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***Geopolitical problems in the Western Balkans
with special overview of Serbia and its
autonomous province of Kosovo and Metohia***

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Abstract: Nowadays, in the early 21st century, the Western Balkans remains a space where geopolitical, geo-economic and cultural interests of the East and the West clash and pervade as they have collided over the past thousand years. The internal instability and antagonisms based on nationality, ethnicity and religion are further burdened with the consequences of the violent break up of SFR Yugoslavia and the formation of new states which still face unsolved issues (borderlines, territory, sea surface, property ownership, minority legal status, etc.). Currently, the key geopolitical problem in the Western Balkans refers to the status of Kosovo and Metohia, an autonomous province of the Republic of Serbia. Other, relatively minor problems are related to geopolitical issues in Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Montenegro. Furthermore, the Republic of Croatia and Albania should not be disregarded within this context.

Keywords: the Western Balkans, former SFR Yugoslavia, balkanization, disintegration, new states, Eurasian integration, deglobalization.

Initial remarks

Nowadays, every issue related to the Western Balkans, including both the term and the territory it refers to, causes controversy and different opinions among foreign and local scientists and representatives of all social classes. Both scientific nomenclature and social practice regard the Balkans and the Balkan Peninsula as synonyms. From the historical-geographical point of view, the Western Balkans may be defined as “the old Europe; the cradle of Hellenistic civilization, the Byzantine Empire and Orthodox religion” [1, p. 41].

There is a generally accepted statement that the Western Balkans is „a region of a multilateral geographical position and polarized ethnic-cultural, religious and demographic systems in a differentiated regional development” [2, p. 14]. In addition, it is widely accepted that balkanization is a main characteristic of the Balkans, especially the Western Balkans. Balkanization refers to processes which cause the internal geopolitical instability and unpredictability along with interethnic, international and interreligious animosity and direct clashes. This state of affairs is centuries old so it is quite “understandable” that the process of balkanization is accompanied by backwardness in all aspects of social and economic growth when compared to the rest of Europe.

Speaking of balkanization, there is an interesting observation that the process is impossible to comprehend unless it is regarded in the context of global power, i.e. the impact of great powers, so that “historical metamorphoses of geopolitical doctrines in

the Balkans, especially the western parts, testify that the Balkans is the „powder barrel” [3, p. 29]. It takes long term gradual transformations and compromises among the great powers unless we want to trigger the explosion [ibidem, p. 29]. Nevertheless, frequent “explosions” over the past hundred years, especially in early 1990 s, which still reverberate today, witness that the transformation has never taken place. It is hard and almost impossible to assume that a peaceful transformation will bring us to generally acceptable solutions in the Western Balkans.

Geographical paradigm of historical and modern processes in the Western Balkans, especially geopolitical ones, rests upon the geographical logic of space. Up to now, the region’s contact position among different civilizations, cultures, religions, and political and economic systems has caused different interventions and spread of the impact sphere. Modern geopolitical processes and problems in the Western Balkans are directly connected with the objectives of globalism and new world order [4, p. 52]. These objectives rule out the presence of Russia in the Western Balkans.

Spatial coverage

From the geographical, cultural, civilization and geopolitical points of view, the term Western Balkans is limited to the space of former SFR Yugoslavia without Slovenia and including Albania. Despite the fact that Slovenia belongs to the Central European cultural circle, it still is and will be pragmatically dependent on the Western Balkan countries for economic and other reasons. Its formal EU and NATO memberships will have less and less importance for the country’s overall social-economic development, which will further strengthen the connection and dependence on the rest of SRF Yugoslavia, including Albania [5, p. 61].

The attachment of the Republic of Croatia to the Western Balkans is deeply rooted in cultural and geopolitical processes which led to the formation of Croatian ethnicity and modern Croatian state within the territory where Serbian ethnic and cultural characteristics had been dominant for centuries. Both Croatian nation and state were mostly formed at the cost of the Serbian ethnicity and ethnic space. The formation had been preceded by the centuries of catholicization of Serbian population conducted by the Catholic Church accompanied by the process of croatization over the past hundred years, which included the genocide of the so-called Independent State of Croatia over the Serbian population in WW II as more than 600,000 Serbs were executed in the Croatian concentration camps.

In his monumental work *Magnum Crimen*, Viktor Novak, a distinguished Croatian historian, analyzed a whole range of historical sources and archives on more than 1,200 pages accounting for the impact of clericalism on the events dating back to the first half of 20th century. He dedicated a whole chapter titled *Terror and catholicization* to the violent processes of catholicization and croatization of the Serbian population in so-called Independent State of Croatia concluding that around 240,000 Serbs were catholicized from 1941 to 1945 [6, p. 600–804]. The processes of catholicization and croatization of Serbian population in the Republic of Croatia continued after the WW II although with lower intensity. The key reasons for this “voluntary” process are related to the peaceful integration into Croatian society and ability to exercise basic human rights and freedom.

There are many elements of geospatial determination which locate Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Macedonia and Albania in the Western Balkans, which is a relatively differentiated historical-geographical and modern geopolitical space characterized by mutual connections and dependence as well as joint and opposed interests.

The Republic of Serbia is the core of the Western Balkans in line with many historical-geographical, cultural and geopolitical features. Its northern part, the autonomous province of Vojvodina, belongs to the Central European cultural circle due to the elements of cultural landscape (urban, rural, and agrarian). Unlike AP Vojvodina which currently has a stabilizing geopolitical role, the southern Serbian autonomous province of Kosovo and Metohia represents a burning issue for both Serbia and the Western Balkans.

Geopolitical problems and challenges of western Balkan countries under modern geopolitical circumstances

After the breakup of former SFR Yugoslavia and formation of new states, West Balkan countries entered a new phase of geopolitical processes with an uncertain outcome. There are both internal and external reasons for this. All the newly formed states resulting from the breakup of SFR Yugoslavia, including Albania and excluding the Republic of Slovenia, are burdened with different issues in regard to nationality, ethnicity, borderlines, territory, property ownership, status and religion. All these issues have been and may again become a cause for Western interventions which would “stabilize” the Western Balkans and arrange it in line with “European standards”. Nevertheless, the real causes of interventions are much deeper and connected with interests of globalism and leading countries of the new world order led by USA. From geopolitical and geostrategic points of view, an unstable Western Balkans which is out of Western control stultifies the old and recently restored doctrine which advocates the full control of Heartland, i.e. Russia [7, p. 89–102]. In order to establish control over the Heartland, it is necessary to first take over its borderline areas, which undoubtedly includes the entire Balkans. The doctrine was developed by Halford Mackinder, a British geographer, more than a century ago. Ideas of the doctrine have had historical continuity and nowadays they are reflected in globalism, a process which came to a halt in some parts of the world, still including some countries in the Western Balkans. Therefore, USA and leading western countries, as the main supporters of globalism, are attempting to finalize the processes initiated in 1990 s in order to establish full control over the Western Balkans.

Crucial interests of globalism exclude Russian presence in the Western Balkans. Hence, it is important to consider geopolitical and geo-economic processes in the Western Balkans only within the context of clashing interests of the West, headed by USA, on one side and Russia, and lately China, on the other side. Both these interests are at the same time either supported or opposed by specific ethnic, national and government entities of the Western Balkan countries, which only further complicates the relations among countries of the Western Balkans and disables finding solutions acceptable to the influential actors of the geopolitical scene of the Western Balkans.

The historical experience and “logic of space” make us infer that only a compromise among the key geopolitical actors, i.e. the West on one side and Russia on the other, if even possible, may stabilize the Western Balkans. Otherwise, the overloaded “powder barrel” of the Balkans is threatening to explode again. The explosion will not occur if a) „both sides” show readiness to defend their interests at all costs or b) one “side” practically abandons its “strategic interests” in the Western Balkans with or without an adequate compensation.

For the time being, the explosion in the Western Balkans can be avoided as long as the southern Serbian province of Kosovo and Metohia is kept in the state of “frozen conflict”. It will also be avoided if Bosnia and Herzegovina keeps functioning in line with the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement and the commitments taken over by the key signatory countries (USA, Russia, UK, France, and Germany). Also, the explosion may be prevented if North Macedonia retains its internationally recognized borderline. Finally, it will be avoided if Montenegro remains a legally and functionally acceptable state for all its ethnic and religious communities.

Speaking of global geopolitical scene, all Western Balkan countries are nowadays burdened with similar problems related to affiliation with different military and economic alliances. Other “internal” problems are rooted in history, especially in regard to WW I and WW II. There are different problems (inter-national, inter-ethnic, inter-religious, political, etc.) complicating relations between the Serbs and the Croats, the Serbs and the Moslems (Bosniacs) and, to a lesser degree, between the Croats and the Moslems.

Locally, the 1990 s witnessed direct clashes between protagonists of preservation and protagonists of separation of the common Yugoslavian state. Essentially, it was a religiously- and ethnically-based conflict.

The first two decades of 21st century marked an attempt of influential western factors to finalize the processes started in 1990 s in order to establish a full control of the West over the Western Balkans. It meant the accession to NATO of all Western Balkan countries and elimination of Russia and its interests from the region. In order to take control over the Western Balkans, the West initiated many processes resulting in the following: *de facto* recognition of independence of the Serbian autonomous province of Kosovo and Metohia by more than half UN member countries; change of Macedonian Constitution in which Albanians became a constitutional people controlling half the state’s territory along with Macedonian NATO membership; deterioration in relations between Serbia and Montenegro and Montenegrin NATO membership; Albanian accession to NATO; and the intensive unitarization of Bosnia and Herzegovina resulting in weakening the position of the Republic of Srpska within B&H, which might lead towards the formal NATO membership of B&H.

Practically, Serbia is the only country without NATO membership. One such position and formal neutrality brings different opportunities for Serbian relations with the East and the West, including regional relations.

Internally, Western Balkan countries are facing both joint and specific geopolitical problems. Problems of the Republic of Croatia reflecting on the whole of Western Balkans are closely related to the following: national minority status, especially those of the Serbs; the nature of WW II and the genocide of the so-called Independent State of Croatia (1941–1945); the nature of the war in which SFR

Yugoslavia broke up; and aspirations of Croatian geo-politicians in regard to geographical space of Bosnia and Herzegovina, including some bordering areas with Serbia and Montenegro.

Due to both internal and external impacts, Bosnia and Herzegovina encounters many geopolitical, economic, social, demographic, ethnic, boundary and other problems of the development. The opposed interests of the country's constitutional peoples, along with the complex political and territorial organization of the state (two entities, ten cantons, one district, many units of local government), keep causing both covert and open conflicts at different levels of governmental and spatial organization. Crucial geopolitical problems of B&H are related to the model of the state (should it be unitary or preserve the existing model of territorial organization) and, as mentioned earlier, membership in NATO and European economic alliances.

On both internal and external scenes, the Republic of Serbia is facing many problems which are much more complicated than those faced by other states formed on the wrecks of former SFR Yugoslavia. Still, at the moment, the key problem of Serbia is the *de facto* loss of its sovereignty over the autonomous province of Kosovo and Metohia. Along with pressure to recognize the full *de facto* independence of Kosovo and Metohia, other pressures and blackmails from the West include Serbian "alienation" from Russia, which also involves China and its increasing economic presence in Serbia and other Western Balkan countries. These pressures will also keep increasing the gap between Serbia and Montenegro and "revive" old problems with neighboring countries (B&H and North Macedonia above all) unless Serbia abandons the full control over its territory. Actually, it is very likely that new pressures and blackmails will emerge in order to force Serbia to be obedient. Otherwise, all political factors advocating Serbian inclination to the West will be supported as well as ethnic minorities, Albanians in particular, and their geopolitical aspirations in south Serbia, Kosovo and Metohia and Raška region. The support may also be gained by the Moslems (Bosniacs) in Raška region and the Hungarians in north Serbia (autonomous province of Vojvodina) regardless of the fact that their status has been arranged by the highest standards.

Without elaborating the possible geopolitical models designed by external impacts, it is now more than likely that Serbia must preserve its territorial integrity and sovereignty over its entire territory. The renouncement of even smallest part of the state's territory might bring many temporary benefits. Nevertheless, it would mean a path towards the complete disintegration of the Serbian state and loss of national and cultural values of the entire Serbian population wherever they might be living.

Political stability of North Macedonia largely depends on the aggressive politics of Albanian separatist community, who, due to high birth rates, now make around 30% of total state population and 90% of population in the western part of the country [5, p. 74]. These separatist aspirations are a part of a political project of creating so-called Greater Albania which was made official by the League of Prizren in 1878. The NATO membership and full support to USA interests currently guarantee the unity of Macedonia and virtual political stability. Covert sources of both internal and international destabilization are the Macedonian language denied by the neighboring Bulgaria and self-proclaimed autocephaly of "Macedonian Church" challenged by the Serbian Orthodox Church.

Geopolitical and other processes of development in Montenegro, especially after it left the state union with Serbia (2006) “are defined by its Euro Atlantic path on one side and internal factors on the other. The international recognition demanded meeting different requests of so-called international community embodied in the likes of EU and NATO and the price of independence, international support and potential Euro integration was paid by abandoning the state union with Serbia, recognition of self-proclaimed independence of Kosovo and Metohia, etc.” [5, p. 75].

Geopolitical stability of Montenegro is agitated by the concept of civil state which only virtually places all its ethnic groups in the same line but essentially it supports the interests of the ethno-genic Montenegrin nation [8, p. 15–19]. Bearing in mind the fact that Montenegro, a NATO member state since 2017, officially fully supports USA interests, it is very likely that this course of politics will remain the same on both local and regional levels.

Ever since its formation in 1912, the Republic of Albania has served different interests and spheres of impact. After 1990 s, Albania has been under full control of USA as confirmed by its NATO accession in 2009. Their aspirations to expand their territory onto the neighboring countries in line with the program of the League of Prizren keep causing both covert and open disputes with neighboring states, especially Serbia. Albanian role in the Western Balkans is and will remain to serve the interests of globalism.

Conclusion

Nowadays, the Western Balkans remains a training ground for the conflicting interests of the East and the West. Due to the process of globalization and introduction of new world order during 1990 s and 2000 s, it became fully controlled by the West as most countries became NATO members. The beginning of 21st century witnessed a powerful comeback of Russia onto the global geopolitical stage, including the Western Balkans and Serbia. This fact is good enough to stop the process of globalization in the Western Balkans and open a path for new geopolitical processes which may make the region more stable and safe.

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Геополитические проблемы на Западных Балканах с особым обзором Сербии и ее автономного края Косово и Метония

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Аннотация: В настоящее время, в начале XXI века, Западные Балканы остаются пространством, где геополитические, геоэкономические и культурные интересы Востока и Запада постоянно сталкиваются друг с другом, как это было на протяжении последних тысячелетий. Внутренняя нестабильность и антагонизм по национально-этническому и религиозному признакам еще более усугубляются вследствие насильственного распада СФР Югославия и образования новых государств, которые до сих пор имеют нерешенные вопросы (границы, собственность морской акватории, правовой статус национальных меньшинств и т.д.). В настоящее время ключевой геополитической проблемой на Западных Балканах является статус Косово и Метохии, автономного края Республики Сербия. Другие, менее значимые проблемы связаны с геополитическими вопросами в Боснии и Герцеговине, Северной Македонии и Черногории. Кроме того, Республика Хорватия и Албания не должны игнорироваться в этом контексте.

Ключевые слова: Западные Балканы, бывшая СФР Югославия, балканизация, дезинтеграция, новые государства, евразийская интеграция, деглобализация.

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