
THE POSITION OF THE WESTERN BALKAN COUNTRIES WITH REGARD TO THE INDEPENDENCE OF KOSOVO

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This study aims to investigate attitudes towards Kosovo's independence by individual nation states of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY). Their positions are analyzed from two mutually linked perspectives; first, through an examination of these states' relationships with the European Union (EU) and the United States of America's (USA) policy influence, and then by analysing the states' ethnic minority issues. Together, both aspects form the behaviour of the adjacent states and their stance regarding the independence of Kosovo.

The position of the Western Balkan countries has been continually marginalized, even though future development of the independent Kosovo state will not be possible without cooperation based on the regional level. The crucial idea of this study is to highlight the inefficiency of solutions by individual nation to regional conflicts. Only a comprehensive approach has a chance of long-term success that would bring stability and security in the region.

The countries analysed for this study can be defined as former SFRY states (*Slovenia, Croatia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Macedonia*) extended to *Albania*, or Western Balkan countries (*Croatia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia and Albania*) and *Slovenia*. Due to its historical-political links with region Albania serves as an important part of this analysis. Slovenia was added, despite its political stability and EU membership, because of a clear political interest in stabilising the region.

Serbia is the largest country in the region and is considered to be a disputing party in Kosovo's independence because of efforts to maintain their territorial integrity. The Serb community in Kosovo does not accept the territory secession and their domestic political position is supported by all Serbian political parties. Statistics have shown a significant decrease in the Serb population of Kosovo¹ (Štěrba, 2006: 11). Ethnic clashes are periodical, especially in Kosovska Mitrovica, which has become a divided city. Today

¹ The population of Kosovo comprises about 88% of Albanians, 7% of Serbs and 5% of others. (CIA Factbook)

the Serbs in Kosovo manifest their disapproval of the situation by boycotting Kosovo institutions (Kupchan, 2008); this is reminiscent of Albanian boycotts of Serbs. The Albanians do not seek their involvement; they rather use the official events to promote benefits emanating from a single Albanian nation holding the decisive power in the state.

Serbia is trying to gain the support of undecided neighbours on a bilateral level. For this purpose declares disturbance of for all Balkan states important bilateral relations in case of their recognition of the independent Kosovo state². Possibly this is a political game played for the domestic audience, for whom it will be difficult to accept the loss of 15% of its territory. Despite the existing Serbian protest, among the population outweigh a desire for a stable and peaceful future in the EU. The results of parliamentary elections in May 2008 rejected apprehensions of long-term nationalist radicalization of Serbia. Subsequent negotiations with the EU culminated in the Serbian application for EU membership on December 2009. (EU, Srbsko a Kosovo).

The first hypothesis scrutinizes the outside *impact of the USA and the EU on those countries and their foreign policy behaviour*. Especially in the case of Kosovo's independence, *the USA and most EU states have accepted non standard methods*.

Currently the hegemony of the *United States of America* significantly affects decision-making process in the Balkans states. The USA enjoys a serious presence in the region, gained by decisive political and military intervention, which put an end to an outburst of violence and solved the immediate problem. This close relationship has a longer tradition, particularly through providing financial support to SFRY since the division of the bloc during the Cold War (Šesták et al., 1998: 575). Although the USA was initially against Yugoslavia disintegration (*G. Bush administration*), later there was the visible change of their position. The same modification was also visible in their distancing of themselves from so-called European problems (Pirjevec, 2000: 493). Subsequently, US military superiority and decisiveness in crucial moments ensured the success of diplomatic negotiations and defused the situation. Their unique role became apparent again after a failed meeting in Rambouillet, when NATO, led by the USA armed forces, carried out the prior threat of the bombing campaign³ (Albright, 2003: 377-84).

² Relations with Macedonia and Montenegro, who recognized Kosovo only a day after the UN Security Council decision about assessment of the legality of a unilateral declaration of Kosovo by the International Court of Justice, have had complications.

³ The USA built the Bondsteel military camp, near Urosevas in Kosovo, after June 1999. (Global Security, Camp Bondsteel)

R. Holbrooke's role in Contact Group is fundamental, just as it was in negotiating the Dayton agreement, which became a key document for peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina. (Silber and Little, 1996: 377) The closest example that articulates the USA's role in the Balkans during the 1990s is the necessity of their support in the UN's, then futile, effort to exclude President of Republika Srpska R. Karadžić from his public office. His ejection was the result of a dire warning that the USA would refuse to fund the restoration of Republika Srpska (Šesták et al., 1998: 645). The result is that most Balkan states consider their relations with the USA vital.

Similar trends can be monitored even in the behaviour of Slovenia, which sought to encourage the exchange of the Serbian territorial integrity violation for signing a Stabilization and Association Agreement with the EU. (The protocol of the visit) The USA is constantly seen as the strongest supporter of Kosovo's independence. During 2006-2007, the USA increased pressure of statements against maintaining an unstable status quo. Since 2007, the USA has repeatedly declared its intention to support the sovereign Kosovo state even if unilaterally declared. (U.S. Consulting with European Partners)

From the outset, the *European Union* has been engaged in finding a solution to conflict in the Balkans. However, a rather more positive impact has been reflected since the halt of escalation of the conflict. The EU does not have sufficient military support available to enforce any fulfilment of submitted peace plans.⁴ The most successful assistance they provide is in humanitarian and economic fields. In 1997, the Council of the EU decided on a regional approach to the Balkans and set the economic and political conditions for development of bilateral relations with Balkan states. In 1999, the Stabilization and Association Process was introduced and after 2000 showed visible results, to the growing credibility of the EU. Besides contributing to the formulation of the Ohrid Agreement, dealing with the crisis in Macedonia, cooperation by Balkan states is driven by an increasing aspiration of future integration into the EU, with the prospect of political stability and economic development (Tesař,

⁴ The European Communities were supported by Germany after the outbreak of hostilities in favour of the unsustainability of SFRY. The commission, headed by R. Badinter, was responsible for reviewing applications for recognition of independence. Although the commission stated that conditions had only been satisfied by Slovenia and Macedonia, the EC recommended recognition of the independence of Slovenia and Croatia within federal borders. However, Croatia has failed in ensuring the constitutional rights of its Serbian minority and Macedonia was rejected as a result of Greek pressure. Two months later the EC also recognized the independence of BaH within its existing border. This effort to prevent war greatly aggravated the situation. Subsequently, the Carrington-Cutileiro plan was introduced and together with the USA the Vance-Owen plan and the Owen-Stoltenberg plan. (Hladký, 2005: 270)

2008). In December 2004, the EU took over responsibility for international peace operation EUFOR in BaH. This mission, named Althea, is the central operation within the European Security and Defence Policy. (Dientsbier et al., 2006: 71-88)

The Thessaloniki agenda (2003), together with the Stability Pact for South-Eastern Europe (1999), is a project establishing primary EU goals targeted at the Western Balkans. At the same time it tries to prevent the outbreak of further conflict, through reconciliation and prosperity arising from a deeper regional integration of the Western Balkans (Greco, 2007).

Although there is considerable doubt surrounding the internal unity of the EU as regards the question of Kosovo's independence, there is generally apparent support for further convergence in the relations of Serbia and its neighbours in recognizing Kosovo (Delevic, 2007; Rusche, 2006:16). Mutual rapprochement and a positive perception of EU membership should help to balance the loss of Kosovo, on the internal level and promote further development. Despite disunity about the recognition of Kosovo between member states is the position of European institutions more testifying about the EU support in common. Despite statements by diplomatic representatives of a common future both for Kosovo and Serbia in the EU, both Macedonia and Montenegro have pointed out pressure from Brussels for their recognition of Kosovo in accordance with their foreign policy interests (Eichler, 2008).

The second hypothesis verifies *the impact of internal ethnic heterogeneity and the effort of those minorities to enforce the right to self-determination, which complicates the opportunity to recognise Kosovo's independence.*

In 2004, *Slovenia* became the only country in its region to become a member of the EU as well as of NATO. Four years later, in 2008, Slovenia became the first of the post-Communist countries to hold the position of Presidency of the Council of the European Union. Independent Slovenia has focused on entry into the Euro-Atlantic structures and has strongly oriented to Western and Central Europe. Diplomatic escape from the destabilized Balkans broke up after its full integration into Western structures. Today Slovenia proclaims full support for EU enlargement but its territorial disputes with Croatia, which is closest to entry, points to certain complications. (Kosovo to test Slovenia leaders) Essential is the declaration of Kosovo's independence during the above-mentioned Slovenian EU Presidency. (Slovenia recognizes Kosovo) Although Slovenia had declared support for an independent Kosovo, the randomness of this situation has been excluded by publishing negotiations protocol between Political

Director of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Slovenia M. Drobnič and diplomats of the US Department of State and National Security Committee from Washington, in December 2007. The following media affair highlighted the impact of USA policy, not only on Slovenia but also the role of the EU and the UN. (The protocol of the visit) The Slovenian national issue is not complicated, it is a homogenous society consisting of 83,1% of Slovenians. Ethnic tension threatening the integrity of Slovenia after the recognition of Kosovo (March 5, 2008) is not possible. Slovenia was not exposed to external or internal pressures restricting this recognition. Rather, Slovenia has been politically involved in previous secret preparation. (CIA Factbook)

From a political reversal in 2000, EU accession has become a clear political priority for *Croatia*. The closest candidate country took complete advantage of high support from its own population (73,5%) and a majority of EU citizens as well. (CIA Factbook) The fundamental success was the accession to NATO (April 1, 2009). The step was encouraged by long term cooperation with the USA⁵. This political priority is seen as a possible way to improve the image of Croatia before accession to the EU. Croatian recognition of Kosovo's independence (March 19, 2008) is considered to be an act in accord with constitutional responsibilities and interests in joining the EU and the harmonization of common foreign policy. (Croatia recognize Kosovo) Croatia's ethnic composition is substantially homogenous with Croats, making up 89,6% of the population. The small Serbian minority⁶ (4,5%) is well organized and represented in government by Independent Serb Democratic Party. (Croatia to follow EU on Kosovo's Independence) Even though their member voted against the recognition of Kosovo independence, they did not leave the coalition after the proposal was passed. Efforts to improve relations with Serbia are shaded by other priorities now. (CIA Factbook)

Bosnia and Herzegovina has traditionally been a heterogeneous society and its ethnic divisiveness has become even stronger since the war. The situation of those Bosnians whose right to self-determination is expressed in this state is problematic. At 48% they do not make up even half of the population. The other ethnic groups making up the multinational state of BaH are Serbians (37,1%) and Croats (14,3%). One sustained result of the war is the lack of the inner ethnical cooperation that had previously operated. (CIA Factbook) A heroic effort to engage in transatlantic structures is stuck

⁵ President G.W. Bush was appreciative of their presence in Afghanistan. (President Bush says US appreciates Croatia's leadership in region)

⁶ Srpska Krajina was systematically homogenised during the end of war. Out of the 650,000 Serbs in 1991, about 450,000 left the region. (Prtna, 2007: 76)

in transition, seeking to consolidate the existence of the state. The EU is an important source of support; however, the absence of BaH reforms prohibits any moving on. The decision-making process is limited by competence disputes which paralyze the situation (Tesař, 2008: 6). Instead, entrance to NATO presents more a visible trace of its intervention and peacekeeping activities. As a result, BaH is regarded more as an international protectorate. Currently BaH seems to be dysfunctional, artificially generated and externally managed. The administrative division makes it impossible to end nationalistic tensions. Internal political turbulence in BaH has been marked by concerns about the negative consequences of Kosovo separation. Accordingly, what is missing is a mention of Kosovo's independence from the BaH federal authorities. Only Republika Srpska representatives have expressed criticism regarding destabilization⁷. Despite the apparent influence of the EU and the USA, the extreme fragmentation of BaH makes it impossible to recognize Kosovo independence without disturbing its own state integrity.

Montenegro, as the youngest country in the region, was established after the referendum in June 2006. With a decision made by 43% of Montenegrins, the public opinion of Serbs on both sides of border is one of outrage. Despite protests against the disintegration of Federal Republic of Yugoslavia by the Serbs who make up 32% of the population of Montenegro, the country has extraordinary bilateral relations (Dienstbier et al., 2006: 69; CIA Factbook). The main reason for the final division was strict support on the part of Montenegrins for maximal harmonization with EU standards. Montenegro is a Eurozone member and in contrast with Serbia there have been no problems as regards cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. (Blahušiak, 2005: 77).

Coexistence in one state brought Montenegro more problems. Two years after the referendum on independence, which had been made under the supervision the EU, the Stabilization and Association Agreement was negotiated. Pushing for entry to NATO, Montenegro therefore accepted the pre-entrance Individual Partnership Action Plan (Tesař, 2008:6). Montenegro has not argued against the separation of Kosovo in spite of being a traditional Serbian ally. Kosovo has been seen as a supply area able to provide a more stable economical environment (Tesař, 2007: 34). Montenegrin and Macedonian recognition of Kosovo independence was especially offensive to

⁷ Serbs are divided into several states, the number of which has risen due to Kosovo independence. This traumatic matter revived the memory of the loss of direct influence in Republika Srpska. (Dienstbier et al., 2006: 69)

Serbia because of its timing. Despite Serbia's recalling of its ambassadors to both countries bilateral relations were reconciled in few months. Montenegro is ethnically fragmented but foreign policy priorities are deeply unifying the pragmatism of whole country. (Serbia-Montenegro relations)

Macedonia is the only former Yugoslavia state which was able to deal with their minority issue without external intervention until 2001. In that year Macedonia asked NATO for help against infiltration of Albanian extremists from Kosovo. Although the Ohrid Peace Agreement was arranged during that same year, the tension between prevailing Macedonians (64.2%) and Albanians (25.2%) has remained. (CIA Factbook) The common priorities, EU and NATO accession, have a strongly unifying influence. (Goals and priorities) Nevertheless the problem of Greece's non-acceptance of Macedonia as the formal name of the state is destabilizing the situation.

Albanians are losing patience with the longstanding unsuccessful solution which penalizes all. Especially debilitating is Albania's accession to NATO, even though Macedonia was better prepared. Should the situation remain in the same phase for too long the stability of the state will be disturbed. Nevertheless, Macedonia became an EU candidate country in December 2005 (Risteska, 2005: 97). The USA is a strong supporter of Macedonian membership to NATO, mainly because of its presence in Afghanistan as well as in Iraq (Macedonia and US policy). The recognition of Kosovo's independence shows an interesting positive effect on relations between Macedonians and Albanians living in Macedonia. Similar rhetoric was heard from I. Selmani, the leader of the Albanian political party New Democracy. (Serbian PM confirms restored relations) The effort to strengthen internal stability reweights the temporal complications in bilateral relations with Serbia, which peaked in the recalling of the Macedonian ambassador. Finally, and in contrast with the Kosovo situation, co peaceful existence between Albanians and Macedonians is seen as feasible, and even the fear of a spill over effect of conflict has not been realized. (www.vlada.mk)

Albania is a homogenous country (95% Albanians), which is deeply involved in the problem of Kosovo independence (CIA Factbook). The origin of the problem comes from the establishment of Albania in 1912, when two-thirds of Albanians remained outside the territory of the new state which in the long term has complicated relations with its neighbours (Šesták et al., 1998: 286). Bilateral relations with Serbia have been devastated in the light of the context of Albanian minority in Kosovo. Recognition of Kosovo's independence has only worsened the situation. EU accession represents

the important political aim, even though Albania is often proclaimed to be the most problematic country in the region together with BaH. Significant success is seen in Albania's admittance to NATO in April 2009, but the whole cooperation has a longer-term nature because of the country's presence in Iraq and Afghanistan. The rational, moderate attitude toward the Kosovo independence is greatly appreciated while Albanian foreign policy priority was clear. Despite existing fears, no Albanian political party has maintained the idea of unification with Kosovo. Certainly there are Albanian nationalists supporting the idea of a Great Albania; however, only a few Albanians have any real interest in becoming one state⁸. This is because their experience of two different states is much stronger than the idea of unification inside the EU. (The Economist)

Most of the countries in this study are not homogeneous; moreover, ethnic war in the last 20 years has been very significant and sensitive, which is still reflected differently in various states. The functioning of a state which allows a common share of power and respect for the human and political rights of minorities is of primary significance. This approach may reduce or even overcome the risks arising from the presence of ethnic minorities for the stability of the state. Therefore is not possible to find a direct correlation between ethnic heterogeneity and the fear of destabilizing one's own country as a result of subsequent demands of separatist minority in response to the recognition of an independent Kosovo as a violation of state sovereignty of Serbia.

CONCLUSION

The positions of Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Macedonia and Albania are greatly influenced by the authority of the USA and the EU, in combination with the ethnic arrangement of their state, rather than the existence of national heterogeneity in itself. Stability of one's own country, which is missing in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, is the fundamental element allowing the recognition of Kosovo, because the political elites have no intention of risking the destruction of their own country. In other cases, the foreign policy orientation of the region clearly outweighs the autonomist demands of minorities, which could even be an element promoting the recognition of Kosovo's independence (e.g. Macedonia).

⁸ Public research in Albania in 2005 found that more than 90% of Albanians support Kosovo independence while less than 10% of them would prefer to create a single state. (the Economist)

All the researched states except Bosnia and Herzegovina accept Kosovo's independence. This indicates their efforts to address the situation in the region and successfully overcome the artificially nurtured status quo, which is an obstacle to economic transformation and growth throughout the region itself. The position of the individual states can provide clear support for Kosovo, in addition to the USA and the EU which are also important elements of external stability. If Kosovo copes with its internal security threats, and these threats do not become international, regional cooperation may offer a positive environment for further stabilization and development.

Map 1: Western Balkans 1991



Source: Gallagher 2005

Map 2: Western Balkans 2006



Source: Gallagher 2005

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