

BALKANS IN THE ERA OF 'AMERICA FIRST'

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Abstract

While Donald Trump's 'America first' policy has been effecting almost every aspects of international politics, the lack of United States leadership has also been felt even in regional politics of the Balkans region. However, three major regional issues (Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo and Macedonia) have potential to undermine the region's path towards 'normality'. Due to these three problems in region, growing activities of Russia and hesitation of Europe, the heavy lifting in the Balkans once again seems to fall to the United States of America. This article intends to examine the Trump's era foreign policy of the United States towards the Balkans region.

Keywords: The United States of America, Balkans, Donald Trump, global powers

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'ÖNCE AMERİKA' ÇAĞINDA BALKANLAR

Özet

Donald Trump'ın 'önce Amerika' politikası, uluslararası politikanın hemen hemen tüm alanlarını etkilerken, Birleşik Devletlerin liderliğinin eksikliği Balkanlar'daki bölgesel siyasette de hissedilmeye başlamıştır. Bununla birlikte, üç temel bölgesel sorun (Bosna-Hersek, Kosova ve Makedonya) bölgenin normalleşmeye yönelik yönünü olumsuz etkileme potansiyeline sahiptir. Bölgedeki bu üç sorun, Rusya'nın artan faaliyetleri ve Avrupa'nın göreceli tereddütü nedeniyle Balkanlar'daki sorumluluk bir kez daha Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'ne kalmış görünmektedir. Bu makale, Balkanlar bölgesine yönelik Trump dönemi Birleşik Devletler dış politikasını incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Amerika Birleşik Devletleri, Balkanlar, Donald Trump, küresel güçler

Etik Beyanı: Bu çalışma "Araştırma ve Yayın Etiği" değerlerine uygun olarak kaleme alınmıştır.

Introduction

The Balkans region was at the center of attention of the United States of America (USA) during the 1990s and it was the region where the USA proved its leadership and supremacy in the international area. In general terms, Western orientation of Balkan countries has a great significance for the USA in the post-Cold War era. Indeed, the USA displayed its objection to any political regime backed up of Russian Federation and partly China in the region with opposition to liberal political order in the case of Kosovo operation against Serbia under the leadership of Milosevic. In this process, bombing of Serbia in 1999 was an important turning point in forming of international system, since it constituted an explicit message to Russia and China. While the US hegemony was restructured in the international system, it had repercussions for the Balkans during the 1990s. Although Europe as a whole has been important for the US foreign policy, strategic axis of US foreign policy started to shift to Eastern Europe by the 2000s. After Kosovo operation, the USA established its military base called as Bondsteel in Kosovo. Moreover, Poland, Hungary and Czech Republic were accepted as North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member during Washington Summit in 1999. Then, in 2004, Romania and Bulgaria accomplished to be a member of NATO, and the USA established small military bases in these two new NATO members (Bugajski, 2010, p. 1). The military presence of the USA in the region is considered as stepping stone for Eurasia region rather than controlling the Balkans.

During both the George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations, the Balkans region was not the top foreign policy priority of Washington (Bugajski, 2010, p. 1). In this respect, the US military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq led to downgrading of its attention to the region. Therefore, the USA has chosen to distance itself from political, diplomatic and economic developments of the region, and identified the European Union (EU) as the responsible actor of the region. Apart from the USA and EU, other international actors such as Russia and China have begun in recent years to be very active in the Balkans. While Russia has raised political, military, economic and intelligence activities in the Balkans, China has raised economic investments in the fields of energy, mining and heavy industry, and transportation (Bieber and Tzifakis, 2019, p. 7). While Russia has sought to disrupt reforms and enlargement in the Balkans through complicating the EU as well as the NATO membership processes, on the other side, Belt and Road Initiative is an ambitious initiative of China which aims to increase Chinese influence in the region.

Donald Trump's 'America first' policy, or in other words the retreat policy has effected almost every aspects of international politics. For instance, the lack of leadership of the US on climate change and international trade, has created a vacuum which can be filled by other ambitious global powers, such as China. The lack of US leadership has been felt even in regional politics of the Balkans. Indeed, the Balkans is a region which, in many respects, remains in the shadow of the wars of the 1990s, and currently, three

major regional issues (Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo and Macedonia) have potential to undermine the region's path towards 'normality'. Due to these three problems in region, growing activities of Russia and relative hesitation of Europe have recently urged the USA to re-engage in regional politics of the Balkans. In this respect, this article intends to examine Trump's era US foreign policy towards the Balkans.

1. The Foreign Policy of the USA towards the Balkans in the Post-Cold War Era

The conflicts leading to the fragmentation of the former Yugoslavia constituted a new challenge for American policy-makers in the post-Cold War era. The George H. W. Bush Administration attempted to delineate a vague policy that supported self-determination but also opposed the disintegration of Yugoslavia. In June 1991, Secretary of State James Baker described the independence declarations of Slovenia and Croatia as “illegal and illegitimate” (Poulain and Teleki, 2020, p. 27). President Bush aimed to avoid any direct American role in Yugoslavia, and his administration agreed that management of the Yugoslavian crisis was to be left to the European Community.

It is argued that some factors contributed to the failure of US foreign policy prior to signing of Dayton Agreement in 1995. These were “the end of the Cold War and subsequent attention of the USA to the transformation of international system in new era, the inadequate American response to the Yugoslavian crisis; and finally, the mistaken belief of the Europeans that they could handle their first post-Cold War challenge on their own” (Holbrooke, 1998, p. 21-22). Furthermore, engagement of the USA to Gulf Crisis and unattractive economic potential of the Balkans were the other factors of relatively ignorant policies of the USA on the Balkans.

During the fragmentation process of the former Yugoslavia, the EU supported the Balkan countries' declarations of independence but only ineffectively intervened in the crises in the region because its member states could not settle on a common course of action (Ağır and Akçay, 2019, p. 21). Inadequate efforts of the EU during Bosnia and Kosovo crises necessitated the active policy of the USA as a crucial factor for the stability of the region. Indeed, during the 1990s, the USA was sole actor with greatest ability to influence developments in the Balkans. Accordingly, basic goals of foreign policy of the USA towards the disintegration process of the former Yugoslavia could be described in the following way; “a political solution in Bosnia-Herzegovina that maintains the country's territorial integrity; preventing the spread of conflicts into a broader Balkan war; preventing any flow of refugees from the conflict; halting the slaughter of innocents; and helping to support NATO's central role in post-Cold War Europe” (The White House, 1995, p. 25).

That's why the USA took the initiative, and some interventions were made in order to provide stability in the region. For instance, the Clinton Administration developed “lift and strike” policy in order to secure a restricted lifting of the UN arms embargo

against the territories of the former Yugoslavia in favor of the Bosnian authorities and provide air deterrence against Serbian forces (Albayrakoğlu, 2011, p. 625). Therefore, Bosnian War could be considered as a starting point for a new US strategy which is called as “Clinton Doctrine” (Klare, 1999). NATO’s Kosovo operation on March 1999 was the explicit exhibition of the doctrine. In general terms, foreign policy of the USA in the Balkans has aimed at supporting peaceful conflict resolution, favoring democratization and rule of law in state-building efforts in the region, and creating and maintaining multiethnic social structures in the breakaway republics of the former Yugoslavia (Limo, 2006, p. 526).

The Bosnian War was lasted with the signing of Dayton Agreement by Slobodan Milosevic, Franjo Tudjman, and Alija İzzetbegovic on 14 December 1995. The Dayton Agreement has sought to preserve the territorial integrity of the state while retaining internal separation of two semi-independent entities: the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (mainly controlled by the Bosniaks and Bosnian Croats) and the Republika Srpska (mainly governed by the Bosnian Serbs). By participating to NATO-led Implementation Force (IFOR) and Stabilization Force (SFOR), the USA took a part in implementing and monitoring the Dayton Agreement. Nevertheless, under Dayton, central governing powers were kept weak, with many governing functions remaining at the Federation and the Republika Srpska entity level. For Ağır and Gürsoy (2016), “Bosnia-Herzegovina is still largely dysfunctional and inefficient state”. Such a characteristic of Bosnia-Herzegovina introduces crucial difficulties for the country’s EU integration process.

In terms of Kosovo issue, until the beginning of the armed conflicts in the province in the late 1990s, the Clinton Administration condemned violations of human rights in the province and supported autonomous status of Kosovo within Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, while opposing independence of it (Kim and Whoerel, 2008, p. 23). However, as ethnic Albanians were forced to leave the country and while the massive human rights violations against the civilians in Kosovo by Serbian military and paramilitary forces were continuing, the Rambouillet negotiations were held in France between Serbian state delegation and Kosovo delegation represented by civilian and Kosovo Liberation Army leaders. When Milosevic regime rejected the Rambouillet accords in March 1999, the NATO led by the USA engaged in military action to end the violence in Kosovo. After the NATO intervention, Kosovo was under the auspices of the United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) according to Resolution 1244 adopted by the UN Security Council on June 1999. A NATO-led peacekeeping force, Kosovo Force (KFOR), has been deployed in order to provide security in Kosovo, and the USA has participated to it since 1999.

In May 2005, the Bush Administration announced a new phase in US policy in the Balkans. Emphasizing the need to “finish the work” in the region, Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Nicholas Burns stated that “a viable political settlement for Kosovo issue could be expected to be achieved by the end of 2006” (Kim and

Whoerel, 2008, p. 25). Because, Kosovo’s ongoing domestic and international problems remained a source of concern in Washington. In this respect, the USA had put an emphasis on concluding of the Kosovo status talks in 2006. However, after status negotiations with the Serbian and Kosovar Albanian parties in Vienna since early 2006, Martti Ahtisaari, Special Envoy of UN Secretary-General, stated that there was no major progress in solving of Kosovo’s status (Kim and Whoerel, 2008, p. 16).

As a result, on 17 February 2008, Kosovo Assembly declared its independence with the support of the USA and the leading member states of the EU such as the United Kingdom, France and Germany. In the face of this decision, the international community was divided. For example, Serbia, Russia, and China did not recognize this decision. Moreover, Spain, Greece, Cyprus, Slovakia, and Romania as the member states of the EU declared that they would not recognize the independence decision of Kosovo (Ağır, 2019). On the other hand, President Bush emphasized the continued American support for Kosovo’s international recognition and membership in international organizations. During his visit to Kosovo on May 2009, Joe Biden, Vice President of Obama Administration, declared that the “success of an independent Kosovo” is a “priority” of the USA (Whoerel, 2019, p. 6).

In terms of Macedonia (now North Macedonia), the USA has long maintained that peace and security in the country is important for the stability of the Balkans. During the 1990s, the USA targeted to prevent the spread of ethnic conflicts in the Balkans to Macedonia. In this respect, Washington emphasized its support for Macedonian independence and state viability, and engaged in bilateral disputes between Macedonia and Greece. The USA feared that any prolonged violent conflict involving Macedonia could become internationalized and include neighboring states, including NATO allies. The USA therefore frequently expressed support for Macedonia’s sovereignty and territorial integrity (Kim, 2005).

In this respect, with the involvement of the USA and the EU, the short-lived conflicts between Albanian insurgents and Macedonians security forces were ended by the signing of the Ohrid Framework Agreement on August 2001, which included the political reforms to improve the rights of the ethnic Albanian minority while rebel forces were disarmed under NATO supervision (Kim, 2005). The USA continues to support the stability of North Macedonia, but has increasingly emphasized the growing role of the EU particularly in the country and generally in the region since the 2000s.

Indeed, with the end of the Cold War, the Balkan countries have become an important laboratory for the EU’s transformative power and its conflict prevention and peace-building activities. In this respect, in November 2000, the EU launched Stabilisation and Association Process in Zagreb Summit for the Western Balkans. The Stabilisation and Association Agreements are regarded as the instruments for the long term integration of the Western Balkans into the EU structures. The EU’s role

in the Balkans has also been supported by military and police missions (*Concordia* and *Proxima* missions in Macedonia, EUFOR-Althea in Bosnia-Herzegovina and EULEX in Kosovo) of it. Thus, the EU has emerged as the leading international actor in the region since the 2000s through all these efforts that represents an important responsibility to transform the region into peaceful conditions (Ağır, 2019). Recently, the European Commission published a new enlargement strategy document which qualified the EU integration process of the Western Balkans as a “geostrategic investment” and put forward a best-case scenario for the accession of countries of the region by 2025 (European Commission, 2018, p. 1). Consequently, the EU views instability in the Balkans as a threat to its own security, so it provides diplomatic, politic, economic and financial assistance to the countries of the Balkan to provide their stability. Moreover, the EU has attempted to ensure the region’s development by promising membership to the Balkan countries.

For instance, following Kosovo’s independence, the normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia has been seen crucial for the peace and security in the region, and for joining of the both countries in the EU. On March 2011, the EU launched a technical dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo in order to ensure normalisation of relations between these two countries. Negotiations between two countries were culminated in April 2013 with the First Agreement of Principles Governing the Normalisation of Relations, known as the Brussels Agreement. This agreement is considered to be a milestone on the normalization process between Kosovo and Serbia (Krasniqi, 2019).

The dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo was a chance for the EU to show its commitment to its backyard where other global actors such as Russia and China have already started to be more active. However, since 2016, the Brussels dialogue has stalled, while political tensions and nationalist rhetoric have risen. However, the two meetings of the presidents of Serbia and Kosovo, Aleksandar Vucic and Hashim Thaci, in Brussels in the summer of 2017 were regarded as the beginning of a new phase of the dialogue. According to Krasniqi (2019), “while it is clear that this phase will take place at a presidential level, details about the content and dynamics of the future dialogue remain unclear”.

It can be clearly observed that the USA was at the forefront of the interventions that brought the Balkan wars of the 1990s to an end. However, during the 2000 presidential campaign, Condoleezza Rice, later appointed National Security Advisor in President Bush’s first term, said that “US military forces were overextended globally, and that peacekeeping responsibilities in the Balkans should be taken over by US allies in Europe”. However, in February 2001, former Secretary of State Colin Powell said that the USA had a commitment to peace in the Balkans and that NATO forces would remain in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo for the foreseeable future (Poulain and Teleki, 2020, p. 29; Kim and Whoerel, 2008, p. 23). Nevertheless, the NATO-led peacekeeping forces in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo were reduced in size, and NATO terminated its SFOR mission to Bosnia-Herzegovina and turned over

peacekeeping duties to the EUFOR in 2004. Indeed, the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the USA and subsequent major military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq reinforced the Bush Administration's desire to decrease the US deployment in the Balkans. Because, 9/11 terrorist attacks on the USA created new security priorities for the country, and accordingly Bush Administration downgraded the Balkans as a US foreign policy priority.

In addition to US military presence in the region, the USA also placed a priority on assistance programs to promote democratization process and economic reforms in the region. The general aim of US aid to the countries of the Balkan is to help their integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions. Through assistance programs, the USA has sought to support state-building activities in respect of fighting corruption, strengthening civil society and an independent media, and promoting the rule of law and human rights throughout the region (Whoerel, 2009, p. 9). For example, in Kosovo US Agency for International Development has provided more than \$500 million since 1999 for projects directed at enhancing security, such as establishing governing institutions and improving economy (Poulain and Teleki, 2020, p. 31-32).

During the Obama Administration, Washington continued to emphasize the growing responsibility of the the EU in the Balkans regions. Indeed, the EU has increased its role, with the ultimate goal of extending EU membership to the countries of the region. On the other hand, in May 2009, during a visit to the Western Balkans region by Vice President Joe Biden, the Obama Administration signaled that the region is a US foreign policy priority and underscored US support for its integration into the Euro-Atlantic structures (Poulain and Teleki, 2020, p. 30). Indeed, it is believed that the USA still may have an significant role to play in the region (Whoerel, 2009, p. 1). Whoerel (2009, p. 9) argues that

“the prestige and credibility that the USA has in the region may still be needed to exercise political leadership in resolving some of the most difficult issues, such as creating viable central government institutions in Bosnia-Herzegovina and ensuring the region's stability, given continuing tensions between Serbia and Kosovo”.

In terms of Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Obama Administration supported the structural and constitutional reforms between three main components (Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats) of the country. According to Obama Administration, stability of Bosnia-Herzegovina was based on its EU integration process. The visit of Joe Biden to Sarajevo on May 2009 was a part of US initiative to mediate among them. Biden emphasized the threat of “growing radical nationalism” for stability of Bosnia-Herzegovina during his visit to the country. Indeed, the threat of referendum has been mentioned to block constitutional reforms by the Republika Srpska leadership. Moreover, a possible referendum in the Republika Srpska may escalate into an armed conflict which could result in division of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Therefore, the USA has a reason to

play a more active role in the region. Accordingly, the USA took a part with the EU in Butmir Process held in October 2009 which targeted to support constitutional reform in the country. However, due to the lack of consensus during the discussions on constitutional changes, the constitutional reform in the country was in a deadlock (Ağır and Gürsoy, 2016). Because, the recommendations of constitutional reforms in the context of the “Butmir Process” was refused by the leaders of Bosnia-Herzegovina.

2. Donald Trump’s Policy towards the Balkans

The end of the first term as president of Donald Trump is approaching and there is still no visit of him to any country of Balkans. The most senior US official to visit Balkans from the Trump Administration since his inauguration was the Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. He made a short visit to two Balkan countries, Montenegro and North Macedonia on October 2019, to negotiate their roles in the NATO alliance (Al-Jazeera, 2019). Personal involvement in US foreign policy is a characteristic of Donald Trump; however it is certain that the Balkans region is not the foreign policy priority of him. In regard of geopolitics, Trump’s focus during his term has been more on Middle East and East Asia.

On July 2018, in an interview with Fox News, Trump’s comments about Montenegro, one of newest member states of NATO, that it has “very aggressive people”, who could start World War III, suggesting that he would not extend support to a Balkan partner, had a negative effect to the Balkan nations aiming to join NATO. Bringing into the question the principle of mutual defense commitment of NATO, Trump discouraged the Balkan countries that are facing the Russian pressure and malign activities at home due to their determination and commitment to the NATO membership (The Guardian, 2018).

According to the results of a survey conducted by Serbian European Integration Office, Serbia’s membership to the EU in a prospective referendum would be supported by a huge majority of people - 70%. However, support for NATO membership is about %18 (Poulain and Teleki, 2020, p. 22-25). That matter is also closely connected with the country’s relations with the USA. George W. Bush administration declared its support to Serbia’s participation in Partnership for Peace program of the NATO in 2006. Although the Serbian state is today a member of the Partnership for Peace programme, the issue of its membership in NATO is still outstanding. Another dimension of the USA-Serbia relations is related with the role and attitude of Serbia in consolidation of central state of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Accordingly, during his visit on May 2009, Joe Biden called on Belgrade to get full cooperation of Bosnian Serbs in reforming the state. Because the integration of Serbia with Western values and institutions is crucial for regional peace and stability.

Indeed, there was a signal during the second half of 2018 that the Trump Administration is going to be more involved and to pay more attention to the Balkans region. While since the signing of Brussels Agreement both Serbian and Kosovo representatives have accused each other of not respecting it, during his visit to Ukraine on August 2018, US National Security Advisor John Bolton said that “If the two parties (*Serbia and Kosovo*) can work it out between themselves and reach an agreement, we do not exclude territorial adjustments” (U.S. Embassy in Ukraine, 2018). When President Aleksandar Vucic and President Hashim Thaci announced on 25 August 2018 in the Alpine village of Alpbach that they were regarding border changes as part of an agreement on normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia, some observers became hopeful that the most burning open issue in the Balkans might be about to be resolved (European Stability Initiative, 2019, p. 4). Donald Trump got also personally involved in the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue, and on 14 December 2018 sent letters to Hashim Thaci and Aleksandar Vucic in order to urge them to secure a “historic” deal that would bring “long-sought” peace to the Balkans region (AP News, 2018).

However, the US-backed idea of a land swap¹ has triggered reactions and protests in Kosovo, and has caused reactions even in the international arena, where it is worth mentioning the Chancellor of Germany Angela Merkel’s opposition to this idea (Krasniqi, 2019). On February 2019, German Ambassador to UN Christoph Heusgen also stated that “nothing in the Brussels Agreement talks about border adjustments... or territorial swaps. We believe these efforts... will destabilize the whole region” (European Stability Initiative, 2019). Those who opposed this idea predicted that the land swap would be destructive for the statehood of Kosovo, since it could cause most likely the loss of the multi-ethnic compound of Kosovo, as well as it could have a domino effect in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia. The epilogue of the dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo is not yet certain. Although there were some improvement, the core issues such as border demarcation, war damage compensation, the issue of missing people of the war, remain unsolved (Krasniqi, 2019). Recently, when the government in Pristina imposed tariffs on Serbian imports in response to Serbia’s campaign to block Kosovo’s accession to international institutions and Serbia’s intensifying campaign for the derecognition of Kosovo’s independence by other states, the Trump Administration insisted that these tariffs should be lifted unconditionally (European Stability Initiative, 2019, p. 14). Because, the introduction of this tax has suspended dialogue between the two countries. Recently, the US President’s Special Envoy for Kosovo Richard Grenell claimed that an exchange of territories is not President Trump’s policy, and he said that “ (John) Bolton was pursuing his own policy rather than President Trump’s policy” (Garcia, 2020).

¹ The idea of a land swap between Kosovo and Serbia includes the integration of the Presevo Valley in southern Serbia with Kosovo. In return, Serbia would re-establish its full control over the north of the Ibar River in Kosovo.

Another important element in regard of Trump’s approach toward the Balkans is the transatlantic relationship, weakened seriously by him. As the transatlantic relationship during the Trump era faced troubles, it has political consequences for the Balkans as well. The issue of paying fair share on defense by members of NATO and the weakening of cooperation and coordination on foreign policy between the USA and EU is reflecting negatively on the Balkans. As a result, other global actors such as Russia and China have engaged in activities in order to increase their influence in the Balkans.

It is argued that there is an uncertainty about the USA’s commitment to the region following President Trump’s election. For instance, General Sir Michael Rose who was the Commander of UNPROFOR in Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1994 said that “my worry ... is that President Trump’s isolationist policies and decision to reduce the budgets that are being employed in the Western Balkans at the moment will leave a vacuum that might well be filled by the Russians” (House of Lords, 2018, p. 22). On the other hand, it was American involvement that helped resolving the “name” crisis between Macedonia and Greece. On Montenegro, in the end there was US assent for it to join NATO and Vice-President Mike Pence made a visit to Podgorica to underline that. So it is argued that the idea that the US is withdrawing from the region is probably not right (House of Lords, 2018, p. 22). Even though there are two conflicting views on US foreign policy towards the region during the Trump Administration, it is important to regard the other global powers’s approach to the region.

3. Other Global Powers’ Approach to the Balkans

Balkan Peninsula has always been crucial for Russian foreign policy due to geostrategic, geopolitical, economic, cultural, ethnic and religious considerations. During the 1990s, Russia pursued a low profile foreign policy towards the Balkans due to its political and economic transformations and problems. Indeed, initiatives that aimed to give an end to internal conflicts in the region were led by Western states and particularly the USA. However, it is argued that especially since the 2000s Moscow has made efforts to increase its influence in the region (Samokhvalov, 2019, p. 189). Indeed, there is a concern that Russia’s involvement in the region is simply one of “spoiler”, intent on preventing any closer integration with Euro-Atlantic institutions. In this respect, Russia has directly or indirectly tried to involve in regional issues. While Montenegro, for instance, was moving closer to NATO membership in 2016, Russia allegedly took part in an attempted coup to overthrow the Western-oriented prime minister, Milo Dukanovic, with the goal of supporting pro-Russian political parties in the country (The Guardian, 2019).

Recently, one of the hottest agendas in the Balkans is about the resolving the disagreement between Macedonia and Greece over the name of Macedonia. Macedonia claimed its right to use and be recognized by its constitutional name, the Republic of Macedonia since its independence in 1991. Greece objected to its

northern neighbor’s use of the name “Macedonia” claiming that it captures Greece’s historical heritage and includes territorial ambitions at Greece’s expense. Therefore, Greece constituted the main barrier of Macedonia in its efforts of integration with Euro-Atlantic institutions, particularly NATO and EU. However, the Western officials have indicated the need to resolve the issue in order to consolidate Western influence in the region. For example, US Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland stated in 2014 during her visit to the region that “membership of Macedonia to NATO is the priority of the US in the region” (Kovacevic, 2015).

On 12 June 2018, the prime ministers of Greece and Macedonia, Alexis Tsipras and Zoran Zaev signed the Prespa Agreement, which involves a change to the name of Macedonia to “the Republic of North Macedonia” and resolves the many decades of conflict between the two countries. Thus, Prespa Agreement helped the removal of Greece’s veto on the North Macedonia’s accession to NATO and the EU. Indeed, on 6 February 2019, North Macedonia signed the accession protocol with NATO and in March 2020, the EU gave its formal approval to begin accession talks with North Macedonia. When it became clear that the agreement, reached without Russia, would pave the way to North Macedonia’s membership in NATO, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov accused the West of interfering in the internal affairs of the Balkan nations (Samokhvalov, 2019, p. 194-195). Indeed, the Kremlin condemned the name change as imposition by the West, and insisted instead that it should be renegotiated in the UN Security Council - a forum in which it holds veto power (Samorukov, 2019). With the Western Balkans ranking low on its list of foreign policy priorities, Russia shifts its attention to the region only when local crises allow for a low-cost intervention. For example, in order to complicate integration process of Bosnia-Herzegovina with Euro-Atlantic institutions and empower the central state in the country, Russia has indirectly encouraged Milorad Dodik’s rhetoric for the secession of Republika Srpska.

In terms of Kosovo issue, Russia has traditionally supported the position of Serbia, and accordingly vetoed UN Security Council resolution that would require the use of force against it. Russia considered NATO operation against Serbia as the violation of international law, UN Security Council resolutions and UN Charter. Russia does not still recognize Kosovo and evaluates its independence as a violation of international law. In this context, Russia has sought to prevent any progress in resolving the Kosovo issue by supporting the position of Serbia. It has also supported the radical positions among the Serb leadership and local communities in the North Kosovo (Samokhvalov, 2019, p. 194). Even in the case of the assassination of Oliver Ivanovic -a long-time leader in the Serb community of Kosovo- the name of Russia was mentioned, but there is no official evidence that confirms this. However, Nenad Canak, the leader of a Serbian opposition party, has claimed that Russia organized the assassination, with the use of a Serb triggerman, in order to destabilize the region. The allegation can seem to be plausible considering the evidence of Russian involvement in Montenegro and North Macedonia.

In addition to political and diplomatic activities of Russia, its presence in the Balkans region is mostly observed in the realms of economy and energy since the 2000s. One of the most important economic instruments of Russia is the energy domain. Since the 2000s, Russia has approached the regional countries through inviting them to support Russia’s pipeline projects. (Samokhvalov, 2019, p. 200). Russian presence and initiatives in media, the church and energy realms can be even used to destabilize the region and/or to undermine Western policies (Samokhvalov, 2019, p. 196). Therefore, diplomatically, as Dimitar Bechev (2020, p. 188) has put it, Russia’s approach to the Balkans “is by and large a function of its relations with the USA and Europe”.

The other global actor that has started to challenge the influence of the Western powers in the region is China. China has been stepping up its investments in the region for a while, and it has gradually become a relevant player through economic projects. Beijing is increasing its presence in the Balkans through its Belt and Road Initiative. All the Balkan countries - except Kosovo, which China does not recognize - are part of China’s 17+1 cooperation platform - an integral part of China’s broader Belt and Road Initiative. The members of this platform are: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia and Slovenia. Chinese investments in the Balkans are primarily concentrated but not limited in Serbia, as China is also making important investments in infrastructure in North Macedonia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Montenegro. Beijing also envisions the use of the Greek port of Piraeus, near the capital Athens, which is currently controlled and operated by the Chinese company COSCO, in order to move goods through the Balkans into the EU. China is now heavily investing in Serbia’s transportation systems through building, repairing and/or reconstructing bridges and roads (Reuters, 2017). All these investments shows that China has a more active position in the region than ever before.

Conclusion

Although the Balkans region does not relatively have a crucial geopolitical importance for the USA especially since the 2000s, instability and conflicts in the region and their spill-over effects can closely influence the US interests. Therefore, policy priorities of the USA towards the Balkans can be summarized as the preserving regional stability, integration of regional countries with Euro-Atlantic institutions, stability of whole Europe and involvement of Russia in regional politics (Larrabee, 2001, p. 90). The general objective of the USA is to stabilize the Balkans in a way that does not require any direct intervention by NATO and international civilian officials. On the other hand, NATO membership is seen as a guarantee of national security of Balkans countries. Of the six Western Balkan countries, three are already members of NATO (Albania joined in 2009; Montenegro in 2017 and North Macedonia in 2019). In this respect, the role and support of the USA is decisive.

It can be argued that in the era of great power competition, the region of Balkans is not excluded from being a battleground. The Trump's 'America first' foreign policy, combined with his personal engagement on foreign policy, primarily focusing on other regions in the world excluding the Balkans, has created a space for increasing presence in this region of other global powers, particularly Russia and China. Beijing's and Moscow's presence and influence could threaten peace, hinder democratization, and challenge the region's Western orientation. The implications of these new dynamics will bring longstanding consequences for the EU and the USA. To counter these influences, more leadership and engagement from the Western powers is needed. The EU and the USA have to be more proactive and more focused in the region in order to defend their interests, and to defend the democracy, liberal economy, rule of law, human rights and the prosperity in this region. Only an active leadership and strong commitment of the EU in partnership with the USA can manage to ensure stability, security and welfare in the region; otherwise, the Balkan countries will remain unstable and will be divided on spheres of influence of different global and regional powers. It is certain that the West is still dominant in the region, but it is not anymore the only alternative for the orientation of Balkan countries.

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