

NATO's Capabilities in Global Governance: On the Balkan Scene¹

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Abstract

In this paper, the development and status of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in the Western Balkans is examined. NATO's regional expansion can be considered a part of the general expansion of NATO to the East. Unhindered eastward progress lasted until 2006, when Russia came back on the Balkan scene with the strategic South Stream pipeline project. The unexpected appearance of a new actor led to an intensification of NATO's membership expansion process. Further, Russia's presence indirectly initiated other meaningful events on the peninsula, such as the self-declaration of Kosovo's independence.

Today, Russia remains the primary irritant for NATO and collective western policy on the Balkans. Allies put considerable pressure on regional actors to avoid closer economic and political ties with Moscow. There are apparent efforts underway to bring all kinds of interaction with the Russian Federation under overall control. Since 2014, local NATO members and candidates have pursued strongly pronounced anti-Russian policy.

Russia relies on its traditionally strong relationship with the Balkan states. Moscow brings an alternative model of economic cooperation and development. Both bids raise questions. The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) has not proven its viability and effectiveness in either the medium- or the long-term perspective; regardless, it competes with a highly desired but elusive European Union (EU) membership.

All this together requires more efforts from NATO and the West to maintain a dominating role and position in the region; it downgrades previously achieved capabilities in terms of global governance on the Balkan scene.

Keywords: Global Governance, NATO, Russia, Western Balkans, Global Security, International Relations, NATO Expansion

For citation: Arlyapova E., Ponomareva E., Proroković D. (2022) NATO's Capabilities in Global Governance: On the Balkan Scene. *International Organisations Research Journal*, vol. 17, no 2, pp. 208–223 (in English). doi:10.17323/1996-7845-2022-02-09

¹ This article was submitted 19 January 2022.

Introduction

As North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said in a joint lecture on global governance at Columbia University in 2019, for 70 years, NATO's deterrence and defence have relied upon maintaining a technological edge, that is, on being better and more advanced than its opponents [Stoltenberg, 2019]. Among those, NATO still—and more clearly than ever—sees Moscow, which “is not the partner [NATO] once hoped it to be” [Ibid.]. Russia remains the primary irritant for NATO and the West in the Western Balkans.

Given the significantly increasing tensions between Russia and NATO, research should go beyond the most apparent political action theater in Ukraine. Any predictive role of the humanities requires addressing other geostrategically significant areas, one of which is the Balkans. This study aims to monitor NATO's infrastructure development and status in the Balkan region in the context of the overall expansion of the alliance to the east. If Moscow succeeds with its steps toward Ukraine, an intensification of NATO's Balkan policy is very likely to follow. Therefore, the quality and level of resources available, and possible scenarios for further absorption of the Balkan space by NATO, get an additional practical application.

To explore the alliance's capabilities, the multidirectional factors that impact and shape NATO's overall status and strategy in the region must be identified. These factors relate to the “conductive” or “complicating” groups. The first consists of the local elites' loyalty, and of their economic and political dependence on Washington and Brussels. The cumulative Serbian factor—the serious resistance of the entire Serbian community, although divided and scattered across the Balkans—plays a main role in the second group. Republika Srpska illustrates this process to a greater extent. It becomes the primary opponent of the alliance's expansion on the institutional level. It is hardly possible to break Serbian resistance at the moment. In addition, unresolved political and territorial issues are a deterrent to the politicization of the Balkans. This includes the non-recognition of the so-called Republic of Kosovo, not only by Belgrade, Banja Luka, and Sarajevo, but also by some NATO member countries (Greece, Romania, Spain, and Slovakia). Plus, the complex political and economic structures of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the special Republika Srpska do not provide grounds for an optimistic scenario for the alliance to entirely absorb the Bosnian polity.

An objective study of the complex and multilevel Balkan matter is possible on the methodological basis of classical political realism and neorealism. Neorealism's statements on the state's counter threat capacity as being dependent on its placement and role in the world system become crucial for analysis when the international relations system becomes unbalanced and the conflict potential grows [Aron, 2003; Morgenthau, 1955]. The harsh, constraining impact of structural limitations remains a driving force of international relations. This, in turn, depends on the development of the structural and regulatory potential of the Western Balkan countries, on the one hand, and the interests and capabilities of the leading players in world politics (in this case, NATO), on the other.

The Balkan region has always been present in NATO's international agenda. NATO officials constantly refer to the peninsula in their public rhetoric. This approach contrasts to the Russian one, in which the Balkan vector had not been on the top of its foreign policy priorities for years [Ponomareva, Proroković, 2021]. A change in the usual status quo brought unexpected facts for both sides. Russia had to realize how much time it had lost and how much its relationship with the Balkans had been missed. At the same time, NATO had to acknowledge Moscow's intention to return to the region and its desire to retain a few positions on the peninsula.

Increased Russian presence on the world scene has not only limited NATO's capabilities in the sense of control and governance but has also stimulated new initiatives within the

organization. Under this pressure, NATO has had to shift its goals and priorities and to make updates and corrections to its current policies in many parts of the world to include the Western Balkans, where, according to NATO leaders, they have seen “tensions rise” as well as “foreign actors working to undermine the progress” [Stoltenberg, 2021]. These foreign actors are mostly Russia and China, building up economic and political influence in the Balkan states.

The shifting balance of power entails certain difficulties and losses for regional players, especially in terms of reputational costs, but at the same time there are new opportunities for maneuvers and bargaining for better conditions with the great powers, whether it concerns NATO membership or accession to the European Union (EU). The latter is crucial for the Western Balkans because all states and quasi-states under consideration are so-called “enlargement countries.” Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia currently have candidate country status, while Bosnia and Herzegovina and the region of Kosovo² are potential candidates [Eurostat, 2022].

For countries like Russia or, of course, Serbia, Kosovo has become a separate, complicated issue, whether permanently or at least for the foreseeable future. Despite the fact that most of the NATO and EU states have accepted the self-declared independence of Kosovo of 2008 and established bilateral relations, formally, according to United Nations (UN) Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999) the territory of Kosovo remains under international administration [Köchler, 2018]. Here, a discursive conflict arises. Those who have recognized self-declared Kosovo refer to the region as “Western Balkans six.”³ The rest describe it rather as “five plus one” [Stepić, 2020].

NATO’s position on the Kosovo issue is well known. Formally, it has been leading a peace support operation there since June 1999. The function derives its mandate from the above-mentioned resolution and from the Military-Technical Agreement between NATO and the Governments of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the Republic of Serbia (the Kumanovo Agreement of 9 June 1999). NATO fully controls the international forces. All adjustments to the Kosovo Force (KFOR) posture are decided by the North Atlantic Council as the security situation on the ground evolves. Surely, a certain level of cooperation and coordination with the UN, the EU, and some other international actors also exists. Officially, NATO strongly supports the Belgrade-Pristina EU-brokered Normalization Agreement (2013).

Kosovo is a particular case for European and general global politics, international relations, and for the further development of, and role for, the state in world politics. Some consider this case to be step in the overall NATO and U.S. strategy toward global governance [Guskova, 2013; Ponomareva, 2020]. In this sense, the Balkans have been, and remain, the region with crucial meaning for global security and politics, in which NATO finds both the opportunity to demonstrate its power as well as limitations associated with the emergence of new international actors on the field.

NATO in a Race to Conquer the Balkans

The Balkans in general, and former Yugoslavian countries in particular, have been under significant geopolitical pressure by the West since the end of the bipolar global order [Gajić, Ponomareva, 2020]. The expansion of NATO and the resulting increase of American influence certainly had its geostrategic reasons. The Balkan Peninsula represents a contact zone between the Adriatic and the Black Sea waters in a narrower geographical sense (along the west-east axis),

² With a Eurostat note that “this designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence.”

³ Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia.

and of the Central European and Middle Eastern continental area in a broader sense (along the northwest-southeast axis). Therefore, NATO domination over the Balkans made sense in the context of limiting the expansion of Russian influence in the border area (which represents the first step in the process of ensuring Russia's own borders) in the direction of the Caucasus-Black Sea (with the newly created independent states Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Ukraine, as well as USSR allies at the time, Romania and Bulgaria) and for uninterrupted planning of activities in the Middle East. The process of NATO expansion in the Balkans is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. NATO Expansion to the Balkans (1952, 2004–20)

Country	Year of Membership	Geostrategic Significance for NATO
Greece	1952	Securing a position in the Eastern Mediterranean; surveillance of communist states in the immediate vicinity (Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, and Albania); control of Otranto; harmonization of foreign and security policy with Turkey to prevent the outbreak of a large-scale interstate conflict; further securing control of the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus
Bulgaria	2004	Access to the Black Sea coast; control of the strategic direction from the Adriatic to the Black Sea; ensuring access to the Middle East; approaching the southwestern border of Russia
Romania	2004	Access to the Black Sea coast; control of the strategic direction from Central Europe to the Danube Delta; border control to Ukraine; approaching the southwestern border of Russia
Slovenia	2004	Securing a position in the northern Adriatic; control of the strategic direction along the Sava valley to the confluence with the Danube
Albania	2009	Securing a position in the southern Adriatic (control of Otranto); control of the strategic direction from the Adriatic to the Black Sea (through the territory of Kosovo and/or North Macedonia to Bulgarian ports)
Croatia	2009	Securing a position in the central part of the Adriatic waters; control of strategic routes from the Pannonian Plain (Hungary) to the Adriatic Sea (most pass through the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina); control of the strategic direction along the Sava valley to the confluence with the Danube
Montenegro	2017	Establishment of the Adriatic Troika by linking with Albania and Croatia, whereby NATO fully ensures the communication route from the Gulf of Trieste to the Peloponnese; control of the southern branch of the Belgrade-Bar traffic route
North Macedonia	2020	Completion of control over the southern route of the strategic direction from the Adriatic to the Black Sea; Control of the "Balkan vertical," a key regional traffic route (Athens- Thessaloniki-Skopje-Nis-Belgrade-Budapest) that stretches through the Moravian-Vardar valley

Source: Proroković [2018].

The fact that the Balkan Peninsula is in the focus of American geopolitics became noticeable in the 1990s. The disintegration of communist Yugoslavia brought a bloody civil war. The EU showed that it could not manage the crisis independently, which became an excuse for U.S. engagement. The United States made a pivotal contribution to achieving a peaceful solution in Bosnia and Herzegovina, ensuring relative peace in Northern Macedonia. Further, after

the Washington agreement between Croatian president Franjo Tudjman and Bosnian Muslim leader Alija Izetbegovic, Croatia resolved an interethnic conflict though the most intensive process of ethnic cleansing in Europe since World War II [Human Rights Watch, 1996].

After the Dayton Agreement, peace did not come for everyone in the Balkan region. Today, numerous resources point to the external interference that led to the Albanian uprising in Kosovo in 1998. Undoubtedly, the problem between the majority Albanian population in this Serbian province and the central authorities in Belgrade existed long before. But it is not certain that an actual war was inevitable. On the contrary, intense (more secret than public) negotiations between Belgrade and Pristina (Slobodan Milosevic and Ibrahim Rugova) on extended autonomy for the Albanians, guaranteed by the international community and mediated by the U.S. Department of State and the Vatican (Catholic organization St. Eugene), were ongoing in 1998.

The State Department's exit from this process marked the end of the search for a peaceful solution through negotiation. In already known and investigated circumstances, the escalation of armed conflicts eventually led to NATO aggression on Yugoslavia in 1999. As a result, the U.S. established the Bondsteel military base in central Kosovo. The U.S. presence was also legalized and legitimized through the KFOR army peacekeeping mission structures.

In general, the United States became a critical factor in the regional security of the Western Balkans during the 1990s. Therefore, to secure their position in the long run, all Western Balkan countries needed to join NATO. But looking back, it is clear that an unexpected issue had arisen. Basically, Albania was the only one to complete its accession to NATO with no problems or scandals. Although there was no referendum on joining NATO, the mood and preferences of the citizens were in favour of such a step, and all political parties advocated it in their programmes [Hendrickson, 1999; Maklen, 2008]. Where then did the unexpected problem arise?

In the second half of the 1990s, American engagement in the Western Balkans became extremely anti-Serbian, resulting in further NATO aggression. Such an approach also meant that the United States was essentially not interested in implementing Resolution 1244 or negotiating the status of Kosovo. It seems fair to underscore that NATO members have higher cohesion than other UN members, although the United States has been the most significant deviating member since 1980 [Ozkaleli, Gunes, 2021]. Therefore, NATO bypassed the UN Security Council document on several grounds, creating a new reality and simulating negotiations on a status solution. Martti Ahtisaari, as an envoy of the UN secretary-general and a mediator for negotiations between Belgrade and Pristina, had a ready solution before the beginning of the entire process. However, negotiations failed, U.S. pressure on Belgrade to comply with Ahtisaari's concept of "supervised independence" did not work, and Kosovo Albanians unilaterally declared independence in 2008. This has prevented Serbia's accession to NATO in the long run as such a step would mean renouncing Kosovo.

Public opinion in Serbia is clearly opposed to joining NATO. Opinion polls consistently show over 80% of respondents are against such a step. Numerous organizations, including the very influential Serbian Orthodox Church, share this position. This would be difficult to ignore, even if pro-Western (pro-American) politicians came to power in Serbia at some point. Serbia is a meaningful country in the Western Balkans, and NATO and the EU are aware of that. However, the entire American plan to solve the "problem" with Serbia ultimately came down to looking for politicians in Belgrade who would sign the recognition of Kosovo. Since 2008, no different vision has been offered. The U.S. did not want to discuss alternative solutions to the Kosovo issue but only reiterated that Kosovo's independence is a reality. This remains a key pillar of U.S. efforts to enhance stability in the Balkan region. U.S. priorities in Kosovo

cover the issue of the comprehensive normalization of Kosovo's relations with Serbia, centred on mutual recognition [U.S. Department of State, 2022].

The development of the situation in Montenegro and Northern Macedonia has certainly given the U.S. a reason for such an approach. In both cases, American pressure paid off. And the desired outcome was achieved—two countries became members of NATO. However, in Montenegro, the majority of citizens were against joining NATO. Due to that, the government did not organize a referendum, although it had been announced, and led a campaign to abruptly end it.

The ongoing, pronounced polarization in Montenegro has been noticeable since the independence referendum in 2006. Ruling thanks to American support, Milo Djukanovic had to agree to numerous concessions regarding the distance from Russia, creating a hybrid identity based on fierce anti-Serbian attitudes, establishing bilateral relations with Pristina, and joining NATO.

Northern Macedonia had organized a referendum, but it failed. Greece has long blocked Macedonia's accession to NATO, demanding to change the country's name. The authorities in Skopje refused to do so, but with the overthrow of Nikola Gruevski, a kind of "coloured revolution," and the bringing to power of Zoran Zaev, they finally met that condition. The Prespa Agreement (signed by Zaev and Tsipras) established a new name—Northern Macedonia. However, the majority of the Macedonian, Slavic-Orthodox population opposed the decision. Thus, the referendum question was crafted as "Are you in favour of European Union and NATO membership by accepting the agreement between the Republic of Macedonia and the Republic of Greece?" Since more than half of the registered voters did not show up (Table 2), the State Election Commission declared the referendum a failure. Nevertheless, Northern Macedonia is a NATO member today.

Table 2. Macedonian Referendum Results (2018)

Response	Votes	%
Yes	609,427	91.45
No	37,687	5.65
Invalid votes	19,230	2.90
Total votes	666,344	100.00
Registered voters	1,806,336	36.89

Source: Compiled by the authors based on data from European Election Watch [2018].

Officials, representatives of NATO, and the EU ignored the fact that almost two thirds of the citizens did not support the proposal. In the Assembly, the majority was then "patched" by pressure and blackmail, even by detaining and kidnapping members of parliament. Johannes Hahn laconically concluded that this was just the application of "Balkan methods." In the further institutional procedure, the illegal became legal, based on the prime minister's declaration of the referendum having been successful. The international community (NATO and the EU) accepted that development and determined it to be legitimate from their perspective. The decision was adopted, the story ended. For the EU and NATO, the referendum process is not disputable; it was, in any event, "consultative."

In contrast, the process in Bosnia and Herzegovina is still not over, so this country has stayed out of NATO. Moreover, the complex internal structure and the existence of three con-

stituent peoples and two entities, with the Serbs being the constituent people and the Republika Srpska one of the two entities, makes it complicated to join NATO, even though Bosniaks (Muslims) and Croats are in favour. Therefore, it will not be a surprise if, in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, they resort to looking for creative solutions to open the way for joining NATO.

Because, as long as Serbia stands firmly on the position that it does not need NATO membership, a change of attitude within the Serbian entity in Bosnia and Herzegovina cannot be expected. Creative interpretations are also related to the membership of the so-called Republic of Kosovo in NATO. Namely, the inflexibility of the representatives of Serbia, who refuse to accept the new reality and allow Pristina's membership in the UN, has forced western experts to think about an alternative. Diplomatic focus is gradually shifting to convincing the four NATO members that have not yet recognized the Republic of Kosovo (Spain, Greece, Romania, and Slovakia) to do so [Popadić, 2021]. After that, there would be no obstacle to NATO membership. It is debatable how feasible this development is due to the unwavering attitude of some NATO members who do not want to legalize secession (Spain is in the lead among these four) and because it is in direct conflict with Resolution 1244. Kosovo Albanians are not allowed to establish their own military forces.

Regarding Serbia, since 2007, the formulation of the military neutrality thesis in a parliamentary resolution concerning the preservation of territorial integrity (dedicated to the situation in Kosovo and Metohija) has become an official position and has gradually gained some content. Finally, it is elaborated in the National Security Strategy of the Republic of Serbia from 2018 [Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2019]. Spoiling the success of NATO enlargement, the Balkans continue to demonstrate noticeable resistance to NATO's further expansion for the first time after the fall of the bipolar order. They have also publicized the view that membership in this military alliance is not the only way to protect national security [Ponomareva, Proroković, 2021].

The calls for full expansion of NATO to the Western Balkans come from NATO, primarily from the United States, and not from the Western Balkans. The leadership of Montenegro and Northern Macedonia did not resist these pressures, although the public's mood in specific situations was utterly different. The goal of the United States is to strengthen its presence in the region through the "suction" of the Western Balkan countries into NATO. That is why it is allowed to circumvent democratic procedures, ignore the majority's will, and even advocate for open violations of international law.

Russia's Return to the Balkans and Feedback From Local States

"Russia is far away!" This slogan has been used so often in all Balkan countries (not just the Western Balkans) for the past 15 years in speeches by politicians, comments from journalists, and even scientific papers, that it has become a cliché. To say that Russia is far away is nothing strange. However, even a glance at the geographical position of the Balkan Peninsula shows an entirely different picture. For example, if we drew a radius around Belgrade, the largest city in the Western Balkans, as far as Moscow, we would see that London is approximately the same distance away. However, so far, the slogan "Great Britain is far away" is not heard.

On the contrary, Great Britain is a factor of regional security in the Western Balkans. British influence and British interests are taken for granted; they are considered a normal phenomenon in current politics. It is absurd that the same is true for the United States. Nobody says, "America is far away!" You get an even more exciting result by describing the circle with the centre in Belgrade and the radius to Sevastopol. The capitals of the 15 EU member states,

including Brussels as the seat of the EU, remain out of the circle.⁴ Crimea is closer to the Western Balkans than Western and Northern Europe. Moscow is not so far away!

From an historical point of view, since the end of the 18th century, Russia has constantly been present in the Balkans. The Eastern question⁵ could not have been solved without Russia, so in that context, the Balkans represent one of the foreign policy priorities of Russia. The Soviet Union's influence encompassed Bulgaria and Romania, Yugoslavia and Albania. Despite entering into numerous disputes with Moscow (Yugoslavia since 1948 and Albania since 1961), these countries remained communist; the Soviet influence was weakened but did not disappear.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union during the 1990s, Russia, as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, and because of its historical role in the Balkans, became an unavoidable factor in the search for peace solutions in the post-Yugoslav era. Without Russia, there are no stable and long-term solutions—that was clear to both the State Department and the EU. Representatives of Russia have participated in the Dayton negotiations and the negotiations in Rambouillet. Thanks to the work of Russian diplomacy, the final version of Resolution 1244 was reached. At that time, it was not said, “Russia is far away!”

Why, all of a sudden, despite geographical determinism and historical facts, is Russia becoming a far eastern, Eurasian destination, a country that cannot help anyone in the Balkans? The answer is simple: because of politics. Or maybe more precisely, because of geopolitics. The distancing of the Western Balkan states from Russia became projected in the first decade of the 21st century in parallel with implementing the concept of NATO expansion. That is why the British and especially the Americans are considered close, and they are anticipated not only as the closest neighbours but also as hosts.

They have deployed their military installations, both independently, like NATO, and under the flag of UN peacekeeping missions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Northern Macedonia, and Albania and on the territory of Kosovo. However, it remains unclear whether NATO will install its base in Montenegro. Information about that has appeared occasionally in the local media since 2017. The last in a series is about constructing a new military barracks according to NATO standards in Andrijević, in the north of the country, but without specifying whether the facility will be used exclusively by Montenegrin military forces or will accommodate members of other NATO armies.

The campaign, promoting the idea that Russia is far away (some, especially the politicians, took this matter very seriously), aimed to make meaningless any attempt to intensify bilateral relations with Moscow and relativize Russian initiatives in this part of Europe automatically. After 2014, the campaign continued in a far more radical form, manifested by introducing sanctions and the expulsion of Russian diplomats, and by promoting the thesis of Russia's malignant influence.

Non-Balkan factors, primarily American and British, but to some extent also German and French, played a key role in designing and organizing the campaign, both through official channels and through the activities of non-governmental organizations and foundations for “spreading democracy” and “protecting human rights.” Individuals and administrations of the Western Balkan entities only represented mere perpetrators. Thus, their responsibility, of course, is not less. Domestic political elites agreed to such a game, and some even began

⁴ Vilnius, Riga, Tallinn, Helsinki, Stockholm, Copenhagen, Amsterdam, Brussels, Luxembourg, Dublin, Paris, Madrid, Lisbon, Valletta, and Nicosia.

⁵ The Eastern question is the conditional designation (accepted in historical and diplomatic literature) of international contradictions from the end of the 18th century to the beginning of the 20th century, concerned with instability and emerging collapse of the Ottoman Empire (Sultan Turkey) and the struggle of the great powers (Austria/Austria-Hungary, Great Britain, Prussia/Germany, Russia, and France) for the division of its possessions, primarily in Europe.

to enjoy it, considering the purpose of their actions is to be constantly proving their loyalty to Washington. The president of Montenegro, Milo Djukanović, went the furthest in that. But it is also necessary to underline that these elites were only executors.

The Western Balkans was not among the top priorities of Russian foreign policy. However, some consider that Russia is not now returning to the Balkans because it has never left [Bechev, 2017].

Indeed, Russia's foreign policy has projected its presence in the region since the 1990s with different approaches in different countries. Russians tried to maintain good relations with all Western Balkan countries. However, the crisis that arose due to the disintegration of communist Yugoslavia forced Russia to clash with the United States occasionally. Although these conflicts were not of high intensity, nor did they produce dramatic consequences in the relations between Moscow and Washington, they existed.

All Western Balkan countries have directed their foreign policies toward the EU since 2000. EU membership is a priority, so they agree to the sacrifices. Privatization, a transformation of economic systems, and the political transition open the door to the spread of western influence in the Western Balkans. In such an environment, relations with Russia went to the second plan. There was cooperation with Moscow, but it involved rather individual ad hoc actions as opposed to enacting some well-thought-out strategy. Also, the impulses to expand cooperation mostly came from Moscow, and the Western Balkan actors accepted them, willingly or unwillingly, in their original or changed form.

The turning point came in 2006. Russia's plan to build a strategic South Stream pipeline, which would pass through the territories of Bulgaria and Serbia and supply gas to Western Europe, was perceived by the United States as a geopolitical project and a great challenge. Since then, pressure on regional actors to join NATO has intensified. By recognizing Serbia as a potential Russian ally, the United States encouraged Kosovo Albanians to unilaterally declare independence [Stolberg, 2007], further problematizing Serbia's position in international relations.

In the background of dominating the EU path for the new Balkan states, Russia brought an alternative integration plan to the table in the form of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) idea. Although the effectiveness and vitality of this Russian initiative is still under question, the model competes with the only one existing before. The appearance of a new alternative bothers the western partners.

Thus, the United States has sought to consolidate its presence in the Western Balkans. Since 2014, all NATO members and candidates for membership have been required to pursue an extreme anti-Russian policy. The demands of the United States were followed by the foreign and security policy of the EU, measures of sanctions against Russia, and the impossibility of maintaining normal bilateral relations. The Montenegrin public mostly does not see Russia as a problem, even less as a challenge, and the Macedonians demonstrate the same attitude. However, this does not influence official policies. The only country in the region that continuously strengthens the Russian vector of its foreign policy is Serbia.

Consequently, the Serb entity in Bosnia and Herzegovina follows the same vector. For others, Russia is far away. Despite the geographical determinism and historical facts, Russia is becoming a far eastern, Eurasian destination, which cannot help anyone in the Balkans. Montenegro and Northern Macedonia are forbidden to think about the Russian vector. Albania has little interest in that. Bosniak-Muslim entities of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo have already perceived Russia as a problem. With tremendous pressure from the West, it seems that very little can change in this status quo. Changes will occur when and if the relationship between Moscow and Washington undergo a qualitative modification.

For now, NATO and the EU are conducting a permanent campaign to suppress Russian influence. Restrictions include: constant monitoring of operations of Russian companies, tracking of the media (Radio Sputnik, with an editorial office in Belgrade, is always in the focus of numerous western non-governmental organizations and research centres located in the Balkans), and the placement of various misinformation that have become part of Western Balkan political folklore. For its part, the United States uses at full capacity the position it has built since the early 1990s, the ties that it has made, and the mechanisms of dependence on American political mercy or financial aid to restrain growing Russian influence. The U.S. intends to remain the one and only external actor of regional security and gain the potential to manage all critical political processes in the Balkans through the order of hegemonic stability. At this stage, the United States skillfully uses local specifics, namely the weak horizontal ties between the Balkan states and communities, which provides greater opportunities for external players [Arlyapova, 2018]. The U.S. defines its attitude toward Russia primarily through the prism of its long-term geopolitical goals. The key instrument in achieving these goals is NATO.

Through this angle, the Balkan Peninsula should have already been a secured “NATO zone,” a geographical region in which the United States is the only guarantor of regional security.

All this highly affects the economy. Achievements in external trade with the Russian Federation remain very modest for all Balkan states except for Serbia and are not even close to the EU trade partners [Trading Economics, n.d.].

Russian efforts to come back to the region have been noticeable since 2006. It strengthened its influence primarily through energy projects and relied on international agreements that guarantee its position as a significant regional economic and political interaction player. This activity makes Russia an obstacle for NATO. It slows down its further progress on the Eastern front [Michta, 2014] and downgrades coordination of pressures on the immediate Russian border in the post-Soviet space [Ponomareva, Proroković, 2021].

Conclusion

Since the first changes in the world order, NATO has consistently developed its position in the Western Balkans. As a part and instrument of the West, NATO has been very effective and successful in this direction. Of course, strengthening its positions in the Balkans has become a piece of an overall strategy of expansion to the east, moving toward the post-Soviet space and Russia.

Unhindered eastward progress lasted until 2006, with Russia coming back on the Balkan scene within the strategic South Stream pipeline project. Russia has offered an alternative economic integration model to the peninsula in competition with the previously dominating EU membership path for all new Balkan states. Moreover, Russian initiatives have brought additional perspectives for local communities. However, perception of the Russian vector varies considerably from state to state.

The unexpected appearance of another power in what had been considered a secured area led to an intensification of the NATO membership process in the Balkans. Allies put considerable pressure on regional actors to avoid closer economic and political ties with Moscow. There were apparent efforts to bring all kinds of interaction with Russia under overall control. Since 2014, local NATO members and candidates have pursued strongly pronounced anti-Russian policy.

This analysis leads to several conclusions. First, NATO is interested in expanding its presence in the region. The ideal project for the alliance is the formation of NATO-Yugoslavia,

that is, the expansion of the political and military infrastructure of the organization within the borders of the former SFRY. Second, there is a complex of conducive and complicating factors determining the capacity of the final consolidation of NATO in the region. The main local obstacle to the region's absorption is not Belgrade but the integral Serbian society. Third, in the context of recent events and Moscow's demands for NATO to "get your stuff and get out to the borders of 1997," there is undoubtedly a change in the Russian policy toward the Balkans. In the political and economic sense, it could be a long and generally unpromising game within the EAEU.

The Russian Federation is entirely satisfied with Serbia's military neutrality in military-strategic terms. At the same time, the need to build up military-technical cooperation with both Belgrade and Banja Luka is obvious. Finally, the current situation requires additional efforts from NATO and the West to maintain a dominant role and position in the region. All this together significantly reduces and downgrades their previously achieved capabilities in terms of the global governance on the Balkan scene.

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