377

Albanians have acquired Greek citizenship and have been totally incorporated within Greek political, economic and social life.

It is more than obvious that the interests of both countries demands their constructive co-operation for the resolution of their issues. The deterioration of their relations will have negative results for both of them, especially their people. Their participation in NATO should constitute an extra motive for co-operation and constructive engagement, not competition between them. At the same time, EU membership prospect for Albania provides another unique opportunity for Albania to come closer with Greece, not necessarily because this is the only way to get the final approval for membership, but because their common borders and shared history demands it. The EU demands full compliance with the Copenhagen Political Criteria from Albania and any other candidate country. For such a prospect to be efficient, however, given the new geopolitical urgency in the region, the EU should accelerate the accession process of Albania and the other Western European Countries, without suggesting an alternative. Finally, if Greece and Albania perceive that some issues cannot be resolved in a bilateral level they can resort to the International Court of Justice. The normalization of their relations is first of all for their own interests and undoubtedly for the interest of the wider region of the Western Balkans.

Research Article

KOSOVO, THE "FOUR-PILLAR" STRATEGY OF SERBIA AND THE ANTAGONISM BETWEEN THE "WEST" AND "MORE-THAN-THE-REST"

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The present article focuses on the opposing efforts for influence on Serbia, between the "West" and its rivals. The main argument of the article is built on the assumption that the world is no more divided between the "West" and the "rest" but between the "West" and a dynamic, emerging bloc of states, which in spite of not having yet the coherency of the "West" constitutes more than the rest. On the basis of this global transformation, the manipulation of the issue of Kosovo in order for pressure to be exercised on Serbia and the four- pillar strategy of the latter are examined.

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Keywords: Serbia, Kosovo, Hard Power, Soft Power, BRICS, NATO.

TPQ

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Reviziting Balkans

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On 7 May 2024, Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Belgrade at the invitation of Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic.[1] The statements included references to the traditional, warm relations between the two states, the comprehensive strategic partnership signed in 2016 and the Belt and Road cooperation. This marked a pivotal moment in the struggle for influence and control between the West and Russia-China, centered around Serbia, which remains one of the few Western Balkan states not to have joined NATO. Serbia's non-accession to NATO has made it a significant issue in the context of the global, modular war continuing on major fronts, including Ukraine and West Asia.[2]

In this article the emphasis is on examining the exercise of influence or even coercion on Serbia, given on the one hand the changing global balance of power, and on the other hand the unresolved issue of Kosovo. The above two conditions combine a mixture of "soft" and "hard" power influence over Serbia in terms of its foreign but also domestic policy.[3]

The primary prerequisite, however, in order to comprehend the situation around Serbia is that the world is no more consists of the "West and the rest"; it may not be the case yet that against the "West" there is a complete and equally consistent bloc of states but at least it is "more- than-the-rest" that opposes the "West".

The "West" and the "More-than-the-Rest"

Here, we use the term "West" for schematic reasons. The concept of the "West" remains largely abstract in principle, but we concretize it based on what is at stake in each historical conjuncture.[4] The "Cold War" provided a solid dimension to the concept of the "West": the capitalist world led by the US. While more or less, the concept of "West" is still dominated by the Cold War approach especially regarding U.S. domination, the end of the "Cold War" gave rise to doubt as to the preservation of this concept.[5]

The concept of the "West" has survived as an international space led by the U.S., its interests and policies. In the present it is mainly motivated by its competition

1) Xi Jinping Arrives in Belgrade for a State Visit to Serbia, http://th.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zgyw/202405/t20240510_11302343.htm

2) Θ. Τζ?μας, *Greece and Cyprus in the Post- American World* (May, 2022), Topos Publisher: Topos Publications, Athens, Greece, ISBN139789604994120).

3) S. B. Rothman, "Revising the Soft Power Concept: What are the Means and Mechanisms of Soft Power?" *Journal of Political Power*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (2011), 49–64; Alexander Vuving, "How Soft Power Works," (1 September 2009). Available at SSRN: https://ssrn.com/abstract=1466220

4) Shahrough Akhavi, "Islam and the West in World History," *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (June 2003), p. 545-562; Samuel P. Huntington, "The West Unique, Not Universal," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 75, No. 6 (Nov.–December 1996), p. 28-46.

5) Owen Harries, "The Collapse of 'The West'," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 72, No. 4 (Sep.–October 1993), p. 41-53.

with China and – in reality the "modular" world war – with Russia and China at the font.[6] This latter situation par excellence "revitalizes" the concept of the "West".[7]

The U.S.-led part of the world, the “West” possesses a huge range of "tools", such as NATO, the EU, the military bases of the USA itself in dozens of states around the world, the dollar and the euro, domination on the most important international economic organizations, the importance of the "West" in the banking and financial circuit, cultural influence on sports and entertainment and the hegemony of Western universities in global education among others.[8]

In terms of “hard power” and military coordination, the main framework consists of NATO, AUKUS, and several multilateral agreements regarding military cooperation.[9] In this framework, the U.S.-Saudi economic and military relationship as well as the failed until now attempt for the so- called “Arab NATO” are also successful and failed respectively, parts of the complex and multi- layered military alliances in the U.S.-led world.[10]

On the other hand, the alliance between Russia and China has neither the same past nor the same depth. Still, it is undergoing a phase of impressively accelerated and intensifying evolution, especially after the start of Russia's "special military operation" in Ukraine and the reaction of the "West" to it.[11]

China and Russia have not yet formed a correspondingly deep and stable common framework for exercising sovereignty, or a perfectly symmetrical antipode to the "West". While the Russian-Chinese alliance was initiated in the 90's, its trajectory was not until recently as stable, coherent and straightforward as the US-led bloc of the "West", ranging from the initial approach of the 90s under the weight of common bitterness and humiliation from US policy to Russia's turn to the West in the 2000s and the intense revival after 2007, especially after 2014 and the events in Ukraine.[12]

Still, synergies between the two states, interdependencies, and cooperation towards forming a coalition of states that are alternative to the US-led world are intensifying.

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6) T. Tzimas, *Greece and Hellenism in the Post-American Era, After Ukraine, What?* (Topos Publications, 2022), ISBN: 978-960-499-412-0.

7) Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

8) Report on how the "West" marks its global hegemony.

9) BBC “Aukus: UK, US and Australia launch pact to counter China,” BBC News, 16 September 2021. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-58564837

10) Dr. Florence Gaub, *An Arab NATO in the Making? Middle Eastern Military Cooperation Since 2011* (US Army War College Press, 2016).

11) Richard Sakwa, “East Vs. West: A New Cold War?” *Transatlantic Policy Quarterly*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (2023), p. 12-20; Ziya Öniş, “The West Versus The Rest: The Russian Invasion of Ukraine and the Crisis Of the “Post-Western” Order,” *Transatlantic Policy Quarterly*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (2023), p. 33-52.

12) A. Lukin, “The Russia–China Entente and its Future,” *Int Polit*. Vol. 58 (2021), p. 363–380, p. 363-364. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-020-00251-7

Since 2009 China has maintained the position of Russia's main trading partner among individual countries, although not without problems.[13] Moreover, their military cooperation has deepened, with Russia supporting China's more sophisticated armaments, while at the same time both countries (though not only them) are leading the way in strengthening the role of the BRICS.[14] The two countries and several others pioneer a "more just, polycentric world order" versus the "collective West".[15] The ongoing "rounds of sanctions" against Russia by the U.S. and the EU have made China an even more indispensable partner of Russia in relation to financial circumvention of sanctions.[16]

Thus, the debate on influence in Serbia is articulated between two blocs of powers that may not be symmetrical yet but certainly cannot be defined as "the West and the rest". As time goes by, the gradual decline of West's power proves inversely proportional to that of the emerging power bloc, which has China and Russia at its center. It is within this emerging dipole that Serbia is moving.

Kosovo as a Point of Reference for Pressure and Influence

In recent history of Serbia, two interconnected events dominate: the dissolution of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The second is the war with NATO and, eventually the de facto secession of Kosovo. The second event is a continuation of the first.

We will not go into detail here about the historical facts about Kosovo. We will only highlight the sequence between the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the conflict in Kosovo, NATO intervention and the de facto secession of Kosovo.[17] While UN SC Resolution 1244 of 1999 reaffirmed the unity of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, it removed all practical and effective control of the federal government, over Kosovo, in favor of a peacekeeping force, which was a state-building force.[18] The whole

13) Gleb Stolyarov, "As trade with China booms, some Russian companies are flourishing," 13 March 2024. https://reuters.com/business/trade-with-china-booms-some-russian-companies-are-flourishing-2024-03-13/

14) D. Stefanovich, "Russia to help China develop an early warning system," The Diplomat, 25 October 2019. https://thediplomat.com/2019/10/russia-to-help-china-develop-an-early-warning-system/; V. Kashin, "Tacit alliance: Russia and China take military partnership to new level," Carnegie Moscow Center, 22 October 2019. https://carnegie.ru/commentary/80136; Hüseyin Korkmaz, "BRICS and the New Cold War: Towards a Multipolar World Order?" *Transatlantic Policy Quarterly*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (2023), p. 147-152

15) Karl Sanchez, "BRICS+ Nizhny Novgorod Day Two: Remarks and Presser, karlof1's Geopolitical Gymnasium," 11 June 2024. https://karlof1.substack.com/p/brics-nizhny-novgorod-day-two-remarks

16) Ralph Jennings, "China, Russia could bypass barriers to buoy business as Western sanctions bite, researchers say," South China Morning Post, 13 May 2024. https://www.scmp.com/economy/global-economy/article/3262503/china-russia-could-bypass-barriers-buoy-business-western-sanctions-bite-researchers-say

17) British Kosovo conflict Balkan history [1998–1999], https://www.britannica.com/event/Kosovo-conflict; Paul Latawski and Martin A. Smith, *The Kosovo crisis and the evolution of post-Cold War European Security* (Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 6-14; A. Cassese, "Ex Iniuria Ius Oritur: Are We Moving Towards International Legitimation of Forcible Humanitarian Countermeasures in the World Community?" *European Journal of International Law*, Vol. 10 (1999), p. 23, 24.

18) UN SC 1244 (1999).

procedure that was followed led to the creation of conditions susceptible to de facto independence.[19] Kosovo authorities declared their independence in 2008.[20]

The fact that the U.S., the UK, the entire G7, and much of the EU have recognized Kosovo's independence has formed a condition of obvious mistrust – to say the least – and distance between Serbia and the "West".[21]

At the same time, however, Kosovo's de facto secession and its stable relationship to the extent of dependence on the US turns it into a constant focus of US hard power pressure – and hence influence – on Serbia.[22] In recent years, relations between the Kosovo authorities and the Serbs still living in Kosovo's north have remained particularly tense. The latest episode which showed how close we are to a new war in Kosovo only broke out in September 2023 and tensions have continued ever since.[23]

U.S. interference was required to reduce tensions temporarily but not to resolve them. The events of 2023, especially as a continuation of the previous ones have been of decisive importance as they have shown not only that Kosovo relies on NATO but also that NATO through the issue of Kosovo can exercise constant pressure on Serbia whenever it becomes a nuisance – at least beyond an acceptable degree – for the US.

Kosovo is seeking NATO membership by invoking its protection vis-à-vis Serbia and the latter's relationship with Russia. In this sense, NATO's presence in Kosovo constitutes a constant "Western" and basically American hard-power influence on Serbia, or else a form of coercion.[24] Besides, one should not forget that especially after the "Prespa Agreement" between Greece and North Macedonia, the latter joined NATO, resulting in an almost complete encirclement of Serbia and its severance from any direct contact with Russia.

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19) Themistoklis Tzimas, *The Russian Special Military Operation in Ukraine from the Perspective of Jus ad Bellum* (Cambridge Scholars, 2024); Letter from Ban Ki-moon, Sec'y Gen., United Nations, to the President, United Nations Sec. Council, U.N. Doc. S/20071168, 26 March 2007; The Special Envoy of the Secretary-General on Kosovo, Report of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General on Kosovo's Future Status, Delivered to the Security Council, U.N. Doc. S/2007/168, 26 March 2007.

20) ICJ, Accordance with International Law of the Unilateral Declaration of Independence in Respect of Kosovo, 22 July 2010, at p. 403, In paras. 56, 79, 83; M. Milanovic, "Arguing the Kosovo Case," in *The Law and Politics of the Kosovo Advisory Opinion*, M. Milanovic and M. Wood (eds) (Oxford University Press, 2014), at p. 26; T. Burri, "The Kosovo Opinion and Secession: The Sounds of Silence and Missing Links," *German Law Journal*, Vol. 10 (2011), at p. 886.

21) Milana Zivanovic, "Memory vs Oblivion: On the 25th Anniversary of the NATO Aggression Against Yugoslavia," Valdai Discussion Club, 22 March 2024. https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/memory-vs-oblivion-on-the-25th-anniversary/; Andi Hoxhaj OBE, "Ukraine war: Serbia is shifting closer to Russia – here's why," The Conversation, 7 November 2022. https://theconversation.com/ukraine-war-serbia-is-shifting-closer-to-russia-heres-why-192472

22) Joyce P. Kaufman, "Chapter 6 - The Post-Cold War Period," in *A Concise History of U.S. Foreign Policy* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021), p. 181.

23) Dimitar Bechev, Analysis: "Are Kosovo and Serbia on the brink of war?" 3 October 2023, Al Jazzera English, https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2023/10/3/are-kosovo-and-serbia-on-the-brink-of-war

24) Kimberley Kruijver and Visar Xhambazi, "Kosovo's NATO future- How to Square the Circle?, Clingedael," Netherlands Institute for International Relations, (December 2020). https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/Kosovos_NATO_future_Correct.pdf; Giorgos Triantafyllou, "KFOR and Provision of Security in Northern Kosovo: Tracing the sources of protracted insecurity," ELIAMEP, Working Paper No. 48/2014, (May 2014); Gordon N. Bardos, "Containing Kosovo," *Mediterranean Quarterly*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (2005), p. 17-43.

The attitude of Russia and China towards Kosovo is obviously different from that of the USA. It should be noted here that during NATO's intervention, Russia and China expressed their opposition as they do today, considering this intervention contrary to international law, while they have also not recognized Kosovo's independence. However, Russia and China lacked at the time the military power and willingness to engage with the "West" to support Serbian strategy on the issue.[25]

Since then and especially because of the global transformation, upgrading the "rest" to at least "more-than-the-rest," the relationship with Serbia is strengthened. Serbia has purchased weapons' systems from China while since 2009 the two states have signed a Strategic Agreement.[26] The military cooperation between Serbia and China has grown stronger. The two states held a common limitary exercise – the first one of China on European territory- while China has become Serbia`s leading military partner. Moreover, China has supplied Serbia with equipment, including the Chinese FK-3 medium-range anti-aircraft missile system and the Chinese CH-95 and CH-92A UAVs.[27]

Traditional relations with China have improved impressively at all levels, with infrastructure investment obviously being the most important. It is no coincidence that during President Xi's recent meeting with his Serbian counterpart, the two countries agreed to build a "shared future". As President Xi stated ""Eight years ago, Serbia became China's first comprehensive strategic partner in the Central and Eastern European region, and today Serbia is the first European country to build a community of destiny with China, fully reflecting the strategic, special and high level of China-Serbia relations," whereas president Vucic declared that "the two countries "are moving from strategic relations, through which we had managed to raise our bilateral ties, to the joint future of our two countries… That is the highest possible form of cooperation between two countries, and I am proud that I was able to sign this today as the president of Serbia".[28]

As far as Russia is concerned, military relations with Russia have been boosted again after 2022. A series of Russian and other analyses suggest that after Transnistria, the Western Balkans region will be the next front in the confrontation between the "West"

25) J. Hughes, "Russia and the Secession of Kosovo: Power, Norms and the Failure of Multilateralism," *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 65, No. 5 (2013), p. 992–1016; Barry R. Posen, "The War for Kosovo: Serbia's Political-Military Strategy," *International Security*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (2000), p. 39–84.

26) Janusz Bugajski, "Serbia Bolsters Connections With Russia and China," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 21(73) (2024). https://jamestown.org/program/serbia-intensifies-connections-with-russia-and-china/; Nina Miholjcic-Ivkovic, "Security Aspect in China-Serbia Relations: Digital and Military Cooperation," The Geopolitics, 19 April 2024. https://thegeopolitics.com/security-aspect-in-china-serbia-relations-digital-and-military-cooperation/

27) Hu Yuwei and Fan Wei, "Exclusive: China-Serbia military cooperation supports Serbia's defense modernization, empowers defense capabilities: Serbian Defense Minister," Global Times, 22 October 2023. https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202310/1300333.shtml

28) Dusan Stojanovic and Jovana Gec, "China and EU-candidate Serbia Sign Agreement to Build a 'Shared Future'," The Diplomat, 9 May 2024. https://thediplomat.com/2024/05/china-and-eu-candidate-serbia-sign-agreement-to-build-a-shared-future/

and Russia.[29] In 2021–2022, Russia ranked third after China and Belarus regarding arms' deliveries to Serbia.[30] In addition, in April 2013, Tomislav Nikolic- then President of Serbia- signed a Declaration on Strategic Partnership with Russia.[31] In implementing this agreement, several protocols have been signed, including the procurement of military drones.

Between NATO's presence in Kosovo on the one hand and Serbia's cooperation with Russia and China – in general and at the military level in particular – on the other hand, there is a fundamental asymmetry however: NATO's presence is entrenched in the region. In conditions of crisis or much more war, NATO has the ability to reinforce Kosovo's forces continuously. Russia and China, on the other hand, cannot offer Serbia assistance practically in the present and near future. To do so, NATO members would have to grant them permission, which is unlikely, or NATO will not exist in the region, which does not seem immediate. They can, of course, arm Serbia to a certain extent in the present or even find collateral ways of reinforcement, but they will prove extremely difficult and not equivalent to those on the NATO side. Serbia needs to balance between its tendency to align closer with Russian and China on the one hand and the potential coercion on the ground by NATO forces in Kosovo.

Conclusions: The Four-Pillar Strategy and Its Future

Serbia's strategy as a non- aligned nation is based on the "Four Pillars of Foreign Policy": the EU, Russia, China, and the U.S. constitute the four pillars. "The EU was and is by far the most influential partner in terms of trade and investments… Russia is the primary gas, oil, and fertilizer source and a key ally of Serbia in the UNSC… China is important for its strategic investments in a few companies and investments in key infrastructure projects. The US has the lowest level of trade with Serbia, compared to the other three, however, it is an important investor, particularly in the IT sector."[32] More than these however, the four pillars which are gradually becoming two, represent on the one side the "West," which is more powerful on the field in the present and the "more-than-the-rest," which are advancing globally, are friendlier to Serbia but are less powerful in the Balkans.

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29) M. Cruz, "Russia in the Western Balkans: Interests and Tools of Influence," In: Mölder, H., Sazonov, V., Chochia, A., Kerikmäe, T. (eds) *The Russian Federation in Global Knowledge Warfare. Contributions to International Relations* (Springer, Cham. 2021), at p. 315-333.

30) SIPRI Arms Transfers Database // SIPRI. URL: https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers

31) Lulzim Peci and Bekim Sejdiu, "Western Disunity Has Enabled Russia to Disrupt Kosovo-Serbia Dialogue," Balkan Insight, 4 June 2024. https://balkaninsight.com/2024/06/04/western-disunity-has-enabled-russia-to-disrupt-kosovo-serbia-dialogue/

32) Norbert Beckmann-Dierkes and Sladan Rankic, "Serbian Foreign Policy in the Wake of the War in Ukraine," Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 29 July 2022. https://www.kas.de/de/laenderberichte/detail/-/content/serbian-foreign-policy-in-the-wake-of-the-war-in-ukraine

Serbia's strategy was based on several delicate balances, which no longer exist beyond any doubt, after the Russian "Special Military Operation". Although Serbia condemned the Russian operation, it refrained from imposing sanctions.

The balance between the four pillars was fragile from the start. The prospect of Serbia's EU membership has been a strong positive incentive for Serbia's further rapprochement with the "West". As the "soft power" bearer par excellence of the "West", the EU would offer Serbia an outlet for economic development, political normality, and normalization of relations around Kosovo. These ambitions have not been confirmed. The weakness of the project of "Europeanization" in general,[33] the EU's stance of making demands for resolving bilateral conflicts that are almost impossible to achieve at this stage,[34] the relative ambiguity as to what Serbia is being asked about Kosovo to join and, of course, events in Ukraine as part of a world war have significantly delayed Serbia's accession path and therefore limited the projection of "soft power" on the part of the "West". A main problem is that EU foreign affairs ministers agreed to amend Chapter 35, which constitutes a key part of the negotiation's portfolio potentially freezing Serbia's accession process in case it does not normalize its relationship with Kosovo and does not stop "obstructing Kosovo's efforts to join key international organizations, such as the UN, the Council of Europe and NATO".[35]

At the same time, we must not forget that a part of Serbia's opposition mobilized against the current president in anticipation of support from abroad and especially from the "West", a condition that further strained relations with the EU and the US, giving rise to the fear of an orange revolution. It is precisely these situations that illustrate how complex relations and attempts to exert influence over Serbia are between West and More-than-the-rest. The EU dominates as a trading partner. It has given Serbia a perspective but at the same time demands a great deal from it. NATO has fought against Serbia, surrounded it, actively supported Kosovo's security and, at the same time, constantly reminded Serbia of the slim scope for action against an area that is still considered part of Serbia under UN Security Council resolutions.

On the other hand, relations with China and Russia are traditional – as far as Russia is concerned and has great cultural depth – but are also rapidly developing militarily and economically, especially with China.[36] They are also firm in their support for

33) Stahl B., "Another "Strategic Accession"? The EU and Serbia (2000–2010)," *Nationalities Papers*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (2013), p. 447-468. doi:10.1080/00905992.2012.743517

34) M. Petrovic and G. Wilson, "Bilateral relations in the Western Balkans as a challenge for EU accession," *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (2021), p. 201–218.

35) Euronews, 'Serbia needs to align further with the EU', Commissioner Várhelyi tells Vucic in Belgrade, 15 May 2024. https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/05/14/is-serbia-sliding-towards-authoritarianism-or-closer-to-eu-membership

36) Miša Stojadinovic and Violeta Raškovic Talovic, "Serbia And China: The Geopolitical And Economic Importance Of Mutual Cooperation For Serbia," China- CEE Institute, Working Paper, 39, 22 November 2018. https://china-cee.eu/

the Serbian positions on Kosovo. Apart from the problems in these relations as well, the major issue is that in the main field of projection of "hard power" in relation to Serbia, which is Kosovo, the possibility of intervention by Russia and China remains limited precisely because of NATO's presence in the region. Thus, a first asymmetry is identified geographically: Serbia on the Kosovo issue is logical to lean towards Russia and China, but in the event of a new war over Kosovo, the latter will not be able to help Serbia today in a way that balances NATO.

The second asymmetry added to the first has to do with the change in the planetary power correlation and the tensions it causes. The ongoing war in Ukraine, Palestine, the economic power of coalitions such as BRICS+, the strong position of China, Russia and other non-Western states mean that the comparison and conflict both in general and around Serbia in particular is not between "West and the rest" but between "West and more-than-the-rest". Or, if we wanted to avoid the pun, we would talk about "West" and the opposing coalition that is being formed, which proclaims not just a "polycentric world" but a "harmonious world".

The above approach is crucial for Serbia's "four pillar strategy". The very fact that we are not in a context of hegemony of the "West" but of the formation of opposing and confrontational blocs, with the "Western" descending and the "more-than-the-rest" rising, shows that Serbia's strategy of not committing to one of the two blocs is correct. At the same time, however, it is becoming less and less feasible, since the dynamics of the "modular world war" that is gradually being waged forces all states to choose sides. From this perspective, the fact that the "West", and in particular the US and NATO, can project more directly, greater, and more threatening "hard power" against Serbia through Kosovo, makes it more attractive for Serbia to turn away from the West, especially if combined with the delays in EU accession negotiations, precisely because the "West" appears more as a patron and even a threat than as a partner. Therefore, we will see Serbia trying to keep a delicate balance while leaning firmly towards the "more-than-the-rest" pioneers of the doctrine of the "harmonic world".

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Research Article

WESTERN BALKANS REGIMES THAT OBSTRUCT, AND THEIR EXTERNAL CONTINGENCIES

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This article argues that recent European Commission and NATO initiatives aim to stabilize the Western Balkans amid geopolitical upheaval from the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Historically, the region has struggled during global transitions due to its strategic location and external influences, leading to entrenched authoritarian regimes that exploit nationalism and corruption. Despite significant EU support, these regimes obstruct reforms, undermining transparency, and accountability. Economic stagnation and mass emigration exacerbate instability. The article suggests that the Western Balkans' precarious position necessitates a credible, concerted effort by external actors to mitigate these challenges and support irreversible progress away from conflict legacies.

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Keywords: Western Balkans, Regimes that Obstruct,
European Commission, European Integration, EU Expansion.

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Two notable steps were taken recently within the Euro-Atlantic integration process to assuage growing instability in the Western Balkans. First, the European Commission (EC), in its 2023 Enlargement Strategy, announced it was expediating the membership accession process and offered somewhat more apparent timelines. Second, at the February 2023 summit, NATO committed to the Defence and Related Security Capacity Building Initiative package for Bosnia and Herzegovina, which is by any measure the most vulnerable among the Western Balkans six. The timing of these two significant developments is ominous. They come twenty-five years since the final episode of the violent dissolution of former Yugoslavia that birthed an independent Kosovo state, and only because of the geopolitical schism over the war Russia waged on Ukraine.

The EC's decision to accept the European Union membership applications by Moldova and Ukraine prompted a breakthrough in a protracted accession process that the Western Balkans had been undertaking with no certainty regarding its outcome. The response by these two major international actors takes place in a particular geopolitical moment when it is not clear what kind of a new global order will emerge out of the current crisis centered on the war in Ukraine. Thus, the question of what repercussions these developments may have on the prospects of peace and stability in the Western Balkans is a pertinent one. This is so because, historically, the broader Balkans region did not fare well when similar global transformations were afoot. After upheavals, it recovered slowly and hesitantly, only to be swept by another wave of violence and instability. The primary reason for this vulnerability lies in its geography. Occupying a landmass that provides the shortest connection between the European continent's heartland and Asia, the Balkans has been exposed to disproportional external influence as well as conquests given its size and economic resources.

Some scholars argue that the inauspicious geography is indeed a reason for its entrenched backwardness.[1] The scramble for influence by external actors to pursue their geostrategic and geopolitical interests has left deep imprints in the form of unfinished statehood and underdevelopment. The most recent history of former Yugoslavia's dissolution and its aftermath, in which explicit and covert international involvement including by the EU and its member states was a significant factor, attest to such outcomes. Those outcomes in their turn perpetuate political and economic fragility and are a threat to stable peace in this part of Europe, as the recent actions by NATO and the European Commission arguably recognize.

The countries that emerged through the dissolution of Yugoslavia have, to a varying

1) B. Milanovic, "Why were Western Balkans Underdeveloped? A Geographical Hypothesis," (2018). Available at: https://www.globalpolicyjournal.com/blog/16/05/2018/why-were-balkans-underdeveloped-geographical-hypothesis

degree, since reverted to authoritarianism, with almost every indicator of democracy, including the rule of law and media freedom down-sliding. The early peace dividend that helped local economies recover from the material, institutional and societal destruction and deterioration, has given way to a stagnant growth that lacks strong foundation in productive economic and technological advancement and innovations to break out of this underdevelopment trap. Income convergence with the European Union as a professed political objective on both sides and a shared aspiration of the peoples of those countries- and one may add arguably a true measure of the benefits of the European path- remains elusive. The gap in GDP per capita between the Western Balkan countries and the EU remains significant. The feeble economic recovery from the 2008-2009 global financial crisis whereby the average GDP growth rates slumped to a fraction of the pre-crisis levels, attests to vulnerabilities and suggests bleak long-term growth prospects. Other indicators corroborate the picture of subdued economic development with all its negative social and political effects. The lack of economic prosperity and opportunity drives the relentless outward migration, which some analysts call a "depopulation disaster".[2] The World Bank reported that the working age population declined by over 400,000 people between 2016 and 2020,[3] while the Global Competitiveness Report lists Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, North Macedonia, and Serbia as top countries in terms of brain drain in this region.

Regimes that Obstruct

Economic motivations driving the mass exodus of individuals and families from the Western Balkans is inextricable from the political uncertainty that the post-Yugoslav states created, through a strategy of ethnic nationalism projected onto their citizens. Creating and perpetuating inter-ethnic tensions is a political strategy that sustains "regimes that obstruct", a particular system of political organization commonly observed in post-conflict countries. Those countries need to rebuild their institutions, and since the end of the Cold War have done so without exception with international support. But the incumbent regimes subvert externally-supported institutional remediation to protect their own interests and power, and " rationalize its delay through prevarication, continued resource misallocation, corruption or persisting public skills shortages".[4] One of the many concepts used to explain this governance configuration in the current Western Balkans context is that of networked state capture based on the nexus among organized crime, business, politics, security services and

2) A. Heil, "Depopulation Disaster: The Balkans and its Creeping Depopulation," RFE/RFL March 2020. Available at https://www.rferl.org/a/depopulation-disaster-the-balkans-and-its-creeping-demographic-crisis/30477952.html

3) A. Heil (March 2020).

4) R, Alley, "Regimes that Obstruct: A Problem of Institutional Refurbishment Following Internal Conflict," *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (2015): p. 112-133.

the judiciary[5] with origins in pre- and wartime links among different types of actors.[6]

The collusion between political, economic, and criminal elites, has created illiberal regimes that champion elite interests at the expense of the broader public, and manipulation of international aid is one of the mechanisms. Particularly in some countries, notably Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, international donors are a significant source of finance as well as providers of technical assistance to implement policy reforms. The EU is by far the largest external donor to the Western Balkans. As such, its interventions have been a target of those networks' strategies of political manipulation to remold EU assistance to their own purposes and extend their grip on power. Cognizant of this phenomenon, the EU has nevertheless remained committed to its established process of staged accession with its benchmarks and targets. This technical exercise is paired with political conditionality, which, in the Western Balkans, has tightened over time. The question of the appropriateness of this approach to the unique needs of a post-war context aside, a stop-and-go manner in its execution has created a permissive environment for the obstruction of reforms the EU supports, and their partial implementation. Such an approach derives from a policy stance that considers stabilization as necessary, and perhaps from where they sit, sufficient, objective of EU intervention. Because the experience so far suggests that the prevailing attitude appears to be that as long as the Western Balkans' elites are deterred from resorting to armed violence, there is both maneuvering space and an extended time horizon before engaging differently, if that is indeed an option. The novel instruments designed selectively to account for certain conflict-specific features of Western Balkans societies – for example the Stability Pact for South-Eastearn Europe – supporting country-level and intra-regional integration processes on the path of closer integration with the European Union, have not been effective in dislodging those structures. Rather they have contributed to the latter's entrenchment.

An example of this is the limited achievement of the European Union EULEX mission in Kosovo, whose core mandate was in the area of rule of law. Those groups of actors belonging formally to different institutional domains, but in fact working as an interconnected nexus bound by mutual interests, have skillfully taken advantage of the opportunities that have opened through closer economic cooperation with the EU. It is not an exaggeration to argue that because of the distortions in the local economies caused by political interference and reform obstructions, those structures have benefited disproportionately. EU is the largest market for all Western Balkan countries, its companies are the largest source of direct foreign investment, and its financial institutions are the owners of a significant share of the Western Balkans

5) I. Prezelj, and N. Otorepec Vogrincic, "Criminal and Networked State Capture in the Western Balkans: The Case of the Zemun Clan," *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 4 (2020): p. 547-570.

6) V. Bojicic- Dzelilovic, and D. Kostovicova, "Persistence of Informal Networks and Liberal Peacebuilding: Evidence from Bosnia and Herzegovina," *Journal of International Relations and Development*, Vol. 25 (2022): p. 182-209; S. Nikolic and C. Petrovic, "Organized Crime in Serbian Politics During Yugoslav Wars," *Journal of Political Power*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (2022): p. 101-122.

banking sector. The way the informal networks in which the state elites partake operate to take advantage of commercial opportunities - through abuse of public procurement tenders, discretionary exemptions from certain types of regulation, direct owners of business or via proxies, privileged access to loans, opaque contracts with foreign investors and so on, has strengthened the economic foundation of the regimes that resist the reforms intended to instill accountability and transparency in the delivery of governance functions. These unintended consequences have de facto questioned the EU's normative power as an important plank in its approach toward the security and stability of its members and its neighborhood.

An equally unwanted drawback to the inconsistent and some would argue, in the face of the precedent the EU has made on Ukraine and Moldova, unprincipled EU engagement in the Western Balkans and its marginalization, is that the space has opened for other actors to vie for influence in the Western Balkans. Since the late 1990s, Russia has been aggressively positioning itself as a powerful political and economic actor directly influencing politics and security in the Western Balkans. It has used its political, military, economic and soft power levers to support the regimes in Serbia and the Serb majority entity Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as pro-Russia political forces in the NATO members Montenegro, and North Macedonia. Russia's interests in the Western Balkans are both geostrategic as well as geopolitical.

The main motive in the short to medium term is to deter Euro-Atlantic integration of the Western Balkans six. The long-term agenda is about having a presence in this part of Europe to bolster its standing in the wider Mediterranean region and in its relation to Türkiye. The links between Russian political and economic actors and the sections of the Western Balkans political and economic elites have strengthened visibly since the full-scale war in Ukraine. The incumbent Serbian regime has defied the EU and the U.S. demands and refused to support international sanctions on Russia, which has helped keep the mutual interests and friendly relations intact. For Russia, the existing divisions and unsettled political issues in the Western Balkans coupled with uncertainties surrounding the EU accession process, have provided an entry point for helping prop up the Serbian regime economic and political standing. For its part, the Serbian regime's foreign policy of hedging which balances between the two main poles of attraction, namely the EU and the Russian sphere of influence, is geared towards providing Serbia with economic opportunities while strengthening its political might as the largest of the Western Balkans six. While pragmatism defines the relations between the two countries, strong cultural affinity between their two peoples as the Orthodox Slavs has facilitated Russia's increasing influence against the backdrop of the retraditionalization of Serbian society since the early 1990s.

The mix of pragmatism and ideological characteristics of Russia's engagement in

the Western Balkans can be observed in the approach pursued by Türkiye as another powerful external actor active in the Western Balkans. Like Russia, Türkiye has harnessed its historical, social and cultural relations to gain a foothold, first during the 1992-1995 war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and thereafter across the broader Balkan region. When tracing the evolution of Türkiye's engagement with the Western Balkan countries over the last three decades, there is the profound sense of a resurgent regional power (and a global actor) in its intent, manifested in the way it has waved its net of diplomatic, economic, and civic links with various constituencies in this part of Europe. According to one assessment, there has been a clear shift from multilateral, constructive engagement in the early 1990s when Türkiye engaged in sync with NATO, the EU, and the U.S., to a more authoritarian, personalistic and transactional modality.[7]

A combination of domestic, regional, and global developments has prompted this change. Akin to Croatia and Serbia's role as mother-states to Bosnian Croats and Bosnian Serbs intent at protecting their respective interests, Türkiye portrayed itself as playing similar role in relation to Bosnian Muslims. Close relationships with Bosnia and Herzegovina Bosnian Muslim leadership, and with the leaders of the political parties representing Muslims in Serbia's Sandzak, enabled Türkiye's to forcefully pursue its strategic interests while increasing its economic footprint across the Western Balkans. For example, the share of imports from Türkiye has increased in all countries over the years, and so are inward investment from Türkiye. Its growing economic role in those small markets (18 million people) is paralleled in some areas, notably Bosnia and Herzegovina and Sandzak, by its growing cultural and religious influence through the establishment of educational institutions and support extended to the Islamic community.

The trajectory of Türkiye's engagement in the Western Balkans is particularly ambivalent in terms of impact on Bosnia and Herzegovina's internal political dynamics and prospects of inter-ethnic reconciliation. Outside the Bosnian Muslims circles that mostly look benevolently and some approvingly on Türkiye's rise to prominence in the country's political, economic, and cultural life, there is disquiet among other groups who see it as "Islamisation by stealth". The members of the Bosnian Muslim political leadership deliberately nurture this kind of sentiment. From their standpoint, it is an aspect of the symbolic struggle to consolidate Bosnia and Herzegovina's statehoods but such that would affirm Bosnian Muslim dominance. For example, Türkiye's president and his wife attended the public wedding of the daughter of Bakir Izetbegovic, the former leader of the largest party representing Bosnian Muslims, which was then widely used to underscore strong inter-familiar bonds as having

7) S. A. Sofos, "Turkey's Presence in the Western Balkans- Achieving Cooperation and Sustainable Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina," University of Edinburgh, (2024). Available at https://peacerep.org/publication/turkeys-presence-in-the-western-balkans/

a role in Türkiye's engagement in Bosnia and Herzegovina. But beneath this act's symbolism, both sides exercise hard core pragmatism in their mutual relations. This is evident in Türkiye gradually ramping up its diplomatic and economic engagement with Serbia as well as pursuing large investment in Montenegro and Kosovo, in lockstep with expanding its diplomatic and economic ties with Russia.

The United Arab Emirates (UAE), who have also established a prominent presence in all Western Balkan countries demonstrates a strong resemblance with Türkiye in their instrumental use of religious affiliation in pursuit of economic and political interests-notably in Bosnia and Herzegovina, along with concerted investment expansion agendas in other countries. Strengthening economic ties with the Western Balkans countries is pursued under the strategy that aims to ensure long-term economic viability of the UAE as an oil-dependent economy. Some of these investments, including by now the infamous Belgrade on Water business and the accommodation construction project in the Serbian capital, have involved dubious deals with the local power players. Pragmatism is the modus operandi of the Western Balkans political establishment in dealing with external actors to protect its interests while resorting to informal and sometimes illegal means. This is illustrated potently by a strong foray the UAE has made in Serbia, by investing in a swathe of representative projects and businesses, despite being one of the countries that have recognized Kosovo as an independent state. For the current Serbian political establishment, Kosovo's independence is an uppermost issue in mobilizing domestic support for its rule. It is, therefore, central to its foreign policy that has rallied other countries to back Serbia's position on Kosovo independence, while simultaneously providing support to the Serb minority in Kosovo to undermine the latter's statehood.

Moreover, the presence of China and the U.S. as two global superpowers is essential for understanding the actions taken by domestic governments within the framework of post-conflict international assistance. In the Western Balkans, despite political instability being economically integrated into the EU, China's focus is on accessing economic opportunities through investment in selected sectors. However, by building stronger relations with Serbia, its economic priorities are intertwined with its political agenda to oppose the Western liberal hegemony and protect its own values and principles. As for the U.S., since the EU took over as the leading external actor in the Western Balkans, its role which was instrumental in ending the succession of wars, has been somewhat weakened. This reflects a shift to other priorities in its foreign policy. It engages intermittently and more forcefully at times of acute crisis. Thus, change in posture has been moted and seized upon by the local political elites in their calculations of what the permissible limits to their actions are.

The Western Balkans' position amid current geopolitical shifts suggests a historical parallel with the end of the Cold War, described evocatively by Carl Schierup (1999)

as a "scramble for the Balkans".[8] The geopolitical vacuum created by the Western Balkans ambiguous status concerning the EU membership has opened door to a plethora of foreign actors whose political and economic interests have complicated the extraordinary task of recovery after inter-ethnic violence in the context of unconsolidated statehood. Benefiting from this scramble are the regimes that lack commitment to the welfare of their citizens and whose short-term outlook drives opportunistic engagement with external counterparts, which generate fragile stability in the process. This is why it is vital that the recent NATO and EU action translates into a credible and concerted process that would mitigate against the Western Balkans' precarious position it has been pushed into by the regimes that obstruct irreversible move away from the legacies of conflict. This will require a genuine change on the part of external interveners that champion values of democracy, freedom, and tolerance.

8) C. U. Schierup, *Scramble for the Balkans: Nationalism, Globalism and the Political Economy of Reconstruction* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999).

Research Article

THE WESTERN BALKANS IN AN UNSTABLE WORLD ORDER: THE ROLE OF CHINA, THE EUROPEAN UNION AND RUSSIA

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The growing competition among major powers in the Western Balkans is a topic requiring attention. The actions of non-Western powers aimed at creating a rebalanced world order are challenging the primacy of liberal values. In this article, we analyse what the race for dominance between the EU, Russia, and China means for the Western Balkans. These three major powers pursue different strategies for dominance in the region: the EU seeks to accelerate the accession of the candidate countries form the region, Russia employs cultural ties, while China leverages its economic position. Caught between different visions for the world order, the Western Balkans countries are facing the challenge of navigating different strategic choices.

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Keywords: Western Balkans, World Order, EU, Russia, China.

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The recent decade has seen the liberal world order disentangling and experiencing growing instability. States like China or Russia are increasingly challenging the centrality of the West. The so-called rules-based order centers on the promotion of a range of liberal values originating primarily from Europe and the West. Besides external challenges, we've also seen leaders in European countries embracing populist and illiberal processes. This, in turn, undermines the ability of the West to convince other states to embrace liberal values. Even more, the wars in Ukraine and Gaza have further magnified the perception that the West embraces double standards, where the U.S. or the EU, for example, criticize their competitors and enemies, while overlooking similar transgressions when perpetuated by allies, as with the case of Israel.

Especially during the last year, the BRICS group of states has grown in prominence, by admitting four new members, which now positions it as the pole that can provide an alternative to the liberal world order. Such a development may have already pushed us into a new Cold War, where, much like the confrontation between the US and the Soviet Union, it will influence trade patterns, promotion of ideology, or security arrangements. It is very likely that small states will be increasingly pulled apart and constrained to choose between the West and its challenges. This level of alignment will primarily encompass small states' economic and political autonomy. The Western Balkans is a critical geographical and political space where the interests of various major powers in the world order clash: China, the European Union, and Russia. In the following, we compare the nature of engagement of these global powers with the Western Balkans by looking at their motivations and desired outcomes.

Russia

Russia's interest in the Western Balkans extends to the Tsarist times when it competed for regional influence with the Ottoman and Habsburg empires. Links with Slavic and Christian Orthodox nations like Serbia or Bulgaria allowed Russia to gain a foothold in the region. At the same time, Moscow helped during the 19th century with the independence causes of these nations. The Cold War brought a new dimension to Russia's engagement in the region, where the Soviet Union was heavily invested in maintaining the former state of Yugoslavia in its sphere of interest, even though the latter also sought to develop close relations with the West. During that period, Russia primarily focused on deepening economic ties and industrial collaboration and ensuring that Yugoslavia would not join the Western bloc led by the United States.

With the breakup of Yugoslavia following the end of the Cold War, we have seen the Western Balkan countries divesting from their relations with Russia. As a result, Moscow's influence generally waned in most Western Balkan countries except

Serbia. A key reason for this has been identified by academic research in Russia's relative economic and military weakness during the 1990s and early 2000s when it experienced a deep crisis which did not allow it to send the same level of financial or military support to the Western Balkans as the Soviet Union was able to during the Cold War.[1] Nevertheless, for policymakers in the Kremlin, the country's inability to prevent Yugoslavia's disintegration left a deep resentment towards the West, which was seen to sideline and completely ignore Russia's interests in the Western Balkans.[2]

Arguably the most important current priority of Russia regarding the Western Balkans is to gain support for its narrative about the war in Ukraine. To be more precise, Russia considers its invasion of Ukraine as a necessary preventive military action that was meant to counter Western military expansionism through NATO within Ukraine. Kremlin also emphasizes the principle of indivisible security, whereby states possess agency and autonomy, and are thus free to choose their own alliances.[3] Still, these decisions should not come at the expense of their peers. Russia sees Ukraine's desire to join NATO as a threat to its vital national interests. Even more for the Kremlin, NATO represents a relic of the past whose primary purpose is to counter Russia's actions. To that extent, further NATO expansion in the Western Balkans will probably not be understood in a positive manner but would also probably not elicit a similar response to that in the case of Ukraine. Another critical dimension of Russia's current engagement with the Western Balkans, refers to convincing the states in the region does not adopt the sanctions regime that the EU or the U.S. have imposed on Moscow – Serbia is the only country in the region does not align with the West in terms of sanctions.

Similarly to China, Moscow also seeks to get broader support for its position in the United Nations. Nevertheless, even Serbia voted for the UN General Assembly resolution that called for the immediate withdrawal of Russian troops in Ukraine on 24 February 2023. From the economic perspective, following the end of the Cold War, Russia has been invested in various degrees in developing lucrative trade relationships based on the export of energy resources. Again, Serbia is a key example here. Russian capital has also been invested in real estate and hospitality, especially in tourist areas by the sea, particularly in Montenegro and Albania. In line with its broader policy of emphasising the bankruptcy of European integration and democracy, Russia has also aimed at weakening the influence of the EU in the region. It should be noted that unlike Western countries, Russia, much like China, does not politicize its economic relations, in the sense that it does not attach any ideological or

1) Lance Davies, 'A "Hybrid Offensive" in the Balkans? Russia and the EU-Led Kosovo-Serb Negotiations', *European Security*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (2 January 2022): 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2021.1948837

2) Pavel Shlykov and Ekaterina Koldunova, 'Russia and China in the Eastern Mediterranean: On Parallel Tracks?', *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* (29 September 2022): 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1080/19448953.2022.2129319

3) Sergey Lavrov, 'Text of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia Mr. Sergey Lavrov`s Written Message on Indivisibility of Security Addressed to the Heads of Foreign / External Affairs Ministers / Secretaries of the US, Canada and Several European Countries', 1 February 2022. https://mid.ru/print/?id=1796679&lang=en

political conditions to striking, for example, trade agreements. A key consequence of this is that corrupt elites tend to prefer to cooperate with Russia or China.

China

The Belt and Road initiative represents the primary vehicle through which China has aimed to engage with countries in the Western Balkans. The key behind this broad strategy of Beijing is the need to secure access to resources and markets while providing FDI to countries that are especially looking to develop their infrastructure. Moreover, through investments in other countries, China also seeks to shape the global geopolitical landscape, by arguably having an agreement for its views of the world order from countries that receive its investment. China's involvement in the region should also be seen from the perspective of the potentially experiencing Cold War 2.0. This thesis argues we are on the brink of the world order coalescing again around two main poles, as during the proper Cold War when the US and Soviet competed for influence across the world. At the root of the new Cold War lie primarily questions around control over resources and innovation. China, for that matter, has mounted an increasing challenge to both these dimensions during the last decade. Even more, with the war in Ukraine and the Western sanctions imposed on Russia, Beijing has also spearheaded efforts to challenge the dominance of the US dollar in the global financial system: for example, the share of global SWIFT payments in the Chinese Yuan has grown from 2.2 percent in 2019 to 4.6 percent in 2023.[4] Ultimately, China perceives itself as a major international actor that should be granted greater ability to shape the rule so of world order. Support from smaller countries like those in the Western Balkans, for China's approaches in various international focus such as the UN can be crucial for advancing China's vision of the world order. Even more, the West Balkans can be seen to represent a getaway for China into Europe, and through to the potential to further challenge the dominance of the EU (but also the West more broadly) in its backyard.

Nevertheless, the proximity of the Western Balkans to the EU is seen as a major factor in China's interests in this region. This explains China's initiative to build the LSER (Land-Sea Express Route), a Belt and Road Initiative component. This transport corridor is meant to link China and the EU through Greece and West Balkans.

A future Chinese intervention in Taiwan is probably one of the more contentious issues that Beijing will aim to gain global support for. The recent expansion of the BRICS to include four new members at the BRICS summit of 2024 further magnified that perception that China is at the forefront of an emerging pole that can provide a clear

4) Lucy Ingham and Callum Tyndall. 'Dedollarisation in 2024: Is the yuan taking on the dollar in cross-border payments?', FXC Intelligence, 25 January 2024. https://www.fxcintel.com/research/reports/ct-dedollarisation-2024-yuan-dollar-cross-border-payments

alternative to the West. Thus, as we go forward, the Western Balkans states will likely be forced to choose between aligning with the West or a Chinese-led alternative. It should also be noted that in its world vision, China tends to build informal relations, where negotiations and personal relations among leaders, diplomats or businesses are crucial for achieving international cooperation.

Thus, China represents the center of an emerging pole in the world order who offers an alternative mode of development, with fewer political conditions attached to cooperation. The slow EU integration process for the Western Balkans countries allows other powers, like China, to exert their influence in the region. In the recent years, Western Balkans countries have been increasingly receiving increasing investments from China and Russia as well as has strengthened economic ties with these two countries. Cheaper products coming from China play a key role due to the purchasing power of Western Balkan countries and the reliance on the Russian gas and oil. Relations between China and the Western Balkan countries can differ significantly as Beijing does not have a foreign policy framework towards Wester Balkans as a region, as the EU does. For example, although China accounts for only 4 percent of Serbian exports and 9 percent of Serbian imports,[5] these two countries see each other as strategic partners.

In October 2023, at the Belt and Road Forum, they signed a free trade agreement aiming to deepen their economic integration. If we consider FDIs in the Western Balkans, China's engagement ranges from heavily investing in Serbia, to limited economic cooperation with North Macedonia, Albania, Montenegro and Bosnia & Herzegovina, to almost no presence in Kosovo, which China does not yet recognise. On average, the Western Balkan countries' exports to China range from 2-4 percent, while these countries' exports to EU range from 33 to 79 percent.[6] Imports from EU are also similarly much higher than the imports from China.

The European Union

The EU, as the central pillar in the Western-led liberal world order, promotes international cooperation through a multilateral framework. This means that states come together and decide the rules of cooperation, in this way ensuring equality. Proponents of such a rules-based order contend that the more informal Chinese preference for bilateral relations puts weaker states at a disadvantage where there are no rules or authorities to protect them from the disproportionate power and influence of states like China or Russia. From this perspective, the EU's engagement n with

5) A. Krstinovska, "Choice," 11 January 2024. [Online]. Available: https://chinaobservers.eu/for-chinese-companies-better-access-to-the-eu-single-market-leads-through-the-western-balkans/. [Accessed 7 May 2024].

6) V. S. F.-P. v. d. P. M. P. &. M. L. Wouter Zweers, "China and the EU in the Western Balkans," Clingendael, 2020. https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2020-08/china-and-the-eu-in-the-western-balkans.pdf

the Western Balkans is primarily influenced by the need to keep the countries in the region engaged in multilateral frameworks, and through this both promote and abide by the rules of the liberal world order. Most importantly, the EU has presented itself as a promoter of democracy and stability in the Western Balkans, providing its neighbours the tools to develop and become resilient from an economic and security perspective.

The Western Balkans have also been kept in the waiting room of the EU, as through the negotiation processes of candidate states, the level of bureaucratic negotiations, reforms and technical requirements imposed by the EU require long-term effort and committed from candidate countries. The EU's enlargement has indeed a shift following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, where Moldova and Ukraine were also afforded the candidate status. Prior to this, these countries developed different forms of association with the EU that would allow them to enjoy some benefits from a certain level of access to the single markets through initiatives through the DCFTA. There seems to be now pressure to hasten the accession processes for all candidate member states, particularly for Ukraine's path to membership to be fast-tracked. However, in practice, there seems to be some confusion regarding how the cumbersome procedures underpin the accession to be slimmed down. One may argue that a key prerequisite for the membership of Western Balkan countries is for the EU to be able to about a measure of domestic change whereby these countries in the region share the values and orientations promotes by the EU. The fact that the EU enlargement process is progressing slowly and the rise of geopolitical tensions is making the Union's presence in the region increasingly important. Economy is becoming a tool for dominance in the region. The recent iteration of the EU's strategy in the region, i.e. the EU's six billion Euros New Growth Plan announced in 2023, emphasises as a key instrument for economic convergence as a pre-condition for EU accession, also labelled as a 'bold offer to the region', aims to bring the region closer to EU. However, the aid does not come unconditioned, as usual. Western Balkan countries are expected to advance on the domestic reform agenda and strengthen the region's economic integration in return.

Conclusion

The transition to a multipolar world clearly poses many problems for the Balkans, just as it does for other regions of the globe. Because of its geographic position, the Western Balkans continues to be a very important route for trade and a suitable region for investments. The political disputes in the region and the slow process of EU integration for decades made these countries vulnerable to attempts at establishing influence from different parts of the world, mainly China and Russia. There is an

increase in pro-EU integration sentiment in Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro, and North Macedonia. Nevertheless, we see a decline in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Given the EU's new investment screening mechanisms, EU integration would influence foreign investments by differing between what is considered a safe or a risky investment. Relations of the Western Balkans with China and Russia would be strained to some extent as their investments would be limited, disrupted, or delayed. This means that the opportunity to function as a multi-aligned country will be constrained, too. However, this could also create more opportunities for more cooperation with EU countries and make the region more attractive for investors coming from the EU. Decades ago, as China was weaker and Russia was transitioning and recovering after the fall of the Soviet Union, the EU faced no competition when it came to influencing this region. This enabled endless EU requirements with little to no progress towards EU integration. The fact that there is serious competition, mainly from China and Russia, for influence in the region now is influencing EU foreign and expansion policy. This has been reflected in increased investments in the Balkans and an accelerated integration process. It remains to be seen how the investments coming from these countries would shift the Western Balkans countries' sentiment towards joining the EU or preserving the autonomy of foreign investment attraction strategies. The fact that there are alternatives puts the Western Balkans region in a better negotiating position. However, this should not be done at the expense of moving towards authoritarianism or increased political disruption and polarisation between these countries.

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Research Article

THE END OF A FAIRY TALE, THE START OF A NEW ERA? THE EU AND CHINA IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

DOI: 10.58867/ZOKD5974

The Western Balkans have been transformed into authoritarian regimes in the last decade, despite the EU's engagement with the region through its enlargement policy. However, prioritizing stability over democracy, the EU lost its chance to transform the Western Balkan countries into democratic entities. In the end, the EU opened a way in for the external actors to the Western Balkan countries and China has entered the scene by increasing engagement with the region. The leaders of the authoritarian regimes in the Western Balkans adopted a pragmatic approach in their relations with China. They used the Chinese card to proceed with their relations with the EU and to gather financial means to legitimize and consolidate their regimes.

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Keywords: Russia, Great Power Politics, BRICS, Global South, Russian Foreign Policy.

TPQ

Spring 2024
Reviziting Balkans

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"European solidarity does not exist. That was a fairy tale on paper. I have sent a special letter to the only ones who can help, and that is China…" - Alexander Vucic[1]

On 15 March 2020, during the Covid-19 era, the words of the Serbian president, Alexander Vucic, alarmed many due to signifying the gradual alienation of the Western Balkan countries from the EU and the increasing role of China in the region that bore fruits through the Chinese engagement with the Western Balkans in the last decade.

While all six countries in the Western Balkans (i.e., Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia) have had institutional ties with the EU for a long time now, the momentum of their accession processes has been lost due to the internal problems of the EU like Euro crisis, Brexit, increasing refugee flow due to the Syrian civil war, the rise of far-right parties. Such developments have dominated the EU's agenda, resulting in the postponement of enlargement processes for the Western Balkans until an unknown period.

In the meantime, Western Balkan countries have been transformed into competitive authoritarian regimes ruled by strong autocratic leaders,[2] who acquired skills to manage the EU's hesitant approach towards the region and multiplied their ties with authoritarian powers like China and Russia. As they turned into competitive authoritarian regimes, hybrid regimes,[3] or defective democracies,[4] Western Balkan countries' ties with the democratic world, exemplified by their relations with the EU, loosened, while their linkages with the authoritarian world further developed. One of the primary examples of such a transformation is China's increasing engagement with Western Balkan countries.

In the end, the EU, losing its credibility in the Western Balkans for the enlargement process, has given way to the Western Balkans' increasing ties with the authoritarian world, signified by their cooperation with a new player in the region, China. The Western Balkans become an arena for competition among the external democratic and authoritarian powers. In line with the growing authoritarianism in the region, the EU has lost its primary position as a democratic engine in the region. Instead, China has increased its presence in the Western Balkan countries. Such a transformation emerged due to the EU's prioritizing stability over democracy in the Western Balkans and China's prioritizing pragmatic cooperation without intervening in domestic

1) Julija Simic, "Serbia turns to China due to 'Lack of EU Solidarity ' on Coronavirus," Euractiv, 18 March 2020.

2) Florian Bieber, *The Rise of Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans* (Cham Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

3) Freedom House, Freedom in the World, 2024. https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores

4) Bertelsmann Stiftung (ed.) "Transformation Index BTI 2024 Governance in International Comparison," 2024. https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/fileadmin/files/BSt/Publikationen/imported/leseprobe/1_974_Leseprobe.pdf

politics and giving the political elites in the region the opportunity to use Chinese money to increase their prestige at home and consolidate power.

In the Name of Stability: The EU Losing its Ground in the Western Balkans

In the 1990s, the conflicts in the Western Balkans led to an increasing focus of the EU on the region's stability. Such focus has continued in the 2000s since post-conflict Western Balkans have still had many problems like the Kosovo issue. Despite providing an accession perspective to the Western Balkan countries in the 2003 Thessaloniki Summit, the EU prioritized stability in the region over democracy, and "its intense focus on stability and development downplayed its role as a democracy promoter."[5] While the EU established itself as a transformative magnet in the previous enlargement rounds, especially in the accession process of Central and Eastern European countries, it has become a stabilizing force in the Western Balkans rather than a transformative power.

The EU's stabiliocratic approach bears some fruit for the stability of the Western Balkans while leading to the consolidation of authoritarian regimes in the region. Prioritizing stability over democracy, the EU triggered the development of Western Balkan countries into stabilitocracies: "countries with obvious democratic shortcomings that at the same time claim to work towards democratic reform and offer stability."[6] Such stabilitocracies offer some sort of stability to the region, while enjoying external legitimacy provided by the external powers, specifically by the EU.[7] However, such offers by the Western Balkan countries are misleading, as Bieber emphasizes, since the lack of democracy has been the primary source of instability in the region.[8]

Therefore, Western Balkans have resided within a vicious cycle that the EU feeds: primacy of stability over democracy that leads to the formation of weak democracies in the region governed by authoritarian leaders claiming to provide stability but not democracy. This approach, in turn, consolidates authoritarian regimes in the Western Balkans, supposedly providing stability. Besides, a paradox emerges out of this: "the EU becomes increasingly dependent for its democratisation agenda on governments

5) Adea Gafuri and Meltem Muftuler-Bac (2021) "Caught between Stability and Democracy in the Western Balkans: A Comparative Analysis of Paths of Accession to the European Union," *East European Politics*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (2021), p. 267-291, p. 268.

6) Wouter Zweers, Giulia Cretti, Myrthe de Boon, Alban Dafa, Strahinja Subotic, Milena Muk, Arber Fetahu, Ardita Abazi Imeri, Emina Kuhinja, Hata Kujrakovic, "The EU as a Promoter of Democracy or 'Stabilitocracy' in the Western Balkans?," *Clingendael Report*, August 2022, p.1.

7) Florian Bieber, "The Rise (and Fall) of Balkan Stabilitocracies," *Horizons: International Relations and Sustainable Development*, Vol.10 (2018), p. 176-185, p. 179.

8) Bieber (2018), p. 179.

that have little democratic ambitions, and which largely stimulate reforms to keep EU counterparts happy and reap benefits of the special enlargement relationship."[9]

In the end, the EU continues to work with these stabiliocratic regimes and consolidates these authoritarian regimes in the region that have nothing to do with democracy. As the refugee crisis created further focus on stability as well as security in the Western Balkans that become a transit route to Europe for refugees, the EU's concern for strengthening stabilitocracies in the region increased, and the leaders of these stabilitocracies gained further legitimacy to their regimes as the "resilient anchors of stability" as well as the guardians of the EU's borders.[10]

In addition to the EU's stability-focused approach strengthening stabilitocracies in the Western Balkans, several factors led to the reduced role of the EU as a transformative power with its successful enlargement policy. First, the credibility of EU conditionality as the primary driving force of democratic reforms in the accession countries has weakened in the case of the Western Balkans. In the 2000s, debates over enlargement fatigue dominated the EU's enlargement processes. Enlargement fatigue refers to the probable loss of the EU's ability to provide membership to candidate countries at a low cost, and has become a determinant of the EU's enlargement processes.[11] Second, through the process, the EU adopted stricter accession criteria for the Western Balkan countries than in previous enlargement processes, further weakening the EU's transformative power.

New criteria like the absorption capacity of the Union or European public opinion led to debates over non-Copenhagen criteria dominating the enlargement process of the Western Balkans, which triggered a sentiment among the Western Balkan countries that, no matter what, the membership prospect is not guaranteed at the end of the accession negotiations. Last, such developments coincided with the decades-long turmoil in the EU over many issues like the Euro crisis, the rise of the far-right parties in Europe, Syrian refugee flow, and Brexit. All these developments led to the EU shelving the enlargement into an unknown period and reduced the EU's role in the Western Balkans a stabilizing power.

While EU-related developments dominated the enlargement process of the Western Balkans, the Union continued its attempts to revive the process with different strategies like launching the Berlin Process in 2014 or adopting a new strategy for enlargement in 2018 that proposed an accession date of 2025 for the frontrunners in the Western Balkan enlargement process. However, the EU proved not ready for any revival of

9) Zweers et al. (2022), p. 6.

10) Nicholas Ross Smith, Nina Markovic Khaze and Maja Kovacevic, "The EU's Stability-Democracy Dilemma in the Context of the Problematic Accession of the Western Balkan States," *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (2021), p. 169-183, p.177-178.

11) John O'Brennan, "Enlargement Fatigue and its Impact on the Enlargement Process in the Western Balkans. The Crisis of EU Enlargement," *London School of Economics' Ideas–Special Report*, November 2013, p. 36-44, p. 36.

the Western Balkan enlargement process, as later exemplified by Macron's insistence on focusing on reforming the EU rather than enlargement.[12] After that, the process entered into a stalemate and revived with the 2023 New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, aiming for further economic integration of the region with the Union and acceleration of the democratic reform process through financial assistance of 6 billion Euros in 2024-2027.[13] Yet, whether this has an impact on the enlargement process of the Western Balkans remains to be seen in the future.

Despite the aforementioned steps of EU for reviving the enlargement process in the Western Balkans, what appears Brussels has been left are regimes with authoritarian tendencies at hand. The region demonstrates many problems with democracy: entrenched corruption and clientelist relations, state capture, and limited freedom to the judiciary, media, and civil society.[14] Dealing with these regimes, the EU adopted a stabiliocratic approach and is now "entrapped in the stabilization mode."[15] Therefore, the EU has been entrapped in its own approach with the need to deal with the authoritarian leaders in the region that supposedly provide nothing but stability, while paying lip service to the EU reforms. In between a hard rock and a hard place, the EU focused on cooperation in difficult issues in difficult times and neglected its transformative potential in the Western Balkans. This has created a space for other external actors as alternative sources, providing both financial means and further legitimacy to the authoritarian regimes of the Western Balkan countries, like China.

Increasing Cooperation: China in the Western Balkans

Starting in the 2010s, China has increasingly engaged with the Western Balkans. China lends, invests, and enhances trade in/with the Western Balkans, which is in need of such engagement from external powers for their economic development.[16] While dealing with the economic impact of the Euro crisis that led to scarce financial inflow to the Western Balkans, the Chinese investment and enhancement of trade has become an alternative source for economic development in the region and political trade-off in the international arena, considering the relations with the EU. Relatively strings-free engagement of China with the Western Balkans and lack of Chinese interest on the

12) Milenko Petrovic and Nikolaos Tzifakis, "A Geopolitical Turn to EU Enlargement , or Another Postponement? An Introduction," *Journal of Contemporary European Politics*, Vol. 29, No. 2, p. 157-168, p. 158-161.

13) European Commission, "Enhanced EU Engagement with the Western Balkans – New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans," 2024. https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/enhanced-eu-engagement-western-balkans_en

14) Soeren Keil. "The Business of State Capture and the Rise of Authoritarianism in Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia," *Southeastern Europe*, Vol. 42 (2018), p. 59-82.

15) Milos Petrovic, "EU Integration Process of Serbia: A Vicious Circle of High Politics," *The Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 1175 (2019), p. 23-48, p. 31.

16) Erika Abazi, "Geopolitics in the Western Balkans: Linkages, Leverages and Gatekeepers," *Academicus International Scientific Journal*, Vol. 24 (2021), p. 85-108, p. 97.

domestic affairs have brought the Western Balkan autocrats close to China, and these leaders of the Western Balkan countries started enjoying authoritarian cooperation with China as close cooperation among authoritarian regimes. The lack of Chinese push to adjust their regime allowed the Western Balkan autocrats to continue their authoritarian path, while using the Chinese engagement for their own political benefit to consolidate their rule at the domestic spectrum and to give a signal to the EU that they could choose China over the EU.[17] Therefore, Western Balkan countries, which are prone to use the Chinese card if needed, have a pragmatic interest-driven approach in their relations with China.

Relations between the Western Balkans and China accelerated in the 2010s through the launch of 16+1 initiative (later with Greece joining 17+1 initiative and with the exit of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia 14+1 initiative) in 2012 as a platform to initiate cooperation between sixteen Central, Eastern, and Southeastern countries, including the Western Balkan countries and providing a regional perspective to the relations, and the launch of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, providing a global perspective to the Chinese engagement with the Western Balkans.[18] An institutional framework for Chinese relations with the Western Balkans is provided through these initiatives, which become a source of funding for economic development for the Western Balkan countries as "simpler and quicker to obtain than alternative EU loans."[19]

China perceives the Western Balkans as a transit corridor to the European markets or a "bridgehead between Europe and Asia"[20] and such proximity gives an opportunity to the Western Balkan countries in need of urgent investment in several areas, especially in infrastructure development. Several investment projects by loans in the Western Balkans have been launched in collaboration with China like the construction of Budapest-Belgrad railway, the Bar-Boljare highway in Montenegro, the acquisition of the Smederevo steel plant and Bor Copper in Serbia, Kicevo-Ohrid highway in North Macedonia, the Stanari and Tuzla thermal power plant in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Such investment projects are fundamentally nationally important projects that are not funded by the Western counterparts, and China "filled the void by investing" in these projects proposed by the Western Balkan countries.[21]

17) Vladimir Dordevic, Richard Q. Turcsanyi and Vladimir Vuckovic, "Beyond the EU as the 'Only Game in Town': The Europeanisation of Western Balkans," *Eastern Journal of European Studies*, Vol. 2 (2021), p. 21-45, p. 29.

18) Anastas Vangeli, "China Anew Geo-economic Approach to the Balkans," in Florian Bieber and Nikolaos Tzifakis (eds.), *The Western Balkans in the World Linkages and Relations with Non-Western Countries* (Abingdon Oxon: Routledge, 2020), p. 205-223, p. 210.

19) Nina Markovic Khaze and Xiwen Wang, "Is China's Rising Influence in the Western Balkans a Threat to European Integration," *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (2021), p. 234-250, p. 234.

20) Vuk Vuksanovic, "Russia and China in the Western Balkans: The Spoiler Power and the Unexpected Power," in Nemanja Dzuverovic and Vera Stajarova (eds.) *Peace and Security in the Western Balkans: A Local Perspective* (Abingdon Oxon: Routledge, 2023), p. 234-254, p. 242.

21) Danijela Jacimovic, Joel I. Deichmann and Kong Tianping, "The Western Balkans and Geopolitics: Leveraging the European Union and China," *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 4, p. 626-643, p. 627.

Despite the increasing engagement of China with the Western Balkan countries, such engagement is uneven across countries. Serbia is the primary Western Balkan country that has tremendous development in its relations with China. First, the country is the only country in the Western Balkans that has relations with China at the strategic level, as the Serbia-China relations were upgraded into a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2016 with Xi's visit to Serbia. Besides, in May 2024, the two countries signed an agreement to establish a 'shared future' residing in the shared values and goals and envisaging further cooperation, as Serbia became the only European country that signed such a document with China.

Second, the country has become a hub in the China-Europe Land-Sea Express Corridor of the BRI as a strategic point for the implementation of the BRI in the Western Balkans.[22] Third, both Chinese investment and trade in/with Serbia have a considerable upward trend, which is enormous compared to the other Western Balkan countries. The country has become the largest recipient of Chinese investment in the Western Balkans, receiving 70 percent of Chinese investment in the region.[23] Regarding trade with China, Serbia again receives the largest share of USD956.46 million in exports and USD4,229.33 million in imports in 2021.[24] However, other Western Balkan countries' trade with China has not improved that much compared to Serbia.[25] For instance, in the same year, Montenegro, had exports to China at USD6.72 million and imports to China at USD289.71 million.[26] Besides, trade with China seems fractional compared to the trade with the EU in 2021, for instance: while 4 percent of the total exports and 12 percent of the total imports of the Western Balkans belong to China, 89 percent of the total exports and 58 percent of the total imports of the region belong to the EU.[27] Therefore, Chinese trade with the Western Balkans needs not to be exaggerated as many expected.

In short, Chinese engagement with the Western Balkans has visibly accelerated in the last decade. However, the increasing presence of China in the region is not even across countries and is primarily focused on Serbia. Besides, compared to the EU, Chinese economic engagement with the region is not promising for the Western Balkan countries. Nevertheless, the political engagement of China, despite being uneven again, provides the Western Balkan leaders to increase their bargaining power vis-à-vis the EU and consolidate and legitimize their regimes in the eyes of

22) Jacimovic, Deichmann and Tianping (2023), p. 630.

23) Jacimovic, Deichmann and Tianping (2023), p. 630.

24) International Monetary Fund (IMF) Direction of Trade Statistics, 2024. https://data.imf.org/?sk=9d6028d4-f14a-464c-a2f2-59b2cd424b85&sid=1514498277103

25) International Monetary Fund (IMF) (2024).

26) International Monetary Fund (IMF) (2024).

27) Eurostat, "Western Balkans-EU- International Trade in Goods Statistics, 2021, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Archive:Western_Balkans-EU_-_international_trade_in_goods_statistics#The_Western_Balkans_trade_with_the_EU_and_other_main_partners

the public through, for instance, nationally significant joint mega projects. In the end, pragmatic authoritarian cooperation overweighs between the Western Balkan countries and China, which provides an easy and quick alternative for economic development to the region and a playing card to the Western Balkan countries against the EU to increase their bargaining power in the accession process.

Conclusion

Western Balkans have emerged as a geostrategic playing ground for external powers in the last decade. As a transformative power through its enlargement policy, the EU has actively been engaged within the region, yet it has prioritized stability over democracy in the accession process of the Western Balkans. In the end, Western Balkan countries turned into stabilitocracies offering little to the Union regarding democratic development. Most importantly, the EU's stabiliocratic and hesitant approach to the authoritarian regimes in the Western Balkans led to a way in for other external actors in the region, like China.

In line with such developments, Chinese presence in the Western Balkans increased, and pragmatic cooperation between the Western Balkan countries and China accelerated in the last decade. Authoritarian leaders in the Western Balkans used such opportunity for their own benefit to consolidate their regime in the domestic arena through their engagement with China bringing economic benefits to the country as well as visibility and publicity to the megaprojects supported by China. Besides, in the external arena, paying lip service to the domestic reforms, these countries found the chance to play the Chinese card to proceed with their relations with the EU. In the end, the winner for all was the Western Balkan autocrats, who used every opportunity for their own sake to legitimize and consolidate their rule.

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Extra - Opinion Contribution

NATO HAS A GEN-Z PROBLEM

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Gen Z support for Ukraine is declining, and skepticism towards the existing security architecture is rising—what is happening to the age group that makes up one-third of NATO's population? The subfactions that make up Gen Z have left the generation critical and dissatisfied with the current global security architecture and NATO. The defining characteristics of the "digital generation," which include deep polarization, anti-imperialism, and anti-hypocrisy, compound with Russian disinformation, and misinformation more broadly, steering the young generation away from NATO and weakening the Alliance's resilience and readiness. NATO should be cognizant of mending this divide to combat the decreasing enlistment rates across NATO countries and develop future political will for the sustainment of the Alliance. To reverse this phenomenon, NATO members should integrate Gen Z dialogue into their political processes, particularly with those who are critical of the current security architecture.

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Keywords: NATO, Gen Z, Transatlantic Security, Political Will, Polarization.

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Gen Z is not a monolith, but in observing its factions, NATO and its members should be paying closer attention to the trends of this generation's discontent with the existing security architecture.

In a Gen Z world where NATO stands for "Not Attached To an Outcome,"[1] or "NATO dating," with no relevance to the North Atlantic Treaty but in reference to casual dating, NATO is obligated to actively bridge this disconnect and remind Gen Z what NATO really stands for.

Gen Z is the most active online and connected generation in human history, and it makes up roughly one-third of the Alliance's population.[2] Just like the rest of Gen Z, I am chronically online and stressed about the future, but unlike most of my generation, I am also a transatlanticist actively working on developing Gen Z transatlantic leaders. As such, I am concerned by the growing disconnect between my peers and the transatlantic security establishment.

Given the shocking lack of polling and statistics on Gen Z, based on the data available, and the trends I see in my own lived experience as an American who has lived in Prague, Brussels, and Madrid and is working on youth transatlantic policy incubation, I have identified the following themes as defining features for this generation's relationship with the existing security architecture:

1)Gen Z is deeply polarized;

2)Gen Z is anti-imperialist;

3) and Gen Z hates hypocrisy.

Together, these defining themes compound into a perfect storm that leaves Generation Z vulnerable to anti-NATO narratives, Russian disinformation, and skeptical of the rules-based order that threatens NATO's current readiness and long-term resilience.

Gen Z is Deeply Polarized

Gen Z is experiencing a growing political gender divide that has left much of the generation vulnerable to anti-NATO narratives.[3] While Gen Z is not a monolith—the gender divide is not homogeneously constructed either—the trend of Gen Z polarization has led to concerning developments among sizable portions of Gen Z.

1) Mark Travers, "A Psychologist Explains The 'NATO Dating' Trend," Forbes, 10 January 2024. https://www.forbes.com/sites/traversmark/2024/01/10/a-psychologist-explains-the-nato-dating-trend/?sh=23a772d24ec7

2) Anne Freer, "A Look at Gen Z Mobile Behaviours – 64% of Mobile Users are Always Connected," Business of Apps, 19 June 2019. https://www.businessofapps.com/news/a-look-at-gen-z-mobile-behaviours-64-of-mobile-users-are-always-connected/

3) DW News, "Why the Political Worldviews of Young Men and Women are Increasingly Diverging | DW Analysis," Youtube Video, 1 March 2024. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=54H8ppxnp8I

Where past generations were more progressive than those before them, Gen Z has altered this cycle, with Gen Z women becoming more progressive over time and Gen Z men becoming more conservative. Plus, there is not only a gender split, but a drastic move apart to opposite extremes of the political spectrum. A Gen Z centrist is a rare relic of a bygone era.

Gen Z men are strongly attracted to and vulnerable to far-right figures such as Andrew Tate, Tucker Carlson, and Nick Fuentes. Across both North America and Europe, the "culture wars" have taken storm, and the far right is winning among Gen Z men. Politico Europe found that political content on TikTok surrounding the election of the European Parliament is dominated by the right wing, with right-wing Members of the European Parliament obtaining 39 million likes and 2 million followers.[4]

Gen Z-ers that move left, move very left. Some sub-factions that are included in this are leftist progressives who embody coming of age during the cancel culture era and full-blown Soviet nostalgic communists, nostalgic for a life they never lived and can't possibly know.[5]

Gen Z is Anti-Imperialist

This theme is most apparent in Gen Z's response to the Hamas terrorist attacks in Israel, the subsequent increased Israeli bombardment of Gaza, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Triggered by the Israel-Hamas conflict, right now, you can observe trends of Gen Z-ers finding which celebrities to block next, which companies to boycott next, as well as videos referring to President Joe Biden as "Genocide Joe,"[6] and most recently, students at Morehouse University turning their backs to President Biden as he gave the commencement speech. There are more than 100 student encampments around the world calling for attention to the mass civilian deaths in Gaza, a ceasefire, and divestment from Israel.[7] Almost all of them are within NATO member states.

In response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, two thought leaders have emerged: realist U.S.-skeptic political scientist John Mearsheimer and philosopher Dr. Cornel

4) Politico, "Europe's Far Right uses TikTok to Win Youth Vote," 17 March 2024. https://www.politico.eu/article/tiktok-far-right-european-parliament-politics-europe/

5) Rev. Ben Johnson, "Half of Gen Z Supports Marxism/Socialism. Here's why," Acton Institute, 23 October 2020. https://rlo.acton.org/archives/117396-half-of-gen-z-supports-marxism-socialism-heres-why.html

6) Shia Kapos, "Pro-Palestinian Protesters are Backed by a Surprising Source: Biden's Biggest Donors," Politico, 5 May 2024. https://www.politico.com/news/2024/05/05/pro-palestinian-protests-columbia-university-funding-donors-00156135

7) See for instance, AlJazeera, "'Divest from Israel': Decoding the Gaza Protest Call Shaking US campuses," 30 April 2024. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/4/30/divest-from-israel-breaking-down-the-us-student-protesters-demands

West, whose presidential campaign calls to "disband NATO."[8] Far-left social media accounts emerged including Slow Factory,[9] and separately, directly-affiliated accounts with Russia have captured the minds of far-left Gen Z-ers. These figures and platforms place a spectrum of blame on NATO for the invasion, seeing NATO as an imperial force and Russia as the reasonable victim defending itself from potential Western atrocities.

For European Gen Z-ers in this camp, they feel they have been born into a weak Europe that is trapped under a tyrannical NATO that is the extension of the U.S. empire. For Americans in this camp, they believe their tax dollars are being wasted on submitting a faraway continent to the American will, all while their streets are riddled with opioids and homelessness.

While on the practical transatlantic policy level, there should be little relation between the events in Eastern Europe and the events in the Middle East, for far-left Gen Z-ers, they are products of the same story: an imperial West asserting itself in a victimized Global South.

Far-right Gen Z-ers have much overlap with the Gen Z left on the Russian invasion of Ukraine, primarily because they are anti-imperial, not from a reformist liberal agenda but from an isolationist one. Included in this is also the fact that Putin and Russia have been drawn into the culture war as a symbol of masculinity, which has encapsulated Gen Z incel culture.

Gen Z's anti-imperial nature could and should translate into being anti-Russia, anti-China, or other current empires on this planet, but they are not, because as they see it—be it from differing perspectives—the United States and NATO are the imperialists. This is because, for Gen Z, what supersedes all is there is no B.S. view of their respective governments. If they sense you are hypocritical, you're canceled.

Gen Z Hates Hypocrisy

While Gaza is very much removed from North Atlantic policymaking, for Gen Z, the hypocrisy in response and rhetoric from Western governments to Gaza versus in Ukraine culminates in a "you're canceled" sentiment with NATO.

On TikTok, where the large majority of users are Gen Z, #freepalestine has 31 billion posts, compared to 590 million for #standwithisrael.[10] Palestine is at the center of Gen Z's attention, no matter their political allegiance. And for all of Gen Z, no matter

8) See CornelWest2024, https://www.cornelwest2024.com/platform

9) See SlowFactory, https://slowfactory.earth

10) The Hill, "Why is Gen-Z so Pro-Palestine and anti-Israel?" 11 December 2023. https://thehill.com/opinion/international/4353828-why-is-gen-z-so-pro-palestine-and-anti-israel/

their support for Israel or for Palestine, Western rhetoric and response signifies to them that the narrative of promoting a rule-based order in Ukraine is empty.

This perception is dangerous, as it leads many to begin to further buy into Russian disinformation. Where Gen Z senses hypocrisy, they are quick to abandon their previous political position. As a result, American Gen Z support for Ukraine has declined since October 7th.[11] Concurrently, Gen Z support has shifted to the Congo, Yemen, and Sudan. These are important issues, but for Gen Z, they signify a change of sides. Gen Z may not even have fully identified what these sides are, but they know that one of them—the West, the United States, NATO—is hypocritical.

Gen Z are not Inherently Transatlanticists

Gen Z is one of the most diverse generations in history. As a result, the traditional familial links between North America and Europe do not exist in the same way that they once did. This is particularly evident in the generational divide in American connections to Europe, which is becoming more prevalent. In 1940, 89.8 percent of the United States was White (of European origin),[12] with many Americans still holding on to their heritage and connection to Europe. Thus, fighting in WWII and the commitment towards the future security of Europe were supported on a familial level to the American public. Today this is not the case. In 2021, 58.9 percent of the U.S. population is White,[13] many of whom are generations removed and feel little connection to their ancestry.[14]

On the European side of the equation, more European Gen Z-ers are born to immigrants than ever before, primarily of North African and Middle Eastern descent.[15] European Gen Z-ers, were also born into the post-History era of Europe, refining their ideas in a world pre-Russian invasion of Ukraine, where NATO and the United States-Europe relationship are less relevant.

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11) Ipsos, "How Young Americans view the Wars in the World Right Now," 17 November 2023. https://www.ipsos.com/en-us/how-young-americans-view-wars-world-right-now

12) David Morgan, "1940 U.S. Census Data Released Online," CBS News, 2 April 2012. https://www.cbsnews.com/news/1940-us-census-data-released-online/

13) See CensusGOV, https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045223

14) D'Vera Cohn, Anna Brown and Mark Hugo Lopez, "Black and Hispanic Americans See Their Origins as Central to Who They Are, Less So for White Adults," Pew Research, 14 May 2021. https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2021/05/14/americans-origins-and-connections-to-their-families-roots/

15) Niall McCarthy, "Europe's Biggest Foreign-Born Communities," Statista, 27 February 2018. https://www.statista.com/chart/13064/europes-biggest-foreign-born-communities/

Conclusion

Whether Gen Z looks up to RFK Jr., Cornel West, Tucker Carlson, or Member of German Parliament Sahra Wagenknecht, what they all have in common are contempt for and dismissiveness of NATO. No matter where a Gen Z-er lies on the political spectrum or within the gender divide, the odds are that they are critical and dissatisfied with the current global security architecture. Gen Z does not (yet) have the power to hinder NATO, but NATO should be paying attention for the following reasons:

1)There is a global culture war happening, and Russia is winning by stoking and aiding in both far-left and far-right extremist campaigns. Gen Z is just the most symptomatic, given that they are the most exposed.

2) Gen Z makes up a third of the Alliance's population and, at present, appears to be one of the most politically engaged and connected generations in history. As NATO is the result of member states political will, the transatlantic relationship should be cognizant of tending to and growing this political will for future generations.

3) Lastly, and most importantly, young people fight wars. Across the member states of NATO, enlistment rates are down,[16] and I do not believe this to be a coincidence given the described situation in this piece. As hot wars are here and have growing potential for spreading, young people need to be ready to understand who the enemy is and why NATO is their friend.

NATO member states must recognize Gen Z and the internet as spaces of confrontation, not just for addressing the adversary but also for understanding the psyches of those on the receiving end. The Alliance needs to go further than hosting the NATO Youth Summit or relying on student-led awareness campaigns; the majority of this generation is uninterested in these outlets.

NATO members should integrate Gen Z dialogue into their political processes, particularly with those who hold opposing views on the current security architecture. This will enable NATO to hear Gen Z's concerns, comprehend their motivations, and ultimately convince Gen Z that NATO is not just a dating acronym but the most effective conflict deterrent in human history, vital to the well-being of Gen Z's future.

This is not only a public relations issue but also a practical and operational one. In a world where Gen Z rejects hypocrisy and is quick to turn their back on those they see as doing so, the West must strategically align itself on the right side of history. Absent this, NATO is an aging 30-plus club.

16) Jack Detsch, "NATO Doesn't Have Enough Troops," Foreign Affairs, 10 April 2024. https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/04/10/nato-troop-numbers-russia-ukraine-war/

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NOTES

The Balkans, a region often caught in the crosscurrents of global power dynamics, stands as a testament to the intricate and evolving geopolitical landscape. Historically a bridge between East and West, the Balkans today are a focal point of strategic interests from major global players, including the European Union, NATO, Russia, and Türkiye. Considering recent geopolitical shifts and the region's enduring vulnerabilities, this special issue of TPQ aims to explore the multifaceted realities and future prospects of the Balkans. The contributions in this issue delve into the political, economic, and social dimensions of the region, examining the interplay between internal dynamics and external interventions. The overarching goal is to provide a nuanced understanding of the Balkans' position at the intersection of Western and non-Western influences, and to stimulate thoughtful discourse on the path forward for this historically significant region.

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