

How is Security Transforming in Southeastern Europe?

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Abstract: Countries generally recognised as forming the core of Southeastern Europe include Albania, Bulgaria, Romania, and the former Yugoslav states. Some interpretations also include Moldova, Greece, and the European part of Turkey. During the Cold War period, it could be recognised as a sub-region due to its role as a kind of strategic balancer in the inter-bloc structure of international relations in Europe: Albania (until 1961), Romania, and Bulgaria were parties to the Warsaw Pact; the SFRY was among the leaders of the Non-Alignment movement; Greece and Turkey were members of NATO. From the point of view of military and political security, they formed a European “testing ground” on which various plots of inter-bloc confrontation were clearly traced and managed. Even though the region lost this role with the collapse of the bipolar IR system, its military and political significance and geopolitical orientation have been growing in importance over the past decade for both the West and Russia. This was reflected in the fact that the EU and NATO offered and consistently implemented European and Euro-Atlantic perspectives for all Southeastern European states, launching projects in order to increase infrastructural connectivity both in the sub-region and between pan-European corridors. Also, they gained more influence in the wider Eastern Mediterranean by training and recruiting loyal political and military elites, inter alia, at the level of integration groups and regional international organisations.

Keywords: Southeastern Europe, NATO, Russia, Regional Security.

Introduction

For Russia, NATO’s expansion to the East in the 2010s triggered an unhinged spring effect when the decades-long irritation from an interaction

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in which the other side was deaf to Russia's geostrategic concerns came to the surface. For Moscow, Southeastern Europe has turned from a region viewed as a space for developing pragmatic, primarily economic cooperation into a zone of geopolitical confrontation, where it is constantly having to "beat back" Russian foreign policy interests, face the West's open desire to squeeze out any Russian initiative, and efforts to denigrate Russia's historically generally positive image among the population. The latter is the most important strategic objective for the West, the instrumental embodiment of which has been the fight against "corrosive" Russian influence in the region (NATO 2022). Nevertheless, not a single nation in Southeastern Europe positions itself as an antagonist towards Russia. That has become surprisingly evident for the West after February 24, 2022, and despite the fact that the launch of the Special Military Operation in Ukraine had a significant impact on the perception of Russian leadership action, it has not become as critical as it could have been and as the NATO and EU leadership probably expected.

Data from sociological polls at the end of 2022 in Moldova showed that people viewed Russia as a valuable economic partner on par with the EU (67%) and slightly less important as a political partner (59%). According to most of the population (59%), the neutral international position guarantees security for the republic. More than half of the population does not consider Russia a threat and would vote against NATO membership (IRI 2022). Even though the perception of Russia as a security threat has increased in all Southeast European countries, more than half of the population in Romania and Bulgaria, while considering NATO a strategic partner, nevertheless believe that the US is dragging them into a war with Russia (Globsec 2023). Greece continues to have one of the highest levels of those who sympathise with Russia no matter what and one of the lowest levels of those who unequivocally condemn (Pew Research 2022). In Montenegro and Serbia, majorities believe that the US and NATO are to blame for the Ukrainian crisis, and the level of support for Russia among the Serbian population has increased markedly. The number of Macedonian citizens who believe that it is important for the country to maintain good relations with Russia has not changed over the past three years (about 53%) (IRI 2023).

Looking ahead, it is worth noting that until the early 2010s, Russia did not lay down a confrontational approach in the scenario of interaction with

the EU in Southeastern Europe and did not plan to increase its influence in the region to a level comparable to that of Brussels. It seems that even today, Russia's presence in the Balkans can relatively easily become a bargaining chip in the general issue of restructuring European international relations after the end of the Ukrainian crisis (which does not call into question the importance of Moscow remaining one of the key international actors in solving Serbian ethno-territorial problems and observing those standards of strategic security that Russia considers principal).

However, taking into account internal factors, the existing sub-regional international order in Southeastern Europe turns out to be fragile, given its external stability and even predetermination. In addition to the classic and common systemic socio-economic problems in all countries of the region, the internal factors that lead to the emergence of real security threats include high polarisation of societies (including political ones), the presence of interstate disputes and ethno-territorial contradictions, which are increasingly used as a tool of political blackmail, the growth of the market for the production and sale of weapons, including shadow weapons, and general militarization.

Military-strategic and Infrastructural-logistical Modernization in Southeastern Europe

NATO's enlargement in Southeastern Europe as the main mechanism of military-strategic cooperation had different justifications for different countries in the region. At the first stage, NATO membership was seen more as a necessary complement to subsequent accession to the European Union and, thus, formed a package proposal for the "reintegration into Europe" of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. In this logic, Bulgaria, Romania, and Slovenia became members of the Alliance in the 2000s, which was caught up in the Central European wave of EU and NATO enlargement. With regard to the rest of the post-Yugoslav space, the formula "accession to the EU through NATO membership" was refined by arguments about the need to neutralise security threats, regional stabilisation, and reconciliation through the creation of a common framework of membership in a politico-military alliance. This approach, among other things, legitimised the maintenance of an international

peacekeeping contingent in Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, and Kosovo (including the American base “Bondsteel”) even after the end of the “hot phase” of the civil wars. It was adopted in one way or another by all the republics of the former Yugoslavia. Croatia (2009), Albania (2009), Montenegro (2017), and North Macedonia (2020) have joined the North Atlantic Alliance.

The NATO enlargement project in Southeastern Europe is thus in its final stages, with Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), and Moldova formally outside the Alliance. However, contrary to the fact that these territories geographically represent only a small gap on the NATO map, their possible reversal towards Russia, or at least their distancing from NATO with the successful completion of the Special Military Operation in Ukraine, disrupts the coordination and predictability of strategic manoeuvring on the Alliance’s southeastern flank. In a scenario where these countries remain outside the Alliance, only Romania separates Russia from the Mediterranean by land. Importantly, the likelihood of all three countries joining NATO in the short term is negligible; Moldova’s fate is unlikely to be determined before the Ukrainian crisis is over. Serbia maintains military neutrality in accordance with the 2020 National Security Strategy. Bosnia and Herzegovina’s membership is unrealizable if the Republic of Srpska is part of the country.

At the same time, it cannot be denied that the degree of integration of Serbia and BiH into NATO structures is quite high. Both countries have been participating in the Partnership for Peace Programme since 2006. In 2015, Serbia signed the Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP), which, among other things, implies granting diplomatic immunity to NATO forces while they are on the territory of the republic. In 2016, Serbia and the Alliance concluded a Logistical Support Agreement. In 2018, the first NATO exercises were held on the territory of Serbia. At the same time, NATO implements traditional officer development programmes aimed at practicing interoperability and shared values and supervises cybersecurity programmes, i.e., sets the contours of future interoperability in strategically important areas.

Despite the continued resistance of the Republic of Srpska against the move towards NATO membership, Bosnia and Herzegovina also has a very dynamic engagement with the Alliance. The IPAP was signed in December

2018, and in February 2021, it was decided to establish a ministerial commission responsible for implementing the reforms prescribed by the plan. The issue of deepening cooperation with NATO is one of the key issues for the functioning of modern BiH. Both the Croats and the Bosniaks predictably favour early accession to the bloc, while for the Bosnian Serbs, this issue is even more sensitive than for Belgrade. It is related not only to historical memory but also to the ownership of military facilities, the transfer of which to the central administration in Sarajevo would seriously reduce the degree of real autonomy of the Republic of Srpska.

The states of Southeastern Europe have no comparable cooperation with other major international actors or organisations in the military-strategic sphere in terms of the depth of their ongoing or envisaged cooperation. Of the entire region, only Serbia, relying on its military neutrality, is also an observer at the CSTO PA and has participated in joint military exercises with Russia and Belarus over the years. In addition, Belgrade has strategic partnership agreements with Russia and China. Russia's role as a guarantor of the Dayton Agreements on Bosnia and Herzegovina and peace in Transnistria remains a key tool for ensuring strategic influence in Southeast Europe. It enables Moscow to contain NATO's ambitions regarding two geographically bordering territories in the Southeast European sub-region. That is not much objectively, but given the explosiveness of the situation in both BiH and Transnistria, Russia's presence does not allow either NATO or the political elites of the sub-region to discount their own and sub-regional interests.

If we turn to the issue of the consolidation of military infrastructure, we can note an increase in the number and equipment of NATO and US military facilities in Southeastern Europe in recent years. Romania remains the anchor point, but its infrastructural connectivity with the rest of the region has been strengthened. In October 2020, the US and Romania signed the 2020-2030 Defence Cooperation Roadmap, which includes cooperation in cybersecurity, military modernization, and multisphere operations in the Black Sea. At the 2022 NATO Summit in Madrid, US President Joe Biden announced that the United States would replace a rotational brigade combat team in Romania. On July 23, 2020, the headquarters of NATO's Multinational Corps Southeast was established at the Joint National Training Centre in Cincu. The NATO Enhanced Forward Presence Battle Group was

established on May 1, 2022, by converting the multinational elements of the NATO Response Force previously deployed to Romania and transforming them into the Collective Defence Battle Group in June 2022 (Zverev 2023).

Over the past two years, the Mihael Cogalniceanu Air Base, the 90th Air Base Otopeni, the 86th Air Base of the Romanian Air Force in Fetesti, the Deveselu Air Base, and the Constanta Naval Base have been strengthened, including with new and experimental equipment. Since 2021, the US Air Force has been working to turn Kimpia-Turzii Air Base into a new US and NATO hub in the Black Sea region (Zverev 2023). Bulgaria is an important infrastructure element in Southeastern Europe because there are four joint US-Bulgarian bases: Bezmer and Graf Ignatievo air bases, Novo Selo Proving Ground, and Aitos Logistics Centre (Burgas area).

The remoteness of the Bulgarian-Romanian infrastructure from other European centres was one of the incentives for Albania, Northern Macedonia, and Montenegro to integrate into NATO as soon as possible and to expand their military infrastructure. For example, the former Soviet airbase in Kuchova, Albania, is to be operational by 2023. In May 2022, in connection with Russian actions in the Northern Black Sea region, Albanian Prime Minister E. Rama proposed to station a part of the NATO contingent at the Albanian Navy base Pasha-Liman in the Mediterranean Sea (TASS 2022).

During 2022, the peacekeeping contingent in Kosovo was strengthened in terms of equipment, and the equipment of Priština units was improved, including through training under the guidance of instructors from the second largest US military base in Europe, Camp Bondsteel (Rossiya Segodnya 2023). Following Skopje's accession to NATO in 2020, joint exercises of the Alliance member states are being held at the Krivolak polygon (Military Times 2023). In 2023, the largest NATO exercise in the Western Balkans region was held in Montenegro. In October 2021, Greece and the US signed an updated Mutual Defence Cooperation Agreement, under which the US gained access to three more military bases in addition to the existing one on Crete (Alexandropoulis, Volos, and the training centre in Litkhoros) (Anadolu 2022). In addition, rumours are actively circulating in the press that after the May-June 2023 Greek parliamentary elections, the US requested access to all Greek ports for the potential transfer of military contingents and equipment to Europe.

In recent years, the issue of increasing infrastructure, logistics, and transportation interconnectivity in Southeastern Europe has also gained significant momentum. Attention to this issue is especially noticeable in the EU and US mediation in establishing political interaction between the countries of the region, where dialogue along the lines of North Macedonia-Greece, North Macedonia-Bulgaria, and Serbia-Albania takes centre stage.

Five of the ten trans-European transport corridors – IV, VII, VIII, IX, and X – pass through a large part of Southeastern Europe.² Corridors VIII and X are of fundamental importance in sub-regional connectivity because they effectively cross all countries in the region.

The geographical position of North Macedonia is important for the provision of Bulgarian and Serbian destinations. To a great extent, therefore, the US supported the “Treaty of Friendship” between Bulgaria and North Macedonia on August 1, 2017, which, among other things, implies the establishment of joint logistics and infrastructure chains (Sofia-Skopje),

² Corridor IV. EU-Southeast Europe connectivity. Road; rail; Danube ferries; airports; ports; combined transport. Berlin, Dresden, Nuremberg (Germany) – Prague, Brno (Czech Republic) – Vienna (railroad) (Austria) – Bratislava (Slovakia) – Győr, Budapest (Hungary) – Arad, Craiova, Bucharest, Constanta (Romania) – Sofia, Plovdiv (Bulgaria) – Thessaloniki (Greece) – Istanbul (Turkey).

Corridor VII. A route down the Danube from Germany to the Black Sea; connected to the North Sea via the Rhine and Main. Germany – Austria – Bratislava (Slovakia) – Hungary – Croatia – Serbia – Ruzhica, Lom (Bulgaria) – Moldova-Ukraine – Constanta (Romania).

Corridor VIII. Subregional route from the Mediterranean to the Black Sea. Road; rail; combined transport at Bitola; Durres, Tirana (Albania)-Skopje, Bitola (Macedonia)-Sofia, Dimitrovgrad, Burgas, Varna (Bulgaria).

Corridor IX. Connects the north and south of Europe. Road; railroad; Helsinki (Finland) – Vyborg, St. Petersburg, Pskov, Moscow Kaliningrad (Russia) – Kiev, Lyubashevka, Odessa (Ukraine) – Chisinau (Moldova) – Bucharest (Romania) – Vilnius, Kaunas, Klaipeda (Lithuania) – Minsk (Belarus) – Alexandroupolis (Greece) – Dimitrovgrad, Ormenio (Bulgaria).

Corridor X. Austria to Thessaloniki and Igoumanitsa in Greece and Istanbul in Turkey. Road; rail; Salzburg, Graz (Austria) – Zagreb (Croatia) – Belgrade, Nis – Veles, Saloniki – Bitola (Macedonia) – Ljubljana, Maribor (Slovenia) – Budapest (Hungary) – Belgrade (Serbia) – Novi Sad – Nis – Sofia (Corridor IV – Istanbul) (Bulgaria) – Veles, Florina, Via Egnatia

which increases Bulgaria's influence in North Macedonia (Entina, Pivovarenko and Suchkov 2019). The signing of the Prespa Agreement between Skopje and Athens in 2018 was astonishingly quick amid more than two decades of deadlocked negotiations. The Prespa Agreement between Skopje and Athens in 2018 made it possible to integrate North Macedonia into NATO without delay, when it became critically necessary for Washington. Thus, the Greece-North Macedonia-Bulgaria strategic interaction seems to be developing organically. For Serbia, access to both Greek and Albanian ports also lies through the territory of North Macedonia and the two transportation corridors mentioned above. In this regard, it is important for Belgrade not to aggravate contradictions with Skopje.

The second key objective of the EU and NATO is to increase connectivity and interaction between Belgrade and Tirana. It is addressed through intensifying political dialogue. Until recently, the "Open Balkans" initiative played an important role here. This project, also known as the Balkan "mini-Schengen", was launched in 2019 by the presidents of Serbia, Albania, and Northern Macedonia. Formally, like a number of other projects in the region (European integration itself, the Berlin Process, the Brdo-Brioni Dialogue, etc.), it aims to create a common economic space and reduce regional contradictions. The "Open Balkans" was endorsed by the US but met with moderate support from the EU, as its objectives overlap to a large extent with its sub-regional brainchild, the Berlin Process of 2014. Without denying the importance of the economic component of the initiative, it is noteworthy that, in geostrategic terms, the progressive development of Serbian-Albanian interaction may provide Belgrade with an alternative access to the Mediterranean via the Albanian port of Durres. In addition, the regional airport in Niš in the south of the country (as close as possible to Macedonia, Bulgaria, and the border line between central Serbia and Kosovo and Metohija), where the Serbian Air Force base is currently located, has an agreement reached in 2022 on reconstruction and a threefold increase in passenger traffic. The realisation of these projects would increase the importance of Belgrade in the regional transport and logistic dimension.

At the same time, Belgrade has an extremely vulnerable position in the dialogue between Serbia and Albania; its strategic efforts can be undermined at any moment. Thus, in July 2023, Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama already announced the freezing of interaction with Serbia due to the

growing tensions in Kosovo (Al Jazeera 2023). Notably, the stalemate in negotiations between Belgrade and Priština over Kosovo's status has had little effect on progress on the Niš-Priština-Drač highway, which will link Corridor X with the Skopje-Priština and Sarajevo-Podgorica-Valona roads.

It is also noteworthy that, in recent years, there has been an active restoration and opening of new air harbours not only in Serbia but also in the whole of Southeastern Europe. In Albania, an international airport in Kukes was opened, and the construction of another one in Vlora was announced. In the Republic of Srpska, Belgrade promised to invest in the construction of an international airport in Trebinje. In Romania, Brasov-Gimbav International Airport opened in June 2023. Moldovan authorities announced that they will rehabilitate the former military airfield in Marculeshti by 2025 (Aviation Exporer 2022).

Even the above trends indicate that Southeast Europe is gradually becoming a logistically connected region, which transforms its former buffer geostrategic status into an integral part of the European and Euro-Atlantic infrastructure. Moreover, with the beginning of the Special Military Operation, a number of decisions have been taken to replace NATO rotational forces with permanently based forces. On the other hand, the sub-region is gradually regaining its historical role as a transit territory, where the Republic of Serbia occupies the central place, as it did centuries ago, due to the peculiarities of its geographical position. All of this would paint an idyllic picture of the gradual rapprochement of Southeastern Europe with its western part if it were not for the movement towards all-encompassing militarization, both through the militarization of consciousness and through the escalation of conflicts and contradictions and the growth of the arms trade market, which in a number of countries traditionally has not only a legal but also a shadow dimension.

The trend towards the escalation of pre-existing interstate and interethnic contradictions is not surprising. This part of Europe is full of frozen and unresolved conflicts: Transnistria in Moldova; the reliance on the Unitarist sentiments of a part of society and elites in Chisinau and Bucharest, which comes into open contradiction with the sentiments of another part of society; the Kosovo issue in Serbia; the deadlock with the development of a de facto international protectorate of Bosnia and Herzegovina; the Macedo-Greek and Macedo-Bulgarian contradictions; and Serbian-Croatian relations, which are

extremely dependent on the sentiments of national political elites. In this regard, the Ukrainian crisis coming directly to the northern borders of the sub-region, as well as its obvious geopolitical component expressed in the confrontation along the Russia-West line, could not but activate the phobias and fears of various segments of society, previously shaded by the non-alternative of European integration.

Domestic Factors of Escalation in Southeastern Europe

The escalation of internal or long-standing tensions can be observed in virtually all countries in the region. The evolving crisis in Kosovo and Metohija and the increasingly dysfunctional governance system in Bosnia and Herzegovina are on the radar.

The intensifying crisis in Kosovo and Metohija is partly triggered by the Russian special operation (SMO) in Ukraine, though it definitely served as a pretext for radicalising the official positions of both Belgrade and Priština and caused a narrowing of the foreign policy manoeuvres available to A. Vucic. First, since the arrival of Kosovo's self-proclaimed Prime Minister, A. Kurti, in 2020, the possibilities of reaching a compromise between Belgrade and Priština, even with international mediation, have sharply decreased. On the one hand, this is due to the fact that Kurti is the first career politician in self-proclaimed Kosovo. He achieved success and recognition on the barricades under the slogans of independence and refusal to make concessions to Belgrade. On the other hand, since the early 2010s, the instrument for reaching agreements through the international mediation of the EU has been European integration. By the end of the second decade of the 21st century, it became obvious that not only Priština but also other countries in Southeastern Europe would not become members of the integration union in the short term. That gave A. Kurti the opportunity to use Priština's European integration perspective as a blackmail mechanism in his dialogue with both Brussels and individual European capitals. Secondly, Priština's disregard for the requirement to form communities of Serbian municipalities, as stipulated by the Brussels Agreements of 2013, with the rather calm attitude of Brussels itself, which until 2023 limited itself to formal condemnation of the inaction of the authorities of the self-proclaimed republic, gradually led to a new round of violence against the

Serbian population of the province by the Kosovars, who in one way or another feel their impunity. Finally, it cannot be denied that the emergence of the radical A. Kurti was beneficial to A. Vucic to a certain extent as well: from 2019 and until the beginning of the SMO, he was betting on contrasting the image of a “treaty-capable” Belgrade with the “ungovernable” Priština, knowing perfectly well that this is an opportunity to further delay the final decision on the status of Kosovo and Metohija, which, whatever it may be in the end, due to various circumstances may not be acceptable to the majority of the Serbian population.

The start of the Russian SMO confused the cards, first of all, for the Serbian side, although to date the Kosovars have not achieved what they had hoped for. Taking advantage of the fact that Belgrade refused to join the anti-Russian sanctions, A. Kurti began to actively exploit the card of Russian “corrosive” influence in Serbia and the need, under this pretext, to solve the issue of Kosovo’s final status as quickly as possible and without concessions, with subsequent, or better, simultaneous, granting it membership in a number of international organisations (primarily the Council of Europe and NATO). To attract the attention of Western actors against the backdrop of the Ukrainian crisis, provocations against the Serbian population of the province have become more frequent since the spring of 2022, which naturally led to a bilateral escalation of tension, but it was more demonstrative than real.

In turn, official Belgrade found itself in an extremely difficult position. To all appearances, the massive support for Russia and the blaming of the United States and NATO for the development of the Ukrainian crisis were the result of the Serbian population’s hope for justice, which had not completely faded into oblivion. In these conditions, it is difficult for Mr. Vucic not only to impose sanctions against Russia but also to agree to the conditions set by international mediators regarding the Kosovo issue. At the same time, it is important to fulfil the request of the most active part of society to continue Serbia’s European path, as well as to maintain economic stability and an investment climate. Thus, the only way out of the situation for A. Vucic is a further escalation of hostile rhetoric towards Priština with *de facto* conditional acquiescence to the growing violence against the Serbian population of Kosovo and Metohija.

But the danger of this path is obvious: the situation around Kosovo is controllable at the level of individual political decisions and international agreements but uncontrollable at the human level. Thus, the Kosovo issue turns from a seemingly predetermined issue waiting for a convenient political moment to be resolved into an explosive point.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, events are also not going well. The creeping revision of the Dayton Accords, which was set in motion back in the late 1990s when the High Representative, under the 1997 “Bonn Powers”, was given virtually unlimited ability to intervene directly in the process of state governance, has not resulted in the emergence of a civil rather than ethnic BiH. To a large extent, this was the result of the “pupation” of the internal political system and the extremely low socio-economic base in the country. In such internal conditions, all emerging resources were naturally distributed within the ethnic group. The situation has been reproduced over the years, and as a result, the security of investments, including external ones, is also ensured mainly within the ethnic group; there are practically no investment projects that would link the whole of Bosnia and Herzegovina. At the same time, the reliance of Western NGOs on funding projects dedicated to inter-ethnic dialogue, complex pages of history, etc., has in fact led to attempts to rewrite history, taking advantage of the political conjuncture and placing all the blame for the civil war on the Serbs. The condemnation of the Srebrenica events in the Serbian Parliament in 2008, the accession of Montenegro in 2021 to the qualification of those events as genocide, the receipt of life sentences for the leaders of the Republic of Srpska, along with the acquittal or transfer to the courts of national jurisdiction of the most odious figures among the Bosnian Muslims and Croats, contributed greatly to this.

Thus, by the early 2020s, the internal political situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina was extremely tense. The incumbent High Representative, K. Schmidt, has not been approved for his position by the UN Security Council as a result of the protests of the Russian and Chinese sides. His powers were also not recognised by the Republic of Srpska, but his actions were unilaterally legitimised by the second entity of BiH, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. During his year in office, K. Schmidt managed to repeatedly use the “Bonn Powers”. In the fall of 2022, he launched the repeal of the RS Law on Immovable Property of the Republic. Despite the fact that

Banja Luka did not recognise the decision, the initiative formally succeeded, as the BiH Constitutional Court declared the law null and void. In October, in an attempt to manage the crisis already within the Federation of BiH, which unfolded in the framework of the election campaign, it de facto satisfied the demands of the Croats, who for many years had cited the fact that, due to the overall preponderance of the Bosniak population, their electoral rights were infringed by prohibiting them from sending their representatives from a canton to the House of Peoples of FBiH if the number of these people in the canton is less than 3%. And in the spring of 2023, K. Schmidt again used his authority to avoid the fiasco with the formation of the government of the Federation of BiH by allowing the approval of the government with the mandatory consent of one vice president instead of two, as it had been before (Eremin 2023).

Formally, all these steps open the way to building a centralised Bosnia and Herzegovina. For example, they make it possible to move away from the paradigm of solving all domestic political issues by finding consensus among the major national parties. They increase the role of smaller parties and movements, including by increasing their blackmail potential. However, this path has already been followed by Serbia in the early 2000s and Montenegro in the last few years. The inability to reach an ideological compromise, the close connection between the political establishment and economic resources, and the high degree of influence of external forces on internal processes in all these countries have led and will lead in Bosnia and Herzegovina to an even greater deterioration of the socio-economic situation and the gap between the objectives of the political forces and the needs of the population. Thus, the order to create more Western-loyal and manageable political forces throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina may be fulfilled, but their ability to ensure effective modernization will still be very low.

It is also important that the course of centralisation in BiH and the discursive conflict of the High Representative with the leadership of the Republic of Srpska leave M. Dodik less and less room for maneuver. If in all previous years he used the discourse and certain steps on the possible withdrawal of the RS from BiH as a blackmail and exclusively political tool, then after the start of the Russian SWO and the aggravation of the situation around the Serbs of the region in connection with their position in support of Russia, the growing erosion of the Dayton Accords leaves him no other choice

but to centralise BiH and weaken the major party structures, or to withdraw from it. It is noteworthy that, in light of the launch of the negotiation process on the possible membership of partially recognised Kosovo in the Council of Europe, it may turn out that the unsettled international status of a number of state entities will not be an obstacle to NATO membership. In this case, the potential withdrawal of the Republic of Srpska from BiH would no longer seem as unacceptable to the West as before. The possible precedent of Kosovo's membership in the CoE or NATO would allow the Federation of BiH to be included in the Alliance while preventing the strengthening of both Banja Luka and Belgrade, as the complex territorial configuration of the RS does not favour this. Instead of the conditionally "failed" American peacekeeping in Bosnia and Herzegovina, in this case, the West will get an instrument of constant pressure on the Republic of Serbia even after the resolution of the Kosovo issue.

A significant factor influencing the resilience of the Southeast European region to external impacts and risks is the level of polarisation of attitudes in the societies of these countries. An outstanding example against the background of all others, as mentioned above, are the Serbs, among whom impressive shifts in public opinion have been recorded in 2022-2023. 83% are against the imposition of sanctions on Russia; 69% believe that NATO is to blame for the Ukrainian crisis; and only 42% support EU accession, with the understanding that 83.5% will be against it if the price of accession is the abandonment of Kosovo. In Montenegro, more than half of the citizens still perceive the US and NATO as the most negative among all significant external actors; 64% do not support sanctions against Russia; and the same number of citizens consider NATO the main culprits in the Ukrainian crisis. At the same time, two-thirds of the population see Montenegro's future in the EU, and a majority supports the pragmatic technocrats who came to power in 2023 in favour of a Montenegro without a national majority (NSPM 2023).

In Moldova, 64% of the population throughout 2022 believed that the country was moving in the wrong direction, and 48% believed that the socio-economic situation had seriously deteriorated during 2022 (IRI 2022). These are the highest figures for the last ten years, even though M. Sandu's pro-European and currently anti-Russian government is still in power and a solid majority voted for her in the last elections.

To summarise, while in the countries discussed above the main rift within society is formed on the issues of relations with Russia and NATO, with a general bet on European integration or at least movement in its direction in the absence of alternatives, in Bulgaria, Romania, Albania, Northern Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina described above, internal crisis trends due to socio-economic reasons play a significant role. Bulgaria held its fifth parliamentary election in April 2023. Another crisis and the sixth extraordinary election were avoided by reaching an agreement on the rotating post of prime minister. The mechanism will be applied for the next one and a half years. It is assumed that during this period, Bulgaria will be able to cope with internal political disagreements and the deterioration of the socio-economic situation caused, on the one hand, by the severance of economic ties with Russia and, on the other hand, by the application of the principle of “conditionality” in Bulgaria by Brussels. Now, it is used not only politically (Bulgaria has not become a member of the Euro Zone or Schengen since January 2023) but also economically: in pursuit of reforms, the EU regularly blocks money tranches from the common fund for economic recovery to Sofia.

The situation in Romania is similar. In the spring and summer of 2023, the country was hit by a wave of general strikes, from education and health care workers to transportation workers, judges, and civil servants. This in itself sets a negative trend for the upcoming parliamentary elections in 2024. Taking into account the real militarization of Romania by NATO forces in the light of the Ukrainian crisis, the unionist sentiments of a growing part of the Moldovan population and political elites in Bucharest, as well as the continuing decline in living standards in Romania itself, we can predict the degradation of the system of public administration and the shift of the leadership and political elites towards egregious decisions and gestures to mix all those internal problems that have been accumulating in the country for years.

In terms of its set of internal problems, Albania remains an “island of stability”. The clan structure of society, rigidly maintained even today, forms a network of corrupt ties and arrangements that, for decades, have formed the basis of the system of governance. In this sense, Tirana lacks the prospect of social revolt and upheaval but is vulnerable to the growing ambitions of, first and foremost, the political elites of self-proclaimed Kosovo and, to some

extent, the growing influence of Macedonian Albanians. Both trends are only marginally developing under Tirana's control and auspices. In the medium term, the shift of the political centre of the Albanian world to the predominantly Muslim communities of Kosovo and Macedonia will radicalise not only sentiments within Albanians but also affect the religious balance in the sub-region.

Finally, the population of North Macedonia is extremely depressed. Leaving aside the complexity of the process of identity formation in the context of its contestation by almost all neighbours, it can be stated that NATO membership and EU candidate status have not improved the country's socio-economic indicators. Economically, Macedonia does not have the advantages of a maritime location like Montenegro, for example, and the real economy has virtually no domestic growth points. Economically, Skopje has been an integral part of the all-Yugoslav complex since socialist times, performing a number of intermediate functions in production chains. In the years since the collapse of the SFRY, it has not been possible to create its own real economy. Mass protests of both a political and economic nature take place in the country on a regular basis.

The demands related to rapprochement with the EU also cause polarisation in society. Thus, after the name change, which opened the way for Skopje to join NATO and the EU, there was a demand to change the constitution and include a provision on national minorities, including Bulgarians. This is opposed by 65% of citizens. An even higher percentage (69%) is against revision of history in exchange for EU membership. 51% of citizens believe that the Russian SMO was provoked by NATO. 32% of the population would support an alternative to the EU (the EAEU is given as an example) (IDSCS 2023). Contrary to some movement towards EU membership, 43% of the population believes that Macedonia is becoming less and less stable. In parallel, a large part of the population does not believe that Skopje has prospects of becoming a member of the EU in the foreseeable future (IRI 2023). The statistical data regarding Macedonia quite clearly confirm the political and economic amorphousness and the feeling of powerlessness in the face of external factors that the citizens have. Given the existing ethnic and interstate problems, this may become a factor in both the escalation of tensions and certain disintegration.

Conclusion

To summarise, we can state that external and internal factors in the transformation processes in Southeastern Europe are in contradiction with each other. In the external dimension, the region is undergoing the final phase of inclusion into the orbit of the North Atlantic Alliance. Against the backdrop of the Ukrainian crisis, there is an arm pumping of its border borders, primarily Romania, as well as the transition of transportation and logistics routes under the control of the US and NATO in the cases of Romania, Greece, Albania, and partly Bulgaria. In addition, through various projects, including those of an economic nature, a project to increase the infrastructural connectivity of the region is underway. At the same time, the completion of the Euro-Atlantic project in Southeastern Europe through the inclusion of Serbs in it seems unlikely. The most realistic scenario is the blockade of the Serbian population through the inclusion in NATO of partially recognised territories without full statehood (the so-called Republic of Kosovo and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina).

Domestic trends have a significant impact on the stability and predictability of international relations in the sub-region of Southeastern Europe. Their key characteristic is the apathy of the population of all the countries in the region without exception regarding the prospects of socio-economic development and the strategic future of the state against the background of growing aversion to other ethnic groups within each country and beyond its borders. The attitude towards the so-called collective West and Russia and the prospects, real and imagined, that they can offer remains a significant factor in public sentiment. Thus, it seems that the outcome of the Ukrainian crisis may have a decisive impact on the future shape and development trajectories of the Southeast European region. Its historical status as a buffer zone, a space at the crossroads of Europe, may play an important role in this process.

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