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THE GREAT POWERS' GEOPOLITICAL COMPETITION OVER THE BALKANS – THE INFLUENCE OF THE UKRAINIAN CRISIS

Ivan ZARIĆ¹
Željko BUDIMIR²

Abstract: The object of this paper is a geopolitical analysis of the great powers' competition in the Balkans. The main reason for the research is the unquestionable impact that the Ukrainian crisis, which is divided in the paper into two phases, has on the Balkans. The authors emphasised that competition between the US and Russia is dominant, while China is geopolitically suppressed. For the US, the main geopolitical framework is Euro-Atlanticism and the policy of NATO enlargement as its most important instrument. Also, it was argued that the EU's approach is completely complementary to NATO's. Regarding Russia, the phases of the neo-Eurasian geopolitical concept and their influence on practical policy were explored. Russia's primary goal is to prevent further NATO expansion, but that policy has experienced several failures in the Balkans. Four scenarios for ending military operations in Ukraine were analysed and their influence on the Balkans assessed. The main conclusion is that the Balkans will continue to be the object of competition between the great powers, and that the extent to which the balance of power between Euro-Atlanticism and Eurasianism will be possible will depend on the outcome of the current Ukrainian crisis.

Keywords: Great powers; US; NATO; EU; Russia; China; Ukraine; geopolitics; Balkans.

The Balkans as a Geopolitical Knot

The Balkans has always been a precise seismograph of geopolitical processes at the global level, especially active over periods characterised by turbulent relations

¹ PhD, member of the Institute of Asian Studies. E-mail: ivanzaric@yahoo.com; <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2019-0879>

² Assistant Professor, Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Banja Luka. E-mail: zeljko.budimir@fpn.unibl.org; <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1745-6667>

among great powers. Thus, towards the end of the Cold War and the beginning of the pronounced domination of a superpower in the unipolar period of the world order, the “Balkan geopolitical knot” (Stepić 2001) has once again become a confrontational arena for the regional actors with the prominent assistance and support of great powers. As the only remaining superpower, the United States maintained its military presence and influence in the Balkans after the conflict’s military phase ended and entered a period of frozen conflict across the major Balkan regions. However, the processes unravelling on a global level since the beginning of the 21st century have led to, to put it bluntly, the temporary placing of the Balkans on the secondary track of US interests, which hitherto completely dominated both the region and global affairs. The American focus on the “Eurasian Balkans” (Bžežinski 2001), especially following the terrorist attacks in September 2001, and the rebalancing to the Asia-Pacific region, left room for other great powers to attempt to establish a balance of power in the Balkans, increasing their presence and efforts in pursuit of their respective interests. In this regard, the Balkans have become a testing ground for the great powers of the modern world: 1) the United States, as the dominant global power and leader of the Western “block”, including the EU; 2) the Russian Federation, which has entered the phase of strengthening traditional influence in the region; and 3) the People’s Republic of China, a new global player, which previously had no significant influence or presence in the region.

The influence of the great powers in the region is multi-layered and implemented by a combination of various instruments. In the geopolitical sense, the Balkans has been and remains an arena where security instruments in the interests of the great powers have been applied. At the same time, however, in order to shape the regional outlook, there are other instruments at play, such as geoeconomic ones, including energy security. The security management of geopolitical interests became increasingly important with the escalation of the great powers’ conflicts in the crisis regions when, as a rule, the balance of power spilled over into the Balkans.

Rendering the perceived geopolitical aspects of the great powers’ competition in the Balkans, it is necessary to note that the key framework in which they take place is set by the conflict of Euro-Atlanticism and Eurasianism, while China remains in a subordinate position in geopolitical terms. That is why the focus of the paper will be on opposing Euro-Atlanticism and Neo-Eurasianism, keeping China’s presence in the region as secondary.

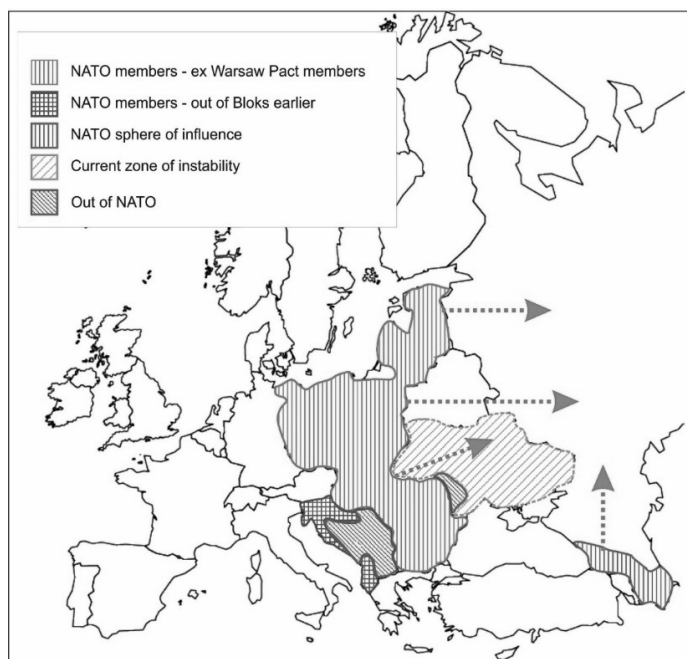
The Ukrainian Crisis and the Great Powers’ Geopolitical Competition

Having in mind the great powers’ competition in the Balkans, the Ukrainian crisis can be divided into two general phases. The first phase can be assigned to the period from late 2013 and early 2014, or the period from Euromaidan events and, more

specifically, from Russian-led referenda in Crimea till mid-February 2015.³ The beginning of military operations in Ukraine on February 24, 2022, led to the second or “hot phase” of the still ongoing crisis. Between the first and the second phases of the conflict, there was *de facto* a frozen conflict between the Russian-supported forces in Donbas and the Ukrainian forces, marked by numerous breaches of the ceasefire but without significant changes in terms of territorial control.

The basic geopolitical aspect of the Ukrainian crisis, especially since the beginning of the second phase of the crisis, is certainly the outstanding level of intensification of the conflict between Euro-Atlanticism and Eurasianism in the wider European context, with significant reflections in the Balkans. However, it is necessary to note that the basis for the current level of conflict between the West and Russia arose after the shift in the demarcation line between Euro-Atlanticism and Eurasianism following the victory of the United States in the Cold War (Zarić 2015, 31).

Map 1: Line of demarcation between Euro-Atlanticism and Neoeurasianism after the Cold War



Source: (Zarić 2015, 31).

³ The key moments to describe the transition from the first phase to a *de facto* frozen conflict in Ukraine were the signing of the Minsk II Protocol on February 12, 2015, and Ukrainian forces’ withdrawal on February 18, 2015, after the battle of Debaltseve.

The focus of the conflict between the thalassocratic West and tellurocratic Russia takes place in Eastern Europe and the “sanitary cordon”, i.e. the buffer zone, as key areas for control of Eastern Europe, the Heartland, and the World-Island, in accordance with Mackinder’s three-part slogan (Mackinder 1996, 106). It is in that area that the greatest emphasis was placed on the actions of the United States and its allies, on the one hand, and Russia, on the other, immediately after the onset of the first phase of the Ukrainian crisis, and especially with the transition to the second phase of the crisis. Mackinder’s buffer zone, as a central place for measuring the strength of Euro-Atlanticism and Eurasianism, represents a historical constant; despite different names assigned to it in the geopolitical projections of the great powers, in essence, the area referred to was always the same. Thus, the historical perceptions of the significance of Central and (South) Eastern Europe are important both in the theoretic-conceptual and practical geopolitical senses, although named differently, simultaneously remaining “litmus” used to geopolitically confirm the status of a great power with global ambitions. This area represents a zone of the Eurasians’ dilemma towards the west. Brzezinski recognised contact of three out of four grand spaces in it. The same area remained a buffer zone in the post-Cold War era, from Rumsfeld’s New Europe and Dugin’s Great Eastern Europe, to Koen’s Gateway region that could easily be turned into a Shatterbelt. China has also recognised its interest in this area, establishing the “16+China” format (Stepić and Zarić 2016, 456–457).

Thus, a region in which all the great powers seek to confirm such a status emanates an attractive magnetism for their further positioning. As the Balkans is a part of that area, it remains a zone of competition for great powers, especially bearing in mind that, from the Western point of view, the Balkans are an “area of instability” within the buffer zone, as it is not fully integrated into Euro-Atlantic structures like its other parts. Thus, an area that is not integrated into anyone’s sphere of interest opens the door of opportunity for the great powers to act actively in it, achieve their own and prevent the realisation of rival interests. In this sense, the United States, as the leader of the West, and Russia are geopolitically competing in the Balkans, with one of the key instruments being NATO enlargement or its prevention. When it comes to China, as another great power of the modern age, it demonstrates no direct geopolitical interest in the Balkans, which is no less than a region of the wider Chinese geopolitical global performance, predominantly within the Belt and Road Initiative.

Considering the position and importance of the Balkans in such a manner, the impact of the Ukrainian crisis, both direct and indirect, on the entire region is inevitable. Thus, after focusing on other regions, the beginning of the first phase of the Ukrainian crisis has ushered in an intensification of the US and Russian interest in the Balkans. The best indicator of the direct impact of the first phase of the Ukrainian crisis on the Balkans may be the assessment of the US Secretary of

State at the time, John Kerry, that Serbia, Macedonia, and Montenegro are in the “line of fire”, along with Georgia, Moldova, and Transnistria. Kerry made this assessment when talking about Russia’s growing influence in the Balkans in front of the US Senate Foreign Policy Committee members (B92 2015). Simultaneously, over the period of a frozen conflict between the two sides and preceding the intensification of the Ukrainian crisis, China has seized the moment in an attempt to position itself as well as possible in the same area.

However, the onset of the first phase of the Ukrainian crisis placed the geopolitical interests in the focus of both the American and the Russian sides, which will be discussed in more detail later. As a consequence of the geopolitical aspect of a clash between the great powers across a wider European framework, including the Balkans, China became *de facto* suppressed. What followed was, to a certain degree, a case of the spatial shrinking of its core instrument from the “17+1” format to “16+1” when Lithuania left in 2021.

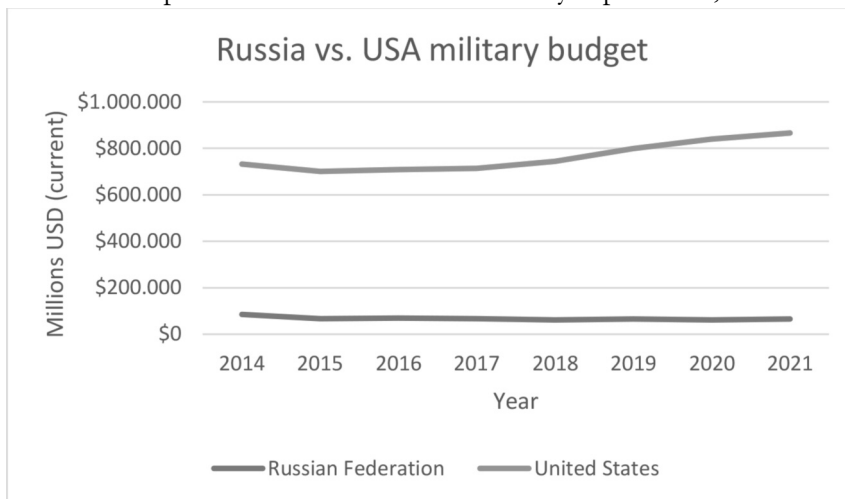
When the second phase of the Ukrainian crisis started, geopolitical instruments and interests were positioned at the forefront of Euro-Atlanticism and Eurasianism. The key feature following the onset of the second phase of the crisis, in the context of the Balkans, is that the intentions of both the United States and Russia to see the completion of their respective spheres of influence have become more intense, with less room to maintain a balanced relationship with the great powers. An additional characteristic is that, indirectly, there are indications that, regardless of the formal denial of the possibility of changing borders and violating territorial integrity and sovereignty, these options have been inherent in international politics. This is further reinforced by what the former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger said at the World Economic Forum in Davos in May 2022. In addition to stating that the conflict in Ukraine could permanently reshape the global order, he also pointed out that Ukraine should cede part of its territories to Russia in order to reach an agreement and end the current military conflict (Kissinger 2022).

The Balkans’ Magnetism for Great Powers

As already mentioned, there are three great powers involved in the competition over the Balkans: 1) the US, as the leader of the political West; 2) the Russian Federation, as a traditional player in the region; and 3) the People’s Republic of China, a new player both globally and regionally. Each of the above-mentioned great powers has its own interest in the Balkans and is trying to impose themselves in almost zero-sum game competition with the other(s), simultaneously putting the region in a wider global geopolitical context. However, from a geopolitical standpoint, they have a distinct level of involvement in the Balkans, with China’s presence in that context in the region already highlighted. This is why the US/NATO and Russian involvement in the region will be highlighted.

Although the US/NATO and Russia are involved in the region, there are several facts important to the Balkans that must be noted. Firstly, the level of possibilities for engaging in the Balkans for the two sides is asymmetrical. Asymmetry is visible when it comes to the military budgets of both the US and Russia, with the US military spending more than 12 times greater than Russia's (Chart 1).

Chart 1: Comparison of Russian and US military expenditure, 2014–2021.



Source: SIPRI 2022.

However, although asymmetry in military expenditure is undeniable in the US's favour, the distribution of US military funds across the Balkans on one hand, and Russian military cooperation on the other, shows precisely where the geopolitical focus is directed in the region, as we will analyse later on.

NATO Enlargement as the main US Security Instrument in the Region

The United States pursues a geopolitical perspective in the Balkans primarily through regional security arrangements, in accordance with the postulates of power projection set by Nicholas Spykman during World War II (Vuković 2007) and by means of the victory achieved in the Cold War. Accordingly, the key factor for the realisation of the interests of the US, as the leader of the West, is NATO, and the secondary aspect of the same complex is implemented by engaging the EU. In that sense, it is necessary to point out several elements that mostly connect this framework of the complementary action between NATO and the EU, and we will start with the EU, which, as Brzezinski pointed out, is an element of the American Western Eurasian bridgehead.

Links between the EU and NATO are powerful, not solely due to the fact that there is strong coordination and cooperation between the two organisations, including joint declarations and now regular progress reports⁴, but mostly because the majority of the EU member states are also NATO member states.⁵ Bearing in mind that Finland and Sweden submitted applications to join NATO, justifying their decisions by the emerging Russian-Ukrainian conflict, current trends show that the ratio between EU member states, which are not at the same time NATO member states, is about to change in favour of the Alliance (NATO 2022a).

In the most important document adopted by the current European Commission (2019–2024) in the area of Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), named “Strategic Compass for Security and Defence – For a European Union that protects its citizens, values and interests and contributes to international peace and security” in several places, including the Introduction of the document, it is clearly stated that “a stronger and more capable EU in the field of security and defence will contribute positively to global and transatlantic security and is complementary to NATO, which remains the foundation of collective defence for its members” (CEU 2022, 5). Clearly, the main point of such a position is that NATO is a leading organisation in the area of defence, which is also a product of the escalation (the second phase) of the Ukrainian crisis as of February 24, 2022.⁶ The fact that the EU adopted the abovementioned document in March 2022,⁷ after the second phase of the Ukrainian crisis began and caused severe reactions jointly from the US and the EU to Russian military actions, demonstrates a close connection between the Ukrainian crisis and the great powers’ competition in the wider European zone.

A part of the EU Strategic Compass directly linked with the Balkans is entitled “Our strategic environment”. It emphasises that the Balkans is labelled as the first layer of the EU’s strategic environment. However, it is still not stable and secure from the EU perspective, and it is exposed to foreign interference.⁸ A focus in the

⁴ Between June 2017 and June 3, 2021, there were six progress reports on NATO-EU cooperation published in total: 1) the first progress report on June 19, 2017; 2) the second report on December 5, 2017; 3) the third report on June 8, 2018; 4) the fourth report on June 17, 2019; 5) the fifth report on June 16, 2020; and 6) the sixth on June 3, 2021.

⁵ Currently, 21 out of 27 EU member states are also NATO member states.

⁶ Also, a statement by Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergey Lavrov, indicates that the second phase of the Ukrainian crisis led toward degrading the EU’s strategic autonomy, at least from the Russian perspective. Minister Lavrov emphasised that since it has come to power, the new German government has lost the last signs of independence and that France is the only one that advocates the EU’s strategic autonomy (Teslova 2022).

⁷ The document was prepared before the second phase of the Ukrainian crisis, with an obvious influence from the first phase of the crisis. However, the emerging of the second phase led to several reviews and changes of the Compass, which, at the end, has its final content.

EU document was put on Bosnia and Herzegovina's sovereignty and the progress of the EU-led Pristina-Belgrade dialogue (CEU 2022).

When it comes to the key zone of its strategic environment in the Balkans affected by the Russian Armed Forces operation in Ukraine – Bosnia and Herzegovina – the EU not only issued a political statement after adopting the Strategic Compass, but it also takes tangible action. The present EU Commission's most key CSDP paper clearly targets Bosnia and Herzegovina as a probable and potential “spill over” location for “deterioration of the European security situation”. Just after the escalation in Ukraine, the EUFOR almost doubled its troops in Bosnia and Herzegovina by engaging almost 500 additional troops from Austria, Bulgaria, Romania, and Slovakia (Shanon 2022).

Besides Bosnia and Herzegovina, as mentioned in the Strategic Compass, the significance of the Kosovo and Metohija issue is also emphasised in the Western geopolitical approach to the Balkans. From a political perspective, also after the second phase of the Ukrainian crisis emerged in late February 2022, the EU has reinforced the EULEX mission with the additional 92 officers from its member states (EULEX 2022). This can be seen as the second pillar of the EU's attempts to achieve the proclaimed goal of stabilisation of its own strategic environment.

From the geopolitical perspective, it can be concluded that these EU decisions are being driven by two factors: 1) a perception of the other great power's (Russian) influence in the Balkans; and 2) the complementarity of the EU CSDP with NATO troops' deployment on the Eastern flank caused by the escalation in Ukraine. Those two factors combined demonstrate that the most important strategic vector of interest is pointed towards the East/Russia, with a perception that no instability can be allowed behind the “main front” (in the Balkans).

When it comes to NATO, it remains the main instrument for achieving Euro-Atlanticism goals in the region. A process of NATO enlargement in the Balkans is directly aimed towards what western perception is – weakening Russia's influence in the region. Analysing details of the prospect of NATO enlargement policy, two main flanks can be highlighted: 1) the Balkans and 2) the Nordic area. In line with that, it was observed when the Ukrainian crisis started that “in terms of implementation, pursuing a geopolitical enlargement policy means reprioritizing NATO's enlargement principles. Candidate countries would be evaluated on how their military, political, and economic assets add to or detract from alliance capabilities, as well as on the impact of their admission on the overall security of the alliance *vis-à-vis* Russia” (Wolff 2015, 1114).

As the sole unstable area of Mackinder's buffer zone, the primary US/NATO goal is to integrate the Balkans into the Euro-Atlantic framework. After a brief pause

⁸ Although not explicitly mentioned, it is obvious from numerous political statements and documents in the EU that this formulation is pointed mainly toward Russia and partly toward China.

in its enlargement, a new period of vigorous NATO active open-door policy began shortly after the outbreak of the Ukrainian crisis in 2014. In the Balkans, it was evident that following a stalemate with the joining of Albania and Croatia in 2009, a new impulse for enlargement was marked by the beginning of the Ukrainian crisis.

Perceiving the Balkans as the black hole in NATO's southern theatre, Wolff argues that stalled NATO enlargement and previous EU and NATO investments in reforming the Balkans are elements that do not allow the West to let Russia pull the region away (Wolff 2015, 1114–1115). It can be concluded that, as a consequence of the first phase of the Ukrainian crisis, Montenegro (2017) and the Republic of North Macedonia (2020) became full NATO members.

A proper indicator for this is the assessment of the significance of Montenegro's joining NATO. Although Montenegro is a relatively small country lacking comparatively (globally/regionally) significant military capabilities, its joining NATO has a clear geopolitical background. Comprised in a relatively simple assessment after that phase of Alliance enlargement, it was pointed out that the "Adriatic is [now] effectively a NATO lake" (Young 2019, 31). Such a geopolitical point of view also shows a direct Euro-Atlantism approach to the Balkans in a Heartland-Rimland concept versus Russian Eurasianism.

Following Montenegro's accession to NATO, the enlargement process in the Balkans continued with the Republic of North Macedonia in 2020. However, directly preceding NATO's membership, a major dispute over its name was resolved with Greece by means of the Prespa Agreement. The key prerequisite for joining NATO was adopting the Prespa Agreement using a referendum held on September 30, 2018. However, there were several problems as regards the referendum: it failed to reach the constitutional census of 50% +1 and it was never ratified in accordance with the law, while its entering into force upon publication in the Official Gazette was with only one signature out of the two required (Vankovska 2020, 356). Despite that, a higher geopolitical interest led the West to accept the results of the referendum and to start the formal procedure of the Republic of North Macedonia's joining NATO.

The second phase of the Ukrainian crisis gave an impetus to the enlargement of NATO towards the Nordic flank, including both Finland and Sweden initiating the process in May 2022 (NATO 2022a). Indirectly, the same elements have also made an impact on the Balkans, especially related to Bosnia and Herzegovina, bearing in mind several key statements of both NATO and B&H representatives.⁹

⁹ The same remark can also be found on the official NATO website, which is dedicated to NATO-Bosnia and Herzegovina cooperation, where it is emphasized that "in light of Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine in 2022, NATO is increasing its support for partners at risk from Russian threats and interference, including Bosnia and Herzegovina" (NATO 2022c).

However, the background of Bosnia and Herzegovina's path towards NATO has several keystones, marked by internal differences with respect to full-fledged NATO membership. The biggest one lasted almost 10 years (2009–2019), between the first showing interest in the Membership Action Plan (MAP) and further path towards Alliance, expressed by Bosniak politicians¹⁰ in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and submitting "Reforms Program" to NATO in December 2019.¹¹ From the Alliance side, the most significant element is the fact that in December 2018, NATO member states' foreign ministers decided that NATO was ready to accept the submission of Bosnia and Herzegovina's first ANP under the MAP.¹² Also, as of early 2020, it was published on its official website that Bosnia and Herzegovina was participating in the MAP (NATO 2022b).

Additionally, statements made by highly appointed representatives of both Russia and NATO presented opposite opinions on the prospect of Bosnia and Herzegovina's NATO accession. In that context, the Russian Ambassador to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Igor Kalabuhov, reiterated on several occasions, following the beginning of the second phase of the Ukrainian crisis, that there was no consensus in B&H regarding NATO membership.¹³ He added that this was an issue which would be difficult to overcome and that every decision in that direction was a B&H internal issue. However, Russia would keep the right to react in the case of the prospective accession of any country, including B&H to NATO (*Al Jazeera* 2022). On the other hand, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, after meeting with the Chairmen of B&H Presidency Šefik Džerferović in May 2022, stressed that the Alliance strongly supports Bosnia and Herzegovina's sovereignty and territorial integrity and "remains committed to its Euro-Atlantic aspirations..." (NATO 2022d).

When it comes to the NATO-B&H-Russia triangle, it can be stated that there are two major difficulties. First, the Ukrainian crisis was the catalyst for NATO's

¹⁰ The Minister of Defence, Selmo Cikotić, reiterated a desire to join NATO in January 2009, which was confirmed by the Bosniak member of the Presidency, Haris Silajdžić, in October 2009, including the announcement of the official MAP application.

¹¹ The Reforms Program has dual interpretation. On the one hand, the Republic of Srpska representatives and institutions are stating that the document is not the Annual National Plan (ANP), but rather a document promulgating improvement of cooperation with NATO and not implying NATO membership, as stated in the document itself. On the other hand, NATO representatives and Bosniak and Croat politicians are stressing that the Reforms Program is actually an ANP, a keystone in the activation of the MAP process.

¹² This step was taken despite the fact that Bosnia and Herzegovina did not fulfil any of the conditions set by NATO in 2010. Also, the broader perspective of the decision is that it was made in the aftermath of general elections held in Bosnia and Herzegovina in October 2018, with several serious obstacles in the formation of the Council of Ministers negotiation process.

¹³ At this point, it is crucial to understand that the Russian position is rooted in the Republic of Srpska National Assembly resolution on military neutrality, adopted in 2017 (Rezolucija NS 2017).

increased involvement in Bosnia and Herzegovina, according to the dynamics of NATO-B&H ties. However, the integration of the “black hole in the southern theatre” was done gradually, starting from easier cases (Montenegro, North Macedonia) and moving towards more complex ones (B&H). Second, the procedures are not so relevant when geopolitical reasons are imperative. They are put aside when perceived in a wider geopolitical context.

Aside from that, the US approach to a region supports the overall processes of NATO enlargement and is focused on increasing interoperability and strengthening ties with regional Armed Forces. One of the main indicators of the US approach is how funds from Foreign Military Sales (FMS) are distributed (Table 1).

Table 1: Distribution of US FMS funds in the Balkans and Ukraine, 2016–2021.

Country	EY	1950-2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	total 2016-2021
Albania		\$87,867,033	\$994,908	\$5,589,703	\$5,330,857	\$2,918,259	\$42,284,081	\$8,760,201	\$65,878,009
B&H		\$88,522,335	\$400,182	\$3,536,189	\$6,004,842	\$429,880	\$40,831,644	\$255,489	\$51,458,226
Croatia		\$38,349,621	\$31,671,492	\$7,678,053	\$6,131,175	\$3,425,044	\$85,068,480	-\$419,212	\$133,555,032
Montenegro		\$108,741,684	\$1,279,992	\$674,415	\$2,365,794	\$1,328,646	\$38,501,006	\$13,623,451	\$57,773,304
North Macedonia		\$5,502,082	\$265,713	\$769,363	\$924,549	\$11,012,940	\$21,085,360	\$84,691,923	\$118,749,848
Serbia		\$11,037,998	\$0	\$0	\$15	\$1,591,510	\$4,116,118	-\$20,972	\$5,686,671
Kosovo and Metohija		\$12,557,346	\$9,132,845	\$148,420	\$0	\$2,707,541	\$11,115,838	\$22,425,205	\$45,529,849
Ukraine		\$179,208,737	\$226,587,316	\$207,721,548	\$250,781,852	\$272,465,442	\$510,598,973	\$333,050,125	\$1,801,205,256

Source: DSCA 2020; DSCA 2021.

Analysing the FMS funds data,¹⁴ it is clear that the first phase of the Ukrainian crisis led to a significant increase of US military support to Kyiv, in addition to other funds used by the US to support Ukraine, especially since the beginning of the second phase of the crisis. However, a distribution of funds in the Balkans at the same time shows that the biggest beneficiaries of the US military support initiatives were new NATO members, North Macedonia and Montenegro. Overall support for B&H significantly increased as well in the same period, reflecting the US political approach to that country, which is in conjunction with B&H-NATO relations linked to the MAP/ANP issue. On the other hand, despite being the largest country in the region with the strongest Armed Forces, funds for Serbia were by far the lowest compared to others for FY 2016-2021.

¹⁴ Available funds in FMS should be observed as total, having in mind that some projects can withdraw more funds in one year, but are planned for a longer period of time. However, in total, funds for the period FY 2016–2021 are showing present trends.

Prominent US theorists have also made direct links between the Ukrainian crisis, NATO enlargement, and Russian actions in Ukraine. Although not among the US mainstream authors, John Mearsheimer's position on this issue is important to note. During the first phase of the Ukrainian crisis, Mearsheimer stated that NATO enlargement was the root cause of the crisis, more specifically, Ukrainian extrication from the Russian sphere of influence and its turning into a "Western stronghold on Russia's border" (Mearsheimer 2014a, 78).¹⁵

Mearsheimer continued with the same position after the second phase of the crisis emerged in 2022, insisting that if there was no NATO eastward enlargement, there would not be a Ukrainian crisis, also reiterating that the beginning of the crisis was the Bucharest 2008 NATO Summit and the promotion of enlargement towards Ukraine and Georgia (Chotiner 2022), with prompt Russian leadership perception that this posed an existential threat to Russia itself, which gradually led to military actions in Ukraine, with territorial goals of operation pointed towards eastern and southern parts of Ukraine. And although not referring directly to the Balkans, Mearsheimer used historical facts to show that the former Yugoslavia, along with Albania, was not a part of the former USSR, which is now part of Russia's first tier of geopolitical interest (Mearsheimer 2022).

Neo-Eurasianism as a Russian Geopolitical Framework in the Balkans

The core geopolitical framework of Russian action towards the Balkans is contained in a broader neo-Eurasian geopolitical conception. According to Stepić's conclusions, the concept of neo-Eurasianism implies that the ultimate goal is the transition from a unipolar to a multipolar world divided into four essentially tellurocratically conceived pan-zones of the meridian direction, within which Big spaces exist. At the same time, such a structure envisages the possibility of connecting Big spaces from different pan-zones. The most significant segment of this geopolitical conception is that Europe would cease to exist as a branch of Euro-Atlanticism and an American bridgehead in western Eurasia, which would inevitably have a direct bearing on the Balkans (Stepić 2013).

¹⁵ This Mearsheimer article triggered a debate between Michael McFaul, professor and former US ambassador to Russia in Obama's administration (2012–2014), Stephen Sestanovich, professor and also ex-Ambassador-at-Large for the former USSR (1997–2001), and Mearsheimer in *Foreign Affairs*' next issue. McFaul and Sestanovich, as mainstream representatives, denounced Mearsheimer's thesis for the cause of the Ukrainian crisis, labelling Russia as responsible for the emerging crisis and advocating that Russia had a wrong perception of the West's actions. However, in his response, Mearsheimer reiterated his earlier thesis, additionally emphasising that good US-Russia relations were always present when Washington took Moscow's interests into account (McFaul 2014; Sestanovich 2014; Mearsheimer 2014b).

The neo-Eurasian perspective of the new multipolar order was forged in the period of the still present domination of the US in the global framework. Taking this into account, Stepić emphasises the four phases of the neo-Eurasian strategy aimed at the transition from a unipolar to a pan-zonal multipolar world:

1. Introductory phase or statement of global geopolitical reality,
2. Reactive phase or the onset of the Eurasian counter-strategies,
3. Multipolar phase and establishing zonal “pan-areas”, and
4. Large-scale phase or structuring of “zones” (Stepić 2013).

Analysing current processes set in this manner, the main conclusion is that the concept has currently reached a phase between the reactive (second) and multipolar (third) phases, and that the transition to the active phase of Russia’s performance was conditioned and accelerated. At present, there are two main factors that should be taken into account: 1) the situation with the connection of the Western Eurasian bridgehead with the Euro-Atlantic core (US), along with the situation regarding Russian intentions to create axes of friendship; and 2) an active process aimed at pushing the spheres of influence of the pan-Eurasian zone in the part of its Big space Russia-Eurasia, at the expense of the Euro-African pan-zone in the part of the European Big space.

Map 2: Sphere of influence contact zone between Neo-Eurasianism and Euro-Atlanticism in Neo-Eurasian geopolitical concept – from reactive to multipolar phase



Source: Authors.

When it comes to the weakening of the ties of the bridgehead with the core while strengthening the axes of friendship, perhaps the best indicator of this approach was the continuation of the energy interconnection between Europe, predominantly Germany, and Russia, with a direct bypass of the buffer zone (or Rumsfeld's "new Europe") by means of "Nord Stream 2". The first phase of the Ukrainian crisis generated the need to diversify gas supply routes between Moscow and Berlin. Although the Ukrainian crisis has led to the introduction, in several areas, of US and EU sanctions against Russia over the annexation of Crimea (Janković 2021, 14), the project of connecting Germany and Russia by means of the "Nord Stream 2" gas pipeline has continued at this stage, despite strong political pressure from Washington on Berlin. At the same time, during the Trump administration, relations along the Brussels/Berlin-Washington line were strained, which resulted in stronger votes for achieving strategic autonomy at the EU level, including in the field of defence. Significant improvements in relations between the EU and its member states and the United States since the establishment of the Biden administration have returned Russia's strategic focus to confronting the United States, including destroying the architecture of arms control agreements highly significant for Europe. Thus, in the first 100 days of the Biden administration, the commitment to renewing relations with allies was emphasised on several occasions, and the culmination of that approach was manifested at the Munich Security Conference, when Biden reiterated that NATO has a future, reaffirmed the US commitment to Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, and stopped the process of reducing the number of American soldiers in Germany (Simić and Živojinović 2021, 201–203). The main conclusion based on the circumstances in which the relations between the great powers are established is that the relatively more favourable process of weakening the core's ties with the European bridgehead has been reversed, contrary to Russia's interests with changes in the United States. Such a disturbance in conception caused a faster transition to an active approach and the third phase of the idea of a multipolar world according to the vision of neo-Eurasianism.

However, it is necessary to note that the immediate preparation for the transition towards achieving the goals defined for the third phase of the neo-Eurasian concept began even prior to the onset of the second phase of the Ukrainian crisis. The culmination of these processes was reflected in the Russian initiative conceived in the proposals for two agreements from December 2021 (Russia-NATO and Russia-US). From the geopolitical perspective, the most significant demand on the part of Russia in both documents was to suspend further NATO expansion, especially emphasising Ukraine among other countries in Article 6 of the draft agreement with the Alliance, and also to limit the deployment of NATO forces along the lines prior to May 27, 1997 (Agreement Russia-NATO 2021, Articles 4 and 6), as well as the application of indivisible security (Treaty US-Russia 2021). The United States and NATO rejected the main Russian proposals, with special emphasis on

maintaining an active “NATO open door policy”, which is certainly one of the most important segments of the Euro-Atlantic strategy after the Cold War (Aza and Gonzalez 2022).

The overall circumstances of the relationship between neo-Eurasianism and Euro-Atlanticism had significant projections in the Balkans. When it comes to Russia’s position, an important feature is that in the neo-Eurasian concept, Russia has not fully defined its aspirations towards the Balkans, except for the Black Sea states, which it still sees as a part of its sphere of interest, regardless of their NATO and EU membership. This can be seen in geopolitical projections of the phase development of the neo-Eurasian conception, where it is correctly noted that the line separating the spheres of interest of neo-Eurasianism and Euro-Atlanticism encompasses the entire country of Ukraine, breaks out almost on the eastern shores of the Black Sea, and includes Turkey. Therefore, Russia stated that the Balkans were in the depths of the opponent’s zone. It is crucial to see that such a situation has violated even the easternmost border between the two opposing sides in the concept of neo-Eurasianism (strategic narrowing on the Odessa-Narva line), which was considered the minimum protection of Russian interests and was not considered part of the contested zone in neo-Eurasian concepts.

However, the functional third phase of the neo-Eurasian concept implies demarcation with Euro-Atlanticism along the lines that include the route from the Baltic to the Aegean Sea and classifies Belarus, Ukraine as a whole, Romania, and Bulgaria as a Russia-Eurasia Big space. By comparing the delineation of neo-Eurasianism and Euro-Atlanticism presented in this way, despite the fact that it was made approximately, it can be concluded that for Russia, when it comes to the Balkans, Romania and Bulgaria’s joining NATO was a case of crossing the “Rubicon”, and that these two countries belong to its primary zone of interest. However, it is important to note that, no matter how rough this spatial representation of the neo-Eurasian concept is, it places the Republic of Serbia, the Republic of Srpska, and other Balkan states in the European Big space of the Euro-African pan-zone. Adhering to such a projection, for Russia, most of the Balkans is territory “behind the *Limes*”.

The beginning of the second phase of the Ukrainian crisis also marked Russia’s launch of a process that would lead to shifting the borders of spheres of influence within Euro-Atlanticism in accordance with the stated situation. The Russian intention to control Ukraine is inherent and a necessity to achieve the minimum goals determined by the proposals of the two agreements towards the US and NATO in December 2021. However, regardless of the outcome of the second phase of the Ukrainian crisis, the further intentions and visions of Moscow with respect to the Balkans remain a big open question.

The strategic sphere of Russian action towards the Balkans is outlined in the key document defining the foreign policy – the Concept of the Foreign Policy of

the Russian Federation, a document that is periodically published. Thus, the shifting of policy towards the Balkans is evident from the most recent concepts, those published in 2013 and 2016. Namely, despite the fact that the Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation from 2013 in Article 66 presents a brief guideline related to the Balkans, this approach was not retained in the 2016 Concept. In 2013, immediately prior to the first phase of the Ukrainian crisis, while the country was *de facto* considered part of (neo) Euroasia, the Concept stated:

“Russia aims to develop comprehensive, pragmatic, and equitable cooperation with Southeast European countries. The Balkan region is of great strategic importance to Russia, including its role as a major transportation and infrastructure hub used for supplying gas and oil to European countries” (FPC 2013).

The Russian foreign policy concept from 2016 makes no explicit reference to the Balkans. However, Article 69 of the document may be interpreted as indirectly related to the Balkans, the Republic of Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, which are not NATO members.¹⁶ It states:

“Russia respects the choice of European States that are not members of any military alliances. These States are making a genuine contribution to ensuring stability and security in Europe. Russia is ready to engage in constructive multi-faceted cooperation with them” (The Embassy 2016).

Two basic elements can be noticed when comparing the above-mentioned attitudes in Russian foreign policy conceptions in the context of their geopolitical approach to the Balkans and relations with other great powers. The first element is closely related to energetics, especially bearing in mind that the energetics factor is the basic instrument of Russia’s geopolitical approach to Europe as a whole, especially to Germany, which is perceived as the key country in the neo-Eurasian concept of future world division. Specifically, the “South Stream” gas pipeline was still a possibility with the concept from 2013, but it was clear as early as 2016, with the update of the document, that the project had been cancelled and that there was no tangible possibility that the situation could not be reversed in the short term. As a result, Russia’s approach not just to the Balkans but also to Europe is altered from geoeconomics to geopolitics.

Along these lines, the second element can be regarded. It is manifested by the fact that the beginning of the first phase of the Ukrainian crisis in 2014 inevitably led to a changed definition of priorities in Russian foreign policy but also a geopolitical worldview, and Ukraine, once regarded as the “default”, became a priority for Moscow. Despite the initial apparent perception that the consequence

¹⁶ When the document was adopted in 2016, the process of Montenegro’s accession to the Alliance was underway, which inevitably led to further antagonism between Podgorica and Moscow in the period immediately before and after the act of gaining full membership of Montenegro in NATO.

of this change is that the Balkans has been hierarchically degraded in that direction, the Ukrainian crisis has led to an increase in Russian interest and action in the Balkans. The increase of Russian interest in the Balkans can also be seen in Article 69 of the 2016 Concept, when the focus is placed on European countries which are not members of any military alliance, in essence NATO, and Russia is ready to cooperate with them in multiple dimensions (The Embassy 2016, Article 69).

In practice, the focus has been placed on the military aspects of cooperation with countries that are not NATO members, primarily with the Republic of Serbia, where, as part of military-technical cooperation in 2021 alone, Russia delivered tanks and armoured vehicles worth almost 75 million euros (Janković 2021, 15), intensifying the number of military exercises at the same time. Ponomareva is on the same line, analysing the position of Serbia in the Sino-EU/NATO-Russia triangle and putting Russia-Serbia military-technical cooperation in the context of the two countries' Declaration on Strategic Partnership, stating:

“Military-technical cooperation is a special area of strategic partnership, which draws the EU's and NATO's heightened attention. Indeed, Russia is the largest military-technical donor of the Serbian army. The Armed Forces of Serbia have obtained free of charge six MiG-29s, 30 BRDM-2MS armoured reconnaissance and patrol vehicles, and 30 T-72MS tanks. Also, Serbia enjoys significant discounts on Russian weapons and military equipment, and other benefits” (Ponomareva 2020, 172).

It is clear that Russia focused its actions in the Balkans on non-NATO or aspirant countries, attempting to strengthen military ties as a means of preventing further NATO enlargement to the region. Simultaneously, Russia is emphasising that “it should be recognised that the strategic partnership *en Russe*, unlike agreements with the EU and NATO, does not place Belgrade in an institutionally subordinate position” (Ponomareva 2020, 172).

At the same time, this is the prism through which the Russian position is outlined in relation to the aspirants for membership in the Alliance. Russia has persisted in opposing the accession of Montenegro to NATO, including the assessment of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) that it is a process of artificially drawing Montenegro into the Alliance. However, although it has made numerous statements to oppose the Alliance's enlargement to Montenegro, Russia has not taken concrete and effective steps to stop the process.¹⁷ The full NATO

¹⁷ It is important to note that in the Western discourse, Russia is accused of being the party that inspired, financed, and supported the alleged coup in Montenegro, with the aim of disrupting the election process and election results in that country in October 2016. Russia's alleged reason for such actions was that Montenegro was joining in the EU sanctions against Russia and its intention to join NATO (Kondratenko 2018, 94). Although such allegations regarding Russia organising the coup are widespread across western discourse, it is disputable, to say the least, that Russia remained opposed to Montenegro's joining the Alliance.

membership of Montenegro has additionally reduced the geopolitical manoeuvring space of Russia in the Balkans, and the politics of preventing the Alliance from expanding further has suffered yet another debacle.

The next step was the process of the Republic of North Macedonia joining the Alliance. On that occasion also, Russia's policy of preventing further NATO expansion has failed. Russia strongly opposed the interpretation of the results of the referendum held on September 30, 2018, in Macedonia regarding the Prespa Agreement. Thus, the Russian MFA emphasised the low turnout of only 36.8%, which was interpreted as a political position contrary to NATO membership, stating:

“Despite the fact that two thirds of Macedonia's population did not vote in favour of the Prespa Agreement, the results of the vote were instantly hailed by the EU and NATO leaders and in Washington as well. The desire to ensure and speed up Skopje's accession to NATO despite the will of the people of Macedonia is evident” (Russian MFA 2018).

As it can be seen, an important position for the realisation of Russia's geopolitical interests, primarily in the context of preventing NATO enlargement, is occupied by B&H and the Republic of Serbia as the only countries that are not members of the Alliance. While Serbia is firmly in the position of military neutrality in accordance with the 2007 decisions of the National Assembly (Rezolucija NS RS 2007, Article 6), the position of B&H towards NATO remains disputable for two reasons: 1) the absence of consensus among the constitutive nations of Bosnia and Herzegovina towards the accession to the Alliance; and 2) the position of NATO that handing in the “Reform program” of B&H in 2019 launched the MAP, as explained earlier. However, Russian reaction regarding B&H joining NATO is significantly more flexible than in the case of other countries in the region, primarily due to the fact that the Republic of Srpska adopted a resolution declaring military neutrality in 2017 (Rezolucija NS 2017), whereby the leadership of the Republic of Srpska is decidedly against joining NATO.

With all these in mind, Russia's policy of preventing NATO enlargement has failed, so that (only) Serbia and B&H remain outside the Alliance in the Balkans (Janković 2021, 15), while the entire remaining area, indirectly (Kosovo and Metohija) or directly, is brought under the full control of Euro-Atlanticism. When it comes to Kosovo and Metohija, it is necessary to note that with the withdrawal of the US/NATO from Afghanistan, the KFOR has become the largest single NATO mission at the moment, which further speaks in favour of the significance assigned to that area and the Balkans.

At the same time, Russia will continue to oppose EU and NATO enlargement in the Balkans in order to keep the region out of Western political and security structures for as long as possible, and will continue to destabilise the region by maintaining frozen conflicts and hybrid actions to oppose the pro-Western

Montenegro, the Republic of North Macedonia, and the authorities of the Provisional Institutions in Pristina (Jagiello 2021).

The Ukrainian Crisis's Scenarios and Possible Influence on Balkans Geopolitics

The geopolitical significance of the Ukrainian crisis, especially after its second phase started, has a global impact, with major implications for the whole of Europe, including the Balkans. However, military operations in Ukraine are ongoing and the outcome of those operations is still unknown. Nevertheless, we will consider four scenarios according to which the second phase of the conflict could end, which would have a direct impact on the Balkans and the geopolitical destiny of both contested countries (B&H and Serbia). Having in mind that Russia is the main great power involved directly in the Ukrainian crisis, scenarios will be considered with Russia as the key subject. Some possible scenarios are:

- 1) *Russian grand victory* – taking control over whole Ukraine, or as a sub-scenario, Russian control over the Ukrainian territory east from the river Dniipro and on the South majority of Mykolaiv, Zaporizhia and Kherson regions, as well as the Odesa region, including territorial contact with Transnistria/Pridnestrovie on the west and with the Danube Delta on the south;
- 2) *Partial Russian victory* – this is a reduced first scenario option, not including the whole Eastern Ukraine, but including Russian control of coastal and eastern parts of Ukraine, area stretching from Kharkiv region (necessarily including Khrakiv city), southern towards Luhansk and Donetsk, the majority of Mykolaiv, Zaporizhia and Kherson regions, as well as the Odesa region, including territorial contact with Transnistria/Pridnestrovie on the west and with the Danube Delta on the South;
- 3) *Russian geopolitical stalemate* – this scenario includes Russian control of territories as assessed on July 1, 2022, which excludes Khrakiv city, but includes Luhansk and Donetsk, as well as the majority of Zaporizhia and Kherson regions,¹⁸ without further Russian advance in Ukraine, and
- 4) *Russian military defeat – Ukrainian military victory*. This scenario includes Russian control over Luhansk and Donetsk, but withdrawal from others part of Ukraine.

In each scenario Crimea is considered as territory under a full Russian control. However, when it comes to scenarios, the probability of realisation of scenarios 2

¹⁸ The scenario with the mentioned territories is based on the Institute for the Study of War assessments and maps of the Ukrainian conflict updates (ISW 2022).

and 3 is significantly higher compared to scenarios 1 and 4. Nevertheless, any of them could have a significant impact on the Balkans.

In the case of the first and second scenarios, Russian influence over the Balkans will be boosted, as well as in the Black Sea region. With controlling the whole Ukrainian territory, although this scenario looks unlikely, Russia will get an opportunity to use the full-scale capacity of its main instruments in the Balkans, such as providing stable gas supplies, a more visible presence in B&H, and maintaining significant military-technical cooperation, according to Ponomareva's conclusions. The same option will be valid in the first sub-scenario and the second scenario cases, however, with fewer available instruments. Both the first and second scenarios would result in increased confrontation with the US/NATO over the Balkans, and due to available instruments, Russia would be able to prevent the US from rearranging the Balkans according to the main Euro-Atlanticism framework. The Balkans' current geopolitical structure will remain the same, despite the highly likely US/NATO attempt to change it, which includes B&H and Serbia out of Euro-Atlantic institutions and Kosovo and Metohija as frozen conflict. In all the mentioned scenarios, all other Balkan countries, already NATO members, will remain in the US sphere of influence.

The specific difference between the second scenario and the first one is that Russia's influence will be focused to the Black Sea region's countries (Bulgaria, Romania), which is its primary geopolitical goal not just according to the presented Eurasian geopolitical approach but also its practical foreign and security policy, presented in December 2021 agreement proposals to NATO and the US. The geopolitical situation in the Balkans will remain as described, having in mind that the B&H integration process into NATO will continue with an uncertain outcome.

The third scenario would result in a frozen conflict in Ukraine and, most likely, negotiations between Russia on one side and Ukraine on the other, with Western support. Such a situation would produce continuing competition over the Balkans, but in this case with initiative on the US/NATO side and less Russian influence and instruments compared to scenarios 1 and 2. A possible geopolitical result in the Balkans would be further and gradual B&H integration into NATO and increased pressure on Serbia to reduce its connections with Russia. When it comes to B&H, Russia's limited instruments will probably lead towards preventing the extension of the EUFOR mandate, thus imposing legal and technical obstacles for the West to continue with a military presence in that country. From the US perspective, the Russian geopolitical stalemate in Ukraine will provide enough momentum for the US to impose strong pressure in order to find, from the western perspective, positive solutions to the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue. North Macedonia and Montenegro, two new NATO members from the Balkans, will also be fully integrated into the Euro-Atlantic framework.

The fourth scenario case – Russian military defeat, although unlikely, would lead to Russia's losing, on a long-term basis, its influence in the region. Two key processes could occur if this scenario were to materialize. The first one is completing the US integration of the whole Balkans into a Euro-Atlantic institutions, NATO primarily. As a continuation of an already ongoing process, Bosnia and Herzegovina will become NATO members, while the West will push Serbia away from its military neutrality. The second is the further fragmentation of Serbian territories, with the possibility of dissolution of the Republic of Srpska and unitarization of B&H as a single process and an almost certain solution of the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue based on Western primary interest – full independence of Kosovo and Metohija.

Conclusion

The Ukrainian crisis, especially its second phase, led to a global and regional intensification of great powers' geopolitical competition, particularly in the European part of Eurasia. The understanding of the cause of the crisis is rooted in completely different perceptions in the West and Russia, and is still provoking debates on this issue, like one in the US, which included Mearsheimer vs. McFoul and Sestanovich. No matter if the cause of the crisis is the US attempt to make Ukraine its bulwark on the Russian border or Russian internal politics, unilateral actions or impulsive decisions of the Russian leadership, the consequences and how the crisis will end will be of the greatest importance for the Balkan countries.

Although there is a narrative of support for the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine in a majority of political statements, several indicators show that border change in this case cannot be completely excluded. Among main indicators, one can stress the already mentioned Kissinger's opinion or a statement of important Russian representatives, such as the Security Council Secretary's, Nikolai Petrushev, who emphasised that other Ukrainian neighbours like Poland are actively working on the seizure of western parts of Ukraine (*Interfax* 2022). This means that, after the end of the Ukrainian crisis, another rearrangement of the Balkans' borders cannot be completely excluded.

Such a scenario imposed a significant need for smaller countries and other subjects of international relations to closely monitor and assess great powers' positions or their definitions of interests in order to be in a position to create the greatest gain or at least the smallest damage to their own interests.

The crisis itself has had and is still having a direct influence on the Balkans' geopolitics. The region represents the most unstable part of the whole Mackinder's buffer zone, not being fully integrated into any great power's sphere of influence. Also, the last two waves of NATO enlargement towards the Balkans with

Montenegro (2017) and North Macedonia (2020), and the ongoing procedure with Finland and Sweden after the June 2022 Madrid Summit decision, are direct effects of the Ukrainian crisis. Russia's policy to prevent NATO enlargement in the Balkans has failed several times. Along with that, it is not completely clear if Russia sees the Balkans as part of its sphere of influence (or Russia-Eurasia Big space). However, military operations in Ukraine are not over, and the outcome will shape Balkan geopolitics in the future.

If any of the scenarios with a positive outcome for Russia (grand or partial victory) come to fruition, Moscow will have enough tools to continue competing with the US over Balkan countries, particularly those outside of NATO. However, it will not lead to reshaping the Balkans' geopolitical landscape but rather to keeping the current geopolitical structures, not easily allowing further NATO enlargement. The breaking point will be B&H, and relations in the US-B&H-Russia triangle will be the main indicator for further developments.

If scenarios with a negative outcome for Russia (geopolitical stalemate or military defeat) prevail, the process of absorption of the whole Balkans into the Euro-Atlantic structure will be quite certain. Current geopolitical structures will highly likely change in that case, with a gradual reduction of Russia's interests and capacity to be an active player in the region.

Whatever the outcome of the Ukrainian crisis, the Balkans will remain primarily an object of geopolitical competition among great powers, and the positions of its countries will be determined by their ability to assess the interests and courses of action of the United States, Russia, and China. Those great powers will continue to compete over the Balkans, but in the foreseeable future, the US will still be the country with the greatest capacity to influence geopolitically in the region.

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ГЕОПОЛИТИЧКА КОНКУРЕНЦИЈА ВЕЛИКИХ СИЛА НА БАЛКАНУ – УТИЦАЈ УКРАЈИНСКЕ КРИЗЕ

Апстракт: Предмет овог рада је геополитичка анализа надметања великих сила на Балкану. Основни разлог за истраживање био је неупитни утицај који је украјинска криза, у раду подељена на два дела, имала на Балкан. Аутори истичу надметање САД и Русије као доминантно, док указују да је Кина потиснута са другом фазом кризе. Сједињеним Државама основни геополитички оквир је евроатлантизам, а као најважнији инструмент деловања САД на Балкану нагашена је политика проширења НАТО. Такође, истакнуто је и да је деловање ЕУ у потпуности комплементарно са НАТО. Поводом Русије, истраживане су фазе неоевроазијског концепта и њихов утицај на практичну политику. Руски примарни циљ јесте спречавање ширења НАТО, али је та политика доживела на Балкану неколико неуспеха. Разматрана су четири сценарија окончања војних операција и њихов утицај на Балкан. Основни закључак рада је да ће Балкан наставити да буде објекат надметања великих сила, а да ће од исхода актуелне украјинске кризе зависити у којој ће мери бити могуће успостављање равнотеже сага евроатлантизма и евроазијства.

Кључне речи: велике силе; САД; НАТО; ЕУ; Русија; Украјина; геополитика; Балкан.

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