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SECURITY IN THE WESTERN BALKANS – CURRENT STATE AND PROSPECTS

Abstract: This paper examines the security in the Western Balkans in the context of current social happenings. In this regard, the dominant problems in the region itself were identified as external influences, and their implications for the security in the region analyzed. The theoretical framework for the analysis is the Regional Security Complex Theory developed by the Copenhagen School of Security Studies. The Western Balkans is geopolitically a very important region, and current problems pose a great challenge to the Western Balkan countries, the European Union and other key actors with geopolitical interests in this region. First, this paper gives a brief overview of the geopolitics of the Western Balkans, then it analyzes the current security dynamics and outlines the prospect of the Western Balkans regional security subcomplex. Due to different interests, particularly those of the Western Balkan countries and other geopolitical actors who have or aspire to have greater influence in this region, the prospects for the Western Balkans look very uncertain. The complex relations in the region, guided by different external influences and different interests of the Western Balkan countries, are much closer to the security regime, including the possibility of an eruption of conflicts or becoming a conflict formation.

Keywords: Western Balkans, regional security subcomplex, security dynamics, region, conflict

INTRODUCTION

The Western Balkan countries share a certain historical heritage. They were socialist countries and, at the same time, the republics of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), except Albania. In the 1990s, after the dissolution of the SFRY, this region was marked by civil wars (Croatia

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1991-1995, Bosnia and Herzegovina 1992-1995, the Kosovo war and NATO military intervention in the FR Yugoslavia in 1999, the conflict in Macedonia in 2001). Generally, the region nowadays called the Western Balkans was marked by political instability and numerous economic and social problems, and the relations in the region still remain complex as well as the dynamics of security. Contemporary developments range from the uncertainty surrounding the European integration process to different approaches to NATO membership, and relations with the Russian Federation. The issue of Kosovo and Metohija in Serbia, internal political instability and ethnic tensions (B&H), the return of warriors from Syria and radicalization, along with the ongoing migrant crisis – are just some of the major security challenges and threats in the Western Balkans.

The issues of regions in international relations and security studies have only recently attracted the attention of scholars. Theoretical considerations date back from the Cold War period (Russett, 1967; Thompson, 1973; Feld and Boyd, 1980; Buzan, 1983; Väyrynen, 1984) and especially in the post-Cold War period (Buzan, Wæver & De Wilde, 1998; Neumann, 1999; Buzan & Wæver, 2003). It is also important to mention current studies on security dynamics in the Western Balkans region within the Regional Security Complex Theory (Lipovac, 2016; Ejdus, 2019). The theoretical framework for our analysis is the Regional Security Complex Theory developed by the Copenhagen School of Security Studies. Barry Buzan defined security complex as a set of states whose major security concerns are so interlinked that their national security problems cannot reasonably be resolved or analyzed apart from one another (Buzan, 1983, p. 10). Barry Buzan and Ole Weaver updated the definition of a security complex as 'a set of units whose major processes of securitization and desecuritization are so interlinked that their security problems cannot reasonably be analyzed apart from one another' (Buzan & Wæver, 2003, p. 201). The updated regional security complex theory starts with a constructivist approach based on securitization theory, moving away from the traditional state-centric approach (Ejdus, 2012, p. 117). Security dynamics within the Regional Security Complex Theory are determined by patterns of friendship and hostility. In this sense, we distinguish between a conflict formation, where the relationships in the region are identified as rivalry and hostility, with a real fear of an outbreak of war between states. The security regime is also complex where there is still a possibility of the eruption of war, but the relations between the states are governed by mutual rules which diminish the security dilemma because it is expected that the agreements between the states will be honored. At the end of the spectrum lies a security

community (Deutsch et al., 1957), that is, non-war communities which, during their development, go through the stages of emergence, growth, and maturity (Adler and Barnett, 1998, pp. 50-57). The basic condition for establishing a regional security complex or subcomplex is the existence of regional security dynamics between the states/units that are physically close together (Lipovac, 2016, pp. 116), which is evident regarding the Western Balkan countries.

The aim of this paper is to review the current security dynamics in the Western Balkans regional security subcomplex. In this regard, dominant problems within the region were identified, external influences and their implications for the security in the Western Balkans were analyzed.

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE GEOPOLITICAL SITUATION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

To geographers, the terms Balkans and the Balkan Peninsula signify the belt beginning east of the Aegean, south of the Mediterranean, and west to the Ionian and Adriatic Seas. The Trieste-Odessa border lies to the north. The Balkans comprises several countries – Bulgaria, Albania, Greece, Romania and Turkey – including the countries created following the dissolution of the SFRY, except Slovenia which only partially belongs to the Balkans. Ten nations, many ethnic groups, three major religions (Orthodoxy, Catholicism, and Islam) – that is the Balkans. For a long time, this conglomerate of nations and diversity was perfectly suited to weighing the forces of the global and regional powers in the Balkans, while extending their interests. Figuratively, Balkanization is a broader term than the Balkans and signifies a region of permanent destabilization, permanent conflicts, and tensions between different ethnic groups (Simić, 2013).

The mosaic of ethnic and cultural diversity in the Balkans leaves room for American geopolitics strategists (Huntington, 1996; Brzezinski, 1997) to develop different theories. In the doctrines, the Balkans is defined as an example of ethnic conflict and rivalry – the term 'Balkans' means the central zone of global instability. Brzezinski (1997) uses 'Balkans' as a geopolitical metaphor in his subversive and destructive theory of the Eurasian Balkans. According to this author, the Eurasian Balkans includes parts of Southeast Europe, central and southern Asia, and the Persian Gulf and the Middle East. Brzezinski sees strategic interest in the Eurasian Balkans, that is, the US imperative, and advises that all that had happened in the Balkans should be applied by the US to the Eurasian Balkans as well – by creating ethnic,

religious, and political tensions to create chaos, that is, a condition well suited to American domination with the ultimate goal of overmastering rich natural resources.

The term Western Balkans' (*In Serb.* Zapadni Balkan) is a recent coinage that identifies the Balkan countries that have not yet joined the European Union (EU). The term was coined in 2003 at the EU Summit in Thessaloniki when the Thessaloniki Agenda was adopted to confirm the European prospect of the Western Balkan countries. These are the countries created after the dissolution of the SFRY – Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Macedonia, with Albania added. Since this is a political rather than a geographical term, certain linguistic correctness is also understood, and the phrase 'Zapadni Balkan' (Western Balkans) is spelled with the capital letter 'Z'. It is a recent term that completely suppressed the commonly used term 'Southeast Europe' from political and security discourse, which encompassed a wider geographical area. Thus, the central Balkans (we believe this is a more specific definition, especially in the geographical terms) 'withdrew' from Europe. Although opening a chapter in the EU accession negotiations is still regarded as a political success and mastering new 'steps' on the path toward full membership in the EU, this is no longer what political leaders emphasize as a result of their politics. Thus, since the Berlin Process, the term Western Balkans has been used to denote the territory which is ahead of the EU for the placement of goods exempted from duties and obligations, at the same time being a zone where the assurances of progress and success on the path to Euro-Atlantic integration are used to suppress Chinese and Russian influence (Ćeranić, 2018, pp. 189-195).

The EU's relationship with the Western Balkan countries is evident in every political discourse concerning the Berlin Process. The interlinking of countries that have gone through a difficult historical period marked by the conflicts between the peoples who share similar cultural and language backgrounds should result in the creation of a collective which, in the economic, political and security sense, will rely on the EU – this is the essence of the Berlin Process, the project 'patented' by German Chancellor, Angela Merkel. The Berlin Process is an initiative to strengthen economic cooperation between the Western Balkan countries and the European Union (Berlin Process, 2014).

The first Western Balkans conference was held in Berlin on 28 August 2014, the second conference was held in Vienna in 2015, the third in 2016 in Paris, followed by the conferences in Trieste (Italy, 2017), London (2018), and Poznan (Poland, 2019) (Berlin Process, 2014). Many things suggested

that it was left to Germany to regulate the political configuration in the Balkans internationally and that since the unification of Germany, the Balkans became the interest of a country whose state borders had become tight for its growing economic power. Based on the analysis of the Berlin process as a project, it may be concluded that this is the beginning of the creation of the 'B League' of the European Union (Ćeranić, 2018, pp. 19-25). The Chancellor of Germany has repeatedly emphasized that the countries of the Western Balkans need to connect economically and politically with one another and cooperate with the EU as a collective. American strategists, primarily Brzezinski, intended to leave the Western Balkans to Turkey, and in Ankara, it was supposed to be interpreted as compensation for not being accessioned to the EU.

In 2016, the relations radically changed. The coup aimed at ousting Erdogan from power (and executing him) failed. The president of Turkey accused his opponent Fethullah Gulen of organizing a coup, and in this context, he did not spare American 'deep state'.[3] Erdogan made a complete turnaround in foreign policy and began relying on Russia, at the same time moving away from the United States in the political sense. Things culminated in the acquisition of the Russian missile system S-400. Consequently, Turkey lost its intended gift in the form of the Western Balkans. The possibility of extending Turkey to the territory of the former Ottoman Empire economically and politically was accepted well in Ankara (Tanasković, 2015). As the Turkish-American relations changed, the US policy toward the Western Balkans (closely and consistently followed by Berlin) changed to – the Western Balkans must not be under Russian or Turkish influence.

In considering the relations in this region, one should not neglect the fact that the Western Balkan countries have very complex historical legacies. They are socialist republics of the former SFRY (except Albania). In the 1990s, following the dissolution of the joint state, this region was marked by civil wars (the 1991-1995 war in Croatia, the 1992-1995 war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the war in Kosovo and Metohija and NATO's military intervention in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1999, the 2001 conflict in Macedonia). The causes of the dissolution of the joint state (which was marked by the conflicts between the contending ethnic groups) can be traced back to the geopolitical position of Yugoslavia. The country was known as

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[3] 'deep state' or 'a state within a state' is a form of covert power, a clandestine government that operates completely independently of the legitimate political leadership of the state.

the 'buffer zone' between East and West, that is, as 'no man's land' between two contending political and military blocs during the Cold War era. Although it was a socialist and one-party state, Yugoslavia was open to the West, the socialism it practiced was viewed differently in the West from the one behind the Iron Curtain. This could have been due to the absence of Russian military bases and troops, which was a long-term consequence of the cooling of relations with the USSR during the Informbiro period. After the dissolution of the USSR, the termination of the Warsaw Pact, or the Soviet defeat in the Cold War, the 'buffer zone' between the blocs that no longer existed lost its meaning. Thus, the demolition of the Berlin Wall, as a symbol of the block division, was the beginning of the dissolution of Yugoslavia. However, few Yugoslav political leaders wanted to read the geopolitical messages. Therefore, negotiations between republican leaders after the first post-war multiparty elections ended with failure. The flames of war spread from the west to the east of the country, from Slovenia to Kosovo.

Current security dynamics in the Western Balkans regional subcomplex

In general, the region nowadays called the Western Balkans is marked by political instability and economic and social difficulties in the transition process. After a decade of wars, the region is entering a phase in which military confrontations should no longer be a means of resolving disputes. However, the region is still far from the states whose practices, attitudes and the sense of shared identity have been developed to such an extent that the issues of common interest and misunderstandings can only be resolved peacefully. Relations in the region remain a complex issue, as well as security issues, which are very dynamic and complex.

The Balkans has not lost its importance in the geopolitical positioning of global and regional powers. The return of Russia to the Balkans is also evident in terms of strengthening its political and economic (primarily in the energy sector) influence. In order to have and maintain a long-term presence in the Western Balkans, it was particularly important for Russia to be present and expand its influence in the countries that were not accessioned to the NATO Pact. To this end, Russia had begun to use soft power, which had long been used as a tool by its opponents, primarily the United States. It was mainly manifested through the creation of a network of non-governmental organizations operating on the basis of funds from foreign governments and foundations, through founding new media and

buying media influence and investing money in the selected political leaders and political options. In the Western Balkans, Russia needed far less effort than the Western countries for this form of power, because of its sincere and deep ties with the Serbian people in particular.

Russia does not hide its resentment toward the NATO aspirations to expand to Russia's borders, and Russia's opposition to the NATO ambitions (more properly American) has become a pillar of Russian security policy, both in the Middle East and the Western Balkans. Of course, Russia uses the position of a permanent member of the UN Security Council to protect Serbian interests, that is, to preserve the political capacities of Serbia and the Republic of Srpska. Although in the context of Russian influence in Serbia (and in the Western Balkans in general), the Serbian-Russian Humanitarian Center in Niš is often referred to as a military intelligence center, Russian influence is of a different nature. Energy security is by far the most significant security sector through which Russian power is manifested in the Balkans. The announced construction of the South Stream and then the Turkish Stream (which is being implemented) will enable the energy stability in the Balkan countries, but also in the European Union, the largest buyer of Russian energy. Russian resistance to the NATO expansion regarding the Western Balkans has remained in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (solely because of the Republic of Srpska's opposition). Macedonia has not yet formally joined the NATO either, although after the parliamentary decision, the integration process into NATO is progressing smoothly. Due to different viewpoints regarding the NATO membership and the relations with the Russian Federation, the relations in the region still remain a complex issue as well as security dynamics.

The Kosovo and Metohija issue in Serbia, internal political instability and ethnic tensions (B&H), the problem of fighters returning from Syria, radicalization and the current migrant crisis – are just some of the major security challenges and threats in the Western Balkans. Specifically, after the latest information that the Islamic State warriors are returning to the Balkans (the last warning concerning all possible security implications was given by French President Macron), we have the impression that a new 'Balkanization' of the Balkans is being prepared. In addition to ex-combatants arriving in Bosnia and Herzegovina by 'regular line', such as the recently deported group, there are also groups that first arrive in Albania without media pomp, from where they move to Kosovo and further to the Balkan states. Note the 'piling' of migrants in B&H where the exact number of newcomers or their security structure is completely

unknown. TV appearances made by French President Macron who emphasized the real problems in the Western Balkans – the return of warriors from Syria, which, as pointed out by the President of France, made Bosnia and Herzegovina a hell machine – indicate that Macron had seen through the United States' intentions concerning the EU, and since the Chancellor of Germany had no courage to respond more sharply, he did it. One may justifiably ask whether migrations are artificial or a form of unconventional weapons? After all, the 'Forced Migration' projector 'Forced Migration Plan' testifies to this. The author is Kelly M. Greenhill, Assistant to Senator John Kerry and a Pentagon consultant. She even published a book entitled *Weapons of Mass Migration* (Greenhill, 2010). It should also be noted that the American 'deep state' strategists such as Brzezinski estimated that the 'Balkanization' of Northern Africa and Central Asia would be an ideal means of preventing the Russia-China-Iran alliance. If this alliance were fully implemented, the influence of Washington in Euro-Asia would be permanently thwarted (Ćeranić, 2020).

A large number of migrants have been set out from the Middle East, including the countries unaffected by the war, such as Pakistan. The 'Balkan route' is very attractive to migrants, as it is the shortest land route to the EU. Affected by large migrant waves, Germany and other developed European countries could not cope with it, so they even welcomed the migrants. Mass migration (which initially posed a problem in Germany only, but soon it became a huge problem for the entire EU) just like Brexit, the UK's withdrawal from the EU (which became quite certain after Boris Johnson's Conservative had won) is the process that can essentially change the functioning of the EU, even its survival in the current form. Much of this indicates the EU is affected by the strengthening of the US-British ties, which is also reflected in the Western Balkans. Specifically, the EU's influence is permanently weakening. For example, regarding the issue of Kosovo and Metohija, the importance of the EU has become quite peripheral. As far as the US is concerned, the role of the EU should be to guard Maidan, that is, to prevent Russian influence in Ukraine and the Baltics.

Britain has deep security and economic interests in both the Middle East and the Balkans. In the security sense, the priority in the Middle East region is the fight against Iranian interests, and in the sense of economic free trade agreements. The British government intends to increase investments in the Balkans, with energy and mining being the biggest interest. The traditional British antagonism toward Russia is also evident in this region. The British

directly, more often in disguise, seek to eliminate 'Russia's malign influence'[4] from the Western Balkans. In this context, their diplomats are pressuring political leaders in Serbia and B&H, the government has been funding NGOs and the media investigating Russian influence, and so on. Thus, in February 2018, Serbia's President Aleksandar Vučić received an official visit from Alex Younger (Zašto su Britanci nezadovoljni srpskim tajnim službama? 2018), the Head of the UK's Secret Intelligence Service[5] (of course, the details of the talks have not been disclosed). The UK's Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) has had a strong presence in the Balkans, primarily in B&H, Serbia, Macedonia, and Montenegro. Owing to Brexit, the SIS can take actions in the Balkans on its own (Ćeranić, 2019, pp. 38-43). The British would often send a military contingent, usually the size of a battalion, to B&H to formally secure democratic processes. This battalion within the EUFOR mission participates in a drill called 'Rapid Response' every year. The Conference on the Western Balkans, the fifth within the Berlin Process, was held in London on 10 July 2018.

Turkey acts in the Western Balkans with its new ally – Russia. The Russian-Turkish relations, especially in the economic sphere, have been on an upward trajectory for years. Turkey's trade volume with Russia is incomparably higher than Turkey's trade with the US. The agreements on free trade, free traffic, free movement of goods, services and investments were signed between Russia and Turkey (Ćeranić, 2019, pp. 119-123). Concerning the Western Balkans, Turkey is most interested in Serbia, where it makes large investments. Turkish interest is, of course, focused on Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Turkish consulate in Banja Luka, that is, the Republic of Srpska, is being prepared for opening. Turkey's role in the energy sector is significant. In other words, when Bulgaria abandoned building the South Stream, the gas pipeline which was to provide additional gas to both the Balkan and EU countries, Russia managed to ensure a new route for its gas pipeline in consultation with Turkey. The Turkish Stream pipeline, which was formally launched on 8 January 2020, will carry gas from the Anapa station in Russia to the town of Kiyikoyin Turkey.

Of all Islamic countries, Saudi Arabia has the strongest influence in B&H; it is present in B&H in a radical way, through the 'export' of ideology, the well-known Wahhabi movement, that is, the interpretation of Islam which

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[4] It was coined by Brian Hoyt Yee, one of the US officials who were in charge of the Balkans.

[5] The Secret Intelligence Service, commonly know as MI6, is the official name of the British foreign intelligence service.

has encountered violent responses across the region. The most striking feature of the Wahhabi movement is the total denial of the development of Islamic intellectual thought in the course of fourteen centuries. The interpretation of the seventh-century Islam, the one nurtured by 'first-generation Muslim scholars' is the only one that is relevant to the supporters of this religious and political direction, which is progressively developing in a number of countries. Its supporters show intolerance, even aggression toward opponents (Ćeranić, 2018, pp. 285-291).

The Wahhabi community has strengthened to the extent that it has created an organization parallel to the Islamic Community in B&H. The Islamic community publicly responded and demanded that the state provide protection, as Reis Hussein Kavazović pointed out in 2016, after identifying 60 Jamaats or religious communities under the Wahhabi influence in the country. Jamaats are also referred to in security discourse as 'Sharia enclaves' because the B&H laws do not recognize but only practice Sharia law. This 'Islamic State' infrastructure, which also refers to the network of enclaves inhabited and operated under special rules, poses a major threat in the security sense while expecting warriors to return from the Syrian battlefield. At the same time, all terrorist attacks in B&H (the attacks on police stations in Bugojno and Zvornik, the attacks on the US Embassy and members of the B&H Armed Forces in Rajlovac) were committed by the followers of this ideology. Security discourses often refer to this thought: 'Not every Wahhabi is a terrorist, but every terrorist is a Wahhabi' (Sekkaf et al., 2005). Wahhabism as a religious-ideological and political movement in BiH is more present than it is publicly acknowledged. In addition to the factions that ideologically rely on al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, a faction ideologically linked to the International Union of Islamic Scholars and the Muslim Brotherhood can also pose a significant security problem. The intensification of the relations between the Wahhabi movement and the Shia[6] in B&H should be considered in the context of relations and their conflicts at the global level. The most important missionaries of Shi'ism in B&H are the institutions established and supported by the Islamic Republic of Iran (Institut Ibn Sina, Fondacija MullaSadra, Persijsko-bosanski koledž).

In considering the influence of great and regional powers on the Western Balkans, the presence of China in both the economic and security sectors must in no case be forgotten. China seeks to implement the Belt and Road

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[6] A religious group that is most represented in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Initiative, informally called the New Silk Road. It is an investment in infrastructure, a project worth thousands of billions of dollars, which would primarily transport Chinese goods from Chinese ports in the Pacific to European countries via a network of high-speed railway lines. The transport would not take longer than three days. To this end, China has rented the Port of Piraeus in Greece.

Geopolitically, the Western Balkans is a very important area and the current problems pose a major challenge for the European Union and other key actors with geopolitical interests in the region. Due to different interests, especially those of the Western Balkan countries and other geopolitical actors who have or aspire to have greater influence in this area, the prospects for the Western Balkans look very uncertain.

Prospect of the Western Balkans Regional Security Subcomplex

The interest of global and regional powers in the Western Balkans is very pronounced and often conflicting. On the one hand, the United States, supported by the United Kingdom and often by the EU, seeks to fully incorporate the region into NATO. Albania and Montenegro have become formal members, and there is a strong possibility that North Macedonia will become a member too. Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina are not members of the Alliance, and the Republic of Srpska in B&H is the one which opposes NATO integration. Russia, on the other hand, understandably seeks to prevent NATO from expanding beyond its borders, being aware that by fully integrating the Western Balkans into NATO, it would have a compact NATO territory against itself. And in the case of new proxy wars supported by NATO, NATO would have a logistically simple situation (the supply of military equipment to forces with which Russian military and police forces would clash would be simplified). Both Brussels and Moscow are aware that the military potential of the Western Balkans means nothing to NATO or Russia. It is the first 'line of conflict' between Russia and the United States in the Western Balkans. The second line of conflict concerns the economy. Russia has become an indispensable factor in energy security in the Western Balkans through the purchase of Serbia's oil potential and more fuel distribution companies. The construction of pipelines that would transport Russian gas via the Balkan pipeline network within the Turkish Stream to the Balkan countries and farther to the EU would eventually make the Western Balkans, including the EU, completely energy-dependent on Russia, which the United States and the United Kingdom seek to prevent.

To counteract Russia's influence, the governments that have signed energy supply contracts with Russia have become targets for psychological operations and colored revolutions carried out with the help of the non-governmental sector funded by American foundations and several Western governments. Also, the media and media influence are bought for the same purpose, while an investment is made in the selected political options and political leaders in order to replace, from the American point of view, non-cooperative governments. The same is true for the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative. The United States quite openly seeks to thwart Chinese trade routes (including Russian pipelines) running from Greece via Macedonia and Serbia to Hungary, that is, the EU. At the same time, there is an ongoing campaign against Russian influence in the region, which is largely exaggerated. One has the impression that the Western Balkans has become a training ground for various operations, with the sole aim to create chaos. The Berlin Process – six conferences have already been held – refers to the Western Balkan countries' economic interconnection and collective cooperation with the EU, leaving these countries outside the EU. The above issues make the prospect of the Western Balkans regional security subcomplex, in the security sense, look very uncertain. In the political and security terms, the Western Balkans, excluded from European integration, remains a 'shaky' region.

CONCLUSION

Although the Western Balkans is no longer a priority within the foreign policy of Western countries as was the case in the 1990s, the region is still important for the geopolitical positioning of great and regional powers. External influences of countries with different interests in the Western Balkans are of great importance in the creation of regional security dynamics. After a decade of confrontation during the 1990s, all Western Balkan countries were formally committed to European prospects, which would provide a common political and security framework for all countries in the region. However, there is no consensus in the EU regarding enlargement, and the Western Balkan countries are overwhelmed with a number of internal problems and unresolved issues. Such discourse makes this complex situation even more complex and creates conditions for new instabilities and the use of the countries in the region as a testing ground for wider geopolitical games. In the context of regional security complex theory (Buzan, 1983; Buzan & Wæver, 2003), the Western Balkan countries, considering the security dynamics in the region, are still far from creating a

security community although they are all committed to European integration. The complex relations in the region, guided by different external influences and different interests of states, are far closer to the security regime, including the possibility of the eruption of conflict or becoming a conflict formation.

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