

The Western Balkans:

Anchored in the past or moving forward towards a European future

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There is a quote often attributed to Winston Churchill that says “The peoples of the Balkans produce more history than they can consume and the weight of their past lies oppressively on their present.” Although it is debatable whether he really said it, the fact remains that the history of the Balkans is overburdened with many wars, quarrels and contradictions. It is no coincidence that the term "Balkanization" has steadily penetrated and is widely used in political science, where the Encyclopedia Britannica defines as: “*Balkanization*, division of a multinational state into smaller ethnically homogeneous entities. The term also is used to refer to ethnic conflict within multiethnic states. The term Balkanization is today invoked to explain the disintegration of some multiethnic states and their devolution into dictatorship, ethnic cleansing, and civil war.”¹

Fair or not, the perception of the Balkans has a certain negative connotation. In the scientific and fiction literature, the Balkans are also called “the apple of discord”, a "wasp's nest" or "Europe's backyard".

Undoubtedly, perceptions of the Balkans changed after the collapse of the socialist bloc and especially after the break-up of the former Yugoslavia. Today, a number of countries are members of the European Union and/or NATO. Many of the old issues have already been resolved, but the overall transformation of the Balkans is not over yet. Six countries in the so-called Western Balkans, despite their desire to become members of the European Union, still have to implement profound reforms in many sectors and resolve the existing disputes. Until this integration process is completed, the region will retain its risk potential and remain an arena for the struggle for influence from forces within and outside the region. The path to EU integration goes through substantial internal transformations and finding solutions to problems that have been accumulated over the years. They range from unresolved issues between countries, ethnic and religious entities, to the organized crime, corruption, weak institutions, economic vulnerability and much more. Each of the listed problems is not independent, but it is connected with others, thus multiplying the security risks. Whether people in the region will remain "anchored"

¹ Encyclopedia Britannica - <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Balkanization>

to their history or take the path to their future development within a united Europe is still a very questionable task.

Security challenges in the Balkans

There are many risks to the security of the Balkans, and in this article I will focus on three of them, namely the existence of unresolved conflicts, the nationalization of policies and the departure of young people from their respective countries.

If we look more closely at the region, we will notice several groups of contradictions based on national, ethnic and religious grounds that pose particular risks to security. Undoubtedly, the conflict between Serbia and Kosovo and Serbia's reluctance to recognize an independent Kosovo, remains the most serious security challenge on the Western Balkans. The inability of the two countries to engage in a dialogue to resolve a wide range of issues, including the protection of human rights, the preservation of cultural and historical heritage, trade and economic issues, etc. does not contribute to finding a final and long-term solution.

Another pair of contradictions is between Macedonians and Albanians. The 2001 Ohrid Agreement ended the armed inter-ethnic conflict, but still many disagreements remain thus increasing the fragility of the security situation in North Macedonia. Against this background, calls for the unification of all Albanians in one country periodically appear, thus creating tension in the region.

Some of these calls received real dimensions. At the end of January 2021 the Former Kosovo Prime Minister and current leader of the Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (KLA) Ramush Haradinaj said that “Kosovo’s reunification with Albania is not linked to an agreement to be reached with Belgrade, but an internal decision by Pristina”.²

The idea of creating a Great Albania to encompass all Albanians in one country came up periodically, provoking backlash in countries with a compact Albanian population. As it is known, there is Albanian population, also in Kosovo, the Republic of North Macedonia and Greece. Undoubtedly, any calls, and even more

² Gazeta Express, quoted in <https://darik.news/en/haradinaj-we-do-not-need-permission-from-serbia-to-unite-with-albania.html>

actions leading to the realization of the idea, encourage other countries to oppose possible actions.

In 2020 the Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama declared that the country would remove the borders with Kosovo and the Adriatic port city of Durres would become a “de facto port of Kosovo”. The statement, according to Euractive, immediately triggered the reaction of Serbian politicians. Serbian Defence Minister Aleksandar Vulin reacted to Rama’s statement related to the removal of borders saying that Rama is building “Greater Albania”³. Undoubtedly, any idea or appeal for creation of any “great state” will trigger a reaction from other countries thus increasing tension in the region.

Another case, which has mainly ethnic dimension, but of an internal nature, is Bosnia and Herzegovina. It has recently celebrated the 25th anniversary since the signing of the Dayton Accords, which ended an extremely bloody war. It created a state composed of two semi-autonomous units, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska, and established one of the most complex and decentralized governmental systems. The inability, as well as the unwillingness of the political leaders of the individual constituencies to move towards building a functioning state, preserves the risks not only for Bosnia and Herzegovina but also to the regional stability.

In addition to the above mentioned unresolved issues, we can also add the border disputes between Croatia and Greece, Croatia and Slovenia, or the quarrels between Bulgaria and the Republic of North Macedonia on issues related to the common past of the two countries. Undoubtedly, the listed contradictions are a serious challenge to regional security.

The serious question is why we have not seen any significant progress in improving relations and attempts to resolve disputes in the long term? As already mentioned above all countries have the prospect and declare the desire of becoming part of the European Union, which has demonstrated over time how centuries-old contradictions between countries could be overcome for the common good.

I think that, to a large extent, the answer to this question lies in the fact that nationalism is growing in all countries, which I consider to be a very serious risk to

³ Euroactive - https://www.euractiv.com/section/all/short_news/no-borders-with-kosovo/

the security and to the political future of the region. As William W. Hagen wrote the “today's Balkan crises are rooted in, above all, the crippling dependence of all Balkan peoples on the ideology and psychology of expansionist nationalism”⁴.

Nationalism as an idea of the superiority of one's nation over others and the imposition of one's own interest, as formulated by the political class, stands over all other interests. Very often this is in conflict with long-term national interests at the expense of resolving short-term ones. By default this is a “Zero sum game” and a return to what is described as "Balkanization".

Nationalism in politics, the idea of the superiority of one nation over another, contains a serious risk potential for security. The desire to put your own interests above others, and often at the expense of others, creates the basis of conflict and, on the other hand, does not contribute to overcoming the existing problems. Unfortunately, in recent years we have witnessed an increase in these trends. In all countries we see a growth of the influence of nationalist parties, and in many cases traditional parties also adopt nationalist rhetoric.

This can clearly be seen in the case of the contradictions between Serbia and Kosovo. On the one hand, there is the Government of the Republic of Serbia, which takes an uncompromising stance on the issue of Kosovo's independence. On the other hand, there are the attitudes of the Serb population itself, which are gaining lasting negative attitudes towards the non-recognition of Kosovo as an independent state. This provokes, on its end, the reverse reaction in Kosovo against Serbs.

As it is written in the publication of the Serbian Center for Social Dialogue and Regional Initiatives - CSDRI “the Kosovo problem has been a key national and political issue in Serbia for decades. The prevalence and over-saturation with the Kosovo issue in the Serbian public discourse affected political social and economic dynamics. Most importantly, Serbia’s EU enlargement perspective, as a proclaimed foreign policy priority, is directly tied to a normalization of relations with Pristina”⁵.

⁴ William W. Hagen, "Balkans' Lethal Nationalisms", "Foreign Affairs,
<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/europe/1999-07-01/balkans-lethal-nationalisms>

⁵ Center for social dialogue and regional initiatives, "Normalization of relations between Belgrade and Pristina from citizens' perspective - What we know and what we feel?" <http://www.belgradeforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Serbian-Hearts-and-Minds-on-Kosovo-October-2019.pdf>

Further in the CSDRI study it is demonstrated that the “recent public opinion research on citizens’ perspective in Serbia on the normalization of relations, conducted by our organization, suggests that one of the main obstacles to the implementation of the comprehensive agreement of normalization of relations between Belgrade and Pristina could be lack of preparation of Serbian public to accept any agreement”⁶.

A public opinion poll conducted by CSDRI shows that more than 70% of the Serbs won’t agree to recognize Kosovo’s independence if that was a precondition for Serbia’s membership in the European Union.⁷

Very often the nationalistic rhetoric is based on emotional constructions. In the case of Serbia the claims over Kosovo are grounded on deep symbolic construction of this territory as a “homeland”, a “cradle of Serbian culture”, a “Serbian Jerusalem”, and “heart of Serbia”, while loss of Kosovo is perceived as “injustice”, “betrayal”, “shame”, “loss of identity”. As we will see further the same approach is used by nationalists in Bulgaria to create a negative attitude towards North Macedonia. This nationalistic approach creates barriers to elaborating more moderate approaches. As the Center for social dialogue and regional initiatives mentions in its study “such a strong view on Kosovo in the Serbian public point to the need to ameliorate the emotional and symbolic roots of this issue before reaching a sustainable, legally binding agreement. That recognition of Kosovo independence would be hard to sell to the citizens tells the fact that only between 15% and 20% of respondents would accept some of the scenarios which entail that option”⁸.

As already demonstrated the policy-making process is twofold. On the one hand, there is a strong nationalistic stance on the part of the Serbian government and mainstream political parties, which influence the public opinion, whereas the public opinion on its part strongly influences the policies pursued, leaving no space for moderate parties. This principle of docked vessels only reinforces nationalist and anti-Kosovo sentiment in Serbia. Virtually any political force that would politically address the issue of finding a solution to the Kosovo problem will face

⁶ Center for Social Dialogue and Regional Initiatives CSDRI, NORMALIZATION OF RELATIONS BETWEEN BELGRADE AND PRISTINA – A LONG WALK TO AGREEMENT - <http://www.belgradeforum.org/normalization-of-relations-between-belgrade-and-pristina-a-long-walk-to-agreement/>)

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

well-prepared public opinion that would not accept it. It is impossible to choose another political force governing the country that would take a different stand from the extreme nationalist position on Kosovo and this creates an extremely stable situation over time for not resolving these issues, although not resolving them is an obstacle for both countries to continue on their path to European integration.

Moreover, nationalism in one country triggers responses in other countries, creating preconditions for even greater aggravation of inter-state relations. Thus, in 2017, Serbia deliberately provoked Kosovars by sending a train labeled "Kosovo is Serbia." And the Kosovars readily accepted the thrown glove. For its part, Kosovo itself has demonstrated an aggressive policy internationally, such as imposing 100% tariffs on Serbian goods.

These nationalist tendencies are not unique to the Serbia-Kosovo relations. Unfortunately, we see that such relations dominate the dispute between Bulgaria and Northern Macedonia, for example. Instead of seeking a pragmatic solution to the dispute, politicians from Bulgaria and North Macedonia get involved with nationalistic rhetoric, along with their own populations thus creating more obstacles to reaching consensus.

Bulgaria and Macedonia have been trying to resolve the dispute over the common past and some controversial moments in connection with recent history for years. A special multidisciplinary commission of Bulgarian and Macedonian scholars was set up to decide on common history, common historical figures and heroes, as well as language and other issues. For many reasons, the work of the commission is not going well, with both parties shifting responsibility to one another. The peak of the dispute was when Bulgaria officially opposed at the end of 2020 during the German presidency of the Council of the EU to start negotiations for membership of the Republic of Northern Macedonia and Albania in the European Union. For many European politicians and observers, this move made by Bulgaria came as a complete surprise, as it was Bulgaria that stubbornly raised the question of the European perspective for the Western Balkans for years. And when the opportunity finally opened, to at least start negotiations, Bulgaria blocked this process.

The roots of the Bulgarian decision point in two directions. On the one hand, no success was achieved in clarifying the common past between the two countries, while on the other hand, a clear anti-Macedonian opinion was created in the Bulgarian society, which is difficult to overcome by progressive political parties. According to a survey conducted by Alpha Research, 83.8% of Bulgarian citizens

do not agree with Bulgaria's support of the Republic of Northern Macedonia for EU membership until an agreement is reached on facts from Bulgaria's historical past.⁹

The issue has shifted to the context of nationalist discourse, without taking into account the wider interests of Bulgaria and the EU as such, namely the future membership of the Western Balkan countries in the Union. Nationalist rhetoric is actively used by nationalist parties to gain influence inside the country such as "we will not allow the Republic of Northern Macedonia to steal our history", "there is no" Macedonian "language", "the history of Macedonia before 1944 is the history of Bulgaria", etc. thus playing on the emotions of the Bulgarian population. Obviously, they successfully influence the Bulgarian public opinion and contribute to the growth of nationalist sentiments. On the other side, these narratives remain incomprehensible abroad and can hardly be accepted by the international community, as they do not rest on principles of international law. It should be noted that similar processes are evolving in the neighboring North Macedonia, where anti-Bulgarian speeches and provocative activities are inherent to the government of Northern Macedonia and political parties.

Similar tendencies exist in most of the countries in the region, where we witness growing authoritarianism and the planting of nationalism, which in turn serves anti-democratic leaders very well, placing themselves in the light of the only defenders of the "national interest".

The most important political issue is how to get out of this vicious circle of the Balkans without letting new contradictions to spread around? The transformative forces are the young generations of the Balkan countries, who will replace the current political leaders, many of whom are linked to the former security services from the socialist era, or involved in corruption schemes and links to different criminal groups. These young people, many of whom have graduated from universities in Western European countries or the USA, have a radically different thinking and could better understand the changing world we live in. There is, however, a new set of issues that pose a specific risk to all Balkan countries. And

⁹ Alpha Research, Public attitudes towards Bulgaria's position on the start of negotiations of the Republic of North Macedonia for EU membership, <https://alpharesearch.bg/post/973-obshtestveni-naglasi-kum-poziciata-na-bulgaria-otnosno-zapochvaneto-na-pregovori-na-republika-severna-makedonia-za-chlenstvo-v-es.html>

this is the emigration of young people from the countries in the region, or brain drain.

As it is mentioned in a study commissioned by the World Bank “in recent years, high unemployment and a lack of job opportunities have made emigration from the region a viable option for young educated people, resulting in a significant brain drain in some sending countries”¹⁰.

It is also mentioned in the study, that between the years 1990 and 2015 from Albania, Kosovo, and Bosnia and Herzegovina over 30 percent of the resident population left and the bulk of emigrants across countries were in the age group between 20 and 39. According to the World Bank “The future competitiveness of the region’s economies is further at risk if large-scale emigration of well-educated or highly skilled young people continues.”¹¹ I believe that the political and economic future of the region, to a large extent, is put at risk if this trend continues.

Great power competition and the role of the external factors on the Balkans

The Balkans have always been a playground for competition of the great powers and have often become an arena for clashes of their interests. Due to its geostrategic importance, the Balkan region still remains a field for competition between different actors.

There are many factors which predetermine the importance of the region. First of all, the countries in the region have expressed their desire in joining the EU and NATO (Serbia stated its interest to join the EU only), expanding the geostrategic positioning of these two organizations. The enlargement process itself provokes tension with countries which oppose it and see it as a threat to their interests and security. On the other hand, the region is of great importance for the security of Europe and for the Euro-Atlantic community as a whole. Next, the region is an important transport corridor between Asia, Africa and Europe. The third reason is related to the demographic characteristics of individual countries, such as the presence of the Muslim population and the opportunity for external Muslim

¹⁰ World Bank, Western Balkans Labor Market Trends 2018, <http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/565231521435487923/pdf/124354-Western-Balkans-Labor-market-trends-2018-final.pdf>

¹¹ World Bank, Western Balkans Labor Market Trends 2018, <http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/565231521435487923/pdf/124354-Western-Balkans-Labor-market-trends-2018-final.pdf>

countries to exercise influence, or the presence of Orthodox Christianity and Slavs, which is perceived as an area of influence of Russia, for example.

The external players on the Balkans might be classified in different ways. One possible classification is to divide these players according to their potential role in the future development of the Balkan countries. In the first group are these players who claim and have the opportunity to be a role model for social, political and economic development for the countries of the Western Balkans, while in the second group are those players who have influence, but who do not represent a role model for development to be followed by the countries from the region. The degree of influence of these factors depends on the scale of their ability to promote interests through various mechanisms they have, and on the other hand, the ability or willingness of the countries in the region to resist to external influence. The EU and individual EU member states, the United States, China, Russia, as well as more complex factors, such as Islam, which is not represented by just one country, could be identified as the main geostrategic players in the Balkans. As evident from the COVID-19 crisis, the abovementioned factors would use different opportunities for influence, while the confrontation between them intensifies.

The European Union is undoubtedly a role model for all countries from the region. Currently Montenegro, Serbia, the Republic of North Macedonia and Albania are official candidates for EU membership, while Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo are potential candidate countries. Accession negotiations and new chapters have been opened with Montenegro and Serbia.

The EU's approach to the Western Balkans is multifaceted. It includes political stabilization of the region, resolving existing conflicts and creating conditions for EU membership through helping the countries to reach all accession criteria. Among priorities of the EU is reducing the malign role of external forces such as Russia, China, the Arab countries, etc. and at the same time creating a new economic paradigm for the whole region.

It can be stated that the European Union is the major factor for the development of the individual Balkan countries in all areas, such as politics, economics, education, social activities, etc. The EU is the most important trading partner and biggest donor of aid for the countries. Due to its role, the EU and its enlargement policy towards the Western Balkans is a key factor for reforms, as the countries must meet certain criteria to receive membership. Unfortunately, we observe that reforms in countries that are already negotiating their membership are going very

slow. On the other hand, the failure to address the issues that are a prerequisite for membership also remains a serious obstacle. This is relevant especially to the dispute between Serbia and Kosovo.

There is no coherent view on the future enlargement of the EU with regards to the Balkan countries per se. Some EU member states provide serious criticism towards the countries from the Western Balkans, pointing out the deficits in the functioning economy, the rule of law, organized crime, corruption, etc. Although in 2020 during the German Presidency of the Council of the EU it was agreed to start negotiations with Macedonia and Albania, Bulgaria vetoed this process. It is still unclear when the procedure for launching the negotiation process with Macedonia and Albania can be resumed. The delay in the integration of the Western Balkans into the EU puts the region in strategic uncertainty and in the “Gray Zone” of Europe. This vacuum is being filled by other global players pursuing their own interests. Although support for EU membership remains high in general, a large part of the population in the Balkan countries is losing hope that the desired membership will ever come true.

The latest multinational survey of the Western Balkans by the International Republican Institute’s (IRI) Center for Insights in Survey Research (CISR) shows that when asked how they would vote if a referendum was held the next day, majorities in all countries said they would vote in favor of EU integration. In Kosovo, an overwhelming majority (93 percent) support accession, and strong majorities in BiH (76 percent) and North Macedonia (74 percent) would also vote to join the EU.¹² At the same time public expectations in the region are decreasing. Sixty six percent of people in Serbia believe they will not join the EU until 2030, if they do so at all.¹³

The role of the United States in the Balkans is largely similar to that of the EU. The United States is also a model for development of the countries. The interests of the US in the region can be traced in several directions. First, the United States is interested in resolving existing problems and conflicts between countries and strengthening the security of the entire region. Second, President Biden's administration has set global goals for competing with China, deterring Russia,

¹² International Republican Institute, survey “Western Balkans Poll Shows Strong Support for EU”
<https://www.iri.org/resource/western-balkans-poll-shows-strong-support-eu>

¹³ ECFR, The power of perspective: Why EU membership still matters in the Western Balkans
https://ecfr.eu/publication/the_power_of_perspective_why_eu_membership_still_matters_in_western_balkans/

promoting democracy, and more. All these aspects will be reflected in the US' approach in the Balkans.

The previous US administration tried to mediate in resolving the problems between Serbia and Kosovo and finding a radical and lasting solution. It became clear that the proposed decision, which envisaged exchange territories, was not accepted by the disputing parties and was questioned by the European Union and some of its member states. Better coordination between the United States and the European Union is very important for the successful implementation of different initiatives.

After the new US administration has come to power, it could be expected that the role of the US in the Balkans would become more visible. The United States is anticipated to have a more active policy of limiting the influence of China and Russia. Undoubtedly, China's economic and political expansion in the region, especially the takeover of key infrastructure, such as airports and harbors, will provoke a tougher US reaction. Next will be the desire to limit China's technological expansion, especially in the field of 5G networks with Chinese technology. This will be partly influenced by the fact that Albania, Northern Macedonia and Montenegro are also members of NATO, and the security of communications is of particular importance within NATO. Next, it can be expected that the United States will also oppose China's attempts to extend its political and cultural influence to individual countries in the region.

The United States has already called for a more stringent policy toward Russia and limit its influence in different regions, including the Balkans. This would mean blocking Russia's attempts to oppose the Euro-Atlantic integration of countries in the region, countering propaganda, hybrid threats and cyber-threats emanating from Russia. Undoubtedly, there will be a negative reaction from the United States against Russia's attempts to pursue its energy policy and promoting political influence through gas exports and transit. The United States has already expressed a negative view of the construction of Nord Stream 2 and the Turkish Stream, which are considered by the United States to be elements of Russia's geostrategic influence.

A specific player in the Balkans is Islam. No single country can be personified in backing the Muslim communities, or educating imams, etc. The main factors in this directions are the Gulf Countries, Turkey, Egypt, but also the Muslim communities in some West European Countries. Islam represents a specific model of behaviour and regulation of social relations, but it also has economic influence,

especially where there is a Muslim population. In the recent years, we have seen the entry from abroad of new, more radical forms of Islam among the Muslim population in the Balkans. This is done mainly through the training of imams in Gulf countries or the implementation of various projects sponsored by other Muslim countries. To a certain extent, Turkey, which perceives itself as a protector of the Muslims in the Balkans, also plays a role in the spread of a more aggressive forms of Islam in the Balkans.

The role of Russia and China on the Balkans

Russia is an old player on the Balkans and its interests, as well as its presence in the region has been made noticeable. However, Russia remains far away from a model of development to be followed by most countries.

According to The Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), one of the pro-Kremlin Russian think tanks, The Balkans are also important (for Russia) in the context of Russia-Europe, Russia-EU and Russia-NATO relations. In the future, the region may take far from the last place in the emerging architecture of relations with Russia's two neighbors - China and Turkey.¹⁴

Russia's interests can be traced in several directions. Above all, this is to prevent further NATO enlargement. The Russia's National Security Strategy clearly identifies NATO as a major threat.¹⁵ Although Russia has not been able to oppose the NATO membership of some of the countries in the region, it would do everything possible to prevent any future enlargement or create discord among the member states. Russia's interests in the Balkans are also related to the possibility of transporting energy resources, preserving Russian investments in some member states, as well as establishing all forms of influence.

Russia also sees itself as a protector of the Slavic population and the Orthodox Christianity. According to a pro-Kremlin think-tank RIAC – The Russian International Affairs Council “The (Balkan) region is a home to a culturally close and politically loyal to Russia population, which can be found not only in Serbia, but also in other countries. Consequently, the Russia's position can receive the greatest understanding and support.”¹⁶

¹⁴ The Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), Россия на Балканах, <https://russiancouncil.ru/balkans>

¹⁵ National Security Strateg of the Russian Federation, published in <https://rg.ru/2015/12/31/nac-bezopasnost-site-dok.html>

¹⁶ The Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), Россия на Балканах, <https://russiancouncil.ru/balkans>

Russia uses all possible means to exercise its influence and to promote its interests. This includes using energy projects, political parties, NGOs, the media, the Russian Orthodox Church and others. A favorable factor for Russia's influence is the positive attitude of part of the population in some of the countries in the region, and it seeks to strengthen this attitude. A good example of this approach is the so-called vaccine diplomacy and the provision of Russian vaccines for some of the Balkan countries.

The vaccine diplomacy has been successfully implemented by another player in the Balkans, which is China. China is a relatively new and largely unknown player in the Balkans, with two main interests. First to implement projects within the “One Belt, One Road” initiative. Second, to find markets for their goods and especially high-tech products and systems. Obviously, China has long-term interests in the region as it is trying to establish a positive attitude towards itself. In addition to vaccine diplomacy, China is building cultural institutes and using all possible factors to build a positive image of itself. According to Vladimir Shopov, an analyst of China’s role on the Balkans, “Beijing has an increasingly expansive, structured approach to using culture as a diplomatic tool in the Western Balkans”¹⁷.

According to Shopov, “China has focused on practical cooperation with ministries, state agencies, and companies involved in infrastructure, energy, and finance.”¹⁸ The local media also presents China as a friendly economic power that is open to cooperation and capable of providing financial and other opportunities. Indeed, the general opinion of China is of a distant, benevolent and rich partner. China presents itself on the international stage as a model for development, especially in economic and technological terms, as well as a role model in the field of international relations, different from that of the United States.

On the Balkans Beijing has focused on ambitious, large-scale projects aimed at the core of countries’ economies. Yet, there is growing evidence that China is also taking a much more nuanced, multi-level approach to the region. Nonetheless Vladimir Shopov points out that “the China’s economic footprint in the Western Balkans remains relatively small, with the country accounting for roughly 6 per cent of regional trade.”¹⁹

¹⁷ Vladimir Shopov, “Decade of patience: How China became a power in the Western Balkans” - <https://ecfr.eu/publication/decade-of-patience-how-china-became-a-power-in-the-western-balkans/>

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

The expansion of China's networks in the Western Balkans is gradually affecting policies, practices, and developments in societies across the region. The country is becoming involved in the domestic affairs of some states, as its initiatives there begin to bear fruit. From this perspective, the Balkans can be expected to be an arena of clash of conflicting interests of China, on the one hand, and the EU, the United States and its allies, on the other.

A black-swan scenario – Cyber attack against critical infrastructure of Serbia.

Scenario-based planning is useful tool in regions like Balkans where the security situation is complex and there are competing interests of many external players. A black-swan scenario for the Balkans could be a major cyber attack against the electricity system of one of the countries in the region, for example in Serbia.

The attack began by cutting off electricity of the capital, Belgrade. The transport network, the hospitals, the airport cease to function. The city was blocked. Attempts to fix the crash were unsuccessful. Something more, on the second day of the accident, several more cities in Serbia were affected. The power outage caused an accident at a chemical plant in Knjazevac, killing many workers. The poisoning gas quickly moved to the nearby city of Nis, killing many people, including five Russians working at the Serbian-Russian Humanitarian Center. The crisis has begun taking enormous proportions, causing damage to the economy. A humanitarian and medical crisis erupted. Serbia asked Russia for help dealing with the crisis, prompting Russia to send 100 troops. Serbia also turned to China for technical and expert assistance.

On the third day, a Serbian official announced that everything was caused by a cyber attack being carried out by a group of Albanian individuals located on the territory of Kosovo.

Serbia was preparing troops to enter Kosovo and neutralize the group. Paramilitary formations and nationalities on both sides began preparations for hostilities.

Albania was convening a NATO meeting and preparing to assist Kosovo's Albanians in the event that Serbian troops entered Kosovo. Russia and China unambiguously supported Serbia and warned NATO not to take any action. The crisis was gaining a broad international character and threatening world peace.

The likelihood of such a scenario should be further explored. Undoubtedly, there are going to be many more cyber-attacks in the future, and every country must take preventive actions to create resilience mechanisms, especially to take measures for the protection of critical infrastructure, which in many countries, is already in private hands and security issues are often overlooked.

Rising nationalisms in the Balkans make it likely that politicians can easily blame the opponents or other countries for any issues or their shortfalls. Nationalism is used by authoritarian and/or populist leaders to pursue their interests even with the danger of provoking larger conflicts. In the Balkans, the interests of various global players are intertwined, and this also poses a certain risk of escalating any crisis at the international level.

The security of the Balkans depends on how quickly and in which way the existing problems will be solved. This includes reducing nationalistic rhetoric. Building resilience and the construction of crisis response systems in order to prevent the crisis from spreading and getting out of control is extremely important.

Increasing the stability in the Balkans through cooperation projects

It is crucial for the security and stability of the Balkans that countries see a clear prospect of their EU membership, including that people are aware that the future of their countries lies within the EU. Undoubtedly, the processes of transformation of the states themselves will take time and efforts, but these efforts shall be rewarded.

From this point of view, any project that contributes to the connectivity between the EU and the individual countries in the region is key. In some areas, this can happen relatively quickly and easily. For example, connectivity was established in the telecommunication sectors of EU and the Balkan countries. This is a good example that can be applied in other areas.

During the Bulgarian presidency of the Council of the EU, Sofia Security Forum proposed establishing different working groups formats within the European Union, in which the countries of the Western Balkans could participate in the discussion of various issues and policies. Of course, they cannot be an element of the decision-making process of the EU, but they will allow the views of these countries to be heard. This could be, for example, a working group for discussing migration policies and decisions. Migration is a common problem and taking into account the views of these countries may be of mutual interest.

The future of the countries of the Western Balkans largely depends on the young people, on their ambitions and commitments to the countries' development. Countries in the region definitely need new young leaders. That is why the EU can introduce more projects, including through Erasmus +, aimed at training young political leaders and youth entrepreneurship. As noted above in the article, the brain drain of young talents from the Western Balkans to Western Europe, the United States and other countries presents a huge challenge. These processes not only deprive the economy of a promising workforce, but also take away public energy for transformation. That is why the development of projects targeting young people in the region should be among the EU's priorities.

The third area in which the EU should work more closely with Balkan countries is the management of the Covid crisis and overcoming its consequences. The crisis has created many new challenges, but it has also opened up new perspectives. It showed us how dependent the European economies are on supplies from Asian countries and above all from China. Some of the key European companies have begun to rethink their supply chains but this process requires in-depth analysis and support from the states. It is an opportunity for the EU and its member states to work actively with the region to analyze which industries could be moved to the Balkan countries. This is a win-win situation. On one hand, it shortens the lines of supply and services, which is positive for the European businesses, on the other hand, the countries of the Western Balkans will develop new industries and create new job opportunities for their populations.

The transformation of the Balkans is not complete. There are still many problems and the influence of foreign factors is strong. It is very important to give the Western Balkans a perspective for future the EU membership. The EU has many leverages and mechanisms to help the Western Balkan countries in their way to the membership and it is of utmost importance that the EU clearly shows to these countries that the question of their integration to the Union is not "if" but "when".