

ТЕОРИЯ И ИСТОРИЯ МЕЖДУНАРОДНЫХ ОТНОШЕНИЙ И ВНЕШНЕЙ ПОЛИТИКИ

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ГЕОПОЛИТИЧЕСКОЕ ВЛИЯНИЕ США НА ЗАПАДНЫЕ БАЛКАНЫ: СФЕРЫ И МЕТОДЫ ПРОТИВОДЕЙСТВИЯ ВЛИЯНИЮ КИТАЯ

В статье рассматривается геополитическое влияние США и других западных держав на страны Западных Балкан (ЗБ), а также их стратегии противодействия растущему присутствию Китая в регионе. Центральная предпосылка заключается в том, что Западные Балканы превратились из «ближнего соседства» в поле битвы геополитики и геоэкономики. До недавнего времени Западные Балканы воспринимались как должное и рассматривались как лояльная колония. Однако произошли значительные изменения как в глобальном, так и во внутреннем плане. Упадок западных держав, вызванный внутренними кризисами и чрезмерной военной гегемонией, становится все более очевидным. Этот спад резко контрастирует с замечательным экономическим, политическим, культурным, социальным и технологическим ростом Китая и других не-западных стран, которые сформировали различные альянсы взаимного сотрудничества. Новости об этих событиях достигли периферии ЕС, побуждая части балканских обществ, уставшие от бесконечного ожидания в залах ожидания ЕС, искать альтернативы. Процесс получения свободного доступа к объективной информации о не-западных достижениях, особенно в Китае, продолжается, но медленно. В ответ западный гегемон прибегает к пропаганде и газлайтингу, пытаясь очернить Пекин, инициативу «Один пояс, один путь» (ОПОП) и страны БРИКС. Предварительный вывод заключается в том, что население Западных Балкан становится все более нетерпеливым и все менее готовым ждать обещанного Западом «рая на земле». Пока элиты остаются послушными и подчиненными, сегменты общества исследуют новые пути формирования своей собственной судьбы в соответствии с мировым большинством.

Ключевые слова: Запад, США, Китай, Западные Балканы, геополитическое влияние.

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US GEOPOLITICAL GRIP ON THE WESTERN BALKANS: SPHERES AND METHODS OF COUNTERING CHINA'S INFLUENCE

The article examines the geopolitical influence of the United States and other Western powers on the countries of the Western Balkans (WB), as well as their strategies for countering China's growing presence in the region. The central premise is that the Western Balkans have shifted from being a «near neighborhood» to a battleground of geopolitics and geo-economics. Until recently, the WB was taken for granted and treated as a loyal colony. However, significant changes have occurred both globally and internally. The decline of Western powers, driven by internal crises and overextended military hegemony, is increasingly evident. This decline is starkly contrasted by the remarkable economic, political, cultural, social, and technological growth of China and other non-Western countries, which have formed various mutual cooperation alliances. News of these developments has reached the EU's periphery, prompting parts of Balkan societies, weary of interminable waits in the EU's waiting halls, to seek alternatives. The process of gaining free access to objective information about non-Western advancements, particularly those in China, is ongoing but slow. In response, the Western hegemon resorts to propaganda and gaslighting, attempting to vilify Beijing, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and the BRICS nations. The tentative conclusion is that populations in the Western Balkans are growing impatient and less willing to wait for the West's promised «heaven on earth.» While the elites remain compliant and subservient, segments of society are exploring new paths to shape their own destiny in alignment with the Global Majority.

Key words: West, US, China, Western Balkans, geopolitical influence.

Overview of the Western Balkans: societal, economic, political, security landscape. More than three decades ago, SFR Yugoslavia collapsed under the weight of its internal controversies and the decisive influence of Western powers [28; 10; 17]. Initially, external economic and financial pressures were the primary factors, including Yugoslavia's forced integration into the global free market under Western rules and its resultant over-indebtedness. However, it later became evident that the CIA and other relevant institutions had already contemplated the country's partition or at least the implications of such a scenario.

The partitioning process ostensibly concluded in 2008 with the establishment of the Republic of Kosovo, the youngest state in the region. However, the process of international state-building remains incomplete, as many of these states are «unfinished» and not fully integrated into the Western fold. For example, constitutionally and under international law (including UN Resolution 1244), Kosovo remains a part of Serbia. In reality, Serbia cannot govern its former province, and Kosovo lacks full international

recognition. Bosnia and Herzegovina is another example of a dysfunctional and deeply divided state, with the Republika Srpska entity frequently raising the issue of secession. Similarly, Macedonia finds itself at a crossroads: caught between more powerful neighbors Greece and Bulgaria, it has sacrificed constitutional sovereignty in pursuit of EU integration, while internal inter-ethnic divisions continue to widen.

In light of the Ukraine war and the Taiwan issue, the question of state sovereignty under international law, and its inconsistencies and duplicities, has become even more complex. States that struggle to maintain their sovereignty against Western power centers are now expected to show solidarity with and provide military assistance to Ukraine. This issue warrants deeper exploration, but a brief diagnosis is as follows: the concept of the so-called «Western Balkans» (WB) – comprising Serbia, Montenegro, Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina – was concocted in the corridors of power in Brussels and Washington. This artificial sub-region, with its flexible geography and borders, lacks logical coherence. It effectively creates a buffer zone of weak states that are unlikely to ever meet the criteria for EU integration, despite being offered a European perspective and hopes.

The recent decision by EU elites to open accession talks with Ukraine – a state currently embroiled in war – speaks volumes about the current state of enlargement policy. It has become clear that this policy is now driven by geopolitical considerations rather than genuine aspirations for European unity and integration. This shift underscores the strategic use of EU enlargement as a tool in broader geopolitical games, rather than as a means to foster stability and prosperity in aspiring member states.

As a prelude one should point out the following facts about the state of affairs in this part of the Balkans:

1. Peripheral Status: The entire sub-region of the Western Balkans is essentially the periphery of the EU periphery. It faces severe structural problems in various sectors, including the economy, social capital, poverty, unemployment, brain drain, and the lack of prospects for socio-economic development in the near future. This area has become a «desert of post-socialism» due to the application of neoliberal policies [11].

2. Stabilitocracies: Recently, these countries have been labeled as «stabilitocracies,» a term reflecting the EU and the West's practice of legitimizing weak, inept, and often corrupt political elites and leaders. In exchange for this legitimacy, these leaders pledge their loyalty to Western geopolitical interests, acting as guardians against other great powers perceived as threats by the West [13]. This arrangement runs counter to the genuine interests of the citizens, who are excluded from the decision-making process on major national issues [25].

3. The US Grip: These states may be characterized as semi-states, puppet-states, or even protectorates. Despite being under EU oversight – since they have all expressed a desire to join the EU – the reality is that the Balkans has long been an American backyard. Long before the Ukraine war, there were occasional invisible clashes and tensions of interest between Brussels and Washington. In these instances, Washington has always emerged as the winner, ostensibly for the sake of European security. The developments in Ukraine, beginning in the 1990s and becoming especially visible since 2014,

have highlighted the US's dominance over the EU and, by extension, its periphery. The ongoing proxy war in Ukraine has further demonstrated the extent of the US grip on the entire continent. This dynamic underscores the overarching influence of the US in European geopolitical affairs, often overshadowing EU initiatives and interests.

4. Multipolarity: The WB region has been a laboratory for Western experiments and interventionism of various types for over 30 years. However, even in this peripheral area, global developments cannot be ignored. With the decline of the West and the rise of multipolarity, the geopolitical landscape has shifted. Today, the Western Balkans is seen as a microcosm of multipolarity, with states adopting slightly differing foreign and security policies in response to external influences, pressures, and their own authentic national interests. This shift reflects the broader global transition towards a multipolar order, where multiple powers influence regional dynamics. In the Western Balkans, this has resulted in a complex interplay of geopolitical interests, with countries navigating between the agendas of the EU, the US, Russia, China, and other influential actors. This evolving geopolitical setting underscores the region's strategic importance and its role as a barometer for the changing balance of global power.

These facts underscore the complexity and volatility of the Western Balkans, a region shaped by external pressures, internal divisions, and a precarious path towards potential EU integration.

The Collective West's Balkan «Sphere of Interest» vis-à-vis Global Developments. The alleged 'end of history' following the fall of the Berlin Wall opened the doors for Western 'soft power' politics. The concept of «soft power», elaborated by Joseph Nye, emphasizes the capacity of states to attract others through the legitimacy of their policies and underlying values [18]. Under this framework, the West initiated its march primarily into Eastern and Central Europe. Advocates argued that the democratic West prioritized integrating nondemocratic regimes into the liberal international order, hoping to coax autocracies toward meaningful political reform and eventual democratization [27]. While employing soft power, the West did not shy away from using hard (military) power to bolster its hegemonic position. Although Washington focused on the global scene – particularly concerning Russia, China, and other rising non-Western powers – the WB experienced both the soft and hard power of the West as part of a disciplinary policy of alleged integration.

This dual strategy was particularly evident in the Western Balkans, where the US and its allies employed a mix of soft power initiatives, such as promoting democracy and economic development, alongside military interventions and security measures. This approach aimed to stabilize the region, integrate it into the Western sphere of influence, and counteract the influence of rival powers. However, the impact of these efforts has been mixed, with ongoing political and economic challenges highlighting the complexities of integrating the Western Balkans into the broader liberal international order amidst evolving global dynamics.

During the critical years of Yugoslavia's dissolution and its aftermath, there was a clear division of labor between the transatlantic allies: the US employed robust force and coercive diplomacy, often acting on behalf of the UN or independently, as seen

during the 1999 NATO intervention over Kosovo. Meanwhile, the EU attempted to exert its influence through soft power. In essence, the US created the disruptions («doing the mess»), while the EU sought to resolve them and establish a liberal order («cleaning the mess»). The framework agreements that ostensibly ended violent conflicts in the region were orchestrated by the US. These include the Dayton Agreement (1995), the Kumanovo Agreement (1999), and the Ohrid Agreement (2001) [19]. These agreements not only shaped the political landscape of the region but also influenced the constitutional orders of the involved countries.

Over time, some Western Balkan countries were integrated into both NATO and the EU, while others joined only NATO, remaining in the queue to meet the EU's membership criteria. Kosovo, for instance, functions as a **de facto** NATO state. Serbia stands as an exception, maintaining a policy of political and military neutrality and fostering broad cooperation with Russia, China, the United Arab Emirates, and other non-Western entities.

This dual approach by the US and EU has left a lasting impact on the region, underscoring the complex interplay between hard and soft power in the Western Balkans and highlighting the region's strategic significance in global geopolitical dynamics.

In the wake of the new multipolar world order, the Western grip and control over the Western Balkans – a region it views as its legitimate and 'natural' sphere of interest – is intensifying. A kind of global/European «Monroe Doctrine» is being overtly implemented: what was once the well-known paradigm over Latin America as the US's 'own backyard' is now being applied to other regions as well, along with attempts to establish a global NATO presence [26]. This strategy in the Western Balkans is facilitated by previous Western investments in various spheres. The most effective investments have been in state-building, human capital, and propaganda. Whenever these methods failed to yield the desired results, more coercive and manipulative measures have been employed, such as inciting «color revolutions» – externally motivated regime change operations [21]. These actions reflect the Western determination to maintain control over the region despite the changing global dynamics and the emergence of a multipolar world order.

Until recently, the collective West took for granted that the entire region of former Yugoslavia (plus Albania) was unquestionably loyal to them. Their policy of Euro-Atlantic and European integration has been a tool of pacification of the region, while the Western corporations were plundering natural resources and taking advantages of the small states' weaknesses in various spheres. The Balkan societies have become objects of a neoliberal agenda of political economy as part of a civilizing mission to introduce a 'liberal peace' to war-torn countries, which has made them both vulnerable and helpless [20].

Initially, it was concerns about energy security and economic growth that prompted Balkan states' leadership to explore alternatives, such as securing access to Russian gas through initiatives like the South Stream project. Macedonia was among those considering such options [16]. Under the leadership of Nikola Gruevski, the Macedonian government actively pursued avenues for non-Western direct investments across various

sectors. They established «economic diplomacy/ambassadors» to explore new markets and expanded cooperation with China, particularly in securing loans and implementing infrastructure projects. However, these initiatives faced significant challenges, particularly with the emergence of the so-called 2015/2016 Colorful Revolution. This uprising resulted in the ousting of Gruevski's government and the branding of all economic and infrastructure projects initiated during his tenure as corrupt and detrimental to Macedonia's national interests. Similar dynamics are observable in present-day Serbia, although the extent of Western success in destabilizing the government and thwarting non-Western economic initiatives there remains uncertain.

To sum up, the WB states have been in a limbo for far too long. The very term WB was coined actually to emphasize the specificity of the region that has never been seen as a «truly Western» by the European elites and public. It has been a sort of a «troublesome frontier» towards the other parts of the world, something that the Western powers wanted to put under their control but not to fully integrate as equals. The concessions made for the sake of NATO and EU integration have always been far more costly (in the eyes of the ordinary people) than the benefits (which *de facto* remained on a level of promises and perspectives, but nothing more than that). The Western elites have betrayed the Balkan peoples many times, with their changeable «methodologies» for enlargement and inconsistent application of the so-called Copenhagen criteria.

In spite of certain initiatives for inciting the regional cooperation (such as Open Balkans, mini-Schengen, etc.), the general impression is that these are just a lip-service and the state leaderships (and publics) do not perceive the region – as a region! There is a lack of regional vision and awareness of their own regional interests. Paradoxically, this is in contrast with the narrative of the EU as a success story, of states that finally realized that it would be better to join their efforts, economies, and to create a common polity. The Americans often turn one state against the other, or insist on «peaceful settlements» that satisfy US interests rather than the ones of the local actors.

The rise of the multipolar order, coinciding with the deepest economic and financial crisis in the West in 2008, presented a real test for the Western Balkans region. Local political elites began to recognize, at least partially, the opportunities emerging elsewhere in the world, particularly in China, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), BRICS, and other non-Western entities. This shift alarmed Western power centers, prompting them to diversify their methods of strengthening their grip over the WB. Despite financial injections and investments, which failed to adequately address the needs of impoverished Balkan societies, Western influence remained dominant. The COVID-19 pandemic further underscored this disparity, with the EU failing to provide adequate assistance to its neighboring countries and displaying a natural inclination toward self-interest. In contrast, China and Russia, despite their own domestic challenges, demonstrated solidarity with no strings attached.

In the following sections, we will provide an overview of the Western methods implemented across various spheres of Balkan societies to prevent any 'non-Western influence', highlighting the complexities and challenges inherent in navigating geopolitical dynamics in the region.

Spheres and Methods of Western Influence Countering China and Other Initiatives. One can discern four key arenas of competition between the collective West and China: political/economic, military, media and civil society, and academia and culture. Interestingly, Western scholars and policymakers often accuse China of co-opting and misusing the concept of soft power for its own ends – a charge that reveals Western hypocrisy and underscores its resistance to any challenge to its dominance.

The sources informing this analysis are diverse, ranging from personal experiences to formal statements by state officials, public figures, and mostly reports from NGOs and think tanks. However, it's important to acknowledge that the conclusions and findings presented here necessitate further in-depth analysis. The growing number of fact-checkers and events for promotion of their reports calls for a systematic analyses and systematic monitoring of trends and developments. However, the available reports display a rather bizarre picture of the Western concern over the Chinese soft power influence. Their findings are drawn from dubious (and definitively, non-academic) methodologies, so no wonder there is a lot of bias in the interpretation of elementary things. The intention is obvious: to please the donors rather than to present objective state of affairs. The most remarkable impression when browsing the available documents on the WB and China is that the number of NGOs, think tanks, media portals, etc. has exploded in the last few years. The majority of them are funded by the well-known US and European foundations and policy-making centers, embassies, etc. The EU's control mechanisms and fact-checkers are particularly influential as they often create regional hubs and networks [7] (1). Another similar platform is CHOICE. It represents itself in the following way: «CHOICE is a multinational consortium of experts providing informed analysis on the rising influence of the People's Republic of China within the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. CHOICE provides a platform for discussion, information sharing, best practices, and collaboration for its members monitoring and evaluating Chinese activity in CEE [8] (2).

It is enough to just have a look at the titles of the reports/articles and the conclusion is self-evident: there is hardly any text that is favorable of China's role in the region/Europe. Surely, since February 2022 the main focus is on «Russian influence», but China is mentioned right away, next to Russia. On the other hand, in the public it is hard to detect any particular response to such accusations by China or its officials, embassies, etc. Actually, the public appearances of the Chinese diplomats are rare, while the public has no opportunities to see and hear the Chinese intellectuals, journalists, professors, experts, etc. The Western opinion-makers have total dominance over the public space but it does not satisfy the fact-checkers who want no other influence whatsoever.

Political/Economic Dependency. At the onset, it is crucial to acknowledge the long-standing presence of Western powers in the political affairs of the WB region, often referred to as the Western backyard. This involvement has intensified since the fall of Yugoslavia, driven by the EU and NATO enlargement policies and promises of prosperity for the impoverished populations. The fact that all Balkan states have adopted a pro-EU stance and declared their wish for full membership underscores the EU's leverage in the region.

Over more than a quarter of a century, EU and Western powers have been deeply involved in the internal affairs of these states. This involvement ranges from influencing electoral outcomes and political actors to shaping coalition governments. A significant aspect of this influence is evident in constitutional engineering and the insistence on implementing Western-brokered agreements, which directly shape the political landscape, dynamics, and elite formation.

For instance, Macedonian President Stevo Pendarovski revealed in an interview that the US ambassador played a direct role at a critical moment in the decision-making process for the 2019 constitutional change. This change, which resulted in the renaming of the Republic of Macedonia to North Macedonia, was crucial for the country's NATO membership bid. According to Pendarovski, the ambassador influenced eight opposition parliamentarians, who were under criminal charges and investigations at the time, to vote for the constitutional amendment [4]. This affair, once the subject of speculation and rumors in the fall of 2018, is now confirmed by the highest state representative and is treated as a normal and acceptable practice.

In contrast to Pendarovski, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić has been more vocal and transparent about the overt external pressures concerning the Kosovo dispute. Vučić's openness highlights the ongoing and significant external influences exerted by Western powers in the political affairs of the Western Balkans.

In the long term, it is essential to recognize that today's WB leaderships and elites have been shaped, both politically and psychologically, under the influence of the EU 'ideology'. It operates almost like a religion, where any dissent or questioning is quickly labeled as blasphemy. As a result, there is minimal difference between government and opposition stances regarding the EU and NATO, with Serbia being a notable exception. Over the past few decades, generational changes in politicians have occurred, but the new leaders and youth are largely «made in Brussels.»

This influence is further evidenced by the regular practice of politicians visiting the US embassy for 'consultations'. According to some rumors, the former candidate for the Macedonian presidency (and today's president) visited the US Embassy on the eve of the electoral race. She received signals, if not overt threats, to not push the issue too far and to assure Macedonia's compliance with the Agreement with Greece. Consequently, she softened her campaign stance on that issue. One could speculate if she feared for her personal safety.

The only real opposition, but with a limited influence on the political scene, are the far left (and a few far right) political parties. They may have no crystal-clear political vision and agenda, but they are still able to articulate confrontational views on the blind following of the Brussels' medicines and advice. It often comes with a high price, as the case with the Macedonian far-left political party **Levica** (The Left) shows. They are seen as the fastest growing political force in Macedonia, especially since it got seats in the Parliament. This fact gave them visibility and despite the total media boycott and even slandering (as pro-Russian, pro-Chinese, and even fascist forces). Unlike the other parties, Levica's leader Dimitar Apasiev has introduced a new practice of meeting foreign ambassadors in the Parliament building and in front of the media

and public eye. As a response, now already former Prime Minister Dimitar Kovačevski had repeatedly been referring to **Levica** as a foreign-funded, extremist and inimical political actor. While talking of the EU perspectives, Kovačevski ridiculed Levica for its alleged advocating Macedonia's «Euro-Asian perspective» [1].

Fight against corruption holds a high place on the Western agenda when it comes to their oversight on the WB countries. Something that should be a legitimate part of the so-called good governance, however, has a twofold geopolitical dimension. On one hand, the corrupted local politicians are easier to manipulate and keep loyal. The US ambassador to Macedonia came with an agenda to fight and even punish corrupted politicians. In reality, she blessed the highly suspicious and nontransparent (let alone non-constitutional) deal with the US-Turkish enterprise Bechtel and Enka. The criticism from the public was met with accusations that they work against the country's national interests. This leads to the second dimension: namely, according to the Western power corners corruption comes only from the East. Its entire apparatus works on blaming China on «economic coercion», «debt trap diplomacy» and «spreading corruption», but they turn their blind eye to evidently corruptive deals that spreads from the West. As already mentioned, the Prespa agreement of 2018/2019 in Macedonia was intentionally pushed through using non-legal means. In other words, political corruption is something normal for the local elites as long as it is blessed by the West.

The most radical means for political gain are the so-called colored revolutions (i.e. external regime changes). The first action of such type was implemented in Serbia, when the Milosevic regime was toppled. In the meantime, Macedonia was an object of such an operation in 2015/2016 when Gruevski was practically ousted because of his stubborn refusal to accept name change, and consequently NATO membership, but also because of his opening to the non-Western markets and investments. The so-called Colorful Revolution did the trick by getting on power a more obedient government led by Zoran Zaev.

The WB's economic dependency on the West is more in terms of awaiting wellbeing (as the political narrative goes) rather than on real terms. The important point here is that the Balkan elites share a specific facet: the business sphere is heavily dependent on the state/politics. There are hardly conditions for free market, and competition on the wider market is something that the local firms can hardly manage in their favor. Therefore, getting deals by the state/politics (i.e. the ruling party/coalition) is the easiest way to gain fortune and social position. Business people migrate back and forth into the political arena. The same happens to people from the non-governmental sector and academia.

Out of need some WB states have turned to China (and other partners) for assistance and economic cooperation, but with different speed and forms of engagement. It is well-known that Serbia has been the most open-minded and pragmatic when it comes to regional and global cooperation, with president Vučić as a leader who is trying to balance national interests with external pressures and opportunities. The biggest share of the total WB – China trade exchange goes to Serbia (almost 60%), China's key strategic partner in the region and in Europe [15]. On the other hand, Albania and

Kosovo are least available for China's influence, as some Balkan think tanks and analysts argue. As for Kosovo, China's reluctance is understandable, but the situation in Albania should be analyzed more carefully. Namely, at the margins of the conference on China and the region (organized by the Albanian Institute for Globalization Studies – AIGS) many local participants were talking of China with great fondness and gratefulness, remembering China's humanitarian and economic aid during the hardest times of international isolation of Albania (in the country's communist era).

One could also argue, on the basis of public opinion polls, that the general population of the WB states holds different opinion on global affairs and friends & foes of their country than the one expressed by the officials. The pro-Western analysts, for instance, argue that the positive attitude of the Serbian public is due to the media control and impact from the political top leadership, which intentionally creates a (fake) image that China is the best foreign partner and donor in comparison to the Western ones. However, this estimation proves false in the Macedonian case, where the opposite is true: the media are under total control of the pro-Western government. For instance, the 2022 survey conducted by the American institute IRI, shows that with respect to the foreign policy, 64 percent of the Macedonian citizens believe that strong relations with China serve the best interests of the nation. The percent for Russia was 60. In sum, it is an increase of 11 percent for China (and 6 percent for Russia) compared to the survey of 2020. The IRI regional director expressed concerns over alleged «constant incursions» of China and Russia; however, he stresses that the public support for the close partnerships with EU and USA remains very strong. The nervousness about the public opinion's shift has increased since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, so some political leaders overtly complain that the citizens have shown sympathies that differ from the official policy. The freedom of speech is still possible to enjoy on social media, although the level of control is increasing so many rather stay numb about global affairs, affections and loyalties.

Obviously, there is one crucial problem with public opinion polls: quite often they are conducted in order to shape the public opinion, to persuade the citizens of some trends and positions, regardless of the real state of affairs. By publishing and raising the public awareness of some issue, the donors (that stay behind the local collaborators) actually influence the recipients that were never asked about their opinion. The opinion about China is easy to be manipulated due to the fact that very few people have firsthand experience and knowledge of this country (and the rest of the world).

3.2. Military Presence. At a first sight, it looks as if the WB is a NATO-land. The only exception from the rule are Serbia (with its policy of military neutrality) and one of the entities of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Republika Srpska). The latter's obstruction apparently blocks the country's membership to the Alliance. It is however a different story if NATO is truly committed to embrace a weak and internally explosive state. However, the war in Ukraine introduces geopolitical chasm in an already deeply divided society. Republika Srpska is blamed to be a Russian satellite in the Balkans; the same applies to Serbia to a much higher degree.

NATO narrative reads that it is a zone of peace and stability, i.e. it represents a security community. Ironically, NATO prevented such peace zone in the WB by taking side in Yugoslav wars and meddling into the internal conflicts (by taking side of the Albanians anywhere they live). Thus the security puzzle in the WB remains unfinished. Even in the states that have joined NATO, such as Montenegro and Macedonia, the state of affairs internally is quite uncertain. In other words, NATO did/does not bring peace and stability. Instead of the promised economic developments (allegedly, the foreign investors would rush to new member-states, as they would be seen as stable and secure), the new member states are exposed to (un)expected costs and increase of the military budget at the expense of the other civilian/public sectors (health and education sectors). The impoverished and underdeveloped states have to make greater military budget allocations for the sake of «interoperability», but de facto it is also a sort of political and economic corruption. (That was also the case with Croatia's purchasing French air fighters that hardly serve any logical military purpose; the narrative reads that the Croatian prime minister has ambitions to become a high NATO official so he provided Macron's support through an expensive military deal). The war in Ukraine creates even bigger stress on these small states. For instance, Macedonia had to send its available weapon systems as a military assistance to Ukraine; according to the defense minister there is an ongoing process of rearming the Macedonian army with more modern weapon systems. Hence Macedonia has paid quite a lot (and will be paying even more in the future).

In terms of military presence, a contingent of 3500 NATO military personnel is still stationed in Kosovo (KFOR), but the situation on the ground is far from stable due to the unfinished conflict between Serbia and Kosovo. In 2022 a US military base was opened in Albania. According to the Western military observers the decision to place Special Forces near «countries such as Greece, Kosovo, Montenegro, Bosnia, North Macedonia and Serbia, where Russian political, economic and military influence has been growing steadily stronger» obviously has a strategic importance. Also the Macedonian government has been calling for establishment of a military base in the region of Krivolak (so far one of the best military training polygons). However, amidst today's global security crisis, the most important fact – not widely known by the local populations in the region – is that there has been a nuclear base established in the northern part of Greece. According to the Greek colleagues, the location is still secret, but an investigative journalist discovered the secret decades ago. Yet not any one is interested in raising the issue. In sum, in a worst case scenario, the region would be a legitimate target and may suffer if things go nuclear.

Media and NGO propaganda. The media and NGO (civil society) sectors have always been probably the most significant part of the ideological apparatus of the West. There is a wide range of predominantly younger people (often with Western education) who make living out of the Western grants in the sphere of media and civil society. They could be dubbed «brown sahibs» to refer to the colonialism in old times [18]. Neocolonialism also uses the services of these people in order to establish cultural hegemony (to use the concept of Antonio Gramsci).

It is interesting that media independence is regularly measured by Western think-tanks and similar institutions, and it is done by Western (geopolitical) standards. It is ironic that they pretend to care about media professionalism and independence at a time of cancel culture and censorship in the West. The idea of media penetration is not to leave any space left for the «Others» (they are usually Russia and China, but also other parts of the world). For this purpose, the Western donors invest heavily in new initiatives that seek the so-called «malicious influence» and «spread of disinformation». It is fair to stress that the focal point on this «investigation» is still Russia, but more and more frequently it is joined by China (with a footnote that Chinese malicious influence is of «lesser degree»). However, in the view of the global changes and developments it is highly likely that Russia and China would be coupled, and referred together as inimical power centers. For the needs of this research, the author detected a numberless newly established media laboratories in the region. The overview of their activities and particularly the list of donors that financially support their work clearly speak of the well-orchestrated Western activity. For instance, the Institute for Communication Studies sponsored an add on the social media with a call to any young people to apply for small grants and to work on detection of «malicious foreign influence». The aforementioned institute is just one of the three or four registered institutions. They all work under a same umbrella, but in the public create an impression that many different institutions/NGOs/Institutes come to the same conclusion about the sources of the «malign influence». As for the funding, it is enough to see the item of «financial transparency» of the «Prespa Institute» in Skopje: almost 100% of the grants come from the USA/West. The public rhetoric is hostile to anyone/anything that is non-Western. But in many cases this aggressiveness in imposing certain narratives create odium with the ordinary citizens who more frequently combine the national frustrations with the external Western pressure. Even the most pro-EU activists and journalists admit that the public support for the West (NATO and EU, particularly) is in a downright tendency [12]. The counter-responses usually point out that in spite of the anti-Western sentiments, if asked about the preferred regions for emigration, seeking better health or educational services, the citizens still point out towards the West. Of course, nobody emphasizes the fact that non-West (the Rest, or better 99% of the world) is kept unknown for the general public. Some surveys among the youth of the countries of former Yugoslavia showed shocking results: over 80% of the young people have never traveled abroad at all! The Ukraine war and Gaza developments shows how the media freedoms and spread of alternative information is seen as perilous for the Western agenda. It did not take long to ban any media outlets, even against the domestic regulative and international standards.

For years now, there is a phenomenon of a media autism, i.e. self-centered and European-centered media reporting. In other words, the citizens in the region are kept in a sort of «there is no world beyond the Western hemisphere». The narrative control is getting harsher than ever. Even from the top state positions, anyone who calls for more balanced public debate on global issues is under risk to be canceled or smeared.

The media's owners and CEOs lead discriminative editorial policies, so there are few opportunities to open a dialogue on global issues.

The media framing of certain stories is particularly telling. For instance, the highway construction deal with the Chinese company Sinehydro in Macedonia was portrayed by pro-opposition media as corrupt and unnecessary. There was pressure on the Public Prosecutor's Office to open a corruption case. The Miladinovci-Štip highway was almost operational in 2017, but it took time for the government to open it for use. Some circles still argue that it has been an economically irrational project that allegedly wasted too much money on infrastructure. On the other hand, the Kičevo-Ohrid enterprise risks becoming a 'mission impossible' due to internal political obstacles and the creation of a ridiculous perception that the Chinese company is incapable of building a 57 km-long highway. The 2019 CHOICE report by Ana Krstinovska, titled «Exporting Corruption? The Case of a Chinese Highway Project in North Macedonia,» highlighted the issues surrounding the project [14]. During the 2024 electoral campaign, Artan Grubi, the then Vice Prime Minister, overtly admitted that his wish was to prove that a project built by an American company like Bechtel & Enka on the same line as the Chinese one would be completed faster than the Chinese one that started 11 years ago [22].

The government tacitly withdrew from the project for the modernization of the Corridor 10 railway with Chinese funds and instead signed a legally dubious agreement for Corridors 8 and 10 with the US-Turkish joint venture Bechtel-Enka, without calling a tender. The government has been trying to push through revisions of eight laws to satisfy the investor's demands. The entire deal has been conducted not only in a secretive manner but is also not available to members of Parliament, as it is veiled in secrecy. The US ambassador, who has called for a fight against corruption, has openly discredited the opposition and anyone else seeking insight into the most expensive deal ever signed by any Macedonian government. It is furthermore believed that the highway is intended to connect all Albanian-populated parts in the region through high-speed highways, giving it both an ethnic and geopolitical dimension. In short, the deals with Chinese and Western companies have been framed differently by the political, media, and NGO complex.

The impact on the academic and culture cooperation. Generally, the WB region suffers from degradation of the university education and brain drain. However, the university education often serves the elites in two ways: first, they help mimicry high unemployment rate among the youth, so instead of wasting time, the families are willing to invest the last funds into the further education of their children. Thus the degree of youngsters that continue their education at the university level (and even on MA level) is quite high. That postpones the raise of the unemployment rate (and societal frustration) at least for some time, which makes live of the government elites easier. The second dimension refers to the ideological and substantial aspect of the university education. One of the important aspects is exposed in the fact that the academic discipline of International Relations is almost undeveloped. There are few textbooks on local languages, and even the existing production is clearly pro-Western. For some

time, European studies have been very popular, but the failure of the EU enlargement reflects on students losing interest in this field. Except for Serbia, there are practically no academic centers that deal with the world affairs/regions. Individual researchers are left alone to invest efforts and expand their interests in regions away from EU/West. Their involvement in projects related to Asia, Africa and Latin America, for instance, is seen as something suspicious [6].

The author of this analysis has been often publicly reprimanded for publishing articles in non-Western part of the world. There is no academic critique or review on the published texts, but the very fact that something was published in Russia or China is seen as undesirable and suspicious. The overview of the submitted MA and PhD theses shows a clear dominance of topics related to NATO and EU or any other subject but solely from the Western point of view. Since Macedonia's joining NATO, and as soon as the pandemic was over, the Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje has become a hub for militaristic attitude and propaganda among the young students. At least a couple of times per month, the students meet the defense minister or other officials, visit the military academy or military objects, and attend the so-called NATO Academy etc. To make things more bizarre, many of these activities are organized within an institute that deals with peace studies.

Both the Western-funded Antidisinfor.net [3] and the «Prespa» Institute express concerns about the rising number of Macedonian higher education institutions that have established cooperation with their Chinese counterparts through bilateral projects. According to «Prespa» survey, China is one of the top three countries that has some involvement/cooperation with the Macedonian higher education [2]. At first sight it looks as if the Macedonian academic space is open and welcoming to non-Western initiatives, but things are more complex. For instance, a professor at a Chinese university of Macedonian origin invested huge efforts to make the then rector of Ss. Cyril and Methodius University sign a memorandum of cooperation and long-term project for cooperation, which would have involved quite a generous Chinese funding. The project was meant for the sphere of social sciences (politics, law and economy). At last, upon the recommendation of the author of this analysis a new contact was established with a lower ranked university in the city of Štip. A conclusion comes to mind: it is much easier to accept a cooperation within the natural or technical sciences, while the social sciences are left to individual initiatives and efforts. Interestingly, the deal with Štip-based University was signed thanks to the fact that the rector is alumni from a Chinese university. One of the hopeful signals is the recent establishment of the Global Changes Center [9], which has ambitions to provide space for much wider cooperation within the multipolar world. It may become even a regional hub for cooperation on behalf of other university centers from the WB region.

The personal contacts with young alumni speaks of their fascination with China's higher education system. A young person from Albania expressed her frustration with the way China is portrayed in the media and public sphere in her home country. Recently she joined a university in China as a professor. Another student that graduated from China has just enrolled on PhD studies, while making her living here by

teaching Chinese language in Macedonia. There are a growing number of Tai Chi Chuan clubs in the region. The work of Confucius Institutes is quite impressive and getting momentum, but what is missing is a wider popularization of their work. Yet, it is a matter of concern for the European think tanks [23]. Often one eloquent and brilliant person can make a difference. For instance, a former PhD student in China, now returned home with his Chinese wife and two children, makes a very powerful impact on the public discourse, through newspaper columns, translation of Chinese poetry, and giving public lectures on Chinese history and philosophy.

One should bear in mind that in the WB countries there is still preserved memory of the communist times, and the fact that Yugoslavia was widely opened to all parts of the world through its policy on non-alignment. A few generations have grown up ever since, but all they witnessed are empty promises from the West and even a decay of the Western civilization (woke culture, militarism, neocolonialism), but also distancing the Balkans as something primitive and corrupt etc. The last couple of years have shown many people that there are alternatives and that the world is changing rapidly. These facts bring back the old memories of a different foreign and cultural policy that was open and welcoming to cultural and other communications with the majority of the world. This fact creates lot of worries in the Western power centers. Their response is quite systematic and harsh. On 23 May 2024, the US officials announced the introduction of the formal U.S.-EU coordination mechanism on information integrity in the Western Balkans [24]. This is not the first or last attempt to strengthen overall control of the freedom of media and academic thought in the WB region. Its rationale is to spread fear and self-censorship among the journalists and scholars, and consequently free the public space exclusively for the Western influence.

Instead of a Conclusion: Can China Respond to the Western Influence in the Western Balkans? Unlike the West who wants «quick fix» policies and behaves arrogantly to the others, China's attitude is quite the opposite. This fact should be made more obvious for the general public in the WB. There is an ongoing geopolitical and even more geo-economic battle on a global scale.

Fairly speaking, the geo-economic battle in the region of WB is currently won by the Western powers. Bearing in mind the population's needs and the fact that the West is in decline and militarization is an expensive endeavor, one should be patient and creative in finding ways how to further cooperation between the region and China. Here we are facing a powerful setback in the face of MIMAC (military-industrial-media-academic complex) run by the USA, but the dissent is present. It just needs time to find a way to express itself.

China is one of the few global powers that are able to assist in rebuilding not only the continent/region but also the global order. In the meantime, one needs to work on promotion of better knowledge of China among the youth, the society, through various events, or other forms of rising public awareness of the fact that China is not what the Western media propaganda argues it is. For many ethnically divided countries of the WB it is of utmost importance to move the focus of the society and governance away from identity politics of divisions and confrontations. The new focus that would be

welcome by the people from all walks of life should be on economic, infrastructural, scientific and cultural collaboration, i.e. everything that is already envisaged in Belt and Road Initiative.

NOTES:

- (1) For instance, Antidisinfo.net describes its mission in the following way: «The Anti-Disinformation Network for the Balkans (ADN-Balkans) serves as the basis of a cooperation between civil society organizations, media outlets, educational institutions and all other relevant stakeholders with a goal of forming a wide front on countering disinformation through affirmation of the highest standards of fact-checking and all other ethical principles of professional journalism, as well as promoting media literacy and critical thinking.» ADN-Balkans brings together the following NGOs from the Western Balkans and neighboring EU countries, Bulgaria and Greece: Metamorphosis, Foundation for Internet and Society from North Macedonia, founder of Truthmeter.mk, Portalb.mk and Meta.mk, Faktoje.al from Albania, JAJ.gr (Journalists About Journalism) from Greece, empowered by News Literacy Center, NGO for Media & News Literacy, Crno beli svet (CBS), organization and online portal from Kosovo, Peace Journalism Lab, School of Journalism and Mass Media Communication, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece, Digital Communication Network SouthEast Europe Hub, Greece, Istinomer from Serbia, Ellinika Hoaxes from Greece, Internews Kosova, founder of KALLXO from Kosovo, BlueLink Foundation, founder of Evromegdan and BlueLink Stories from Bulgaria. It is noteworthy that a group of the same experts often work on multiple similar projects, suggesting a profit-driven engagement rather than a genuinely broad and effective influence of these NGOs.
- (2) The Macedonia-based NGO **Estima**, headed by Ana Krstinovska, is a typical example of the previously elaborated point that very same people (and NGOs) take part in a number of similar networks dealing with the non-Western negative narratives and disinformation. A very peculiar thing with Estima's head is that Ms. Krstinovska (under her maiden name) used to work for Confucius Institute during the government of Nikola Gruevski, but as soon as he was toppled from power, she moved her business on the other side, now working with Western grants detecting «negative foreign influence».

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