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Ontological Security as a Factor in Balkan Geopolitics

Abstract

The term "Balkanisation" is used in the description of unstable regions where actors of international relations (states and peoples) are most often in continuous and intractable conflicts. Why did the Balkans become the birthplace of this term? Why do the conflicts in the Balkans last and seem intractable in the long term? In searching for answers to these research questions, the author relies on the methods of discourse analysis (examining perceptions) and comparative analysis (comparing perceptions that are mutually opposed and irreconcilable). The theoretical framework of this research is based on a combination of theses of social constructivism (perceptions that shape ontological security) and structural realism (as perceptions materialise in certain foreign and security policies of states). The hypothesis being proven is as follows: conflict potential in the Balkans is determined by ontological factors that represent important factors of security perceptions of different nations and geopolitical conceptions of different states. As a result, different perceptions influence the formation of opposing geopolitical conceptions, which leads to continuous appearances of aspirations for a territorial reconfiguration of space and changing borders, which is why a high level of interstate and/or interethnic mistrust is maintained over a long period of time. The concluding remarks are devoted to the presentation of views on how there are several reasons for Balkanisation, since this process is influenced not only by Balkan actors, but also by non-Balkan actors (big and regional powers with their own perceptions and geopolitical conceptions). That is why the attempts to stabilise the region initiated during the previous century were generally short-lived and were limited in scope. The tangle

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of different perceptions and mutually irreconcilable geopolitical goals of Balkan and non-Balkan actors results in ongoing Balkanisation.

Introduction: Research Objective and Theoretical Framework

There is a wide and voluminous amount of literature on regional relations in the Balkans. Therefore, it is impossible (within the scope assigned to this paper) to write about a detailed review of the literature and present the views of different theoreticians. However, generally speaking, at least when it comes to the research presented in the last decade, those theoreticians' different attitudes can be divided into three groups. The first group consists of authors who emphasised the importance of European and/or Euro-Atlantic integration and observed regional relations from such a perspective. Such research is mostly based on the theoretical frameworks of liberal institutionalism or liberal internationalism, but is also based on social constructivism and peace studies (Radić-Milosavljević, Domaradzki, 2023; Kmezić, 2020; Turan, Akçay, 2019; Dabrowski, Myachenkova, 2018, pp. 4–23). The second group includes researchers who analysed the historical dimensions of regional relations. It goes without saying that their analogies and comparisons are based on the theories of realism (mainly supporters of the theories of offensive and defensive realism), and their methodologies are based on historical and geopolitical methods. Changes in the balance of power in international relations, which are also reflected in the regional security of the Balkans as well as the insufficiency of answers to certain questions offered by research from the first two groups of the previous decades, caused the emergence of a new wave of research into Balkan realpolitik and geopolitics. It is the third group, which includes researchers who, by combining different theoretical frameworks and using new methodological tools, try to explain current processes (for example: Tepšić, Vukelić, 2022; Janković, 2021; Bieber, 2018).

Logically, such an epilogue is, to some extent, expected, since phenomena are observed that are impossible to explain otherwise. The Balkan countries are either in the EU or on the way to the EU, most investments and donations come from the EU, and an analysis of formal documents gives the impression that this process has no alternative, but, at the same time, the level of trust in the EU in Balkan societies continues

to stagnate or even fall and thus the legitimacy for a continuation of formal politics is being lost (Economides, 2020, pp. 3–17; O'Brennan, 2014). With the exceptions of Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (and in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina it is only because of the opposition of the Serbian entity), all Balkan countries are members of NATO. A lot has been invested to make this integration effective and long-term, the thesis of indivisible security and the famous Article 5 of the NATO Charter being particularly widespread. In the post-Soviet era, several generations of officers and politicians were educated at Western universities with the aim of ensuring this process, but after the escalation of the crisis in Ukraine, it is observed that a non-negligible part of the public (this is not the case only in Serbia, but also in Bulgaria, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and, to some extent, in Greece) has surprisingly expressed sympathy for Russia (Saric, Morscos, 2022). At the same time, mistrust in Bulgarian-Turkish or Greek-Albanian relations remains high, despite NATO membership and formal announcements (Nikolov, 2021; Sintès, 2015). The laconic explanation that this is a consequence of Russian propaganda simply does not hold up, since there are only two forms of Russian media in the entire Balkans, and they are in Serbia (Radio Sputnik and RT Balkans). Also, looking for the causes of Balkanisation exclusively in historical events can lead one astray because, as a rule, in such analyses, some events are overemphasised and others are neglected. The ongoing Serbian-Albanian relations are probably the worst they have ever been, so in that context it is often explained that due to historical circumstances they could not be different. However, in the last 100 years, as many as four strategic initiatives aimed at achieving friendly relations between the two nations have been recorded: the agreement between Nikola Pašić and Esad Paša Toptani in 1914; the agreement between King Aleksandar Karađorđević and King Ahmed Zogu from 1924; the joint work of the two communist parties from 1944 during which the creation of Greater Yugoslavia was even discussed; and, finally, a conversation between Fatos Nano and the denounced Slobodan Milošević from 1997, which attempted to de-escalate the growing conflict potential in Kosovo, and, not counted among them, the last project of Aleksandar Vučić and Edi Rama on the Open Balkans (Proroković, 2011; Arnaudov, Ćurčić, 2023). Why the lack of results despite those episodes from Balkan history?

In order to explain the phenomenon of Balkanisation, it is necessary to combine two theoretical approaches. First of all, these approaches are the foundations of social constructivism, which examine the establishment of collective structures. Identity is one of the key categories in social constructivism, and when asked what identity is, Wendt answered

that having an identity means having a certain idea about who you are in a specific situation (Wendt, 1999, p. 170). Identity, however, is not a subjective category, but involves interaction. In order for a certain identity to be formed, it is necessary for others to recognise it as such. In this sense, whether it is an individual, a group or a state, "identity is formed by internal and external structures" (Wendt, 1999, p. 224). States, as well as individuals, can have different identities – personal or corporate, role identity, and/or collective identity. In terms of a given state, it refers to the need for individuals in that state to have a collective identity – an awareness of "us" as a corporate entity. The corporate identity of the state depends on how pronounced the collective identity is among individuals in the state. Wendt lists four basic causes of collective identity formation: interdependence; common destiny; homogenisation; and self-reliance (Wendt, 1999, p. 44). In situations where individuals develop an extremely strong sense of belonging to a group, i.e., when "we" becomes part of the understanding of "I", an internalisation of culture occurs. In the theory of social constructivism, the extraordinary impact that changes in the structure of internalised culture have on changes in collective identity is pointed out. In this sense, the importance of "collective self-esteem" as a national interest, which Wendt points out, should be mentioned. By this term, Wendt refers to a community's desire to feel good about itself, that is, to deserve respect and a certain status in the eyes of others. Depending on whether the collective "I" is more or less expressed, the subjects will act differently in the cases of both personal and group threats. Over time, the perception of group safety becomes part of the collective identity, and the relationship between "us" and "them" becomes part of a generally extended and accepted narrative. Such a perception can be formed beyond formal institutions and the narratives that are created within them. Formal institutions often have less impact on collective identity than changes in the structure of internalised culture. The experience of a shared destiny is the driver of mass and long-term social homogenisation, and it is shaped mostly thanks to perceptions of security.

Such a process, sooner or later, must leave an impression on formal structures (among which are political structures within which state policy is defined). That is, formal structures will, to a greater or lesser extent, begin to define state policy in accordance with a constructed narrative. Otherwise, formal structures risk becoming illegitimate and thus unusable (which happened with communist structures in the 1980s). The moment when formal structures begin to adopt narratives constructed outside of them, there is a review (and then a transformation) of geopolitical concepts. Due to this, it is necessary to rely on the second theoretical approach

– the theory of structural realism. Waltz emphasises that anarchy is the most important feature of international relations (Waltz, 1979, pp. 95–96, 103–104). The anarchy of the world political system causes constant disruptions in relations between actors, because due to the absence of central authorities, clear hierarchies, and formally regulated relations of superiority and subordination, states must look for ways to ensure their own existence. They do this by applying the principle of self-help, that is, by relying on available resources thanks to which they can defend their position and realise defined interests (Waltz, 1979, p. 92). The questioning of the geopolitical conception of one actor, no matter how harmless it may be (it can also only concern the non-compulsory statements of politicians who, in the pre-election campaign, want to get votes by running for a constructed narrative), already disrupts the ongoing relations between "us" and "them", affects the growth of mistrust and forces other actors to enter into the process of reconsidering their own geopolitical conceptions. Changes in perceptions about the (non)endangerment of group security and collective identity are concretised and materialised through changes in international (therefore also regional) relations in an anarchic environment.

The Phenomenon of Balkanisation

Since the emergence and development of the phenomenon has been viewed from a theoretical point of view, it is now necessary to deal with its content. "Balkanisation has no clear definition. Derived from troubling occurrences in the Balkans, it has most often been used to describe a wide range of complex and problematic situations, people, and events" (Veliu, 2002, p. 80). Most likely, that notion was formed during the First World War (Simić, 2013, pp. 113–134). It was then necessary to explain the events that followed the Balkan wars and that were, to a certain extent, the reasons for the outbreak of the First World War (Todorova, 2002, pp. 71–79). Nevertheless, the use of this term would experience its renaissance in the last decade of the 20th century. With the escalation of tensions on the territory of the former Yugoslavia, the frequency of mentioning Balkanisation is increasing. According to Pringle, "the term Balkanisation is today invoked to explain the disintegration of some multiethnic states and their devolution into dictatorship, ethnic cleansing, and civil war" (Pringle, 2023). Balkanisation indicates continuous divisions, the maintenance of conflict potential, periodic clashes, and border changes. Since the process is continuous, it also implies the irrationality of the actor, stubbornness as a character trait, belief in invented myths instead

of proven historical facts, and a tendency to live in the past instead of the present. That is why Todorova states that Balkanisation carries a pejorative meaning.

Of course, the content of the term and explanations of its origin and development point to the character of regional relations in the Balkans. The settlement of the Eastern Question, which lasted from the second half of the 18th century (it is usually stated from the end of the Russo-Turkish War of 1768–1774), also referred to the Balkans, that is, to territorial rearrangements on the Peninsula. Until then neglected, and labelled as European Turkey, this geographical area becomes geopolitically significant. From an internal point of view, the topic of the formation of the states of the Balkan nations and their mutual demarcation is open. Not only did this process continue (or was continuously re-examined) throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, but it still has not ended at the time of this writing.

The unilaterally-declared independence of the so-called "Republic of Kosovo" and the absolute dysfunctionality of Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as inter-ethnic disagreements in North Macedonia, are all indicators of this. With the successive disintegration of the Ottoman Empire, followed by the rapid disappearance of Austria-Hungary from the historical scene, two great powers of their time that were also actors in regional (Balkan) relations left behind a state of disorder that somehow had to be regulated by the creation of a new order. The basic problem was that the experiences of the character of that new order were different in different Balkan nations; some were satisfied, others were dissatisfied. For some, the order was just, for others unjust, some understood it as a logical realisation of historical aspirations, whereas others saw it as an imposed framework to satisfy other people's geopolitical interests. Despite the fact that such experiences were often created on the basis of the irrational and unrealistic, despite the fact that narratives stemming from dissatisfaction in certain historical stages were not dominant in societies, they persisted, were passed on from generation to generation, and became part of the collective identity. "Our" homogenisation is necessary because of "their" pretensions, and, in this light, images of "eternal friends" and "eternal enemies", "historical justices" and, consequently, "rectification of historical injustices" are developed. That is why all the orders established during the 20th century were temporary and ended in political turbulence, social instability and/or armed conflicts. The root of such experiences is in ontology. It is not possible to consider the phenomenon of Balkanisation without considering ontological security.

Ontological Security

Ejdus states that at certain points in history when uncertainties and crises threaten the certainty of daily routines, some fundamental questions come to the agenda which are then widely debated amongst the public. Uncertainty and crises bring about insecurity and instability in actors, and that is why the topic of ontological security opens up (Ejdus, 2017, pp. 883–908). The noun ontology comes from the Greek words *ov* – meaning "being", and *λογος* – "learning". At the same time, referring to the definitions of Wolfers and Baldwin – security is not only the absence of threats that acquired values (which are manifested in daily routine and determine certainty) may be threatened, but also the absence of fear that these values may be attacked (Wolfers, 1952, pp. 481–502; Baldwin, 1997, pp. 5–26). The existence of a perception of a hypothetical possibility of an attack on "our" values is the reason for uncertainty, that is, the perception of threatened security. Uncertainty and threats to security come from "them". For this reason, the concept of ontological security, despite all the controversies and criticisms, is also applied in the research of international relations (Gurney, 2021).

Examining psychological disorders, Laing established that individuals whose autonomy has not been violated perceive their own being as real and whole and "have a solid core of ontological security" (Laing, 2001, p. 41). Collective security (the collective as a being that has been taught certain values) depends on identity and the narrative that maintains that identity. Collectivities with consistent and indestructible narratives embedded in their identities have a solid core of ontological security. For this reason, Mitzen claims that states become hostages of security dilemmas mainly because of the subjective perception of security, and not because of objective threats coming from other actors (Mitzen, 2006). Narratives are built and maintained on a whole series of subjective perceptions that then shape identity. Mitzen also adds that ensuring the ontological security of states involves an entire spectrum of topics from self-concept, ideas about one's own role in the international environment, experiences of challenges, risks and threats, etc. (Mitzen, 2006, pp. 341–370). The difference between "us" and "them" is created ontologically.

The continuity of the Balkanisation of the Balkans has its roots in ontological security. One actor's self-concept often leads to antagonism with other actors by proving how "we" are different from "them". The idea of one's own role in the international (or, more precisely, regional) environment is often built on mythologising one's own importance, inheriting so-called "great ideas" or referring to "great historical victories".

Experiences of challenges, risks, and threats are based on perceptions of competing concepts of other actors that threaten "our" security, bring about uncertainty and instability. Geopolitical conceptions are born from such narratives and thus form identity.

Genius Loci and Balkan Geopolitics

Considering certain "European issues", Ivanička described the Old Continent as a "comprehensive *genius loci*". By that, this author meant "specificity in the relationship between man and the territory" (Ivanička, 2001, pp. 98–99). Certain phenomena and events are understood one way in Europe, and in a completely different way in other parts of the world. In relation to how they are understood, events and phenomena are reacted to in a certain way and with certain means, which affects the process of the production of culture and leads to the creation of self-regulating mechanisms.

Applying this definition, it can also be said that the Balkans are a kind of *genius loci*. And, in many ways, different from other parts of Europe. The production of a unique culture and the creation of self-regulating mechanisms have determined the construction of value patterns that have shaped identities. The self-concept that influences the experiences of the common destiny of individual nations also determines the experiences of collective self-esteem. It primarily concerns self-perception and the aforementioned experiences in relation to neighbouring nations.

Stepić describes that one of the peculiarities in the relationship between man (people) and territory in the Balkans is the emergence of a "border mentality", that is, an awareness of the mission of the "border people". The geographical space where the Orthodox and Catholic blocks have collided, and then the "Islamic-Oriental bloc joined as a non-European one", represents the limit of the ultimate spatial reach of all three religions. For the Orthodox bloc, it is the part that has the extreme southwestern range, for Catholicism it is the southeastern part, and for Islam it is the northwestern part. "That tripartite border implies a sense of special responsibility, awareness of the border mission, readiness for a decisive battle without retreat, the xenophobia of the eternally threatened front wall and watchtower, which further gives rise to the spirit of the border, where self-identification with one, another or a third identity of the measure of all things, where ethno-confessional differences and extremism are not exceptions but rules and where every attempt to impose a different model is interpreted as a new attack by them on us" (Stepić, 2004, pp. 320–321). Relying on Churchill's statement that the Irish national movement was

religiously motivated and that it would be resolved on the Last Judgment, Milorad Ekmečić characterised the type of nationalism that appeared in the Balkans as "doomsday nationalism" (Ekmečić, 1989, p. 15).

That type of doomsday nationalism has its own characteristics that distinguish it from other European types. According to the Yugoslav historical experience, these basic characteristics are: the dedicated presence of irrational elements in ideology which feed the eternal differences of mixed communities on a daily basis; its ultimate goals and the millennial way of thinking in politics, when, with even the smallest event, there comes the question of whether it is possible to live in a common state; thinking that realistic politics is unrealistic; the tendency to replace the history of the people with the myth of history; the fact that of all the sciences, historiography is the slowest to modernise and is burdened with emotions; the thinking that in times of great historical crises, religious intolerance is the basis of political and military gathering; the provincialism of culture; the identification of language as the basis of culture, religious division that allows only exceptionally gifted individuals to resist the standards of values of their closed church milieu; and emphasised martyrdom in spiritual activity – invisible didactics that others are to blame for their own history, and are in constant conflict with the opening of cultural circles (Ekmečić, 1989). The ontological roots are easily visible when talking about border mentality and when mentioning this special type of nationalism.

Snyder sees the nationalism of Eastern European peoples (not only the Balkans!) as the result of a historical process during which national and state borders were two different concepts (Snyder, 1954, pp. 118–120). This caused a constant tendency to extend state borders to the area of national borders. National borders were often not ethnic borders either (they did not delineate the space inhabited by members of one ethnic group), but were formed in the collective consciousness on the basis of accurate or doubtful historical events and representations. Hence, national borders were often declared "historical", and Eastern European nationalism often relied excessively on mythology and the notion of a national vocation. The Balkan *genius loci* implies the duration of doomsday nationalism is based on a border mentality that translates into mutually-opposed or conflicting geopolitical conceptions at certain points in history, which also includes undying aspirations to change borders. However, it should also be added that the opposition and conflict of those geopolitical conceptions were significantly influenced by external factors of regional security – the great and regional powers.

Causes of Instability: The Link Between Balkan and Non-Balkan Actors

"In big countries and powerful states, nationalism is always considered the stupidity of small peoples. When large nations fulfill their own interests in economy and politics, it is always reasonable politics, and the nationalists are always someone else, the smaller ones" (Gauss, 2017, p. 1). After this introduction, Gauss points out that "the Balkan ball is in the hands of the big countries". Such evaluations have been found before. Writing about Balkan politics, Ivo Andrić pointed out that it represents "small bloody change" in the trade between the great powers (Proroković, 2012, p. 260). The Balkan issue is a geopolitical issue and it is also one of the key reasons why almost always during a change in the balance of power in international relations, "peasants, members of different churches, somewhere in the Balkan hills, far from the front, clash with each other as if it were their war" (Ekmečić, 1992, p. 14). Since the resolution of the Eastern Question, major and/or regional powers remain interested in the Balkans, regardless of the fact that in different historical periods this interest was more or less expressed by certain actors. Balkan actors once underestimated this interest, but more often it is now overestimated and the same Balkan actors have tried to achieve their geopolitical goals through "strategic partnerships" that actually turned into "vassal relations" (Zarić, Budimir, 2022). With a strong ally, as a local conductor of one's influences, a Balkan state can always achieve more than by acting alone. It is unfortunate that the geopolitical goals of the great powers were opposed (and still are today should one look at the rivalries between Western and non-Western actors), so the attachment of one Balkan actor to one great power automatically meant that another Balkan actor was attached to another great power. Some were for preserving the current order, others for its revision or overthrow. This way, the border mentality and doomsday nationalism acquire a completely new dimension. As a result, new elements are added to the self-concept and a far greater importance is given to the creation of the self-image, because of the idea that they are defending broader and more universal values. For that reason, the perception of security also becomes different. It includes a far wider context than the current one, and non-Balkan actors are also declared to be friends or enemies (mostly historical ones!).

These processes determine not only interstate and interethnic relations in the Balkans, but also political dynamics within the Balkan states. Frequent protests, instability, the overthrowing of regimes or undermining of institutions are induced by mutual struggles of great non-Balkan powers.

Russia's geopolitical ambition concerns the reaching of "warm seas" and "control of the straits", and Russia's provision of assistance to the Balkan Orthodox peoples to free themselves from Turkish rule and build their own national states was also motivated by this (Vukašinović, 2023). German geopolitics, following the paths built by Austro-Hungarian politics, tried to establish a Berlin-Baghdad connection through the Balkans, but also implemented concepts such as *Mitteleuropa*, *Drang nach Osten* or *Drang nach Sudosten* (Proroković, 2014). In contrast, immediately before and after the First World War, France supported all the projects that were supposed to prevent revisionism (the Little Entente and the Balkan Pact serve as examples) (Trud, 2007). For British and American geopolitics, the Balkans are an integral part of the Rimland, which must be controlled in order to effectively encircle the Heartland (Vuković, 2007). That is why all Russian and German geopolitical ambitions were unacceptable for the USA and Great Britain. Turkey's neo-Ottoman conception that is taking shape during the 21st century also counts on the Balkans, and Davutoğlu has underlined the importance of this region for ensuring strategic depth (Davutoglu, 2014). In the 21st century, China also appears as a new non-Balkan actor, as all Balkan states are included in China's BRI megaproject, either through bilateral arrangements or through the 17 + 1 platform (Šekarić, 2020; Despotović, 2018). Despite all the restrictions and abandonment of cooperation with China in the post-pandemic period (as American-Chinese relations worsened, so did the enthusiasm for cooperation with Beijing in certain Eastern European countries), it is absurd to expect that the Chinese influence will just disappear or that the Chinese will suddenly withdraw themselves from the equation.

Bearing in mind that this geopolitical interest is detected by the same actors over a long period of time (excluding China), the burden of history and interpretations of historical processes becomes greater. Because of this, Boppe concluded that history in the East is nothing more than "an eternal beginning anew" (Proroković, 2012, p. 260). In combination with the complex Balkan ethnic mosaic and the legacy of the great powers that, either in an indirect sense by organising military campaigns in the Balkans, the results of which were long wars and suffering, mass slaughter, and the ethnic cleansing of the civilian population, or, in a direct sense, by giving support to others for such actions, legitimised the most brutal forms of violence as politically acceptable; "murder and expulsion have become two instruments excessively used in solving national issues in the Balkans" (Gleni, 2000, p. 26). That is why this "eternal beginning anew" results in renewed tensions, frequent crises, and, oftentimes,

armed conflicts. In fact, this "eternal beginning anew" is Balkanisation as a specific regional *genius loci*.

Conclusions

Ontological security is one of the foundations of Balkan geopolitics. Formal structures can serve to temporarily maintain the current order established at a given past moment thanks to the distribution of power between interested great (and/or regional) powers and local actors, but historical experience shows that this does not last for long. The geopolitical goals that are defined by the disaffected through aspirations to create a new order are often prepared beyond formal structures, and are based on the spread of perceptions about group security that become part of the collective identity. Perceptions of security and experiences of the common destiny of a nation (its self-concept) are influenced by the uniqueness of the Balkan geopolitical space (*genius loci*), which is determined by the continuous interest of great (and regional) powers in this geographical space (Russia, Germany, Great Britain, USA, Turkey, France previously, Austria-Hungary, and, in the last decade and a half, China). The conflict of the geopolitical goals of external actors (which are today primarily Western and non-Western actors), which is observed in international relations directly reflects on the regional security of the Balkans, as it automatically causes new re-examinations of the current order. Even if the formal structures are guided by different strategies, the arising of questions becomes inevitable because it is induced by reasons of an ontological character. That is why Serbian-Albanian relations could not be repaired in the long term, despite attempts at formal structures. The degree of inter-ethnic mistrust remains high, and this was influenced by the competing goals of non-Balkan actors and their struggle to restore the balance of power in international relations. Because of this, disputes between the Balkan nations whose states are members of the EU and NATO also persist. Experiences of shared fate and the perceptions of challenges, risks, and threats persist despite formal policies, even in the face of the benefits that come from such formal policies. The outcome of all this is that Balkanisation continues. In certain historical periods, it has manifested itself in different ways, but it has not disappeared. For this reason, when discussing the situation in the Balkans, it is necessary to pay special attention to the concept of ontological security. Insisting exclusively on analyses and comparisons of indicators concerning formal structures is simply not enough.

Balkan geopolitics is also shaped by ontology. At the same time, in the search for long-term solutions, it should be borne in mind that formal

structures can affect the concept of ontological security and contribute to the reduction of conflict potential. For such a thing, it is necessary that there is a minimum agreement of external actors on the regulation of the regional order, which would be based on clear principles and rules.

Acknowledgment

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