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16+1 Initiative and Other External Influences on the Stability and Security of the Western Balkans

Abstract

The paper analyzes the impact of the 16+1 Initiative and other external actors – such as the United States, the European Union, the Russian Federation, and Turkey – on the stability and security of the Western Balkans. Security and stability of the Western Balkans are dependent on internal and external factors. Internal factors affect the state of affairs in individual countries and relations between them. External factors reviewed in this paper involve the activities of particular states and international organizations which have revealed their interests in the as yet unstable region. Their activities may involve the use of soft or hard power, depending on their intended goals. An analysis of the impact of external actors shows that some of them combine both types of power, whereas some, such as China, primarily use the soft one. This is why the Chinese policy towards the Western Balkans, examined through the comparative perspective of other external actors, is the central part of this paper. By connectivity in the Western Balkans, especially infrastructure-wise, the Chinese initiative significantly contributes to its stability and security.

Keywords:

China, the Western Balkans, security, cooperation, 16+1 Initiative

INTRODUCTION

Regional cooperation and security, especially the concept of the security community as desired outcome, play important roles in any research into international relations and security studies. The security community in its broadest sense is a process of intensive and continued relations among states enabling the establishment of special relations within a certain geographic area, where the development of common and institutional frameworks may contribute to the strengthening of trust, good economic cooperation and political ties.¹ In examining the influence of external actors, such as the United States, the European Union, the Russian Federation, and Turkey, the paper will focus on the impact of the 16+1 Initiative and Chinese policy toward the Western Balkans.

The term 'Western Balkans' as a political notion rather than a mere geographical designation was introduced at the beginning of armed conflicts accompanying the disintegration of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in the 1990s. It was coined by the European Union when it opened up the integrations perspectives for former Yugoslav states, which excluded Slovenia but included Albania.² After the consolidation formally promoted and initiated by the Zagreb Summit of the European Union³ in 2000, the Western Balkans is still burdened with the aftermath of the conflicts and difficulties in the implementation of intrastate reforms and the establishment of good neighborly relations. It is especially important to emphasize that state-to-state relations in the region are significantly affected by international players whose influence has both positive and negative effects. This paper examines China's influence of through the "One Belt, One Road" project and the 16+1 Initiative intended for Eastern and South-Eastern European states. This influence is considered important for the process of stabilization of the Western Balkan region. The paper provides answers to

¹ The theoretical concept of the security community was defined by theoreticians such as: Karl Deutsch, Barry Buzan, Fulvio Attina, Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett (see also: Deutch Karl W. et al, *Political Community and the North Atlantic Area: International Organizations in the Light of Historical Experience*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1957; Adler, Emaunuel and Barnett, Michael (eds.), *Security Communities*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998; Buzan, Barry and Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The structure of International Security*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003).

² Since the Republic of Croatia became a full member of the European Union in 2013, this paper does not treat it as a part of the Western Balkans.

³ European Commission, Zagreb Summit 24 November 2000 Final Declaration, at <http://www.esiweb.org/pdf/bridges/bosnia/ZagrebSummit24Nov2000.pdf> (accessed March 12, 2018)

the questions whether this initiative could contribute to better connectivity and understanding among the Western Balkan countries, and whether it is complementary to other initiatives aimed at the region. When answering these questions, our assumption is that the stability and security of the Western Balkans is possible with the synergetic activity of all external actors, where the 16+1 Initiative is of crucial significance due to its long-term effects on the increase in the capacity for cooperation among those countries. The paper analyzes the internal situation in the Western Balkan countries, relations among those states, the region's interactions with its neighboring regions, and the influence of key actors outside the region on the region's security and stability.

RESEARCH FRAMEWORK – THE CONCEPT OF THE WESTERN BALKANS AND REGIONAL SECURITY

Considering how to approach the new-formed states (which excluded Slovenia and included Albania) after the conflicts accompanying the disintegration of former Yugoslavia, in mid-1990s the European Union began developing the concept of the *regional approach*, based on the assumption that it was necessary to strengthen the cooperation among those countries. Since designators such as South-Eastern Europe or the Balkans included a broader area than that of the regional approach, the European Union introduced the term 'Western Balkans' for the area in the framework of its regional approach in 1997. Slukan Altić notes that "the summary report of the European Union under the title *The Role of the Union in The World*, where the seventh section 'Relations with the Western Balkan Countries' decidedly and geographically defined the Western Balkans as the area of Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, Macedonia and the FRY, has played a significant role in the political affirmation of the term 'Western Balkans'" (Slukan Altić, 2011: 409–410). Simić notes that stability, the relative durability of a pattern (system) of mutual activity of states and security, and the propensity to adhere to the rules of conduct intended for states as parts of such a system and for the system as a whole are the most significant values for which a system should strive (Simić, 1999: 40). The Western Balkans defined as a regional system had very conflicting characteristics since it included very heterogeneous state entities. The heterogeneity of the region was further confirmed by the events that the area experienced in subsequent state and legal reconfigurations. The FRY split into Serbia and Mon-

tenegro, and Kosovo proclaimed its independence in 2008 after it separated from Serbia following the conflicts in Kosovo in late 1990s. Those events corroborated Slukan Altić's conclusion that "the regionalization has resulted exclusively from international interests and post-1991 circumstances in the European Union rather than any socio-geographical principle." (Slukan Altić, 2011: 409). The area, consisting of seven states, was therefore not characterized by integrative aspects, since it was an imposed concept which was also adopted by NATO and the international community.

When considering the region from a security standpoint, then, according to Buzan's definition, the "Region (...)" refers to the level at which the states or other units connect closely enough that their value systems cannot be considered separate from one another." (Buzan and Wæver, 2003: 43, Buzan, 1983: 106). The key element that makes this area a region in the security sense, as stated by Buzan and Wæver in this definition of a region, is the inseparability of the security of individual regional entities; the security of individual states of the Western Balkans is undoubtedly connected and mutually determinant, as demonstrated by the wars waged in the area. When the Republic of Croatia became a member of the European Union in 2013, the term 'Western Balkans' was reduced to six countries, which the European Union has begun calling the *Western Balkans 6 (WB6)*. The European Union has continued to encourage regional cooperation through the WB6 concept, although the regional approach has since then been abandoned.

However, this gives rise to some questions: What are the outlooks of such cooperation? To which extent could the area become an integrated region? What are the influences within and outside the regional entities on closer integration, stability and security in the region? The work of Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, who developed regional security complex theory, may prove useful in answering these questions. The theory provided an empirical research framework of regional security with four interrelated levels of analysis: 1. Domestically in the states of a region; 2. State-to-state relations; 3. A region's interaction with neighboring regions; 4. The role of global powers in a region (Buzan et al., 1998: 201) and (Buzan and Wæver, 2003: 51)

DOMESTIC SITUATION IN INDIVIDUAL WESTERN BALKAN STATES

Numerous dissimilarities and disputes rooted in history, which determine their domestic and state-to-state relations and individual development, are

characteristic of the Western Balkan states. These countries have distinctive ethnic and religious differences at both regional and domestic levels.⁴

All these countries strive to join the European Union and are hence at their individual stages of the accession process.⁵ All these countries, with the exception of Serbia, either are or wish to become NATO members.⁶ However, there is some concern that the support to the EU membership has been weakened in the Western Balkans (House of the Lords, 2018: 20).

The Western Balkan countries are still in the process of developing democracy and sustainable market economies. Political systems that generate a lack of readiness for any serious structural reforms are also characteristic of the region, which has in turn led to almost a decade of stagnation in political, economic and general social development. This view has been corroborated with analyses by key international factors. An early 2018 document by the European Commission on the prospects of the Western Balkan states for accession to the European Union provides a comprehensive analysis of the situation and warns of numerous serious problems and weaknesses in these states:

1. Rule of Law: a) The countries exhibit clear elements of state crisis, including links to organized crime and corruption at all levels of government and administration; b) There is a strong entanglement of public and private interests; c) Political interference in and control of media are extensive; d) There are strong sentiments of impunity and inequality; e) There is a need for empowered and independent judiciary and accountable governments and administrations; f) It is necessary to reinforce the functioning of democratic institutions.
2. Economies: a) Economies are not competitive, with too high undue political interference and underdeveloped private sector; b) Low productivity, restricted access to financing, unclear ownership rights; c) At present, none can be considered functioning market economies; d) Low competitiveness and high unemployment, accompanied by

⁴ For more on ethnic and religious relations and conflicts in the Western Balkans see also: Tatalović, S., *Globalna sigurnost i etnički sukobi*. Politička kultura, Zagreb, 2019, pp. 129–153.

⁵ Albania has been a EU candidate since 2014, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo are potential candidates. Macedonia has been a candidate since 2005, Montenegro opened negotiations in 2012 and Serbia in 2014.

⁶ Albania and Montenegro are already NATO members; Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo also aspire to become members. In this, Macedonia is faced with the blockade by Greece over the dispute about its name. Bosnia and Herzegovina must resolve its internal disputes – Republika Srpska is against NATO membership; and the path of Kosovo into integrations is limited since some of the EU and NATO members have not recognized Kosovo as a state.

- deeply-rooted and widespread grey economy; e) Political interference in economy; f) Low employment opportunities for younger people;
3. Bilateral disputes between the region's countries that still need to be solved: Primarily by the normalization of relations between Belgrade and Priština;
 4. Political and societal consensus for accession to the European Union: The leaders cannot be ambiguous about where the Western Balkans belong or the direction in which they are heading.⁷

These assessments have been confirmed by analyses from US sources, which warn of problems such as: "Official corruption, trafficking in persons, the plight of the Roma, attacks on journalists and control of the media" as well as the problem of "missing persons and unpunished war crimes" (U.S. Congress, 2014: 2–3) and "the treatment of minority populations" (U.S. Congress, 2014: 6). A special warning is given that "Official corruption is a daily fact of life across the region and it is preventing democratic and economic reforms from taking firm root". (U.S. Congress, 2014: 5). "The region suffers from authoritarian leadership, weak democratic institutions and serious challenges from organized crime and corruption. This situation is exacerbated by uncertainty about EU accession, a brain drain of young and educated people, and a rise in extremism and anti-democratic nationalism." (House of the Lords, 2018: 3). In addition, Morelli adds that the relative "political stability in the Western Balkans (...) remains tenuous. Several of these countries have experienced governmental and political crises, sometimes involving third-party interference, stagnating economies, high unemployment, and an exodus of people from the region" (Morelli, 2018). Further, according to the British assessments, the instability in the region is driven by serious and deep-rooted governance challenges. These are the results of political elites with an interest in maintaining ethnic division and status quos (House of the Lords, 2018: 6). Morelli also warns that "the continuation of or sudden increase in these factors could provide a vacuum in which outside political meddling", including Russia's, "transnational crime, radicalization, or terrorism could flourish". (Morelli, 2018). Russian Foreign Minister Russia Lavrov replies that "any attempt to force the Balkan countries to choose sides" is very wrong "and that Russia intends to keep its interests and relations with Serbia and its neighbors".

⁷ More in: European Commission, *A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans*, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, Strasbourg, 2018, pp. 3-7.

These problems in the Western Balkan countries “result in low citizen engagement, weak inclusion particularly of youth, women and minorities, and growing discontent and mistrust in public institutions (...)” Hence, “EU enlargement now seems like a distant prospect” (House of the Lords, 2018: 6).

RELATIONS BETWEEN THE WESTERN BALKAN STATES

Relations between the Western Balkan states have been determined to a significant degree by historical events (especially recent ones characterized by armed conflicts) and unresolved issues resulting both from the conflicts and from the disintegration process of the former common state that preceded them (succession, border disputes and so on). This also has affected numerous emotional disputes brought about by these events – the relations between Serbia and Kosovo that have generated numerous unresolved issues, and problems stemming from the undefined and unsolved domestic relations in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Macedonia, to mention just a few of them. Political relations resulting from such a situation and the role of ruling elites enable the views of the elites to be manifested through state-to-state relations in the region and to impact regional stability directly. Cooperation is made more difficult by historical and geopolitical concepts and numerous unresolved bilateral issues in the region. Further, most countries are in poor economic state, and differ in the degree to which they have adopted democratic standards, which in turn affect their positions in terms of their EU integration. The Western Balkan countries agree to multilateral cooperation at their vertical political levels, but they hardly do on the horizontal ones. Under the pressure from outside actors, they agree to multilateral forms of cooperation which do not necessarily result in corresponding levels of bilateral cooperation. Finally, one should also bear in mind, as Deutsch states, that security community “actors cannot *imagine* a war among each other” (Deutsch et al., 1957: 5–9; quoted according to Buzan and Wæver, 2003: 57), which is not true for the Western Balkan countries. On the contrary, war-mongering messages and statements continue to threaten the fragile stability and security in the region.

THE INTERACTION OF THE WESTERN BALKANS WITH NEIGHBORING REGIONS

The Western Balkans is surrounded by a security region formed by EU and NATO members. That is the region with which the Western Balkan countries have the most intensive political, security, and economic interactions, but also a region which is by far superior to and dominant over the Western Balkans by all parameters of political, economic, and military power. In all likelihood, all the Western Balkan countries are bound to be integrated in this broader region in the (medium-term) future and the Western Balkans as such will cease to exist as a designation, at least bearing in mind the present platform which defines it. Interactions with the European Union and NATO are the key inter-regional relations of the Western Balkans. In addition to the European Union and NATO, the Western Balkans area has an important interaction, especially security-wise, with the Middle East and its surrounding area extending to Northern Africa and Central Asia with two basic components. One stems from the fact that a large number of individuals from the Western Balkan countries has joined terrorist organizations, especially ISIL on Syrian battlefields. A significant number of those individuals has returned to the Western Balkans bringing back with them the contacts they made in areas where they fought and terrorist organizations whose ranks they joined, and the threats they pose for the security of the states they have returned to, and therefore for the security of the entire region. The other component of the interaction with the Middle East, Northern Africa, and Central Asia are the migrants who transit the so-called Balkan route and who can pose a security threat to the Western Balkan countries. The Western Balkan countries undergoing processes specific to this area are passive objects unable to affect the source of the problem and are as such dependent on other security actors which they have cannot influence.

THE ROLES OF GLOBAL POWERS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

The role of outside actors in the security dynamics of the Western Balkans is indisputable and reaches back to the disintegration of former Yugoslavia. The outside actors have had a huge role in the region even when the dynamics seem to be totally internally driven. Even during the period without decisive external action when the initiative was with local actors, expect-

tations of the sides in the conflict about the responses of the global powers prevailed. (Buzan, Wæver, 2003: 383). Neither the UN as the central international security mechanism nor the European Union, regardless of its marked post-Cold War ambitions, have shown the capacity to solve the conflicts and unresolved issues in the Western Balkans. The United States, both on its own and as the leader of NATO activities in the region, has come to the forefront as the sole dominant and central entity capable of process managing in such circumstances. By the end of the first decade of the 21st century, after the initial consolidation of the region, the end of conflicts, and definition of Kosovo's new status, the U.S. lost much interest in the region and reduced their involvement accordingly. The withdrawal of this dominant actor coincided with the 2008 international financial crisis and marked the beginning of the region's stagnation. The withdrawal of the U.S. resulted in the strengthening of the roles of actors external to the region, primarily the European Union, but also Russia and Turkey. Russian and Turkish interests and strategies have mostly remained particular, whereas the European Union offers a comprehensive approach to and concept of cooperation with the end goal for the states of the region to join the EU and thus provides a general framework for regional processes. China's regional presence, non-confrontational and based on a primarily economic approach, has been expanding in recent years. As the report on the Western Balkans prepared for the House of Lords of the British Parliament cautions, the proliferation of external influences, was the reason why "the competing influence of third countries have slowed progress towards regional reconciliation and greater consonance with the rest of Europe" (House of the Lords, 2018: 3).

The European Union

The Western Balkan countries are geographically surrounded by the EU member states and hence inevitably oriented toward mutual cooperation. The European Commission's so-called strategy for the Western Balkans, outlining the credible enlargement perspective for the region, states that "firm, merit-based prospect of EU membership for the Western Balkans is in the Union's very own political, security and economic interest. It is a geostrategic investment in a stable, strong and united Europe based on common values." (European Commission, 2018: 1). To be sure, the accession is dependent on the fulfillment of criteria by each candidate state and will not happen before 2025 as indicated in the document and President Juncker's State of the Union address (European Commission, 2017).

The first initiative by the European Commission intended for the Western Balkans was the 1999 Stability Pact for South-Eastern Europe.⁸ In 2008, it was followed by another regional initiative called the Regional Cooperation Council.⁹ The purpose of the regional initiatives was to strengthen mutual cooperation and trust between the region's states to the degree where interaction would be strong enough to meet the criteria of a security community in its modern form. Namely, the adoption of new political cultures by states disunited by conflicts must mostly be driven by external drivers. Any removal of external drivers also typically means that the regional connectivity process will simultaneously slow down or even come to a complete stop.

The European Union has had limited success in its regional approach and that, along with the relative stabilization of the region, is probably the reason why the EU has almost completely deviated from the regional approach concept and focused on an individual approach to single states, which are membership candidates. To eliminate the delay in the EU integration process and the weaknesses analyzed in the 'Domestic Situation in Individual Western Balkan Countries' section, the European Commission states that, in order to meet the integration process criteria, those countries need to "(...) strengthen their democracies, comprehensive and convincing reforms are still required in crucial areas, notably on the rule of law, competitiveness, and regional cooperation and reconciliation" (European Commission, 2018: 3). "All the Western Balkan countries must now urgently redouble their efforts, address vital reforms and complete their political, economic and social transformation, bringing all stakeholders on board from across the political spectrum and from civil society." (European Commission, 2018: 2). A particular challenge is posed by the criterion that "In Serbia's case, the interim benchmarks related to the normalisation of relations with Kosovo (chapter 35) must be met and a comprehensive, legally-binding normalisation agreement concluded urgently." (European Commission, 2018: 8). Comprehensive reforms and the solution of inter-state issues are necessary not only for the EU membership integration process but also for the continued strengthening of the cooperation between the

⁸ The Stability Pact for South-Eastern Europe was promoted by the 1999 EU Köln Summit. The Stability Pact for South-Eastern Europe was the framework for the first treaties between the states established in former Yugoslavia, by which they undertook to continue developing democracy through bilateral and multilateral cooperation aimed at achieving lasting peace, development and stability in the region.

⁹ The Regional Cooperation Council was officially inaugurated at the foreign ministers' SEECF (South-Eastern Europe Cooperation Process) meeting in Sofia, February 27, 2008, as the replacement for the Stability Pact for South-Eastern Europe.

EU and the Western Balkans. In view of the characteristics of the security environment, especially the escalating threats of terrorism, organized crime, cyberspace threats, and security challenges encountered by Europe regarding illegal migrants, cooperation bringing about normative and institutional harmonization at all levels of activity is also a prerequisite for successful action. From this starting point, the security of the European Union and that of the Western Balkans are indivisible. When assessing the potential for enhanced cooperation of the Western Balkan countries as a requirement for the creation of a security community, the EU initiative for better regional economic connectivity (which states that “the Regional Economic Area is an essential step for furthering economic integration between the EU and the Western Balkans and boosting the attractiveness of the regional market”) is an important tool. (European Commission, 2018: 12).

NATO

The Western Balkans was the first to become the theater for NATO’s *out of area operations*, including nearly three months of operations in 1999 aimed against the then Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. NATO is an alliance which geographically surrounds the Western Balkans, an alliance whose members are all EU members that surround the Western Balkans, and an alliance which already includes two Western Balkan countries – Albania and Montenegro. NATO strives to enlarge further to include the remaining Western Balkan countries. The process is dependent on the resolution of issues such as the Greek–Macedonian dispute over Macedonia’s name. For Kosovo, the obstacle is that Kosovo’s independence has not been recognized by all NATO members. Serbia has declared its military neutrality¹⁰ and, “(...) at least for the time being, does not seek NATO membership...” (Jakešević et al., 2017: 583). In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the integration process is greatly affected by the disposition of Bosnian Serbs, together with numerous domestic weaknesses. Namely, Serb political representatives in this country feel solidarity with Serbia (...) and block the progress of Bosnia and Herzegovina toward NATO (Jakešević et al., 2017: 582). Finally, the process is affected by the activities of actors outside the region, especially Russia, which is actively opposed to the NATO membership of the Western Balkan countries.

¹⁰ The parliament of the Republic of Serbia, Resolution of the National Assembly on the protection of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and constitutional order of the Republic of Serbia, *Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia* 125/2007, Belgrade, 2007.

United States of America

The policy of the United States in the Western Balkans does not display continuity. The U.S. has controlled regional processes, occasionally becoming seriously involved when other actors were unable to resolve crises and impose sustainable solutions. The U.S. has been a dominant actor in regional relations, especially with regard to the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the war in Kosovo (including the imposition of the final solution for Kosovo), and conflicts in Macedonia. The U.S. actively supports democratic development and the Euro-Atlantic prospects of the Western Balkan countries and provides active assistance in removing obstacles they encounter on this path (e.g. the Greek–Macedonian dispute over Macedonia’s name or the encouragement for Montenegro to join NATO in 2017).

Hoyt Yee summarizes the U.S. approach and notes that “for more than two decades, the desire to support the aspirations of the Western Balkan states to integrate into Euro-Atlantic institutions has been the animating force behind U.S. engagement in the region. This has been a top policy objective (...) because it is the best means of ensuring long-term peace, stability and prosperity in a region that is a critical part of Europe.” (US Congress, 2014: 4). The U.S. is still concerned because the progress in two most multiethnic countries of the region – Bosnia and Herzegovina and Macedonia – has stalled. (US Congress, 2014: 2). The U.S. is especially worried about the growing Russian ambitions aimed at putting a stop to the EU and, particularly, NATO integration process in the region.

Russia

Russian relations with the Western Balkans are traditional, long-lasting, and built on religious (Orthodoxy) and ideological (communism, Putin’s conservatism) foundations reinforced with political, economic and security elements. During the disintegration of the SFRY and the transition process in the new states dominated by Western influences in the 1990s, the Russian influence in the Western Balkans was almost completely lost. The re-escalation of international diplomatic disputes over the future status of Kosovo opened the door for Russia to return into the region. Russia gave its support to Serbia in order to re-establish their ties and strengthen its own position in international relations. Soon after the negotiations on the future status of Kosovo began under the auspices of the UN, Russia signaled that it could no longer be counted on to yield as it had done in previous similar instances. (Reljić, 2009: 11). The power of veto in the UN Secu-

rity Council over the Kosovo issues enabled Russia to demonstrate that no UN-based legitimacy in international relations could be ensured without Russia. The declaration of independence by Kosovo and the recognition of the independence by a significant number of states is a failure of Russian efforts, but also the turning point in power relations of key non-regional actors. For the U.S., Kosovo's independence meant that the main security issues were resolved, which marked the beginning the U.S. disinvolvement in the region which, in turn, made room for Russia and other interested actors. Reljić defines three basic components of Russian activity involving the Western Balkans: 1. The power of veto which can be used to block UN-governed processes in the Western Balkans; 2. Historical, cultural, and political relations with South-Eastern European nations and states with Orthodox traditions; 3. The growing Russia's economic significance for the region's countries and particularly the dependence on the supply of Russian oil and gas¹¹ (Reljić, 2009: 6). This was the beginning of a decade of Russian efforts to increase its influence in the Western Balkans based on the Russian concept of foreign policy adopted in 2013, stating that "(...) The Balkan region is of great strategic importance to Russia (...)" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2013). A strategic partnership involving military, economic, and political cooperation developed between Russia and Serbia in this period.¹² Russian presence in a 'friendly' Serbia is also perceived by the West as helping to project Russian influence elsewhere in the Balkans (Morelli, 2018). This is especially true for the Russian influence on Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina (House of the Lords, 2018: 24). In Serbia's case, the question whether all those treaties and cooperation are compatible with Serbia's proclaimed ambition to join the EU has become topical. As Bieri cautions, "while Russian stronger economic engagement in the past ten years has always included a political component, it never seriously challenged the EU perspective for the Western Balkan states. This has changed since 2014, in the wake of the Ukraine crisis. With respect to the

¹¹ Russian state firms control oil and gas production and operate refineries as well as the distribution network in Serbia and Republika Srpska. Russia's dominant position in the energy sector is crucial for maintaining its influence in the Western Balkans. Serbia, Bosnia, and Macedonia depend significantly on Russian natural gas. (Bieri, 2015: 2)

¹² Free Trade Agreement between Serbia (then the FRY) and Russia was signed on August 28, 2000 with the aim to deepen and enhance their mutual trade and economic cooperation. Serbia is the only state in Europe that, apart from some member of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), has a signed a Free Trade Agreement with Russia. In 2013, Serbia became an observer in the military alliance of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Serbia did not join the sanctions imposed against Russia by the European Union for its illegal annexation of the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea.

Western Balkans, too, Russia now refers to external pressure for EU integration as a problem.” (Bieri, 2015: 1). Forestalling any further expansion of NATO to the Western Balkan countries is actually a continuation of Russian foreign policy.

Despite its proclaimed closeness and engagement, Russian relations with the Western Balkans, as assessed by Samorukov, have been hindered by the lack of economic cooperation, while Russian investments in and foreign trade with the region have been in steady decline and lag significantly behind that of EU members. He believes that Russia, primarily focused on the Pacific and Middle East regions, is not ready to engage any significant resources in the Western Balkans. However, it has been taking advantage of the potential of deep-seated local issues to create problems for the West through the region and to sustain its own image as a veritable world power. Russia has opted for a low-budget, opportunistic approach in the region, shifting most of the burden to local actors (Samorukov, 2017). Many have seen this influence as a threat. Wiśniewski thought that Russians considered the Western Balkans as Europe’s “soft underbelly. This is where Russia seeks the opportunities to exploit differences by playing the anti-Western card.” (House of the Lords, 2018: 23). Russia employs the same approach in the broader competition with the West for influence at a global level. Although the real Russian influence is difficult to assess, “Russia did not provide the region with an alternative prospect for achieving stability and prosperity compared to EU and NATO membership.” (House of the Lords, 2018: 23).

Turkey

The end of the Cold War triggered significant changes in the Western Balkans. Historical experience and Turkey’s relations with the area, which has been undergoing state transformation and transition, the region’s Muslim population for which Turkey has kept a special sensibility, and the war accompanying the disintegration of the SFRY (...) made room for Turkey’s strong diplomatic, political, economic, and security return to South-Eastern Europe. (Malnar, 2016: 127–128). Turkey’s active role in the region’s post-conflict consolidation has been accompanied with clear dedication to strengthen its influence in the Western Balkans. Turkey has been increasingly using its significant soft potential to enhance its political, economic and cultural influence in the Balkans. (Dursun-Ozkanca, 2013: 1). Networks of Turkish religious and cultural institutions have found a fertile ground in many parts of the Western Balkans. Schools and universities have sprouted

up reviving demographic and cultural linkages. (Vračić, 2016: 6). Its activities are focused on Muslim communities and Bosnia and Herzegovina, where Turkey offers special support to the strengthening of the Bosniak influence. Along with traditionally good relations with the Muslim population in the Western Balkans, Turkey has recently encouraged multilateral economic and political cooperation through trilateral mechanisms of conferences – with Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia. As Vračić states, the greatest strategic shift in Turkey's policy in the Balkans is evident in its relations with Serbia. The ups and downs in this relationship throughout their long history have evolved from open animosity to strategic partnership. (Vračić, 2016: 27). Turkey has tried to use the traditional cultural links and strengthened economic influence in the region to increase its political influence. Nevertheless, Turkey is seen as a biased third party, favoring the Muslim populations in the Balkans (Dursun-Ozkanca, 2013: 10). Even among Muslims in the Balkans, Kosovo, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Macedonia, there is no unified approach toward Turkey, or to its policies and open interference in the region (Vračić, 2016: 31). Turkish activities and goals in the Western Balkan region raise the issue of the reach of Turkish policy and of its goal-achieving capacity, as well as the issue of the compatibility of Turkish policy with those of other non-regional actors, especially the European Union. Taking into consideration the general situation in the area and the region's prospects for EU integration, there is no doubt that Turkey's influence will continue and become stronger. This conclusion is corroborated by the differences in priorities, ambitions, and potentials of the interested non-regional actors. Although its members sometimes have divergent views, the European Union's interests primarily lie in the security aspects generated by the Western Balkans integration process. On the other hand, Turkey's priority is to strengthen its own political influence, and the influence of Muslim communities, in the region. At the same time, Turkish foreign policy has undergone significant changes in recent years, with its relations with the U.S. becoming increasingly complicated¹³, and its relations with Russia becoming increasingly dynamic. The resulting paradigm is their cooperation in the fields of energy and defense (as exemplified by the purchase of Russian advanced air defense systems). These vectors may also reflect on Turkey's geopolitical role in the region, which is vague and gives rise to the issue "whether ... Turkey will definitely support the integration of the Western Balkans into the EU." (House of the Lords, 2018: 20).

¹³ See the statement by the Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan, The Associated Press, Turkey's president slams NATO for lack of support in Syria, March 10, 2018.

CHINA – THE IMPACT OF THE 16+1 INITIATIVE ON THE STABILITY AND SECURITY IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

China's influence has been felt in the Western Balkans for the past thirty years and has had an economic dimension rather than a political one. This influence has been increasing since China presented its 16+1 Initiative and began more intensive investment into the countries of Eastern and South-Eastern Europe. As some analyses argue: "The future of Chinese presence in the Balkans will depend on several factors: primarily on Chinese domestic economic circumstance, and on the dynamics of economic circumstances in the Balkans. In the political sense as well, those relations are in function of the relations between China and the European Union. Balkan countries need foreign investments, essential for the maintenance of their financial stability. In this context, unlike Western investors, China is more ready to risk its funds, which not only solidifies its position in the Balkans but also leaves a business card for the rest of Europe."¹⁴ Consequently, by achieving its economic interests, China will gain stronger political influence in the Western Balkans, especially in the countries of transit of important communication routes.

While other outside actors who express their interest in the Western Balkans primarily take individual approach to single states, China has developed a different approach. China's activity aimed at all the region's countries is based on the same principles pertaining to a broader approach to Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, articulated in the initiative launched by China in Central and Eastern European countries (CEEC), which includes sixteen countries in Central and South-Eastern Europe¹⁵ – informally called *16+1 Initiative* – and includes all the Western Balkan countries except for Kosovo (China has not recognized Kosovo). This is a typical Chinese approach to foreign policy, especially to the regions where it has an economic interest. China has always pursued a strategy of building political support among a large number of relatively small developing countries. The area of the Western Balkans is no exception (...) (Tonchev, 2017: 2). In the context of the so-called New Silk Road, the Initiative can be considered as an organ-

¹⁴ Novi put svile vodi preko Balkana – Kina i zemlje jugoistočne Evrope, FES, Sarajevo, 2014., p. 12. http://www.fes.ba/files/fes/img/Bilder_Aktivitaeten/Kina%20i%20zemlje.pdf (accessed on April 09, 2017.)

¹⁵ Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Montenegro, Czech Republic, Estonia, Croatia, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Serbia are also included.

ized multilateral form of Chinese cooperation with particular states which is closest to the Western practices. (Tatalović, 2016: 146). The launching of the initiative in 2012 marked the beginning of a significant increase in China's presence in the Western Balkans. The primary goals of the Chinese policy toward the Western Balkans within the 16+1 Initiative involve economy and connectivity of economies, infrastructure and people. Employing this approach, China has become the most significant economic actor in South-Eastern Europe in the last several years. The significance of the initiative and of China's policy is not only economic and political but extends to security as well. Better economic and political cooperation among the Western Balkan countries has a positive effect on regional security. For China, the security of the Western Balkans resides in its economic development and better transport connectivity, rather than in armament and maintenance of balance of military power between the region's countries, as other outside actors would prefer.

Five summits of prime ministers of the participant countries have been held and a 10-billion fund has been set up for financing projects within the 16+1 Initiative. It is expected that in a few years, China-funded transport infrastructure will crisscross the South-Eastern Europe, connecting ports, capitals and vital economic hubs (Tonchev, 2017: 2). This could increase the rate of economic growth and employment in the Western Balkan countries, which will contribute to the region's political stabilization and security situation. However, this brings up the question whether the Western Balkan countries wish to receive and use Chinese investments and whether they are capable of receiving and using them. If the countries fully use the Initiative's potential and the positive influences of other external actors, primarily the European Union, there is no doubt that the Western Balkans will take a huge step toward a state of existence that could be seen as a security community. The 16+1 Initiative undoubtedly demonstrates how other initiatives able to stimulate economic development, political stability and regional security may be sustained along with the dominant EU integration process. The prevailing opinion is that the Western Balkan countries must remain dedicated to the EU goals and accession. This would alleviate the concerns expressed by the European Union as to the expansion of Chinese influence in this part of Europe. With the necessary level of transparency, the stimulus to economic development of the Western Balkans resulting from the 16+1 Initiative may prove to be complementary to the EU efforts for economic development and the acceleration of integrative processes in the region. Unlike Russia, China does not oppose EU or NATO enlargement (House of the Lords, 2018: 26). The 16+1 Initiative could be important not only for the Western Balkan countries and China, but for the European Un-

ion as well. This initiative could enhance the capacities and willingness of the Western Balkan states to join the European Union, which significantly improves the prospects that security will be established in the Western Balkans.

CONCLUSION

Domestic factors, such as the situation in individual states and their bilateral relations, are of equal importance for regional cooperation and security as the external ones, such as their interactions with other regions and the influence of international organizations and global powers. Divergent interests of both regional and non-regional actors in the Western Balkans, and weaknesses of the region's states and their institutional systems, make the region's coherence and prospects very weak. The conflict potential of unresolved issues and internal weaknesses is additionally increased by destabilizing influences of non-regional actors. This is especially true for external actors who do not have a uniformed approach to all the region's countries. With its soft power approach, China creates space for intra-regional connectivity. However, Chinese policy is specific, especially with regard to Kosovo. China has specific reasons for not recognizing Kosovo and not including it in its Chinese initiative. Due to the significance of unresolved relations between Serbia and Kosovo for regional stability and security, the potential of that connectivity for building a security community in the Western Balkans is greatly reduced. Chinese policy toward the Western Balkans and the 16+1 Initiative could contribute to better connectivity and understanding among the region's countries and be complementary to most other initiatives and policies of non-regional actors. Therefore, stability and security in the Western Balkans are achievable through synergetic actions of all external actors, while the 16+1 Initiative is very significant due to its long-term effects on building the capacity for cooperation among the region's countries. The Western Balkans is still on a "quest for security" in which every outside, positive influence is important. However, EU membership, and belonging to the EU security zone, seems to be the best solution, no matter how far in the future and objectively uncertain they may be. Meanwhile, the Western Balkans will remain the theater not only for meetings and cooperation but for conflicts of different regional and global interests as well.

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