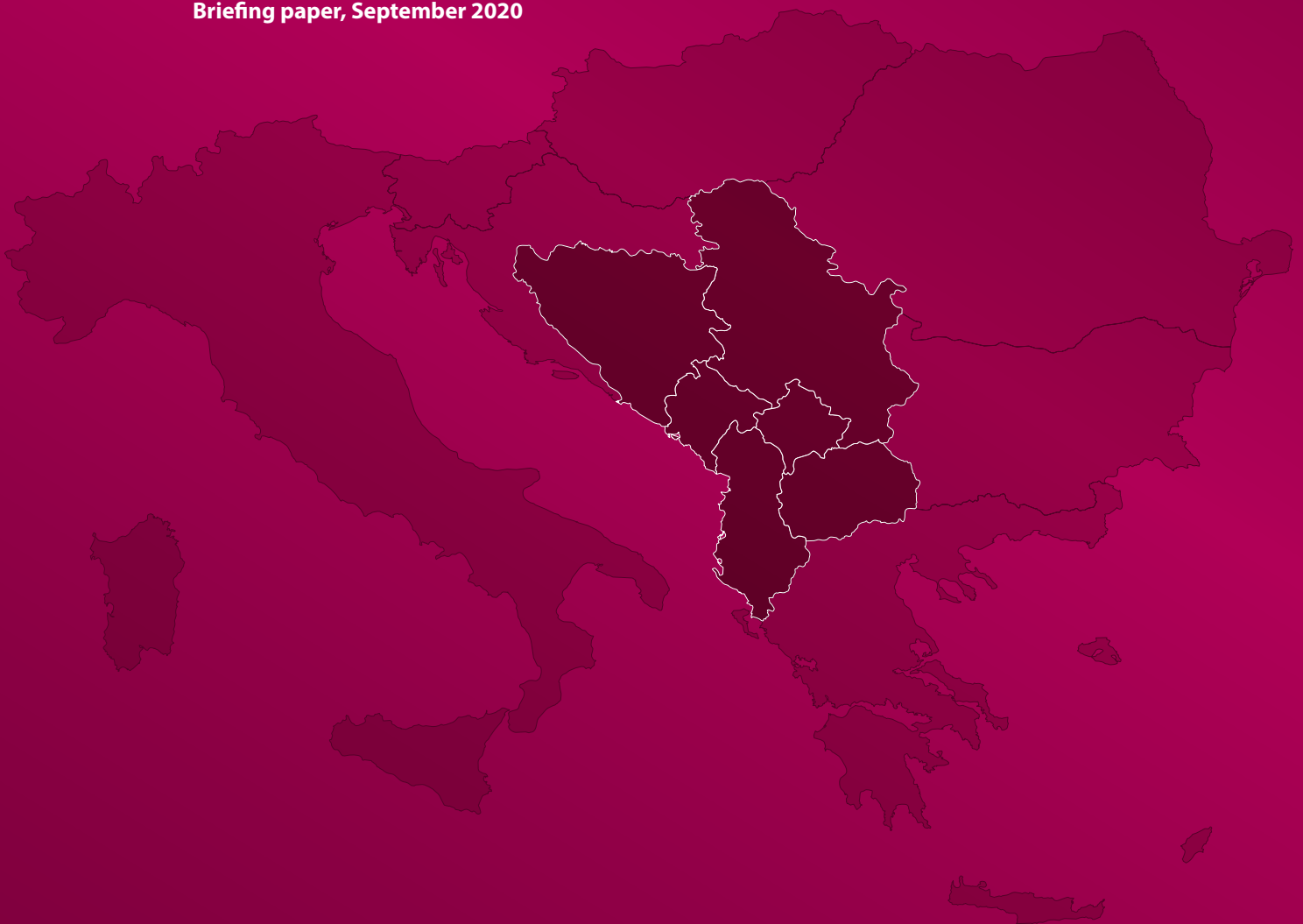




COVID-19 Raises Geopolitical Stakes in the Balkans

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Executive Summary

The Balkans, like the rest of the world, was shocked and humbled by the outbreak of COVID-19 crisis early this year. Yet this proved to be just the calm before the storm, as ethnic, religious, political, security, economic and social tensions increased across the region as soon as April. This escalation was mostly related to political quarrels caused by the fact that most Balkan countries were scheduled to hold general or local elections in the course of 2020.

The Coronavirus pandemic has intensified the years-long competition of key global actors for power and influence in the region. China, the EU, Gulf countries, Russia, the USA and Turkey all rushed to help Balkan countries, but also tried to use this opportunity to strengthen their positions in this region in their ongoing geopolitical games. While China and the Gulf countries focused mainly on humanitarian and economic issues, centre stage was eventually taken by Russia and Turkey's renewed aggressive attitudes in the region, as well as by the White House's attempt to broker a slap-dash agreement between Kosovo and Serbia.

As a series of violent demonstrations shook Serbia and Montenegro in recent months, their officials and media complained about what they said was direct Russian involvement in the organization of protests. Russian officials denied these allegations, but several experts warned that Russia is indeed trying to use all of its resources in the Balkans to stop or even reverse the expansion of NATO and the EU in the region. Some blamed Russia for trying to prevent a Kosovo-Serbia deal in order to maintain its own influence in the Balkans. Others said Russian "pan-Slavic" ambitions were focused on using the EU and US's internal problems and divisions to unite all Slavic nations under Russian command.

The Turkish role in the Balkans has been eclipsed in recent months by Ankara's increasingly aggressive behaviour in the Mediterranean and Middle East, including in the wars in Syria and Libya. Nevertheless, recent findings reveal

that Turkish nationals connected with Erdoğan's regime have been establishing a foothold for criminal and/or paramilitary networks in the Balkans since early 2020, which raises questions about Ankara's engagement in and plans for the region.

COVID-19 crisis also saw a further shift in US policy towards the region, continuing a trend which first became visible with the last US presidential elections in 2016. While on the one hand the US provided considerable and transparent financial assistance to all Balkan countries, on the other this was overshadowed and tainted by the White House attempt to push through a slap-dash deal between Kosovo and Serbia. Strong pressure from the special US envoy for Serbia-Kosovo talks, Richard Grenell, undermined the Kosovar government's ability to deal with the pandemic and eventually led to the toppling of Kosovar Prime Minister Albin Kurti.

This rollercoaster of developments continued on an almost daily basis, threatening to push the Balkans over the edge towards further destabilization and possibly new ethnic or social conflicts. Although these dynamics prevent any reliable long-term analysis, most experts agree that in this situation only the EU has the capacity to gradually stabilize and normalize the Balkans.

Whether the EU will now succeed at what it has been failing to do for the past 15 years will be known by this fall, when the EU is expected to produce the long awaited "Marshall Plan" for the region. This plan will outline a set of reforms and other conditions under which Balkan countries will be able to use a combination of grants and loans worth 3.3 billion euro, which the EU earmarked for the Balkans back in April. Yet the EU will have to tread very carefully and wisely if it wants to make good use of this opportunity; otherwise local, regional and geopolitical quarrels in the Balkans will likely continue escalating, with potentially devastating consequences.



Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to assess the impact of COVID-19 on different external influences in the Western Balkans (WB6: Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Albania, Montenegro and Kosovo), which have already been steadily increasing in recent years.

The briefing paper, titled **“COVID-19 Raises Geopolitical Stakes in the Balkans,”** represents the first part of two content-wise connected papers and documents recent American, Chinese, Gulf countries, Russian and Turkish humanitarian, economic, political and other activity in the Balkans. Outside of those connected to the initial phase of the Coronavirus pandemic, most of these activities have little or no direct connection with the COVID-19 crisis. Nevertheless, all these foreign actors used the pandemic and its multidimensional repercussions in their attempts to further their own strategic interests in the Balkans. The paper offers insight into different forms and levels of engagement by these actors, establishing a better understanding of their agendas and strategies, and also providing data for future research on and analyses of this topic. The focus of this report is on Russian, American and Turkish political activities in the region, as they directly threatened the stability of the Balkans and weakened governments’ capacities to deal with the pandemic.

The paper is interlinked with a policy paper, **“The Balkans between the EU and a Hard Place” (available [here](#))**, which identifies and analyses opportunities and challenges, which the EU is facing in the region as it tries to regain its leverage there. The policy paper starts from the oft-repeated premise that of all foreign actors, only the EU has the capacity to gradually stabilize and normalize the Balkans. It also examines the roots of the acute misunderstanding and miscommunication between EU and Balkan officials. Finally, the paper identifies possible scenarios of the future relationship between the EU and the Balkans, as well as the possible cost of “non-enlargement.”

While both papers are mainly focused on foreign influences in the Balkans, this does not mean that they ignore or negate local actors’ responsibility for the difficult situation in which the region finds itself today. However, given the current political impasse that is present across the Balkans, the long history of various foreign influences in the Balkans and the latest escalation in geopolitical tensions, the two papers presume that global rather than local factors will determine the direction of the region in the near future.



Balkans: Caught in Great Powers' Geopolitical Struggles

The various geopolitical alignments of the Balkan countries changed significantly during and after the breakup of Yugoslavia and the wars that ensued in its wake. The special relations which Bosniaks, Croats and Serbs had traditionally cherished with Istanbul, Vienna and Moscow (respectively) for the past several centuries, were, beginning in the late 1990's, replaced with American and to a lesser degree EU dominance (read more in the PSSI paper [Western Balkans at the Crossroads – East vs. West](#)).

As of the early 2000's, the US committed to withdrawing from day-to-day Balkan political affairs, with its presence intended to be replaced with the EU enlargement process. While the US did eventually reduce its regional presence, the EU failed to assert itself as a political player and continued to be perceived primarily as a "cash-cow" by local actors. This stagnation of European integration processes gradually enabled the resurrection of nationalist and populist local politics, but also opened space for other foreign actors, such as China, the Gulf countries, Russia and Turkey to increase their regional influence (Prague Security Studies Institute, 2018).

For years, these countries have applied different combinations of soft and hard power, steadily building up their presence in the region. While China relied mainly on offering relatively cheap, condition-free, non-transparent loans to all countries in the region, Russia, Turkey and the Gulf countries used their special historic, political, business, religious and cultural links with different ethnic and political groups. Regardless of the different sets of tools these countries applied in the Balkans, their presence was always focused on using the Balkans in their larger geopolitical games.

For example, this political focus was clearly reflected in Russian investments in the regional energy sector, in the Kremlin's exploitation of political and religious links with local leaders in Serbia and BiH's ethnic-Serb majority Republika Srpska; in Chinese loans supporting major energy and infrastructure projects across the region; or in Turkish and Gulf countries' business links with Bosniak and Serbian leaders.

While EU and US officials expressed concerns and dismay in recent years over other foreign actors' growing presence in the Balkans, their leaders nevertheless continued overlooking the region's geostrategic importance.

The US appeared to be more aware of the political and ethnic nature of Balkan problems than the EU, but was still reluctant to be dragged back into the Balkan political quicksand. American foreign policy moved even further away from its previously strong positions in the Balkans after Donald Trump enacted his "America first" foreign policy beginning in 2016.

The EU, meanwhile, mainly ignored or downplayed the intricate political and ethnic nature of Balkan power games, focusing on economic relations, the EU accession process and technical reforms. Lacking proper political will and strategic communication capacities, the EU failed to capitalize on its massive financial support to and trade turnover with the Balkan countries, even though its economic importance in the region outweighs that of all other external actors by a wide margin.¹

1 A review of all available public resources and databases shows that the EU member states dominated trade turnover and Foreign Direct Investments (FDIs) with the six West Balkan countries (Albania, BiH, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia). For details, see the second paper "The Balkans between the EU and a Hard Place." The exception is Montenegro, where most investments in the last year came from Russia and then China. See more at: <https://www.bankar.me/2020/07/03/za-cetiri-mjeseca-2020-u-crmu-goru-se-slilo-282-miliona-eura-stranih-investicija/>.

Balkan Power Games Flourish amidst the COVID-19 Crisis

A closer look in Balkan geopolitical realities in the first half of 2020 puts to shame even the best political thrillers. What started with the global COVID-19 pandemic, was followed by the EU's blockade of exports of medical equipment; the rise of Chinese and Russian "masks and respirators" diplomacy, as well as a hardening of the Turkish position in the Balkans and Mediterranean. Meanwhile, the US envoy for Kosovo-Serbia talks, Richard Grenell, contributed to the toppling of Kosovo's previous government, while the EU made a strong comeback pledging 3.3 billion euro for health, economic and social assistance for the Balkan countries.

This intensification of geopolitical competition in the Balkans was matched by similarly intense local dynamics. The initial public focus on the pandemic after only a month of seemingly functional governance gave way to ethnic, political, economic and social tensions as most of the countries in the region started preparing for their national or local elections. Violent protests erupted in Albania over the demolition of the Tirana National Theatre, while in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) the political impasse deepened, threatening the conduct of local elections.

Dirty political campaigns preceded parliamentary elections in Serbia, where the Serbian Progressive Party of President Aleksandar Vučić won by a land-slide, as well as in North Macedonia, where the Social Democrat-led "We Can" alliance of Zoran Zaev won by a narrow margin. Despite different results, both elections deepened concerns about the state of democracy and EU perspective of these countries.

Incidentally, a war crimes indictment against Kosovar President Hashim Thaci stopped Grenell's Kosovo-Serbia "peace plan" from proceeding just three days before Thaci and Vučić were supposed to meet in Washington, DC. Meanwhile, recent violent clashes between police and protesters in Montenegro and Serbia raised concerns about Russian involvement in the regional political scene.

Preoccupied with pre- or post-election campaigns and daily power plays, Balkan leaders have been ignoring a potentially grave danger – a looming economic and social downturn amidst the industrial slowdown and interruption of trade relations caused by the pandemic. The 2008-09 recession showed that the Balkan region is more vulnerable to the global economic downturn than the rest of Europe. This is because of the Balkan countries' high level of dependence on the EU market, as well as on remittances from hundreds of thousands of their nationals who have moved to the EU in recent years. They are usually among the first ones to suffer from personnel or salary cuts during any crisis and are often eventually forced to return to their homes. Furthermore, populist Balkan leaders, feeble governance capacities and underperforming public services are ill-prepared to deal with such challenges. In this situation, years of ethnic and political frustrations, combined with continued COVID-19-related health hazards along with deepening economic and social hardship could lead to new ethnic or social violence across the region.

It is inherently difficult to ascertain how serious or imminent this threat truly is. On the one hand, some believe that perpetual crisis has become the region's way of life and could continue without any major changes or negative consequences for the foreseeable future. Others point out that the Balkan crisis is not a continuation of the status quo, but a continuous disintegration of political, governmental and rule of law systems. According to this line of thinking, this process has already created an antagonistic environment similar to the one that existed in the 1990s, and could eventually result in a new outbreak of violence if left unchecked. Which of the two schools of thought will prove to be more accurate is impossible to foretell, but the outcome will certainly depend on the ability of the US and EU to continue acting as stabilizing agents – a condition that is becoming increasingly uncertain.



Geopolitical Toolbox: From “Mask Diplomacy” to Government Bashing

At the very beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, all Balkan countries struggled to obtain the most basic protective materials and equipment needed to deal with the new health threat. At that critical time, the EU’s decision to block the export of medical equipment and supplies drew angry reactions from some EU member and Balkan countries alike. It also opened doors for China and then Russia to win easy PR points with their “mask diplomacy” campaigns, while Turkey and the Gulf countries quickly followed suit.

A large part of this assistance was provided in the form of materials, including masks, protective gear, COVID-19 tests and on rare occasions respirators and other medical equipment. While badly needed in the first phase of the pandemic, this aid was provided in such a way that its true value and overall effect could not be measured. Furthermore,

the Balkan countries provided little concrete information about where and how these donations were used, except in a few cases concerning respirators or other more expensive equipment.

As the initial shock and panic caused the pandemic subsided, the Balkans witnessed a new surge of local, regional and geopolitical powerplays. In this situation, different foreign actors used different approaches. Most of them had little or nothing to do with COVID-19, outside of the fact that most of them used the health, political, economic and social context created by the Coronavirus pandemic in an attempt to achieve their strategic goals in the region. The following pages present a comprehensive overview of their actions and provide analytical insight into their impacts.

China, the EU and the Gulf countries focus on humanitarian and economic assistance

China: strong presence despite low profile

At the start of the COVID-19 crisis, China was the first to realize the Balkan countries’ need for protective gear and basic medical equipment, as well as the great PR potential which the pandemic created for both Chinese and local leaders. While China made sure to provide basic assistance to all Balkan countries, the bulk of its assistance focused on Serbia, which is the region’s largest market, the main political

actor, and China’s key regional business partner.² Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić hailed China’s actions, and initially criticized and later downplayed the EU’s assistance, which eventually triggered strong reactions from the EU (Popović 2020).

Between early April and the end of May, China also sent protective gear and medical equipment to Albania,³ Bosnia

2 By the end of May, Chinese donations to Serbia included “nine plane loads of equipment,” equipment for two laboratories for coronavirus testing, as well as a team of Chinese experts. *See more at:* <http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a585896/Pomoc-Srbiji-iz-EU-Kine-Rusije-za-onu-sa-istoka-glasnije-hvala.html>, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-i-kina-ugovor-o-donaciji-laboratorije-korona-virus-/30541795.html>.

3 Albania received its Chinese donation on April 25, which included an unspecified amount of medical supplies including “testing kits, protective garments, face masks, goggles and gloves.” Although none of the officials was able to provide even an estimated value for this shipment, it was nevertheless welcomed at the Tirana airport by Albanian Deputy Minister of Health and Social Protection Mira Rakacolli and Deputy Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs EtjenXhafaj. Rakacolli was quoted as thanking China and stressing that “we can overcome this global challenge only through solidarity.” *Information available at:* http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-04/26/c_139007921.htm.



and Herzegovina,⁴ North Macedonia⁵ and Montenegro.⁶ Kosovo was the only one left without Chinese assistance as Beijing officials took caution not to antagonize its main client in the region – Serbia (Loxha 2020). Nevertheless, the exact quantities and value of most of these provisions remain unknown. The overall picture is further muddled by the fact that both local governments and the EU paid for some of the supplies provided by China, or their transport (Kovačević 2020).

As the pandemic dragged on, the Chinese presence in regional media dwindled, partially because the need for basic protective and medical gear subsided, but also because of the poor quality of its products, many of which had to be returned (LO 2020) and because China faced strong global criticism for using the pandemic as a PR opportunity (Borrell 2020). By the beginning of August, China kept a relatively low media profile in the region. Nevertheless, it continued strengthening its presence through infrastructure projects, such as the start of the construction of Block 7 of the Tuzla thermal power plant in BiH (Pavlova 2020), or the delivery of the first contingent of six Cai Hong (Rainbow) military drones, accompanied with eighteen FT-8C laser-guided missiles for Serbian military forces, on July 1 (Roblin 2020).

The EU: finally taking the lead in the Balkans

Despite its poor start, the EU again came through as the region's single biggest donor by offering a 3.3 billion euro assistance package for the Western Balkan countries, aimed at helping them to deal with the challenges caused by the Coronavirus pandemic.⁷ The proposal was welcomed by all local officials as one of the most concrete EU moves in the region in recent years, as well as a sign of renewed EU interest in the Balkans. In subsequent months, the EU also continued providing support to Balkan countries' overstretched health systems in dealing with the pandemic.

Following the interruption of the White House-sponsored talks between Kosovo and Serbia, the EU reengaged with this process, after EU-led talks had been frozen for more than a year and a half. The EU-led talks between Pristina and Belgrade resumed in mid-June and continued with a series of high-level and technical meetings in July. Yet officials and experts stressed that the prospect for success is limited due to heightened tensions and animosities, as well as low trust towards the EU in both countries (Hehir 2020).

Meanwhile, EU officials have been engaged in the process of matching the earmarked 3.3-billion-euro financial injection for the Balkans with reforms and other conditions that will be required in order for the countries to access the EU funds. This package will be presented in the fall and will likely determine the fate of the EU-Balkan relations, and therefore the future of all other foreign influences in the region.

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- 4 Bosnia and Herzegovina has also received Chinese donations in the form of medical supplies and equipment, which were delivered in three tranches during April, 2020. The donation included six ventilators, medical supplies, including nucleic acid testing kits, protective clothing and N95 masks. *Information available at:* <https://www.fena.news/bih/first-contingent-of-chinese-donation-in-medical-equipment-arrives/>.
 - 5 The Chinese embassy in Skopje donated 30,000 euro to North Macedonia on April 16, which is one of the few cases where the Chinese government donated cash to the Western Balkan countries. In addition, the country received a Chinese donation of medical supplies of unknown quantity and value on April 18. None of the local officials greeted the donation at the Skopje airport but Deputy Prime Minister Bujar Osmani thanked China by video link, as he was in self-isolation. *See more at:* http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-04/19/c_138990481.htm.
 - 6 In addition to the donation of the medical equipment, which Montenegro received from the Chinese government on April 16, (*available at:* http://me.chineseembassy.org/mon/sghd_1/t1772820.htm), the country also received several private donations. They included "300,000 protective gloves, about 550,000 surgical masks and 45,000 N95-type masks, 3,000 face visors, 2,000 coronavirus test kits and about 3,500 [units of] protective clothing" from Chinese billionaire Jack Ma, as well as nine tons of medical equipment and medical supplies (protective masks, suits, tests, respirators etc.) that were delivered to the Montenegrin embassy in Beijing. The financial value of these donations is unknown. *See more at:* <http://www.gov.me/en/News/223718/Valuable-medical-equipment-donated-by-Jack-Ma-and-Petros-Stathis-arrived-in-Montenegro.html>.
 - 7 The 3.3 billion euro package includes immediate support for the health sector from the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) worth 38 million euro; 389 million euro earmarked for social and economic recovery needs; 455 million economic reactivation package; 750 million euro of Macro-Financial Assistance and a 1.7 billion euro assistance from the European Investment Bank. *See more at the European Commission press release, April 29, 2020. Available at:* https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_20_777



The Gulf countries cherish Islamic ties but also business links

Among the Gulf Countries, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar were the most active in providing assistance to the Balkan countries, with BiH⁸ being their main focus. Nevertheless, Serbia also benefited significantly from the Gulf countries' assistance – much more than Albania,⁹ North Macedonia¹⁰ or Montenegro, which all have significant Muslim populations.¹¹ Although Kosovo is also populated mostly by Muslims, there are no available reliable records of COVID-19 assistance provided by the Gulf States.

These figures suggest that the Gulf countries recognize Serbia's strategic importance in the region, but also cherish the good political and business relations which Serbian President Vučić has established with many Islamic countries in recent years. Nevertheless, as previous analyses have shown (see more in the [final publication](#) of the first round of the Western Balkans at the Crossroads project), Gulf countries have only limited interests in and influence on the Balkan countries, which are mainly composed of person-to-person business relationships, as well as religious links with Bosniak elites. This also explains why, besides their initial humanitarian assistance, the Gulf countries showed little interest in the Balkans in this period.

Russia blamed for trying to destabilize the Balkans amidst the COVID-19 crisis

Amidst diverse foreign actors' intense humanitarian, economic and political activities, it was eventually Russia that took centre stage in the Balkans during the time of the Coronavirus pandemic.

At the beginning of the pandemic, Russian assistance in the Western Balkan appeared somewhat more concrete than Chinese assistance, yet it was almost exclusively limited to

the two remaining non-NATO countries with significant ethnic Serb populations, Serbia¹² and BiH¹³ (more specifically to its ethnic Serb-dominated entity, Republika Srpska). The fact that the assistance was coordinated and carried out by the Russian Ministry of Defence and the Army has raised eyebrows among many observers (The Moscow Times 2020).

- 8 Bosnia and Herzegovina benefited the most from the Gulf countries, confirming the close links its Bosniak leaders enjoy in the Islamic world. In another rare case of direct financial assistance, on April 15, Saudi Arabia donated 250.000 euro to the BiH ministry of security for its fight against COVID-19 pandemic (see more at: <https://radiosarajevo.ba/vijesti/bosna-i-hercegovina/iz-saudijske-arabije-nasoj-zemlji-uplaceno-vise-od-pola-miliona-km-pomoci/373932>). On May 19, BiH received 10 tens of medical supplies worth 3 million euro from Qatar – which was one of the very few cases where the donor country declared the value of the donation (<https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/u-sarajevo-sletio-jedan-od-najmodernijih-aviona-stiglo-10-tona-katarske-pomoci/200519088>). The donation was welcomed at the Sarajevo airport by the BiH Minister of Foreign Affairs, Biser Turković, who on that occasion stressed that “true friends are recognized when you are in trouble.” A week later, on May 27, Minister Turković was also on the Sarajevo airport welcoming the assistance from the UAE, which did not declare its value. More information at: <https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/u-sarajevo-sletio-boeing-747-400-s-vrijednom-donacijom-iz-ujedinjenih-arapskih-emirata/200527077>.
- 9 Although predominately Muslim, Albania received assistance only from the UAE – seven tons of medical supplies delivered to Tirana on May 18. See more at: <https://www.mofaic.gov.ae/en/mediahub/news/2020/5/12/13-05-2020-uae-help>.
- 10 Northern Macedonia received 600,000 masks and other personal protective equipment from Qatar on May 19. Information available at: <http://balkans.aljazeera.net/video/pomoc-iz-katara-stigla-u-sarajevo-beograd-i-skoplje>.
- 11 Montenegro received assistance only from the UAE – seven tons of medical supplies delivered to Podgorica on May 13. See more at: <https://www.mofaic.gov.ae/en/mediahub/news/2020/5/12/13-05-2020-uae-help>.
- 12 Russian assistance to Serbia amounted to 11 plane loads, which in addition to the usual masks, protective suits and other equipment brought 87 military specialists, eight teams of doctors and nurses as well as specialists for decontamination, along with 16 vehicles and other equipment. The arrival of the assistance was closely followed by Serbian and Russian media, with Serbian President Vučić repeatedly thanking Russian President Vladimir Putin and “brotherly Russian people.” Available at: <https://www.rtc.com/news/484872-russia-serbia-coronavirus-aid/>.
- 13 Russian assistance to Bosnia and Herzegovina was focused exclusively on BiH's Serb-populated entity of Republika Srpska. On April 9, three Russian airplanes brought medical supplies and equipment, as well as specialized military vehicles and experts for disinfection to the RS administrative centre of Banja Luka. At the Banja Luka airport, the donation was welcomed by the Serb member of the BiH Presidency, Milorad Dodik, and Russian ambassador Peter Ivanov (see more at: http://www.rtv.rs/sr-lat/region/avion-sa-pomoci-iz-rusije-sletio-u-banja-luku-docekali-ga-dodik-i-ivanov_1112258.html). A contingent of Russian military vehicles with experts tried to reach the southern town of Mostar on May 1, acting upon the invitation of a Bosnian Croat leader Dragan Čović – Dodik's closest political ally – who asked them to carry out disinfection of the main hospital in Croat-dominated West Mostar. Yet they were forced to turn back from the Serbia-BiH border crossing at Rača, since neither Foreign nor Defence Ministry of BiH – both led by Bosniak officials – approved their request. Available at: <http://rs.n1info.com/Region/a595051/Covic-ih-pozvao-u-Mostar-ruskim-vojnim-strucnjacima-nije-dozvoljen-ulaz-u-BiH.html>.



What triggered even more concern were statements from local officials and media who claimed that Russia was using the situation created by COVID-19 pandemic to orchestrate or support protests against the governments of Montenegro and Serbia, in an attempt to influence or topple them.

Post-election protests test relations between Russia and Serbia

While the start of the COVID-19 crisis seemed to mark a peak in the "historic brotherhood" of the Serbs and Russians, the situation took a different turn in early July, after Serbian government-controlled local media and officials blamed Russia for supporting – if not instigating – a series of violent protests against the Serbian government. The protests started in Belgrade on July 7, prompted by the Serbian government's decision to reintroduce tight lockdown restrictions due to a sudden rise in the number of COVID cases. Many local residents were provoked by this announcement as they believed that the huge spike in COVID-19 cases was caused by the government's previous decision to completely lift restrictions, and even downplay the number of infected people – apparently in order to enable the holding of the June 21 parliamentary elections.

As soon as the elections had further increased the political dominance of Vučić's Serb Progressive Party – which won some 63 percent of the vote and two-thirds of MPs in Serbian Parliament – Vučić announced new exceptionally strict restrictions, including a weekend-long curfew. The protests which ensued turned violent, and over the next few days spread to several other Serbian towns. After just the first night of protests, some Serbian media and experts stated that some of the protests were orchestrated by local pro-Russian politicians. They claimed that the main purpose of the protests was to destabilize Serbia and weaken its position in the EU-sponsored negotiations that were supposed to start a few days later, or to undermine the negotiations altogether (Kurir 2020a). The pro-Western Belgrade-based Centre for Euro-Atlantic Studies (CEAS) warned that the protests in Serbia resembled "*Russia's violent undemocratic-autocratic attempts to emulate non-violent, truly pro-democratic movements (that) have already been witnessed in Ukraine, Montenegro and Northern Macedonia*" (CEAS 2020).

President Vučić also told the media that "foreign agencies" were involved in the organization of protests but declined to provide any further details (Blic 2020). Such claims were further validated by reports that several foreign citizens were involved in the demonstrations (Kurir 2020b; Kurir 2020c). The Russian ambassador to Belgrade, Aleksandr Bocan-Harcenko (@ABocanHarcenko, July 9, 2020), denied any Russian involvement in the protests but Vučić nonetheless turned down his request for a meeting on July 9 – offering no official explanation – which for many pundits was further confirmation of the deterioration of relations between him and the Kremlin.¹⁴ Vučić's clash with Russia continued even after the protests subsided, currently mainly through media and press statements alleging 'Russian deep state' involvement in the protests (Bojić 2020), accusations which were then rebuffed by Russian officials (@ABocanHarcenko, July 27, 2020).

Some believed that the continued "anti-Russian" campaign in a the Serbian government-controlled media was a part of Vučić's tactics, which he often used in the past, as a part of which he underscored the threat of the Russian domination in Serbia to frighten the EU and the US and soften their positions towards him.¹⁵

Nevertheless, one of the leading Russian foreign affairs experts, Maxim Samorukov, said that relations between the Kremlin and Vučić have already taken a turn for worse after the June election, after which Vučić became even more powerful and therefore harder for Russia to manipulate. The Kremlin appeared to be made increasingly nervous by regional developments, first by US-led and later by EU-led talks between Kosovo and Serbia, and showed a determination to remain involved in this issue in the future. On several occasions Russian ambassador Harcenko publicly stated that "*a deal with Pristina is out of the question without Russia,*" and expressed Russian readiness to get involved in the talks "*if Belgrade invites us*" (FoNet 2020). The Kremlin seemed concerned by the possibility that Vučić could reach some kind of a deal with Kosovo without the Kremlin's involvement, which would seriously undermine Russia's political position in Serbia and the rest of the region.

Several local and Russian sources provided additional explanations for this sudden crisis in the relations between

14 Online interview with a Serbian official, July 9, 2020.

15 Online interview with a Belgrade-based Serbian political analyst, July 2020.



Belgrade and Moscow.¹⁶ According to them, the clash intensified when Vučić, emboldened by his party's landslide victory, decided to sideline his long-time junior partner, the Socialist Party of Serbia of Ivica Dačić, who is considered a closer and more loyal partner to the Kremlin than Vučić. Despite occasional problems in relations with Dačić, Vučić was always reluctant to move against him because of his ties with Russia.

Vučić used the protests as a convenient pretext for his move against the Socialists, as a few senior members of the Socialist Party, or their family members, were found to be participating in the demonstrations. Dačić was eventually forced to intervene by removing several senior party officials from party membership as well as from their official positions.¹⁷ Possible removal of these officials marked the beginning of a clash for control over Srbijagas – a Serbian state company managing the import of Russian natural gas. For many years the Socialist Party controlled this trade, which is believed to have brought in millions of dollars in personal profits for many Serbian and Russian officials. A Russian expert, speaking on the condition of anonymity, said the clash for control of this lucrative business is most likely the main reason for Russian involvement in recent protests in Serbia. The source added that the request for this action probably did not come from the top of the Kremlin, but from lower levels of the Russian administration, which are influenced by Russian oil and gas companies.¹⁸

Vučić's bold response to the protests and his anti-Russian campaign has attracted too much public attention, and probably also the attention of Russian President Vladimir Putin, Serbian and Russian sources said. However, at this stage, it is unclear whether or how Putin could react, and how this episode will affect official relations between Belgrade and Moscow. According to both a Serbia expert and a Russia expert, the first concrete signal of the state of the relations between Vučić and Dačić, and

therefore between Belgrade and Kremlin, will be the new government, which Vučić is expected to nominate in August or September.¹⁹ They added that if Dačić remains in the same position in the new government it will be an indicator of Vučić trying to appease Moscow. On the other hand, Dačić's demotion or complete absence from the new government will signal a further escalation of tensions.

One way or the other, Samorukov believes that after this episode, relations between Vučić and the Kremlin "will never be the same again."²⁰

Russia uses Dodik to control future of BiH and Kosovo

This Serb-Russian issue became even more complicated when Bosnian Serb strongman Milorad Dodik was once again thrown in the rift between Moscow and Belgrade. Dodik is the Serb member of BiH's three-person Presidency and the leader of the ruling Bosnian Serb party, and is also considered to be closely linked with Moscow. On the same day the Russian ambassador traded barbs with Serbian pro-government media, July 23, Vučić came to visit Dodik in the RS administrative centre of Banja Luka. Vučić brought hefty gifts, reportedly worth 2.7 million euro, including a 540,000 euro donation for schools and health centres, a donation of 15 ambulances worth 750,000 euro, and a 600,000 euro donation for the ongoing construction of a Russian religious and cultural centre (BNTV 2020).

Vučić also pledged future investments worth millions of euro for Republika Srpska, including construction of an airport near the south-eastern town of Trebinje, and participation in the construction of a Bijeljina-Belgrade highway. Despite Vučić's multi-million pledges, one statement that drew most of the public attention came from Dodik, who directly linked the future of Republika Srpska, as a part of BiH, with the status of Kosovo.²¹ Dodik's statement was obviously timed to coincide with the restart of EU-led talks on Kosovo-Serbia

16 Online interviews with a senior Russian expert, as well as one Serbian and one Bosnian Serb government officials, July 2020.

17 Petar Skundrić, Serbia's energy minister in 2008-11 government, was already removed from the position of Dačić's adviser on energy issues following his son's arrest at a protest rally, while local and Russian sources say the next in line for the removal is the outgoing minister of environment Goran Trivan and the influential manager of Serbian gas company Srbijagas, Dusan Bajatović.

18 Online interview with a senior Russian foreign affairs expert, July 2020

19 Separate online interviews with one Serbian and one Russian expert, July 2020.

20 Interviews with Maxim Samorukov, a deputy editor of the Carnegie Moscow Centre, June-July 2020.

21 "Today we informed President Vučić that it is impossible to discuss the separation of Kosovo (from Serbia) without also talking about the status of Republika Srpska. The President (Vučić) has taken this issue seriously, but he did not respond to it," Dodik told a press conference in Banja Luka on July 23. Available at: <https://www.kurir.rs/vesti/politika/3502387/Vucic-danas-u-banjaluci-predsednik-urucuje-pomoc-republici-srpskoj-od-27-miliona-evra>.



relations. Most experts and commentators from the region saw Dodik's statement as proof that Dodik – and by proxy Republika Srpska and BiH – are now being used by Moscow to maintain influence in the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue.

"The West is playing with fire: Republika Srpska is strengthening Belgrade's position in the battle for Kosovo," reported Russia's Sputnik Serbia news agency on July 24 (Ristić 2020). The article added that Republika Srpska will remain within BiH as long as Kosovo does not get full international recognition of the independence it declared in 2008. It also warned that international recognition of Kosovo's independence would enable RS to follow suit and declare its own independence.

Dodik's statement and Vučić's silence on this issue triggered new ethnic and political tensions and rebukes, especially from Bosniak officials and media in BiH. Most experts and commentators agreed that with his statement, Dodik was basically reiterating Moscow's positions and limitations for the Kosovo-Serbia talks that are expected to continue in coming weeks. However, some Serbian and Bosnian Serb officials say that this statement also helps Vučić, giving him an excuse to drag his feet on the continuation of the EU and US-led dialogues on Kosovo-Serbia relations.

While some EU officials expressed hopes that the EU could finalize Kosovo-Serbia talks with some kind of technical agreement by the end of the year,²² Dodik's statement indicates that the EU should not be so optimistic.²³ This is especially true given that Dodik has been undermining the integrity of BiH for years and threatening to separate Republika Srpska from the rest of the country – especially in the event of definitive recognition of Kosovo. Any new attempt for a breakup of BiH could easily lead to new ethnic violence in BiH and the rest of the region.

Montenegro blames Russia for stirring religious protests

Parallel to developments in Serbia, Montenegro was also rocked by a new series of protests in June and July, which on several occasions escalated into open clashes between police and demonstrators. The focal point of these protests was the ongoing dispute over the law on the status of

religious communities and their property, which was adopted at the end of 2019. The Serbian Orthodox Church sees this law as an attempt by the government to limit its influence and presence in the country. It also saw this as government meddling in its decades-long dispute with the Montenegrin Orthodox Church, which split from the Serbian Orthodox Church in 1993. Although it was not canonically recognized by the other Orthodox Christian Churches, the Montenegrin Orthodox Church claimed succession to the autocephalous Montenegrin Church that operated until the 1918 unification of the Kingdom of Serbia and Kingdom of Montenegro in 1918.

The adoption of the law was perceived as a typical pre-election move by Montenegrin President Milo Djukanović, ahead of the general and local elections that are currently scheduled to take place on August 30. According to local experts, Djukanović has been using his spat with the head of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro, Amfilohije Risto Radović, for the past three decades to win one election after another by repeatedly raising tensions and dividing local communities.²⁴

Initially, the controversial law seemed to have backfired against Djukanović as the Serbian Orthodox Church held a series of peaceful prayer-protests since the beginning of the year, which further undermined Djukanović's already failing popularity in the country. This process was briefly interrupted by COVID-19, but then continued and soon escalated into a more violent form after Montenegrin police started arresting priests, protestors and more recently even local city officials from opposition parties. These clashes further divided Montenegrin society along ethnic, religious and political lines, raising questions about the country's future. The most recent negotiations between representatives of the government and the Serbian Orthodox Church failed to bring about a compromise (Janković 2020).

Local experts and media expressed concern that protests and clashes that have been reoccurring in Montenegro since late last year have been supported by Russia, either directly or through the Russian Orthodox Church, which has a close relationship with the Serbian Orthodox Church and its leader Patriarch Irinej.

22 Online interview with a senior EU official working on the Balkans, July 2020.

23 Online interview with one Serbian and one Bosnian Serb government official, July 24, 2020.

24 Online interviews with a leading Montenegrin political analyst, May-July 2020.

In an interview for Reuters in February this year, Djukanović openly blamed Serbia and Russia for trying to undermine and possibly even topple Montenegro's pro-EU government (Vasović 2020). More recently, Serbian opposition leader Nenad Čanak, the head of the League of Social Democrats of Vojvodina, told the media that the Serbian Orthodox Church is the "Kremlin's tool for destabilization of Montenegro" (Standard 2020). Others go even further, blaming Russia for trying to reinstate the idea of "pan-Slavism", according to which all Slavic countries would be reunited under Russian patronage.

The latest developments show that NATO membership – which Montenegro gained in 2017 – is by itself unable to stabilize this Balkan country. It finds itself in a tight spot, caught between a corrupt government on the one hand, and growing Russian and Chinese and weakening EU influences on the other, a senior Montenegrin expert said.²⁵ Yet the expert also argued that regardless of how dangerous they may be, foreign influences in Montenegro are still overshadowed by the complex ethnic, religious and political quarrels that dominate the country.

US financial assistance overshadowed by Kosovo stumble

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, the USA provided significant assistance to all countries in the region, mostly in the form of direct financial injections.²⁶ However, its role in this crisis, as well as its general image in the region, was eclipsed by a White House attempt to push through a Kosovo-Serbia agreement. This initiative was seen as a reversal of years of the American Balkan policy, in which it put pressure on Kosovo to remove its reciprocal trade tariffs with Serbia in order to placate Vučić into agreeing to meet with Kosovo representatives (Kingsley et al 2020).

Although the special US envoy for Serbia-Kosovo dialogue, Richard Grenell, repeatedly denied that the US-sponsored Serbia-Kosovo deal would include any exchange of ethnic territories (@RichardGrenell, April 20, 2020), several US and Kosovo officials confirmed that this was in fact the case (Llaza 2020). This indicated that under the current President, Donald Trump, the White House withdrew its full support for Kosovo's independence and changed its previous position, which had opposed changes of borders in the Balkans. Strong US pressure undermined and then

helped topple the government of Albin Kurti, undercut Kosovo's government capacity to deal with the pandemic and eventually stained America's image in the region (Mackinnon 2020). With Kurti removed, Grenell proceeded with the preparation of a Kosovo-Serbia "peace deal." However, the initiative was interrupted following the last-minute June 24 announcement of a war crimes indictment against Kosovo President Hashim Thaci by the Office of the special Kosovo prosecutor (Kosovo Specialist Chamber 2020).

The fact that the indictment was filed in April when it was still not confirmed by the judge but got published just three days before the planned meeting in Washington, DC triggered widespread speculations. Some officials suspected the timing of the announcement was deliberately set to sabotage the peace talks. However, several Western diplomats stressed that this timing was aimed not to disrupt Grenell's initiative, but to prevent Thaci from negotiating a deal with the White House that would undermine the office of the special Kosovo prosecutor, or even lead to its closure.²⁷

25 Online interviews with a leading Montenegrin political analyst, May-July 2020.

26 Between March and June, through its embassies or USAID offices, the USA provided Balkan countries with more than 7 million USD, mostly in direct financial aid, and in a few cases with additional assistance in medical equipment. In the process, Albania received USD 700,000 (euro 630,000) (see more at: <https://www.oecd.org/south-east-europe/COVID-19-Crisis-in-Albania.pdf>). BiH got USD 2,2 million (euro 1,98 million), which among other things was aimed at boosting the country's laboratory systems, bolstering responsiveness and preparedness, as well as risk communication (information available at: <https://seenews.com/news/usa-id-donates-1-mln-to-help-bosnia-fight-covid-19-699744>). The US government provided USD 1,6 million (euro 1,44 million) to Kosovo (available at: <https://www.usaid.gov/kosovo/news-information/press-releases/usa-id-commits-additional-500000-support-kosovos-response>) as well as USD 315,000 (euro 278,000) for Montenegro (available at: <https://me.usembassy.gov/the-united-states-provides-assistance-to-montenegro-to-respond-to-covid-19/>) and USD 1.1 million (euro 974,000) to North Macedonia (available at: <https://mk.usembassy.gov/u-s-provides-assistance-to-north-macedonia-to-respond-to-covid-19/>). In this period, Serbia received USD 1.38 million. A part of this grant was implemented through the Red Cross of Serbia, enabling it to procure essential items for Serbia's most vulnerable families and groups (available at: <https://rs.usembassy.gov/usa-id-partners-with-serbian-red-cross-on-covid-19-response/>).

27 Online interview with a Western diplomat close to the Kosovo prosecutor's office, June 25, 2020.



Following the announcement, Thaci, then Kosovar Prime Minister Avdullah Hoti and eventually Vučić all cancelled their participation, forcing Grenell to call off the meeting that was already scheduled in the White House on June 27. This initiative has agitated all regional and international actors, and has generally been perceived as a new low for US foreign policy in the region. US diplomats, academics and experts admit that under Donald Trump, US foreign policy – in the Balkans and elsewhere – has become incoherent. The White House has been pursuing its own foreign agenda, narrowly focused on providing Trump with some quick wins – such as failed “peace deals” in the Middle East and the Balkans (Pineles 2020).

A number of local, US, EU and Balkan officials and experts strongly criticized the initiative, which according to them was one of the lowest points for US foreign policy in recent decades.

“This [i.e. the Trump Administration’s] America is no friend to Kosovo,” says scholar Hana Marku in a text published in *Pristina Insight* on April 24 (Marku 2020). Molly Montgomery, Vice President of the Albright Stonebridge Group, called a land-swap agreement a *“Pandora’s box”* which *“would almost certainly result in de facto ethnic cleansing, heightened tensions, and the potential for renewed violence”* (Montgomery 2020).

Veteran US diplomat and academic R. Bruce Hitchner argued that America’s unilateral approach to the Kosovo-Serbia talks *“suggests that it is time for the US to push the re-set button on its current policy in the Western Balkans.”* In a *Balkan Insight* article, he went even further and stressed that *“between now and the presidential election, the US should step back from high-visibility initiatives and avoid the prospect of conducting flawed negotiations that might do more harm than good, and only serve the interests of a President in search of foreign policy success at all costs”* (Hitchner 2020).

Despite the criticism, Grenell (@RichardGrenell) on August 14 announced that the US-led initiative was back on track and that Vučić and Hoti would meet at the White House on September 2. Several online conferences, which were held in July and August to discuss the situation in the Balkans and especially the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue,²⁸ stressed the need for close coordination of the US and EU – and especially of their special envoys, Richard Grenell and Miroslav Lajčák. Nevertheless, the US initiative that was continuing on September 2, still seemed to be out of sync with the EU-led Kosovo-Serbia dialogue, which was scheduled to continue with a high-level meeting in Brussels on September 7, the US and EU officials said.²⁹

Turkish nationals establish criminal/paramilitary foothold in the Balkans

Following the outbreak of the Coronavirus pandemic, Turkey – just like China – made sure to provide all Balkan countries with humanitarian assistance in the form of protective and medical equipment.³⁰ Just like most other foreign actors, it provided no concrete information about the value of this aid.

Despite Turkish humanitarian assistance, the outbreak of the Coronavirus pandemic has failed to soften concerns around the increasingly radical and aggressive foreign policy which Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has pursued in the Mediterranean, the Middle East and the Balkans since last year. Regional and international attention has so far

28 One such webinar was a webinar held on July 1 as a part of the “Balkan Dialogues”, an initiative created by the EastWest Institute (EWI) and the Belgrade Fund for Political Excellence (BFPE), see more at: <https://www.concordia.net/leadershipseries/balkan-dialogues-kosovo-serbia-dialogues-beginning-with-the-end-in-mind/>.

29 Online interviews with EU diplomat and US academic engaged in the Balkans, August 2020. Both confirmed that Grenell failed to answer repeated phone calls and emails from the EU envoy, Miroslav Lajčák.

30 BiH, Kosovo and Montenegro were the first to receive Turkish assistance in the form of general medical and protective equipment on April 8. North Macedonia received similar assistance on April 10, together with Lebanon and Tunisia and then again on May 12, together with Albania (see more at: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/30541707.html> or <https://www.aa.com.tr/ba/korona-virus/turska-poslala-albaniji-i-sjevernoj-makedoniji-pomo%C4%87-u-medicinskoj-opremi/1837550>). Serbia also received a more significant amount of assistance from Turkey – whether because of its larger number of population or because of the good relations between Turkish and Serbian leaders, or both. The first shipment of Turkish assistance landed on the Belgrade airport on April 8, with usual medical and protective equipment (available at: <https://www.bizlife.rs/aktuelno/covid-19/stigla-pomoc-iz-turske-vulin-hvala-predsedniku-srbije-redzepu-izvinite-video/>), while the second shipment, with 16 tons of unspecified aid, arrived on July 4, earmarked for the Muslim-populated Sandžak region (available at: <https://radiosarajevo.ba/vijesti/regija/po-instrukciji-Erdogana-u-beograd-stigao-turski-vojni-avion-s-opremom-za-sandzak/382273>).



been focused on the role of Turkey in the wars in Syria and Libya, and on new Turkish drilling for oil and natural gas in Cyprus' territorial waters (Council of the EU 2020). This Turkish regional policy has contributed to the recent dangerous escalation of tensions between Turkey and Greece (Lindenstrauss et al. 2020), as well as to a security incident involving Turkish and French military ships (Herszenhorn et al. 2020).

Some experts assert that less visible, though not necessarily less significant or potentially dangerous, is Turkish involvement in the Balkans.³¹ According to them, there is evidence that Turkish nationals and companies, known for their links with Turkish criminal and political actors, have been building criminal or paramilitary networks in the region.

One of those individuals is Sedat Peker – one of the prominent Turkish crime bosses and arms dealers known also as a Turkish ultra-nationalist and an ardent Erdoğan supporter – who moved to Montenegro at the beginning of 2020. Peker is currently residing in Montenegro, from where he is overseeing arms trade and foreign fighters' transfers to Libya via Montenegrin ports. His business and political ambitions also seem to be growing, as he held secret meetings with a number of senior Turkish officials in recent months.³²

In a separate but likely related development, Mehmet Naci Efe, a former military officer, owner of Ekol, a Turkish security company, and a professor at the Turkish National Defence University, has also at the beginning of this year purchased a controlling package of shares of the International University of Gorazde (E.A. 2020), in eastern BiH, close to the tri-border area between BiH, Montenegro and Serbia. According to BiH and Turkish sources, Efe plans to turn part of the University into a camp for the training of military, paramilitary, police and security personnel. In the future this facility could be used for all sorts of activities in this tri-border area, from overlooking and assisting trafficking of drugs and weapons, to even participating in some covert intelligence or military operations (Gorazde. ba 2020).

These activities are believed to be part of Erdoğan's struggle to remain in power amidst his waning popularity and a deepening political and economic crisis in Turkey.³³ In Turkey, Erdoğan recently allowed Turkish "night watchmen" – considered to be his private militia – to carry weapons and investigate and arrest citizens (Rothwell 2020). Some experts go as far as to believe that Erdoğan could use his strong influence on the Bosniak political scene in the region, especially in BiH, either to remain in a position of power in Turkey, or to withdraw to BiH or some other "friendly country" in case he eventually loses power. Given the existing ethnic and political tensions in BiH, such an attempt might destabilize the country even further.

31 Online interviews with two Turkish foreign affairs experts, May–July 2020.

32 Ibid.

33 Online interviews with two Turkish foreign affairs experts, May–July 2020.

Conclusions

The outbreak of COVID-19 has heightened the security, ethnic, political, economic and social tensions across the Balkans, which have been lingering in the region for decades due to unresolved issues within and among Balkan nations. At the beginning of the pandemic, all key foreign actors present in the region for the past few decades, or even longer – China, the EU, the Gulf countries, Russia, Turkey and the USA – have answered Balkan countries' calls for help and provided them with financial or material assistance to deal with the crisis. Most of these actors, however, have also used this situation to further strengthen their positions in the Balkans and utilize them in their domestic and geostrategic power plays.

As a result, in recent months the Balkans has been witnessing a rollercoaster of developments, many of which bore the mark of one foreign actor or another. This included alleged Russian involvement in protests in Serbia and Montenegro, the US initiative for a peace deal between Kosovo and Serbia which led to the toppling of the Kosovar government, as well as reports that Turkish nationals and companies may be establishing criminal or paramilitary networks in Montenegro and BiH. Most foreign actors seem to be focusing on the Balkans' most sensitive issues, which have been unresolved for decades, such as the relationship between Kosovo and Serbia, the undermined sovereignty of Bosnia and Herzegovina, or fragile ethnic and religious relations in North Macedonia and Montenegro.

This combination of deepening geopolitical competition and rising local and regional tensions, which some compare with the period preceding the beginning of World War I, have capacity to destabilize the region, and potentially even the whole world. The Balkans' short-term perspective is additionally threatened by the looming consequences of the global economic slowdown caused by COVID-19. These consequences are expected to have an even greater impact on this region than on the rest of Europe, due to the Balkan countries' weak governance, underperforming public services and high level of corruption. This, in turn, makes fertile ground for continued unchecked geopolitical competition.

In this situation, the EU remains the only foreign actor that does not seem to have its own self-serving agenda in the Balkans. This is one of the reasons why the EU's political presence in the region has been constantly trailing far behind its economic imprint, but this is also why the EU is still seen as the only player with the capacity to stabilize and normalize the region in the long run. Yet in order to do this, the EU will not only have to step up its game against other foreign actors, but will have to face its own growing internal divisions and foreign affairs mistakes, which have over the last few years weakened the EU's position in the Balkans and the rest of the world alike.

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Interviews

Online interviews with a leading Montenegrin political analyst, May-July 2020.

Online interviews with two Turkish foreign affairs experts, May-July 2020.

Online interview with a Western diplomat close to the Kosovo prosecutor's office, June 25, 2020.

Interviews with Maxim Samorukov, a deputy editor of the Carnegie Moscow Centre, June-July 2020.

Online interview with a Serbian official, July 9, 2020.

Online interview with one Serbian and one Bosnian Serb government official, July 24, 2020.

Online interview with a Belgrade-based Serbian political analyst, July 2020.

Online interview with a senior Russian foreign affairs expert, July 2020.

Online interview with a senior EU official working on the Balkans, July 2020.

Online interviews with EU diplomat and US academic engaged in the Balkans, August 2020.

About the author

Srećko Latal covered Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and the rest of the Balkans during the wars in the 1990s as Associated Press correspondent, and later editor and Sarajevo bureau chief. He also served as an overseas correspondent from other places such as Afghanistan and Pakistan. Since 2000 he worked as a communications expert and political advisor for the EU and the World Bank, while from 2008 he joined the International Crisis Group, ICG as its Balkan Analyst until 2013 when ICG left the region. Afterward, Srećko established a new regional

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About the project

“Western Balkans at the Crossroads: Ways Forward in Analyzing External Actors' Influence” is a follow-up project that aims to build upon a knowledge base established in the preceding project “Western Balkans at the Crossroads: Assessing Non-Democratic External Influence Activities,” which mapped, analyzed and publicized Russian, Chinese, Turkish, and Gulf States' influence activities in the region. The innovative project focuses on in-depth socially rooted research and investigative journalism. Its design reflects the aim to go beyond conventional analytical frameworks, overcoming ideologically constructed stereotypes and methodological nationalism while combining a variety

of methodological approaches from security studies to visual anthropology.

Project outputs consist of fifteen analytical studies and fifteen journalistic articles drawing on their findings. Major observations on external actors' influence gathered throughout the work on the project will be summarized in a final reflection paper.

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About Prague Security Studies Institute

PSSI is a non-profit, non-governmental organization established in early 2002 to advance the building of a just, secure, democratic, free-market society in the Czech Republic and other post-communist states. PSSI's mission

is to build an ever-growing group of informed and security-minded policy practitioners dedicated to the development of democratic institutions and values in Central and South-East Europe.

