Geopolitical Interests in Western Balkans

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Introduction

Zdeněk Rod, Halina Chraščová

Western Balkans has always played a crucial role in the geopolitical chessboard. Nowadays it is not otherwise (Bieber – Tzifakis, 2019). After the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, the geopolitical map significantly changed, admittedly due to the presence of newly independent states: Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia. The existence of new circumstances was followed by interests of traditional geopolitical actors that have been involved in the Western Balkans matter for many decades. Those are predominantly geopolitically represented by European states (European Union respectively), Russia – whose presence dates to the time of Tsardom of Russia, which designated itself as the protector of Orthodox Christianity (Morelli, 2018), and Turkey. Turkey has been traditionally present within the region since the existence of the Ottoman empire, leaving significant historical heritage behind (Causevic – Bryce, 2019). Except these traditional powers, Western Balkans has become a region of interest also for the non-traditional geopolitical actors who emerged in the course of the fall of Yugoslavia – the United States, Gulf states (primarily UAE), Iran and People's Republic of China (PRC).

With the break-up of conflict in Kosovo in 1999, an increased interest could have been observed among the states. As Abadi states for Foreign Policy: *"The Kosovo war also foreshadowed the return of great-power politics, spurring the rise of revanchist nationalism in both Russia and China that the West contends with today."* Habitually, during the ongoing conflict, the external actors were sending humanitarian aid or another form of help. However, plausibly, many of these actors were also projecting their influence to reach their foreign policy interests (Cigar, 1999). Therefore, not surprisingly, certain interests were in a mutual contradiction. To give an illustration, on the one side Russia supporting Serbia and Kosovo Serbs, on the other side Arab states supporting Kosovo Albanians. Moreover, experts did not preclude that Kosovo had

been a subject to one of the proxy wars (Policraticus, 2018; Biddle, 2002; Steinke, 2015).

As implied above, experts and academics have assumed that Western Balkans is gaining special attention in geopolitics terms (Bieber – Tzifakis, 2019; Simurdić – Teokarević, 2016; Islam, 2019; Rrustemi – de Wijk eds., 2019). The subject of this matter is to find out what kind of influence are the above-mentioned countries asserting in Kosovo.

In terms of Kosovo, things significantly changed when Kosovo declared its independence from Serbia in 2008. Admittedly, it was one of the big blows for Belgrade, chiefly due to the loss of territory and its Serbian minority living in the northern parts of Kosovo. Notwithstanding, likewise Serbia, not every state shared Pristina's appeal to become a fully recognized state in the United Nations (UN). With regards to its recognition, so far Kosovo has been recognized by 114 UN countries (Palickova, 2019). In substance, Kosovo's recognition has been dividing the countries since 2008 and it stems from various reasons. For Russia, on the one hand, it is symptomatic that it does not recognize the independence of Kosovo, due to its special relationship with Serbia. However, that does not mean that Russia is not interested in Kosovo's matters at all. On the other hand, China primarily does not assert Kosovo's sovereignty due to its ethnic minorities living in its territory.

This paper aims to focus on foreign policy influence of traditional and non-traditional geopolitical actors in terms of Western Balkans, and other specific countries vis-à-vis Kosovo. Firstly, as traditional countries, we consider according to Hänsel and Feyerabend (2018) Russia and Turkey, simultaneously with the EU which: *"considers itself involved, against its will, in a traditional geopolitical game of influence in a European periphery where its competitors allegedly strive to redefine the rules of the game, to the disadvantage of the region and the EU,"* (EWB, 2019). Secondly, in terms of the non-traditional countries, we consider the United States, China, the Gulf States (especially Saudi Arabia) and Iran. Furthermore, even though it might seem not fit the outline of this paper we also decided firmly to add Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia. These two countries are undoubtedly recently shaping the situation of Kosovo to a large extent and in case of Serbia literally

define it. Adding these two Balkan countries also announces and outlines a future intended analysis done by CBAP experts with a direct interconnection to this one, providing the research on influencing relations between Kosovo and the other Balkan countries. From that reason for the purposes of this paper, we have decided, in case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, to analyse the most recent phenomenon that influences both sides significantly, which are the economic relations between them regarding the tax policy. Concerning Serbia, the aim of this paper is not to provide a deep analysis of Kosovo and Serbia relations, as the amount of content would deserve a separate analysis, some of the issues are slightly introduced in the chapter regarding Russia. However, we deal with Serbian parallel structures operating directly in Kosovo and we provide an overview of how the country is shaped by this double governance and the modus operandi used by these structures.

Except for the slightly different methodological approach in case of Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina defined by their particular relations in case of both, traditional and non-traditional geopolitical actors in Kosovo, we provide seven descriptive analyses following the same pattern of methodology for a clear reader-friendly analysis.

The methodology of proceeding the text was selected and based on the foreign policy interest mentioned by Chong-Han Wu (2017), Fordham (1998), Levi (1970) and publication from Close Up Foundation Washington D.C. (n. d.).

In each of the provided analyses, divided by chapters and by the particular country, we will focus on the main three particular interests, thus: 1) security interests (alliances, military bases, projecting and exercising military power); 2) economic interests (foreign direct investments, arms trade, the appearance of mineral resources); 3) ideological interests (culture, religion, promoting ideological interest abroad or protecting it from foreign interference at home).

Within the chapters, we will conduct an *in-depth* analysis in order to find out what source of interest the specific country is projecting towards Kosovo. In every analysis, we will also provide a short historical overview of the defined country in terms of their mutual diplomatic relations.

Additionally, at the end of each chapter, a brief concluding summary will also be provided. Apart from that, the paper by itself contains an independent critical assessment part, containing the results of the whole analyses. The authors of the analyses represent an international team of junior researchers from various countries (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Russia, Spain, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo) who have had both professionally and privately close relations with the Western Balkans region. Lastly, the empirical data are gathered from open source data such as the reports of international or local non-governmental organizations, international organizations, policy papers and reports, scientific articles, local or international media etc.

Turkey

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Turkish presence and influence across Western Balkans is not only historically rooted but also currently widely discussed. The engagement of Turkey might be observed through all important fields of the region including politics, economic and trade ties, diplomacy, education, humanitarian aid, support to the Muslim community, cultural impact, infrastructure and energy field investments and nevertheless military and security involvement.

In December 2018 Turkey stated that it will support Kosovo´s effort to transform its security force into an official army that is supposed to consist of more than 5000 members, Öztürk points out. Turkey referred to the transformation as to a "sovereign right" of the state of Kosovo, according to the Turkey´s Embassy in Pristina, the capital of Kosovo. This transformation is being expected to happen within Kosovo´s constitutional framework, in coordination with NATO. Its main focus is to apply principles of democracy regarding all ethnical communities in the country. Moreover, Turkey´s approach is that the transformation is seen as a tool to preserve stability and peace within the region which Turkey emphasizes as its main priority (Öztürk, 2018).

In August 2018, Turkish infantry troops from multinational battle group forces conducted crowd-and-riot-control training near the town of Miresh in Kosovo in coordination with the American forces from 3rd Battalion, 126th Aviation Regiment, Massachusetts Army National Guard using UH-60 Balck Hawk helicopters for an aerial insertion. The exercise was clearly aimed to demonstrate Turkish outright capability to respond up to 30 minutes in full alert to various crisis scenarios on the ground that might appear in Kosovo in the future, according to the statements made by the commander of the Turkish infantry based in Kosovo, captain Mehmet Onat (Sweeney, 2018).

The Turkish infantry unit represents an inevitable part of the Kosovo Force (KFOR) mission that provides for a contribution to maintain a safe environment in Kosovo. In

December 2018, the unit consisted of approx. 80 members. Apart from crowd and riot controls, it covers the responsibility mainly for joint patrols with the Kosovo Border Police, North Macedonia border patrols, Liaison Monitoring Team field house evacuations and securing observation post patrols. In addition, it is prepared and equipped to support Kosovo Police in the event of civil disturbances. Turkish soldiers that officially arise under Multi-National Battle Group - East (MNBG-E) are deployed in Kosovo and stationed with its headquarters at an official American base Camp Bondsteel located in Uroševac/Ferizaj that was established in 1999. The armament of Turkish infantry in Kosovo claims to include heavy and light arms like rifles, sub-machine guns, machine guns and pistols. It is equipped by Mercedes-Benz Unimog trucks, Land Rover non-tactical vehicles and Cobra armoured vehicles.

Since 1995, Turkey has participated in all operations that were conducted by NATO in the Balkan region. The most prominent appearance Turkey made in IFOR and SFOR in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Operation Essential Harvest, Amber Fox and Allied Harmony in North Macedonia and of course KFOR in Kosovo (Sweeney, 2018).

However, Turkey and it´s military and security position in NATO is nowadays a very current issue internationally discussed. The reason for increased concerns is tensed relations of Turkey and the USA. It is anticipated that in case of a deteriorated situation regarding this issue, Turkey may change its attitudes towards NATO enlargement and change its stance to a rather passive one or it will pass its involvement on Russia. First and foremost, it must be said that Turkey´s involvement in the region of Western Balkans does not depend on the regional situation, but rather on its ties and relations with the USA. It might seem evident that the USA does not welcome Turkey´s cooperation with Russia on various levels (Reid, 2019).

Firstly, it is known that the USA strongly objects Turkey´s proposal to buy Russian surface to air missiles system S-400. Moreover, Turkey intentionally plans to cooperate with Russia in Syria. Therefore, the Turkish proposal to buy S-400 must not be necessarily perceived as a sheer provocation towards the USA but as a logical step, even though the USA offered Turkey an

alternative in the form of Patriot system. On the other hand, the USA openly considers an option to apply sanctions on Turkey in case it accepts an offer from Russia. The sanctions are said to be represented by excluding Turkey from the F-35 fighter jet programme. In this case, Turkey provided statements that claimed the programme without Turkish attendance, will be a failure as it produces nearly seven per cent of the parts for the machines. On the other hand, USA representatives are denying any potential threat to the programme if Turkey steps off (DefenseWorld.net, 2019).

Nevertheless, the issue appears more complex and causes a dilemma for NATO members in adopting a standpoint to the act and what is more, the conclusion will have a deciding impact on Turkey´s external relations, including transatlantic norms in the Balkans and its alliances in the Middle East, namely in Syria. For now, Turkey is still promoting the integration of Western Balkans into transatlantic institutions, supports the enlargement of EU and NATO in the region.

The energy security of the Balkans is an area with the need for significant improvements. First of all, the region lacks energy infrastructure and the present one, being constructed throughout the 1960s and 1970s, is quickly ageing. Secondly, Balkans should also avert its over-dependence on fossil fuels, especially, when it comes to electricity production which is based on fossil fuels. Even though Balkan states are rich in coal, the reserves are rapidly disappearing and the use of coal for electricity production causes damages to the environment. However, the region has a huge potential to increase its energy security. In particular, the potential stems from the strategic geographical position of the Balkans. They are well placed in the neighbourhood of the European Union from the one side and Turkey and the Black sea from the other side connecting it to Russia, Caucasus and the Middle East. In that matter, it is important for the Balkans to develop mechanisms of regional cooperation with all these actors to increase its own energy security.

Energy security of Kosovo could be characterized very similarly to the energy security of Western Balkans. Energy mix of Kosovo comprises almost solely on its own energy sources that are based in lignite. To be exact, the share of energy generation by sources is 97 per cent lignite, 3 per cent

waterpower and a small percentage of renewables. There is no share of energy produced by nuclear reactors (WorldData.info, 2015). With the Stabilization and Association Agreement in force since 2016, Kosovo has become a contracting party to the Energy Community of the EU. This presupposes Kosovo to align its energy policy with the energy acquis of the EU, among others; it includes opening its energy market and enhancing the use of renewables in energy production with the aim of environmental protection.

The Energy Strategy of the Republic of Kosovo 2017-2026 summarizes many challenges ahead of Kosovo to become energy efficient and secure. The energy production of Kosovo is based almost solely on two lignite-based power plants – Kosovo A and Kosovo B. The problem is their high level of air pollution. Also, power plant Kosovo A, constructed in 1960s/1970s, is in the need of replacement. Its generation capacity was approximated by the Energy Regulatory Office of Kosovo (2017) at about 50-60 per cent since two of five units are out of operation. That is why the 'Kosova e Re' power plant is in preparation to be constructed. Power plant Kosovo B which is ageing as well needs to be rehabilitated at least in 2023/2024 to prolong its years of operation to 2039 (Energy Regulatory Office of Kosovo, 2017). In general, the dependency on lignite-based power generation ought to be reconsidered, and new ways of energy production should be established also in accordance with the EU Energy Community. Another set of challenges presents the current ageing infrastructure, causing technical and non-technical losses. Particularly, gas infrastructure could be characterized as highly underdeveloped and in fact non-existent (Ministry of Economic Development, 2017). In order to decrease the share of lignite-based power generation and thus lower damages on the environment, Kosovo needs to include other sources for energy generation. Accordingly, the construction of gas infrastructure and connectors into regional and international natural gas networks are necessary steps. However, it depends on the cooperation and development of good relations with regional and global actors regarding the energy security and in fact willingness and interest of global actors to cooperate with the Balkans.

The region of Western Balkans is placed where interests of various global actors meet each other, in particular the European Union, Russia and Turkey. Turkey's geographical position predestines the country to be the energy hub of the region and to play an important role for Western Balkans in terms of energy security. However, even Turkey has some challenges ahead when concerning energy politics. Among its main interests is to diversify sources and supply countries. This is especially true for energy production based on gas. In fact, Turkey is highly dependent on imports of gas (98 per cent) (Ministry of Energy and Natural Resources, 2015) coming mainly from Russia via Blue Stream in the Black Sea and the Western Pipeline crossing Bulgaria (Winrow, 2013). There are two other routes, one transporting gas from Iran via Eastern Anatolian natural gas main transmission line and the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum line (BTE) transporting gas from Azerbaijan (Batten, 2014). There is also a couple of projects for construction of additional pipelines for Turkey to sustain its growing energy consumption. Firstly, it refers to Turkey – Greece Interconnector (TGI), as a part of the South European Gas Ring. Secondly, it is Trans – Anatolian Natural Gas pipeline (TANAP) in the Turkish territory and Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) crossing Greece, Albania and Italy with the aim to connect Azerbaijan with Europe. Thirdly, there is a planned project of TurkStream transporting gas from Russia via exclusive economic zones of Turkey in the Black Sea towards Bulgaria and Greece (Ministry of Energy and Natural Resources, 2019). What is more, according to the Strategic Plan of Turkey, it wants to develop infrastructure and agree on new contracts with resource rich countries like Iraq, Qatar, Algeria, and Turkmenistan, Eastern Mediterranean or African states (Algeria, Nigeria for LNG) (Ministry of Energy and Natural Resources, 2015).

All these initiatives demonstrate the effort to diversify and safeguard a sufficient flow of gas into the region. It demonstrates the willingness of Turkey to cooperate on both the EU and Russian projects as well as other states, too. Unfortunately, the problem might be that energy markets of Western Balkans and especially that of Kosovo are very small. It is mainly a problem when making decisions upon investments for constructions of energy infrastructure. These

kinds of constructions are awfully expensive, that is why sufficient guarantees are needed for investors that it would be paid off in the future. It means that there is the need for long-term contracts between the supplier and the consumer based on sufficient supply and demand for the agreement to be beneficial for both sides. However, the consumption in Western Balkans as well as in Kosovo is almost solely dependent on energy generated by fossil fuels that is less expensive (Barysh, 2007). That is why they may not be perfect candidates to attract foreign investors for the construction of energy infrastructure. On the other hand, the region is still important for actors placed in its immediate neighbourhood for political or economic reasons. There is the EU preoccupied with energy supply diversification in order to halt dependency on Russia. The concern refers also to deteriorated relations with Ukraine because of crisis in 2009 and 2014 and the subsequent unreliability of gas imports for European consumers. There is then the Russian Federation and the interest to sustain its incomes by the export of energy resources, in particular gas, and thus in the search of new energy markets (Önsoy, 2015). Above all Russia does not want the EU or other actors to gain a significant advantage in the influence of Western Balkans via energy politics.

Last but not least, there is Turkey and its politics of "zero problems" with neighbours (Önsoy, 2015). Throughout the years´ Turkey has developed intensive cultural and economic ties with Western Balkans as well as with Kosovo. They might benefit from these ties when it comes to energy security, particularly, because Turkey might be more willing to invest in Western Balkans despite the size of their energy markets. Moreover, there is the inability of Turkey to store a large amount of energy sources. Since the consumption of Turkey is seasonal there are times of high peaks and low peaks in consumption but not enough storing capacities (Barysh, 2007; Winrow, 2013). That is why Turkey also needs to find markets to re-export its energy sources. In this way, Western Balkans and Kosovo might constitute the most possible beneficiaries.

In the last decade, Turkey has become one of the most influential actors in international affairs through the provision of foreign aid. It relates to the provision of humanitarian as well as development

assistance. In particular, foreign aid does not work solely but the activity is determined by the overall foreign policy. As stated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the main goal is: "*to ensure that our region follows a robust sustainable development and peace agenda, instead of struggling perpetually with fragility and conflicts. Turkey's Enterprising and Humanitarian Foreign Policy will continue to secure her national interests while simultaneously contributing to the common goals of humanity,"* (n. d.). Turkish foreign policy is set up to work according to two main principles. Firstly, it pursues the policy of "*peace at home, peace in the World"* and secondly it is shaped by the idea of "*thinking globally but acting locally in every corner of the world,"* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n. d.).

Another characteristic is that Turkish leadership does not consider foreign aid to be just an activity of foreign policy. It is believed to be the responsibility and duty and in fact a part of Turkey's identity based on historical and cultural traditions (Hasimi, 2014). In that matter, humanitarian aid is provided to regions and other countries affected by disasters, man-made or natural. The aim is to make the international community more stable and undermine the impacts of poverty and social classes that are causing humanitarian need. The provision of humanitarian aid has been on the rise, especially, since 2011 when Somalia became one of the main receivers. Nevertheless, the most pressing need activating Turkish humanitarianism has been also found within Turkey itself. It has manifested itself by the "open door policy" for Syrian refugees fleeing the Syrian crisis in the Middle East. It has also caused that the number of Syrians in Turkey is more than 3.6 million as of January 2019 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n. d.).

Western Balkans constitutes to be the prime region targeted by Turkish aid, too. It has been provided mainly to repair damages caused by severe floods in Serbia, Bosnia, Croatia and North Macedonia. In the case of Kosovo, Turkish Red Crescent distributed most lately humanitarian aid in the means of food to families throughout the holy month of Ramadan (Öztürk, 2019). As has been already stated, the goal is to achieve and maintain stability and peace. That is why Western Balkans, since its proximity as well as historical and cultural relations, is particularly the region to be considered by Turkey.

On the other hand, the foreign aid policy serves various other interests of Turkey. Most importantly, it helps the actor to shape the international order and its image. Foreign aid, including humanitarian or developmental, constitutes a tool of Turkish public diplomacy. It is determined by foreign policy principles and interests of Turkey, which are formed into a distinctively Turkish public diplomacy framework (Cevik, 2016). First of all, these soft power tools help to disseminate an ideal image of Turkey and its leaders. Secondly, it contributes to fulfil political and economic ambitions of Turkey. The prime example could be found in references to history and culture made by Turkey when it comes to humanitarian assistance. It might be understood as an effort of Turkey to redefine global order by recalling its long-forgotten legacy (Hasimi, 2014). In this matter, foreign aid policy encourages Turkish efforts to become one of the most influential and leading actors globally and regionally. Public diplomacy forms a complex of communication directed towards foreign publics and authorities and other organizations, with the aim to pursuit certain foreign policy initiatives. It presents a positive or ideal image of Turkey through nation branding and information campaigns (Cevik, 2016).

There are various forms of how the foreign aid could be distributed, which may consequently determine the scope and form of the public diplomacy of Turkey. Its approach to aid provision is characterized mostly as state-centred based on the sovereignty respect principle (Gilley, 2015). In that way, personal relations and interactions play a very important role. Considering Western Balkans, Turkish public diplomacy is highly based on personal ties between president Erdogan and regional leaders. Besides bilateral cooperation, Turkey is also part of the international aid community. Namely, it is a member of the United Nations Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and the World Food Programme (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n. d.). These create another form of a channel where Turkey may realize its ambitions on the international scale. In fact, in 2017 Turkey was named the biggest donor.

The list of main organs acting on behalf of Turkey in relations to foreign aid encompasses the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Disaster and Emergency Management Authority and Turkish Cooperation and

Coordination Agency (TIKA). Among supporting actors are the Office of Public Diplomacy, Turkish Red Crescent and Directorate of Religious Affairs (Cevik, 2016). It is another way how to demonstrate the interconnection between public diplomacy and foreign aid. What is more, since the year of 2002 when the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power, TIKA has been assigned with the role of conducting development cooperation policy. The Agency thus became more important in terms of foreign politics. Activities aided by TIKA were redefined and broadened in terms of area, depth and strength in order to encompass a wider range of activities (Hasimi, 2014). Nowadays, TIKA, as a governmental agency, delivers foreign aid and communicates government main objectives. It is a source of pride that Turkey is capable to support and improve the lives of people around the world and presents Turkey as a great power. This ideal image is also presented in the media and via political speeches in order to disseminate the image among the Turkish population (Aydintasbas, 2019).

In relation to Western Balkans, 18 per cent of TIKA´s budget goes to the region (ibid.). It is mostly spent on renovation activities, particularly, on mosques renovation and other buildings from the Ottoman era. It is understood to be a historical responsibility that is why areas of a former Ottoman empire are frequently provided with Turkish foreign aid. The leading AK Party defines these activities as civilizing and believes that Turkey should be assigned with this role as the former Ottoman Empire had been. Moreover, it is also supported by the fact that humanitarianism as a concept, has been broadened by Turkish leadership and relates to aid provided through peacebuilding and development initiatives (Gilley, 2015). This idea is pursued, particularly, via development aid used for reconstruction and rebuilding projects.

Kosovo represents the kind of an example. TIKA funds there various kinds of rebuilding projects in the area of health, education and agriculture. When it comes to education TIKA funds mostly rebuilding projects, for example, to renovate students´ dormitories (TIKA, 2017). Kosovo is said to have good conditions for agriculture production; unfortunately, the economic status of the region is determined as

moderate to poor. Due to these conditions, TIKA contributes development aid via Agricultural Development Program to these regions in Kosovo. The aim is to revitalize the livestock industry, as well as to support family economies. Consequently, it helps to increase employment rates and prevents migration out of poor economic regions. What is more, the Program provides support for women who were marked by the war in the 1990s, who now struggle financially too. The Agency helps them mainly to integrate into the economy through milk industry businesses. As it states, the Agricultural Development Program has been set up to: "*achieve permanent friendship [between communities and farmers] and peace in Kosovo,"* (TIKA, n. d.).

The practice of Turkish humanitarianism is further identified through political neutrality, professionalism and pro-Islamic bias (Gilley, 2015). It means there are no rules of conditionality set up by Turkey, as well as no coordination with regional or international actors. In comparison to other international donors, Turkey targets mostly Muslim countries like Bosnia, Kashmir, Myanmar, Somalia or Syria. On the one hand, as a predominantly Muslim country, it holds a functional advantage over non-Muslim donors as well as a normative justification. In the Western Balkans, it relates mostly to Bosnians and Albanians. In the case of Kosovo, the prime example of the support provided to Muslim communities could be seen on TIKA´s restoration projects of Mosques (TIKA, 2017; TIKA, n. d.). On the other hand, the provision of foreign assistance to Muslim populations might serve as an entering point to establish closer cooperation with non-Muslim countries in the region.

For regional actors, such as the EU or Russia, this could be a warning sign that another actor is establishing itself in the area. In comparison to these two states, it holds some advantages, as already mentioned. Firstly, Turkish foreign aid is provided with no conditions as opposed to the EU conditionality principles, for example. At the same time, Turkish foreign aid policy is a pro-active one, aiming to encourage peace and stability. Secondly, based on its Ottoman legacy, historical and cultural ties may help Turkey to enter the region. This applies, especially, to countries where the Muslim community dominates. As opposed to some critiques, it is argued that cultural

and religious exchange, as well as development aid, works to prevent radicalization tendencies in Western Balkans. In particular, one of the sources of radicalization in Kosovo is identified in poor economic performance and institutional failings. In that way, Turkish development projects in agriculture or education aim to improve these conditions (Kaminski, n. d.). Thirdly, while pursuing the foreign aid policy through principles of personal ties and locally based activities, it may work also for non-Muslim communities. Although the influence of TIKA and Turkish foreign aid might have only limited impact in non-Muslim areas in the Balkans, the goal is to change it. While pursuing the foreign aid policy, public diplomacy works in this direction, presenting Turkey as the harbour of peace and stability, while preserving the human dignity principle. How successful Turkish foreign aid could be and to what extent Turkey is able to establish among other regional actors in the Western Balkans we will see in the long run. An important point is also how these efforts would affect Kosovo and other Balkan states.

Turkey is one of the countries with the largest presence of direct investment in Kosovo, and one of the first countries to recognize Kosovo's independence in 2008 (Koha, 2017). The value of Turkish investments in Kosovo reached over EUR 372 million since 2008. While according to official figures in 2017, investments from Turkey have been over EUR 28 million. These data rank Turkey as the fourth country when it comes to the value of investments in Kosovo, after Germany, Switzerland and Great Britain (Opoja.net, 2018). In trade exchanges, according to data from the Kosovo-Turkish Chamber of Commerce, Kosovo imported goods worth over EUR 128 million from Turkey in 2008. This figure has increased to over EUR 334 million in 2018. In 2008, Kosovo´s exports totalled the amount of EUR 3 million, while in 2018 exports reached a value of EUR 8.4 million (TRT Shqip, 2019).

Investments from Turkey are mostly oriented in the banking sector, education, health, manufacturing, energy, construction, trade, hotels, transport and other areas (KOHA, 2017). The total number of Turkish businesses registered in Kosovo is about 800, while 200 businesses are currently active (Ahmeti, 2017, A).

Representatives of the Consulate General of the Republic of Kosovo in Istanbul state that, Turkish companies continue to be

interested in investing in Kosovo. Erven Fusha, acting consul general, said for Radio Free Europe that they meet Turkish businessmen several times a week to present the business conditions in Kosovo (KOHA, 2017). In addition to direct investment, in Kosovo, some of the companies with the largest financial capital have been given more concessions to Turkish consortiums (Ahmeti, 2017, A). Bechtel-Enka, the US-Turkish consortium, has built the Kosovo-Albania highway for EUR 1 billion, as well as the Pristina-Skopje highway, worth more than EUR 600 million. The Turkish-French company Limak - Airport de Lyon is another concessionaire, which has received a concession for twenty years starting in 2010 for Prishtina International Airport "Adem Jashari", with the obligation to invest over EUR 100 million in it (Ahmeti, 2017, A). Also the Turkish consortium Limak-Çalik in 2012, privately owned the Kosovar electricity distribution and supply network, buying it for EUR 26.3 million (Ahmeti, 2017, A).

The Turkish International Cooperation and Development Agency (TIKA) was established in Kosovo in 2004. Since 2004, this organization has implemented various projects, as well as restored a large number of mosques, but it has also invested in the construction of new mosques throughout Kosovo. The agency has also invested in the health sector, as well as in parks and playgrounds in the capital (KOHA, 2017). Some of the largest Turkish companies operating in Kosovo are Enka, Limak, Çalik and the Turkish Economic Bank (TEB) (Epoka e Re, 2020).

Kosovo has further facilitated the process of foreign investment with Turkey, signing important agreements that serve investors. Ratification of these agreements greatly facilitates bilateral investment and trade promotion between the two countries (TRT Shqip, 2019). Also, Minister Rozeta Hajdari in a meeting with Turkish Ambassador Çagri Sakar, states that: *"Turkey is one of the main investors in Kosovo and we want to deepen economic cooperation, especially in the field of foreign investment,"* (Lajmi.net, 2020).

While in 2018, at the European Union Summit in Sofia, it was noted that with EUR 340 million invested in Kosovo, most of it used to buy an airport and power distribution network, Turkey is the third largest investor in the country. The editor-in-chief of the portal Insajderi, Vehbi Kajtazi

emphasized: *"I think Turkey will continue its political pressure. I don't know how much the Kosovo authorities and its fragile institutions are able to withstand the political pressure from Turkey. Second, I think that Turkey's influence and pressure will continue through the religion,"* (Ora News, 2018).

Turkey is very committed to strengthening ties with the Balkans. Turkish investments in major national strategic projects have great economic and political impact in the country. Some of the Turkish investments in Kosovo are perceived as positive because they are investments that bring jobs and economic growth. The cooperation in the field of medicine is also assessed positively, following the agreement between the two ministries, many patients from Kosovo have been treated in Turkey. Turkey remains a preferred destination for medical treatment. The construction of mosques in Kosovo was also welcomed. But the companies like Bechtel-Enka, the US-Turkish consortium that built the highways in Kosovo, have been criticized for the costs, as Kosovo has paid a high price to the company.

Also, the Turkish-French company Limak-Airport de Lyon, which manages Pristina International Airport, is now criticized for laying off its workers. In this reaction of PSD (opposition party in Kosovo), it is said that "Limak" is not able to stop while quoting the workers' union who said that from January this year until today the number of fired of workers is 54 (INSAJDERI,2020). In addition to the difference in contracts of workers, some of whom have worked at the airport for more than three years, workers with seasonal contracts say they have also been discriminated in wages, despite doing the same work. According to Bashkim Latifi, President of the Trade Union of Prishtina Airport Workers "Adem Jashari", the difference in salaries is a serious violation of human rights (Kafexholli, 2020). The union claims that the International Airport of Prishtina "Adem Jashari" has fired 54 workers since January, which is in various sectors considered a sign of "revenge" for the strike that the workers held in August (Sopi, 2020).

The Labour Inspectorate requests the Airport to hire the workers back. Valon Leci, acting Chief Inspector of Labour has confirmed that: *"A large number of violations have been encountered, starting with those who have over 10 years of work experience.*

The evaluation of the work performance has had irregularities, but there has also been discrimination against workers," he said further (Sopi, 2020).

The Kosovo Electricity Distribution and Supply Chain has been managed by Limak-Çalik since 2012. It has also been criticized for the layoff of workers, and consumers have also expressed dissatisfaction with the high price of electricity. There were protests in Pristina over the issue, as Serbs in the northern part of Kosovo do not pay for the Company's electricity. Due to this, Kosovars emphasize that they pay for Serbs as the company raises the price of electricity, especially during the winter. Following the energy agreement, the Republic of Kosovo will control its energy borders. Kosovo also joined the Kosovo-Albania Energy Regulatory Block. Following this agreement, Ilir Shala, Chief Executive Officer of KOSTT, said that the collection of expenses in the north will be done soon (S.LI, 2020). This means that Serbs in northern Kosovo will also start paying for electricity.

Recent cases of dismissal of workers, non-compliance with their rights, have affected citizens' dissatisfaction with companies managed by the Turkish management.

To conclude, Turkey is one of the countries with the largest investments in Kosovo. In the trade exchanges, it ranks among the first countries. Investments from Turkey are having an economic impact on the country. Turkish companies have managed important national projects in the country, such as infrastructure, the Airport and electricity. Kosovo is a favourable space for Turkish investment given the political and economic relations between the two countries. In addition to direct investments, Kosovo has signed free trade agreements with Turkey in 2013, and this agreement has been ratified by the Turkish Parliament. Kosovo has further facilitated the process of foreign investment with Turkey, signing important agreements that serve investors, greatly facilitating bilateral investments and strengthening trade between the two countries. Kosovo authorities welcome Turkish investment. Also, Kosovo-Turkey Chamber welcomes Turkish investment as it claims that the investment generates jobs. Turkey remains one of the countries with the largest investments in Kosovo, while Turkish companies show interest in investing in the

country. The cases of fired Prishtina Airport employees, also in KEDs, as well as high energy bills, have resulted in dissatisfaction with the Turkish management. Turkish investments in the country are seen as an attempt of the Turkish state to increase economic and political influence in Kosovo. Especially the political influence is seen through religion.

Russia

Igor Suvorov

Russia has a long history of relations with the Western Balkans. The two are bound culturally, historically, economically, politically, and religiously. There is, however, a country, with which Russia enjoys a very special relationship with, that only a couple of countries can enjoy — Serbia. Any discussion about Russia and Kosovo would be impossible without this actor.

Since 1838, when the Russian Empire has established a consular department of his emperor's highness in the Principality of Serbia, relations between these two countries have been different — fraternal, hostile, good and bad.

During the bloodshed on the ruins of Yugoslavia, Boris Yeltsin could not do much to help their Orthodox brothers. The country has been going through a very hard and painful transition times in domestic affairs. But in 1999 the pattern of relations has changed.

After the bombs have fallen on Belgrade, policymakers both in Belgrade and Moscow have called upon the unity under one faith, unbreakable historical bond between the nations, brotherhood and became friends. Both, though, had a lot more in common: pessimism towards the West (however, not open back then).

In February 2008, a little bit more than a year after the fundamental Munich speech by Vladimir Putin, Russia opposed the independence of Kosovo and did not recognize it. *"At the end of the day it is a two-ended stick and the second end will come back and hit them (the West) in the face,"* Putin (2008) said.

This was basically the start of relations between Russia and Kosovo. Logically, without diplomatic ties, interactions between these two countries are close to zero. However, since talks about possible solutions (land swaps) between Belgrade and Pristina began, Russia has become "active" in its diplomacy towards Kosovo (The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2019).

How do the Russia-Kosovo relations develop? What role (if any) plays Russia in

the economy of Kosovo? What are Russian (if any) soft-power tools in Kosovo? How strong (if any) is the Russian cyber presence in Kosovo? These are the questions to be asked on several levels: political, economic and socio-cultural.

Before independence, Russia had leverages of influence in Kosovo, such as the placement of its peacekeeping troops in Pristina. A lot of efforts have been put to show its global ambitions by taking part in discussions over Kosovo status that would be satisfactory for both sides. The message was clear: peace in the Balkans without Russia is not possible.

After independence, there have not been many diplomatic interactions between Russia and Kosovo, except for an occasional meeting between Vladimir Putin and Hashim Thaci, president of Kosovo (Thaci, 2018), or detention of a Russian UN officer in Kosovo (Mishchenko, 2019). By closing a way to the UN for Pristina, Russia has won huge geopolitical points in the Western Balkans. Particularly in Serbia, where the friendship with Russia is morally idealized. Mostly because both countries are Orthodox, and Russia, as well as Putin, is a defender of traditional values (International Republican Institute, 2018).

The friendship became an opportunity. After independence in February 2008, Putin's words about a "two-ended stick" have become prophetic in Georgia, and 6 years later in Crimea (Verhovnaya Rada Avtonomnoy Respubliky Krim, 2014). For Russia and its president, Kosovo has become a universal precedent, applicable for any territorial dispute, mainly in the post-Soviet area.

To say, Vladimir Putin is a rock star in Serbia. His cult of personality made him sort of the first man in the country. What he does and what he says plays a big role in relations between Serbia and Kosovo. For quite a long time, Serbian leaders have used Russia and the president personally to show that they are top class policymakers of the big game. Putin's repeatable words that Russia does not recognize Kosovo, about resolution 1244, about a decision satisfactory for both sides, etc. were easily convertible into political points in Serbia. As Dragan Vucevicec, the owner of The Informer magazine (keep the name of the magazine in mind), admits: *"Our usual daily circulation is 120,000, so we are already the highest-*

selling tabloid in Serbia. When I have Putin calendars, we sell 250,000," (Hopkins, 2018).

At some point, Vladimir Putin has become a bigger Serb than Serbs with unprecedented popularity. And not only in Serbia itself, but also in the northern provinces of Kosovo of predominantly Serbian majority. Their relation to Russia and Putin can be described in a series of graffitis "Kosovo is Serbia, Crimea is Russia" and posters of Vucic and Putin. Not to mention, Putin's United Russia party has developed ties with the Serbian ethnic party, Srpska Lista which claims Serbian sovereignty present in the parliament of Kosovo (Kallaba, 2017; Zivanovic, 2017).

There is also a security factor. Kosovo has concerns about the Russian-Serbian humanitarian centre, located nearly 100 km away from Pristina. It is seen as a military outpost, that coordinates Russian destabilization activities in the Balkans (Kallaba, 2017).

Today, as far more post-Yugoslav countries are NATO members, Russia risks losing its influence in the region. In this case, Russia has to sustain the status of Kosovo as it is, hence not let Serbia — an important asset to protect Russian influence in the region — join the European Union. The loss of Kosovo would mean the loss of Serbia — the last outpost of influence in the Balkans.

So far, Moscow has a great position. It does not have to do anything, except for keeping things as they are. This strategy is not really sustainable neither for Serbia nor Kosovo, but for now, it seems to be working. Moscow has veto power to lock the way to the UN, influence on this matter in Serbian politics, negative public opinion on independence of Kosovo (Center for social dialogue and regional initiatives, 2019) together with Russian popularity among the people and, as a result, limited Belgrade's political manoeuvrability. All these points are interconnected and create a fragile structure of power relations, where nobody wants to make decisions. And the situation does not change — the best diplomatic outcome a-la Russe.

When this circle is broken, the balance of power in the region will change. Thus, as long as there is no independent Kosovo, Russia has a word in the Western Balkans.

Since diplomatic relations are limited, it would be wrong to expect huge economic relations between Russia and Kosovo.

Since 2015, trade between the two countries has been asymmetric and negative. Meanwhile, Kosovan exports to Russia in 2015-2020 have been minimal (ranging from complete 0 to some EUR 3 million annually). Russian imports have been on the rise since 2015. The significant decrease in trade was in 2019 when it had dropped 10 times compared to 2018 data (Kosovo Data, 2019). The Russian figures are simply incomparable to the total EU, which were at least 10 times higher.

Logically, FDI could not be huge. Unlike in Serbia, Russia does not have any big projects and does not own any shares in the state economy and business. Statistics are quite poor, but according to the findings of the Prague Security Studies Institute (2019), in 2016 Russian investments in Kosovo were nearly EUR 2 million, which is not much.

Additionally, Kosovo itself does not have its own oil refineries. In the energy sector, it is strongly dependent on the import. In 2018, it exported nearly 768 thousand tons of petroleum products, the majority of which is formed by diesel (Energy Regulatory Office, 2019). All this fuel is bought from the neighbouring countries, primarily Greece and Serbia. In 2017, Greece has gotten 16 per cent of crude petroleum from Russia, and Serbia has got 26 per cent (OEC, 2017).

Taking into account the reports of the Association of Kosovo Oil Traders, the large amount of fuel that comes to Kosovo from Serbia (and from Bulgaria) originates in Russia (Ahmeti, 2017, B). It is not a surprise, that the biggest Serbian oil and gas company NIS is 56.15 per cent is owned by Gazprom, which automatically prioritizes the customer (Kallaba, 2017). Also, as of right now Putin has promised to extend the new TurkStream pipeline and make sure that Serbia will get its oil. It can be assumed, that when Russian oil supplies will arrive in the Western Balkans, Kosovo will be further getting Russian oil from its neighbours (Rossiya 24, 2019).

The last aspect of economic relations is tourism. Russia does not recognize Kosovo passports and refuses any entry for holders of such passports. Kosovo, however, allows Russian citizens with Schengen visa to enter the country for 15 days without a visa. If it is not possible, a visa can be obtained at the border, or in the consular department in Istanbul (VisaSam.ru, 2020). Such a policy helps to attract several thousand Russians annually. The destination is not attractive,

but according to findings, nearly 1300 Russian citizens have visited Kosovo in 2016 (Kallaba, 2017).

Evidently, there is not much direct economic cooperation between Russia and Serbia. Nor are there prospects that it will be different in the near future. The terrain and market are small, unfriendly and practically have no sense for Russia to invest in it economically. Everything Russia needs from Kosovo; it gets in the political equivalent.

As Kosovo has two different ethnic groups, Orthodox Serbs and Muslim Kosovars, logically Russia would have a specific approach to each of them separately.

Overall public opinion in Kosovo is strongly anti-Russian. According to the survey (Qehaja, 2018), nearly 82 per cent viewed Russia as hostile, meanwhile, only 6 per cent described it as friendly. The Muslim population has practically a lot of reasons not to consider Russia a friend, due to its out-loud support of Serbia, rejection of its independence, destabilization activities in the region, fake news and propaganda. The Muslim majority of people in Kosovo think they belong to the West, they are pro-American and pro-European (International Republican Institute, 2018).

The Serbian population is totally different. They are supported by Russia politically and to a certain level also economically. Not to say it was sufficient, but on political sign language, it has got the meaning. An NGO called the Russian Humanitarian Mission runs several development projects in education, healthcare, and welfare in Serbian populated regions. It can be easily found on their website. The director of the centre is Evgeny Primakov, a grandson of another Evgeny Primakov, a Prime Minister of Russia back in 1999. He was famous for his so-called Atlantic turn when, during the flight to the USA, he heard of the bombings of Yugoslavia in 1999 and ordered the plane to turn back to Moscow (RBK, 2015).

His grandson is a reporter on a state Russia-24 channel. He has got his own TV program “International Review”, a deputy in the Duma and an aide to Chairman V. Volodin on humanitarian projects, a member of the United Russia party. His colleague and co-founder Alexey Polkovnikov was a former member of the Russian diplomatic mission in Ukraine, but there is not much about him on

the internet, not even a bio on the Russian Humanitarian Mission web.

Evidently, the roots of this NGO are in Moscow, however, it claims to be independent. It is unclear who the donor is, but apparently, some money is received from the presidential grants (Vasilyeva, n. d.). However, they do what, for instance, any other humanitarian project does — fraternally build a road in rural Serbia to the village Putinovo for example (Russian Humanitarian Mission, 2018). But generally, they work for the good of people and (Serbian) people in Kosovo and Metohija seem to be happy (Russian Humanitarian Mission, n. d.).

Their activities are shown in a very positive way throughout the media like Sputnik. No doubt it is a great soft-power tool (Danas, 2019; Sputnik, 2019). The agency has a branch in Belgrade and in 2017 it has signed a memorandum of understanding with the Serbian government to mutually assist Serbs in Kosovo (B92, 2017).

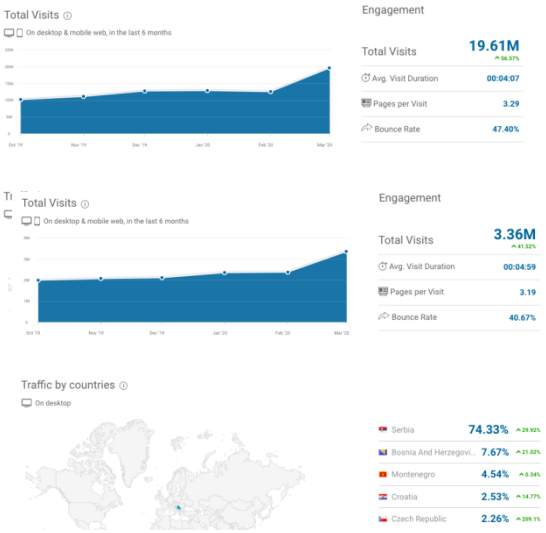
As for the media, Russia has deployed and supported a huge arsenal of disinformation proxies that exploit the Kosovo issue by targeting the very precise group of people — Kosovo Serbs. Also, such news reaches the public in Serbia, which kind of unites the people around the matter of national pride.

Despite that the majority of the Kosovo population gets news from the local TV stations, more and more people get information online, where algorithms create a personalized content for a user (National Democratic Institute, 2019). Reaching out the right Serbian audience for sources like RT, Sputnik, Front News, Geopolitica, The Informer or Vecernije Novosti is almost fluent: loud and sensational headlines are good not for just click bite, but for developing a general opinion within the media discourse.

Such outlets produce news in amounts, that Soviet Pravda newspaper could never think of, and these news strike the sensible place of the public (Popovic, 2019). These outlets often write provocative and deliberately fake news and stories. As one can doubt about the quality of journalism these days, this is a dangerous sign. All the mentioned webs have had an increase in the views since March 2020 — an outbreak of COVID 19 in the Balkans.

As Serbia based investigative portal Raskrivanje.rs concludes that the content of the mentioned media (and the other ones) are designed as fake and manipulative news. As of 2016, the Center for Euro-Atlantic Studies (2016) had found eight web portals, explicitly six Russian outlets, and 16 local pro-Kremlin news sources, as well as various different unions and civil organizations (some of them are claimed to be radical) that operate in Serbia and the Serbian language.

These relatively low-cost media proxies seem to be useful: only in March 2020, Sputnik and The Informer had over 22 million visits, mostly in Serbia (Kosovo included), Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro, according to the statistics, acquired through Similarweb.com (30th April 2020). Other sources are less popular, nevertheless, they are viewed monthly by hundreds of thousands of users.



The Informer, 30. April 2020, source: similarweb

Sputnik Serbia, 30. April 2020, source: similarweb

Yet, most of the sources are very "cheap" and marginal. However, they seem to be functional. Particularly in Kosovo, there have been many reports and statistics, claiming that its impact is seen as dangerous in the country's context. The impact on social opinion can be observed in the comments to posts on social media pages of each of those media. As most comments have quite an offensive pattern, it can be concluded, that this Russian media proxies systematically undermine the West, its values and decisions, and push the needed agenda for the political establishment.

Also, an Orthodox church as an institution is a great tool of influence. Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) are both well connected and stay in touch. The ROC, which is apparently richer and bigger, offers big donations to the SOC, runs a public fundraising campaign at home to assist their

Orthodox partners. The mainline of cooperation is the support of Serbian shrines, most of which are part of UNESCO heritage, that have left in Kosovo (Serbian Orthodox Church, 2010) and denial of Kosovo independence (Russkiy Mir, 2017). Also, ROC had established a Monitoring Centre for Violations of the Rights and Freedoms of Orthodox Christians in Europe that observes the violations to Orthodox religious sites and provides support. On their website, Kosovo is often mentioned how it robbed or vandalized holy sites in Serbia (Monitoring the Rights and Freedom of Orthodox Christians in Europe, 2020).

Logically, such things are not left unnoticed and they perform headlines of several media outlets, which were mentioned before. Hence, Russia has significant soft-power tools inside both Kosovo and Serbia which altogether serve its geopolitical strategy to preserve the current status quo. Russian (sponsored) media machine is capable of reaching out to the needed people, forming a situation of uncertainty. Many Serbs and Kosovars claim that they do not often use media as a source of information and generally think the media does not show a full picture (International Republican Institute, 2018). But when they (the media) do, they show the picture that is needed to be seen.

European Union

Ivan Iliev

When the Berlin wall fell in 1989, the Western Balkan countries got a new perspective on their future. From 1989 onwards, Western Balkan countries, Kosovo including, have performed economic and political transformation. The European Union has been a crucial factor that has supported this transformation. This paper seeks to explain how the EU – Kosovo relations developed over time.

After the bloody dissolution of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, the whole region of Western Balkans was politically and economically unstable. In 1999, the European Union helped Kosovo financially to stabilize and relieve the regions' devastated economy. *"Economic development was left mainly to the EU; it was known as Pillar IV (Reconstruction component) and was managed by the European Union as part of the UN mission. The EU was the only actor in the field of economic development in Kosovo,"* (Nezaj, 2015). The EU, in cooperation with the World Bank, established a reconstruction program that sought to build an open market economy and public institutions that would help the region in stabilization efforts. Even though Kosovo was only an autonomous region of Serbia, devastated by war and ethnic division, the European Council confirmed its interest to make Kosovo an EU member state one day. This idea was developed in Santa Maria da Feira European Council in 2000. Therefore, Kosovo had hoped for prospects after 2000. Also, the Thessaloniki Summit in 2003, the European Council, once again confirmed its interest to support the EU membership perspective in the Western Balkan countries (Nezaj, 2015). *"It is important to mention that the Thessaloniki European Council identified ways and means of intensifying the stabilization and association process, including the drawing-up of European partnerships. The Thessaloniki Summit reinforced the stabilization and association process and underlined the prospects for the integration of Kosovo into the EU,"* (Nezaj, 2015).

During the years after 2003, the European Union was seeking to bolster economic and political stability rule of law

area. In this effort, the Community Assistance for Reconstruction, Development and Stabilization (CARDS) instrument was of crucial importance. The purpose of this instrument was to create legal and institutional frameworks for the building of democracy, to support economic development and construction of the market economy, as well as it was established to promote cross-border cooperation with other countries in the region. Also, the first EU Liaison Office was open in Kosovo at that time (European Commission, 2016). By 2007, the EU CARDS instrument was replaced by Instrument of Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA). IPA was focused on assistance in institution building, regional development and cross-border cooperation. IPA performed very well, as justice, economy and development areas improved in Kosovo under its assistance (European Commission, n. d.). In 2008, the EU approved the following partnership with Kosovo. This partnership supported relations between the EU and Kosovo. The period in between 2000-2008 could be considered as crucial for the relationships between the European Union and Kosovo. Various EU instruments were established to build ties with Kosovo, as well as to help the region to achieve economic, political and legal development (European Union Office in Kosovo, 2016). The 2008 Kosovo declaration of independence forced the EU to establish a new agenda for Kosovo, as it became a sovereign state. Kosovo's constitution from 2008 mentions that the country is a European country and it should be an EU member.

The relations between Kosovo and EU after 2008 were mostly performed by EULEX Kosovo rule of law mission. In 2008, the EULEX Kosovo mission was created. It was established within the framework of UN Security Council Resolution 1244 as the largest civilian mission under the Common Security and Defense Policy of the European Union. The EULEX aimed to assist Kosovo authorities in the establishment of the rule of law institutions that can rule independently. *"EULEX Mission supports relevant rule of law institutions in Kosovo on their path towards increased effectiveness, sustainability, multi-ethnicity and accountability, free from political interference and in full compliance with EU best practices,"* (EULEX, n. d.). EULEX´s mandate has not always been the same. Since 2008, it was last changed in 2018. Therefore, its mandate could be

divided into two categories -before and after 2018. Before 2008, EULEX was tasked with two types of objectives. Monitoring, mentoring and advising were supposed to support Kosovo rule of law authorities. This included the support of Kosovo judiciary, police and customs, but also supporting the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia. The second was the executive objective. It was focused on the support of civil justice, constitutional justice and prosecuting criminal cases. In practice, EULEX performed these two objectives via Strengthening and Executive Divisions. The first one was supporting Kosovo rule of law authorities, all in close cooperation with the European Union (EULEX, n. d.). This support was focusing on high management positions within the Kosovar judiciary. By monitoring, mentoring and advising, the Strengthening Division supported justice in fighting political interference, and also monitored criminal cases of ethnic violence, corruption, war crimes and organized crime in general. The Strengthening Division also supported Kosovo Prosecutorial Council, Kosovo Judicial Council and Kosovo Police, to address their weaknesses. Additionally, this division assisted Kosovo Border Police in migration and customs policies, but also in activities in cooperation with FRONTEX (EULEX, n. d.).

In 2015, the Council of the European Union reached the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) between the European Union and Kosovo, entering into force in April 2016. In November 2016, the European Reform Agenda (ERA) was launched to overlook reforms application in Kosovo. The SAA helps Kosovo to adjust laws and political standards to those of the European Union. The SAA is focused on overcoming the issues that restrict Kosovo from becoming the EU member state (European Union Office in Kosovo, 2016). Essential EU – Kosovo Agreement's objectives are: a) to support the efforts of Kosovo to strengthen democracy and the rule of law; b) to contribute to political, economic and institutional stability in Kosovo, as well as to the stabilization of the region; c) to provide an appropriate framework for political dialogue, allowing the development of close political relations among the parties; d) to support the efforts of Kosovo to develop its economic and international cooperation, should objective circumstances allow, including through the

approximation of its legislation to that of the EU; e) to support the efforts of Kosovo to complete the transition into a functioning market economy; f) to promote harmonious economic relations and gradually develop a free trade area between the EU and Kosovo; g) to foster regional cooperation in all the fields covered by this Agreement (Council of the European Union, 2015). Despite the fact that, the EU – Kosovo Stabilization and Association Agreement requires the strengthening of democracy, its level is far from being optimal.

After 2015, the EU has put specific importance on overlooking of democratic development (Gerguri - Hoti, 2017). In measuring democratic progress, the EU analyses elections, the functioning of the legislature, operation of the executive, civil society, public administration reform, functioning of the judiciary and other criteria (European Commission, 2019). To evaluate the development of democracy in Kosovo, the European Commission annually publishes the Kosovo Progress Report. The 2019 Kosovo Report claims that the country has made progress in democratization. However, the report stresses continuous violations of democracy in the form of clientelism, corruption, the weak electoral framework, avoiding investigation of minorities' harassment, unfair political parties' financing and privatization of state resources (European Commission, 2019). The relations between the EU and Kosovo could be marked as beneficial. Kosovo has developed under the EU assistance. Various tools have developed Kosovar judiciary, economic and political capacities. However, it still has not been enough for Kosovo to become an EU member state. The European Commission president, Ursula von der Leyen, has proclaimed interest to help Western Balkan countries to become EU member states. Kosovo is on the way to do so. If Kosovo achieves proper implementation of reforms under the EU assistance, there is no doubt it will become a member state one day.

Gulf States – UAE, Saudi Arabia, Quatar, Kuwait

Judith Corcoba

It is well known that Saudi Arabia is one of the largest and most important economies in the world. During the last years, the country has invested in the improvements of different regions around the world (Algethami, 2017) and one of these regions has been the Balkans, with a special focus in Kosovo (Mandacı, 2017).

It is estimated that the Gulf countries have invested substantial amounts of resources in Kosovo, especially since the war in 1999 (Mandaci, 2018). The main actors of the Gulf countries in the Balkans region are the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Kuwait (Rrustremi et. al, 2019). However, from all the Gulf States, Saudi Arabia is the country with the biggest influence in Kosovo, even though other countries like Qatar and the United Arab Emirates have an important impact, Saudi Arabia has a special influence. The main reason is that Saudi Arabia was one of the first states to recognize Kosovo's independence and has supported and played a key role in the rehabilitation of the region (Hänsel, 2018).

The special attribute of Saudi Arabia is that while other investing countries like UAE, Qatar or Kuwait have tried to separate politics from economics, Saudi Arabia has promoted its ideology among the citizens (Mandacı, 2017), showing the real motivation and the interest in the region.

At the beginning, Saudi Arabia was highly involved in the religious and cultural area of Kosovo, but in recent years, there has been also an increase in economic involvement in the region. This can be observed through the relations with arms trafficking and there are also different routes in the area that have experienced an increase in tourism (Rrustemi et al., 2019).

Right after the Kosovo war, different Muslim investors from Saudi Arabia arrived in Kosovo and provided a big support with the purpose of rebuilding the mosques destroyed during the war, and to offer educational support to the population both in the region of Kosovo and in Saudi Arabia (Angelini, 2019).

In case of Kosovo, several charity organizations and foundations from Saudi Arabia provided financial support with the purpose of rebuilding houses and different buildings which were destroyed during the war and built schools and mosques among others (Hänsel, 2018; Llapashtica, 2014; Basha, 2013). Almost immediately, it became clear that all this was part of the plans of Saudi Arabia to spread religious ideas and its hard-line in the field of political Islam in the European continent (Angelini, 2019).

One important mechanism that has been used was the provision of scholarships and financial support to study in Saudi Arabia (Llapashtica, 2014; Basha, 2013). Most of the Kosovo's general population was sympathetic towards the U.S. and the European countries, however, the isolation after the war and the lack of socio-economic investment in the region along with unequal access to educational possibilities have forced the young people of Kosovo to attend Saudi and Turkish schools. After this, some of them returned to Kosovo with radical ideas (KCSS, 2017).

The development of the country has increased but also the conservative religion. Evidence suggests that not only are the speeches more conservative than before, but attendance has also increased, suggesting an increase in both the breadth and depth of the influence of radical Islam (Brezhan, 2016).

According to a number of reports, Saudi Arabia has used various instruments to facilitate the dissemination of its conservative religious practices. On the other side, the government of Kosovo put up effort and tried to promote the traditional culture of Kosovo. Certain measures, like banning the headscarves at primary and secondary education schools throughout the country, were taken (Lowen, 2010).

The external conditions and influences of religion have made a huge impact in Kosovo, especially after 1999. Nowadays, the amount of Islam followers is higher than before the end of the war in 1999 (Kursani, 2015). Apart from the clear impact after the war, there are several factors that can explain the influence. Multiple strategies were at play during the first years after the war and after that period. All of them provided fruitful grounds for the religionization of the society.

In the first period, the economy was weak, the society was confused, and the

political scenario was chaotic (Basha, 2013). On the other hand, Kosovo´s institutions were not ready to assume the control of the region and the Middle Eastern charity organisations massively invested in the region (Blumi, 2005). Especially people in the rural areas, with lack of education, accepted some of the conditions of Saudi charity organisations to attend their lectures which introduced them to more conservative and rigid thoughts in Islam.

During this period, the government authorities did not request to investigate suspicious religious activities in Kosovo (Basha, 2013). According to the October 2018 KCSS Kosovo Security Barometer (KSB) survey, people living in rural areas have more trust in religious institutions compared to those living in urban areas.

The 2019 Corruption Perceptions Index of Transparency International, which ranks territories based on how corrupt a country's public sector is, ranked Kosovo on the 101st position, out of 175 countries and territories observed by Transparency International listing Kosovo below 36 per cent of all the territories where the perception about the level of corruption has been measured. Moreover, 41 per cent of the population believe that they will obtain the service or get the problem solved through corruption (UNDP, 2014).

Several investors from Saudi Arabia and the Middle East have used these factors as an argument to employ religion as an instrument to achieve prosperity (Basha, 2013).

The main reason for this influence is that several political Islamic groups became more trustworthy and realistic than the official governing elites because they are more familiar with the concerns of the people and their needs. Imams in Kosovo engage much more directly with and remain much closer to the citizens, compared to policymakers and the political elites of secular institutions in Kosovo (KCSS, 2015).

Saudi Arabia definitely plays an important role and is an essential element in the security area in Western Balkans (Rrustremi et. al, 2019).

There are two important elements in this field. On one hand, Saudi Arabia has become a major purchaser of weapons from the region, and on the other hand, it is linked with the extremist Islam that has resulted in young Muslims leaving Western Balkans (Gall, 2016).

Moreover, Saudi Arabia has been facilitating arms trafficking in the regions and jihadist travels between both areas (Marzouk – Angelovski - Svircic, 2017). According to Mincheva (2013), the studies suggest that a group of Saudi Arabian soldiers were supporting the Kosovo Liberation Army against Serbian forces during the Kosovo war.

The involvement of Saudi Arabia can be damaging to the internal and external security of Western Balkans. The most relevant factor can be the relations between the investment in the mosques and the number of foreign fighters that belong to the region (Rrustremi et. al, 2019). Moreover, the studies suggest certain involvement and collaboration between the Saudi establishment and Jihadist actors in the region.

The Saudi Arabian investment in the region is linked to the arms trafficking, and it has been proved that the arms trafficking is connected to Islamist conflict across the Middle East (Marzouk, 2016).

Consequently, Saudi Arabia is related to the security aspects of Kosovo. The Saudi Arabian influence addresses the religious activities, which attempt against the security and are being used for extremist and armaments purposes.

Iran

Zdeněk Rod

Iran is one of the main international actors, who has never been rooted in Western Balkans in history, in contrary with Turkey, Russia etc. Its significant emergence can be traced back in the late 1980s and beginning of 1990s given various reasons (Trad, 2017). However, what is clear is that Iran has gained certain influence in Balkans, primarily among the Muslim population which might go hand in hand with ''the issue of inspiring and financing the spread of religious extremism,'' (Heler, 2019)[1]. Nevertheless, other indicators say that financial or political influence is negligible (ibid.). Notwithstanding, to understand the full nature of Iranian influence and its reasons for approaching Balkans, including Kosovo, it is important to start from the very beginning.

One of the reasons has been the break-up of the former Yugoslavia, which was followed by the bloody conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Bosnia was for Iran one of the turning points of its foreign policy, whereas one of the fighting parties were Bosnian Muslims (Bosniaks). In terms of pro-Muslim policy, which intensified when Milošević restored the diplomatic relations in Israel in 1992 (Progonati, 2017) Iran projected its influence towards Bosniaks and supported them not only with military material but also, with people coming from so-called Revolution guards which have functioned as parallel army[2]. Moreover, it was estimated that Iranians formed one of the biggest groups of foreign combatants. Furthermore, this kind of Iranian support was interpreted as humanitarian aid, and it is also fair to notice that this aid was also directed towards catholic Christian Croats. Not surprisingly, Iranian activities were also generously accompanied by activities of their security intelligence officers, who should have kept eyes opened on Bosniaks politicians, such as Ilja Izetbegović, and of the post-conflict development[3] as such (Kraus, 2018).

After the Dayton Peace Agreement, which ended the conflict in Bosnia, many foreign fighters remained, including Iranian ones, who helped to partially spread religious influence in the region (Bassuener,

2019) and increase the geopolitical leverage in the Western Balkans. This approach was then considerably used by Iran during the other conflict in Western Balkans, in Kosovo. As in Bosnia in previous years, Iran ''championed the Albanian Kosovars,'' (Freedman, 2006)[4] thus, people of Muslim origin. Furthermore, during the Kosovo crisis, Iran was a chairman of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) (today Organisation of Islamic Cooperation), where Iran presented its support towards the Muslim population and called on Serbia to refrain from killing[5]. Moreover, based on a certain shred of evidence it can be declared that Iran ''had provided the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) with aid'' (Menashri, 2001; Cigar – Clawson, 1999). However, after the NATO bombing, Iran reconsidered its options and focused on diplomatic initiatives with Russia even though, their relations had been complicated due to Russia´s support of Milosevic regime, and simultaneously Iran desired: *''to pursue an independent foreign policy that is neither East nor West,''*(Samii, W. A., 1999). Afterwards, Iran started intensively cooperating with Russia on the Kosovo crisis and strongly criticised NATO[6] 's steps in the conflict and what's more, Iran marked NATO bombings as illegal (Samii, B., 1999). One of the greatest issues has been that Iran, accompanied with Russia, have a decisively different look on how to tackle the conflict and primarily wanted to negotiate on the United Nations ground, which did not precisely go hand in hand with the Western perception (Menashri, 2001). Last but not least, Iran clearly showed its paradoxical relations towards Russia, when on one side Iran criticised the Serbian atrocities, and on the other side stood side by side with Russia towards NATO which helped to create: *''a perception of Iran as siding with Pan-Slavic Russia against Muslims,''* (Meshabi, 2001) as well as trying to preserve a neutral stance.

Nevertheless, the Western attitude, strongly influenced by the United States, prevailed and Iran lost its part. Following this happening, Iran accused America from the creation of an American World Order (O'Rourke, 1999) and also labelled Kosovo´s independence as an American project (Progonati, 2017). Afterwards, Iran had to face a certain amount of critique from other OIC countries for being ambiguous in advocating Kosovo's independence and just stuck to humanitarian aid (Samii, W. A., 1999). Other authors argue that Iran missed

its diplomatic opportunity in solving the Kosovar crisis when it conceived a hatred for West (Cigar – Clawson, 1999), which played a crucial role during the conflict and in the post-conflict reconstruction (Earnest – Dickie, 2012), instead of cooperation. Since the Kosovar conflict, the Iran influence in the Kosovar territory has been diminishing. Even though Kosovo is a predominantly Muslim country[7], the American influence accompanied by the European Union undoubtedly prevailed[8]. Not in vain it is said that Kosovo is: *''perhaps the most pro-American country in the world,''* (Sullivan, 2019).

Without any doubts, Iran maintained a neutral stance after the Kosovar conflict. Another underlying moment was Kosovo's declaration of independence on 17th February 2008. As Misha Glenny says: *''Kosovo's announcement divided world opinion,''* (Glenny, 2012). Moreover, some important members of OIC have not recognized its independence, such as the new aspiring power Indonesia (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, 2018). Nevertheless, Iran once again kept neutral stance towards the declaration and clearly uncovered that prioritized national state interest accompanied with: *''the decisive objection by its strategic ally, Russia[9],''* (Zimmt, 2008) than support its revolutionary vision considering, for example, Muslim solidarity etc. (ibid.).

However, in 2013 it seemed that Iran might consider Kosovo's independence when: *''the office of Deputy Prime Minister of Kosovo, Behgjet Pacolli had announced that Iran is ready to recognize the state of Kosovo,''* (Tota, 2013). Nevertheless, after the meeting held in Teheran between Kosovo and the Iranian delegation, Iran eventually did not change its position (ibid.). Moreover, there have also been certain attempts from Albania to support Kosovo's recognition in Teheran, when Albanian former minister of Foreign affairs Ditmir Bushati raised these questions during a meeting held with the Iranian counterpart Mohammad Javad Zarif (OCNAL, 2016). Yet nothing has changed.

Even though that Iranian presence is rather small, in 2015 Kosovo's police raided several NGOs, some authors such as Jordan Steckler (2018) are mentioning five of them, working in Kosovo and found out that some of them had close links to Iran and: *''whose activities are tied to Iran, as a part of a*

strategy to counter religious extremism,'' (Hajdar, 2015). One of these NGOs was so-called Koran Foundation launched in 2002 which sought to promote Iranian culture and Shia Islam[10]. Especially this NGO was being investigated: *''by Kosovo authorities for terror financing, money laundering, and corrupt property deals,''* (Schwartz, 2015). Beside several NGOs, with close links to Teheran, there also can be for instance found Iranian radio Voice of Teheran which is broadcasting in Albanian language (ibid.). Last but not least, based on the investigation from 2015, Kosovar authorities arrested high-profile Iranian cleric Hasan Azari Bejandi who was accused of money laundering and terrorism financing. Additionally, his activities should have been accompanied by Khomeinist teachings Al-Mustafa International University (Steckler, 2018). Lastly, there are also certain pieces of evidence that Iran is closely linked to Hezbollah[11] and according to Bulgarian security intelligence community, this Iranian proxy might have its assets in Kosovo (Trad – Avramov, 2018). Nevertheless, the reasons for that are yet unknown.

To sum up, it seems that Iranian actions in Kosovo had had at rough guess underground character. In addition to this, according to the latest information: *''the Iran NGO network in Kosovo is no longer operational,''* (Steckler, 2018). However, that does not mean that Iranian activities have disappeared. Furthermore, Kosovo-Iranian relations have remained tense after the police raids in 2016 (Samardijev, 2016). One might think that Iran has been waiting for a new chance on how to approach Kosovo and spread its geopolitical influence in this area. As written in the headline and above in the text, it can be suggested that Iran plays the role of ''stealth observer'' given various reasons. One of them is that Iran has close economic cooperation with Serbia and Bosnia (ibid.). Another one is that the Balkan region is strategic to Teheran which has been supported by its cultural and investments activities. And what's more, The Denmark-based Dergipark research centre argues that: *''corruption and political weakness in the region, which is an attractive model for Iran's ambitious agenda and its military arms, i.e. Hezbollah,''* (Mohem, 2018). To recapitulate this analysis, based on the experiences from other world regions, it is clear that the Western Balkans is in the scope of Iranian foreign policy and even though it seems in

some areas that Iran is losing its interest, Iran should have never been underestimated and ought to be considered as a serious actor.

The United States

Michael Andruch

The United States of America play an important role in the Western Balkans since the beginning of the Cold War. It openly offered aid to Yugoslavia in 1948, after Tito´s regime broke close relations with the Soviet Union and became an anti-Soviet state "albeit a communist and undemocratic one" (Holbrooke, 1998). After receiving financial aid to secure sufficient food supplies and develop Yugoslavian agriculture, since mid - 1960s, Yugoslavia was able to enter commercial relations with the USA and other Western partners and export into these countries. Even if there were misunderstandings, especially on the US side, the relations were mostly friendly and useful for both sides, and President Tito even visited the USA several times (Lampe - Prickett – Adamović, 1990).

The United States played the most important role in the region during the conflict in Yugoslavia 1991-1995 as, after the failure of EU countries, it was a member of the Contact Group on Bosnia since 1994 and led the Dayton peace process a year later. Until 1998, the USA, along with other international actors, did not put any effort in resolving the difficult and explosive situation in Kosovo. It did not want to create a precedent for changing internal borders of former Yugoslavia and announced the Kosovo problem as a Serbian internal issue (Girgle, 2006). However, after the escalation of violence in Kosovo, the United States engaged within NATO Operation Allied Force, which conducted air bombing against Serbian forces in Kosovo to stop ethnic cleansing (Girgle, 2006).

In the immediate aftermath of the 1999 events, the United States started to support Kosovar democracy through the NGO -The National Democratic Institute (NDI), whose goal was to: *"carry out citizen-based election monitoring and assisting with the creation and development of a national legislature, the establishment of a political party system, and the building of a foundation of civic activism that is opening doors to public engagement with government,"* (NDI, 2020).

The United States was among the first countries to recognize the independence of

Kosovo in 2008. It has become an important supporter of normalising Serbia-Kosovo relations, as Serbia belongs to the countries that did not recognize Kosovar independence, and Serbian elites still consider Kosovo as an integral part of Serbian territory. Normalising their relations is one of the conditions, which both countries have to fulfil if they want to aspire for becoming an EU member in the future (Russell, 2019). Although the EU plays a role of a mediator between Serbia and Kosovo, the USA is trying to influence and push both countries to an agreement.

Apart from NDI, there are some more US NGOs and governmental agencies trying to help Kosovo to establish a stable democracy through financial aid, or courses for civic personnel and advisory. They are helping also in different sectors of public life. For example, one of the most relevant government agencies there is, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), which is implementing development strategy in Kosovo in accordance with US Government´s central foreign policy. In the present time it is focusing on three main issues: improving rule of law and governance that meet citizens´ needs, increasing investment and private sector employment and enhancing human capital (USAID, 2014).

The image of the USA as a reliable partner is strengthened by many US investors who: *"are involved with projects in the construction, energy, health, information technology, and real estate development sectors. There are over 16 companies registered in Kosovo that have direct US ties. Among the most active are Bechtel, Hill International, Coca Cola, General Electric, KFC, ContourGlobal, Marriott, Cisco, Famous Famiglia, Burger King, Domino's, and Microsoft. There are also other U.S. goods being sold in Kosovo through distributors as well as local UPS and FedEx offices,"* (US Department of State, 2019, A).

As mentioned above, the USA is providing direct financial help to Kosovo. Its primary goal is to not only build a stable democracy but also to drop the poverty rate and enhance economic growth. Kosovo belongs to one of the poorest countries in Europe with around 30 per cent of its people living below the national poverty line. Also, the unemployment rate of young people is exceedingly high, which is problematic as Kosovo has the youngest population in

Europe (The World Bank, 2013). In 2017, the US foreign assistance agency Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) has signed with Kosovar elites Kosovo Threshold Program, which aims for two key constraints: *"an unreliable supply of electricity and real and perceived weakness in rule of law, government accountability and transparency. MCC's investments are designed to strengthen the power sector by fostering a market-driven approach to lowering energy costs for households and businesses, encouraging energy efficiency, and developing new sources of electricity generation. The program also supports the Government of Kosovo's efforts to improve decision-making and accountability by increasing the accessibility and use of judicial, environmental, and labour force data".* The agency invests more than 49 million dollars (MCC, 2017). However, at the beginning of 2020, MCC paused the implementation of the threshold program due to Kosovo´s tariffs against good from Serbia, which should help reduce poverty through economic growth (MCC, 2020).

Besides political and economic influence, Kosovo closely cooperates with the USA in the security sector. Especially in fight against terrorism through the American project Antiterrorism Assistance Program, which helps partner nations to build skills and institutions for successful counterterrorist operations to maintain national and regional security (US Department of State, 2020).

The Kosovar government successfully implemented a comprehensive counterterrorism strategy and an action plan for 2018-2022, as well as new legislative framework sufficient enough to prosecute individuals suspected of committing or supporting terrorist activities. According to the US Department of State, there have been more than 400 Kosovar men women and children who left the country to join terrorist groups in Syria and Iraq. To show close cooperation between USA and Kosovo in the counterterrorism efforts, we can see that Kosovo is also a member of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS (US Department of State, 2019, B).

The United States of America clearly shows support and interest in creating a democratic, liberal and pro-European regime in Kosovo since gaining independence in 2008. The Kosovar elites also see the USA as: *"their country´s most powerful and reliable*

ally," (Congressional Research Service, 2018). Therefore, if the USA wants to remain in this position, it needs to continue with the long-term interests in Western Balkans. According to several experts, they should reinforce their politics in the region. Through the support of democratic institutions and rule of law in Kosovo, the USA is following a goal to create a country promoting human rights, liberal values and free market from Kosovo. Its goal is also to shift foreign-political orientation to Euro-Atlantic and to become a member of the international organizations from this geopolitical region (EU and NATO as the most relevant). That should minimize the influence of other global powers, which can be described from the US point of view as "hostile"- China, Russia and Iran. But is this the only reason why the US government is investing millions of US dollars into this little, young country? Are there any possibilities that the USA wants to see a truly united Europe in one organization and following the same values? If this is the real US goal, to gain supporters even from the Balkan region, it will need to put much more effort into a long-term strategy, which might not be successful. As for Kosovo, the US investments and support might bring the country closer to Europe. Kosovo is already cooperating with Albania and North Macedonia concerning security, both already NATO members (US Department of State, 2019, B), and if the relations with Serbia will be normalised (with help from the USA and the EU), the EU will probably begin accession talks with the country. Normalising relations with Serbia would mean that Kosovo could finish transforming Kosovo Security Forces into Army forces and slowly start making steps toward accessing NATO.

China

Zdeněk Rod

Chinese leverage is not solely associated with certain African countries where most of the academic attention is heading. In fact, Chinese worldwide ambitions are to become a global player. Considering China, as an omnipresent actor might not be that preposterous. At the same time, China considers itself as an ''inherent superior'' (Allison, 2018).

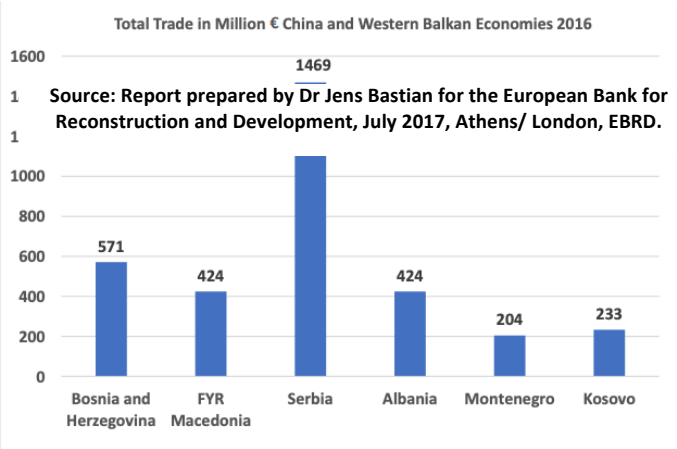
''China's fingerprints are everywhere,'' David Ignatius (2018) mentions for the Washington Post, and the Western Balkans is not any exception. Why is that so? There is no easy answer but one thing is clear, China tries to spread its influence in Western Balkans countries: *''that will likely one day be full-blown members of the European Union,''* (Karnitschnig, 2017). And allies within the EU structures are always worth having, for instance, to secure Chinese investments (Vuksanovic, 2017). Furthermore, the key actor working in China's favour is currently Serbia which opens the door to Western Balkans for Chinese foreign investments and infrastructure projects (Le Corre – Vuksanovic, 2019). Moreover, Chinese activities are part of the ambitious economic strategic plan One Belt One Road initiative with its goal to pave a new silk road (Tonchev, 2017) to boost the national economy. Hence, China's revelation was not a coincidence. Chinese banks are also very generous in terms of their loans in Western Balkans offering quickly accessible loans which, as experts have warned, might have potentially resulted in debt trap diplomacy (Crosby, 2019) if Western Balkans countries will not be capable to pay back. This situation could have already been seen around the world, lately in Sri Lanka when building the Hambantota port (Moramudali, 2019).

Regarding the Chinese increasing role in Western Balkans, it seems that there is a considerable lack of influence in Kosovo. There are various factors why that is so. One factor can be Serbia, which has not reconciled yet with Kosovo's independence, and simultaneously perceives China's main partner in Europe (Surk, 2017) and in this game China stands for Serbia: *''Chinese Ambassador to Serbia Li Manchang has said*

that as far as Beijing is concerned, Kosovo is Serbia - and that it shall remain that way,'' (b92, 2018). Li also aptly portrayed these relations between China and Serbia as: *"the golden age between Beijing and Belgrade,"* (ibid.) whereby Beijing agreed on $3 billion packages of economic investments and military purchases (Zivanovic, 2018). In other words, Serbia has sought China's support over Kosovo dispute, as well as to support Serbian falling apart economy which cannot hold up without a considerable amount of investments (Vuksanovic, 2017). Another reason why China has never principally recognized Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008 is due to geopolitical, inter-state matters and sovereignty disputes (Rey etc., 2018; Lagazzi – Vít, 2017). What is more, the unrecognition was also supported by NATO bombing in 1999 during which the Chinese embassy was coincidentally hit by NATO strike (Lagazzi – Vít, 2017). For these reasons, the Chinese attitude is strongly determined by the relations with Belgrade. Therefore, given the fact that the current conditions are rather comprehensive, this article is aiming to explore and examine the Chinese influence in Kosovo, if there is any.

If we look at the economic volume of both countries, we can conclude according to the latest data, that the total trade in million EUR is rather low (see the table below). From these numbers can be certainly seen that trade with Serbia plays a significant role.

Alike BRICS countries, Indonesia, or for instance Spain which firmly advocates Serbian position due to Basque country or Catalonia (Glenny, 2012).



Source: Report prepared by Dr Jens Bastian for the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, July 2017, Athens/ London, EBRD.

	Imports				Exports				Total trade		
	Partner	Value Mio €	% World		Partner	Value Mio €	% World		Partner	Value Mio €	% World
	World	3,330	100.0		World	366	100.0		World	3,696	100.0
1	EU 28	1,450	43.5	1	EU 28	110	30.2	1	EU 28	1,560	42.2
2	Turkey	333	10.0	2	Albania	68	18.6	2	Turkey	342	9.2
3	China	311	9.3	3	North Macedonia	44	11.9	3	China	312	8.4
4	Albania	204	6.1	4	India	36	9.8	4	Albania	272	7.4
5	North Macedonia	170	5.1	5	Switzerland	29	7.8	5	North Macedonia	214	5.8
6	Bosnia-Herzegov...	69	2.1	6	Serbia	19	5.3	6	Bosnia-Herzegov...	78	2.1
7	Brazil	47	1.4	7	Bosnia-Herzegov...	8	2.3	7	India	66	1.8
8	USA	36	1.1	8	Turkey	8	2.3	8	Switzerland	63	1.7
9	Switzerland	34	1.0	9	USA	2	0.6	9	Brazil	47	1.3
10	Russia	31	0.9	10	Libya	1	0.4	10	USA	38	1.0
1	EU 28	1,450	43.5	1	EU 28	110	30.2	1	EU 28	1,560	42.2

Source: European Commission, 3rd June 2019, https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/isdb_results/factsheets/country/details_kosovo_en.pdf.

However, according to IMF analysis from 2018 (see the table below), the data shows that China is the third most important economic actor if we consider the value of the total trade. Nevertheless, compared with the EU countries it is almost five-times lower. In terms of export, Kosovo is not even worth mentioning. Moreover, Kosovo is excluded from the economic 16+1 format, where China: *''has defined three potential priority areas for economic cooperation: infrastructure, high technologies, and green technologies,''* (CEEC, 2016). On the other side, Kosovo is one of the members of the Western Balkans Chamber Investment Forum, which is a joint initiative of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Serbia and the Kosovo Chamber of Commerce, that could be considered: *''as being a step ahead of politics in Belgrade concerning the non-recognition of Kosovo,''* (Bastian, 2017).

As can be seen above, China's economic influence represents a marginal role compared to the European Union or Turkey. When looking at the numbers, we can trace the EU still plays a significant role considering that, the EU contributes by 60 per cent of foreign direct investments (FDI) and 73 per cent trade. China's contribution is about 3 per cent FDI and 5.7 per cent trade. Moreover, much of the Chinese attention is heading towards Belgrade (Day, 2019).

One might have thought that China solely determines its relationship in economic terms towards Kosovo. Nevertheless, China has also several times expressed its concerns in terms of security. This particularly happened on 14th December 2018 when the Albanian dominated parliament of Kosovo: *''approved*

new legislation to transform the 3,000-strong, lightly armed Kosovo Security Force into an army that would grow to 5,000 active troops and 3,000 backups in the next decade,'' (Surk, 2018). In return, Belgrade announced that this legislation concerning the Kosovo Army: *''has jeopardized peace and security in the region,''* (Bacigalupo, 2019). Afterwards, Serbia turned its attention towards the United Nations to discuss the new on-going circumstances (ibid.), which Serbia perceives as an existential threat within fragile security stability. Due to the close relations between Belgrade and Beijing, as described above, China refused the creation of any Kosovo army without any hesitations (Bashota, 2019). However, on the one side, the new legislation had been unilaterally accepted without the Serbs parliament minority, and NATO also opposed the creation of a Kosovo Army: *''unless the constitution was amended with the support of the Serb minority,''* (Bytyci, 2018) thus, there are doubts on both sides. On the other side, Kosovo's President Thaci has expressed himself at the UN Security Council in New York that: *"nothing extraordinary happened in Kosovo,''* (Rudic – Morina, 2018). Since then the situation has not significantly changed and has remained the same if we do not count considerable lack of money which Kosovo needs to keep the army in relatively good shape (Begisholli, 2019).

To sum up, it can be stated that Kosovo does not have the primacy in China's Western Balkans foreign policy. What is more, according to Vesna Bashota: *''the activities of the Chinese Office are unknown,''* (Bashota, 2019). Even though Kosovo would be interested in intensifying the common economic bonds with China, especially when Kosovo declared support for the One China policy and immediately closed all kind of relations with Taiwan, nothing has really changed so far and any kind of significant Chinese activities cannot be traced (ibid.), and probably in the foreseeable future any important changes might not be seen as long as Kosovo remains unrecognized by its crucial neighbour, Serbia.

Serbia

Zdeněk Rod, Halina Chraščová

Since ethnic Albanian leadership in Kosovo declared independence from Serbia in 2008, the territory has remained a disputed and to a limited extent a sovereign autonomous territory. Currently, Kosovo is recognized by more than a hundred countries. Its sovereign status is yet a matter of question and rather vague. The country must rely on diplomatic patronage of states that act in favour towards it, it still is on its way to gain membership within United Nations and its efforts to enter European Union are rather precocious. Moreover, Kosovo´s attempt and fight to achieve a sovereign status is being opposed and hindered by Serbia that has its support from influential international scene players – China and Russia. Besides them, there are a number of other countries that actively resist the idea of Kosovo creating an independent area and acting as a state under its own supremacy. For instance, we could state Cyprus and Spain which both paradoxically had been experiencing separatist issues of their own.

European Union has been actively included in proposing solutions leading to normalisation of relations between Serbia and Kosovo since 2011. Since this engagement, several agreement suggestions were submitted but literally, none of them was ever feasibly applied in practice. Even though the proposals did not include a formal recognition requirement, but rather tried to imply measures leading to a stable country based on democratic and transparent principles in accordance with its multi-ethnic nature. As a result of its unsettled relations, Kosovo does not fulfil requirements essential for entering both EU and UN and is stuck in a so-called frozen conflict. What is more Serbian minority in Kosovo still retains firm links with Serbia, occurring and present mostly in northern parts of the country. This phenomenon is commonly referred to as parallel structures and systems or a state within a state. These structures operate on the very basic and crucial levels and cover political, educational, health, security or social systems. These

structures act autonomously, representing and promoting the interest of Serbia in Kosovo.

This paper aims to provide an outline of modus operandi of Serbian parallel structures in Kosovo, historical background, formation as well as efforts and measures taken in order to dismantle them or eliminate their influence in Kosovo. It describes its actions and a dual practice in Kosovo and contextually provides a summary of the impact of parallel structures within a state of Kosovo.

The concept of parallel structures is not a new phenomenon and has been around for many years, even though it is sometimes inaccurately associated only in term of Kosovo. Parallel structures have been typically represented not only in Northern Kosovo but also in the Northern part of Sri Lanka which was controlled by Tamil militant organization (Somasundaram, 2010). Rather similar cases could have been seen in: *''the Moldovan province of Transdniester, South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh,''* (Selimi, 2015). Even though the concept itself has been seen in many variations with a number of nuances, it was necessary to come up with a common definition within the international society. Parallel structures are, thus: *''parallel institutions opposite institutions representing popular sovereignty is a socio-political phenomenon that accompanies transition societies,''* (Ibid.). In a simple way, they are also sometimes called as: *''a state within a state,''* (Ibid.).

If we examine the meaning of the definition closer, we can explore that parallel structures are in Selimi's (2015) research featured with seven characteristics. First of all, these structures cannot be recognized by the state power given the lack of political legitimacy and therefore, they can be labelled as illegal structures. Secondly, inasmuch as they are illegal within a certain state, they cannot be internationally recognized as a sovereign entity. Moreover, rationally, they do not possess internal as well as external authority. Nevertheless, they might be occasionally recognized by other states but in this case, it would inevitably lead to the violation of the UN Charter. Thirdly, given the lack of legitimacy, potential clashes between the parallel government and the official structures of the given state might occur as the official government would try to attempt to gain control over the

disputable territory. Fourthly, during the existence and functioning of parallel structures, the state where they reside should not be considered as a failed state. The parallel structures are not merely a result of the ethnic division, but also other causes can be explored such as social, political or economic differences. Finally, these structures should be entirely independent in their decision-making processes, however, it does not imply they cannot obtain any kind of support from other related states. Lastly, parallel structures ought to have a certain degree of legitimacy over the territory they control. It means that they are very often the main and crucial providers of education or security.

To sum up, the parallel structures can be easily considered as illegal structures lacking any kind of legitimacy. In addition, they also very often represent sort of a burden for the official government in terms of security and alike. Drawing from the theoretical reflection of the concept itself, the further chapters will focus on the development and performance of the parallel structures in Northern Kosovo.

Looking back into the history we can trace that these so-called parallel structures had been already present in the area before the civil war, where Kosovo Serbs and Albanians were living in parallel societies divided from each other. The Albanians were first in creating such structures, which emerged with Slobodan Milošević's policies towards Kosovo region. Kosovo Serbs did act differently (Jancić, 2015). After the NATO intervention in 1999, which brought the conflict between the Serbian regime and Kosovo Albanians to its end, the United Nations designated Interim Administration Mission (UNMIK) based on UN Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1244 (Visoka, 2012). Drawing from the UNMIK mission, the main purpose of the act was to substitute temporary authority in a war-torn society and to establish peace and begin post-conflict reconstruction. Nevertheless, the remaining Kosovo Serbs waved aside to recognize the UNMIK temporary administration and therefore: *''the Serbian administration; courts, schools, hospitals, etc., directly answering to Belgrade, has been maintained,''* (OSCE, 2003). Moreover, after the conflict, the Kosovo Serbs were predominantly living in municipalities such as Mitrovica, Zubin Potok, Zvečan and Leposavić (Agimi, 2016).

Additionally, due to the preservation of Serbian influence, the Serbian administration has been ipso facto maintained and these conditions helped later to form the so-called parallel structures. Simultaneously, the UNMIK has been refusing these structures since the late 1990s (OSCE, 2006-2007). Also concerning the Northern Kosovo, due to the Serbian influence and Kosovo Serbs' reluctance the parallel structures were, and are still to some extent, obstructing peacebuilding and state-building efforts in Kosovo. Furthermore, Serb's parallel structures have not only opposed to the UNMIK's decision, but they have also hindered the activities of EULEX (The European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo), KFOR (Kosovo Force) and ICO (International Civilian Office) (Visoka – Beha, 2015). In terms of unwillingness of Kosovo Serbs to join the peace process and given the mixture of different policies coming from the international community, Belgrade and Kosovo Serbs, it is not far from reality to note that very unstable, murky and sometimes rather violent environment was formed (Visoka, 2012). As an example, it is worth to mention the so-called Bridge watchers. Bridge watchers emerged at the end of 1990s as a formal security Kosovo Serbs organization. The main aim of the Bridge watchers was: *''to prevent Kosovo Albanians from entering the north of Mitrovica; to gather information on Kosovo Peacekeeping Force (KFOR) and UNMIK Police; and to gather information on any Kosovo Albanian living in the north,''* (Beha, 2012). The Bridge watchers were likewise involved in certain criminal activities (Ibid.).

During the 2003 the conditions in Kosovo worsened rapidly due to the unresolved status of Kosovo Serbs. Also, the Albanians felt hugely frustrated, because they did not see any possible solution for tackling the whole situation. With no clear-cut political status on Kosovo, the violent riots erupted in March. The result of the massive riots was that thousands of Serbs were displaced, and hundreds of Serb Orthodox Churches were damaged (Visoka – Beha, 2015). The overturn came to the effect in 2008, when Kosovo declared its independence. Nevertheless, this decision was greatly refused by the Kosovo Serbs who called for strengthening ties with Serbia (Lehne, 2012). Therefore, despite the strong criticism from the international community, Serbia organized local elections in northern

municipalities dominated by Serbs. However, given the inner tension between Kosovo Serbs living in the north and south of Kosovo, the result was rather vague and did not lead to any final solution and afterwards the current conditions of parallel structures were with the help of Serbia preserved (Beha, 2012). As a matter of fact, Serbia did not only help the preservation of parallel structures, but Serbia also established its own municipalities in Leposavic, Zubin Potok, Zvečan and Mitrovica North (Visoka – Beha, 2015). Besides, Serbia pays huge costs for the functioning of these structures when only in 2008 Serbia allocated almost EUR 500 million to fund them (Bartlett eds., 2018).

Another round of negotiations regarding the existence of parallel structures emerged in 2011 when the EU started the mediation between Belgrade and Pristina. Nevertheless, the negotiations were rather unsuccessful given the fact that Belgrade denies being involved in support to parallel structures on the one side, but Pristina states otherwise (Jancič, 2015). Furthermore, the attempt: *''to include the northern municipalities of Zubin Potok, Leposavić, Zvečan, and North Mitrovica,''* (Agimi, 2016) failed as well. Even though the EU, mainly Germany, wishes to dismantle these structures due to the obstructions to the peace talks in the ethnically divided country (Nikolić, 2012). Very active figure on the Germans' side was certainly Chancellor Angela Merkel who clearly announced that presence of parallel structures does not correlate with free trade and border cooperation and, thus, existing structures ought to be dismantled as soon as possible (World Bulletin, 2011).

Furthermore, at the beginning of negotiations, the EU was striving to implement any kind of reform, at the end of 2013 after the immanent pressure, the EU diplomats implemented so-called Brussels Agreement, which was partly accepted by Belgrade and Pristina agreement (Rossi, 2018). The agreement was specially signed by Serbia's Prime Minister, Ivica Dacić, and Kosovo's Prime Minister, Hashim Thaci (Ibid.). The Brussel agreement specifically contains that municipalities such as Mitrovica, Zvečan, Zubin Potok and Leposavić (Smolar, 2013) will be: *''subject to Kosovo law,''* (Ibid.). In other words, on the one hand, these municipalities will follow the rule of law in Kosovo, and on the other hand, they will be endowed with certain

competencies concerning their own economic development, education, healthcare and urban planning. Moreover, the points of the agreement also contain the reference that, even the Kosovo police should be sent to the northern parts. However, in this case, Kosovo Serbs addressed the crucial condition, that the commander of the local police unit must be Serb by any means (Emini – Stakic, 2018). Regarding the court system, the local courts in the Serbian municipalities should also be predominantly occupied by Serb judges (Smolar, 2013). Furthermore, another condition was that the local Serbian parallel courts had to be dismantled too (Peci, 2013). Lastly, certain Kosovo politicians, such as former Foreign Minister Enver Hoxhaj, believe that these new principles should ensure the multi-ethnic character of Kosovo (Euroactiv, 2013).

The Brussels Agreement has gone beyond the expected border that would have been expected and is arguably marked as a historical turn. But the change never comes overnight. And even the foremost agreement does not always have to be followed. Northern Kosovo and its parallel structures are not an exception. Some experts argue that the parallel activities have not absolutely disappeared yet. Drawing on this conclusion, according to the GAP Institute the Brussels Agreement specifically: *''addresses mainly the integration of police, judiciary and creation of the Association, telecom, energy and holding of local elections.''* (Gap Institute, 2015). However, it does not have to necessarily imply their absolute disappearance. What's more, the agreement sort of does not deal with other structures embedded in the society and therefore, the municipalities in Northern Kosovo still have considerable influence over education, administration, health, urbanization, public service, sports and culture (Ibid.) The following chapter will examine the particular issues, which already existing parallel structures conduct.

As mentioned above, Serbian parallel structures in Kosovo have not been dismantled at all so far. After the implementation of the Brussels Agreement, some of the existing structures just switched the coat when the northern municipalities were renamed, on Belgrade's suggestion, to ''Interim Administrative Bodies'' (parallel structures). Nothing has really changed much. The structures managed to achieve

certain progress in integrating police and courts, but in other terms, they remained merely unchanged. Serbia has not cut its financial support yet. Additionally, it could be said that Serbia is practising a model of local governance in the four municipalities/Interim Administrative Bodies (Zvečan, Leposavić, Zubin Potok, Northern Mitrovica). Regarding the public service, for instance, the parallel organs issue the ID cards etc. according to the Serbian model, and not according to Pristina regulations. More importantly, the special Serbian organ, the Ministry for Kosovo in the Government of Serbia, has substantial control over education, culture as well as healthcare. Another pivotal issue emerged when local officials had been revealed when taking double salaries, from Pristina as well as from Belgrade. This basically goes hand in hand with unfinished consolidation of power over the Northern municipalities, since not all of the structures have been dismantled and therefore existing systems create a great chance for such incidents (Gap Institute, 2015). Now the paper will provide an outline of examples of modus operandi of parallel structures.

First of all, it is necessary to point out that, the Serbian influence is still present and that the nature of the security structures have undergone significant changes. For instance, Bridge Watchers, tremendously known for their criminal activities, have disappeared over the years. Nevertheless, the existing police, even though it should have been integrated into the official Kosovo police, with certain exceptions such as having a Serb commander, is still under Serbian influence. Indicated reasons according to Selimi (2015) - locals still feel strong mistrust in Pristina, which is moreover supported by Belgrade benefiting from the whole situation.

Parallel courts go strongly hand in hand with security structures and these courts had up to 2007 only solved around 5000 cases, according to OSCE (OSCE, 2007). Moreover, the parallel courts followed Serbian justice and law regulations. In the past, particular conditions were met when Serbian official agreed to integrate its judges into newly emerging Kosovo judicial system. Notwithstanding that the international community pressure for change: *''in other parts of Kosovo, individual judges and prosecutors were integrated in the Kosovo*

justice system. Nevertheless, in Serbia courts claiming jurisdiction in Kosovo still persist,'' (Selimi, 2015).

Public service, starting with education, municipal services and ending with healthcare, has been supported by Belgrade and does not match with the activities of Pristina (Crisis Group, 2011). Probably the biggest concerns arise within the educational system, which is constantly being supported by the Serbian Ministry of Education (Hysa – Haziri eds., 2011) that exclusively controls 21 primary schools and 9 secondary schools. Undoubtedly: *''the illegal system of education still continues to operate outside the legal education system of the Republic of Kosovo,''* (Selimi, 2015) which does not correspond with the educational framework of Kosovo. On the other hand, to be accurate it is necessary to state in this coherency that according to Ahtisaari Plan (formally the Comprehensive Proposal for the Kosovo Status Settlement – CSP), particularly Law on Education from 2008 it was allowed to follow Serbian curriculum. According to this plan, schools that were offering instructions in Serbian could implement textbooks and curricula issued by the Ministry of the Republic of Serbia with the notification of the Ministry of Education of Kosovo. (Selimi, 2015)

In terms of the healthcare system, the conditions are rather similar. *''Illegal Serb Health Care in Kosovo is particularly well organized in its northern municipalities,''* (Selimi, 2015). The parallel health care institutions are also covered by the Ministry of Health of Serbia, which predominantly donates the whole sector. The biggest hospitals are primarily located in Mitrovica (Hysa – Haziri eds., 2011).

Lastly, parallel structures are also tied up with the financial system when: *''the financial system in the North is mainly separated from the bank system functioning in Kosovo and the one of Central Bank,''* (Hysa – Haziri eds., 2011). Furthermore, the Serbian Dinar is the most-wide spread currency in Northern Kosovo. Besides the financial system, in the Northern Kosovo, there are many other parallel structures such as culture and sports institutions, parallel post and energetic institutions, parallel local government institutions or parallel transport institutions (Hysa – Haziri eds., 2011).

To conclude, the integration of the Serbian minority in the new Kosovo appears as a multidimensional and coherent problem

that is present on the international scene since the end of the Kosovo war in 1999. Whilst most Serbian citizens employed within public structures in Kosovo have managed to embed itself into the new system, the northern part of the country – Mitrovica region, seemingly resists all the efforts made in order to be incorporated on the domestic as well as on the international level. As the main problem, it appears the fact that Serbian parallel structures are publicly tolerated as this attitude helps to preserve relative peace, maintain stability and prevent further conflicts. Serbia seems to hold tightly on sustaining the existence of its parallel structures in Kosovo, as their primary function is to secure Serbian interests and control and cover a broad spectrum of activities in Kosovo.

The Serbian community living in Kosovo was also encouraged by Belgrade to participate in local political processes under the international organization and the administration, including the first elections after the war in Kosovo, on both a national and municipal level. The legal and political basis of the international mission in Kosovo was joined by independent policies of some countries as Spain, Russia, etc. Those countries participated in civil-military missions in Kosovo and in some way helped to further formation and functioning of parallel structures in the region. According to the Resolution 1244 adopted by United Nations Security Council in 1999, structures regarding public services as education, health care, cadastre etc. were not treated and seen as illegal. On the contrary, those, regarding safety issues were strictly forbidden not only by the Resolution but also by Military technical Agreement of Kumanovo. Since the very first Kosovo institutions were established after the end of the war, the problematic northern municipalities started to object the cooperation and until 2007 accepted cooperation with UNMIK instead. It might be concluded that this approach served as the main trigger that started systematic strengthening and expansion of parallel structures in Kosovo. Serbia and Kosovo institutions overlap in the northern Kosovo seemingly without formal boundaries or rules. Serbian and Albanian communities have developed pragmatic ways of navigating between these parallel systems where cooperation is unavoidable.

For now, institutions in Kosovo are clueless against the influence and practice of the structures and rely merely on an external intervention from Brussels to constrain further arrangements to eliminate them. For now, it might be predicted that the northern parts of Kosovo will remain for an unspecified term under a dual sovereignty practice opposing Serbian influence – the primary goal of Belgrade to control and possibly regain what it has formerly lost.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Fitore Fejza, Rusmir Piralić

Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina have the poorest bilateral relations in the Western Balkan. Both states were born after the breakup of the former Yugoslavia. Both countries claim to join the European Union in the future, but one of the requirements for becoming a member of the European family is regional cooperation (Ruge, 2017). External pressure continues to have an impact on the cooperation, as well as the ethnic roots of political actions in Bosnia's relations with other countries which reflect in its relationship with Kosovo (Krajišnik, 2016).

After the declaration of independence, Kosovo requires to be recognized as an independent state by the United Nations. At the same time Serbian representatives in Bosnia and Herzegovina, opposition politicians and those in power, have a clear attitude that Kosovo will never be recognized as an independent state (Krajišnik, 2016).

In Bosnia and Herzegovina political decisions are made with the approval of three nationalities - Bosnians, Serbs and Croats and such an attitude affects the possibility (or impossibility) of establishing relations between Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. This policy is based on the background of fundamental problems affecting the lives of ordinary citizens, stability in the region and trade cooperation (Krajišnik, 2016).

The political attitudes also affect other areas of the relations between Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina. This is confirmed by The Foreign Investment Promotion Agency of Bosnia and Herzegovina: *"Bosnia and Herzegovina does not recognize the independence of the Republic of Kosovo and accordingly diplomatic relations do not exist. Therefore, relationships of other species are minimized. Given the political turmoil, it is certain that no internal consensus will be created in the near future regarding relations with Kosovo,"* (Brkic, 2020).

When it comes to cooperation, these countries face many barriers. There are serious obstacles in travelling which damages the relations between people.

Barriers to trade between the two countries affect regional economic cooperation, as well as overall stability (Krajišnik, 2016). The visa regime and the visa application process are complicated and economic exchanges have been destroyed, while facilitating relationships is not on the horizon in the near future (Krajišnik, 2016).

Kosovo is one of the ten most important partners for Bosnia in the area of trade. Both countries are members of the CEFTA. Bosnia and Herzegovina has been a member of CEFTA since 2007, while Kosovo is a member of CEFTA in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 1244. CEFTA founded the free trade zone under the provisions of the Agreement and the World Trade Organisation's procedures. The agreement provides a CEFTA framework for EU accession (MVTEO, 2018)

However, travel barriers and certification problems affect all kinds of non-tariff barriers to free trade between the two countries (Ruge, 2017). Exporters from Kosovo face various difficulties when exporting to CEFTA markets. Political issues bring some of the biggest difficulties for Kosovar exporters, which relates to the non-recognition of Kosovo's independence by Bosnia and Herzegovina, member of CEFTA. Such an obstacle is impossible to avoid, as it is equivalent to an import ban on the target markets. Obstacles to travel caused by the fact that the personal documents issued by the Kosovo authorities and Kosovo registered vehicles are not recognised. This does not relate only to personal documents, but also non-recognition of certificates and other documents issued by the Kosovo Authorities. Procedural barriers also arise due to the implementation of Food and Veterinary Agency and Border Control limits to border phytosanitary and veterinary testing for each export, poor transparency and border bureaucracy (Raporti mbi BJT që prekin eksportuesit kosovarë, 2019).

Trade with countries in the region is very important for Kosovar businesses. CEFTA represents the largest market for Kosovar exports. The data presented in the following table show the value of exports for certain members of CEFTA countries for the period from 2015 to 2018.

Country/year	2015	2016	2017	2018	Export growth between 2015-2018
Albania	40.25	36.41	53.29	66.27	64.64%
North of Macedonia	33.36	31.46	39.54	41.84	25.42%
Serbia	32.26	39.75	46.35	32.19	-0.21%
Montenegro	12.14	13.17	19.17	18.53	52.63%
Bosnia and Herzegovina	5.66	7.62	7.86	7.74	2.08%

Statistics provided by Kosovo Customs show that the level of trade exchange between CEFTA member states and Kosovo has increased. It should be noted also that, the progress of the Kosovo exports changes in the countries that have recognized Kosovo as an independent state, compared to the countries that have not recognized it. In the former case, there is a noticeable dynamism, while in the latter case exports are declining, as in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia. This difference in performance can be attributed to the "cost of non-recognition" (Raporti mbi BJT që prekin eksportuesit kosovarë, 2019).

Also, Kosovar companies have problems in the Bosnian and Herzegovinian markets. Only 4 companies with capital from the Republic of Kosovo (in the period 2010 – 2015) are registered in the Register of Business Entities of Bosnia and Herzegovina, in the territory of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (We have information that a Court in Sarajevo has refused to register a company with a founder from Kosovo). The importance of regional cooperation and economic exchange for maintaining stability in the Western Balkan is indisputable. Kosovo represents a significant market for companies in the region, including those in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Brkic, 2020).

The GDP of Bosnia and Herzegovina as a potential candidate for the EU is the second lowest leaving behind only Albania, while Kosovo's GDP compared to the EU stands at 9.14 per cent and is by far the lowest in the region. Therefore, the two states should raise economic co-operation to a higher level, which would result in the EU average GDP exceeding EUR 35,000 (Plečić, 2019).

The balance in trade between the two countries is uneven. The value of products exported from Bosnia to Kosovo is ten times the value of Kosovo's exports to Bosnia. European Trade Commission's website and Bosnia's Chamber of Foreign Trade have announced that during 2017, the export of Bosnia and Herzegovina's goods to Kosovo amounted to up to EUR 80 million. While Kosovo's imports to Bosnia and Herzegovina reached EUR 8 million (Lajmi.net, 2018).

Bosnia's five most exported goods to Kosovo in 2017 were milk products and other food products, bringing the state EUR 5.5 million data published by the Bosnian Chamber of Commerce (Lajmi.net,2018).

In August 2019 the Government of Kosovo, as part of the CEFTA Agreement abolished all import tariffs on milk products from Bosnia, as it was considered to be a support for Bosnian producers. At the same time in the first nine months of 2018, Bosnia's most exported products in Kosovo were iron and steel worth EUR 20 million, meat, and fish worth EUR 5.5 million, daily and chicken products worth EUR 4 million (Lajmi.net, 2018). Bosnia and Herzegovina's biggest exporters to Kosovo are companies "Arcelor Mittal" from Zenica and "Commerce-Mali" from Prnjavor exporting iron and steel, then "Millkos“ Sarajevo, Gradačac “Dukat“ and "MI99“, "Meggle“, the pharmaceutical company “Bosnalijek“, “Thermo Flux“ exporting heating cauldrons, furniture producers from the Pale, Sokolac and Čajniče, oil company “Bimal“ of the Brčko, "Stanić“ from Kreševo and "Violeta" from the Grude producing hygienic material.

On 6th November 2018 the outgoing Government of Kosovo imposed a 10 per cent tax on products originating in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina and on 21st November, this tax was tightened to 100 per cent on all imported products and goods from these two states. Such a decision makes the economic cooperation between Kosovo and Bosnia even more difficult. The new 100 per cent customs tax is a response of Kosovo to Serbia's aggressive policy against Kosovo's membership in INTERPOL and Serbian diplomacy in countries designated to withdraw Kosovo's recognition.

Prime Minister of Kosovo, Mr Haradinaj, has justified the tax through the violations that Serbia has made to the Free Trade Agreement – CEFTA: *“We are a witness that Kosovo has been blocked for a long time, was not allowed to enjoy the rights of CEFTA,*

has been prevented through the origin of goods, thus not knowing the origin of the goods, has been prevented in transport, analysis and on any other instrument. CEFTA has not worked between Kosovo and Serbia and this is evidence," (RFE/RL, 2018).

Following the decision to increase the tax on products from Serbia and Bosnia, the Chamber of Commerce of Bosnia and Herzegovina has reacted. The head of the chamber, Nemanja Vasic, said the decision was political. "*This is a reaction to what happened at INTERPOL. Kosovo cannot last long because it will close itself to all European processes. I am afraid they will remain isolated because at least CEFTA countries have accepted to implement this free trade agreement because it is a market of 30 million,"* he said (RFE/RL, 2018).

Business representatives in Bosnia also reacted after the tax was imposed. The director of the Sarajevo Dairy "Milk" Adin Fakić, declared that the decision has led to discrimination on three bases, the first is a violation of the CEFTA agreement, violation of Stabilization and Association Agreement, as the agreement defines the abolition of customs and the third one is the fact that the measure refers only to domestic firms, not to foreign companies that are producing in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Šarenkapa, 2018).

Following the Government's decision to increase the tax to 100 per cent, the UN Secretary General's Special Representative for Kosovo, Zahir Tanin, who is also UNMIK chief, has reacted. *"We call on political leaders to consider the long-term interests of the people and the fundamental need to maintain peace, security and stability,"* said Tanin through a statement (RFE/RL, 2018).

The reaction has been followed by international actors. The European Union and the United States of America have repeatedly called for the suspension or cancellation of this tax, qualifying it as a violation of the principles of the CEFTA agreement on freedom of movement of goods (RFE/RL, 2018).

The decision is also a reaction of Kosovo's authorities to the policies of Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina that cause difficulties for the export of Kosovo goods to these two states without recognizing the origin of the goods, not recognizing the documents of the Kosovar authorities, the difficulty in transport, lack of transparency and bureaucracy at the border crossings. These policies are a violation of the CEFTA

agreement for a long time, from both countries concerning economic cooperation with Kosovo. Kosovo´s decision should be understood as a rational response, for respecting the CEFTA agreement and for equal economic cooperation.

One year after imposing a tax on goods exported from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo Customs Director General Bahri Berisha, in an interview for Radio Free Europe, said: *"The import of products from Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina on the Kosovo market has dropped by 99 per cent,"* (albinfo.ch, 2019).

"Their products in the Kosovo market have been quickly replaced by imports from other countries in the region and the European Union," said the competent authority in Pristina (albinfo.ch, 2019). In 2019 Bulgaria exported to Kosovo about EUR 58 million or 87 per cent more than in the previous year, Greece over EUR 72 million or 58 per cent more, Croatia about EUR 42 million or 43 per cent more, Northern Macedonia over EUR 68 million or 40 per cent more and Turkey over EUR 15 million or 73 per cent more. During the time with 100 per cent tariff, there was an increase in the manufacturing sector up to 10 per cent (Gap Institute, 2020).

Tariff setting affects the price of products. In 2019, the increase in food and beverage prices represented about 6.1 per cent in January - September 2019 compared to the same period in 2018. This was also the highest increase since 2017. The prices fell in the second half of 2019 compared to the same period in 2018 but they were still higher by 3 per cent (Gap Institute, 2020).

The value of goods imported from Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2019 was EUR 2 million, which is EUR 80 million less compared to 2018. The export of "Made in Kosovo" products to Bosnia and Herzegovina is EUR 5 million. Since the Kosovo government imposed taxes on products from Bosnia and Herzegovina, the losses of producers in these countries amount to hundreds of millions of EUR, but Kosovo does not notice any shortage of products or any impact on customs revenues (Epoka e re, 2019). Bosnia and Herzegovina producers are also counting the losses from the effects of this tax. *"For the country, it was a collateral damage. Bosnia and Herzegovina exported 800 million KM to Kosovo from 2014 to 2018, and imported only 60 million,"*

said Vjekoslav Vukovic, the president of the Foreign Trade Chamber of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Čavčić, 2020).

Exports from Bosnia and Herzegovina to Kosovo for the first nine months of 2019 amount to DM 11 million or, if converted to EUR 5.6 million, representing a decline of 90.4 per cent compared to 2018. Nemanja Vasic, deputy chairman of Bosnia and Herzegovina's Chamber of Foreign Trade: *"If compared to the pre-tax period, it is 100 million marks of Bosnia and Herzegovina or over EUR 51 million less. It is difficult to talk about direct and indirect damage. If we look only at the export loss of buyer's loss of market loss of contracts…, etc these are damages for which there is no unit of measurement,"(*albinfo.ch, 2019).

After the parliamentary elections in Kosovo, the new government led by Albin Kurti has promised an initiative to lift the 100 per cent tariff, first on raw materials and then on all products. Mr Kurti has said that the tariff on Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina's goods has been a decision of the previous government and the government he runs does not support tariffs as a punitive measure against the consume, but is committed to reciprocity as a safeguard against producers (Telegrafi, 2020, A).

On 20th March 2020, the Kosovo Government decided to abolish the import tariff for raw materials from Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Kosovo Prime Minister, Albin Kurti, wrote on Facebook that 10 votes to 2 abstentions decided to release 100 per cent tariff on raw materials import from Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. He also has said that by the 1st April 2019 the Government of Kosovo will issue a new regulation on imposing reciprocity measures instead of the 100 per cent tariff (Telegrafi, 2020, C).

The reciprocity measures will not be implemented in relation to Bosnia and Herzegovina (BHRT, 2020).

Minister of Economy, Employment, Trade, Industry, Entrepreneurship and Strategic Investments, Rozeta Hajdari, declared: *"The Government of Kosovo yesterday acted with willingness and dedication, but we also expect international allies to press Serbia to fully eliminate the non-tariff barriers applied on Kosovo companies and to stop immediately,"* (Telegrafi.com, 2020, B).

The decision was preceded through diplomatic pressure from the United States, which repeatedly called on the Kosovo government to abolish fees altogether, in order to create opportunities to continue a dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia.

The decision to abolish the tax was welcomed by the European Union, the higher representative of EU Mr Borrell declared*: "Happy to see the decision of the full lifting of tariffs by Kosovo caretaker government for goods coming from Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. This is an important decision. Regional cooperation is the key as is maintaining the flow of goods, in particular in times of crisis,"* (Korrespodenti, 2020).

The former Prime Minister of Kosovo, Mr Haradinaj, criticizes the Government's decision to remove tax: *"The outgoing government could not leave without removing the tax,"* (Sheu, 2020). However, the civil society in Kosovo welcomed the Government's resolution. Kosovo Institute for European Policy (EPIK), part of civil society, in a statement for media, says it has welcomed the decision of the Government of Kosovo to remove the fee for raw materials from Serbia. "*The 100 per cent tariff is contrary to the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) and contrary to the spirit of the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA). Today's decision ensures that Kosovo respects the obligations arising from the integration process, advances regional cooperation and creates the necessary political environment for the advancement of Kosovo's European perspective,*" said the EPIK statement for media (Shehu, 2020).

After the lifting of the embargo, goods from Bosnia and Herzegovina penetrated the Kosovo market, without any obstacles. And in full compliance with the CEFTA agreement on free trade.

To conclude, the two states with aspirations to be members of the European Union do not have a common language in economic cooperation trade and free movement. It is very clear that representatives of the Serbs in institutions of Bosnia and Herzegovina authorities have not permitted to enter a parliamentary procedure to vote on recognizing the state of the Republic of Kosovo. Therefore, the adoption of the procedures and rules from CEFTA regarding the simplified procedures for citizens, businessmen from Kosovo, and what needs to be transferred by the

recognition of the document of the Republic of Kosovo is not possible. The state is a direct link to policies that govern the Western Balkans, specifically the effect of Serbia on the Serbian people's steps in the institutions of government in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The political impact, the absence of diplomatic relations, absence of embassies and visa regime harms the economies of both countries and makes citizens life more difficult. Currently, the economic relations between Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo in the field of the exchange of economic goods and services are not at a satisfactory level. The trade balance in the years before the introduction of 100 per cent taxes in November 2018 by the Kosovo Government on imports from Bosnia and Herzegovina is uneven. The value of products exported from Bosnia to Kosovo is ten times the value of Kosovo's exports to Bosnia.

Kosovo exporters face difficulties in exporting to the Bosnian market. The cooperation was diminished further by the imposition of a 100 per cent tax on products imported from Bosnia and Herzegovina. After this decision, the Kosovo authorities declared that CEFTA has not worked between Kosovo, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, because Kosovo has been blocked for a long time and it was not allowed to enjoy the rights of CEFTA.

After imposing the 100 per cent tax, the amount of products imported from Bosnia and Herzegovina has declined rapidly while Kosovo's exports to Bosnia have declined slightly. Bosnian products on the Kosovo market have been replaced by products from other countries. The result of such decisions on one side paid the citizens of Kosovo by increasing the price of basic living supplies at an average of 3.0 per cent.

The European Union and the United States reacted to the decision by demanding the tax to be removed, arguing that this is a violation of the CEFTA Agreement.

The new government of Kosovo decided to abolish tax on Serbian and Bosnian products, but at the same time, it has demanded international allies to pressure Serbia to remove barriers to Kosovo businesses and halt the reconnaissance campaign. Now it is up to Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina to respond positively to Kosovar authorities by contributing to the regional economic cooperation and not presenting difficulties for Kosovar businesses in exporting goods to these countries.

Unfortunately, for now, the improvement of economic relations between Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo is unpredictable. Therefore the question stays when will the two countries reach the level of cooperation they had, especially now in the era of a global recession caused by pandemic – Covid 19.

The CEFTA agreement, which contributes to regional economic cooperation and stability in the region, must be respected. Also, economic cooperation facilitates the process of accession to the European Union for all Balkan countries. The European Union defines the neighbourhood relations between two countries that are in their interest and binding on the process of integration into the European Union. Therefore, political rhetoric must change, serving in concrete actions of economic, social and cultural cooperation between two countries.

Conclusion

Francesco Trupia

The research project "Geopolitical Interests in Western Balkans" conducted by the Centre for Security Analysis and Prevention explores the socio-political and economic legacy that international and regional actors have left in Kosovo.

Since the collapse of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Kosovo has represented the essence of the Western Balkans and its geopolitical representation within Europe. Many argue that the Old Continent needs to reimagine and rethink itself in the face of the international challenges and societal implications that the Europeanisation of Central and Eastern Europe will bring. Others criticise such ideas, which have subtly paved the way to overwhelming conditionalities or to interests of international stakeholders.

Both perspectives remain centrally paramount to shed light on vested interests and investigate certain opportunistic attitudes in Kosovo. This twofold angle of investigation opens the further debate regarding the category of so-called "Great Powers" and their influence in the newest country of Europe. Do "Great Powers" drive and promote, or malignantly orchestrate and spoil, the future of Kosovo?

To begin with, it is worth noticing that today's status of Kosovo lacks universal recognition from the United Nations and an agreement within the European Union regarding the visa-free travel in the Schengen area. Even though more than 50 per cent of the United Nations member states recognise Kosovo and that Pristina has signed a Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the EU, domestic issues have ignited controversies on the international arena. Particularly in the field of humanitarian intervention, international peacebuilding and international recognition (Newman – Visoka, 2019), we can accordingly identify three categories of international determinants in relation to Kosovo, its oldest issues and newest scenarios.

The first category of international determinants groups influential powers such as Russia, China, Brazil, South Africa, India and Indonesia that, among others, have

rejected Kosovo's statehood. Within this, the Sino-Russian veto represents the strongest opposition to recognising Kosovo's declaration of independence dated 18th February 2008. The second category is composed of the five EU member states that have not yet recognised Kosovo's statehood – Spain, Cyprus, Romania, Slovakia and Greece. Lastly, the third category is composed of Serbia along with Kosovo itself and the European Union leading the Brussels-based dialogue for interstate reconciliation.

In general, the role that non-recognisers have played regarding the issue of Kosovo's statehood has been that of warning the international community about the risk of setting a dangerous precedent. The potential risk of moving past the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 would recognise the case of Kosovo as exceptional and legitimise (arguably) replications of already-existing phenomena of secessionism and de facto states in the post-Soviet space.

Against this, Russia has always considered the NATO operation in Kosovo in 1999 and the 2008 declaration of independence as breaches of international law and a malign procedure against the principle of sovereignty. More precisely, Moscow has criticised the violation of the covering norm regarding the agreement of the host State to permit a secession of a specific territory from its de jure national borders. In doing so, Russia has never been satisfied with the argument that NATO military intervention, as well as Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence, were both required to stop the grave violations of human rights against ethnic Albanians committed by the Serbian forces (Ker-Lindsay, 2012) and impede any return of Serbia in Kosovo.

Within the European Union, too, Romanian authorities and political parties have always expressed great concerns about recognising the statehood of Kosovo. The risk of worsening the domestic issues within the contested Székely Land and Transylvania has to be avoided at all costs. Likewise, Spain has refrained from recognising Kosovo's statehood due to the historical issues of the Basque region and Catalonia (Sarriá, 2019), while Greece has worried about legitimising the creation of a "Greater Albania" in the region. Given this token, however, all these critical positions about the heatedly

contested recognition of Kosovo's statehood have little to do with the scenarios related to secessionist minority groups or other self-determination issues. Under the parapet of the political discourse, such risk assessment has obfuscated the large variety of vested interests as well as lack of political will behind the non-recognition of Kosovo. Among others, poor trade relations have so far stopped Spain and other countries to accelerate the recognition procedure of Kosovo.

Even the literature considering the support of "Great Powers" as one of the most important factors behind phenomena of secessionism (Coggins, 2014), as correctly pointed out in Rod and Chraščová's analysis, could not fit Kosovo's scenario anymore. Unlike other breakaway entities or de facto states in the so-called former Eastern Bloc, since 2008 Kosovo has largely provided empirical evidence of its modern statehood (Newman – Visoka, 2019), whose progress has correctly reported by Iliev's argumentation in relation to the European Commission 2019 Kosovo Progress Report. After all, countries such as Great Britain, Turkey, Bulgaria, North Macedonia, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have recognised Kosovo regardless of the self-determination issues that might erupt within their national borders. On the other hand, Romania has monitored the new strategy of the EU towards the accession of the Western Balkans, particularly of Kosovo in order to have a better comparison with the Eastern Partnership and Moldova, which continues to mobilise great interest among certain nationalist parties and their élites in the Romanian political landscape.

There is no doubt that also the crises in Ukraine and Spain have worsened the scenario of Kosovo recognition. Nevertheless, both crises have respectively displayed the idiosyncratic positions of the Russian Federation and Spain. On the one hand, the Kremlin has never been interested, and it continues not to be, in exacerbating the dispute between Belgrade and Pristina or the interethnic relations between Serbs and Albanians. On the other hand, however, Moscow's intervention in the Ukraine's Easternmost regions, in defence of the Russian population under the threat of Kyiev's banderovski, and its swift war would likely justify, albeit silently, the NATO intervention in Kosovo. The latter was indeed aimed at stopping Milošević's grave

repression against Kosovo Albanians and preventing ethnic cleansings such as the ones seen in Bosnia from being repeated once again. In few words, it seems even clearer than in the aftermath of the 1999 Kosovo War that for Moscow, the non-recognition of Kosovo's statehood has been nothing but one of the ways for confronting and criticising the West's modus operandi.

If both the Romanian and Spanish positions show less interest in comparison to other countries and international players, foreign investments and infrastructural projects that other countries such as Turkey and Iran have promised might unravel new perspectives across the whole region. Regarding Kosovo, while Lehutová and Chraščová have noticed that the position of Turkey and Iran is nothing but contradictory. In addition, Fejza's comparative analysis between Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina suggets a bigger picture and lack of regional cooperation from within the region. Although the European Union has constantly invited both countries to strengthen their interstate relations in the attempt to smooth the EU accession process, the Bosnian parliament has not recognised Kosovo's statehood due to the fear of reigniting majority-minority tensions within the country.

Hence, Kosovo does not pay the cost of non-recognition, but also the false hope of economic support. For example, in 2013 Behgjet Pacolli officially announced the Iranian readiness to recognise the statehood of Kosovo. Since then, Teheran has not moved forward to do so. Perhaps, too much attention was drawn to the key role that Islam would play rather than better considering how a potential recognition from Teheran would squeeze the country in between Russia and the USA. Respectively, Iran would have to balance Moscow and accept the extremely positive feeling that all Kosovo Albanians share towards the role of the USA and NATO, both understood as saviours during the wartime.

Turkey has beyond doubt a much larger space of intervention in Kosovo, instead. The latter is mainly twofold: on the one hand, Turkey has always tried to influence the Balkan politics through its role of "ağabey" (e.g. "big brother" in the Turkish language) and its future strategy to intervene on behalf of its Ottoman past (The Patriarchate of Peć, 2012), while offering economic opportunities for development

and sustainability, on the other hand. Turkey is keen to help Kosovo and its population along the not-yet-concluded national-building process. For instance, in December 2018 Turkey officially stated its support for Kosovo's effort to transform its security force into a formal one, which is supposed to consist of more than 5000 members. However, as Lehutová pointed out, Turkey's foreign policy has been so far limited to promoting projects related to the restoration of the Ottoman cultural heritage or construction of new mosques and religious centres across the country.

As Rod notes, China can only determine its relationship through its economic investments, yet it has concerns about the diverse issues related to security and in relation to the Serbian position. In theory, Kosovo could be interested in strengthening economic ties with China. In doing so, however, the country might exemplify its preference for short-term projects that have so far caused a "dependency syndrome" that has worsened its national capacity to qualitatively promote and independently follow up longer-term cycles of projects for stably developing infrastructure and the third sector.

Despite the auspices of the European Union and its early enthusiasm about bringing Belgrade and Pristina to speak with one voice and "normalising" their relations, both countries are still a long way from achieving such "normalisation" (Tadić, 2019).

The continuous standstills that the EU-led dialogue held in Brussels has ended up with, cannot be exclusively considered as the outcome of the 1999 Kosovo War, that did not end with any sort of peace agreement between local Albanians in Kosovo and Serbian authorities in Belgrade. On the contrary, tangible results have not yet been achieved due to the lack of political will of both counterparts to compromise, while remaining always suspicious about the other's reaction. To sum it up, while for Kosovo recognition is everything, for Serbia the dialogue for reconciliation can lead to everything but Kosovo's recognition.

Despite the fact that Serbia does not seem particularly eager to disentangle the "Kosovo knot", pretending to address the issues at stake while continuing to interfere within Kosovo through the parallel structures in the Serb-majority areas of the country, its political agenda might change sooner than expected.

Behind the political rhetoric, Kosovo Serbs would be more likely to lose their dependency on Serbia-promoted parallel health system, pensions, education and taxation in Kosovo in front of the competing and de facto hegemonic power structures and legal framework that they themselves started to refer to in their everyday life. In addition, the level of political dissatisfaction among Kosovo Serbs has been on the rise in the last few years, especially in the Serb-majority areas of South and Central Kosovo, where Serbs themselves are found more positive about integrating in the Kosovo system.

Even in Serbia, the Internal Dialogue that Aleksandar Vučić launched for discussing the question of Kosovo and Metohija without a mythical approach, but also without easily giving up on what Serbia thinks to have every right to (Tadić, 2019), has shown all its rhetoric and inconsistency. Yet, the EU will not leave Serbia complete its accession without Kosovo, therefore without a clear, stable and trustworthy agreement with Pristina. Sooner than perhaps expected, Serbia will face the dilemma to lose what is considered to be lost already by the majority of Serbs or not fundamental anymore for the youngest segment of the Serbian population.

Nevertheless, the European Union has to avoid opportunistic accession to the European Union similar to the cases of Bulgaria and Romania in 2007 that showed how both countries, despite the great celebration in Brussels, were not ready to join the EU family due to their economic conditions. In other words, the European Union cannot permit anti-European actors to turn the platform of the normalisation process into a space where territorial swaps or border corrections along ethnic lines are proposed and welcomed, or where democratic backlashing is expected as seen in other contexts in Central and Eastern Europe (Domaradzki, 2019).

To conclude, considering those 15 states that have withdrawn their first recognition since 2008, recognition of Kosovo's statehood remains without any doubt the most important, and at the same time problematic, issue on the international arena. Other aspects cannot be overlooked, particularly those that arise within and from local areas of Kosovo. The increased level of distrust toward the international community of the majority of the population in general,

and the political dissatisfaction of other communities toward models of ethnic-power sharing in particular, are rocketing. While the so-called "dependence syndrome" seems to foresee the negative side effect of the influence of international actors in Kosovo (Papić, 2001), it is more likely than in the post-1999 Kosovo War to rethink the different roles that drivers and spoilers can play in the newest country of Europe.

Even though the tight relations between Serbia and Russia and the latter with China seem stable, Kosovo remains for them nothing more than an issue to evaluate the West's modus operandi and criticise it accordingly. Under the parapet of highly politicised state rhetoric Serbia and Russia will have to face domestic issues, respectively the EU accession conditionalities and post-pandemic economic recession, that might relax their critical positions over Kosovo.

Without any doubt, Russian military operations in Southeast Ukraine and Crimea have worsened the "Kosovo question". To a certain extent, it could be possible to affirm that the political agenda that came out as a result of the Ukrainian-Russian tense relations would probably have an impact on the (un-)recognition of Kosovo's statehood. In a few words, the question of whether Russia should continue to be considered as one of the stronger opponents of Kosovo's future remains nowadays open.

During the Covid-19 crisis, the European Union has included the Western Balkan countries in its emergency aid plans. Kosovo can thus count on the assistance and special programs that Brussels seems more than others to guarantee for better promoting economic and social development (Tuhina - Palokaj, 2020). However, if the EU-led normalisation process fails to transform Kosovo and its relatedly political and societal issues into a horizon of perspectives for Pristina and for Belgrade, too, the risk to leave room to external actors and their vested interests would potentially be the worst-case-scenario: everything but recognition on the one hand, and continuous dependency on external actors and States on the other hand.

Notes

[1] Similarities can be also found in the case Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the Gulf States as such (Zakem and Rosenau eds: 21).

[2] ''The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) was founded as an ideological custodian of Iran's 1979 revolution'' (Council on Foreign Relations 2019).

[3] For example, in Sarajevo, Iran has one of the biggest embassies in Europe and it is used to mark as the Iranian headquarters in Western Balkans (Kraus 2018: 226).

[4] The fact that Iran supported Albanians considerably complicated the relations with Russia who stood for Serbia (Freedman O. 2006: 11).

[5] However, mass atrocities happened on both sides of the conflict. Nevertheless, Serbia had a greater deal on that.

[6] On the other hand, Iran had been criticized by some OIC member for doing nothing in favour of Kosovar Muslims. The biggest criticism was expressed by Turkey which sees itself "real protector of the people of Kosovo" (O'Rourke 1999). Moreover, Kosovo is not a member of OIC (Schwartz 2015).

[7] However, the northern part of Kosovo is predominantly inhabited by Serbs. This northern part, around Mitrovica etc., is well known for its parallel structures which are strongly depended on Belgrade (Rod and Chraščová 2019).

[8] This is not only a problem of Iran but also other Gulf States which lack a considerable amount of influence, at least in economic terms. In a way of spreading extremism and radicalism, they play a certain role (Bashota: 84).

[9] In term of Serbia, Serbian politicians, for instance, current minister of foreign affairs Ivica Dacic, have many times thanked Iran that maintained its foreign policy towards Kosovo (B92 2015).

[10] The mainstream in Kosovo is Sunni Islam (beinkosovo 2019).

[11] Kosovo designated Hezbollah as a terrorist organisation in 2019 (RTKLive 2019).

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