

STRATEGIC INSTABILITY IN BALKANS AS A CONSEQUENCE OF US FOREIGN POLICY

Annotation

The US engagement in the Balkans in the early 1990s had its pros. However, the continuation of American engagement after the (short-term) resolution of these crises proved to be catastrophic. The Balkan countries are peripheral in every respect, the depopulation trend is worrying, and the difference in economic indicators in relation to the Western countries is more pronounced than in the 1990s. The perceived instability is of a strategic nature, the level of trust is very low, both among the Balkan states and peoples, and towards the Collective West — because it has been shown that joining supranational structures and sacrificing one's own sovereignty and integrity is not a solution in itself. Therefore, solutions to a number of issues cannot be sought within the existing framework created by the United States.

Keywords: The Balkans, USA, NATO, EU, foreign policy, strategic instability.

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Introduction: The notion of strategic instability and the goal of research

According to Alexander Panarin, strategic instability arises as a result of the sovereign states and national communities deconstruction, which is the goal of a US-led globalist project with the help of (pro)Western allies. This includes subjugating states and even individuals to the supranational authorities, the global elite, which no one controls. On the one hand, this project serves to master the resources of the planet and on the other hand to broadly promote the value of universal enlightenment. [11] In this paper, the notion of strategic instability is viewed from a broader context. The aim of the research is to prove the thesis that the US foreign policy positioning in the observed spatial framework contributed to strategic instability. The research question is: has the US with its foreign policy caused strategic instability in the regional, Balkan framework?

The spatial research framework covers the territories of sovereign states — Greece, Bulgaria, Albania, Northern Macedonia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia (including the territory of Kosovo), Romania and Croatia¹. The timeframe is limited to the period from 1990 and the beginning of the era of unipolarity that has shaped regional relations in the long run. The research was conducted by relying on realistic theories of international relations using methods of comparison, content analysis and synthesis. For the purposes of the research, contemporary historiographical, political science, security and economic literature

¹ Certainly, there are lively discussions about which countries can be classified as Balkan. It has long been not a question of geography, but of politics. If the traditional opinion on the borders of the Balkan Peninsula is applied (the rivers Kupa, Sava and Danube, and the Black Sea, the Sea of Marmara, the Aegean Sea, the Ionian Sea and the Adriatic Sea), Turkey and Slovenia can be included in the Balkan countries.

was used as well as primary sources related to state strategies and interstate agreements, as well as statements of officials relevant to the topic of this paper.

The Balkans after the Cold War: Go West!

In order to capture the atmosphere in the societies of the Balkan states at the beginning of the observed period, we can use the verses from the then popular song of the British music group Pet Shop Boys from 1993: „Together — we will fly so high / Together — tell all our friends goodbye / Together — we will start life new / Together — this is what we'll do!” The song carries symbolic title — Go West! The chorus goes: „Life is peaceful there / Go west — in the open air / Go west — where the skies are blue / Go west — this is what we're gonna do.” It was enough to get rid of the gloomy communist heritage and head to the West, it's all there — blues sky, open air, peaceful life. In communist Yugoslavia, this trend has been observed since the mid-1980s, in Romania after the overthrow of Ceausescu, and in Bulgaria and Albania following the fall of communist authorities. The pro-Western orientation of societies was followed by political elites. True, this realignment process has taken different paths in different states.

There have also been many wanderings, social upheavals, too much corruption, political protests and armed conflicts. In Romania's Transylvania in the spring of 1990, huge interethnic tensions erupted between Romanians and Hungarians. [9] Mass protests in Bulgaria at the end of 1996 and beginning of 1997, also known as the Bulgarian Winter, led to the resignation of Prime Minister Jean Vasilev Videnov. [7. — P. 435 — 443] In 1997, a short-term civil war broke out in Albania following the collapse of pyramid savings schemes, the blockade of state institutions and the collapse of part of the security apparatus. In clashes that were difficult to end, about 1,600 people were

killed. [1] The conflict began in January and ended in July after operation Alba was carried out — a multinational peacekeeping force led by Italy, which was intended to help the Albanian government restore law and order¹. [16. — P. 1 — 2] Destabilization spilled over from Albania to the Serbian province of Kosovo and Metohija and contribute to the adverse developments in the territory, which is predominantly populated by ethnic Albanians. The most dramatic events happened in Yugoslavia, the transition to a “new era” took place through a bloody civil war, ending with NATO's military aggression against Yugoslavia. Joining the Collective West, expressed through interest in EU and NATO membership, is shaped first through conflict and then through co-operation. In that first decade of post-communist times there were no blues sky, open air, peaceful life. But crises that could not have been resolved without the US or their allies inevitable influenced the public opinion to believe that the road to the West is without the alternative and that joining the Collective West is inevitable.

What has this unalterable journey to the West brought to the Balkan states? The number of papers in scientific journals on benefits is measured in the tens of thousands. A separate “scientific discipline” has almost been established about European integration, based on a concept of liberal internationalism. [4] Undoubtedly, the economic performances of the Balkan states have changed from 1990 to today (see Table No. 1). Looking at data presented by the IMF and US state institutions, nominal GDP increased by 4 times in Albania, by 3.5 times in Romania, by 3.5 times in Greece, and almost twice aggregated for the states of the former Yugoslavia (including Slovenia and the Kosovo entity), while in Bulgaria, GDP per

¹ The United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 1101 to establish the Operation Alba. The eleven nations that participated in this operation were Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Spain and Turkey.

Table 1: Economic indicators of the Balkan states (1990–2019 comparison) [5]

Country	1990 per capita PPP	2019 per capita PPP	1990 GDP	2019 GDP
Albania	2976	14467	3800	15276
Bosnia and Herzegovina		15626		20203
Bulgaria	9922	24331	51200	68563
Croatia		29945		60759
Greece	13425	30914	56300	205349
N. Macedonia		17294		12550
Serbia		19025		51475
Romania	7611	31226	79800	249695
Yugoslavia	5464		129500	

capita towards purchasing power parity is higher by 2.5 times.

At first glance, the conclusion is that the Balkans are now better off living than they were before the 1990s. At the same time, however, the Balkans are an area of intense populist outflow. The population is shrinking at a rapid rate, and the cause is not only a lower number of newborns, but primarily the intensification of migration towards the Western countries.

To some extent, the examples of Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia are absurd. These three states are full members of the EU and NATO, but the population is “fleeing” these countries as well as other neighboring countries. Did they join the EU and NATO to encourage emigration? Why does the population leave if the Balkans are living better today, if economic performance is higher than in previous decades?

Table 2: Number of inhabitants in the Balkan countries (2001 — 2021) [3; 8; 14]

Country	2001	2021	2021/2001
Albania	3.069.225	2.877.797	-191.428
Bosnia and Herzegovina	3.798.953	3.280.819	-518.134
Bulgaria	7.932.984	6.948.445	-984.539
Greece	10.964.020	10.423.054	-540.966
Macedonia	2.022.547 (2002)	1.832.696	-189.851
Romania	21.680.974 (2002)	19.237.691	-2.443.283
Serbia	7.498.001 (2002)	6.908.000	-590.001
Croatia	4.492.049	4.105.267	-386.782
Montenegro	620.145 (2003)	621.718	1.573
Kosovo/UN	1.850.000 (~)	1.350.000 (~)	-500.000
TOTAL	63.928.898	57.585.487	-6.343.411

The answer to these questions cannot be found in absolute indicators on GDP growth, investment and average earnings. The answer to these questions can be given by relative indicators, when we compare the indicators for Balkan states with the examples of other countries. Over the observed period, the UK's nominal GDP grew by about 3.5 times, the US by about 4 times and Austria by about 4.5 times.

On the one hand, Western economies grew faster than Balkan economies, so the difference, either in absolute or in relative terms, became even greater than during the Cold War or bipolar period. On the other hand, new actors (primarily individual Asian countries) surpassed the Balkan states, leaving them not only behind, but also diminishing their importance in the global economy. Balkan societies wanted to become part of the Collective West, political elites sought towards the EU and NATO, but even though these aspirations (in most of the individual cases) were fulfilled, the Balkans became merely the periphery of the Western world. Economically and politically peripheral, and decimated in terms of population, Balkan states are now in a worse position than at the start of the process in 1990s. That is the cause for discontent. And any discontent, sooner or later, becomes the cause of instability. "Open borders" and relatively easy procedures for emigration to rich European countries, represent sort of a "discontent valve". Only a question of how long such an approach can last and what results it will bring in the long term remains open.

The USA and The Balkans after the Cold War: Go East!

Unlike Balkan societies that set out on their way to the West driven by the hazy goal of "blue sky, open air, peaceful life", it seems that the US knew clearly what they wanted when they headed East. In a geopolitical context this kind of approach enabled the establishment of control

over the Balkan part of the Rimland. „The expansion of NATO and, through that, the expansion of American influence certainly had its geostrategic reasons. The Balkan Peninsula represents a contact zone between the Adriatic and the Black Sea waters in a narrower geographical sense (along the west-east axis), i.e., the Central European and Middle Eastern continental area in a broader sense (along the northwest-southeast axis). Domination over the Balkans made sense in the context of limiting the maintenance or a long-term penetration of the Russian influence in the border area (which represents the first step in the process of ensuring its own borders) — at the Caucasus-Black Sea direction (newly created independent states Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Ukraine, as well as USSR allies at the time — Romania and Bulgaria) and for uninterrupted planning of activities in the Middle East" [12. — P. 120] The process of NATO expansion in the Balkans is shown in Table 4 [compiled according to: 13. — P. 557 — 579].

American foreign policy in the Balkans and strategic instability: Clintons versus Kissinger

In the late summer of 1995 when NATO forces bombed Republic of Srpska Army positions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Henry Kissinger declared, "I do not understand what we are trying to do with the bombing". [6] Kissinger prophetically warned Washington of what could happen in the Balkans: "It cannot end even if we win in it. We can't stay there in permanent occupation." [6] An administration led by Clintons didn't care much for these warnings.

Namely, to justify the 1999 proceedings and present it as a humanitarian intervention, the Americans had to lobby for "Kosovo's independence". That's why in 2008 the US allowed Albanians to declare independence with the promise that the Collective West will support it. Kosovo thus remains one of the world's biggest

Table 4: NATO expansion to the Balkans (1952–2004–2020)

Country	In NATO since	Geostrategic significance for NATO
Greece	1952	Securing a position in the Eastern Mediterranean; surveillance of communist states in the immediate vicinity (Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Albania); control of Otranto; harmonization of foreign and security policy with Turkey in order to prevent the outbreak of a large-scale interstate conflict; further securing control of the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus.
Bulgaria	2004	Access to the Black Sea coast; control of the strategic direction from the Adriatic to the Black Sea; ensuring access to the Middle East; approaching the southwestern border of Russia.
Romania	2004	Access to the Black Sea coast; control of the strategic direction from Central Europe to the Danube Delta; border control to Ukraine; approaching the southwestern border of Russia.
Slovenia	2004	Securing a position in the northern Adriatic; control of the strategic direction along the Sava valley to the confluence with the Danube.
Albania	2009	Securing a position in the southern Adriatic (control of Otranto); control of the strategic direction from the Adriatic to the Black Sea (through the territory of Kosovo and/or North Macedonia to Bulgarian ports).
Croatia	2009	Securing a position in the central part of the Adriatic waters; control of strategic routes from the Pannonia Plain (Hungary) to the Adriatic Sea (most pass through the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina); control of the strategic direction along the Sava valley to the confluence with the Danube.
Montenegro	2017	Establishment of the Adriatic Troika by linking with Albania and Croatia, whereby NATO fully ensures the communication route from the Gulf of Trieste to the Peloponnese; control of the southern branch of the Belgrade — Bar traffic route.
North Macedonia	2020	Completion of control over the southern route of the strategic direction from the Adriatic to the Black Sea; Control of the 'Balkan vertical' — a key regional traffic route (Athens — Thessaloniki — Skopje — Nis — Belgrade — Budapest) that stretches through the Moravian-Vardar valley.

frozen conflicts and a key regional security issue in the Balkans.

To make the position of “disobedient Serbia” even worse, the US invested in breaking up the state union with Montenegro and played a very active role in organizing the 2006 referendum. At the referendum, which was full of irregularities, the “establishing of independence” was voted with a “slight majority” (the qualified majority for the decision was 55%, and for dissolution of the State

Union 55.49% voted). The result is that the Montenegrin society remained permanently polarized. In order to prevent negative effects that could come out from this polarization in the future, after the removal of Milo Đukanović, Montenegro is „drawn into“ the NATO [15. — P. 195–210].

At the same time, in order to strengthen the position of Albanians in the Balkans, Washington is actively lobbying for Albania’s accession to NATO. However, this puts in a completely new context the

pronounced separatist aspirations of the Macedonian Albanians. In order to prevent the “Bosnian” or “Kosovo” scenario in Macedonia, American foreign policy starts being oriented towards “drawing” this country into NATO. Thus, NATO becomes the only guarantor of maintaining territorial integrity. However, “drawing into” NATO could not be done easily because Greece was blocking it, demanding that this former Yugoslav republic changes its name. Finally, a solution was found in changing the name of the state into the Republic of Northern Macedonia. But, as in the case of Montenegro, there is no support from citizens for that step. Northern Macedonia is emerging as a solution, due to NATO expansion. Instead of this being the solution, two new problems automatically have arisen. [17. — P. 165 — 186] First, Macedonian society remained polarized, and interethnic tensions between Slavic Macedonians and Albanians became more pronounced (Albanians supported the name change with one hundred percent in the referendum, because that undermines Macedonian identity). Secondly, since this “blackmailing policy” has brought results to Greece in its treatment of (Northern) Macedonia, Bulgaria started applying the same method. Sofia is blocking the continuation of negotiations between Northern Macedonia and the EU until the identity issues are resolved (including the issue of the name of the language, which Sofia claims is only a dialect of Bulgarian). Bulgaria’s aggressive policy towards Northern Macedonia, led by the Defence Minister Krasimir Karakachanov, has provoked reactions from Greece and Serbia, which sees it as a revival of old plans for the country’s “horizontal division” between Sofia and Tirana. In this way Greece is getting involved in this crisis again.

Once more, since there is no solution for Kosovo that Serbia would agree to, during Donald Trump’s presidential term, a new approach was being considered, manifested through the term “delimita-

tion”. No one has explained exactly what that would mean, but it was understood that this would lead to the division of Kosovo into a majority southern Albanian part (about 85% of the territory) and a minority Serbian northern part. Also, in order to prevent an unfavorable outcome in B&H, Western powers organized a new campaign on the necessity of de — daytonization of B&H. It is becoming obvious that if the “delimitation” in Kosovo is legitimized, then the division of B&H must be legitimized also. American policy in B&H is based on the revision of the peace agreement, the abolition of the entities and the creation of a unitary state. Republic of Srpska institutions are reacting sharply, adopting a series of decisions on “defense of competencies”, and leading Serbian politician Milorad Dodik (currently a member of the tripartite Presidency of B&H, former Prime Minister and President of Republic of Srpska) is openly advocating a thesis on status referendum and secession. Thus B&H is entering a new crisis, one which in only two years (2018–2020) became unrelated with Kosovo case, but a case for itself. Understandably, events in B&H provoke reactions in Croatia, which would not support the unitarization of the country, because it would worsen the already bad position of Bosnian Croats, but would rather see the formation of three entities instead of two (Croats would finally get their territorial autonomous unit within B&H).

Also, the situation in Romania is being closely monitored due to another frozen conflict in which Bucharest is very interested — Transnistria. The American desire to see Moldova in NATO thus gained a completely new dimension. Additional cause of complicating relations in the Balkans is the new elements of American foreign policy. Since 2014, there has been word about — Russian malignant influence, and since 2019, Chinfluence has been talked about more and more often! [10. — P. 2 — 11] Although Chinese investments are well accepted, often they are

the only ones in the Balkan countries, and the energy security of the region directly depends on cooperation with Russia, the USA and the EU are trying to impose a completely different view to the Balkan elites and societies. This is creating the conditions for the outbreak of new crises and new polarizations.

Conclusion: Causes of strategic instability and their solution

American foreign policy was not guided by Kissinger's visions, but by Clinton's. Unilateral actions, constant imposition of solutions that did not have public support, blackmail and pressure (which has been detected since 2014 through demands to distance the Balkan states from Russia and China) have created a "flammable atmosphere", disrupted interstate and interethnic relations, and contributed to accelerated polarization within all societies. Kissinger's words prove correct: „It cannot end even if we win in it. We cannot stay there in permanent occupation." The US engagement in the Balkans in the early 1990s had its good sides. However, the continuation of American engagement after the (short-term) resolution of these crises proved to be catastrophic. American foreign policy followed maximalist geopolitical aspirations. The Balkans were supposed to become an "exclusive American zone". Following the US foreign policy became a *conditio sine qua non* for

any politician or political party who wants to legitimize their position and participate in government. Those who refuse this become marginalized. However, it turns out that the job of ensuring regional security is much more complex than expected. Regional relations in the Balkans operate on the principle of joined vessels. Despite NATO enlargement and partial EU enlargement, the benefits are not great. The Balkan countries are peripheral in every respect, the depopulation trend is worrying, and the difference in economic indicators in relation to the Western countries is more pronounced than in the 1990s. The perceived instability is of a strategic nature, the level of trust is very low, both among the Balkan states and peoples, and towards the Collective West — because it has been shown that joining supranational structures and sacrificing one's own sovereignty and integrity is not a solution in itself. Therefore, solutions to a number of issues cannot be sought within the existing framework created by the United States. In order to resolve open issues, it is necessary to seek compromises with respect for the interests of all Balkan factors of regional security, but also with the consent of non-Western external factors of regional security, whose interests in the Balkans are as legitimate as the United States. Otherwise, strategic instability can lead to a very unfavorable outcomes and worse results than we see today.

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