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ABSTRACT

The region of Southeast Europe, as a post-communist and post-socialist region, has been going through a series of transition processes in the last thirty years. The disappearance of the common state of the South Slavs/Yugoslavia, the devastation of war and the wider demographic collapse, and complex national relations have burdened democratic processes to the extent that every issue in the Balkans is the subject of major and fundamentally important debates.

In the new and fundamentally changed geopolitical circumstances that have led to the growth of new centers of power, the growth of a multipolar world, the Balkans region is becoming a significant zone of conflict between global powers. This region is not at all immune to impulses coming from Eurasian space, especially after the NATO alliance's attempt to move the "great border" to the banks of the Dnieper. Serious opposition to this approach in Europe, first in Hungary and then in Slovakia, led to a series of complex political processes in Central and Southeast Europe. With growing Turkish dissatisfaction with the attitude of Western partners towards Ankara, the question of NATO's strategic goals began to be raised.

The withdrawal from Afghanistan indicated the American understanding that they were facing a great burden (imperial overload), but it also opened a discussion about the future of the global influence of liberalism and the West in general. This crisis of liberal hegemony, which led to a new approach and repositioning of world powers and rising powers, began to be clearly observed after 2016 in the actions of China, as well as in the emergence of a new American isolationism that was very pronounced during Trump's first term, and even more so during the past 2025, in which Trump took dramatic steps.

The great topic of a multipolar world and a new order was opened, so that the entire European continent, due to its visible loss of position on the global level, can be problematized as a space of possible polar non-belonging. The latest events (the Greenland affair in particular) clearly demonstrate this.

In this sense, the Balkan peninsula, as the "soft belly" of European geopolitics, but also the centuries-old "in-between space", is in a dead end bordered by regional hegemons and their national interests on the one hand and the aspirations of pro-democratic, weaker states on the other.

Keywords

Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), European Union (EU), Geopolitical shifts

Introduction

While the entire international order is shaking due to the concecvences of the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, major changes in Africa/Sahel that affect the global position of some European powers, as well as the strong turns of the Trump administration on the issues of America's future relationship to partnerships and alliances, the Balkan region is not steady too.

It is not without context that both world wars had a link with the Balkans as a springboard in Germany's plans for world domination because it was part of the "transverse Eurasian axis". Germany, indeed, was on the way to secure this land route to Asia, and control over this gateway to the Orient would lead to the secondary position of Great Britain and France, one of the most important German goals in the first half of the twentieth century (Roucek, 1946, 372).

The political and security integrations that took place in the last thirty years had one goal: to integrate this part of Europe into the EU and NATO. And while most of the area, some faster and some slower, successfully moved towards that goal, several countries still stand in a vacuum today. The most accurate description of the stalemate would be the influence of the Great Serbian ideology or the "Serbian question" in Serbia, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro.

The post-Cold War world, immediately after the collapse of the bipolar order, faced a very interesting situation, at least in theorizing about its realities and future development. Namely, no matter how much it seemed that the unipolar hegemony of the United States left little room for alternative geopolitical processes, many authors had already warned during the 1990s that this was an illusion.

The disappearance of communism as an ideology but also of the repressive regimes that existed for almost fifty years in Eastern Europe had a significant role in the issue of the security of the continent, especially because of everything that happened during the disappearance of Yugoslavia. The Balkans, as the closest neighborhood of the European Union, has become a zone of conflict and a threat to general stability.

Grand Strategies

In this period, regional powers, and primarily China, tried to determine new approaches, looking, at least, several decades ahead. Jiang Zemin's active foreign policy marked a final departure from the legacy of revolutionary diplomacy and the adoption of realistic geopolitical thinking in the conduct of its current foreign relations. The creation of Russia as its strategic partner is perhaps the most significant indication of this (Yue, 1998, 84).

For China's leaders, multipolarity was already a fundamental feature of the 21st century, and Jiang was sure that the relations between the great powers were already in constant flux, shaping a multitude of power centers while developing countries with increased overall power and elevated status have become an important force to be reckoned with on the international stage. (Yue, 1998, 102).

Indeed, the global power gap was narrowing, and Washington was facing more serious threats to its supreme position. Great power competition was back, as Russia and China constantly tested the contours of an order they had never fully embraced. As Brands (2018) put it, "Moscow and Beijing are seeking to assert primacy within their own regions; they are probing the far peripheries of the American alliance system; they are developing military capabilities that threaten the US' ability to project power and maintain its security commitments in Eastern Europe and the Western Pacific" (p. 141).

Security considerations have guided the Chinese and Russian rapprochement and put the disputes of the past behind them. The cooperation is designed, in the words of Chinese Defense Minister Chi Haotian, so that China and Russia should be "good neighbors, good partners, and good friends forever." (Yue, 104.)

It is true that many international relations theorists believed that the unipolarity enjoyed by the United States was unsustainable and would lead to a rebalancing of the great powers and the rise of opposing coalitions. The prediction that some of the disastrous phenomena expected would materialize after the end of bipolarity convinced John Mearsheimer to warn that "The prospects for major crises, even wars… are likely to increase dramatically now that the Cold War is passing into history" (Brands, 2018, 138).

On the other hand, the European Union grew significantly during the 1990s and early 21st centuries due to the dominance of the liberal paradigm. However, everything that happened during and after the second invasion of Iraq

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opened many security challenges. As early as 1998, the French and the British agreed that it was essential for the Union to have the capacity for autonomous action and credible military forces (Saint Malo), while the French stressed that the Common European Security and Defense Policy offered the possibility of elevating the concept of "strategic autonomy" to a European level (Anghel and Darnen, 2025, 16).

But the crisis in Ukraine has established new realities and through it the out-lines of the following decades can be glimpsed. Marked by the outsmarting of great powers in zones where decisive influence is sought, the coming era has the potential to be marked by political tensions and military conflicts across the globe. There are dozens of zones, from strategic to less tactical, from the North Pole to the South China Sea, that will shape an entirely new world.

In the last decade or so, through success in Syria, Eastern Ukraine (Black Sea region), recently in Kazakhstan, Russia has very directly challenged the US and their Western allies (Miller, 2022). Acting simultaneously with China in certain global processes Moscow also significantly contributed to emergence of strong opposition to liberal democracy due to prediction of the collapse of liberal internationalism. No matter how brave this prediction is, one can see "signs on the road" which are strengthening arguments.

European security, in this regard, has become more vulnerable. New devel-opments have put the European Union in front of a series of political debates but also upheavals. Migrant crisis (2015) and Brexit (2016) were a strong call to Europeans to start thinking more seriously about their own military power. Old French idea (President De Gaulle) about European Forces drove President Macron to support a joint European military project once again in 2017, while German Chancellor Merkel, in her address to the European Parliament in No-vember 2018, said "we need to work on a vision of establishing a European army" (General Secretariat of the Council, 2010).

Migration, terrorist attacks and total dependence on American will under the auspices of NATO contributed to the rise of voices about the need for greater European autonomy. EU initiatives (the birth of the European Defense Fund (EDF), Permanent Structured Cooperation (Pesco) and the Coordinated Annual Review of Defense (CARD)) did not find much understanding in Washington, as the revitalization of EU security and defense led to a simultaneous resurgence of concerns about its impact on transatlantic relations, on protectionism in the defense industry and cooperation within NATO. What was most striking was the ambition formulated in the EU Global Strategy to become strategically autonomous (Drent, 2018, 1).

However, since 2016, the UK has started to play its own game, which has made this issue of European strategic autonomy very questionable. This was especially true of the UK's new vision of cooperation with the EU. Without detail, and with a focus on a multitude of new transformations of hard and soft power, "from an inherently global perspective, Europe is generally referred to as a NATO ally that can count on the UK when it really matters, while the EU can only expect constructive and productive relations, with Brexit providing Britain with the opportunity to pursue different economic and political paths where it is in our interests and to mark a distinctive approach to foreign policy" (Hadfield, 2020, 184-5).

A key policy shift initiated by Prime Minister Boris Johnson in 2020 was a "tilt" to the Indo-Pacific region, interpreted as a return to the UK's role "east of Suez", before the downsizing and joining the European Economic Community in 1973. The report (described by Johnson as the most in-depth review of British foreign, defense and security policy since the end of the Cold War) signaled a change of direction from the UK's traditional post-Cold War policy of preserving the "rules-based international system". While the "tilt" to the Indo-Pacific was not as explicit, it was implicitly confirmed in the UK-EU Trade and Cooperation Agreement signed in December 2020, which did not include external security and defense cooperation (Smidak, 2021, 1-2).

Perhaps the answer to this cold British approach lies in reshaping Britain's relationship with key EU internal security platforms, where the primary foundation is ontological security that relies on traditional ways of continuity and material control over specific security dilemmas. Given that continuity depends on domestic frameworks of self-perception that crystallize around key ways, including the preferred national security apparatus and achievable goals, mainly to ensure stability in an uncertain security environment, it becomes clearer where the desire for dosed cooperation comes from (Hadfield, 2020, 170).

In addition to the EU, Russia and China, which are in the phase of redefining their roles, positions and interests, Turkey as a regional power in a certain way under the great pressure of these global trends had to make strategic maneuvers. In the post-Davutoglu period, Turkish foreign policy has been marked by the refugee crisis, the conflict with ISIS, increased terrorist attacks, the conflict with the PKK/YPK/PYD in Iraq and Syria, the failed coup, etc. A few similarities can be observed, which are quite logical, with the issues that burdened the EU as well.

While former prime minister and minister of foreign affairs Ahmet Davutoğlu based his foreign policy on soft power and civilizational multilateralism, due to

such threats and challenges, Turkiye switched to a firmer approach to promote its own interests (Blend Lami, 2018, 39). The post-Davutoğlu approach, defined as "moral realism", is seen as a "radical reset of Turkish foreign policy", initiated in 2015 and accelerated in 2016 due to the security risks posed by ISIS, PKK/ PYD/YPG and the influx of refugees. The "new" Turkish foreign policy functions through security concerns and involves hard power (Akça Ataç, 2018, 62).

Russia and Turkiye, together, are seen as a challenge to the West in the Balkans because they are seen as authoritarian alternatives to the liberal-democratic paradigm. Of course, there are cases where Russia and Turkiye coordinate their policies in the region, and this can undermine European interests. However, despite occasional policy coordination, Turkey and Russia do not act in concert in the Balkans due to their different attitudes towards the West. As Bechev (2021) argues, "while Moscow seeks to reduce Western influence, Ankara is ambivalent and sometimes aligns its foreign policy with that of the EU and the United States" (p. 56).

Hungary certainly plays an important role in the security and geopolitical dynamics of the Balkans. The fact that China's economic aspirations in Europe are most developed in Hungary opened space for Budapest to mediate and balance at the highest level. Imports from China to Hungary long ago exceeded imports from the United States, and as Hungary approached EU accession in 2004, imports from China as a percentage of total imports tripled compared to imports from the United States. AFTER temporary stabilization again by 2017, the percentage started to differ in favor of China (Blocher, 2020, 10).

However, the most important global player that also dominates the security dilemmas in the Balkans is certainly the USA. Especially for the reason that, with its moves and possible new strategic approach, it opens/closes space for Russia, the EU or Turkiye as powers that traditionally strive to increase their own influence in southeastern Europe. The connection between foreign policy goals and military doctrine when talking about Washington is unquestionable, so changes in the latter actually testify to the future trajectory of the US.

As Kime (2018) stated: "The economic reality is that America, in its post-industrial phase, cannot afford to patrol the world like a policeman and, perhaps more importantly, cannot afford to sustain the kinds of prolonged conflicts and prolonged military presence abroad that we have supported in recent decades" (p. 59) leading to the conclusion that it is dangerous and extremely costly to impose forces and policies to do what they are not actually prepared to begin or finish.

Security and Geopolitical Developments in the Balkans

The security dilemmas of the Balkans are closely linked to the security issues of Central Europe and the Black Sea region. What is happening in this wider area has repercussions on the development of not only political but also military relations in this part of Europe. Given that the transatlantic strategy for the Black Sea region focused on NATO, it was also important to indirectly encourage aspirants beyond the region through an open door policy for membership (Horrell, 2016, 4). Montenegro was an excellent example which only showed how impulses have their effects, or at least they are considered to be able to have them.

Security risks in the Balkans are manifold, and the conflict between Serbia and Kosovo is just one of them (Zweers et al., 2025, 4). In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the secessionist agendas of the Republika Srpska leadership, as well as the veiled similar intentions of Croat political representatives, keep the country in a painful status quo. The increasing influence of external actors such as Russia and China, in addition to the already enormous influence of the EU and the USA, prevent domestic political forces from encouraging themselves to find solutions that they will bring about and implement themselves.

After the overthrow of Serbian President Slobodan Milošević (October, 5 2000), the new Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić showed a desire for a new approach but his assassination (2003) put an end to this kind of change and put Serbian politics back on old tracks. In the early 2000s, the EU was focused on setting up the institutional framework for crisis management so cooperation agreements with NATO and the Berlin plus Agreements were concluded by 2003. That allowed the EU to launch its first civilian mission (EU Police Mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina - EUPM) as well as its first military operation (Operation Concordia in FYRO Macedonia) in 2003. (Anghel and Darnen, 2025, 20).

When Montenegro became independent (2006), and then Kosovo declared independence (2008), things looked quite gloomy from Belgrade's perspective, because the Greater Serbian idea was under enormous pressure. The NATO membership of Croatia and Albania (2009), therefore, set off a red alert to them. Throughout this period until 2009, positive progress was noted in Bosnia and Herzegovina's path to joining the NATO alliance, prompting NATO member countries to encourage substantive action plans to enhance Bosnia and Her-

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zegovina's Euro-Atlantic aspirations and helping in reform efforts to achieve those goals.

One of the fundamental conditions for Bosnia and Herzegovina's integration with the Alliance was the adoption of a comprehensive defense law. After long political games, it was finally adopted, and as stated in Article 1, it "regulates the unique defense system of Bosnia and Herzegovina, establishes and defines the chain of command and the role of all elements so that the state has full capacity in civil supervision and protection of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina." (Zakon o odbrani Bosne i Hercegovine, 2005)

At the NATO summit in Bucharest (April 3, 2008), NATO member states invited Bosnia and Herzegovina to initiate an Intensified Dialogue (ID), which includes discussions on political, military, financial, and security issues. With this move, NATO brought Bosnia and Herzegovina one step closer to membership. In December 2010, the Alliance unequivocally stated that Bosnia and Herzegovina was ready for the Membership Action Plan (MAP), but NATO foreign ministers emphasized that it would happen when needed progress in reform efforts is achieved, highlighting significant strides that had been made (Bosnia and Herzegovina and Membership Action Plan, 2010).

At this summit, NATO also gave the "perspective" of membership to Ukraine and Georgia. This compromise between the US and France and Germany, who were much less inclined to do so and did not want to provoke Russia, did not yield results, as Russia soon invaded the Georgian provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. This five-day war was a "wake-up call" to NATO that Russia could still be aggressive, while for Russia, the Bucharest summit was a wake-up call that NATO enlargement would not stop (Anghel and Darnen, 2025, 18).

As Anghel and Darnen state (2025, 23), the 2010s were marked not only by a worsening security situation in the EU's neighbourhood, but also by "successive and sometimes overlapping crises" originating from outside the EU but affecting it domestically. During this period of redefining relationships, with the withdrawal of the U.S. and the EU, Russia and Turkiye began to play a more significant role in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The declaration of Kosovo's independence in 2008 further complicated the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina too.

Different interpretations of international law, particularly the linkage of cases, began to be applied to the Bosnian-Herzegovinian entity Republika srpska and this former autonomous province in Serbia. During this period, Bosnia and Her-

zegovina received goals and conditions (5+2) that had to be fulfilled before the Office of the High Representative (OHR) could cease to exist, as voices calling for the institution's closure were directly linked to the Dayton Constitution of the country and were gaining strength. The idea of ending the OHR mandate gained more attention, even though it was clear that the country would likely descend into chaos quickly due to the already worsened political situation.

Albania, especially after 2022, tried to take serious steps toward EU integration. After joining the NATO in 2009. governments in Tirana had to focus on reforms due to EU regulation and to surpass decades of communist legacy. Russia's on-going war against Ukraine has further strengthened cooperation within the EU but also with its closest partners, so that Albania, a candidate for accession to the European Union and otherwise a valuable and reliable partner of the EU in the areas of security and defense, has begun to actively contribute to missions and operations of the EU's Common Security and Defense Policy (Albania: New Security and Defence Partnership, 2024).

The signed Partnership for Security and Defense also brought about the EU's decision to assist (13 million euros under the European Peace Facility to the Albanian Armed Forces) cooperation in the field of security and defense as a form of gratitude from the EU for Albania's full alignment with the Union's Common Foreign and Security Policy, which was assessed as a clear expression of Albania's strategic choice for the future within the EU (Albania: New Security and Defence Partnership, 2024).

The term Eastern or Southeastern Balkans is not used, but for this analysis it will act as a counterpoint to the already established concept of the Western Balkans. Although all of these countries (except Moldova) are in the NATO alliance, it cannot be said that the dynamics unfolding in Romania, Bulgaria, but also Greece and Turkey are completely immune to the new realities in the Black Sea and Eastern Mediterranean region.

Romania has certainly seen Moscow as the main military threat to the security of the Black Sea for a long time, while Bulgaria, although it only began to share similar views after 2022, is the most passive NATO member in terms of concrete action. Turkey, on the other hand, in its approach strives for bilateral economic cooperation with Moscow, and military engagement is prioritized in other strategic areas, so it did not view the increase in NATO's presence in its immediate neighborhood as positive. (Calus et al., 2025, 1).

The intention to take control of the Odessa region worried Bucharest because it spoke of the possibility of securing Russian access to the Danube Delta,

thereby blocking and controlling a key artery of regional trade. When added to this is the struggle for influence in Moldova, it is clear that Romania is striving to internationalize regional security issues (Calus et al., 2025, 2).

Bulgaria's political instability, with seven parliamentary elections held since 2021, and the division of political elites in assessing the level of the Russian threat continue to hinder its ability to devise an effective response to the changing regional security environment. Russia's influence was felt not only in politics but also in the defense sphere. Despite NATO membership and constant efforts to modernize its armed forces, Bulgaria continued to use Soviet-era equipment, which slowed down the overhaul of the army, as well as its interoperability with the Alliance (Bechev, 2016, 21).

However, as Calus points out (2025, 2.), strategic documents, such as the 2025 National Defense Strategy, identify Moscow as the primary threat to the country. Given that Bulgaria is a member of the EU and NATO, it is logical that such a document would be adopted. The key question, of course, is how political life will unfold in the future, especially given the growth of anti-European sentiment across Central Europe, which was reinforced by victories in the Czech Republic by newly appointed prime minister Babis and the very poor and bad EU influence on the elections in Romania (May 2025).

There is no doubt that the potential reduction of the US military presence in Europe could have significant consequences for the Black Sea region, especially for Romania. The announcement of Romania's withdrawal has already caused significant confusion and increased nervousness in the area of NATO's Eastern Wing (Beta-AFP, 2025).

Everything suggests that, due to uncertainty and open questions, NATO's Black Sea members will have to take on greater responsibility for regional defense and deterrence, in close cooperation with their European allies. This, of course, implies accelerated and increasing investment efforts both in the modernization and expansion of their own capacities, and in improved cooperation with neighboring countries (Calus et al., 2025, 6). But it also, as already mentioned, affects political processes that can significantly turn these states towards new emerging geopolitical poles.

Recent and Current Security Challenges

The new security reality demanded new approaches. Thus, French President Emmanuel Macron proposed a "European Political Community" (May 2022) that would allow democratic European nations (not members of the EU) to find a new space for political and security cooperation, cooperation in the energy sector, transport, investment, infrastructure, free movement of persons, etc. The goal of linking the countries aspiring to membership, as well as the United Kingdom, Norway and Switzerland, into a closer dialogue with the EU was clearly set. Of course, the French proposal met with mixed reactions in the Western Balkans and a negative reaction in Ukraine because it could also mean "a standstill in the enlargement process and the transformation of the EU's neighborhood policy into a watered-down European dialogue on political cooperation conducted outside the EU framework" (Anghel and Darnen, 2025, 58).

Russian behavior, especially after 2014., began to change EU-Russia economic relations while the term geoeconomics has slowly replaced free trade to characterize the world trade order what was strong witness that security and economics became strongly intertwined, and energy independence became prominent on the EU agenda (Anghel and Darnen, 2025, 23). In 2021, the creation of the European Commission's Directorate-General for Defense Industry and Space (DG DEFIS) and the emergence of a "geopolitical commission" signaled the EU executive's willingness to strengthen its role in the field of defense. The new initiatives undoubtedly represent strategic steps towards a more capable Europe in the field of defense, with the ultimate intention of being a fully-fledged European Defense Union, as requested by the European Parliament in several of its resolutions (Anghel and Darnen, 2025, 24).

The question what the future of the Western Balkans will be is strongly related to the security and integration of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia into the EU and NATO alliance. The support that Bosnia and Herzegovina have received from the Alliance over the past years has been unquestionable - sometimes the conditions that NATO set before the Bosnian Herzegovinian authorities seemed unnecessary but did not disrupt the positive relationship - but the end of 2023 threw a worm of doubt into the outcome of the integration process that had begun. Namely, during the visit of former NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg to Sarajevo (and other capital cities during his Western Balkans tour), a

not so encouraging position was expressed that Bosnia and Herzegovina needs to make an internal compromise in this regard (Stoltenberg u Sarajevu, 2023).

Secretary-General Stoltenberg said that the disruptive behavior of the authorities of the Bosnian Herzegovinian entity Republika srpska (Rs) on this issue in the last few years cannot be ignored. Despite the procedurally satisfied conditions, the support of the public and the commitment of most political factors in the country towards the integration of Bosnia and Herzegovina into NATO, with this statement, Stoltenberg froze the entire process and gave wind to Dodik's anti-NATO policy. The concern he expressed was spiced up with the remark that "every country has the right to choose its security arrangements without interference from outside" and thus, it is clear to anyone who knows the political relations in Bosnia and Herzegovina, he dealt a blow to the advocates of integration (Karup Druško, 2023).

In the past few years, RS has militarized its special police (a gendarmerie was established), and ethno-nationalist rhetoric, including the Bosnian Croats' call for a Croatian entity, threatens to undermine the territorial security and integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Zweers et al., 3025, 10-11). All this is increasing over time, and one of the reasons lies in the destruction of the stability of the pro-Bosniak (Bosniak) political factor by a series of bad interventions by EU and US representatives since 2020.

The development of cooperation between Bosnia and Herzegovina and NATO is probably one of the most sensitive issues of security policy, perhaps on the entire southern wing of the Alliance. The sensitivity of national relations both in country and in the wider area of the Balkans, among other things, provides an opportunity for various geopolitical actions, and then for undermining the European security umbrella. Since 2014, this has become increasingly clear.

In the multitude of problems that Bosnia and Herzegovina has faced since then, two stands out – the Election Law and NATO integration – and they represent true turning points. While Croatian politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina, through the Election Law, seeks to cement the ethnic principle and preserve its coercive position primarily through the House of Peoples of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Serbian side (led by Dodik and his SNSD) has been doing everything to prevent Bosnia and Herzegovina from fulfilling one of its important strategic goals – accession to the Alliance.

After the 2018 elections, the issue of cooperation between Bosnia and Herzegovina and the NATO alliance became one of the most significant factors in forming the government at the state level. Undoubtedly, the political burden

of the integration process was too immense not to have consequences on the relations between the Alliance and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Within parties based in Sarajevo, voices advocating the temporary abandonment of NATO and the exclusion of this issue from the political arena began to emerge, focusing solely on the EU. Interestingly, these opinions came from political circles that had significant sympathies from Western centers of power (Karup Druško, 2019).

More significant strategic shifts started to occur in 2019. Specifically, in early August, the United States officially withdrew from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, an agreement with the Russian Federation that limited the types of weapon systems that participating countries could use (Todd Lopez, 2019). All of this made the already difficult and tense situation in Ukraine and the Black Sea region even more complicated and challenging. After the COVID-19 pandemic, it became evident that relations between NATO and Russia were increasingly deteriorating, and Russia's renewed strike in February 2022 brought the world to the brink of nuclear war.

Tensions were also felt in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It was often heard that the war in Ukraine had postponed the one approaching Bosnia and Herzegovina. Connecting these critical points and complicating the situation in Montenegro and Kosovo did not bode well for the integration process for several reasons, with the most significant reflected in the Western powers' desire to win over the "Serbian factor" against Russia by offering them what they wanted. The stagnation in cooperation/integration was most explicitly revealed in the above-mentioned words of the former Secretary-General of the Alliance Stoltenberg.

In addition to Stoltenberg, Ukrainian President Zelensky also stirred spirits in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Before the Secretary-General's Balkan tour, Zelensky very directly mentioned the possibility of war in this part of Europe. "Russia could create new crises in the Balkans and Moldova to divert attention from the war in Ukraine; Pay attention to the Balkans. Trust me, we receive information. Russia has a long-term plan: the Middle East and the next distraction will be the Balkans. If partners do nothing now, there will be explosions again, and again. This is not new. Russia will make sure that one Balkan country goes to war with another", Zelensky said without further explanation, so his statement could be interpreted as an attempt to strengthen the weakened position of his country (Zelenski najavio rat na Balkanu, 2023).

A very likely Russian gain in Ukraine (it is worth recalling that former NATO Secretary-General Rasmussen said that NATO should offer Ukraine membership without the return of Crimea, Donbas, and other territories annexed by the

Russian Federation while second term of US President Trump could bring it into reality) opens the door to greater Russian influence in the Balkans.

Traditional friends, especially Serbia, would feel the need to emphasize their own hegemonic demands even more significantly. In this sense, the Balkan region can indeed be seen as one of the "hot spots" (along with Ukraine, Palestine, the Sahel, the South China Sea...) and a place where the balance of power between the global West and Russia, China and other geopolitical players of the global South can be of great importance. Accession to the European Union does not pose a great difficulty for Serbia due to "traditional Serbian alliances", in which Serbia's importance for the EU can become much more important and friendly. It was Hungarian President Viktor Orban who said during his visit to Belgrade (July 2021) that Serbia needs the EU more than the other way around and, in a way, confirmed this position (Manojlović, 2021).

But, for Serbia, NATO was undesirable because even in a significant part of the public as well as the political establishment it is considered as enemy organization. For this reason, already in the Resolution of the National Assembly on the Protection of Sovereignty, Territorial Integrity and Constitutional Order of the Republic of Serbia from 2007, "military neutrality in relation to existing military alliances is proclaimed precisely because of NATO's role in the events that led to the declaration of Kosovo's independence" (Đokić, 2019).

This neutrality in operationally and in terms of non-cooperation, it was not clearly set, so in 2015, Serbia and NATO signed the IPAP/Individual Partnership Action Plan, which led to wider coordination from those that were foreseen by the Partnership for Peace from 2006. (Luković, 2019) The program and Serbian participation in it are nothing more than keeping relations within the bounds of benevolence, while the scope of cooperation with the Russian Federation has been increased in parallel. In 2019, the Minister of Defense of Serbia, Aleksandar Vulin, thanks to the Russian military technical assistance, stated that in that year alone, 94 activities were carried out within the framework of international military cooperation with the Russian Federation, and in the period from 2000 to 2012, this cooperation was negligible (Cvetković, 2020).

This underlining of the previous period was supposed to testify to the change brought by the new government in Serbia after 2012, and it was most significantly reflected in the signed Declaration on strategic cooperation from 2013 between the then president of Serbia Tomislav Nikolić and Vladimir Putin. A kind of Greater Serbian response to the overall Euro-Atlantic integration of the countries of the Western Balkans was the "Serbian World", an integrative initiative that extended to so-called Serbian ethnic space. This caused new ethnic

tensions and confrontation. After what happened in Ukraine in 2014, especially with the start of the war in February 2022, this initiative only got stronger. Croatia on the other side remained devoted to its *antemurale Christianitatis* identity, now bit modified as a gate for other South Slavs to the EU. It is mostly visible in Bosnia and Herzegovina where paternalistic approach is elevated to the new heights, especially in the context of security and European energy policy.

By interfering with the elections and post-election events in (North) Macedonia (2017) with the support of Russia and constantly dramatizing the situation with the phrase "Macedonian scenario", Belgrade quietly destabilized this country (Pančić, 2017). However, Macedonia represented the focal point of Balkan relations in the middle of the decade due to its treatment as the "control tower of the Balkans", especially during the refugee crisis in 2015. what also more strongly involved USA too. Of course, the Gruevski government, which leaned towards Moscow, also contributed to this attitude of the USA (Martinović, 2017).

The elections in Montenegro (2016 and 2020) have shown even more dramatically how strong the connection between Belgrade and Moscow is and to what extent actions in the Western Balkans are synchronized. A report by the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) provides a valuable overview of the malign interference under the aegis of protecting Slavic brothers, which has led to historical reminiscences and the identification of today's Russia with the Russian Empire and anti-Ottoman alliances of two centuries ago (Conley and Melino, 2019). A significant tool used to attack Montenegro since 2006 and its declaration of independence was the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC). The Serbian-Russian political abuse of the Orthodox Church continued ten years later (2016), at a time when Montenegro was taking decisive steps towards NATO.

In political and ideological terms, it is unquestionable that significant changes in Serbia began with the 2012 elections, in which the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) won the largest number of votes. From 2012 to the present day, Aleksandar Vučić has managed to become an unquestionable authority and leader on the wings of electoral and media pressure, first as Deputy Prime Minister of Ivica Dačić's Government (2012-2014), and then as Prime Minister in his first (2014-2016) and second term (2016-2017), and since 2017 he has also become President of Serbia.

Significant misunderstandings and necessary caution in the region were caused by the document Strategy for Preservation and Strengthening of Relations between the Home State and the Diaspora and the Home State and Serbs in the Region (SANA Memorandum 2) from 2011, in which the Serbian government,

among other things, set a demand for the constituency of the Serbian people in Montenegro and Croatia. Like the Memorandum from 1986, this document was also based on the Greater Serbian policy of "blood and soil", according to which Serbia is where Serbs live, which makes undermining the situation in neighboring countries a logical consequence of implementing such a policy.

Because of such complex relations who include political tensions, security dilemma and cultural considerations during the time 3 scenarios for the Western Balkan were extracted. First one known as "The hour of Europe" represents a positive and optimistic vision of the future evolution of the Western Balkans. Second, "The Balkans in limbo" is seeing the region still on the path to EU integration, but by slow progress in implementing reforms due to a lack of political will, and thirdly "The ghosts of the past", the scenario in which the EU integration process has slowly slipped off the political agenda, while geopolitics and violent conflicts are resurgent. (Čeperković and Gaub, 2018: 5-6.)

The so-called Mini Schengen, what was renamed to Open Balkans basically was about one and the same idea that has support of Serbia, Albania and North Macedonia. That zone, in some brief description, should provide facilities in trade, exchange students and encourage EU integration. Criticism of this initiative was based on several arguments. In the first place, it was considered a deception of the European Union since it is primarily necessary to resolve political issues to reach an agreement of this kind put into practice. This argument is more than valid in assessing range and capability of implementation because the next one, as there is already a similar agreement in the region (CEFTA), was just violated due to political disputes during the establishment of Kosovo fees on Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. There is, of course, the Berlin process too, which includes the goals of the mini-Schengen (Open Balkans) as well as a few others complex questions.

Precisely in this period, that is, the time of strong promotion of the Open Balkans, Great Serbian politics makes several important decisions and documents through which they show in which direction they intend to lead The Open Balkans. First, at the beginning of March 2019, the Charter on the Serbian Cultural Space was adopted, which tried to provide guidelines for a unique cultural and educational policy of the Serbian people and what is being done de facto completely entered the internal relations of countries where Serbs are part of the population (BiH, Montenegro, etc.) (Vele, 2019). After Vulin's scandalous speech in Banja Luka in May 2019 about the army of the Serbian people (which again a clear message to neighbors about the desire to cross borders) the whole thing culminated in the adoption of the Strategy of national security in December

2019, in which, among other things, it was said that Serbia "takes care of Serbian people no matter where they live" (Marković, 2021).

There is no doubt that Belgrade wisely counts on major changes in the international order. Within the integrated region, and in addition to the help of Moscow and Beijing, it is trying to build the position of hegemon who will in the emerging geopolitical realities primarily satisfy their own interests. Possible agreed principles of the countries of the Western Balkans on integration carry the possibility of creating and form of control by the dominant strength. The possibility that government in Tirana is tacitly accepting this scenario because of the great part of the influence it can have, all in agreement with Belgrade, also should be a part of equation.

Conclusion

The region of Southeast Europe is not immune to impulses coming from the Eurasian space, and the attempt of the NATO alliance to move its border to the Dnieper River, with serious opposition to the policies of the USA and Great Britain, first of Hungary, and then of Slovakia, has led to a series of political processes in this part of Europe (pro-Russian sentiments are on the rise in Bulgaria, Romania, etc.). Taking all this into account, and especially with the growing dissatisfaction of Turkey with the attitude of its Western partners towards Ankara, the question arises about the strategic goals of the Alliance, i.e. whether they are sufficiently profiled.

Bosnia and Herzegovina and its integration into NATO are, of course, part of a wider problem, and not just a question of its internal relations. Central Europe, dissatisfied with the American (and British, of course) policy towards the Old Continent as an appendage, and pro-Russian sympathies in the southeast, especially among the Serbs, still leave room for different approaches and

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It should be noted here that the document "Renewed Partnership with the Southern Neighborhood. A New Agenda for the Mediterranean" (2021), prepared by the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, defined strengthening cooperation and partnership with the Southern Mediterranean as a strategic imperative that provides new opportunities for the entire Balkans (Renewed Partnership with the Southern Neighborhood, 2021). If we add to this the strongly open issue of the southern interconnection in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the last months of 2025, i.e. the import of primarily American but also Azerbaijani (as well as from other sources) gas through the Adriatic-Ionian Corridor in order to diversify and avoid dependence on Russian suppliers, a kind of security and economic integration should also occur with countries struggling with the so-called Serbian issue.

Another option would be to rationally accept Stoltenberg's message from November 2023 on integration, which implies internal consensus without external interference. Indecision and cooperation, such as the Partnership of Serbia with NATO (IPAP), in this sense, can become an argument of certain political forces in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which would then mean advocating for a more serious Bosniak-Serb dialogue. Whether this would also mean a turn towards Eurasia (primarily BRICS, but also the strengthening and creation of trilateral, quadrilateral and multilateral initiatives) is not easy to determine at this point, but the context is quite clear.

The existence of strong Russian mediators with great support from Russia, while Bosnia and Herzegovina can hardly count on the help of the Alliance in a possible new conflict, leads to a complete focus on its own interests. What will happen and in what Several underlying dynamics are evident. The unresolved issue in northern Kosovo, which remains under strong informal control of Belgrade and fuels tensions, has stalled the EU-led normalization process. A key example is the failure of the 2023 Brussels-Ohrid normalization agreement. Although verbally accepted by both Serbia and Kosovo, the agreement was never implemented and was subsequently rejected by the Serbian side (Zweers, 9).

The second thing is related to the visibility of Russia's return to the Balkans and the issue of its limitations, but also the produced tension between Moscow and the Balkan capitals. According to Samokhvalov (2019, 204), the main

factor that limits the possibility of a true Russian-Balkan alliance is the fact that Moscow has historically placed more value on participation in concerts of great powers than on friendship with the countries of the region. In this sense, Serbia is perhaps the best example.

Moscow was always ready to put its relations with the West in the foreground and only then look at the interests of its allies in the Balkans. The creation of instability in the Balkans in this sense often followed the logic of the West's willingness to accept Russia's significant position in the region. The history of relations, as well as the current process, gave birth to a large amount of skepticism in addition to the previously mentioned Russophilism.

Another thing that does not work in Russia's favor is the nature of the tools it uses. The reliance on people and instruments it uses to create alliances and loyalties in its domestic politics (corruption), an informal network of violent groups, and compromising materials have aroused widespread caution and distrust, as countries in the region see Russia's manipulation of instability as a threat and have drawn the line for Russia's further penetration (Samokhvalov, 2019, 204).

Security challenges also arise from violent extremism and radicalization of the far right, which has become a growing challenge across Europe in recent years. For reasons of political or financial gain, populist politicians exploit divisions within societies and portray minority ethnic groups as a threat, and as Zweers (2025, 12) aptly notes, promote an ethnic rather than a civic definition of society. Such narratives are often normalized in public discourse thanks to government-controlled media.

Although to different degrees, the countries of the Western Balkans also suffer from the risk of state capture: a process of systemic political corruption, in which political actors abuse political influence over the country's decision-making processes for personal gain and closely control state institutions, the media, and society. Such political systems, sometimes called "stabilitocracies," are inherently unstable. "Semi-authoritarian stabilocracies are willing to provoke and manage instability with their neighbors or with the internal other party—the opposition or minorities—to ensure continued rule" (Zweers et al., 2025, 13.)

Such instability can be seen, as a practical example, in Serbia in recent years, where large-scale democratic protests have been met with repression, as well as physical violence, both by the police and unidentified hooligan-like groups, and the authorities have resorted to provoking external crises related to Kosovo to distract attention from domestic democratic shortcomings.

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The latest events in the wider area of Central and Southeastern Europe are only witness to a major political wave that encompasses all of the above. The emergence of far-right politics as a normal political expression, openness to repositioning in new multipolar circumstances, and the desire to realize historical dreams of controlling larger territories by establishing small hegemonies are becoming a Balkan reality. The grand strategies of global powers that are in the process of being redefined are also giving space for these winds to blow ever stronger.

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