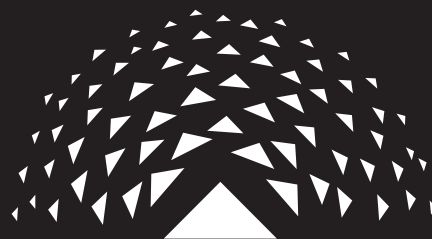




KKI

4:1

What Role Do the External Actors
(Russia, China, Turkey,
and the European Union) Play
in the Western Balkans?



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In the 4:1 series of the Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade, four researchers give a short answer to the same questions concerning international politics and economics. Our aim is to launch the scientific debates in Hungary and promote dialogue among experts. In this issue, our topic is: "What Role Do the External Actors (Russia, China, Turkey, and the European Union) Play in the Western Balkans?"

ARTYOM ULUNYAN

The settlement of the situation in the Western Balkans could be viewed from Russia's stand as the challenge to her present existing positions in international relations. The set of options is limited by a very narrow corridor of choices. The first of them assumes a change in the attitude toward the problem of the Western Balkans as a vulnerable sensitive knot of the Euro-Atlantic community which is advantageous tactically and strategically. This means that the primary issue is the principal Russia's consent to the current ethno-political realities with the existing modern borders and the recognition of the accession of all the states of the region to the Euro-Atlantic community as the only way out of the crisis and as a guarantee to stabilize the Western Balkans politically, militarily, and economically. This approach, to all appearances, is hardly possible even in the future.

The second approach to the problem of the Western Balkans was to provide Russia with a "special place" in the discussions on the crucial topics in the region. It primarily deals with the Bosnian and Kosovo issues. As a part of this approach, on the one hand, Russia's position could include her consent with the accession of the Western Balkan states to the Euro-Atlantic community and, on the other hand, to offer Russia guarantees for presence in the region. This approach in one form or another could have existed before the spring of 2018 and could be expected as the subject of "political bargaining." However, the situation has now changed dramatically and there is even no ground for speculation about this option as having any chance for the nearest and even distant future.

Thus, under the existing conditions, the last variant of the development of events exists and it certainly differs from the approaches listed above. It is based on the thesis of "categorical imperative" and is connected with the implementation of the concept of "imposed presence." Its essence lies in supporting those forces in the Western Balkans who oppose European integration and the entire Euro-Atlantic community as a whole. In their turn, these forces will try to use Russia as much as possible to reach their own goals by exerting pressure upon the European Union. If the situation develops along this path, there is no doubt that the main problem will be the solution of the so-called "Serbian problem" posed in the form of a regional issue.

It is directly linked to the Bosnian and Kosovo "hotspots," while Serbia herself becomes a hostage to what is happening and meets the alternative in form "to follow" this way or "to break through" the vicious circle. It may seriously make Belgrade's



flesh creep because it will occur as the choice between Russia and Europe. In case of a negative scenario, when the Serbian part of Bosnia and Herzegovina declares independence, and the northern part of Kosovo, populated by the Serbs, will require accession to Serbia (all of that contrary to internationally agreed treaties), the question will arise: what should be done? The aggravation of Russia's relations with the Euro-Atlantic community over the Western Balkans, where Serb enclaves will be created, will require a response from Belgrade to whether it is ready to support them or not. For Serbia, if the latter happened, this would mean being isolated and without a serious political and economic perspective, since Russia cannot provide both of them for her.

For Russia herself, such a scenario, with all seemingly tactical benefits, will not bear any fruit in a strategic sense. Moreover, all responsibility for what happened, when time passes, can be imposed by the Serbs themselves on her in the future when the situation changes. Thus, the artificially fueled so-called Serbian question, from political advantage may turn out into serious political burden, which will build an obstacle on the way already in the visible future. Any nightmarish tangle of ethno-territorial claims in the Western Balkans, whoever and whatever predicts, is impossible, but the "wasting a time" period can drag on for a long run.

XIN CHEN

Forty years of China's reform and openness show that the *development* is the core. Nothing is more important than the *development*, especially for a developing country. Among the experiences and lessons drawn from China's development path, there are two elements that should be mentioned. The first one is the development of infrastructure which is led by the government, and the other one is to be part of the global value chain which is motivated by the enterprises. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a Chinese solution for the development.

The Western Balkan countries are part of the BRI and China's cooperation with the Western Balkans had promoted their development. There are numerous cooperation projects between China and the region: the Zemun Danube Bridge, the Kostolac power plant and the Surčin–Obrenovac part of the E763 Highway in Serbia, the Kamengrad power plant in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Miladinovci–Stip and Kičevo–Ohrid highways in Macedonia, the Mojkovac–Mateševó highway in Montenegro, the Blue Corridor highway in Albania, and the list could be continued. These are the contributions of China to the Western Balkans.

China's presence had recalled the European's attention to the region. China and Europe can work together for the development of the Western Balkans. There are three fields where they can cooperate mostly: infrastructure, industrial cooperation, and tourism.

One of the core values of the European integration is the free movement of factors. And the interconnectivity of infrastructure is the precondition for the factor

movement. Roads only have their function when they are interconnected, and thus factors can move. This is the spillover effect for the economic and social development where the roads pass. Europe has its own planning for the infrastructure but the weakness is the lack of implementation. China has the strength of implementation but the infrastructure projects in the region are fragmented. China and Europe can cooperate on several backbone infrastructure routes, and promote the development of the region together.

Industrial cooperation is the second field. The Western Balkans is isolated from the European production chain and Germany is too “lonely” to drive the region. The labor cost in the coastal area of China is higher than in the Western Balkan countries. China’s investment could help the region to get better integrated into the European production chain.

The third one is tourism. The potential of tourism in the Western Balkans has not been discovered well yet, due to the poor infrastructure facility. Chinese tourists are becoming one of the main groups for world tourist market. As the infrastructure is improving, more and more Chinese tourists will come.

In sum, China and Europe can cooperate and work together to promote the development of the Western Balkans, and China would like to be a positive contributor.

ZOLTÁN EGERESI

Turkey has lost the majority of its European territories (except a tiny land portion around Istanbul) in 1912–1913 in the Balkan wars; nevertheless it has strong historic, cultural, economic, and political connections with the Balkans which shapes the country’s current foreign policy in the region. The predecessor of Turkey, the Ottoman Empire ruled Southeast Europe for centuries and played crucial role in the spread of Islam among the Slavic and Albanian populations, the settlement of thousand hundreds of Turks in the region thus shaping the religious-ethnic picture of the Balkans. It also contributed to the economic and societal development of the region and influenced the nation-building processes. All in all, it has a significant impact on the region.

The Balkans has its special place in the Turkish foreign policy framework. Due to the Ottoman legacy (the great number of Ottoman mosques, bridges and other buildings), the Turkish public opinion feels closer the Western Balkans, especially Bosnia and Herzegovina. Furthermore, the [mass immigration](#) of Bosniaks, Albanians during and after the loss of Ottoman territories has created strong psychological connections with the region. Still an important part of Turkish population keeps the memories of ancestors coming from the peninsula. Finally, the war in Bosnia where Muslims were persecuted also had effect on Turkish Islamist movement (one of the most important foundations, the İHH İnsani Yardım Vakfı was [created](#) during the war) that later also put the Western Balkans on the limelight of Ankara’s foreign policy.



During the governments of the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP), especially in Ahmet Davutoğlu's time, Turkey intended to create kin-state relations with the Muslim communities living in the Western Balkans. Visits at presidential and ministerial level have become frequent and close relations have been established between the Turkish and the various governments of the region.

Turkey has emerged as an actor that pushes for stabilization of the region. In order to settle any conflicting issues and establish stronger cooperation between various Western Balkan countries, [trilateral consultation](#) mechanism was launched with the participation of Turkey, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina and also among Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and Turkey. Ankara also participated in a number of peacekeeping missions (such as KFOR, EUFOR, etc.) in the region. More recently, the Western Balkan [countries also benefited from the EU–Turkey](#) declaration to stop the flow of refugees.

In order to boost Turkish cultural presence and preserve the Ottoman heritage, the Yunus Emre Institute has opened a number of offices in the Western Balkan countries and the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (*Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı Başkanlığı*, TİKA) got active in the renovation of old Ottoman buildings outside of the traditional development projects (schooling, training, hospital construction, etc.).

Furthermore, the region serves as a market for the Turkish products and investments. The global opening of the Turkish economy did not avoid the Western Balkans either. The Turkish investors are active especially in Kosovo, Macedonia, and Albania. Nevertheless, the Southeast European countries are small markets ranging from a couple of hundred thousands of people (Montenegro) to maximum 7 million (Serbia) and the relatively high level of corruption raises obstacles for Turkish companies as well. Despite the strong political and cultural relations, the whole region represents a few percent of Turkey's global trade: in 2017, only 2 percent of the total exports went to and only 0.5 percent of total import arrived from the Western Balkans.

Finally, the region is paid attention by Ankara as a consequence of handling the Gülen movement (or the Fethullah Terrorist Organization [*Fethullahçı Terör Örgütü*, FETÖ]) that has become one of Ankara's major goals after the July 15, 2016 coup d'état attempt. The movement opened its schools, established its foundations in the regions, and it possesses even universities in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Albania. The organization, which used to be an important soft power tool for Ankara, recently has become a challenge. To cope with it, the Maarif Foundation appeared to [open new](#) Turkey-related schools. The Turkish diplomacy puts pressures to the Western Balkan governments to hinder the activities of the movement and extradite its members. So far, only Kosovo showed readiness to cooperate with Turkey in this issue by detaining and [extraditing some members](#) of the movement.

ANNA OROSZ

The Western Balkans is a turbulent area whose instability and security risks can negatively impact the security situation of the wider Europe, including the European Union. For this reason, ensuring the EU's leverage in the region is crucial from the Union's security perspective. Compared to other actors that are active in the Western Balkans, the European Union plays the most comprehensive role through the EU membership perspective offered in 2003 on its Thessaloniki Summit. Its policy toward the region can be considered as part of the foreign policy of the EU but as the countries of the Western Balkans are targeted by the enlargement policy as well, there are various further instruments at the disposal of the EU, including financial instruments, policy harmonization, etc., to pursue its goals.

The EU's enlargement policy is also an important tool to support the long-term transformation of the countries that wish to become its members. In a narrow term, it contributes to the security of the EU by attracting countries into its alliance. Nevertheless, the EU explicitly declared that the integration process aims to enhance democratization and economic transformation of these countries that is a long-term process and to a large extent dependent on the engagement of the local actors in the Western Balkans.

The EU membership perspective contributed significantly to the peace in the region and through the stabilization and association process the Western Balkan region has built strong economic and political ties with the EU. As it is noted in the [communication of the European Commission](#) published in February 2018, the total trade between the Western Balkans and the EU was over 43 billion euros in 2016 and the European companies invested the most into the region (over 10 billion euros). The strong economic links to the European Union and the declared will of the countries to join the Union strengthened the belief that the EU is the only game in town.

At the same time, the real political will to foster enlargement toward the region got diluted by the various crises that hit the EU and even the European Commission explicitly argued in favor of stabilization of the former achievements of the European integration process against enlargement. Nonetheless, new security challenges (Russia's increasing spoiler role, migration crisis, violent extremism, etc.) emerged in the region especially after the beginning of the crisis in Ukraine and they put the region back on the EU's security agenda. The new/old actors (Turkey, Russia, and China) in the region started to pose immediate challenges and questions that the EU needs to address while these sometimes contradicts the long-term goal of democratization.

However, the strong EU action is hindered by the lack of unity of the Member States' positions. As the EU's foreign policy depends on their unanimous decision, it is highly dependent on the foreign policy preferences and traditions of the individual member states. While some countries, like Hungary, encourage faster enlargement



in order to keep the membership perspective credible, Western European members would like to see better track records in order to preserve the other credibility aspect of the enlargement process, namely that the EU is still engaged in democratization.

Both concerns are valid. The EU is more often blamed for supporting "stabilocracies" in the Western Balkans by closing eye on the backsliding in democratization. While the official EU integration process and the development of the democratic institutions do not accompany each other all the time, the price for alienating the Western Balkans' governments from the EU path could be even much higher. The time pressure even increased as a consequence of the activities of external actors and for this reason the EU will need to re-evaluate its approach toward the region to find proper balance between the length and content of the accession process.