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Western Balkans-EU Relations between the USA, Russia and Turkey

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Abstract: Driven by stability and security concerns stemming from the recent past, the European Union (EU) has decided to include the Western Balkans (WB) in its enlargement process. In the meantime, the United States of America (USA), Russia, and Turkey have become engaged in promoting the need for balance of power in the region, although their interests have been mutually conflicting. In fact, the USA has supported the policies of the EU towards the WB to consolidate Euro-Atlantic integration and to maintain its authority as a superpower on the eastern side of the Atlantic. Another major power, Russia, has sought to counterbalance both the EU and the USA in the region by leveraging its close relations with Serbia. On the other hand, a neighboring country in the region, Turkey, has adopted the policy of soft power and good neighborly policy towards the WB to strengthen relations with old partners, based on perception of shared culture, heritage and history. This article analyzes the diverging national interests of the USA, Russia, and Turkey in the context of the Normative Power Europe approach pertaining to the WB.

Keywords: enlargement, Euro-Atlantic integration, power balance, soft power, counterbalance, superpower, power struggle, European Union.

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Introduction

Due to their geographical position, the WB have gained strategic importance for the EU during the last three decades. The EU's history as a peace initiative has also been invoked in the traditionally unstable WB, whose membership perspective was recognized during the Thessaloniki European Council exactly twenty years ago (European Consilium, 2023). On the other side, some international actors, such as the USA, Russia, and Turkey, which were highly influential in the region in the 1990s and 2000s, have influenced the Western Balkan countries in diverging ways. From a realist standpoint, the EU, Russia, Turkey, and the USA are all involved in the WB to varying degrees, driven by their power projection goals and self-interest. Each actor aims to safeguard and promote its strategic objectives. They do so through encouraging economic or political integration, historical and cultural traits, countering rival influences or ensuring regional stability.

As a matter of fact, the USA, Russia, and Turkey have played unique roles in the region. As an effective international power, the USA has supported the enlargement policy of the EU towards the WB, from the other side of the Atlantic to maintain its power in the strategically important European region. As a leader, Washington has dedicated itself to mediate conflicts and promote regional peace agreements. Besides, the United States (US) administrations have also supported the EU by providing financial aid to bolster Euro-Atlantic integration. As the other effective international power, Russia has preferred to use its historical bonds in the region to counterbalance the USA and the EU in order to prevent them to pursue any possible hegemonic policies. In contrast to other actors, Turkey officially aspires to be a more neutral actor in the region. In general, Turkish governments use the concepts of shared culture and common history to cooperate with the regional countries and to promote economic partnerships in the region. Turkey also encourages European integration in the WB and supports diplomatic and economic initiatives within the enlargement policy as a good neighbor. In brief, external actors have different interests in the region. While the main interest of Washington is to promote Euro-Atlantic integration by openly supporting the EU, Russia intends to counterbalance to prevent the USA to pursue hegemonic policies by using its close relations and alliances with the regional countries. Russia also wants to consolidate its influence in the region. Turkey, as a neighbor and a strategic partner to Western Balkan states, especially Bosnia and Herzegovina, supports the EU policies leading to the EU membership and strengthens relations with the old partners. Turkey also expects to improve its relations with the EU on the road of full membership through close relationships with the regional countries.

This article uses the Normative Power Europe approach, which examines the interrelationship between the EU and other actors in terms of its planned policies and projects and aims to explain the similarities and differences between the perspectives of actors. In this context, the paper hypothesizes that external powers such as the USA, Russia, and Turkey also affect shaping the WB besides the EU. The dependent variable of the study is the EU's policy towards the WB, and the independent variable is the influence of some external actors. The article has two main parts. The first part includes a short summary and literature review, which refers to the primary contributors, their publications, and their main points. The second part of the article explains both the policy of the EU towards the WB, including its enlargement policy in the region, and interactions of some external actors, namely the USA, Russia, and Turkey with the regional countries, based on their different interests and approaches. The article also explains how actors have changed their policies over the years. The article concludes that external actors have had an impact upon the WB so that they have affected the policy of the EU towards the regional countries and so increased the possibility of becoming membership in the EU.

A Literature Review

The WB have always been a critical region to stabilize European prosperity and security because of its geopolitical and geostrategic position. The region has faced many challenges and conflicts throughout the 20th century, including in the 1990s with the dissolution of Yugoslavia. The power gap has been deepened due to conflicts and crises, and the tension in the region has rapidly escalated because of unstable power balances. The WB (a term that applies namely to Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Kosovo^{*3}, and Serbia) have been included in the EU enlargement agenda to promote regional economic and political stability and security. In this context, the EU has tended to include the WB in its accession process and enlargement agenda to promote regional economic and political stability and security.

Considering the developments in the WB, Bechev (2012) highlighted the region's peripheral status in the framework of the EU and the vulnerabilities of

³ "This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UN Security Council resolution 1244 and the International Court of Justice Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence."

external influences towards the area and system. Bechev argues that the Euro-crisis pushed the Balkans to the outmost circle of the periphery. According to him, accepting the stagnation in the backyard of the EU-WB would be an official admission of the failure of European policies. Consequently, it was vital for the EU to include WB in the enlargement process to keep its authority in the region and reduce other international actors' influences. Similarly, Dabrowski and Myachenkova (2018) discussed the challenges that the WB have faced with law, economic development, and politics before and during the accession and enlargement processes of the EU. The authors pointed out that the EU is the biggest trade partner, the largest source of foreign investment, and the primary destination for outward migration to the region. Thus, various economic reforms are necessary to promote the stability of the WB.

According to Kovačević (2019), the EU has a unique role in the WB, where it has applied a wide array of foreign policy instruments ranging from diplomacy and trade, through financial aid, to enlargement as the EU's most successful foreign policy tool in Central and Eastern Europe. Kovačević discusses the Europeanization concept that based on incentive is not enough to explain the European integration towards the WB. Moreover, the author refers that an additional significant factor is the impact of the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), which has not only contributed to the proliferation of unfinished countries in the WB but has also led to a diminished efficiency of the enlargement policy instruments. In this context, Atiyas (1995, 185) explained the impact of external actors and initiatives towards the area, especially the importance of mediation initiatives in the conflict of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Atiyas examines mediation initiatives by concentrating on that particular case and highlighting the distinctions between a mediation process that results in an agreement and one that concludes in a stalemate. Mayer (2004, 237) discussed the positioning of the WB within the EU structure and their requirements to promote long-lasting peace and stability. Moreover, Mayer discusses the primary objectives for the settlement by drawing attention to the conflict between Pristina and Belgrade and international organizations' influences. Arı and Pirinççi (2011, 1) highlighted the importance of the power gap created after the world wars and sought to explain that the gap continued to deepen the dissolution of Yugoslavia during the 1990s. The authors analyze the power gap and Washington's actions during and post-crisis engagements in the context of the Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Macedonia crises. They called attention to the region's critical situation with examples of the economic initiatives of the USA toward the area. Djokic (2020, 231) analyzes Russia's soft power approach in the Balkans from the perspective of the Russian Federation's longstanding historical ties with the region. Djokic also explains the reasons for Russia's counterbalance status and its partnership with

Serbia. Likewise, Brey (2022) presents Moscow's solid media power and its influence over the Balkans by explaining strategic partnership between Russia and Serbia throughout the decades. In Ekinci's (2009) comprehensive analysis, the economic, political, and cultural connections between Turkey and the WB are explored through an examination of their historical ties. The author emphasizes the strategic significance of the WB as a crucial link between Turkey and Europe, making the developments in the region of utmost importance.

Ekinci (2018) argues the visible decline in the EU's political, normative, and economic power as a dominant actor in the WB. The author analyzes the power vacuum that created space for action for international actors and explains Turkey-WB relations under the AKP Government. Sorovic (2019, 87) explains and defines political processes and changes throughout the history of the WB and Republic of North Macedonia. In that manner, Sorovic refers the influential factors in the region which are promoting ethnic and cultural heritage in the EU. Brown (2019, 141) explained the political and economic aspects of Turkey's involvement in the region, exemplifying its objectives and motivations in the WB. Likewise, Janković (2016, 7-23) alluded to former Foreign Minister Davutoğlu's foreign policy objectives until 2023, which align with Turkey's aspiration to enhance its international influence in neighboring regions, coinciding with the evolving trend towards a multipolar order. Bieber and Tzifakis (2020) provided a deep analysis of the Western Balkans' traditional relationships with the international community, and they offered insights into the region's integration with non-Western actors.

The EU provides financial investments with political and cultural initiations towards the WB to promote lasting peace and stability. According to Petrović (2019), the notion "Western Balkans" was unsolicited by the region, but rather bureaucratically imposed by the EU, to designate the yet-to-be-integrated part of Europe; however, this temporary designation has been in use for over two decades, reflecting the prolonged EU accession process of the region (Petrovic 2020). On the other hand, the effects of external actors have always been a game changer in the region because of strong historical ties with the WB. Besides international actors with similar interests can confront a power struggle when they seek to maintain their authority in the WB, the prevailing sentiment of enlargement fatigue has recently overshadowed the EU's enlargement efforts in the WB as another threat. Europeans and their leaders were reluctant to embrace new members into the union, citing concerns about potential strains on processes and institutions (Economides 2020). However, a more recent shift has been observed towards enlargement resistance, where opposition to enlargement is no longer solely based on absorption capacity but twin obstacles of internal fragmentation and disintegration and the candidate's ability to meet the necessary criteria. Notably, besides the primary driver of the EU's

impact on the region, the USA, Russia, and Turkey, which are the external influences, also shape the dynamics of the WB by using their shared culture, historical ties, and close relations with the Western Balkan states. Recognizing these influences is vital for the EU to maintain its presence in the region. Thus, the EU has followed a path through diplomacy and global cooperation.

Actors' Agenda on Western Balkans: Strategy and the Policies in the 1990s and 2000s

The European Union

The EU and other actors have aimed to promote regional control within their national interests and political agenda. The EU's objectives were to promote regional stability, democracy, peace, economic development, and political integration with other Balkan states. However, the EU's short-term stability interests, coupled with the specific state challenges in the region, did not translate adequately into the long-term democratic stability in the WB (Kovacevic 2011). Besides the EU and its policies, the other external actors, the USA, Russia, and Turkey, have taken crucial steps that affect WB and shaped the region's political stability. The WB have suffered from fundamental problems and conflicts that ended with the United Nations (UN) and NATO's promises of accession to the area in the 1990s. In the early 2000s, the EU's specific goals and interests in the WB focused on economic recovery and institutional reforms. The EU's enlargement policy towards the WB has sought to complete the Balkan integration so that the EU could continue to control the region and promote stability for the sake of all Balkan states (Kıraç and İlhan 2010).

In the 1990s, the WB faced numerous challenges that resulted in highly negative consequences for the region. With the dissolution of Yugoslavia, extremist nationalist movements arose in the WB, and ethnic tension became another problematic issue besides critical economic status. However, the EU recognized the necessity to offer a membership perspective to the Balkans, like it did earlier in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2008) Thus, the EU strengthened its policies and initiatives throughout the region and was successful due to the EU's national agenda (Bieber and Tzifakis 2020). The Stabilization and Association Process (SAP) became operational in 1999 to draw a path for possible membership in the long run. In the 2000s, the EU set its goals to promote economic and political stability. Between 2007-2009, the global boom in

economic recovery supported the EU's accession to the area. However, the European financial crisis in 2010 slowed down the economic recovery and the EU's efforts to improve the region's prosperity and the EU's accession efforts (Dabrowski and Myachenkova 2018). Therefore, these efforts resulted in some incentive reforms in the region (European Consilium 2023). In 2011, the EU's enlargement efforts continued with the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue. In this process, the EU facilitated the mediation to promote reconciliation and reduce the tensions between the two sides. Similarly, the UN supported the EU's leadership in the process to mitigate possible conflicts in the WB (United Nations 2023, 2010). In 2018, the European Commission adopted the strategy for credible enlarged perspective and engagement towards the WB (European Commission 2023). However, this indicative timeline stands in contrast to the earlier enlargement rounds, where accessions were pre-scheduled and strongly supported by the EU (Petrovic 2019). In the Annex of the Action Plan, the Commission confirmed that the region's future would depend on European values (European Consilium 2023).

The EU has continued to promote regional stability, democracy, and progress toward integration in the 2020s with some renewals. In 2020, the European Commission publicly announced its renewed policies and enlargement strategy in the WB in the form of the revised enlargement methodology (Bojinovic-Fenko and Kocan 2022). Its brand-new policies focused on strengthening the law, fundamental rights, and WB integration into the EU (European Consilium 2023). Besides, the EU contributed to financial development for regional connectivity within the Western Balkans Investment Framework (WBIF) (WBIF 2023). Finally, in 2022, the EU adopted its 2022 Enlargement Package to continue to promote stability in the region. The primary objective of the EU since the 1990s was to stabilize the region in every area to keep it safe and sound in the Balkans. Even the external influences in the region can change the structure of the region. In this context, the EU's policies and allies have intended to prevent possible threats and counterbalances. In CEE, the European and NATO integrations were mutually complementary (Hürsoy 2002). Likewise, in the WB, most countries are either NATO members or candidates, while also seeking to become EU candidates.

The United States of America

The foreign policy of the USA largely corresponds with the EU's leadership in encouraging further accessions of European candidate countries. Moreover, Washington actively advocates for NATO enlargements and its policies became more active in the WB throughout the last decade. The Balkan region has faced many conflicts that greatly influenced stability and security, such as Yugoslavia's

collapse and the difficulties of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Macedonia's position. After regional fragmentation and ethnic cleansing campaigns, the region's latest concerns were financial, and the consequences were severe for the Balkans (Ari and Pirinç 2011, 1). These conflicts have grown so much that they have become a possible threat to USA's global interests directly or indirectly. In other words, the situation in the Balkans forced the USA to take measures as a superpower to keep control and authority in this very significant part of the world (Mayer 2004, 237).

Regarding the escalating disputes and tension in the Balkans, the USA has taken remarkable initiatives toward the region, primarily economic, diplomatic, and military. After the Cold War, in the WB, the region's political structure needed a unique strategy. In this sense, Washington was active in creating unique policies that fit the regions and disputes (Ruy and Conley 2021). After the period of Yugoslavia's collapse, the USA followed a much more protective path in its policy, but the Balkan Crisis, which flamed pretty much at the same time as the Gulf Crisis, was a milestone for the USA on its path to the Balkans. Until then, the USA diplomatically worked towards stabilizing the region due to its economic and political concerns like Russia and the EU. The USA's integration through the Balkans continued with the considerable financial aid, and this support increased after the EU's initiation to solve the Balkan Crisis through negotiation (Biden, 2021). The EU's negotiation efforts were persistent, but it yielded no result (Atiyas 1995, 185; Ari and Pirinç 2011, 1). In 1993, the Clinton administration revitalized its Balkan policy. The main concern for the USA was the prevention of the possible clashes in Europe. The USA aimed explicitly for cooperation and military power in the Balkans. In 1995, the Clinton administration announced its national strategy on engagement and enlargement (A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement). In this context, Washington stated its global goals and intentions in the Balkan region (The Washington Institute, 2023). The EU referred to its commitment to the WB on its European engagement and integration process in the context of membership in Euro-Atlantic institutions in recent years. Washington focused on conflict settlement and economic initiatives in the 1990s, then focused on post-conflict stabilization and integration and continued to provide financial aid through agreements such as Central European Free Trade Agreement and institutions like the Regional Cooperation Council in WB, in the 2000s (DG NEAR, 2023). The Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA), endorsed by the EU and also supported by the USA, has notably facilitated the liberalization of trade in the WB, covering not only goods but also services and investments (Markovic, Petrovic and Bjelic 2021). In the early 2000s, The USA primarily focused on Kosovo and Bosnia; with Bosnia's NATO initiative about peace program and Washington encouraged the EU to bear the region's problems in the first place (Ruy and Conley 2021).

In the 2020s, the USA stance through the WB was still active and focused on promoting stability, supporting democracy, and seeking to reach Euro-Atlantic integration. However, differences of administrations affected the USA attitudes toward the region. In fact, there were critical differences between Donald Trump (2017-2021) and Joe Biden (incumbent) administrations. On the one hand, Trump, was more likely to reduce the USA's engagement through the region, unlike the other administrations. On the other hand, Biden clearly expressed his support for the WB at the Munich Security Conference in February 2021 and their integration into the institutions such as the EU and NATO (Biden 2021; Ruy and Conley 2021). Biden's expression of the recent USA vision of the region was encouraging, contrary to Trump's indifferent strategies. However, regardless of differences in administrations, the USA foreign policy in general, focused on promoting regional stability, and democracy and supporting the EU's enlargement in the region (Krstic 2021, 175).

In short, the USA supports the EU's policies towards the WB and provides significant financial aid to show its support to the EU. The USA's desire to strengthen its authority in the WB has become a matter of national agenda, especially after 1992, with the dissolution of Yugoslavia. The new power balances in the region would threaten a superpower that might shake its authority and existence. Thus, Washington took some precautions to be ready for any possible power conflict. The path through surveillance of the region and keeping the power balance stable in the WB is creating tailor-made policies towards the area, such as the one of the Clinton administration in the 1990s. The plans of the EU had failed one by one due to unstable political and economic situation in the Western Balkan states. The USA proved its presence in the WB by these measures on the other side of the world regardless of government differences. On the other hand, Russia most likely counterbalances any actor, including the USA's influence in the region, to maintain its strong presence by using its alliance relations. In contrast to the USA and other actors, Russia also sees itself as a domestic actor and uses its historical background with Slavs to unite against the outside world to newborn influences (Suslov, Vuckovic, and Dordevic 2023).

Russia

Unlike the USA and Turkey, Russia's goals in the WB differed slightly due to cultural affinities, financial concerns, and geopolitical compete with the West. Back in the Russian Empire period, Russia attributed itself to a role as protector of the Orthodox Christians, simultaneous with the Balkan Wars and the dissolution of Yugoslavia (Djokic 2020, 231). Until then, WB were in the sphere of influence for

Russia's national agenda. In fact, Russia was a significant political, financial, and military supporter of the region. In essence, Russia's goals were to engage with the world, retain control over the post-Soviet atmosphere, and preserve its global status (Bechev 2012).

Russia's strategy in the WB has been balancing the Western influence, and resisting expansion of the institutions such as NATO and the EU. Russia perceives itself as a power with a longstanding historical presence in the region and the other actors, like the USA and the EU, were just newborn powers. The power of stability in the WB was necessary. In this sense, the Russian government followed its energy interests, construction of oil and gas pipelines, and therefore provided a secure path to access energy resources. Also, Russia and Serbia have been allies since the world wars (Djokic 2020; Brey 2022). In this context, Russia's power on media in Serbia was enough to present its own views on the recent developments in the region. Besides, heavy energy dependence of the Serbian industry strengthens this alliance. Russian authority was similar in Montenegro and Bosnia Herzegovina due to the same religious, historical bonds, and financial dependence. In this way, Russia improved its influence and authority in the Balkans and, at the same time, kept its ties strong against sanctions that applied from other Balkan states.

In the 2020s, Russia maintained its close ties with Serbia in advance and continued to counterbalance the USA effect in Europe by using an alliance system and media power. In Serbia, Russian power on media was enough to shape public opinion in the region. Serbia, a traditional Russian partner, has been exposed to these influences due to constant support of Moscow to Serbia's territorial integrity in Kosovo. Russia questioned that Kosovo's demand violated international law and brought it to the Court of Justice (International Court of Justice 2008). Russia's relationship with WB was motivated by cultural and historical roots of Slav communities and to protect Orthodox Slavs in the region. Nevertheless, the invasion of Ukraine has led to the imposition of sanctions against Russia by the EU and its Western Balkan allies, resulting in their distancing from Moscow. While Serbia mostly refrained from implementing restrictive measures against Russia, it did align with seven political EU declarations critical of Russian actions in Ukraine throughout 2022. Consequently, the relations between Serbia and Russia have become more intricate and multifaceted since the onset of the 2022 invasion (ISAC 2023).

In brief, Russia's active stance in the WB continued although the invasion of Ukraine caused distancing of the entire WB (to a varying degree) from Moscow. However, Russian support for Belgrade in international forums over Kosovo has made such a course in case of Serbia more challenging and uncertain. For Russia, the WB is not a new interest; contrary to the USA stance. Russia has historical and cultural ties with these states, and religion represents a cohesive factor. Russia's

relations provide the Russian government to attribute itself as a protector of the Orthodox role in the international area, specifically in the region. Russia wants to continue and improve its presence in the WB by providing protection and security for economic interests. Moscow was determined to reach the region's energy paths while keeping it secure through alliances with Serbia. Also, Serbia has not been dismissive of Russia's presence and activities in the region. The media represent an additional tool for Russia's authority and a surveillance system. Serbia's support for Russian media provided convenience to Russia in their allied relations. Russia's influence in Montenegro, Bosnia, and Herzegovina were similar, but the connection with Serbia was more strategic and consistent. In that manner, it is rational and strategic to Russia that continues its presence in the WB with allies, funding, and media instruments. However, Russia is not the only state with historical ties to the Western Balkan region. Due to its Ottoman legacy, Turkey has strong ties and shared culture with the most Western Balkan states. Besides being an ally, Turkey has been a reliable partner for the Balkan countries. Turkish government always followed the path of mediation while in their relations and all the conflicts that Western Balkan states had to face.

Turkey

Turkey has a shared cultural traits and sense of kinship with the Western Balkan states because of its Ottoman heritage. Unlike the USA and Russia, Turkey aims to apply a more neutral partnership approach. In other words, Turkey is a semi-active alliance with the Western Balkan governments. Turkish government seeks to enhance cultural, economic, and political cooperation and integration while supporting peace building and stability. Ankara has no goals of controlling the region but cooperating closely with neighboring countries. The efforts have always been cooperative, based on the idea of negotiation, and being a good neighbor (Ekinci 2018). Like Russia as regards the local Orthodox Christian inhabitants, Turkey has a significant influence as a protector and strategic ally of the Muslim population in the WB. The Turkish government attributed itself a role of protector to those in the international area. Turkey's stance was sharp, and the government publicly opposed artificial differences among Balkan states (Çavuşoğlu 2017; Ekinci 2018).

In the 1990s and the early 2000s, Turkey shared the WB goal to join the European Union. Especially in the 1990s, the general Turkish foreign policy was on mediation and good neighbor policy to create and strengthen an alliance system in the international area. Turkey wanted to improve its credibility with the Western world and desired to become a member in the long run. Stabilization problems of the Euro-Atlantic integration and Turkey's insufficient political and economic

stability overlapped in the membership process (Sorovic 2019, 87). Turkey's policies highly depend on soft power, and in the last two decades, Turkey's proactive attitude in the WB has been significant. In 1996, Turkey promoted the mediation South-Eastern Europe Brigade (SEEBRIG) and participated in Southeastern Europe Defense (Ekinci 2009). Similarly, in the 1990s, Turkey played its part in Bosnia in the UN Protection Activities, and in 1996, the actors signed two bilateral agreements that included the defense industry, military, scientific research, and development. As the years passed by, although the Turkish government's hopes to become a member were shaken, in 2010, Turkey had a diplomatic initiative to create stability between Western Balkan states and continued its mediator role again. Unfortunately, the Turkish government did not reach its goal of becoming a member of the EU. The process is going backward with the latest developments in Turkish politics, the economy, and the migration dilemma (Boskovic, Reljic and Vracic 2015).

In the 2020s, Turkey sought its national agenda on economic cooperation and trade in WB due to shared historical and cultural connections. Turkey has strengthened its trade and energy infrastructure investment in the region in the last three decades with the Balkan borders. Since the 1990s, Turkey has continued to support infrastructure and connectivity projects in the area and is a faithful ally to Western Balkan states, especially Bosnia and Herzegovina. The perception of Turkey's intentions to use soft power in the area is undoubtedly beneficial for relations between Turkey and the WB and to someday become a part of the EU. On the other hand, besides Turkey's role as a good neighbor, the government also promoted cultural and educational exchange programs in the last decades to improve its approach toward the region and the EU (MFA 2023).

Turkey is an excellent example of a bridge and mediator between East and West. Especially in the WB and due to the historical ties since the Ottoman Empire period, Turkey regarded the WB as a strategically significant region. Turkey's strategic aim to join the European Union constitutes the shared interest with the Western Balkans, even though Europeanization in both cases is challenging and burdened with problems. The Turkish government undeniably has significant initiatives in the economic and diplomatic scenes, specifically in the last decades. Russia's national interests in the WB would be a problem for Turkey, such as in the USA, in the long term. Turkey's choice of soft power is rational due to its national agenda and international goals. Also, the government avoided to pick sides during the regional disagreements. Turkey's influence in the WB has never been questioned and has risen since the 2000s.

General Assessment: How Actors Have Changed Their Policies over the Years

Even though the goals were different, all foreign actors in the WB – the USA, Russia and Turkey – maintained their influence in the region, pursuing their national interests. The primary objective of all actors was maintaining their authority in the region, in the heart of Europe. Occasionally, the EU's endeavors to foster a more stable and democratically developed region have faced opposition from the short-term political interests or gains pursued by the mentioned "third actors". The primary aim of the EU has always been to keep all European regions secure. Thus, the organization took measures to stabilize the region and focused on economic and political development within the line of peace-building. Throughout its history, the EU enlargement process has consistently been motivated and guided by security perceptions, with Brussels aiming to enhance its own stability by integrating neighboring regions. Thus, the EU decided to include Western Balkan states in its alliance system to complete the economic development. The USA supported almost all the EU's policies in their enlargement and provided financial assistance to the region as a superpower. Besides being a superpower and regional authority, Washington was advocated about completing the Euro-Atlantic integration. Even the Trump administration, which followed an ambiguous stance in foreign policy, the USA government provided its support to the mediation and peace-building processes. Similarly, Biden administration focused more on mediation and publicly supported the EU's enlargement. Both cases show that even though the WB are not the priority of the USA's foreign policy, they do represent an important element in their agendas.

On the other hand, Russia has been challenging the EU and the US dominance in the WB by enhancing and deepening cooperation with Serbia. The ideology behind Russia's stance in the region was its thought that Russia was the domestic actor and a protector of Orthodox Christian culture and the others were just outsiders. Besides the doctrine, Russia aimed to reach energy hubs in Europe and desired to strengthen its authority. Russia used its historical and religious background with Slavs and propaganda tools to achieve its goals. On the contrary, Turkey's stance was more into mediation and partnership-based to WB, the EU, and others. Turkey's choice of soft power positively affected its presence in Europe and its membership goal. Like Russia's historical ties, Turkey has also shared history and culture with the Western Balkan states since the Ottoman period. Turkish foreign policy towards the region was partnership driven. The administration supported the EU's policies to promote their neighbors' regional stability and take a step towards the Union membership. By supporting the EU integration in the WB, and

NATO enlargement agenda (proposed by the USA), from its perspective, Turkey contributed to the Euro-Atlantic perspective of the region and to the decrease of the Russian influence at a geopolitically volatile moment. Turkey's policy towards the WB complements that of the EU, which also reflects advanced ties between Ankara and Brussels, despite all challenges and some negative phenomena.

Conclusion

The EU acknowledged the membership prospects of the WB through the Stabilization and Association Process (1999). This process aimed to provide financial assistance, diplomatic support, and economic and political reforms to prevent problems to any potential harm to the EU's structure. The USA, Russia, and Turkey are highly interested in the region with overlapping concerns and goals. The USA highly supported the EU's enlargement policies in the WB, aligning its national interests by providing stability, economic development, and democracy. The USA supported the EU initiatives for the WB, such as Central European Free Trade Agreement in the 2000s. Also, the Euro-Atlantic integration process has started since the late 1990s with the Clinton administration's. For the USA's global authority, it was essential to support areas that would be the direct sphere of influence in the future to retain its superpower status. Although during the early 1990s, the US refrained from taking the lead over the EU in the WB, this changed following the EU's unsuccessful efforts to resolve conflicts in the context of the dissolution of Socialist Yugoslavia. Despite its support to the WB in the 1990s and early 2000s, the USA engagement in the region has been problematic and questioned the level to the transatlantic partnership.

Despite the differing strategic focuses and leadership styles of the last two American administrations (Trump and Biden), Washington has largely supported the EU's leadership role in the WB. Although there were some isolationist moves during the Trump administration, transatlantic cooperation has strengthened since 2020. This strengthening is particularly evident in the context of the invasion of Ukraine, which contributed to enhanced coordination and deeper cooperation between the transatlantic partners.

On the other hand, Russia aims to counterbalance the Western strategies in the WB and to maintain its influence in the region, which has been challenging, especially since the beginning of its assault on Ukraine which is perceived negatively in the entire region, despite some differences in terms of harmonization with the EU's common foreign and security policy. Russia attributes itself a role of the

protector of the Orthodox Christians due to Russia and Western Balkan states' shared historical background. The European and NATO integrations are not perceived favorably by Russia, especially since the onset of its military campaign in Ukraine, which also caused wide-range geopolitical disturbances. Russia also supports the governments and minority groups that advocate Euro-Atlantic skepticism. Like the USA, Russia did not want to lose its authority in the area due to concerns that different actors' influence may disrupt its energy dominance in that part of Europe. Besides not supporting the EU's enlargement policies, Russia also showed its stance to oppose Kosovo's secession and strengthen partnership with Serbia.

Turkey formally aligns with the EU's enlargement policy in the WB and shows its support for integration with the EU within the actors. Apart from the connections stemming from the Ottoman era, relations with the WB are also developing in economic, diplomatic, and other segments. Even most Turkish leaders refer in their speeches that WB are their relatives, which is why Turkey plays a mediator role and shows its presence in most regional disputes attempting to act as a neutral actor. Turkey's active stance in mediation also positively impacted the region, and in fact, the Turkish government's choice of soft power was mainly successful. However, the domestic problems in Turkey and the lack of progress towards meeting EU membership criteria has caused ambivalent reactions in the EU, including when it comes to Turkish influence in the WB. Turkey continued its mediation efforts and the use of soft power in the 2020s as it was in the 1990s to keep its ties strong with the Western Balkan neighbors and the EU, Turkey's long-lasting goal to become a member of the EU is still formally in place, despite the political and economic instability and challenges when it comes to harmonization with EU standards and the *acquis*.

On the other hand, the lack of the US direct engagement in the WB affairs provided more space to the other foreign actors, apart from the EU. Whereas Washington did intervene on several occasions during the 1990s in the context of the Yugoslav conflicts, since the early 2000s, the European Union took the lead as the primary protector of the WB. The signals of increased US interest for the region only reappeared following the invasion of Ukraine, which brought security concerns to both EU and its transatlantic ally. Turkey's recent domestic problems raised concerns about the compatibility of its foreign policy with the EU's values, even if Turkey is an important mediator. The power conflict in the region occurred, where different actors took a stance within their national interests, and in some cases, these interests may harm the region's fragile status and the EU's efforts to promote peacebuilding and stability in the area. Managing the actors' controversies must be the essential and primary goal of the EU's future initiatives to strengthen the

Western Balkan and Euro-Atlantic integration to reach their diplomatic objectives and decrease regional threats. Russia's perspective of the USA, the EU, and Turkey is the newcomer to the region, and Russia has historical rights in the area, caused to strengthen their tight policies towards the region.

In brief, considering each actor's regional policy, they are consistent and stable in their goals despite the choice of Russia to pursue its national interests through warfare. Namely, these actors have no intentions to make unexpected, devastating policies toward the region to deepen the power gap, at least soon. Although the risk of escalation in the WB should never be underestimated, such a scenario is unlikely and does not suit the interests of all major mentioned actors, except perhaps Russia to a certain degree. Taking the very nature of the EU-WB relations as exemplified in the Stabilization and Association Process, the regional stability and security has remained one of the top priorities for Brussels, and also the USA and Turkey as its close partners.

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**ODNOSI ZAPADNOG BALKANA SA EVROPSKOM UNIJOM IZMEĐU SAD,
RUSIJE I TURSKE**

Apstrakt: Usled bezbednosnih zabrinutosti proisteklih iz skorije prošlosti, Evropska unija odlučila je da uključi Zapadni Balkan (ZB) u proces proširenja. U međuvremenu, Sjedinjene Američke Države (SAD), Rusija i Turska promovisale su potrebu za ravnotežom moći u regionu, premda su njihovi interesi međusobno suprotstavljeni. Zapravo, SAD je podržala politike Evropske unije spram Zapadnog Balkana kako bi konsolidovala evroatlantske integracije i zadržala svoj autoritet kao supersila na istočnoj strani Atlantika. Druga velika sila, Rusija, nastojala je da pruži kontratežu Evropskoj uniji i SAD-u u regionu kroz bliske odnose sa Srbijom. S druge strane, zemlja iz bliskog susedstva, Turska, usvojila je politiku meke moći i dobrosusedskog pristupa prema ZB kako bi ojačala odnose sa starim partnerima, na osnovu percepcije o zajedničkoj kulturi, istoriji i nasleđu. Ovaj članak analizira suprotstavljene nacionalne interese SAD, Rusije i Turske u kontekstu pristupa evropske normativne moći spram Zapadnog Balkana.

Ključne reči: proširenje, evroatlantske integracije, ravnoteža moći, meka moć, kontrateža, supersila, borba za moć, Evropska unija.