

GEOPOLITICAL REALITIES IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

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The Western Balkans has always been a confronted border, an area where Great Powers struggle for influence. The interests of these Great Powers will never diminish but will instead change and adapt to the current international system, their outright objective being that their interests should be satisfied. When one speaks of the Western Balkans one supposes the countries of the former Yugoslavia and Albania, namely Serbia, Croatia, FYROM, Montenegro, Slovenia, Bosnia (BiH), Albania.

It is extremely important to point out that unlike their EU neighbours, the disappearance of Yugoslavia has brought a whole series of geopolitical, geostrategic and geoeconomic changes to South East Europe and more specifically to the Western Balkans. States that emerged from the Yugoslav federation have entered a triple transition: together with the transition of the political and economic systems they had to go through the transition of internal sovereignty and positioning of themselves in international relations as sovereign states.

The Western Balkans' firm objective is EU membership, and all the countries of the region are working to reach this goal. Joining the EU is the main foreign policy goal, however, to some observers there are those who believe that the Western Balkans take one step forward and two steps back when it comes to the EU. Croatia is taking steps forward. It has been officially allowed to become the twenty-eighth EU member state, most probably in the middle of 2013. FYROM on the other hand is building a huge statue of Alexander the Great which will not help it win any sympathies with Greece and will keep the conflict over its name in the spotlight. Albania is caught up in a political crisis at home between the leading coalition and the opposition and problems over vote rigging.

Despite these issues which are still continuing to undermine the Western Balkans, some member countries of this region still find themselves in much more complex geopolitical games on their road to EU membership. The countries which find themselves in such games are undoubtedly Bosnia & Herzegovina (BiH) and Serbia. The Great Powers that have vied for interests in the Balkans are the US, the EU, Russia and Turkey. The crises in BiH have long served the purpose of implementing certain US interests in Europe. US hegemony in South East Europe has been realized, the geostrategic idea to get closer to Russia through influence and approach to borders of the former Warsaw Pact, Russia and Central Asia have been implemented, influence has been achieved on openly-expressed Russian interests in the Balkans, presence in Southeast Europe enables stronger geo-strategic connection with other regions such as the Danube, Eastern Mediterranean, the Caucasus, the wider Black Sea Region and finally the military presence within the NATO mission in

BiH (in combination with camps Bondsteel in Kosovo and others in Bulgaria and Romania).

With the collapse of Yugoslavia, geopolitical changes have not been completed nor does it mean that the potential for new changes is not huge. The unilateral declaration of Kosovo's independence and the potential for separatist movements have continued the period of instability in South East Europe and have cast a shadow over security arrangements, the economic situation and integration of those states into Euro-Atlantic and European Integration.

With regard to the EU, in the breakup of Yugoslavia it was the US that took over the EU initiative with regard to this conflict. By taking such a strong initiative and hegemonic position in this region of the world, the US has taken an active hegemonic approach towards the region which aims to counter and to prevent the military and political strengthening of the EU.

The strong US and EU presence in South East Europe also lies in the fact that Russia increased its presence in the Balkans over the past two centuries. When Russia had recovered economically and politically after the Cold War and the arrival of Vladimir Putin, it turned its attention towards its interests in South East Europe. This is mostly visible through investments in Serbia and BiH (mostly the Serbian entity Republika Srpska (RS)), Montenegro and other former Yugoslav republics. The geographic, national and economic connections of Serbia and BiH (mostly Republika Srpska) represent a great value for the implementation of Russian strategic goals in the region which aim to maintain Russian influence in the Balkans in order to counter US and EU influence. For this reason, Serbia along with BiH is in a much more complicated geopolitical position than its neighbours, as it has to find a right method to balance these interests from all sides. In the West any adherence to the Serbs in the region, over the issue with Kosovo or over Republika Srpska with regard to its autonomy, is seen as directly helping Russian influence in the region. This is a very dangerous precedent which is seen more than ever. One example is the continued calls for a centralized Bosnian state which is contrary to the demands of the Serbs and the Croats who live there and on the other hand is the support for an independent Kosovo from Serbia which could further destabilize the region if the Albanians in Montenegro and FYROM call for independence. The situation in neither Montenegro nor FYROM is stable in regard to their Albanian populations.

Another very important player with increasing influence in the region is Turkey. Turkey seems to emphasize its role as a leader for Muslim communities in the Balkans. This can be seen in Albania, the Federation of BiH in BiH, the Kosovo province, as well as a significant influence of the Islamic factor in Sandzak and Presevo Valley in parts of Serbia, Sandzak in Montenegro and Western FYROM.

The EU on the other hand has taken a very constructive approach towards resolving disputes in the Balkans, nowhere has this been seen than in the talks between the Serbs and the Kosovo Albanians over issues which affect the day

to day lives of the population in the Kosovo province. The latest developments in the province of Kosovo are a huge test for the EU and its ability to maintain control in the area. The EU must take the initiative and not be influenced by the US and its policies. The EU has to also realize that any implementation of double standards in the Balkans is a time-bomb waiting to explode at some time in the future. Through such double standards concrete issues will never be really solved instead they will re-surface once a new geopolitical power balance is established.

The issue when the Western Balkans should enter the EU should be rephrased into 'who benefits and who gains for the time being'. In this region this has not been the first time that the Great Powers have curved their interests. Let us hope that the new geopolitical balance that is to be established, presuming EU membership for all, will take the Western Balkans one step further in the twenty-first century.

References

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