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Hybrid and Psychological Geopolitical Warfare - the Western Balkans Case Study



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Abstract

Undemocratic processes of hybrid and psychological geopolitical warfare blurred relations and security paradigm. The legacy of conflicts and the applied Western policies to the region is the strengthening of ethnonational discourses and the activation of regional crises. The Anglo-American project of post-Cold War spatial planning in the Western Balkans is ineffective. It would be necessary to formulate new Western policies. Balkan nationalist and separatist ideas, which resurfaced with the former Yugoslavia's break-up, should be reticent and transform within the European Union (EU).

Montenegro and, in particular, Bosnia and Herzegovina (B&H) is vulnerable to destabilizing Russian influences, using a complicated social, political, and economic environment, a lack of strategic orientation, and divisions over NATO integration. As for China, Arab countries, and Israel, their influence in the Balkans remains limited, primarily - but not exclusively - to economic projects. However, these impacts will continue to grow unless more severe and concrete measures are taken by the US and EU. Further weakening or eventual disappearance of

the EU perspective in the Balkans could lead to new attempts to establish "Greater"- Albania, Croatia, Serbia, or even Ottoman Turkey through violent border changes in the region. Instead of democratizing, the 21st century has brought fragility in the Balkans.

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The Phenomena and the Western Balkans

The new geopolitical climate has changed the character of conflicts in which wars are fought in the name and for the benefit of other actors supported by powerful forces, which can be terrorist groups, various revolutionary independence movements. When it comes to political pressures, one usually uses one's position at the international level to force a political decision or influence one to give up already established attitudes. There is the possibility of providing support to specific groups or individuals in power to change the country's political system or cause riots and conflicts, then political embezzlement that can help violate some international agreements. Psychological - propaganda activities are a form of special operations aimed at achieving psychological effects for their benefit. By carrying out psychological actions, it seeks to "weaken and overthrow the defense of the attacked party by encouraging internal divisions, provoking mistrust and suspicion in the ranks of the defense and encouraging internal enemies of the attacking system to initiate fear, insecurity, disorganization; it serves to spread bad promises, illusions, rumors." [1] The use of psychology for war purposes dated back to the Chinese thinker Sun Tzu's thoughts and received its real revelation in the 20th century through two worlds and the cold war. However, the form of use of psychological actions in the new information space has changed significantly. Likewise, psychological operations used to be the exclusive advantage of the state and the armed forces. However, today, in the new social information media, it is in the hands of non-governmental organizations, formal and informal groups, and individuals. In the socio-information framework, the primary means of war participation are becoming psychological activities and operations. Psychological techniques are used to realize numerous general goals of hybrid warfare, which are primarily aimed at avoiding the emergence or minimization of the duration of the regular (militarized) mode of leadership war. Confrontation in the information space has become of general importance and for the collapse of the political, economic, and social system. [2] Thus, psychological activities play a central role in hybrid geopolitical warfare.

The fact is that after the end of the Cold War, the world found itself at the epicenter of a hybrid war in which disinformation became the primary weapon of populism, right or left-wing. The penetration of fake news and various misinformation is becoming more and more powerful on social networks, and the users of these platforms are increasingly victims of deception and

manipulation. The Balkans are witnessing the growing crisis of Western powers daily and the worsening populist, nationalist, and conservative US and European leaders' policies, from US President Trump to Hungarian President Viktor Orbán. They nullify any European Union (EU) and The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) attempts to reform Balkan countries.

Hybrid warfare is a new term by which they try to cover and emphasize all the specifics of contemporary conflicts in the first two decades of the twenty-first century. There is still no generally accepted definition of hybrid warfare, despite the great popularity in the professional field and scientific circles. Initially, hybrid warfare [3] was considered a combined application of conventional military capabilities and special forces, irregular acts, terrorist acts, and criminal activity. In the combined application of different forms, a synergistic effect is expected both in the conflict's physical and psychological [4] domains. Later, the perception of hybrid warfare is extended to all other forms, means, and ways of endangering security. In the broadest sense, hybrid war is any action by any means that undermine, hinders, damages an opposing-rival-hostile state, its economy, people, and the entire social life. In a narrower sense, hybrid warfare undermines state order in the opposing state in any way and by any means. Within the category of hybrid warfare, hybrid action, it is necessary to mention the notion of "soft power" as a weapon that threatens universalist and inclusive elements better than the conventional one. I maintain that hybrid warfare is a term used uncritically today. The very expression as a peculiarity - *sui generis* - has existed since the Lebanese war in 2006 and Hezbollah's strategy towards Israel and implies a combination of conventional, irregular, and information warfare. According to specific goals of interest and with the help of specific and psychological operations or the so-called, there are several traditional state strategies according to specific goals of interest, reflexive control operations to influence someone's decision-making process.

The Balkan territorial-expansionist ethnopolitics' destructive power has already shown that it can destroy states, peoples, religious institutions, educational systems, scientific plants, and human dignity. In the dominant diplomatic discourse, the Western Balkans' stability and prosperity are viewed in the context of two integrative processes: the accession of the region to NATO and the EU regions and their targeted Europeanization. The newly formed countries of the region become an area of export of democracy, the object of geopolitics enlargement, political and security order, and the US and the EU's engagement, which as external actors moderate the crisis in the region. In particular, the US' policy toward the region, in which it has been active since the end of the Cold War, can be seen in the context of a complex diplomatic and military approach aimed at establishing a new geopolitical configuration in Southeast Europe. In the crisis area of Southeast Europe, the US has been present for almost three decades, and in resolving the crisis and stabilizing the region, it has continuously used a whole range of diplomatic, political, and military instruments to securely "encircle" the Western Balkans, geopolitically necessary for strategic control of the Adriatic Mediterranean and the Black Sea regions. However, after 2000, preoccupied with the "war on terror," and thus the geopolitical restructuring of the Middle East, the US was present in the Western Balkans indirectly, through the actions of Allied actors pursuing a policy of expanding security (NATO) and economic (EU, IMF and other international financial institutions) order, and with the help of which the region is identity-shaped as a western value. [5]

The US geopolitician Robert Kaplan (2017) argued that peace in the Balkans could be achieved and maintained solely with "external imperial force." According to Kaplan, in the times of the empires' (Charlemagne, the Habsburg Monarchy, and the Ottoman Empire) collapse that ruled the Balkans, the region regularly turned into battlefields. [6] A logical question arises - did the European Union become a new empire that would maintain a peace order in the Balkans? The EU's role in Southeast Europe is inconsistent between its normative potential and current problematic aspects of process implementation policies. Moreover, outside the ritual, political matrix framework, concentration on specific programs to stimulate economic, technological, social, human development, and regional integration is not progressive. [7] Although the EU adopted a new Enlargement Strategy for the Western Balkans in 2018, the potential of stability is not proven. Instead of liberalism and Europeanization, further Balkanization of the region resulted from the EU's failure and the allies' conflicting interests - the US and NATO. Such a constellation of relations has made it possible to strengthen many non-Western actors - Russia, Turkey, China, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, whose presence has strongly shaped the Western Balkans' security climate for many years. After years of close cooperation, during which mostly followed EU and US peacekeeping solutions in the region, Montenegro decided to declare independence (2006), and Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence (2008) significantly damaged relations between Russia and the West. The unusually active role of the US and Western allies in the decomposition of Serbia and the region's geopolitical transformation has resulted in increased Russian engagement with the region. Ever since the Ukrainian crisis outbreak in 2014, the US and the European Union have seen Russia's presence in the Balkans as a security threat. The geopolitical clash between the West and Russia is gradually profiling itself into a conflict of interest of the great powers, which measure their influence on the region's countries through diplomacy, significant investment, and confrontational energy infrastructure projects. [8]

Because NATO is still the strongest geopolitical alliance, Russia is increasingly turning to new allies who are actively working to create a counterweight to the US as a unipolar center of the post-Cold War world. China, Iran, and Turkey, which are increasingly moving away from Western countries' influence and policies, are strengthening their own economic and political ties with Russia. Although not without risk to Turkey, the new alliance with Russia, Iran, and China has a significant impact on the region. In the Western Balkans, China is more present, especially in the sphere of economy. So far, Chinese investments in energy, roads, railways, and other 5.5 billion euros have come to Bosnia and Herzegovina (B&H), Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia. Saudi Arabia finances numerous humanitarian centers and non-governmental organizations and provides several other investments in B&H, such as market centers and separate luxury resorts for Arab citizens. Investments are expanding widely in the region. Turkey has long strengthened its economic and political influence and seeks to establish itself as a dominant regional power. Besides, it is an indisputable fact that during the genocide and war crimes, and within the arms embargo, Iran provided the most significant possible military and diplomatic assistance to the B&H people during the war.

I maintain that "negative influence" threatens universalist and inclusive elements of Balkan societies, the political and national history of these countries, intercultural diversity, and sovereignty, strengthening regional pan-nationalisms' irredentist aspirations. Based on credible data, analyzes, and estimates that after the failures in Montenegro and Macedonia, which are today within NATO, almost all Russia's capacities in this area are directed, i.e., Russia's hybrid

action towards Macedonia, Montenegro, and BiH. In such hybrid activities, Serbia, one of the neighboring countries, gives Russia excellent aid and plays a significant role. The fact is that representatives of the Serbian state apparatus were active in Montenegro, Macedonia, at the events' time, which was a clear sign. At the same time, we should not rule out that such activities are very intensive towards B&H. However, Russia should not be denigrated either. It is trying to use the same means, although it succeeds to a lesser extent than the US and Western Europe combined. We have had the Snowden case and the Prizma affair, and Western spying on the states and officials, with contractual cooperation with Facebook, Google, Twitter, and Microsoft. Russia did not invent such particular warfare, even though they are merely adopting Western techniques. They also have a significant learning capacity, with a high population having a university degree.

The Balkan security dilemma's central discourse is "who will control the land," a piece of a particular territory within the pressure of national hegemonist ideas (Greater Serbia and Croatia). Albanians in Macedonia did not get territory but rights (they changed the Constitution, the President of the Assembly is of Albanian nationality, the right to speak in Albanian was also introduced), while in B&H, ethnicity was gained, which means increased opportunities for monopoly and power over the territory. [9] According to Jadranka Polovic (2018), the Greater Albania concept, behind all the previous post-Cold War administrations of the US and UK, has already been practically-legally realized and becoming irrelevant. The borders between Kosovo and Albania and the borders between Kosovo and western Macedonia do not exist. Formal recognition of the creation of a "Greater Albania" that reaches beyond western Macedonia, the southern and eastern parts of Montenegro (Ulcinj and parts of the municipalities of Plav and Rozaje), the Presevo Valley in southern Serbia, and southern Greek Epirus, parts of foreign countries, would cause complete chaos and a new war in the region. The Greater Albania concept's implementation is being achieved by drawing the entire region into NATO and the EU. [10] B&H and the former Yugoslavia area with a nationalist ethnopolitics and a continuous conflict, as a dangerous "barrel of gunpowder," become a scene of competition, collisions, and competition between most influential actors of the modern world in the first decades of the 21st century. In this constellation, violent hegemonic nationalism in the Balkans partly serves as a space of displaced European horror in which clashes of "great powers" take place, while a small number of South Slavic peoples maniacally exterminate each other, demolish places of worship, expel the population, commit mass crimes, and destroy the remaining ethnically homogeneous and clean spaces. [11]

Dominant perceptions in the countries of the Western Balkans are sometimes present. It narrows the framework for observing and understanding the behavior of great powers in this region, with an unargued overestimation of their significance and importance in the plans of these great powers, and the introduction of emotional elements in the field of international relations where only interests are most valued and measured. The great powers' mutual relations are complex, multi-layered, and pragmatic above all. The great powers in some regions or on some issues agree, coordinate actions, and even help, while in other areas or issues, there is disagreement and confrontation. In pursuing their interests, the great powers have a wide range of opportunities and resources at their disposal. The various forms of contemporary conflict are often portrayed as the result of the projection of hybrid threats and termed hybrid warfare. The wide presence and topicality [12] of the phenomenon of hybrid warfare is the reason to problematize the

concept of hybrid warfare by evaluating of central questions and answers of practical interest to decision-makers at the strategic level. The Western Balkans region's importance in the two elected great powers' strategic agendas - Russia and Turkey are evident. For years, Montenegro and other countries in the region have been a testing ground for cyber attacks and the spread of false news by which some foreign powers, primarily Russia, are trying to undermine and slow down the Euro-Atlantic integration of the post-Yugoslav states. Indeed, other great powers are closely following the development of events in the Western Balkans and possible trends and scenarios [13] of future development. In addition to the "malignant" Russian influence, the West is increasingly facing Turkey's arbitrary policy, which, especially after 2000, is questioning the possibilities of its action in the region. Namely, Turkey, a strategically important member of NATO, until recently an unquestionable ally of the US, is trying to renew its sphere of influence in the Balkans, a region that belonged to the Ottoman Empire until the First World War. Turkey is a unique, doubly "endowed" country - with the space of its geopolitical influence, especially the control of the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles as internationally important straits and the successor to the Ottoman Empire. The mutual relations between Russia and Turkey have become very topical in recent times and there is much research in this area. [14] It is critical in the current time in the broader context and the relations of these two countries with other great powers and the conflicts in the Middle East and growing tensions in South America.

In Serbia, approaching NATO is taboo due to Serbia's 1999 bombing to stop Kosovo's conflict. This relationship is reflected in B&H politics. There is also a declarative commitment to European integration, which is burdened by the Kosovo syndrome. By the Kosovo syndrome, we mean Serbian politics' burden with the belief that joining the EU means renouncing territorial sovereignty. In this way, the EU's demands for better functioning of BiH are read in the Republic of Srpska RS (one of the B&H entities). In B&H and Kosovo's relations, no aspect can be singled out to function at a satisfactory level. Relations remain in the realm of political rhetoric, and the problem of freedom of movement between BiH and Kosovo is directly linked to asymmetric and scarce economic cooperation. B&H is a permanent crisis state, with the world's most complex political and public administration, the inability to create the minimum internal political cohesion needed to build a stable political identity. In the BiH's ethnoreligious model formed by the Dayton Peace Accords (1995), the demographic remnant is unconstitutional. For the most part, a mere constitutional decor appropriately enshrined in the last indent of the discriminatory BiH Constitution's Preamble. Therefore, the name "Others" is an unsentimental description of their position in this ethnoreligious divided society. [15] Furthermore, Chinese investments in the Western Balkans economies have brought the presence of the Chinese intelligence service MSS with them. This service deals with the interests of China's state policy and the protection of Chinese investments. Moreover, the Chinese service, together with business people, operates not only in the Western Balkans but also throughout Europe. The German counterintelligence service has marked 10,000 German citizens in contact with fake intelligence officers from China. That is why the presence of the Chinese intelligence service on the territory of B&H, and especially in Serbia and Croatia, is very significant for the intelligence and security apparatus of B&H. [16]

The Western Balkans remain poorly connected in terms of infrastructure atomized energy market, burdened with political instability, which negatively affects the energy security of the region. The EU on the Western Balkans is focused on infrastructure projects that can

significantly affect the energy sector's decarbonization (hydropower, renewables, natural gas), while China prefers mining and thermal energy. Russia is focused on the gas and oil sector and currently fully controls areas in Serbia and B&H. [17] Some argue that strategic or religious goals drive the Arab Gulf countries' investment interest in the Balkans. Others state that the reasons are strictly financial, a convenient location at the crossroads, competitive labor cost, and the EU joins the regions for investments. While the media's attention is on companies from Arab countries, the crucial fact is that 80 percent of real estate investments in the region must be due to Israel. "Israel investors have concentrated on retail parks and shopping malls." [18]

Social media has become a platform for diversity in psychological activities and processes of a coercive, deceptive, alienating, and defensive nature. People receive most of their information daily via Facebook and other online platforms. If we briefly focus on B&H, 1,500 media outlets have been proven to have published false news at least once. During one-year research and analysis of the observed media, a whole network (hub), domestic and newspapers from the environment that spread false news in an organized manner, exists. "The hub is not actually in B&H, but it consists of 14 media from B&H and 15 media from Serbia, which have been proven to share misinformation and have over ten connections in spreading various misinformation. It is alarming because they work together and operationally. Among these media is Russian Sputnik." [19] These are elements of information warfare, as a type of special warfare, which is an essential feature of the information-communication era in which information, misinformation, false information, deception, and propaganda are on the scene. However, it is not just the states that do it, but huge companies, non-governmental organizations, and formal and informal groups.

Conclusion

The legacy of conflicts and the applied Western policies to the region is the strengthening of ethnonational discourses and the activation of regional crises. The Anglo-American project of post-Cold War spatial planning in the Western Balkans is ineffective, so it would be necessary to formulate new Western policies. Undemocratic processes of hybrid and psychological geopolitical warfare blurred relations and security paradigm. Confrontation in the information space created the ground for numerous influences on the physical and the opponent's cognitive sphere in the hybrid geopolitical warfare.

Balkan nationalist and separatist ideas, which resurfaced with the former Yugoslavia's break-up, should be reticent and transform within the EU borders. Montenegro and, in particular, B&H is vulnerable to destabilizing Russian influences, using a complicated social, political, and economic environment, a lack of strategic orientation, and divisions over NATO integration. As for China, Arab countries, and Israel, their influence in the Balkans remains limited, primarily - but not exclusively - to economic projects. However, these impacts will continue to grow unless more severe and concrete US and EU replace them. Further weakening or eventual disappearance of the EU perspective in the Balkans could lead to new attempts to establish "Greater Albania," "Greater Croatia," "Greater Serbia," or even "Greater Ottoman Turkey" through violent border changes, which would unquestionably lead to new violence in the region. Thus, instead of democratizing, the 21st century has brought fragility to the Balkans.

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