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## Expert Comment

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## **Stabilising the Balkans: Towards a regional security architecture in Southeast Europe**

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From a Western European point of view, the Balkans have for a long time been considered as a kind of ‘powder keg’, which, in the words of German Reichskanzler Otto von Bismarck, “was not worth the bones of a single Pomeranian grenadier”. Despite his warning, millions of German soldiers not only broke their bones but lost their lives in the First World War, which originated in the Balkans following the murder of Archduke Ferdinand in Sarajevo in 1914.

But even before the Great War, the Balkan region had been ravaged by war, rebellion, and ethnic and religious strife, culminating in the ‘Balkan wars’ of 1912 and 1913, which marked the beginning of the end of the Ottoman Empire. There were two major reasons for this unruly situation. First, nationalism was increasing among people in the region striving for ethnically ‘clean’ nation states, which, given the mostly mixed settlement in many areas, only served to aggravate tensions between different ethnic and/or religious groups. Second, foreign powers interfered in the region to gain authority and influence. The common denominator for both reasons was the ‘oriental question’, referring to the future of the stumbling Ottoman Empire that had ruled for nearly 500 years in the larger part of the Balkans. Russia wanted control over the Bosphorus and supported Serbia; England defended the status quo; and the Habsburg Empire, supported by Germany, wanted to preserve its influence in the Balkans and prevent emerging nation states like Serbia from expanding.

One can observe striking similarities almost 100 years later. The Yugoslav ‘successor wars’ in the 1990s brought about the same hatred and cruelty as the Balkan wars 80 years earlier. They also nearly accomplished the ethnic cleansing started during the Balkan wars, leaving only two ‘national questions’ unsettled: 1) the ‘Serbian question’, essentially referring to ethnic Serbs living in the Republika Srpska under the framework of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and striving to unite with the Serbian homeland; and 2) the ‘Albanian question’, namely the idea of a Greater Albania including Albania, Kosovo, and the Albanian-settled western parts of Macedonia. To a lesser degree, the ‘Macedonian question’ involving

Bulgaria, Greece, and Macedonia might come up again, although a solution seems to be on its way.

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, foreign powers were siding with regional powers along nearly the same lines: Russia used to consider itself the protective power of orthodox Christendom, and its main influence today lies in exactly these areas (Serbia, Republika Srpska, Montenegro, Bulgaria, Macedonia, and to a certain extent Greece). An exception is Romania, which, although orthodox, has remained historically and linguistically distinct and more oriented towards the West. It is in this country, and to some degree Albania and Kosovo, that American influence is the greatest. Muslim Albania and Kosovo, as well as the Muslim–Bosnian territories of BiH Turkish involvement, are

growing as part of the ‘neo-Ottoman’ strategy of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, thus placing themselves into the historical continuity of the old Ottoman Empire. Last but not least, the European Union (EU) represents in a certain way the heritage of the Habsburg Empire, with Catholic and historically Western-linked Croatia and Slovenia as members of the EU along with Greece, Romania, and Bulgaria. Their promise of further enlargement for Western Balkans trying to stabilise the region has thus far been met with little success. In the background, we can see the growing influence of a power hitherto almost unknown to the region: China.<sup>1</sup>

### **Main features of today’s southeastern Europe**

In this section, we are not looking at the situation in the Balkans (or SEE) in general, but rather seeking to identify potential risks and opportunities for security cooperation between Russia and the EU (possibly including other powers) in the framework of a common Eurasian security architecture. The specific political and economic situation of these different countries, as well as their historical links and foreign policy outlooks, might serve as a first step towards this objective. Croatia and Slovenia, although geographically part of the Balkans, are left out as they are culturally and historically part of ‘the West’. The region under consideration includes three EU member states (Greece, Bulgaria, and Romania, all NATO members) and the WB6 (Serbia, BiH, Kosovo, Macedonia, Albania, and Montenegro, the latter two of which are also NATO members).

Despite their EU and NATO membership, the situation in Greece, Bulgaria, and Romania is highly volatile, and their foreign policy outlooks are quite distinct. Greece,

despite having been an EU member since 1981 and part of the Eurozone since 2004, has always had a political culture unlike those of Western Europe. Under longstanding Prime Minister Andreas Papandreou, the country followed a kind of 'third world' orientation. The government of Alexis Tsipras and his Syriza party has again placed Greece in a unique role in the EU. The financial crisis has aggravated economic difficulties: with a per capita income of €14.550 (EU average: €21.900) and an unemployment rate of 21.5% (EU average: 7.0%), Greece is far from the economic level of core EU countries; it ranks 69<sup>th</sup> on Transparency International's corruption index. The austerity policy imposed on Greece by the Troika under German leadership has aroused anti-European feelings and led Greek leadership to seek alternatives. Such options potentially include Russia, where old links based on the common orthodox heritage could serve as a foundation, or China, which became highly active in recent years, culminating in the purchase of the main Greek port in Piraeus. Thus, Greece might play a role in establishing trust between Europeans and Russians and in the creation of a SEE security system.

Bulgaria and Romania became members of the EU in 2007, a move now considered by most European capitals to have been a mistake. Both countries lag far behind EU standards. Per capita income in Bulgaria is around €7000 and around €10,000 in Romania. On the corruption index, Bulgaria ranks 75<sup>th</sup> and Romania ranks 67<sup>th</sup>. Romania has experienced years of unrest due to widespread corruption and attempts by the ruling 'social-democratic' party to change anti-corruption laws and whitewash leaders implicated in such cases. The Romanian national movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> century referred to Roman heritage; between the two World Wars, Bucharest was considered the 'Paris of the East'. Even in Soviet times, the communist regime pursued a rather independent foreign policy, and Romania today is pro-American. The country is even considering following the American example of transferring its Israeli embassy to Jerusalem. The European Court of Human Rights has condemned Romania for having hosted a secret CIA prison, alleging this goes hand-in-hand with human rights violations. Bulgaria, on the other hand, has a strong pro-Russian history. Although the conservative government of Prime Minister Boyko Borisov, in power since 2009, has tried to deepen relations with the EU by aspiring to introduce the Euro, the government is also keen to maintain good relations with Russia. The socialist opposition is even more pro-Russian, asking for closer relations and the lifting of EU sanctions. This position received a greater push by the election of former general Rumen Radev as President in November 2016, who is openly Eurosceptic and pro-Russian.

Altogether, the specific situation of these three countries as part of the 'West' and at the same time close to the 'East' could be an asset in constructing a security architecture for the region. Such an architecture would be all the more important for the six West Balkan countries, who "share problems related to widespread corruption, the presence of organised crime, the lack of an independent and/or functioning judiciary, and the deep politicisation of public administration" (Lange, 2016, p. 3). In all these countries, we can observe a "democratic backsliding" in recent years and unemployment rates between 15% and 30%, reaching between 30% and 60% among young people (Bieber, 2017, p. 65). The result is massive emigration and political apathy among most people in the face of a growing 'stabilitocracy', meaning semi-authoritarian rule by strongmen and/or family clans.

This is even true in the two countries with which the EU is leading accession talks, namely Serbia and Montenegro. President Aleksandar Vučić of Serbia, a former Nationalist, is now playing the European card without giving up connections with Russia. The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (2016) characterised this situation as follows: "The EU in crisis is considered as [a] useful partner, but really enthusiastic about it are only a few people" (p. 6). In Montenegro, strongman and clan head Milo Đukanović has dominated the political scene for more than a quarter of a century as Prime Minister, party chief, or—as at the moment—President. Montenegro has a centuries-long tradition of close relations with Russia; today, however, the country is split nearly in two over the pro-Western policy of Đukanović, who managed to get NATO membership for his country and is aspiring to become an EU member. A similar situation prevailed in Macedonia with strongman Nikola Gruevski in power who, in contrast to Đukanović, relied more on Russia while officially discussing EU membership. Widespread social unrest and mass demonstrations led to new elections and, after long disputes and violence, to the establishment of a new pro-Western government under Social Democrat Zoran Zaev.

One of the reasons for the internal quarrels in Macedonia in recent years was the existence of the Albanian minority in this country, which accounts for between 20% and 40% of the population according to different estimates. Given that the mostly Muslim Albanians have a much higher birth rate and ethnic Macedonian Slavs are leaving the country in search of jobs, the Nationalists feared becoming a minority or having the Albanians separate to unite with Albania. Although the idea of a 'Greater Albania' does not officially exist, it remains one of the last unresolved 'national questions' in Europe. It also concerns Kosovo with its predominantly ethnic Albanian population, where certain political groups openly favour this

idea. The fact is that there is an increasing “triangle of interaction between the main Albanian centres” in Albania, Kosovo, and Western Macedonia, and an “increasing number of projects that will dramatically improve communications between the various Albanian populations of the Southern Balkans” (Pettifer & Vickers, 2009, p. 264). Distrust among neighbours, especially in Serbia and Montenegro, might be exaggerated<sup>1</sup>, but the establishment of a regional security architecture including Russia would certainly help to diminish these fears—especially in light of the fact that Albania (besides Romania) is the most pro-American country in the Balkans, having joined the ‘War on Terror’ and contributed to US-led coalitions in Afghanistan and Iraq. Kosovo is also host to one of the biggest American military bases abroad, explaining why Washington is protecting the former War Lords now turned political leaders that may go to trial in The Hague for crimes against humanity and/or involvement in organised crime. From a European security point of view, it is important to recognise that Kosovo and Albania are the main transit countries in the Balkans to transport heroin from Afghanistan into Western Europa.

In the last of the WB6 countries, Bosnia-Herzegovina, the situation is marked by a political stalemate due to the Dayton constitution, which favours ethnic-religious separation and distrust. The (orthodox) Serbs in Republika Srpska, under the leadership of strongman Milorad Dodik, have threatened to leave the state and are supported by Serbia and Russia. The (Catholic) Croats tend more towards Croatia so that the only ones who are eager to keep the country as such are the (Muslim) Bosnians supported by Turkey and some Arab states. Clearly, BiH reflects the old ‘fault lines’ and mechanisms of foreign interference.

### **The major external players**

Since the implosion of the Soviet Bloc in 1989–91, and especially since the end of the Yugoslav succession wars in 1995, the EU has remained the most influential external player in the Balkans amidst growing competition from Russia, Turkey, and others. Greece was admitted to the EU in 1981, followed by Slovenia in 2004, Bulgaria and Romania in 2007, and Croatia in 2013. At the Thessaloniki summit in 2003, the WB6 received the promise of full membership in the EU. Accession talks are already underway with Serbia and Montenegro, with the prospect of opening such talks in 2019 with Albania and Macedonia. To the surprise (and certain disdain) of many member states, the European Commission in its new Western Balkan strategy issued in February 2018 called 2025 a possible accession year for the WB6, confirming the widespread mantra in political and academic circles that

“only recognition from Brussels and other EU capitals of the Balkans for what they genuinely are—namely an integral part of core Europe and the European integration project—can offer a way forward” (Bonomi & Reljic, 2017, p. 4). There are mainly geopolitical reasons for this argument, such as preventing frozen conflicts from erupting and/or resisting other powers’ growing influence in the region. But is the promise of accession the best way to get there?

Apart from the disastrous state of the EU, given a deep divide over financial and migration policies and ensuing ‘enlargement fatigue’ in many member states, the result of 15 years of massive military and economic European engagement in the Western Balkans is rather disappointing: “Yet the prospect of membership in the European Union and NATO has proven insufficient for incumbent elites to undertake meaningful democratization, and the EU and the U.S., out of fear of instability and a failure to imagine alternatives, have turned into agents of the status quo” (Vogel, 2018, p. 5). The calamitous political, economic, and social situation in all WB6 countries described above clearly exemplifies this statement. Even worse, when the EU rule-of-law mission in Kosovo, the EU’s largest and most expensive foreign mission, left Kosovo in June 2018 after ten years, the result was rather meagre. In 2015, *Le Monde diplomatique* called the mission a failure and described the situation there as worse than before the arrival of the European mission (Otasevic, 2015, p. 10). In a comprehensive study, King and Mason (2006) concluded, “In Kosovo, the international community went from being all-powerful to being ignored, impotent and under attack” with the result that “Kosovo threatens to become a black hole in the middle of Europe” (pp. 20–21). A similar judgment concerns BiH, where more than 20 years of an international, mostly European quasi-protectorate did little to change the political and constitutional stalemate of the country.

In the light of these (and many other) failures, it is all too easy to blame other foreign players for acting against European interests in the region “with Russia in particular reviving Balkan ethnic tensions to pursue its goal of undermining the EU and its power of attraction” (Balfour, 2017, p. 18). Russia is certainly back in the Balkans (and in global politics in general) but in light of historical and cultural ties, it definitely has the same right as the EU to be in the region. Against alarmist voices that see Russia as a major spoiler in the region, a sober analysis reveals the limits of Russian influence and power there. Economically, the EU is the dominant power with three-quarters of trade with the region, whereas Russia holds approximately 5%. The same is true for foreign direct investment: “Russia simply does not have the means or resources to substitute the West and in particular the EU as a pole of

attraction for economic, [and] far less political, integration” (Reljic, 2017, p. 46). Of course, there are differences (see de Borja Lasheras, Tcherneva, & Wesslau, 2016): Serbia, for example, depends on Russia for its natural gas and oil imports, and there is limited military and security cooperation. More important is Moscow’s support in the UN Security Council, using its veto right concerning issues like Kosovo. Consequently, Belgrade did not align with EU sanctions against Russia. In Republika Sprska, Russian companies control parts of the energy sector, and Russia provides loans to the entities. There is general political support from Moscow for regional leadership and some security cooperation. Bosnia also did not align with EU sanctions. In Montenegro, Russia is now in confrontation with the pro-Western government but enjoys significant support among pro-Serbian groups. Russia remains Montenegro’s top investor, especially in the private sector. Nevertheless, the country aligned with EU sanctions against Russia. In Macedonia, Russia lost support after the fall of the conservative government but still remains influential. Finally, as mentioned above, there is a certain level of influence and support for Russia in the EU member states of Greece and Bulgaria, the latter of which also depends on Russian gas and oil.

Another foreign player challenging EU influence in the Balkans is Turkey. This has intensified with Mr. Erdogan consolidating his power and moving towards an authoritarian regime, which has incited fear among European leaders. Turkey’s influence is substantial in Muslim areas of the region: “Many Muslims across the Western Balkans see Turkey as a traditional friend and protector, and Erdogan as a champion whose political and economic support has reinforced their positions, even if political actors sometimes resent Turkey’s role” (de Borja Lasheras, Tcherneva, & Wesslau, 2016, p. 10). Turkey is the largest foreign investor in Albania and Kosovo, especially in the banking and construction sectors, along with being highly active in the Muslim–Bosnian parts of BiH. Together with the Gulf States, Ankara is also investing in religious and educational systems, thus raising fear around the radicalisation of young Muslims. Indeed, “Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo are the European countries which have produced the highest number of foreign fighters per capita who joined armed groups in Iraq and Syria” (Ejdus, 2017, p. 53).

In 2012, China gave a new push to its activities in the Balkans. In the framework of its ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ (BRI), it established the so-called 16+1 initiative comprising China and 16 central, eastern, and southeastern European countries, among them all Balkan countries with the notable exception of Kosovo.<sup>1</sup> What is China’s interest in this region? “At first glance, southeast Europe is not a particularly attractive market per se: the

EU member states have been hit hard by the financial crisis, and the states of the Western Balkans are of limited size and lack purchasing power. But the fact is that the region can act as a major transport corridor for the BRI connecting the Mediterranean to central Europe” (Tonchev, 2017, p. 3). Besides other investments, the major strategic goal is a prospective commercial route connecting the recently acquired port of Piraeus in Greece with Budapest (Hungary) via Macedonia and Serbia. As in other parts of the world, Beijing has refrained from commenting on internal affairs, making some people in the EU fear that this might undermine European democratisation efforts in the region and offer Balkan strongmen an alternative to European integration. Of course, Chinese investment can influence political behaviour: in 2017, Greece blocked an EU resolution regarding human rights in China.

### **Towards a regional security architecture in southeastern Europe**

It is becoming clear that SEE is a region with a high potential for conflict whose dynamics are exacerbated by increasing foreign interference. From the EU’s point of view, the risks are mainly as follows: (re-) eruption of armed conflicts within or between states; failing states and mass migration towards Europe; the spread of Islamist fundamentalism and terrorist networks; and organised crime, massive drug smuggling, and human trafficking. The EU might be the dominant economic power in the region with close institutional ties (e.g., membership, accession talks, and association agreements), but when it comes to hard power required in cases of armed conflict, it would probably fail shamefully as it did during the Yugoslav succession wars in the 1990s. The migration wave of 2015 with its main entry gate through the ‘Balkan route’ once again demonstrated the importance of the region for the EU.

Unfortunately, this wake-up call did not change the business-as-usual attitude of European leadership towards the Balkans. Besides the internal divisions of the EU over finance and migration, the main reason for this lies in the weakness of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) of the EU, which basically exists only on paper. There is especially “the absence of common threat perceptions and common responses” of member states with the northeastern EU countries “primarily pre-occupied by the Russian challenge” and considering NATO (i.e., the US), and not CSDP, as the proper answer to it. On the other hand, the southern member states see “state failures and radical Islamist terror movements on the southern shore of the Mediterranean” as the main threat and “American-led coalitions” as the proper answer (Deubner, 2018, p. 63).

To prevent SEE from becoming a grey zone where different strongmen ally themselves with competing foreign powers according to their (pecuniary) interests, and in light of their hard power weakness, Brussels and the most important EU member states should urgently seek means of stabilising the Balkans. This would require establishing a new security architecture for the region, which must include Russia but also Turkey if possible. Russia has already been challenged by the NATO membership of Bulgaria and Romania and, most recently, Albania and Montenegro. An alternative to further NATO enlargement could be a kind of neutrality status for the remaining Western Balkan countries, particularly Serbia, BiH, and Macedonia. Following the Austrian example after the Second World War, this neutrality status would be guaranteed by foreign powers, namely the EU and Russia, but also including Turkey and the US if possible. One precondition for such an arrangement would be the development of trust between the EU and Russia and prioritising the stabilisation of SEE without considering other conflicting issues between the two sides. The second precondition would be for the EU to make CSDP a credible means of deterrence. A first step could be the creation of a European intervention force in the framework of PESCO, the permanent structured cooperation within the Lisbon Treaty, as proposed by French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel at their Meseberg meeting in June 2018. Only then would Brussels be able to meet the requirements as formulated in the EU Global Strategy: “Europeans must be able to protect Europe, respond to external crises, and assist in developing our partner’s security and defence capacities, carrying out these tasks in cooperation with others” (Mogherini, 2016, p. 19).

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