

THE WESTERN BALKANS: BETWEEN BREAKUP AND REGIONAL RESTRUCTURING

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Abstract: The Western Balkans region is undergoing a significant transition marked by both fragmentation and efforts toward regional reorganization. Political, economic, and social dynamics are shaping this complex landscape, with historical legacies and contemporary challenges playing crucial roles. The region's trajectory reflects a delicate balance between fragmentation stemming from historical conflicts and aspirations for regional integration and stability. The Balkans has historically been a focal point of geopolitical competition, characterized by diverse cultural influences, unresolved conflicts, and strategic interests of global powers, making it crucial for regional stability and international relations. Western firms are increasingly drawn to the Balkans due to the region's abundant natural resources and more important strategic location. This growing interest reflects a trend of economic expansion and investment opportunities, shaping the Balkans as a significant area for international business and resource development. Kosovo has become an American protectorate formed by force, outside of international law. The European Union, as the second geopolitical player in the Balkans, acts as a destabilizing factor in the Southeastern Europe region, despite advocating for integration in theory. The main question addressed in this work is whether the European order can endure and if there will be restructuring in the positions of Balkan states.

Keywords: Balkans, geopolitics, geostrategy, Serbia, Kosovo, energy, EU, international order.

The Balkans as a major geostrategic issue

In his famous book “Le Grand Echiquier”, Zbigniew Brzezinski, a naturalised Polish American, coldly announced the American strategy in Eurasia. In order to perpetuate the control of the world by the United States, Russia should be dismantled into three parts: European, Asian, and Central, and a direct east-west corridor should be opened via the Balkan Peninsula, the Caucasus, and Turkestan. The oil from the Caspian Sea could reach directly to the West thanks to two new pipelines, one through the Caucasus

and Turkey and the other crossing the Balkans via Bulgaria, Macedonia, Kosovo, and Albania, leading to the Adriatic Sea. It is no coincidence that just weeks after the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia began, Brzezinski wrote, "The fact is that the stakes are infinitely higher than the future of Kosovo"

The American strategy in the Balkans was developed more than forty years ago. It is well known that the CIA planned, in a 1988 report, the explosion of Yugoslavia. This country had, long before Poland or Hungary, signed a pre-accession agreement with the EEC in 1989; it was therefore well placed to integrate the Western system. In addition, its self-management system gave way to private initiative. In 1990, Yugoslavia was the third country in Europe, ahead of Italy or Germany, for its hotel capacity. Finally, the Yugoslav Army, based on the idea of decentralised territorial defence, represented the first army in south-eastern Europe.

We had to break the middle power, which was Yugoslavia. The United States and the West attached to it needed to destroy a model that, when the Soviet bloc fell, represented a kind of third way. This neither liberal nor communist model dominated the capitalist economy and social advances, which could represent an attractive ideal, challenging the two models mentioned above. The Russians also had an interest in the disappearance of this former leader of the Non-Aligned Movement, of which they were suspicious. In the early 1990s, Russian generals remembered that the Yugoslavs had, after the 1948 schism between Tito and Stalin, sporadically rejected offers of Russian military exchanges and even built their territorial defence in anticipation of an attack by the Red Army. Despite repeated calls from Slobodan Milošević to Yeltsin during the conflicts in Croatia and Bosnia, the Russian generals were taking revenge on the Yugoslav outcry by not helping Veljko Kadijević, Chief of Staff of the Yugoslav Army. But in 1992, as the weakened Russians struggled through the turpitudes of the economic transition, Clinton and his team devised a strategy that would gradually impose an empire logic on Yugoslavia by slowly breaking up this country of 24 million inhabitants, the largest in the Balkans. The Democratic administration was hesitant at the beginning of the Yugoslav conflicts, but very quickly it knew how to choose its side. In Croatia, strongly influenced by the Croatian lobby in the American Congress, formed in particular of pro-ustasha exiles of the Second World War, the influential political leaders and the intelligentsia worked for more than thirty years to develop the Croatian national programme around the idea of a Croatian state; this was in contradiction with the idea of Yugoslavia, as the Serbs supported it.

The American government had been arming the Croatian army since 1993 through the port of Split. But especially in 1995, the action of its veterans, who

for two years trained and financed the Croats, allowed them to drive not only the militias but also the Serb civilians of Krajina in two stages: the operation “Hurricane” in May and “Storm” in August. However, these two operations, conducted by private agencies linked to the American military-industrial complex, have provoked what the official media inappropriately called “collateral damage”. The success of “Storm” resulted in several hundred deaths on the roads of the exodus, and 230,000 Serbs were irremediably expelled from Croatia in the summer of 1995. By diverting the international embargo that it had called for two years before, the Bill Clinton government armed Bosnian Muslims in 1994; it was the Bosniagate. In a new conception that marked the apogee of American unilateralism in the mid-1990s, the three national leaders of the Bosnian conflict were ordered by the American administration to sign separately, at a base in Ohio (Dayton), a peace treaty under an authoritarian view of diplomacy. That is not all. Through Military Professional Resources Inc. (MPRI), the US supported the arrival of jihadists on Bosnian soil in its struggle against the Bosnian Serb Army. The goal was to fight Serbian “barbarism”. In this way, the European Union would be able to establish itself in the heart of the Balkans. Since 1996, the programme “Equip and Train”, directly controlled by the Pentagon, has allocated a tidy sum of 400 million dollars to the army of Bosnia-Herzegovina; in a year, no less than 5000 Bosnian soldiers were trained by 200 American specialists.

But the American policy of support for Muslims in the Balkans continues, both according to the principle of “small is beautiful”, through which the Bochnians were martyrs against the Serbian ogre, and the principle of “freedom”, which would see the little Albanian thumb shed the horrible Serbian communism. Now we know that the two principles, which the Americans sincerely believed in, are false. The Sarajevo Historical Documentation Centre has shown, after ten years of scrupulous investigations, that 102,622 Bosnian citizens died during the Bosnian civil war. This number of deaths is proportional to the demographic number of each people at the beginning of the conflict: 69.9% of Bosniaks and Croats (68% of the population in 1991) and 30.1% of Serbs (32%) died between 1992 and 1995 in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Kosovo: the birth of a US protectorate in Europe

In 1997, the US State Department decided to arm the KLA. This ultra-violent Maoist group, founded in 1993 with the support of the Albanian diaspora in Europe, was fighting to impose a regime that was the antithesis

of the American democratic ideal. From 1995 on, it planted numerous bombs in Serbia and was even placed on the CIA's list of terrorist movements. But it did not matter: by the end of the 1990s, the aim was already to prevent the resurrection of Russia and to hinder the construction of a European defence system. In 1998, the KLA had rear bases in Albania and embarked on the politics of the worst just when it felt the game was getting out of hand. As Balkans specialist Christophe Chiclet puts it, it was "at this point that the US decided to use the KLA as a tool to finish off Milošević". During the NATO operation in the spring of 1999, the KLA took over the entire territory of Kosovo in the luggage of KFOR, not without taking the precaution of assassinating a number of moderate Albanian leaders.

A senior French UN official explained the subtleties of the American presence in Kosovo. The American emissaries are careful to keep a tight rein on all the important decisions taken by UNMIK. In Kosovar municipalities, American advisors take care to maintain good relations with Albanian-speaking mayors, and through US government agencies, such as "US AID", they have been providing indirect financial support to these municipalities for the last ten years. These are often secondary economic projects, such as the construction of libraries or thermal baths, but they are very useful in ensuring the loyalty of elected municipal officials. The latest example of American control over the Kosovo state is the police. In 1999, the Kosovo Protection Corps (KPC) was created, in which many ex-KLA fighters were retrained as "law enforcement officers". Although financed by the European Union, the KPC was trained and organised from the outset by the American company Military Professional Resources Inc. (MPRI). The Americans trained the KPC's recruits in such a way as to turn it into a fully-fledged military formation, whereas the organisation was intended to remain a civil protection force. The United States even controls the Kosovar police force, sometimes without consulting UNMIK. On February 17, 2001, near the village of Livadice, Albanian terrorists blew up the "Niš Ekspress" bus, killing 11 Serbs, including two children, and injuring 40 others. Although some Albanian suspects were arrested after the investigation, all were released except Florim Ejuoi, who was proven to have direct links with Albanian organised crime and former KLA circles. Ejuoi was transferred to the American base at Bondsteel for "security reasons", from which he managed to escape a few days later. However, this escape was organised by the American army without asking UNMIK for authorization. On July 29, 2001, London's "Sunday Times" reported that UN informers suspected Florim Ejuoi was working for the CIA and that his trial would have been highly embarrassing for his employers.

But the system set up by the American government in Kosovo is now a model for future territorial detachments around the world, planned by the American government. This is evidenced by the fact that the most senior American leaders in Kosovo are then sent elsewhere to destabilize other countries, far from the Balkans. The best example is Philip S. Goldberg, US ambassador to the Philippines, Bolivia, and Colombia. In the 1990s, Goldberg was a key player in the breakup of Yugoslavia. From 1994 to 1996, he was in charge of the State Department's Bosnia Office. He worked closely with Washington's special envoy, Richard Holbrooke, and played a key role as Secretary General of the US negotiating committee in Dayton, which led to the signing of the Dayton Accords in 1995. These agreements led to the breakup of Bosnia-Herzegovina. In 1996, Goldberg worked as a Special Assistant to Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott (1994-2000), who, together with then Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, was instrumental in bringing about the war against Yugoslavia in 1999. In Kosovo, Philip S. Goldberg served as US Chief of Mission in Pristina (2004-2006) and maintained ongoing relations with the leaders of the paramilitary UCK (Kosovo Liberation Army), whose leaders are now at the head of the Kosovar government and who were known for their close ties with the US government.

From 1993 onwards, the American government provided the Croatian army with arms through the port of Split. But above all, in 1995, the action of its veterans, who for two years had been training and financing the Croats, enabled them to drive out the militias and Serbian civilians from Krajina in two phases: Operation Hurricane in May and Operation Storm in August. However, these two operations, carried out by private firms linked to the American military-industrial complex, caused what the official media were already inappropriately calling "collateral damage". The success of "Storm" resulted in several hundred deaths on the roads of exodus and the irremediable expulsion of 230,000 Serbs from Croatia in the summer of 1995. In 1994, Bill Clinton's administration armed the Bosnian Muslims by circumventing the international embargo it had called for two years earlier; this was Bosniagate. In a new concept that marked the apogee of American unilateralism in the mid-1990s, the three national leaders of the Bosnian conflict were summoned by the US administration to sign a separate peace treaty at a base in Dayton, Ohio, in an authoritarian conception of diplomacy, to say the least. But that was not all. Through Military Professional Resources Inc. (MPRI), the US supported the arrival of jihadists on Bosnian soil in their fight against the Bosnian Serb Army. The aim was not to combat Serbian "barbarism", but to establish a lasting foothold in the heart of the Balkans.

Western firms' appetite whetted by Balkan resources

Twenty-five years after the NATO bombardment of Serbia and Kosovo, the strategic importance of the Kosovo highlands, wedged between the mountains of Albania, Montenegro, and Macedonia, is becoming clearer. To the east, in the lower Morava region, Corridor X already drains vital trade flows between Budapest and Salonika for Macedonia and Serbia. To the west, Corridor IV, Trieste-Constantza, is whetting Russian appetites. It is easy to see why Moscow-backed gas and oil pipeline projects ("SouthStream") in Kosovo are thwarting the American AMBO project to bring hydrocarbon supplies from Central Asia through the Balkans. Since 1997, the European Union has invested eight billion euros in Corridor VIII (pipeline, rail, and road). On this east-west axis, the EU is in competition with the Americans. Since 1997, the Trans-Balkans AMBO oil pipeline has been developing between the Black Sea and the Adriatic, while the Nabucco gas pipeline is due to link Istanbul to Vienna via Romania. The Russians' return to the energy race is striking. Since 2007, the Burgas (Bulgaria)/Alexandroupoli (Greece) pipeline has made it possible to avoid Turkey by passing through two Orthodox countries. But above all, the American "Nabucco" gas pipeline project is competing with the Russian/Turkish "Turkish Stream" gas pipeline project.

As a gateway to Hungary and Romania, Vojvodina is at the end of the Balkan energy tubes; European corridors IV and X pass through it, as do the routes of the future Russian "Stream" and American "Nabucco" pipelines. This is why major Austrian, Hungarian, and Russian industrialists are trying to establish themselves in Vojvodina. In 2006, Austria's O.M.V. was already interested in acquiring a refinery in Novi Sad, and in early 2008, an Austro-Hungarian energy alliance was about to be concluded. But the Russians moved faster, acquiring 51% of Naftna Industrija Srbije (NIS), the Serbian oil company, in December 2008. Vojvodina has thus become the site of a strategic confrontation between Russia, which is banking on Vojvodina as an energy corridor to Europe and a means of bypassing the Ukrainian "enemy", and Hungarians, who are increasingly present on their southern bangs. It is no coincidence that Gazprom has decided to locate Russia's main gas storage centre for the Balkans in Vojvodina. The Western Balkans, engaged in a process of Euro-Atlantic integration, are brimming with unsuspected energy resources. Coveted by multinational firms and regional and international powers, these resources are a major reason for past wars and future conflicts. Serbia is both in the heart of the Balkan hydrocarbon distribution networks and a supplier of electricity to neighbouring countries.

With 8 hydroelectric and 9 thermal power stations, Serbia's energy dependence is moderate (40%). The NATO bombing in 1999 damaged this potential, as Serbia went from being self-sufficient before the war to importing 25% of its electricity needs. This has led the EU to provide substantial loans, and Serbia joined the ECSEE in 2005, with credits ranging from 1 to 6 billion euros. In addition to increasing the capacity of the Djerdap hydroelectric power station on the Danube, there is considerable potential on the Ibar, Lim, and Drina rivers. Croatia is a transit country on the various gas routes between Asia and Europe and, at the same time, the Western Balkan country with the most diversified energy offer. With no fewer than 30 hydroelectric power stations, hydroelectric capacity is a major contributor to electricity generation (54%). Bosnia-Herzegovina's network was severely damaged by four years of war, which explains the substantial aid provided by the EBRD and the EIB, which have granted more than \$230 million to the country's three electricity companies. With no hydrocarbons, Bosnia's main energy resources are hydroelectricity and lignite. Montenegro, which has no hydrocarbons, is also a long way from the big energy tubes; Elektroprivreda Crne Gore (EPCG) publicly manages 76% hydroelectric power. Kosovo, on the other hand, is one of Europe's most mineral-rich regions. The Kopiliq site has the world's fifth-largest lignite reserves, and the Trepča mine is brimming with lead, zinc, and copper of exceptional grades. Kosovo is also home to silver, gold, nickel, bauxite, and manganese. According to the November 2007 World Bank report, the value of Kosovo's subsoil wealth is estimated at \$13 billion. This concentration of wealth in such a small area is bound to attract covetousness. Trepča, until now operated by the "Privatisation Agency", is to come under the control of the Kosovo government.

On this east-west axis, the EU is in competition with the Americans. The Trans-Balkans AMBO pipeline was the subject of a feasibility study in the late 1990s by the Houston, Texas-based company Brown and Root. Brown and Root is a subsidiary of Halliburton, of which Dick Cheney was director before being elected Vice President of the United States. The project is also the work of the Trade and Development Agency (TDA), created in 1981 by President Reagan to promote US exports. The TDA has been heavily involved in the design of Corridor VIII from the outset; in 1998, it decided to specifically finance feasibility studies for the modernization of the ports of Burgas in Bulgaria and Constantza in Romania. It was no coincidence that Bulgaria announced in 2003 that it was making the port of Burgas, the end point of Corridor VIII, available to Anglo-American troops. The Russians' return to the energy race is striking. Since 2007, the Burgas

(Bulgaria)/Alexandroupoli (Greece) oil pipeline has made it possible to avoid Turkey by passing through two Orthodox countries. But above all, the American “Nabucco” gas pipeline project, from Istanbul to Vienna via Romania, is in competition with the Russian “South Stream” gas pipeline project. The latter would follow a much safer, and therefore less costly, route, passing through Bulgaria, Serbia, and Croatia, with which agreements have already been signed. In February 2007, Putin signed a comprehensive gas transit agreement with Croatia, a country not known for its Russophile tradition, and in 2008, Gazprom merged with the gas company Srbijagaz and took over the oil company NIS in Serbia.

On January 15, 2015, Vladimir Putin announced that Turkey would change the route of the South Stream pipeline, thus putting an end to the procrastination of his supposed “allies” Serbia and Bulgaria and, like a chess player, responding with an “oukaze” (proclamation) to the sanctions policy implemented against Russia in 2014. The 2015 revival of the East-West conflict is blatantly obvious here. The South Stream is dead because of the pressure exerted by the EU on one of the countries that recently joined, Bulgaria. In November 2014, Bulgaria declared that it no longer wanted Russian gas pipes. Putin then changed his tune and proposed the “Turkish Stream” from January 2015, which would pass through Turkey, Greece, then Macedonia, and Serbia. However, the EU is exerting constant pressure on these southeastern European countries to prevent the Turkish Stream from becoming a reality. Proposals for a hypothetical “Eastern Ring”, credit blackmail on Greece, and other revisions of EU-US projects from the 1990s (TAP or TANAP) seem for the moment to be dissuading Gazprom and the Russian government from starting any major work. Is this the end of the South Stream project? Putin is testing the Europeans here, given that over 40% of their gas supplies come from Asia, but he is also showing that Europe is no longer the bright future so much hoped for. Russia is turning more and more towards Asia, while China is moving into the Balkans. The latter has decided to turn Serbia into an energy hub.

China will build two thermal power stations and a high-speed rail network between Greece and Hungary via Belgrade. In this new Eastern Question, the Balkans have become the European centre of the world’s great energy game. At the end of 2019, the strategic alliance between Russia and Turkey seems, despite the EU’s resistance, to have definitively occupied the terrain of Southeast Europe for decades to come. The Turkish Stream project is making great strides on European soil. On September 18, 2019, Bulgarian energy operator Bulgartranz and Saudi Arabian Arkad signed an investment

agreement to extend the Turkish Stream into Europe. By early 2020, the new “Balkan Stream” will be able to transport Russian gas from the Bulgarian port of Burgas to the Hungarian spot connected to the West European network. Through Serbia, a 403-kilometre pipeline will link Zaječar (on the Bulgarian border) and Horgoš (on the Hungarian border). Despite the cancellation of the South Stream project, the Russians were able to overcome the European blockage by reaching an agreement with Turkey. From 2021, the Turkish stream will not only supply all of Eastern and Central Europe with gas, all the way to Italy, but will also bypass the EU’s main ally in the region, Ukraine. The Americans, eager to find an outlet for their formidable LNG deposits, had initially delivered part of their LNG reserves to the EU, but Biden, wanting to defend US national interests first and foremost, decided to cut off these deliveries in January 2024, putting the EU once again under indirect dependence on Russian LNG (Bohineust, 2024).

“International Disorder”: The EU as a factor of instability in Southeastern Europe

Two of the former Yugoslav republics, Slovenia and Croatia, joined the EU in 2013. Accession processes have been launched with Serbia and Montenegro, and soon after with Macedonia and Albania. But there is still no question of Bosnia-Herzegovina, an administrative mille-feuille that is very difficult to manage, and Kosovo, plagued by political instability and security chaos. The question is whether the EU still has the will to enlarge its eastern borders and in what political configuration. For Serbia and Montenegro, the EU’s procrastination has already left room for Russian, Turkish, Emirati, and Chinese geopolitics, particularly in energy and transport. At a time when the European Union is beset by internal problems, it is time to reconsider its enlargement, particularly in Southeast Europe.

But is it not already too late for the EU in the face of Russian and Chinese geopolitics? In Bosnia-Herzegovina, the High Representative appointed by the EU, which finances him from funds normally earmarked for Bosnia’s economic development, has special powers known as “Bonn powers”. These include the discretionary power to overturn laws, dismiss senior civil servants and political leaders, and dissolve institutions. The first High Representatives took advantage of this to impose “binding decisions” on everyday life: a unified flag and anthem, common vehicle registration, and a common currency (the “konvertibilna marka”, indexed to the mark and then the euro). The international protectorate is also based on a denial of

sovereignty that is unique in the world. The governor of the Central Bank, appointed by the IMF, cannot be a Bosnian citizen.

The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) decides on privatisations and other acquisitions of investment funds. The protectorate has also been Europeanized in recent years, with the EU Police Mission replacing the UN Police Mission in 2003 and the European Force (EUFOR) replacing SFOR in 2004 and 2010, with 2,000 soldiers in the field. In addition, the offices of the EU representative and the UN High Representative were merged in 2007, with Austrian Valentin Inzko of Slovenian descent at the head of this super-protectorate (Gros-Verheyde, 2009). This has led to the absurdity that Bosnia's European integration is likely to be negotiated by itself! In this situation, the Serbian authorities in the Republic of Srpska can hardly seek to safeguard what was guaranteed to them by the Dayton Accords.

The Serbs of Bosnia-Herzegovina find themselves, in a kind of irony of history, the best defenders of these agreements imposed in 1995 by the international community, while Bosniaks and Croats are seeking to revise the international agreements. In early 2000, Bosniak Haris Silajdžić, former Prime Minister of the federal government, advocated a strengthening of unitarianism around the powers of the central government. In March 2001, the Croatian Dražen Budiša proposed doing away with the two entities and replacing them with ten to twelve cantons. He believed that in this way, each of the three peoples would be able to live in security in territories that were easier to administer. Since then, Croatian political leaders in Herzegovina have been making thunderous announcements in favour of the forthcoming incorporation of the two Croat-majority cantons of Bosnia-Herzegovina into neighbouring Croatia. On February 17, 2008, the Priština Parliament unilaterally proclaimed secession from Serbia. Twelve years after this self-proclaimed independence, this secession is a real tragedy for the region and a danger for Europe. In 2020, Kosovo is in fact a failed state, i.e., a state in economic and political bankruptcy, where the most elementary rights, such as freedom of movement and personal safety, are still not applied throughout its territory. It is run by corrupt authorities involved in various forms of trafficking, some of whom are accused of war crimes. Finally, Kosovar secession poses a growing risk of destabilisation for the entire Balkans, in a region where each country groups together several nationalities, which themselves often occupy cross-border areas (Albanians, Serbs, Hungarians).

The unilateral declaration of independence on February 17, 2008, endorses a state of lawlessness. Agim Çeku, a former Yugoslav army commander who became Prime Minister of Kosovo in 2004, committed war crimes while fighting in Croatia in the 1990s. He is also being prosecuted by Serbian courts for war crimes committed during the 1998 conflict between Serbian police and the UCK in Kosovo. The second Prime Minister, Ramush Haradinaj (2006-2007), had a trial at the ICTY in which the prosecutor demanded 25 years' imprisonment for the massacre of dozens of Serbian villagers (civilians, women, and children) during the Kosovo war in 1998. Haradinaj was acquitted in April 2008 for lack of evidence; indeed, nine witnesses died accidentally during his trial. Considering that there had been insufficient witness protection, on July 21, 2010, the ICTY ordered Ramush Haradinaj's re-imprisonment in order to open a new trial. He is to be retried on six counts of war crimes, including several for murder, cruel treatment, and torture, and will remain in prison until the start of the trial this time. Finally, the current Prime Minister of Kosovo, Hashim Thaçi, who led the KLA forces in 1998, is accused by Belgrade of having directly massacred 60 Kosovo Serb villagers in the summer of 1998. In addition, a recent report by the German secret service (BND) demonstrates Thaçi's involvement in the racketeering and cigarette-trafficking activities of the Albanian mafia. Finally, Hashim Thaçi has been accused by Carla Del Ponte, former ICTY Prosecutor, and Dick Marty, Rapporteur of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, of having been involved in a terrible affair of trafficking in organs taken from Serbian prisoners during the Kosovo war of 1998.

Since Kosovo was placed under international supervision in 1999, neither the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) nor the Kosovo Force (KFOR) have been able to prevent a process of ethnic cleansing driven by Albanian extremists. Between 1999 and 2008, of the 235,000 Serbs, Gypsies, Gorani, and Turks expelled from Kosovo after the Kumanovo agreements, only 18,000 were able to return to their homes. Worse still, between 1999 and 2004, 1,197 non-Albanians were murdered and 2,300 kidnapped. There is not a single Serb left in Gnjilane, where there were 8,000 in 1999; there are barely 40 or so in Pristina, down from 40,000 in 1999. Of the Roma population estimated at 140,000 in 1999, two-thirds have had to flee. More than 150 Orthodox churches and monasteries have been destroyed, and 40,000 houses have been burned down or blown up by extremists. Finally, with regard to the anti-Serb riots of March 2004, in which no fewer than 19 people were killed, a recent report to the French National Assembly highlights *"the damning record of the judicial handling of the spring 2004 riots. Although 50,000 people are said to have taken part in the violence, only*

454 charges were brought and 211 guilty parties convicted". But the height of ignominy is the trafficking in organs, of which the Kosovar mafia, linked to certain gangs of power in Pristina, has been suspected for several years. In April 2008, Carla del Ponte published in Italian *"La chasse, les criminels de guerre et moi"* (The Hunt, the War Criminals, and Me), a book in which she described organ trafficking in Kosovo in the late 1990s, involving some of today's leading politicians in Pristina. In the summer of 1999, some 300 Serbian prisoners were allegedly transported from Kosovo to Albania, to the small town of Burrel, 91 km north of Tirana, where they were locked up in a sort of prison. A room in a "yellow house" outside the town was allegedly used as a theater of operations. During a Council of Europe mission in 2004, investigators discovered traces of blood in the house, which had been repainted white in the meantime, as well as remnants of used medical equipment (gauze, syringes, empty bottles, and drugs used for muscle relaxation). The harvested organs were then *"sent to clinics abroad to be implanted in paying patients"*, while the victims remained *"locked up until they were killed for other organs"*.

Regional recompositions to the rescue of the European order

In this rather difficult context, marked both by the appetites of the powers that be and internal problems, the leaders of the small Balkan nations attempted, not without difficulty, to federate their economies by bringing them together in regional organisations. The Open Balkan is an economic and political zone of three member states in the Balkans, those being Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia. The zone has a total area of 131,935 km² (50,940 sq mi) and an estimated total population of almost 12 million, located in Central and Southern Europe. The official languages are Albanian, Macedonian, and Serbian. Its administrative centres are the cities of Belgrade, Skopje, and Tirana. With the establishment of the zone, all three member states aim to increase trade and cooperation, as well as improve bilateral relations.

The idea of the Open Balkan (formerly known as the mini-Schengen Area) came in the early 1990s. It was first mentioned as an economic area between these countries on the Balkan Peninsula. The plans were eventually abandoned due to the Yugoslav Wars. The first signs of the Open Balkan emerged in 2018 as a way to improve political relations. The idea of the area was brought to life by Edi Rama in Berlin when he discussed it with the interested nations. Rama took on the idea of the former Prime Minister of

Albania, Fatos Nano. The Open Balkan's intentions are to provide greater opportunities for trade and student exchanges and encourage EU integration, *inter alia*. Citizens of member states will need only an ID card to visit other member states, saving time at border crossings. This economic zone prepares the countries to become members of the European Union. In this union, goods and capital between these countries would flow quicker, and more than 30 million hours would be saved crossing the borders of these three countries every year. The estimate by the World Bank projects savings of \$3.2 billion, of which, according to President Vučić, Serbia would save at least \$1.5 billion. On July 29, 2021, Vučić, Rama, and Zaev participated in the forum for regional economic cooperation in Skopje, where they signed agreements on the movement of goods, access to the labour market, and cooperation in protection against disasters. It has been agreed upon mutual acceptance of diplomas and job qualifications, making work forces more flexible and available and so attracting more investment. As part of the initiative, a regional economic forum attended by some 350 companies, mostly coming from these three countries but also from the wider region, was also held. An Open Balkan Leaders Summit was held on September 2, 2022, in Belgrade. Serbia, North Macedonia, and Albania signed several agreements on the exchange of food products, energy, and cinematography, as well as cooperation in emergency situations. The countries also agreed to further cooperation and the easing of tensions in the Balkan region. Montenegrin Prime Minister Dritan Abazović and the chairman of the council of ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Zoran Tegeltija, also attended the summit, expressing their wishes for these countries to join the initiative.

The Visegrád Group was established in 1991 when the Polish, Czechoslovak, and Hungarian leaders met in the Hungarian city of Visegrád to foster cooperation between the three Warsaw Pact states. In 1993, Slovakia separated from the Czech Republic, and the Group became the "V4". The initial objectives, which were to promote the integration of these states into NATO and the European Union, were fulfilled in 1999 and 2004, respectively. The V4 subsequently continued its existence mainly as an instrument for consultation, cooperation, and the definition of the common positions of the countries ahead of the European deadlines. Today, the pace of meetings at all levels is slowing due to the divergences between Hungary and its three partners on the issue of the war in Ukraine. With around 65 million inhabitants, the Visegrád group enjoys a similar weight within the European Union to that of France, which gives it 12.46% of the votes in the Council of the European Union. The V4 operates in an informal

intergovernmental mode and makes its decisions by consensus. The agenda of the meetings is set by the Presidency and generally evolves according to the main deadlines of the European calendar (European Councils, Informal Summits, etc.). The current presidency is held by the Czech Republic until July 2024. In 2023, the leaders of the Visegrad Group set several priorities: cross-border interconnection (modernisation and expansion of transport networks between V4 countries); increased coordination in the energy transition through the development of nuclear energy and low-carbon technologies; economic development; strengthening digital skills; fostering “green innovations” through cooperation with third countries such as South Korea, Japan, and Israel; sustainable development: protection of nature and biodiversity, particularly forests; promotion of technological neutrality; harmonization of legislation in line with European climate objectives. While the members of the Visegrád Group all defend a strong attachment to the Euro-Atlantic area, they differ both in terms of varying accessions to European programmes (euro or Schengen) and also in terms of their respective foreign policies. While Poland has placed itself under the US military umbrella, Hungary is gradually getting closer to Russia. Aleksandar Vučić, President of Serbia, took advantage of these reconfigurations to approach Hungary in recent years with Viktor Orbán. This Serbo-Magyar axis represents the backbone of a reconfiguration of the Western Balkans towards a space more oriented towards Central Europe.

Following the Summit of June 25, 1992, in Istanbul (Turkey), the Heads of State or Government of 11 Black Sea Basin countries (Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Georgia, Greece, Moldova, Romania, Russia, Turkey, and Ukraine) signed the Declaration on the Establishment of the Organisation for Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC).

Serbia joined the Organisation in 2004. Aiming to promote cooperation and harmony between member countries by encouraging friendly and good neighbourly relations in the Black Sea region, BSEC now serves as a platform for cooperation in a wide range of areas for its twelve member states. The Committee of Senior Officials of BSEC reports to the Council of Foreign Ministers and acts on behalf of the Council. The Committee shall be responsible for implementing the activities of the Organisation. On March 10, 1994, the Permanent International Secretariat of BSEC was established in Istanbul by the decision of the Council of Foreign Ministers. The current Secretary General of the Permanent International Secretariat of the BSEC is Lazăr Comănescu, of Romanian nationality. Since 1995, a “Troika” consultative mechanism has been set up, which includes the previous,

current, and subsequent presidencies. BSEC priorities, as set out in the BSEC Charter, include cooperation in the following areas: trade, economic development, banking and finance, communications, energy, transport, agriculture, health and pharmacy, environmental protection, tourism, science and technology, exchange of statistical data and economic information, cooperation between customs and border authorities, fight against organised crime, drugs, illegal importation of weapons and radioactive materials, terrorism and illegal emigration, extermination of emergency consequences, small and medium enterprises, education, institutional renewal, and good governance. Albania and Serbia benefit economically and politically from their integration into the BSEC, which has a population of 333 million and an average GDP per capita of more than 10,460 euros. Both a continental free trade market and a growing political-military group, the BSEC offers important prospects for the Western Balkans, which wish to escape the US or Eurasian prisms.

Conclusion

Emmanuel Todd, in his last book, explains the vacuity of a West that arrived, especially in the Protestant world, at the end of a process of dechristianization and loss of values (Todd, 2024). This explains the decline of this West on the international scene and therefore the weaknesses of the American empire on its eastern steps. The US military-industrial apparatus has been able to carry out, as in other parts of the world, an exercise of predatory resources for decades. Carried out almost to completion, it has enabled, among other things, the grabbing of Kosovo's subsurface resources by the children of the US deep-state.

The US soft power agencies have also succeeded in placing many of their followers at the head of micro-governments in Balkan states. But the dream of a democratic, liberal, and human rights-promoting space, supported by bodies like the UN, has hit the wall of reality. Kosovo is a failed state in the grip of all types of criminal trafficking; Bosnia-Herzegovina, despite the proclamation of the high representative of the EU, is still in danger of splitting in two.

Faced with a process of continuous fragmentation, the leaders of some of these countries have understood the need to regroup around already very active regional organisations. The Open Balkans, the Visegrad Group, and the Organisation for Black Sea Economic Cooperation offer a path of regional reorganisation that allows the Balkan countries to regain control of

their destiny. But will these initiatives be enough to get out of Western or Eurasian influence?

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