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The Western Balkans at the crossroads of European integration and the emerging powers' projection of influence

Liridon LIKA¹

Keywords: Western Balkans, European Union, Emerging powers.

The Western Balkans on the way to EU membership: progress and challenges

The Western Balkans is a heterogeneous region made up of multiple nations, states, languages, cultures and faiths. The neologism “Western Balkans” is a political, geopolitical, technical and social construct concept, used for the first time by the European Union (EU) in December 1998. This concept currently includes six states: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. Initially, Croatia was also part of it, until it joined the EU in 2013. During the 1990s, the EU demonstrated its strategic and operational presence in the Western Balkans, but it was the United States (US) that assumed the greatest role in the stabilization and pacification of the region. Moreover, although the European presence is intensifying in all areas, the US and the North

¹ Liridon Lika, PhD, is a lecturer and researcher at the Center for International Relations Studies (CEFIR) of the Department of Political Science of the University of Liège (ULiège) in Belgium. He is also a postdoctoral researcher at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASoS) of the University of Maastricht (UM) in the Netherlands. In 2020, at ULiège, he defended his doctoral thesis: “The Western Balkans at the crossroad of European integration and the projection of emerging powers. Analysis of the triangular framework between the Western Balkans, the European Union and Turkey”. He obtained a master’s degree in Political Science: International Relations at ULiège, and an advanced master’s degree in Interdisciplinary Analysis of European Integration at the Institute for European Studies (ISE) of the Free University of Brussels (ULB). His research focuses on Western Balkan states in particular Kosovo and Albania, EU’s external action, the foreign policy of the emerging powers towards the Western Balkans and the theories of the International Relations.

Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) provided, and continue to ensure, the security of the Western Balkans. In order to carry out its actions and sustain its credibility, it was essential for the EU to secure the cooperation of the US and NATO. European soft power (attraction, positive image, values and cultural attributes) was therefore combined with attributes of hard power (military and economic aspects) and reinforced by them.

Since 2000, the US and the EU have been working closely together to stabilize the Western Balkans and prevent further conflicts in the region. The US and the EU share the goal of integrating the Western Balkan states into Euro-Atlantic structures, as reaffirmed at the 2004 NATO summit in Istanbul and the EU's summit in Thessaloniki in 2003. The values of democracy, the rule of law, respect for human and minority rights, and a free-market economy constitute the foundations of the Euro-Atlantic community. Since the US and the EU share the same goals in the Western Balkans, the transatlantic cooperation in the region becomes very important. The US and EU continue to be united in their commitment to help the region in its transition to liberal democracy and European-Atlantic integration (EU and NATO). For many years, the US strongly supported the EU's commitment that the future of the Western Balkans is within the EU (US Department of State, 2005).

Since 2000 at the Feira and Zagreb summits, and especially 2003, following the Thessaloniki European Council, the EU committed itself to enlargement on a "case-by-case basis" or in a process described by the European authorities as "meritocratic" (EU-Western Balkans Summit, 2003). This vision aimed to put an end to the long democratic transition in order to transform the Western Balkans into a region of peace, stability and economic prosperity, the ultimate goal of which would be its full membership to the EU. In this context, the EU has launched in 1999 and strengthened in 2003 the Stabilization and Association Process (SAP). Through this twofold objective, the EU wanted, first of all, to stabilize this region and, secondly, to accept these countries to adhere to the common European project. The SAP had created great hopes for change in the Western Balkans, fueled by the 2004 and 2007 enlargements towards the Central and Eastern European countries (Elbasani, 2008, p. 306).

Beyond geostrategic and economic interests, security was undoubtedly one of the main reasons that led the EU to open up to these countries. The security issue also presents the main motivation for the Western Balkan states to join the EU, which is perceived as a pole of attraction capable of neutralizing conflicts and pacifying the region (Lika, 2015, pp. 123-124). Since then, the EU has become a key player in the region (Bretherton and Vogler, 2006, p. 147). The European Commission has made consistent

efforts to strengthen its transformative power to support the implementation of reforms, particularly in the areas of rule of law and economic governance in the region (European Commission, 2014, p. 1). This enlargement policy, based on a pre-accession strategy, consisted in an Europeanization process and transfer of the *acquis communautaire* to the Western Balkan countries (Anastasakis, 2005, p. 78). In other words, in order to become full members of the EU, the latter required the Western Balkan states to fulfill the Copenhagen criteria (political, economic and *acquis communautaire*). By applying the principles of conditionality and Europeanization as in previous enlargements (Keukeleire and Delreux, 2014, p. 209) and disseminating its standards, values and norms, the EU has worked to ensure and promote security, regional cooperation and to affirm respect for human rights, the consolidation of democracy, the establishment of a market economy and the rule of law.

The EU's external action in the Western Balkans has been the subject of much debate between academics. In the European context, a large number of researches has focused on the question of the EU as an international actor (Bretherton and Vogler, 2006; Hill and Smith, 2005; Petiteville, 2002) which, to exist, requires the assembly of several elements, namely authority, autonomy, coherence (Merle, 1988) and recognition (Jupille and Caporaso, 1998). Thus, some studies focus on the Union's foreign and security policy (Smith, 2004); others interrogate the difficulty of communitarian Europe in having a common, consistent and coherent foreign policy (Yakemtchouk, 2005; Vanhoonacker, 2018). The nature of the EU action remains most often apprehended in terms of civilian power by mobilizing civil instruments such as multilateralism, socio-economic influence, enlargement and inter-regionalism (Telò, 2006). Others point out that the EU is a normative power, based on a solid foundation of values, standards and a European identity, which guides its foreign policy (Manners, 2002). Still others estimate that the concept of normative power has certain limits because it forgets material, military or security interests (Holden, 2009). The consistency of the Union's external action has been analyzed in its multiple dimensions: institutional consistency (vertical dimension between the Union and the states, as well as horizontal between the Union's institutions), substantial consistency (between the various European policies with an external dimension and between the Union's external action and its internal policies) (Dony and Serena Rossi, 2008). Moreover, an abundant literature describing the EU's foreign policy (Saurugger, 2020) and the European integration (Schimmelfenning and Winzen, 2020) stems from the liberal approach (functionalism and neo-functionalism) and analyses inspired by constructivist approaches. To date, analyses of the EU's enlargement policy towards the Western

Balkans have focused on security, normative, civil aspects, meritocracy, Europeanization and conditionality (Keukeleire and Delreux, 2014).

The EU assistance was conditional on respect for European norms and values and aimed at institutional building (Quaglia *et al.*, 2007). Dimitar Bechev demonstrated that “[b]eyond the carrot-and-stick strategies proceeding from the application of membership conditionality, the EU has wielded considerable ideational power as promoter of certain normative notions of appropriate state behavior” (Bechev, 2006, p. 28). At the beginning of the 2000s, everything indicated that the states of the Western Balkans were destined to integrate the European project as quickly as possible.

However, this EU enlargement strategy has produced mixed results. The Western Balkans are dragging on in this process. Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia have already achieved candidate country status. These four states are therefore more advanced in the accession process. However, there are differences between them: Montenegro (since 2012) and Serbia (since 2014) have opened accession negotiations, while Albania and North Macedonia hope to open as soon as possible the first chapters of negotiations. Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo both have potential candidate status, which means that they are currently further away in the accession process. Thus, the Western Balkan states have not progressed at the same pace, because they are conditioned by the so-called merit principle, which is strongly criticized by some authors in the name of a collective regional policy that promotes the block membership of these countries in order to avoid the dividing lines and the gap between the pioneers and the latecomers; in a region marked by post-conflict trauma, competition has not proved very constructive so far because values dear to the EU such as cooperation, solidarity and trust have been neglected (Marciacq, 2017, p. 17). For example, the disputes between Greece and North Macedonia over the name of the latter constituted an unsolved problem until 2019, which also had consequences for the enlargement of the NATO and the EU. Through active Western diplomacy, led by the US and supported by the EU, that name resolution was possible (Nechev and Nikolovski, 2019, pp. 127-134).

In fact, the US’s commitments in other parts of the world, such as the conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya or Syria, and the EU’s concerns about its own economic and political problems have negatively impacted the carrying out of reforms in the Western Balkan states. Believing that the democratic future of the Western Balkans was tied to the EU, the US largely entrusted the EU with responsibility for the political, institutional and economic development of the region; something it has not managed

to fully assume, leaving space for action for other emerging international actors. The European crisis had spillover effects for the Western Balkans, leading to a relative lack of interest on the part of the EU, whose objectives and commitments for enlargement to the region proved slow. Political inertia in the EU – combined with internal political concerns, Brexit, economic and refugee crises, and pressures from far-right parties – meant that the Western Balkan states could not engage reforms for EU membership.

Since 2008, some EU member states have experienced successive waves of economic and financial crises that have led to the adoption of austerity policies within the domestic economy and affected both the Eurozone and the EU member states and those of the Western Balkans (O’Brennan, 2014, p. 231). Interdependence exposed the countries of the Western Balkans to the crisis in the Eurozone, particularly in areas of foreign direct investment (FDI), private finance and remittances (Lika, 2016).

The six Western Balkan states in the EU accession process



Source: albinfo.ch, 2020.

The six Western Balkan states in the EU accession process (candidate and potential candidate countries)

EU accession status of Western Balkan countries January 2020



Source: European Parliament
ECFR · ecfre.eu

**Source: Shopov Vladimir and European Council of Foreign Relations
(ECFR) – ecfre.eu, 2021.**

The European perspective of the Western Balkan countries has been confirmed on numerous occasions by the European institutions over the

past twenty years, but in fact, the EU has experienced a gradual erosion of its enlargement policy. Delays in EU membership and growth of the emerging powers' influence in the Western Balkans are also associated with the dynamics of the Western Balkan states (Richter and Wunsch, 2019, pp. 6-17). The bilateral political disputes and economic problems of the Western Balkans, combined with the economic setbacks of the EU and the "fatigue of enlargement" have contributed to the creation of a relative "power vacuum" in the region (Anastasakis, 2012, p. 202). In other words, the EU is confronted with a new situation within itself, and in the Western Balkans too. For many years, the EU enlargement process has slowed down for reasons both internal and external to the Western Balkan countries and to the EU itself. The EU has itself been weakened by multiple crises (economic, political, migratory). Among others, in view of this slowdown, new players qualified as emerging or re-emerging powers, such as Russia, China and Turkey, but also some other countries like Saudi Arabia, have projected themselves into the region. These states have adopted different strategies to set up themselves in this part of the European continent. The projection of their influence in the Western Balkans is to varying degrees and fields as diverse as political, economic, financial, commercial, military, cultural or religious. In this context, the emerging powers took advantage of the situation to project themselves and increase their influence in the region, thus competing with the EU.

The influence projection of the emerging powers in the Western Balkans

Following the disappearance of the bipolar order and in the post-2000 international context, the EU is challenged by the rise of so-called emerging powers or re-emerging powers at the global level. Even if the emerging powers do not always have a common vision and do not form a homogeneous block, they see themselves as the future. The emerging powers promote the spread of global power and gradually calling into question the international order that has been dominated for centuries by the traditional Western powers (Santander, 2012, p. 10).

The great emerging powers first appeared under the acronym BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India and China) coined by the researcher Jim O'Neill of the international bank Goldman Sachs as a practical label to qualify these countries (Goldman Sachs, 2003, p. 2). Other waves of emerging middle powers later gathered under the acronym CIVETS, grouping together Colombia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Egypt, Turkey and South Africa, or under the abbreviation MIKTA: Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, Turkey and

Australia. Thus, whereas China and Russia are usually considered as great emerging powers, according to Ariel Gonzalez Levaggi, “Turkey is an emerging middle power that has developed a near-BRICS active foreign policy while [being] member of the G-20 and MIKTA group, even if in the last years [this] label is increasingly contested” (Gonzalez Levaggi, 2016, pp. 62-63). In other words, Turkey, which displays and projects economic, military, political, and ideological influence in its near region, is qualified by scholars as an emerging middle power (Jabbour, 2017, pp. 27-28; Parlar Dal, 2018; Donelli and Gonzalez Levaggi, 2016). In summary, since the first decade of this century, China, Russia and Turkey have had a sustained economic development and did not hesitate to deploy efforts to increase their presence on the world stage by adopting ambitious, multidirectional and multidimensional policies both regionally and internationally. The rise of the emerging powers is increasingly shaking up the balance of power in the world, including Western Balkans. As the EU procrastinated, China, Russia and Turkey were actively working to increase their influence in the Western Balkans. In other words, the emerging powers are trying to compete with the EU in this region (Lika, 2019).

Russia is promoting to the Western Balkans exactly the opposite of the EU, namely: censorship, militarization, incitement to war, disinformation campaigns, instability and non-accession to the EU and NATO (Bieber and Tzifakis, 2020; Bechev, 2017, Rustemi *et al.*, 2019). Russia continues to promote its own political, economic and traditional ties with the Slavic and Orthodox communities in the region – especially in Serbia, in the federated entity of the Serbs of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and North Macedonia – presenting itself to them as a closer ally than the EU. Serbia is a Russophile country where Vladimir Putin enjoys a solid popularity; and, at the same time, it is progressing in the agenda of accession to the European project (Marciacq, 2020). At a time when relations between Russia and the West are at the lowest, Serbia is positioning itself between the two, insisting that European integration is in its eyes a priority, while maintaining close ties with its traditional Russian ally (Marciacq, 2020). On October 25, 2019, Serbia joined the Russian-promoted Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), a project that competes with that of the EU. However, with the exception of Serbia, and partly Bosnia and Herzegovina, the other states of the Western Balkans are now members of NATO (Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia) or have clearly expressed a demand in this direction (Kosovo). For Moscow, Serbia remains its key ally in the Western Balkans, or even the Balkans as a whole, through which Russia tries to maintain or re-develop its hegemonic influence in this re-

gion (Graham *et al.*, 2018, p. 16). The projection of Russian influence in the Western Balkans poses a security threat to the EU.

Turkey also aims to establish itself as a regional leader in the Western Balkans. Since 2002, Turkey has adopted a policy that is multidirectional, multidimensional, autonomous, proactive, and competitive with the EU. Turkey's projection in the Western Balkans has two major dimensions: a neo-Ottoman one, and the other, as an emerging power one (Lika, 2020). Thus, Turkey has extended its influence in all the states of the Western Balkans to political, economic, media, education, military, culture and religion fields. It has conducted infrastructure projects, opened schools and universities, built and/or rebuilt mosques, promoted Turkish investments in the region (Öktem, 2012, p. 31). The business community, municipalities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), soap operas and individuals (Kirişci, 2012), all have become important actors in Turkey's relations with the Western Balkans. The influence is also visible at the socio-cultural level, it is a real emanation of soft power through, for example, television series or Turkish soap operas which have become very popular (Paris, 2013, p. 158). In addition, the Turkish Agency for International Cooperation and Development (TIKA) is funding numerous projects to rebuild the monuments dating from the period of the Ottoman Empire domination (mosques, bridges and schools). The Presidency of Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB) coordinates the activities of NGOs and grants scholarships for students including those from the Western Balkans. The Yunus Emre Institute, a public foundation created in 2007 to promote Turkish language, culture and art, operates through several cultural centers in all countries of the region.

But a lot of critics have emerged and the Turkish influence is not always positively received in the Western Balkans for a number of reasons: Turkish interference in the internal affairs; the Islamic agenda; the lack of transparency of its investments; the distancing of the Turkish authorities from the EU, or the Turkish regime's slide towards authoritarianism (Lika, 2020; Phillips and Peci, 2018). In this context, several obstacles to the Turkish projection in the Western Balkans have been identified. First, those specific to Turkey itself, such as the limits of its own material and immaterial power capacities in the region. Second, the EU remains the main player in the Western Balkans, both in terms of its image and its economic means. Third, Turkey faces many obstacles in the Western Balkans due to the negative perception of the period of Ottoman occupation and domination (Lika, 2020).

China is also trying to expand and strengthen its influence and strategic presence in Europe including the Balkans (Holslag, 2019). In 2012, it

announced a new global initiative (17+1 initiative) for cooperation with seventeen countries of Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe (CESEE), including Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina; the Republic of Kosovo, which is not yet officially recognized by Beijing, has not been invited to join it. The Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – formerly called One Belt, One Road (OBOR), initiated in 2013 by President Xi Jinping and also known as the New Silk Road – in addition to Asia, Africa and Latin America, also includes the European continent in general and the Western Balkan region in particular through significant economic and financial investments. The Balkan Silk Road is the name given to the transport and logistics corridor that Beijing has started to establish in the Balkans under the BRI (Bastian, 2017, p. 4). As part of this initiative, the Chinese are providing investments and loans to carry out infrastructure projects in some Western Balkan countries (Stumvoll and Flessenkemper, 2018). This economic presence has grown significantly and has become increasingly visible since 2015. China prints its economic and financial influence, particularly in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Montenegro. Trade links have been strengthened, including through bilateral agreements. Regarding the implementation of projects, Serbia stands out as the key partner of Beijing in the Western Balkans especially since, beyond the historical Sino-Serbian relations and a growing Chinese political presence in Serbia, the latter is chosen by the Chinese authorities as the main point of support of the investment strategy BRI (Marciacq, 2018, pp. 107-112). Chinese projects tended to be treated outside normal project selection processes or procurement procedures in the Western Balkan states. Thus, China tries to compete with the EU through its autocratic model, and its non-democratic principles. This poses challenges for the EU.

Yet, despite their increasing projection, the economic influence of the emerging powers remains far behind that of the EU. Indeed, there is a very strong economic interdependence between the EU and the Western Balkans. With 73 % of trade exchange, the EU is by far the largest trading partner of the six Western Balkan states, followed by China with 5 % and Russia with 4.8 % (Council of the European Union, 2018). The exchanges between the EU and the Western Balkans have doubled in 10 years – from € 21.4 billion in 2006 to € 43.6 billion in 2016 – the EU was, in fact, the main market of the Western Balkans in 2016, 67 % of imports and 83 % of exports (Council of the European Union, 2018). The enlargement process has opened up new business opportunities for EU and Western Balkan companies. Since 2000, almost all exports can enter the EU without customs duties or quantitative restrictions; thus, exports to the EU increased from € 7.337 billion (2006) to € 17.740 billion

(2016), while imports from the EU increased from € 14.08 billion (2006) to € 25.92 billion (2016) (Council of the European Union, 2018). EU firms are by far the largest investors in the Western Balkans (72.5 %), followed by Russia (4.6 %), Switzerland (3.7 %), Norway (3 %) and Turkey (2 %) (Council of the European Union, 2018). In this sense, the Western Balkans have strong economic ties with the EU. However, the Europeans are concerned about the presence of the emerging powers in the Western Balkans (Heath and Gray, 2018; Hopkins, 2019; Brzozowski and Makszimov, 2021).

The complex administrative and bureaucratic accession procedures and European hesitation have favored the penetration of the emerging powers in the Western Balkans. The EU is increasingly conditioned by the decentralization of the world power in the face of which it is readjusting its strategy to remain the main actor in the Western Balkans. Thus, the projection of emerging powers in the Western Balkans poses some challenges for the EU, since strategic competition for power maximizing and influence is developing in the region. There are tendencies towards a multipolar competitive order in the Western Balkans between the EU and the emerging powers (Russia, China and Turkey), and the emerging powers also among themselves, which have pushed the European authorities to pay more attention to the region.

The EU's enlargement policy towards the Western Balkan states (2014-2020)

While the EU has been the most visible player in the Western Balkans since 2000, the recent dynamics of emerging powers are seen as a direct threat to European interests. The EU therefore wishes to maintain its leadership in the region. In the context of multiple crises in and around the EU as well as the tense geopolitical situation in the Western Balkans, the EU and some of its member states (Germany, Austria) have shown new awareness by launching four initiatives promoting enlargement and in order to remain the most important players in the region: the Berlin Process (2014), the enlargement strategy of the European Commission (2018), the Sofia Summit (2018) and the Zagreb Summit (2020) (Lika, 2021). These initiatives were launched at a time many critics emerged in the Western Balkans regarding the EU, accusing it of failing to keep its promises and neglecting the states of the region.

Otherwise, in August 2019, the US Department of State appointed Matthew Palmer as a special representative for the Western Balkans and, in October 2019, President Donald Trump has appointed Richard Grenell,

former US ambassador to Germany, as his personal envoy for the dialogue between the Republic of Kosovo and the Republic of Serbia, announcing a renewed interest of the US in the Western Balkans. Europeans answered immediately that in addition to Josep Borrell acting as the EU's mediator (from his position of EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy), a Special European Envoy should be appointed (EEAS, 2020; Lika and Reka, 2021, p. 238). On 3 April 2020, Miroslav Lajčák was appointed by the EU Council as EU's Special Representative for the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia (Council of the European Union, 2020). Thus, the US and the EU continue to cooperate in the Western Balkans. Washington and Brussels support constitutional reforms in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the normalization of bilateral relations and reciprocal official recognition between the Republic of Kosovo and the Republic of Serbia.

Furthermore, popular support for EU membership varies from state to state in the Western Balkans. For example, annual surveys of the Balkan Barometer provide figures on the perceptions and expectations of public opinion in the Western Balkans about European integration. The results of 2018 show a favorable opinion from citizens of states such as Albania (83 %), Kosovo (84 %), North Macedonia (59 %) and Montenegro (53 %) to European integration; as for Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, respectively 45 % and 29 % of citizens responded that accession to the EU is a good thing (Balkan Public Barometer, 2018). Thus, Kosovo and Albania are the two most pro-EU states in the Western Balkans, followed by North Macedonia and Montenegro.

The launch of these European initiatives was welcomed by the Western Balkan states. All countries responded favorably and their leaders have thus expressed their willingness to continue promoting European regionalism and to strengthen the dialogue and cooperation between them and with the EU. These initiatives have brought new dynamism and encouraged cooperation with a perspective to a future membership. They constitute a relaunch of the EU's enlargement policy towards the Western Balkan states and are based on three main pillars: regional political cooperation and the settlement of bilateral disputes between the Western Balkan states; improving economic cooperation via interconnectivity in the fields of transport and energy; youth-oriented interpersonal relations and cooperation with the civil society. Concretely, since 2014, the Berlin Process has focused on regional cooperation, inter-connectivity and reconciliation in the Western Balkans (Berlin Process, 2014, pp. 1-4). Four years later, the European Commission published a document entitled: "A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement

with the Western Balkans” (European Commission, 2018). In this official document, the European Commission has announced that regional cooperation and good neighborly relations remain a prerequisite for the Western Balkan states to join the European common project (European Commission, 2018, pp. 5-8). The Sofia (2018) and Zagreb (2020) summits constitute respectively the third and the fourth European initiatives.

However, as it was the case at Thessaloniki summit (2003), the recent European initiatives reaffirmed the support for the European perspective of the Western Balkans, but the EU’s foreign policy has produced a lot of declarations with little effect. The EU enlargement policy reflects the way in which the EU institutions and a number of member states, including Germany and France, formulate their policies towards the Western Balkans (Ker-Lindsay *et al.*, 2020). Thus, the EU still fails to speak with one voice and to keep its enlargement promises.

The Western Balkans from different perspectives: contributions to the Journal of Cross-Regional Dialogues (JCRD)

This special issue² of the Journal of Cross-Regional Dialogues (JCRD) is the result of a reflection carried out on the occasion of an international conference organized on March 28, 2019 by the Center for International Relations Studies (CEFIR) of the Department of Political Science of the University of Liège (ULiège) on the Western Balkans and more particularly entitled: “The Western Balkans at the crossroads of European integration and emerging powers”³. As the organizer of this event and coordinator of this special issue, I made the choice to include this double scientific activity in a process of openness and interdisciplinary dialogue by involving researchers specializing in comparative politics, internal politics, International Relations, European studies, and international political economy. In other words, the research included in this special issue deals with a wide variety of subjects relating to International Relations, economics, the role of political actors in the Western Balkan states in the process of

² In this special issue, the authors write in their personal and individual capacities. The authors hold sole responsibility for the views expressed in their articles.

³ This conference was organized thanks to the support of several sponsors: the CEFIR and its president, Professor Sebastian Santander, the Cité research unit of the Faculty of Law, Political Science and Criminology of ULiège, the Heritage of ULiège, the Wallonia-Brussels International (WBI) and Erasmus +. In addition, many thanks to all the participants of this conference: Sebastian Santander, Liridon Lika, Bashkim Iseini, Kamal Bayramzadeh, Jean-Christophe Defraigne, Afrim Krasniqi, Vjosa Musliu, Arlind Puka, Anton Vukpalaj, Dorina Bérdufi, Xhabir Hamiti, Ardijan Sainovic, and Antoine Delens.

European integration, strategic issues, politics of enlargement of the EU in the Western Balkans and the place of European institutions and member states in the European decision-making process, or the projection of influences from emerging powers in the region. Each of the articles featured in this publication addresses specific topics. However, they all have a common object of study, that of the Western Balkans.

This special issue⁴ brings together articles in English and French from young and senior researchers, which aim to present a critical and original analysis on the Western Balkans. To do this, the authors articulate in their studies both theoretical and empirical approaches. They thus aim to contribute to the enrichment of academic debates and to the development of knowledge about the Western Balkans, the EU and the emerging powers. This special issue intends to answer the central question of the challenges posed by the penetration of emerging powers in the Western Balkans for the EU's deployment in this region. In other words, it seeks to analyze the new international balance of power in the context of the diffusion of global power. The research therefore raises the hypothesis that the Western Balkans today constitute a field of competition between the great powers which aspire to increase their influence in the region. Emerging powers like Russia, Turkey and China intend to compete with the EU in the Western Balkans and maximize their own interests. The research question that drives this issue is therefore the following: does the EU's enlargement strategy in the Western Balkans face competition from the deployment of emerging powers in the region? This question comes in several sub-questions: what are the interests of the EU in the Western Balkans? What are the interests of the emerging powers in the region? How do Western Balkan states position themselves towards the EU and the emerging powers? Does the assertive presence of the emerging powers in the Western Balkans present challenges for European enlargement? This special issue will try to provide answers to these various questions.

In her article, Dorina Bërdufi analyzes the role of political actors in the process of European integration of the Western Balkan states, focusing on the cases of Kosovo, North Macedonia and Albania. The author emphasizes that political actors are of paramount importance in advancing or hampering the process of integration with Western Balkan states into the EU. All the states of the Western Balkans have marked similarities but also significant differences with regard to their dynamics and prospects

⁴ My warm thanks go to all those who, despite their busy schedules, agreed to review the articles of the participants in this special issue. Their professionalism, their criticism and constructive remarks, as well as their sound advice have undoubtedly contributed to the high quality of this publication. My thanks also go to the JCRD editorial board: Sebastian Santander, Antonios Vlassis, Vincent Bricart and Camille Schmitz.

for development. The article uses a comparative method indicating the similarities and differences between these three states, in the context of the search for factors of progress and hindrance towards European integration. The factors of analysis highlighted in this article are: the majority-opposition and political parties, international actors, civil society, the media, public perceptions and ethnic and nationalist divisions.

Vjosa Musliu assesses the potential impact of the Berlin Process on the prospects of EU integration for the states of the Western Balkans. In the first part of the article, she examines whether the Berlin Process, a German initiative, can be read as a replacement for the current EU enlargement to the Western Balkans. In the second part, she analyzes how Orientalist/Balkanist tropes are once again part of the discourse emanating from the EU towards the Western Balkans. The author makes two central arguments. First, according to her, the idea behind the Berlin Process appears to be a replacement for EU enlargement to the Western Balkans, even temporarily. Second, she underlines that the Berlin Process is being used, once again, to re-establish Orientalist and Balkanist tropes when approaching the EU with regard to the Western Balkans. To do this, this article uses the documentary analysis and speeches by the heads of state of the twelve countries of the initiative between 2014 and 2019.

In his article, Antoine Delens studies the strategic renewal of the EU in the Western Balkans, emphasizing the asymmetry of approaches between the different European institutions. In other words, he aims to identify the divergences in approaches between the European institutions and is particularly interested in the enlargement strategy towards the Western Balkans that the European Commission presented in 2018. The author analyzes in depth the positioning of the European institutions regarding the strategic renewal of the EU and the possible impacts for the states of the region. Subsequently, he seeks to demonstrate that the asymmetry existing in the approaches of the various supranational (European Commission and European Parliament) and intergovernmental (Council of the EU and European Council) European institutions is the consequence of a renationalization of the process of enlargement. The reaffirmation of the central role of the member states in the decision-making process and the governance of the EU is illustrated in particular by the analysis of the European institutional blockage and the opening accession negotiations for Albania and North Macedonia.

Ardijan Sainovic focuses on the internal factors, systemic pressures and foreign policy of the Western Balkan states. He reminds in his article that the states of the Western Balkans are engaged in a process of accession to the EU which remains at the basis of their national policies. However, in

recent times, according to him, they have adopted different foreign policy strategies: all have increased relations with emerging powers, some have even intensified these partnerships, going so far as to occasionally oppose foreign policy directives of the EU. The author emphasizes that the attitude of the Western Balkan states is of strategic importance from a theoretical and empirical perspective. He notes that European leadership is accepted and continues to be wanted in the sense that Euro-Atlantic integration remains a priority. The author has used two theories of International Relations, namely realism and liberalism to explain these phenomena. After presenting the different theoretical postulates of realism and liberalism, the author argues that in his research the second offers a more complete framework by integrating internal and environmental factors into the analysis.

Kamal Bayramzadeh analyzes the rivalry between Turkey and Saudi Arabia in the Western Balkans and the impacts for the EU. In other words, he looks at the political, economic, military, security and religious issues linked to the competition between Turkey and Saudi Arabia in the Western Balkans in order to examine the implications for the EU. The author shows that Turkey and Saudi Arabia have increased their activities in the Western Balkans, notably in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Serbia. According to him, unlike Turkey, which had maintained a regional presence during the Ottoman Empire's long period of domination, Saudi Arabia's presence did not begin until after 1992, first in the context of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and then spread after the 2000s to other states in the Western Balkans. The author also intends to show in his article that the strategies of Turkey and Saudi Arabia are linked to a policy of soft power in two emanations of political Islam: one linked to Wahhabism and the other to Turkish political Islam close to the Sunni Islamic transnational organization of the "Muslim Brotherhood". The author confirms that the rise of the multiple activities of these two actors constitutes a security threat and a political challenge for the EU in the Western Balkans.

In his article, Jean-Christophe Defraigne assesses the impact of China's economic penetration in the Western Balkans on the region's relationship with the EU and on the region's role in the international division of labor. Using theoretical concepts from international economics and international political economy, the author presents an interpretation of relevant quantitative data and a qualitative analysis of Chinese economic flows in the Western Balkans. According to the author, the results show that China is unlikely to question the EU's economic hegemonic position in the region. The article also shows that Chinese economic flows and

development projects, notably the BRI, are not significantly transforming the role of the Western Balkans in the international division of labor. The author explains why Chinese economic flows do not substantially contribute to the integration of the economies of the Western Balkans into the international production networks set up by Chinese companies.

The last article, which is part of the “*varia*” section of the JCRD, does not deal with the Western Balkans, but with Central Asia (CA). In this article, Noemi M. Rocca argues that the “CA corridor” is experiencing an informal process of region building. She mentions that its internal drivers are represented by the BRI and a renewed Iranian stance towards the East. According to the author, although the primary goal of the BRI is to build a vast transport infrastructure to connect Chinese goods to Western markets, it also has the potential to improve connectivity and economic growth in CA. She points out that factors such as gas and oil could increase the region’s energy self-sufficiency and lead to economic interdependence. Moreover, given that all of the seven states of CA share regional stability and security as major political concerns, according to her, their mutual engagement can help to avoid interstate and intrastate conflicts in the region. The first part of the article is devoted to the theoretical debate on regionalism, in particular in the CA. The second deals with the main features of the integration process being built in the “CA corridor”.

Finally, this special issue ends with two book reviews. In the first, Sebastian Santander presents the book “*La Coopération de Shanghai. Conceptualiser la nouvelle Asie*” or, in English, “The Shanghai Cooperation. Conceptualizing the New Asia”, written by Pierre Chabal, Liège, Presses Universitaires de Liège, 2019. According to Santander, this book lies at the intersection of International Relations and studies on comparative regionalism, and deals with the construction of “New Asia” through the founding and the evolution of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). This is an original monograph which aims at understanding how International Relations evolve in a post-war context. Moreover, according to Santander, it is a significant and very welcome contribution to the discipline, which substantially enriches the existing scientific literature on the phenomenon of regional dynamics as well as on the SCO.

As for the second review, Antonios Vlassis focuses on the book “Commercial Realism and EU Trade Policy: Competing for Economic Power in Asia and the Americas”, written by Katharina L. Meissner, London, Routledge, 2018. According to Vlassis, this book seeks to understand the EU’s external trade relations, challenging the liberal-institutionalist approach, which is dominant in the EU external relations’

literature. Thus, according to him, the book explores why and how the EU systematically engages in trade relations and analyzes the motivations for different modes of European trade diplomacy such as bilateralism, interregionalism, and multilateralism. Vlassis recommends the book, highlighting that it is a key reading for academics, researchers and practitioners in various fields, such as foreign policy, regionalism, international political economy, as well as the EU external action.

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Role of Political Actors in the EU Integration Process: Cases of Kosovo, North Macedonia and Albania

Dorina BËRDUFI¹

Abstract

Political actors bear a pivotal importance in advancing/hindering the European Union (EU) integration process in the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia). All countries of the Western Balkans have marked similarities but also significant differences in relation to their dynamics and developmental outlook. In order to make the article more concrete, we focus the attention on Kosovo, North Macedonia and Albania. The article uses a comparative method to pit against each other indicators pointing to similarities and differences among these countries, in the context of finding the factors of progressing and hindering towards the EU integration for the three countries. The factors in focus are: ruling majority-opposition and political parties, international actors, civil society, the media, public perceptions, and ethnic and nationalistic divisions (a specific factor in North Macedonia and Kosovo). The analyze show that there has been improvement in some aspects. The political parties, the ruling majority and opposition, give both tendencies towards the more inclusive political situation and pragmatist one of their interests fulfilling. International actors, civil society and the media show contribution to the EU integration. For the last factor, results indicate that in North Macedonia ethnicity is a major cause behind political conflicts,

¹ Dorina Bërdufi, PhD in Political Science, is a lecturer at Political Science Department of the Aleksandër Moisiu University, Albania. She is also a political research expert. Her expertise is in political parties, governance and political research methods. She is the author of several research articles in her field of expertise. Her academic work is parallel to national and international research projects with main emphasis in social and political challenges of the Albanian citizens, such as: political party finance, Balkan comparative electoral study, administrative territorial division of 2015 in Albania, transparency monitoring of administrative juridical behavior and Albanian voting behavior. E-mail: berdufidorina@gmail.com

with a clear impact on the EU integration process. Kosovo is to be located somewhere in the middle, as interethnic relations play a role, but also internal strife is significant in terms of defining the forcefield between the different political and ethnic actors.

Keywords: Western Balkans, Political actors, EU integration process, Advancing/hindering factors.

Introduction

The three neighbor countries, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Albania, as part of the Western Balkans, since the fall of communism cope with explicit challenges from centralized to democratic political process. In order to enter the European Union (EU), they also need to fulfill politically and technically the EU Copenhagen criteria (political, economic, and *acquis communautaire*). The stages process is dependent on each of the country's own progress (De Munter, 2020). The progress of country consolidation and recommendations for factors to be corrected are every year delivered by the European Commission on its progress reports. Meanwhile, the EU's relations with the Western Balkan countries take place within a special framework known as the Stabilization and Association Process (SAP). The SAP has three aims: stabilizing the countries politically and encouraging their swift transition to a market economy, promoting regional cooperation and eventual membership of the EU (European Commission, 2020). If we consider the EU integration stages of the three states on focus, it is noticed that they have different timetable of the EU integration process. Albania and North Macedonia are candidate countries (respectively since 2014 and 2005), sharing a nine-year period difference between them from the starting point of this status. Kosovo began the integration process in 2014, eleven and fourteen years after the latest two. Thus for, Kosovo, as an independent state since 2008, could be considered to have a separate tendency of development compared to the other two. Although, in this article we will see that there are many similarities in the way the main political actors act, especially how the political parties act in their internal country politics.

Some specific characteristics of the Western Balkans are their communist past, border conflicts, post-war period of state-building process, leadership with an authoritarian tendency, the government disputes between the ruling majority-opposition relations, bilateral disagreement between the neighbor states, ethnic divisions and nationalistic accounts. Con-

sidering these variables, the Western Balkan countries confront a new European reality of state-building in terms of democratic development. Concentrating the comparison of the main affecting political indicators in only three Western Balkan states that share some common outlines, helps in a specific oriented analyze and qualitative results. Therefore, the focus of this article is the analyze and comparison of the main political actors' contribution in the EU accession progress for Kosovo, North Macedonia and Albania, in the period from 2009 to 2019.

From the methodological point of view, this article is an attempt to map the contribution to the European integration process of the main political actors. More precisely, the research question is: what is the role of the political actors in the EU integration process, in the cases of Kosovo, North Macedonia and Albania? To answer the research question is applied a comparative perspective due to their peculiarities. This method is used to confront similar indicators, pointing to similarities and differences among these countries. The dependent variable is therefore the EU integration process. The analyze has the dimension of a case study, where the independent factors are cross-compared in their impact on enlargement. Our independent variables in this research are the political parties, civil society actors, international actors, the ruling majority-opposition relations, the media, ethnic divisions and nationalistic narratives. Furthermore, for each of the actors the analyze is divided in two main lines, in the way of positive and negative influence towards the EU integration. This article's goal is to single out success stories, achievements, and to describe the motives and drivers of progress and causes behind failures. More specifically, each of our target countries presents a highly specific context in relation to the actors involved in the EU integration process. Firstly, the data used for this article are mainly of two forms: the official data, official reports, countries analyze, etc. Secondly, a crucial role in the comparison is the usage of statistical data from surveys, Balkan Public Barometer mapping the public perception of political actors and also data from the CHESdata survey focusing on statistical data of the three countries' political parties' attitude over the European integration.

The three states present interesting elements in terms of political parties and other political actors. Since political parties are the bases of government and opposition of a country, their nature, as also their leaders, are related to the government behavior towards the EU progress. In this regard, the first part of this article examines in detail the political parties' role in this process. Specifically, their attitude compatibility towards the progress in the checks and balances reforms and governance, central and local administration, legislation reforms, fighting against corruption and

getting better neighborhood relationships, are factors that will be analyzed in this section. In order to complete the framework of the research question, the article further analyzes other actors, such as international actors, the media, civil society, ethnic and nationalistic divisions (a specific factor in North Macedonia and Kosovo), and the citizen, as part of a fundamental role in the integration process, is going to be considered in analyses.

The ruling majority-opposition political parties'² role

The first actor to be analyzed is the role of the countries' main political parties. Primary, we have to remark that in all three states there have been positive progress on making the political atmosphere more inclusive for the opposition. Furthermore, data will show the progression on the check and balance situation of the governance. Therefore, from this point of view, the political arena results to be more open on fulfilling the EU criterion of integration.

Specifically, since 2001 in North Macedonia the most important development is the deep political crisis overcome. The application of the "urgent reform priorities", "in the fields of rule of law and fundamental rights, depoliticization of the public administration, freedom of expression and electoral reform" (European Commission, 2015) gave the government a positive motivation for the parliament and government functioning. In the last period, particularly from 2017, opposition parties took important leading positions. This positive factor led consequently to a better practically application of independence from the juridical institutions and controlling bodies. A good example in this context is solutioning the Wiretapping Affair of 2015. The committee of inquiry, based on the June 2, 2015, agreement for the solution of the political crisis, worked in order to identify political responsibility by looking into the conversations that have been taped (Pajaziti, 2015). Likewise, in Albania and Kosovo there have been a progress in terms of political parties' attitudes and central government. In Albania, the Public Administration Reform Strategy was adopted, resulting in a better depoliticization of the state professional officials from the political parties and political majority. As per the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) rapporteurs "The political environment, the cooperation between ruling majority and opposition, as well as electoral reform in line with OSCE/ODIHR³ and Venice

² Refer to annex 1 for the list of abbreviations of political parties.

³ Organisation for Security and Coopération in Europe/Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights.

Commission recommendations, were main topics during the discussions with all political forces” (Council of Europe Office in Tirana, 2018). One of the most important action of the Albanian Assembly is the unanimous approval and adoption of the legal reform and the constitutional amendments. Furthermore, Albania has made progress on launching the vetting process procedure of magistrates in 2014, fighting organized crime as also the cultivation and traffic of cannabis (in the line of fulfilling the priority 2 and 4 of the European Commission).

On the other hand, in Kosovo, the government is devoted and promised to accomplish the European Reform Agenda (ERA) (Republic of Kosovo, 2016). Even though the slow progress, likewise in Albania, there have been good efforts on the “fight against corruption, pointing specifically towards the lack of transparency and accountability of political parties, an issue civil society groups frequently denounced” (Martínez *et al.*, 2018, p. 13). Apart from the own country governance and political actors, the EU has a decisive role in this development, by pressuring the Kosovar institutions. An illustrative example was on March 2018 with the ratification of the border demarcation with Montenegro. The ratification took place, but there was strong resistance from opposition parties such as Self-determination Movement (LVV) and a significant number of the citizens of Kosovo (Bytyçi, 2018).

Another key element of positive similarities is the tendency of election administration, both municipal and parliamentary. All three countries have made positive development on that regard. Consequently, the election process and results show signs of development towards the European criterions of inclusions and transparency. Differently from the former period of elections in Albania, the European Commission reports that “the 2017 parliamentary elections were held in an orderly manner and its results were accepted by all parties. The May 2017 cross-party political agreement resulted in the opposition’s participation in the election and a less aggressive electoral campaign” (European Commission, 2018a, p. 7). Meanwhile in “North Macedonia significant improvements had been made to the electoral legislation and more confidence in the voter’s list, addressing most of the OSCE/ODIHR and Venice Commission recommendations” (European Commission, 2018b, p. 5). Likewise, Kosovo has also made some progress on both local and central election by better administering them. Thus, in all three countries progressive development is shown in the election point of view towards the EU integration criterions fulfillment.

A final positive argument is the ending of parliament boycott. North Macedonia and Albania have experienced this situation in 2016 and

2017. In Albania (2017), the opposition parties hindered the political life by blocking the parliament activities, while political parties also prolonged the crisis in North Macedonia (2001-2016). Political parties' agreements were ensured in both states from the EU interventions. In Albania, the Prime Minister Edi Rama and the leader of the Democratic Party of Albania (PD) Lulzim Basha overcome the parliament boycott and release the normal political and government activities. In North Macedonia with the Pržino Agreement, the opposition party Social Democratic Union of North Macedonia (SDSM) return the parliament. In both countries, the arrangements also included that some of the key position of the government or committees to be chaired by the political opposition parties. Such positions were ministers and parliament chair. In Albanian case the political parties went beyond this step, by establishing a technical government composed by ten ministries from the position party (Socialist Party of Albania (PS)) and eleven ministries from the opposition parties of PD and Social Movement for Integration (LSI). This was the first time in Albanian politics that a government is composed more from opposition parties than the actual government political party (Krasniqi, pp. 7-8).

Hence, all three countries have made good progress in the checks and balances reforms and governance, from central, local, administration, legislation, fighting against corruption and getting better neighborhood relationships.

Apart from the above positive role of the political parties and government/opposition in the EU integration, next are analyzed the delaying ones. The most two obvious factors for Kosovo, North Macedonia and Albania are the tendency for strong control of the majority leader and the strong polarization of political parties. Nevertheless, there is a difference between North Macedonia and the other two countries. In Kosovo and Albania, the leader control is more moderate than in North Macedonia, where the former Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski, showed mostly an authoritarian control (Bieber, 2018). This results in a difficult process of governance and further democratization of the countries, hence hindering the EU integration. The situation is deep-rooted in a long time period for these parties in power. For example, in Albania, the PS is in power from 2013, with Edi Rama as Prime Minister. Similarly, in North Macedonia, the leader of the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization-Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE) Nikola Gruevski governed for ten years from 2006 to 2016. In North Macedonia's politics there is a strong rhetoric aiming against the ethnic Albanians. Linked to this problematic of the governance, we also notice other challenging factors such as corruption, asylum seeker (especially in

Albania) and government approach to control the parliament. The polarization of political parties reflects and contributes in a difficult work for the governments of the countries, difficulties in the government formation (North Macedonia in 2017) and problematic tendency of internal parties' fragmentation (mainly in Albania and Kosovo). Consequently, these hampering aspects somehow brought difficulties to the governments functioning, executing improvements and problems solving. For example, in 2017, in Kosovo this situation brought a weak political coalition that was dependent on the minority's parties (Martínez *et al.*, 2018, p. 3). Kosovo reflects an interesting case, where the political party LVV performs in some interior politics critics on the EU integration, due to its nationalistic tendency politics (Bieber, 2015, p. 311), and the desire to be politically unified with Albania in one state. Nonetheless, this party is in favor of the European integration, as the best road to the Kosovo's development (Feilcke, 2019). These arguments of internal political polarization and power centralization tendency from the party's leadership also convey in the obstructive behaviors of the political parliamentary opposition. Additionally, this political situation impacts the citizen⁴ to suffer from the overpowering control of the party's leadership. In overall, these arguments point to a slowdown progress of the EU integration process.

Since political parties and their leaders result to be the most decisive political actors in the EU integration process, as also in the domestic politics of the country, this section analyzes statistically three factors that are considered politically determinant: the relative salience of European integration in the parties public stance in 2014; the position of the parties leadership in 2014 on fulfilling the good governance requirements of EU membership (administrative transparency, accountability, civil service reform and judicial reform); the overall orientation of the party leadership towards membership of the EU in 2014. The statistics are part of the CHES candidate survey of 2014 (Table 1).

The descriptive data confirm the above tendency of the political parties and leaders of the three Western Balkan countries. Therefore, it is not a surprise that political parties of North Macedonia show the highest level out of these three Western Balkan states of opposing the overall orientation of the party leadership towards membership of the EU: VMRO-DPMNE 50.10 % (opposes and somewhat opposes). Almost half of the party leadership has a tendency to actually obstruct the EU politics. The other parties in North Macedonia also show opposition but in moderate levels, between 20-25 %: the Democratic Party of Albanians

⁴ The argument of the citizens' perceptions is analyzed in detail in the last section of this article.

(PDSH) 22.7 %, the Democratic Union for Integration (BDI) 25 % and the Citizen Option for Macedonia (GROM) 22.6 %. As expected, in Kosovo only two parties have moderate levels of opposition, the LVV 21.4 % and Serb List (SL) 25 % (mostly opposition in some politics). The other significant parties tend to 100 % of favoring the EU, such as the Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (AAK), Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK), New Kosovo Alliance (AKR), Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK). Albania tends mostly to have a leader that supports the EU integration. The actual government party of PS, shows the tendency of 100 % pro-EU integration from its leader. There are a few small parties, mostly minority parties and national politics program parties, that lightly oppose the EU integration support, such as the Unity for Human Rights Party (PBDNJ) 13.40 % and the Republican Party of Albania (PR) 15.40 %. The results also show a 20 % of the today main opposition PD party leadership orientation in opposing the EU integration. This result could probably be explained with this time polarization and opposition status, by minimal chances in contributing to the Albanian governance.

According to salience of the political parties in the European integration public stance in North Macedonia, Albanians and North Macedonians show more evidence of positive trend. The position of the party leadership in 2014 on fulfilling the good governance requirements of EU membership is generally in line with the position of their party towards EU integration. The most notable case is VMRO-DPMNE party, which in all three variables opposes with 67 % the fulfilling of good governance requirements of EU membership (administrative transparency, accountability, civil service reform and judicial reform). The other parties show a constant trend on what they declare and actually act. In Albania, the political parties and leaders of PS, PR, Christian Democratic Party of Albania (PKDSH) and LSI and mostly are stable in their position to the EU via their public salience, fulfilling the good governance requirements of EU membership. The only party that somehow contradicts in this set of data is PD. Publicly its salience is declared to be of great importance to the EU integration at the level of 94 %, while at the level of 20 % it opposes the fulfilling the good governance requirements of EU membership (administrative transparency, accountability, civil service reform and judicial reform as also the overall party leadership oriented towards the EU). Meanwhile in the Kosovo's data, we observe another issue. Generally, in the majority of the political parties in Kosovo the public stance is more opposing than the leadership of that party towards membership. The exception in this case is made from the LDK, which shows a stability in its EU integration importance of fully in favor. Parties like AAK, AKR and Social Democratic Initiative (NSD), moderately show public posture

towards the non-importance of EU integration. Like in North Macedonia, in Kosovo there is also a political party, SL, that demonstrates an almost extreme public stance against the EU integration of 70 % compared to that of 25 % of the leadership and 43 % of the EU requirement of good governance fulfillment.

In conclusion, generally political parties and their leadership do show positive public attitude towards the EU integration. Whereas if we go deeper in the analyze, we find different behaviors between each country and between the countries at the comparison level. Political parties tend to be pragmatic and fulfill their own interest, rather than the country and citizen interest.

Table 1. Political parties' attitude toward the EU integration.

Indicator		Relative salience of European integration in the party's public stance in 2014		Position of the party leadership in 2014 on fulfilling the good governance requirements of EU membership (administrative transparency, accountability, civil service reform and judicial reform)		Overall orientation of the party leadership towards membership of the EU in 2014	
Country	Party name	European integration is of no importance	European integration is of importance	Opposes	In Favor	Opposes	In Favor
Kosovo	AAK	7.70 %	84.70 %	15.40 %	77.00 %	0.00 %	92.90 %
	AKR	15.40 %	69.30 %	0.00 %	100.10 %	0.00 %	100.00 %
	LDK	0.00 %	92.40 %	15.40 %	77.00 %	0.00 %	100.10 %
	LVV	23.10 %	46.20 %	8.30 %	91.70 %	21.40 %	71.50 %
	NSD	15.40 %	46.20 %	9.10 %	90.90 %	0.00 %	100.00 %
	PDK	0.00 %	92.30 %	30.80 %	69.30 %	0.00 %	100.00 %
	SL	69.30 %	7.70 %	42.90 %	28.60 %	25.00 %	24.90 %
North Macedonia ^a	PDSH	37.50 %	45.90 %	36.30 %	49.90 %	22.70 %	45.50 %
	BDI	20.90 %	58.30 %	54.20 %	37.50 %	25.00 %	62.50 %
	GROM	25.10 %	41.60 %	19.00 %	52.40 %	22.60 %	59.00 %
	RDK	20.90 %	58.30 %	15.80 %	73.70 %	20.00 %	65.00 %
	SDSM	4.20 %	79.20 %	12.50 %	79.20 %	8.70 %	86.90 %
	VMRO-DPMNE	54.20 %	37.50 %	66.70 %	24.90 %	50.10 %	50.10 %

Indicator		Relative salience of European integration in the party's public stance in 2014		Position of the party leadership in 2014 on fulfilling the good governance requirements of EU membership (administrative transparency, accountability, civil service reform and judicial reform)		Overall orientation of the party leadership towards membership of the EU in 2014	
Albania	LSI	6.70 %	93.40 %	6.70 %	93.40 %	6.70 %	93.40 %
	PBDNJ	6.70 %	73.40 %	7.10 %	92.90 %	13.40 %	73.40 %
	PD	0.00 %	93.30 %	20.00 %	80.00 %	20.00 %	80.00 %
	PDIU	20.00 %	66.70 %	7.70 %	84.60 %	0.00 %	100.00 %
	PKDSH	14.20 %	57.10 %	9.10 %	81.90 %	9.10 %	72.80 %
	PR	13.40 %	80.00 %	15.40 %	69.30 %	15.40 %	84.70 %
	PS	6.70 %	93.40 %	6.70 %	93.30 %	6.70 %	93.30 %

^a In North Macedonia there are some other Albanian ethnic political parties, such as Alliance for Albanians (AA) founded in 2015, Alternativa (A) founded in 2018 and Movement Besa (BESA) founded in 2014. Their main goal is to achieve full national equality between Albanians and North Macedonians in all areas. These parties are not included in the statistical analyze of this article because they are established after the data from CHES 2014 is gathered. In overall, these parties favor the EU integration, and do not constitute a factor of hindering this process.

Source: CHESDATA, 2014.

The civil society

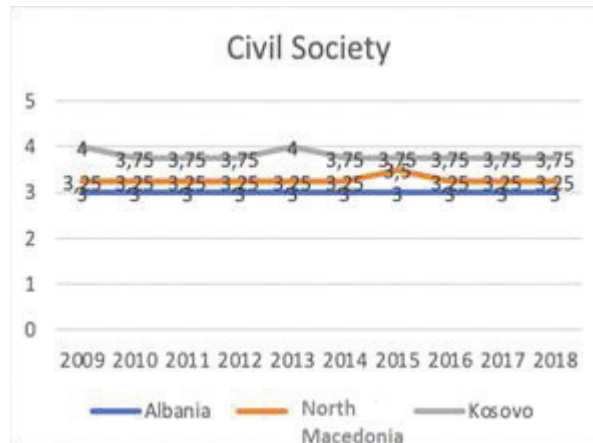
The second factor to be analyzed is the role of the civil society. The Freedom House indicator's measurement⁵ shows that in each of the three countries the tendency stays in almost the same figures in nine years (Freedom House, 2020). More specifically, Albania has the best result, at the rate of 3 points, North Macedonia 3.25 points and Kosovo 3.75 points. We should note that compared to the media, civil society plays a more important role towards EU integration, thus deducting that the media is politicized because of the political parties.

The civil society, compared to the other actors, shows almost more similarities in its action. Therefore, in Albania, the 2014 Law on public con-

⁵ The reading procedure is the same in all figures and tables that presents this institution data for civil society and media, in all years included in the analyze, for all the three countries: a rating of 1 indicates the highest degree of freedom and 7 the lowest level of freedom (Freedom House, 2019).

sultation leading down the procedural norms for transparency and public participation in decision-making is in line with European standards (European Commission, 2018a, p. 11). A very good example of public participation is the student protest, by the end of 2018-beginning of 2019 (Top Channel, 2018). This fact proved the functioning of the civil society.

As per Kosovo, Freedom House states for progress in the cooperation between government and civil society. The government showed a higher disposition to engage with civil society and involve it in political processes. On the other way, the regulation on minimum standards for civil society consultation, approved in 2016, has been implemented in a proper manner, and an environment of communication akin to that existing at the Assembly is starting to develop. Civil society organizations have been increasingly active this year in a number of fields, including European integration (Martínez *et al.*, 2018, p. 8). Similarly, in North Macedonia some progress towards the integration of the civil society dialoguing with the government is noticed, contributing therefore to the democratization of the country. An example is the adoption of “the Strategy for cooperation with and development of the civil society, as well as the Action Plan 2018-2020” (Balkan Civil Society Development Network, 2018). The European Commission confirms the above by stating that the “Civil society and other stakeholders are increasingly being involved in the policy-making and legislative processes and continued to play a constructive role in supporting democratic processes and ensuring greater checks and balances” (European Commission, 2018b, pp. 4-5).



Source: Freedom House, 2020.

Even though in all three states this progress of civil society is hindered in some stance by different factors. In Albania, the organization of the civil society is mostly not institutionalized and the “foreign donor support constitutes the main source of financial income” (Partners Albania for Change and Development, 2017, p. 14). In Kosovo and North Macedonia, the ethnocentric groups prevent more inclusion and the democratic development of the country, therefore hindering the EU integration. From the point of view of this factor, Albania stands in a better place than the other two in the road towards the EU. We can thus also confirm that till the present analyze, mostly the same hindering factors rotate in the delaying issues of these countries.

The international actors

The third factor to be analyzed is the role of the international actors. These actors play a significant role in stabilizing the democratic, economic and juridical area of the three countries, as also stabilizing the intern area of the political parties and between the parties themselves. The United States (US) and the EU are both actors that positively contribute towards the EU integration of the three states. It consists on contributing to a more democratic society by consulting the legal and political countries’ topics. In Albania, for example, the main two parties’ leaders Lulzim Basha (PD) and Edi Rama (PS) reached an agreement in May 2017 (Bota Sot, 2019). Meanwhile in Kosovo, an obvious actor influencing the country politics is the US. An example: “the United States has in the past engineered coalitions to prevent the Self-Determination Movement from taking office” (BiEPAG, 2017, p. 7). However, the US also serves as a national protector of the Republic of Kosovo. Furthermore, the EU assisted Kosovo to reach agreements with Serbia to normalize their bilateral relations (Technical and Political Dialogue Agreements). Apart from the positive achievements in these years, yet there is a “dialogues lack of transparency, and this might jeopardize the achievements reached through this process” (Beha, 2015, p. 102), impacting thus on delaying the EU integration process. North Macedonia, on the other way, differs slightly from Albania and Kosovo, because of less influence from the US into the intern politics than the other two. Nevertheless, the EU and the US did mediate in some areas of the political parties and politics in general. The best example is the Pržino Agreement in North Macedonia, with the intervention and direction of the EU. This pact stabilized the prolonged conflicts with Bulgaria and Greece, by reaching an agreement in June 2018 to rename the country the Republic of North Macedonia

(Harris, 2019). In overall, this is the most obvious positive progress in North Macedonia.

As per the hindering factors of EU integration in the three states, they are generally linked to the same positive ones analyzed in the preceding paragraph. The most negative influences towards the hindering to the EU integration do concern North Macedonia and Kosovo, while Albania stands in a more sustainable and calm position. As it is mentioned already in this article, North Macedonia faced for a long time its name dispute with Greece, which was a constant obstruction for its integration. Kosovo faces continuous tensions mostly in the north of its territory, with the Serbian political parties, like the LS. This last one in 2016 “proclaimed it would boycott the work of parliament and government. These political and social problems demonstrate how difficult the road still is toward developing a functioning civil society, reconciliation between Kosovo’s different ethnic groups and the country’s full integration into international political structures” (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2018, p. 4).

EU accession consists on complex long-term administrative and bureaucratic procedures, favoring the projection of influence of the emerging powers like Russia, Turkey and China in the Western Balkans. Generally, these emerging powers stand the point of view that these countries have other alternatives rather than the EU and NATO (Hänsel and Feyrabend, 2018). Turkey acts in a soft power base, such as investments in economy, culture, TV series, opening of Turkish colleges, restoration of mosques, etc. Russia, on the other hand, is not in favor of NATO and EU enlargement by promoting its political, economic and traditional ties with certain countries (like Serbia) in the region, presenting itself to them as a closer ally than the EU. Meanwhile, China “tries to compete with the EU through its autocratic model and its non-democratic principles” (Lika, 2020). However, there are a lot of critics about the Russian, Turkish, and Chinese influence in the Western Balkans (Lika, 2020; Rrustemi *et al.*, 2019). Despite the long-term procedure of European integration and the increasing tendency of influences from the emerging powers, the EU remains a key political and economic partner for Kosovo, North Macedonia and Albania.

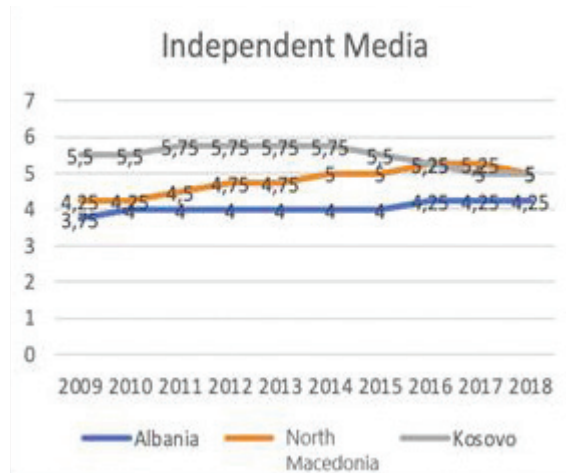
The media

The fourth factor to be analyzed is the media. “Media freedom represents without any doubt one of the most difficult challenges as the country aspires to be democratic and transparent, as well as to respect human rights and fundamental freedoms” (Hoti and Gërguri 2015, p. 29). As in the case of civil

society, also for the media, there are basically similarities between the three countries. All three states show a more progressive environment towards the media freedom. In this context, online media has its own importance, considering its large spread into the society. Nevertheless, Albania and North Macedonia are moderately prepared in the field of electronic communications and the information society (European Commission, 2018a; European Commission, 2018b) whereas Kosovo has a lower level of preparation in this area (European Commission, 2018c, p. 73). Although, in general the media in Kosovo is getting more independent than the previous period (5.5 in 2009 to 5 point in 2018) (Freedom House, 2020). Differently, Albania and North Macedonia between 2015-2018 have been slightly deteriorating in the media independence, 4.25 point and the second in the margin of 5-5.25 points. In overall, if we reflect on the media indicators, such as freedom of expression, critical media and media reporting, we can assert that the three countries are in a somewhat good position in being a linkage between the citizens and the EU integrator. In this regard, each country has made legislative media change. For example, in Albania, the Audio Visual Media Authority (AMA) approved the strategic action plan 2017-2019. Furthermore, “the condition of North Macedonia’s independent media improved slightly in 2017, reflecting positive developments in the credibility of media reporting as a result of the change in power at the central level” (Bliznakovski, 2018). In Kosovo, the journalists have grown their professional abilities to inspect proofs and actualities. Having this in mind, the Kosovar government is trying to accelerate the integration process by supporting the idea of free and transparent media as a precondition to EU membership. Such an objective has become an obligatory part of many documents deriving from the Kosovar Constitution as well as other plans and strategies like the National Strategy for European integration ‘Kosovo 2020’ (Hoti and Gërguri 2015, p. 29). This last argument could be one of the explanations of a better performance of the media in Kosovo than in Albania and North Macedonia, which are already candidate countries.

Besides the positive factors of the media, this sector also challenges delaying ones. The media of North Macedonia and Albania show some characteristics of dependency from the political parties. In North Macedonia, Alfa and Nova TV are more in favor of VMRO-DPMNE; the TV such as ALSAT-M and 24 TV are less polarized (Bliznakovski, 2018). Also, in Albania, some private media show tendency of dependency in their news towards the political parties and mainly for the most important ones, PD and PS. Furthermore, these Albanian media has the tendency towards the ground creation of an opinion-based journalism and fake news (Zguri, 2017, p. 58). In Kosovo, the European Commission invite the state authorities to take further steps “on the regulation of media ownership and transparency” (European Commission, 2018c, p. 22). In Kosovo and

North Macedonia differently from Albania, the media problematics are also connected to the ethnic, linguistic and nationalist conflicts, thus reflecting these issues in the media sector. The European Commission often advice that the government should take further political and legal provisions in this direction (European Commission, 2018a, p. 7).



Source: Freedom House, 2020.

The ethnic divisions and nationalistic narratives

The fifth actors to be analyzed are the ethnic divisions and nationalistic narratives. In two out of three countries, ethnic divisions and nationalistic narratives effect the political stability of countries. In the case of Albania this variable is not an influencer for the political actions. Albania is best known for ethnic and religion tolerance (UNDP, 2018, p. 25). Therefore, political parties do not take into consideration in their political actions neither of them. Furthermore, there has been progress towards human rights, policies of anti-discrimination, Roma rights (priority 5): the legal framework for the protection of human rights is broadly in line with European standards, national strategy on social protection for 2015-2020 is under implementation (European Commission, 2018a). Albania has ratified most international human rights conventions. "The overall legislative environment is conducive to the exercise of freedom of religion and progress was made in strengthening the independence of the regulatory authority and public broadcaster" (European Commission, 2018a, p. 78). Despite this positive situation, further enforcement for human rights have to continue (European Commission, 2018b) and also "the government

should step up its efforts to ensure there is a comprehensive plan for building up the capacity of all line ministries and local governments to implement the actions in the document” (European Commission, 2018b, p. 78).

Differently to Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia have still problems that concern interethnic relations (Demjaha and Peci, 2014, p. 4). However, there has been some progress in this area in Kosovo, “such as the application of the ethnic quotas in the relevant administrative jurisdiction, at the local level, at the government level, twenty seats in the Parliament (one sixth of the Assembly), as well as a minimum of ministerial positions” (Martínez *et al.*, 2018, pp. 5-6). Otherwise, since 2011, the EU has been facilitating the dialogue on the normalization of bilateral relations between Kosovo and Serbia (Visoka and Doyle, 2016). “Still, the dialogue has delivered far less than expected. Conflicting interpretations and contradictory narratives of Kosovo and Serbia exacerbated differences” (Demjaha, 2018, p. 22). But, official reciprocal recognition between these two states is important in order to move forward on the path of European integration (Hajrullahu, 2019).

The adoption of the double linguistic law on 11 January 2018 (Marusic, 2018) and the improvement of the interethnic relations are the most important developments in North Macedonia. According to 2002 census, the Albanians in this country make one fourth of the population (The State Statistical Office, 2002, p. 34). This population does not feel represented in the North Macedonia’s institutions. On this purpose, the Ohrid Framework Agreement implementation (Ohrid Framework Agreement, 2001) “paved the way for major political reforms that improved the rights of the Albanians in North Macedonia” (Krasniqi, 2011, p. 22). However, “the Ohrid Agreement has only been partly successful in addressing the root causes of the conflict” (Bieber, 2005, pp. 89-107).

Apart from the positive actions, these two countries still have challenges that hinder the EU integration process. Political actors themselves utilize these problems on their pragmatist interest. Specifically, the main challenge of Kosovo is the integration of the Serbian minority in the Kosovar politics. North Macedonia is the country that has the most serious consequences on this point of view, because of the long-time tensions between ethnic Albanians and North Macedonians. This inside hindering conflict is extended in time. One of the culminations of this conflict was in 2016, when the government did not form because one of the main political party in North Macedonia VMRO-DPMNE did not accept officially the Albanian language.

Given the importance of these indicators in Kosovo and North Macedonia, in Table 2, we illustrate the political parties' attitudes on ethnicity and nationalism. As already deliberated, these two states have a common variable that plays an active/important hindering role in EU integration process. North Macedonia, as is mentioned earlier in the analyze of this article, brings up in its political parties the problems of ethnicity and nationalism. The empiric data confirm this point of view. PDSH, BDI are almost (+90 %) compatible and fully in support of more rights for ethnic groups and nationalistic view of the society. Whereas, VMRO-DPMNE support nationalism (+90 %), and has a low rate of support for ethnic rights (14.3 %). In Kosovo's data the only party that does oppose the ethnic rights for ethnic minorities at a high level is LVV 67 % (CHESDATA, 2014). The other parties result more moderate, for example NSD follows with 25 %. AKR, LDK and PDK are parties that mostly support cosmopolitan views of the society (linking political party's politicization and inside political interest); these parties also support ethnic rights of minorities in Kosovo, while SL's result in this area is 100 % of support (CHESDATA, 2014).

Table 2. Kosovo and North Macedonia political parties' ethnic minorities and nationalism position.

Indicator		Position towards nationalism		Position towards ethnic minorities	
Country	Party name	Promotes cosmopolitan rather than nationalist conceptions of society	Promotes nationalist rather than cosmopolitan conceptions of society	Opposes more rights for ethnic minorities	Supports more rights for ethnic minorities
North Macedonia	PDSH	4.30 %	95.60 %	4.80 %	95.30 %
	BDI	4.30 %	95.70 %	4.80 %	95.30 %
	GROM	38.90 %	27.90 %	13.40 %	46.70 %
	RDK	11.20 %	72.30 %	0.00 %	100.00 %
	SDSM	52.10 %	13.00 %	23.80 %	47.70 %
	VMRO-DPMNE	0.00 %	91.20 %	57.10 %	14.30 %

Indicator		Position towards nationalism		Position towards ethnic minorities	
Kosovo	AAK	25.00 %	0.00 %	16.60 %	41.70 %
	AKR	81.90 %	0.00 %	9.10 %	63.70 %
	LDK	46.20 %	0.00 %	7.70 %	53.90 %
	LVV	7.70 %	92.40 %	66.80 %	25.00 %
	NSD	11.10 %	11.10 %	25.00 %	41.60 %
	PDK	46.20 %	0.00 %	7.70 %	69.30 %
	SL	0.00 %	91.60 %	0.00 %	100.00 %

Source: CHESDATA, 2014.

An additional statistical correlation test was pursued onto Kosovo, Albania and North Macedonia data of CHES 2014, to confirm the so far results (Table 3). Basically, the correlations search for the relationship between four variables: “Overall orientation of the party leadership towards membership of the EU in 2014” with “relative salience of European integration in the party’s public stance in 2014” with “position towards ethnic minorities” and with “position towards nationalism” (CHESDATA, 2014). Results show that the parties (leaders) in North Macedonia who, in overall, orient the party leadership towards membership of the EU, have the tendency to support more rights for ethnic minorities (44 %) and promote cosmopolitan rather than nationalist conceptions of the society (28 %). This cosmopolitan promotion also results to be part of the Kosovo’s parties (except LVV and SL). We could thus confirm that ethnicity and nationalism is of great importance in the political parties’ agendas, discussions, and problems occurring mainly in North Macedonia. We can assert that these variables indirectly constitute a hindering component of the EU integration delay for North Macedonia and Kosovo. Regarding to Albania, the CHES data statistical analyze confirms the results of the political parties-opposition section. Political parties and the government in Albania affirm the orientation towards the EU integration, although the public stance (56 %) is a bit lower than in Kosovo (70 %) and North Macedonia (73.5 %). This average percentage result for Albania could be linked with just a momentary factor of governance transition 2013-2014, from PD to PS, since the overall analyses of Albanian leadership presents a high level of public stance in entering the EU.

Table 3. Correlations: overall orientation of the party leadership towards membership of the EU in 2014.

* relative salience of European integration in the party's public stance in 2014.

* position towards ethnic minorities.

* position towards nationalism.

		Membership Kosovo	Membership Albania	Membership North Macedonia
EU salience	Pearson Correlation	.700**	.559**	.735**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0	0	0
	N *	87	97	135
Ethnic minorities	Pearson Correlation	-0.154	-0.155	-.280**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.173	0.159	0.003
	N*	80	84	110
Nationalism	Pearson Correlation	-.446**	0.016	-.439**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0	0.883	0
	N*	82	86	123

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* Number of respondents cross-tabulated.

Source: CHESDATA, 2014.

The citizen role

The last factor in analyze is the citizen. Citizens are a vital base for the EU integration process. In terms of political actors, they set the ground from which emerge the political parties, civil society, and the media. Hence, their perceptions of desiring the EU integration must considered. The below analyzed data is taken from the Balkan Public Barometer for the period 2015-2018. The most central problems facing the entire South East Europe (SEE) as per the Balkan Barometer are the economic situation, political disputes, unemployment and corruption (Balkan Public Barometer 2014, 2020). Consequently, these issues converge in the EU priorities and restriction for the three countries to the integration process. Specifically, the economic situation in North Macedonia and Albania from the citizens' perception is in decline from 2015 to 2018. For North Macedonia is -14 % decline, while for Albania is -25 % decline. These results could be possibly linked with reforms and intervention in the economic sector from the EU. Kosovar perception instead shows an increase of economic problems at the rate of +14 %. This could be explained by its

not yet getting candidate status. On the other hand, surprisingly, regarding the corruption level and political dispute, Kosovo shows a decline of -6 % and -5 % on its perception from 2017 to 2018. These factors result to be positive for this country. In the data below (Table 4) we will notice that probably they are not so much linked with the public perception of better relationship in the SEE region. Consequently, these two variables do confirm the hindering factors analyzed in the section of negative influences.

Accordingly, in the Balkan Public Barometer data (Table 4), the citizens of Kosovo are the most skeptical regarding the improvement of the relationship in SEE with 48 % who agree and 34 % who disagree. In contrast, the citizens of Albania have the highest level of better relationship in SEE at the level of 62 % who agree and 26 % who disagree. In between the latter two are the perceptions of the citizens of North Macedonia at the level of 57 % who agree and 30 % who disagree. In overall, from 2015 to 2018, the public perception data in Albania and Kosovo show a slight reduction of better relations in SEE, respectively in Albania of -3 % and in Kosovo of -4 %. Differently, in North Macedonia, the public shows an increasing perception of better relationship in SEE, at the rate of +8 %. The last result could be linked with the political stabilization of the government and better political relationship with the SEE.

Table 4. Do you agree that the relations in SEE are better than 12 months ago?

	Disagree	Agree
Albania	-9	-3
Kosovo	-3	-4
North Macedonia	-13	8

Source: Balkan Public Barometer for the period 2015-2018.

These results are also confirmed from the public of the three countries, regarding the possibility of contribution from the regional cooperation to the political, economic or security situation of the society. Albania and Kosovo tend to agree over 80 %, and North Macedonia is in the marge of 71-82 %. North Macedonia's public in this time period does also perceive between 11-15 % that EU membership is a bad thing, and 28-36 % is skeptic of either good or bad (Table 5). The opposite happens

to Albania's and Kosovo's publics, showing high levels of believing in EU membership over the rate of 80 %. Therefore, the citizens of the three states have a different tendency of thinking about the EU membership. The result could be linked to the long period of candidate status. Likewise, they could also be connected to the government tendency not to apply and realize the EU directive of cooperation and problems solving.

Table 5. Do you think that EU membership would be a good thing, a bad thing, or neither good nor bad?

Economy	Good thing	Neither good nor bad	Bad thing	Don't Know/ refuse
Balkan Barometer 2018				
Albania	83	11	4	1
Kosovo	84	11	4	2
North Macedonia	59	28	11	2
Balkan Barometer 2017				
Albania	81	14	5	1
Kosovo	90	6	3	1
North Macedonia	54	33	11	1
Balkan Barometer 2016				
Albania	81	12	6	1
Kosovo	83	12	2	2
North Macedonia	47	36	15	2

Source: Balkan Public Barometer for the period 2016-2018.

A concluding point regarding the citizens' perception in the period 2015-2018, is their overview for the time when they expect to enter the EU. In North Macedonia 22-28 % of them confirm that will never enter the EU. The long time period of sixteen years from granting the candidate status and political and economic problems, may cause this reasoning of high-level skepticism. Otherwise, Kosovo's public had the highest-level perception of EU accession shortly in 2020 (43 %), which is probably linked to the high level of public belief that consequently to entering the EU, problems will be solved. Seen from this angle, also the citizens of

Albanian, in 2016, have the same positive perception for entering the EU, at the rate of 51 %, whereas in 2018 they show a perception of postponing the accession in 2025. Involving all the factors analyzed up to here for this country, the results are likely allied to the latest political decision, the inside unstable political climate and the party leader's political attitude. In summary, the citizens' perception on EU integration is affirmed to be an important factor for the political actors of Kosovo, North Macedonia and Albania to considerate in their political behavior.

Conclusion

Despite the dissimilar length of the EU integration process of Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Albania, from the perspective of the political actors' role, this comparative analyze emphasises their importance towards the European integration of these countries. Qualitative and quantitative data, show a significant improvement of these political factors during the integration process, even though some of them have not yet fully met the EU criterion, therefore delaying the conclusion of the integration process.

In the three countries, international actors, civil society and the media have the most positive impact on the progress of the EU integration process. Despite the influence projection policies of emerging powers such as Russia, Turkey and China in the Western Balkans, the EU remains the crucial international actor contributing in the three countries development. Even though some critics advice that the EU needs to relief the political pressure on these Western Balkans countries in order to integrate them as soon as possible into its project, the latter is continuing its enlargement strategy based on its merit criterion. As well, there is still room for improvement in the institutionalization of civil society, the depoliticization of the media (mostly in North Macedonia and Albania) and the settlement of bilateral disputes with neighbouring countries (mostly regarding the North Macedonia and Kosovo). Despite the long duration of the process (mainly in North Macedonia), the public perception still remains positive in terms of the significance and desire for the country to be part of the EU.

Kosovo, North Macedonia and Albania have shown a positive attitude towards implementing in their central and local governments progressive reforms such as: depoliticization of state administration employees, the fight against corruption, the improvement of relations with neighbouring countries and the justice system. A factor that has intervended in hindering this politics is the somehow strong political leadership attitude of the

main political parties, hence delaying the fulfilling of the EU integration criteria.

A specific similar factor in North Macedonia and Kosovo is the nationalistic and ethnic divisions. Among the other factors analyzed in this article, disputes based on ethnicity and nationalism can be considered as one of the factors of delaying the EU integration process for these two states. Nevertheless, considering the positive attitude of the main political actors in Kosovo and North Macedonia and the pro-EU integration desire of their citizens, we can assert that this issue is today not an obstacle for the them to join the EU.

As a conclusion, despite the delaying issues, this article asserts that the role of the political actors, in overall towards the EU integration process is positive for Kosovo, North Macedonia and Albania.

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Annex 1: List of abbreviations of political parties.

Country	Party Abbrev	Party name	Party Name (English)
Kosovo	AAK	Aleanca për Ardhmërinë e Kosovës	Alliance for the Future of Kosovo
	AKR	Aleanca Kosova e Re	New Kosovo Alliance
	LDK	Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës	Democratic League of Kosovo
	LVV	Lëvizja Vetëvendosje!	Self-Determination Movement!
	NSD	Nisma Social-Demokrate	Social Democratic Initiative
	PDK	Partia Demokratike e Kosovës	Democratic Party of Kosovo
	SL	Srpska Lista	Serb List
North Macedonia	PDSH	Partia Demokratike Shqiptare	Democratic Party of Albanians
	BDI	Bashkimi Demokratik për Integrim	Democratic Union for Integration
	GROM	Gragjanska opcija za Makedonija-koalicija	Citizen Option for Macedonia-led coalition
	RDK	Rilindja Demokratike Kombëtare	National Democratic Revival
	SDSM	Socjaldemokratski Sojuz na Makedonija	Social Democratic Union of Macedonia
	VMRO-DPMNE	Vnatreshna makedonska revolucionerna organizacija-Demokratska partija za makedonsko nacionalno edinstvo	Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization-Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity
Albania	LSI	Lëvizja Socialiste për Integrim	Socialist Movement for Integration
	PBDNJ	Partia Bashkimi për të Drejtat e Njeriut	Unity for Human Rights Party
	PD	Partia Demokratike e Shqipërisë	Democratic Party of Albania
	PDIU	Partia Drejtësi, Integrim dhe Unitet	Justice, Integration and Unity Party
	PKDSH	Partia Kristian Demokrate e Shqipërisë	Christian Democratic Party of Albania
	PR	Partia Republikane Shqiptare	Albanian Republican Party
	PS	Partia Socialiste e Shqipërisë	Socialist Party of Albania



Facteurs internes, pressions systématiques et politique étrangère des États des Balkans occidentaux

Ardijan SAINOVIC¹

Résumé

Les États des Balkans occidentaux sont engagés dans un processus d'adhésion à l'Union européenne (UE) qui demeure au fondement de leurs politiques nationales. Cependant, dans la période récente, ils ont adopté des stratégies de politique étrangère différentes : tous ont accru les relations avec les puissances émergentes, certains ont même intensifié ces partenariats allant jusqu'à s'opposer ponctuellement sur les directives de politique étrangère de l'UE. Les deux principales théories des Relations internationales (RI) – le réalisme et le libéralisme – offrent des explications diverses à ces phénomènes. Après avoir présenté les différents postulats théoriques du réalisme et du libéralisme, cet article soutient que le second offre un cadre plus complet en intégrant les facteurs internes et environnementaux dans l'analyse. Les acteurs accroissent les relations avec les puissances non-occidentales pour différentes raisons qui sont souvent fonction des enjeux et des contextes : la globalisation, les dépendances et les caractéristiques du paysage politique intérieur. Alors que la globalisation et les formes de dépendance économiques et politiques poussent les États à privilégier l'intégration euro-atlantique, l'approfondissement ponctuel des relations de certains acteurs avec les puissances non-occidentales peut révéler des politiques extérieures plus opportunistes, guidées par des facteurs internes.

¹ Ardijan Sainovic, docteur en science politique, est chercheur postdoctoral au Centre Émile Durkheim (CED, Sciences Po Bordeaux – CNRS). Ses travaux couvrent des questions de théories des Relations Internationales, de politiques de puissance, de politique étrangère des petits États et de résolution des conflits. E-mail : ardijan.sainovic@scpobx.fr

Mots clés : Balkans occidentaux, analyse de la politique étrangère, Union européenne, puissances émergentes.

Introduction

Les six États des Balkans occidentaux – l’Albanie, la Bosnie-Herzégovine, le Kosovo, la Macédoine du Nord, le Monténégro et la Serbie – sont engagés dans un processus d’adhésion à l’Union européenne (UE). Leur état d’avancement diffère² mais tous poursuivent cette stratégie qui se situe aux fondements de leurs objectifs nationaux.

Cependant, depuis quelques années, le processus d’élargissement a fonctionné au ralenti, notamment causé par la crise économique de 2008, puis la crise financière, la « fatigue » de l’élargissement, la montée des populismes, le Brexit, les projets internes de réforme, ou encore les crises migratoires. En même temps, des puissances émergentes, telles que la Russie, la Turquie et la Chine ont accru leur présence dans les Balkans occidentaux (Bieber et Tzifakis, 2019, 2020 ; Bechev, 2017 ; Blank et Younkyoo, 2014).

Devant cette double évolution dans la période récente – de ralentissement de la perspective d’élargissement et d’essor des puissances émergentes – les États de la région ont défié les attentes et surpris en développant et appliquant des politiques étrangères différentes.

Traditionnellement, depuis la fin des guerres yougoslaves des années 1990, des efforts de la démocratisation de la région, et de la perspective d’adhésion à l’UE et à l’Organisation du Traité de l’Atlantique Nord (OTAN), les États ont suivi le leadership des puissances occidentales, et, malgré la persistance des tensions dans les relations bilatérales, ils ne se sont pas positionnés contre les intérêts européens. Ceci a changé depuis quelques années : tous les États de la région ont démontré un désir accru de développer des liens étroits via des relations bilatérales et parfois des forums multilatéraux avec les puissances émergentes. Tout en approfondissant les relations bilatérales avec la Turquie, les États de la région ont répondu favorablement au projet de « nouvelles routes de la soie » (*Belt and Road initiative (BRI)*) chinoises en adhérant au cadre institutionnel 17+1 qui le soutient³. Certains – à l’instar de la Serbie, de

² Pour rappel la Serbie et le Monténégro sont en négociation d’adhésion à l’UE ; l’Albanie et la Macédoine du Nord viennent d’obtenir le feu vert pour l’ouverture des négociations ; la Bosnie-Herzégovine et le Kosovo sont des candidats potentiels.

³ Le Kosovo est le seul État des Balkans occidentaux à ne pas en faire partie de l’initiative, n’étant pas reconnu par la Chine.

la Bosnie-Herzégovine et ponctuellement de la Macédoine du Nord – se sont davantage éloignés stratégiquement des positions de l’UE en matière de politique étrangère et de sécurité. La Serbie a par exemple développé un partenariat stratégique avec la Chine, l’a soutenue concernant les camps d’internement du Xinjiang, et continue d’avoir des relations étroites avec la Russie. Les trois États précités ne se sont pas alignés sur les sanctions européennes à l’égard de la Russie après l’annexion de la Crimée, s’opposant directement aux demandes de l’UE. De manière générale, l’alignement de ces États sur les positions européennes a connu ponctuellement une diminution (Bieber et Tzifakis, 2019).

L’attitude des États des Balkans occidentaux est d’une importance stratégique dans une perspective théorique et empirique : la sécurité des petits États sur la scène internationale est garantie par la création d’alliances. Ainsi, désavouer le leadership européen dans la politique internationale peut refléter un changement stratégique. En même temps, aucun État n’a démontré un signe clair de rejet du cadre stratégique général en matière de politique étrangère et de sécurité de l’UE : le leadership européen est accepté et continue d’être voulu dans le sens où l’intégration euro-atlantique demeure prioritaire.

Dès lors, comment expliquer les différences dans la politique étrangère des États des Balkans occidentaux vis-à-vis des puissances internationales ? Ces développements défient les théories conventionnelles des relations internationales et les études sur les petits États, qui s’attendent à ce que ces derniers appliquent des politiques étrangères minimalistes. La littérature académique sur la politique étrangère des États des Balkans occidentaux demeure faible : elle a été principalement préoccupée par les recherches sur la transition démocratique, les conflits internes, les constructions étatiques, et le nationalisme. La littérature récente continue de se focaliser sur la politique comparée et les études régionales, au détriment des relations internationales.

Cette recherche vise aussi à combler ce déficit. Dans les pages qui suivent, nous chercherons à expliquer ce phénomène – l’accroissement des relations et les différences dans le comportement des six États des Balkans occidentaux à l’égard des puissances émergentes, ainsi que l’éloignement ponctuel de certains de ces pays vis-à-vis de la politique étrangère de l’UE, mais l’intégration européenne demeurant toutefois prioritaire pour tous – à partir d’une perspective théorique. Puis nous vérifierons le cadre théorique par une analyse empirique.

Explications théoriques de la politique internationale des États des Balkans occidentaux vis-à-vis des puissances émergentes

En Relations Internationales (RI), trois paradigmes demeurent les plus populaires parmi les chercheurs : le réalisme, le libéralisme et le constructivisme. Ce dernier affirme que la politique étrangère et le résultat international sont déterminés par la culture et les identités nationales et internationales. Les perceptions qui affectent la politique étrangère sont ainsi façonnées par la formation de l'État, les structures des élites et les identités compétitives (Houghton, 2007).

Cependant, à ce stade, elle offre peu d'outils pour saisir quelles identités prédominent. Malgré les fructueuses contributions, elle souffre dès lors de faibles capacités pour prédire sur quels fondements les États construisent leurs stratégies internationales : les fondements méthodologiques demeurent faibles. Les sciences sociales sont toujours incapables de définir et mesurer les identités proprement (Abdelal, 2006), l'usage de la notion risque dès lors de tomber dans l'arbitraire : l'auto-perception par les dirigeants joue certes un rôle dans l'élaboration de la politique étrangère, mais il est nécessaire de faire usage avec prudence de l'identité dans l'analyse de la politique étrangère des États. Dès lors, nous avons choisi de mobiliser principalement deux théories – le réalisme et le libéralisme – pour discuter des évolutions empiriques observées dans les Balkans occidentaux.

Le réalisme et ses limites

Les théories qui se rapportent au réalisme demeurent les plus utilisées en RI. Ceci se vérifie également dans l'analyse de la région balkanique : les recherches se focalisent majoritairement sur le rôle des objectifs réalistes traditionnels concernant la puissance et la survie, sur la balance des pouvoirs, ainsi que sur la géopolitique. Les États des Balkans occidentaux, ayant des ressources limitées et en conséquence de faibles capacités pour assurer leur sécurité, sont tenus de former des alliances avec des acteurs extérieurs pour assurer leur protection. Ainsi la politique extérieure est prioritairement fonction des facteurs systémiques.

Le changement dans la balance des pouvoirs. Les États des Balkans occidentaux ont traditionnellement été exposés aux influences de grandes puissances extérieures : l'Empire ottoman a été présent dans la région durant près de cinq siècles, les États des Balkans occidentaux ont partagé une même base idéologique communiste avec l'Union des républiques

socialistes soviétiques (URSS) durant la Guerre froide et un État comme l'Albanie avait même noué un partenariat stratégique avec la Chine dans les années 1970 (Méhilli, 2017), sans équivalent pour un État européen. Depuis 2000 et la fin des conflits armés dans les Balkans occidentaux, les États de la région ont orienté leur politique étrangère principalement vers l'adhésion à l'UE et à l'OTAN⁴. Dans une perspective réaliste, la nécessité de former des alliances pour échapper aux menaces et incertitudes géopolitiques expliquerait cette considération pour l'UE et les États-Unis. En dépit de quelques réserves, les impératifs en matière de sécurité et de survie seraient primordiaux (Waltz, 1959, 1979). Cette primauté donnée aux États-Unis et à l'UE s'expliquerait aussi par le moment unipolaire qu'a connu le système international dans les années 1990 et 2000 : ces acteurs auraient bénéficié d'un quasi-monopole pour étendre et consolider l'ordre mondial (Cooley et Nexon, 2020).

Cependant, le ralentissement de la perspective d'adhésion à l'UE aurait créé un vide relatif à la puissance, les demandes continues en matière de résolution des conflits bilatéraux, de démocratisation et de renforcement de l'État de droit auraient renforcé la défiance des acteurs locaux, ouvrant la voie aux puissances émergentes pour étendre leur influence dans la région. D'autant plus que sur la scène internationale, on assisterait à un changement de structure du système au profit de ces mêmes puissances émergentes qui viennent défier l'ordre libéral (Cooley et Nexon, 2020). La Russie a accru les relations bilatérales avec la Serbie et la République serbe de Bosnie-Herzégovine, tandis que la Chine est devenue le deuxième partenaire économique pour la région des Balkans occidentaux. Cette dernière a créé un organisme régional (l'initiative 17+1) dans lequel tous les États des Balkans occidentaux – sauf le Kosovo – ont été inclus, qui lui sert à promouvoir ses intérêts et sa vision du monde. Ces grandes puissances fournissent un certain nombre de biens publics, sans demander les mêmes efforts de démocratisation. Les changements rapides dans la distribution de puissance pousseraient les petits États des Balkans occidentaux à être plus flexibles en termes d'alliances. Après l'érosion de la puissance hégémonique, les petits États peuvent devenir plus actifs sur la scène régionale afin d'altérer leur environnement. Ces États peuvent profiter de patrons alternatifs pour sortir de l'ordre sur un problème de gouvernance donné, notamment en raison des avantages pour défendre l'intérêt national que cela peut procurer.

Les circonstances géopolitiques constituent un autre effet important sur la politique étrangère des petits États. Dans les Balkans occidentaux, les États sont vulnérables vis-à-vis de l'UE et des États-Unis, tandis que

⁴ Sauf pour la Serbie qui ne souhaite pas adhérer à l'OTAN.

certains sont plus exposés à des puissances non-occidentales comme la Russie, et dans une moindre mesure la Turquie et la Chine. Un certain nombre de facteurs géopolitiques peuvent expliquer les différences dans les stratégies de politique étrangère :

- la dépendance serbe à l'égard de la Russie (les besoins en gaz et les obstructions russes à l'égard du Kosovo) encourage la Serbie à coopérer ;
- les différends bilatéraux entre le Kosovo et la Serbie poussent ces États à chercher des soutiens et alliances auprès des grandes puissances. Chacun privilégiera en priorité ses soutiens internationaux respectifs pour approfondir les relations, tout en cherchant à accroître les relations avec le plus grand nombre d'acteurs possible ;
- le soutien occidental à l'égard de l'indépendance du Kosovo amène également l'Albanie – ayant des liens affectifs avec le Kosovo – à considérer l'intégration euro-atlantique comme seule alternative possible de politique extérieure ;
- les vulnérabilités géopolitiques de l'État de Bosnie-Herzégovine et, dans une moindre mesure, de la Macédoine du Nord, ainsi que les relations aux voisins, notamment le rapport délicat du Monténégro avec la Serbie, les conduisent à construire des liens étroits avec des puissances extérieures qui leurs garantissent la survie.

Ces explications ouvrent la voie à des analyses prenant en compte d'autres facteurs que ceux strictement structurels. D'un point de vue néoréaliste, l'accroissement des relations avec les puissances internationales est prioritairement dû à l'émergence d'une forme de multipolarité compétitive qui se manifeste dans les Balkans occidentaux. La structure contraint et détermine le comportement des États, au même titre que le marché contraint le comportement des agents économiques (investisseurs, consommateurs, producteurs). Ainsi, selon le paradigme néoréaliste, les États étant des acteurs unitaires, rationnels et égoïstes, cherchant à maximiser leur utilité définie en termes de survie et évoluant dans un système anarchique marqué par le « *self-help* », ils ne peuvent compter que sur eux (Duncan et Siverson, 1982). Dès lors, face à l'essor des puissances non-occidentales telles que la Chine, la Russie, et la Turquie, les États de la région ont trois options principales : 1) travailler avec les puissances démocratiques occidentales (les États-Unis et l'UE) pour contrebalancer l'implication des puissances non-occidentales ; 2) s'aligner (de manière modérée) sur les puissances non-occidentales ou s'en rapprocher en rompant avec les États-Unis et l'UE ; 3) adopter des politiques et actions contraires dans le but de diversifier leurs partenariats

et d'accroître leur autonomie (*hedging*) (Massie et Paquin, 2019). En ce sens, les différences de comportement entre les États des Balkans occidentaux s'expliqueraient par cette combinaison de changements structurels et d'enjeux géopolitiques.

Cependant, malgré la popularité de ces analyses, la narration néoréaliste ne permet pas d'expliquer à elle seule les développements clés observés dans la région. Les Balkans occidentaux demeurent une sphère d'influence de l'UE qui domine largement les statistiques économiques et commerciales et joue un rôle clé dans la diffusion des normes libérales dans la région. D'un point de vue structuraliste, l'accroissement des partenariats stratégiques ponctuels avec les puissances non-occidentales, en particulier de la Serbie, de la République serbe de Bosnie-Herzégovine et de la Macédoine du Nord sous le gouvernement de Nikola Gruevski (2006-2016), au risque de miner la perspective d'adhésion reste inexplicé. Raison pour laquelle d'autres facteurs doivent être pris en compte dans l'analyse. Les États ont plus d'autonomie dans leur comportement international que ce que les théories structurelles semblent proclamer. Certes, le réalisme néoclassique a tenté de répondre aux limites du réalisme en incluant dans l'analyse du comportement international des États les relations État-société, la nature du régime politique, la culture stratégique et les perceptions des élites dirigeantes (Rose, 1998 ; Sterling-Folker, 1997 ; Schweller, 2006 ; Ripsman *et al.*, 2009). Cependant, en essayant de corriger les défaillances du réalisme par l'intégration de variables *ad hoc* telles que les perceptions, les arrangements politiques internes et les normes internationales, ces théoriciens s'éloignent considérablement de la tradition réaliste (Legro et Moravcsik, 1999).

L'approche libérale : interdépendances et politiques intérieures

Le libéralisme est une théorie des RI qui soutient que la force fondamentale de la politique mondiale est la globalisation comprise comme l'interdépendance entre les intérêts des groupes de différentes sociétés. Ces groupes cherchent à amener leurs gouvernements à réguler la globalisation : ces demandes variées déterminent les comportements différents des États (Moravcsik, 1997, pp. 518-520).

L'institutionnalisme néolibéral est plus optimiste sur les possibilités des petits États dans le système international (Keohane et Nye, 1977). Les capacités matérielles ne sont pas primordiales : leur positionnement dans le réseau global d'interdépendances les rend moins vulnérables à l'égard de l'environnement extérieur. D'un point de vue institutionnaliste, les

institutions et les caractéristiques politiques contribuent à affecter le comportement international (Keohane, 1990). Prendre ainsi en compte les variables domestiques dans l'analyse rend l'explication plus puissante.

L'inclusion des perspectives internes est importante compte tenu des caractéristiques des États des Balkans occidentaux : des États récents, sortant de conflits armés et en développement, dont le processus de démocratisation est inachevé et où les élites politiques sont en compétition pour le maintien au pouvoir. Dans cette perspective, la politique extérieure ne peut être séparée des politiques internes et fait partie des stratégies de pouvoir des élites étatiques.

Globalisation et interdépendance. L'élargissement des domaines de la politique étrangère est directement lié au processus de globalisation. Celle-ci a conféré une plus grande importance au développement économique, mais aussi à la culture, et à l'éducation (Held *et al.*, 1999). Phénomène économique marqué par la libre circulation des capitaux, des biens, des services et des technologies, les acteurs sont amenés en permanence à attirer les investissements étrangers et à accroître les parts de marché mondiales indispensables pour assurer la croissance économique (Stopford et Strange, 1991). L'accroissement des liens économiques sur les marchés globaux peut avoir plusieurs objectifs stratégiques : la réalisation de profits, l'accroissement de l'influence dans le système économique international, et le renforcement des interdépendances avec les puissances régionales à travers les investissements dans les secteurs économiques clés afin de consolider les capacités d'influence. Les États des Balkans occidentaux sont en développement et leurs poids dans le système économique demeurent négligeables. Mais l'impératif économique à travers l'accumulation des richesses peut constituer un facteur explicatif de la diversification des relations avec les puissances extérieures.

Le processus de démocratisation permet aussi d'expliquer la tendance en faveur de cette diversification par des politiques commerciales plus libérales. En ce sens, les systèmes politiques inclusifs encouragent des politiques qui bénéficient au plus grand nombre d'individus : les systèmes électoraux libres participent à disperser les préférences des groupes d'intérêts dans la masse des électeurs. Cette relation entre régime politique démocratique et marché libre est d'autant plus prononcée dans les pays en développement : selon le modèle de Stolper-Samuelson à partir du théorème d'Heckscher-Ohlin, lorsque le travail est le principal facteur de production, aux dépens du capital, il est dans l'intérêt collectif des travailleurs de s'assurer que leur économie est ouverte aux

investissements et orientée vers les exportations⁵. La signature d'accords de libre-échange est aussi un moyen pour les élites dirigeantes de montrer à leurs citoyens que les problèmes économiques sont traités (Mansfield et Snyder, 2002). La globalisation et les dépendances économiques peuvent apporter des explications utiles – comme nous le verrons dans l'analyse empirique – mais ne permettent pas, à elles seules, d'éclaircir les évolutions à l'œuvre.

L'environnement politique intérieur. Pour comprendre les choix de politique étrangère que font les États, aucune étude ne peut faire l'impasse sur l'analyse des facteurs internes. Cet élément se voit renforcé davantage encore lorsqu'il s'agit de comprendre les différences de comportement en matière de politique extérieure entre États possédant des caractéristiques et ressources matérielles similaires. Cela suppose d'examiner les forces sociales et politiques, ainsi que leurs histoires respectives⁶. La théorie libérale permet ainsi de se pencher sur les dynamiques spécifiques des États. Ces derniers possèdent des caractéristiques distinctes dans les Balkans occidentaux : ils sont ethniquement et religieusement hétérogènes. Ces acteurs sociaux ont des préférences propres et cherchent à influencer la politique étrangère des gouvernements. Ces liens affectifs entre groupes peuvent inciter à la formation de partenariats stratégiques entre États.

L'approche libérale insiste également sur l'importance des facteurs institutionnels. Depuis deux décennies, les États des Balkans occidentaux sont dans une phase de triple transition : de la guerre vers la paix, de l'autoritarisme vers la démocratie et du communisme vers le capitalisme. Cette période marquée par des faiblesses en matière institutionnelle permet de multiples externalités : la domination des intérêts particuliers sur les intérêts nationaux ; la compétition entre les élites qui cherchent à accéder et se maintenir au pouvoir conduit à élargir et approfondir les soutiens internationaux ; en ce sens, le nationalisme est particulièrement attrayant et utilisé par les élites pour consolider leur emprise sur le pouvoir et tracer des frontières entre les groupes. Ainsi, les structures politiques domestiques des États des Balkans occidentaux (les transitions institutionnelles, le nationalisme mobilisé dans les sociétés ethniquement divisées, les compétitions entre factions et la recherche de reconnaissance) peuvent expliquer les différentes orientations de politique étrangère prises par les États.

⁵ Cela permet d'augmenter la demande de main-d'œuvre et de pousser à la hausse des salaires. Les liens entre démocratisation et la libéralisation économique ont été largement documentés dans la littérature (Dutt et Mitra, 1995).

⁶ Le néoréalisme est certes capable d'expliquer comment les pressions systémiques poussent les États très différents à agir de manière similaire, mais il se révèle incapable d'expliquer pourquoi des États qui partagent des capacités similaires agissent différemment.

La théorie libérale peut apporter une explication claire et cohérente concernant le comportement des petits États des Balkans occidentaux. La globalisation, les interdépendances et les facteurs intérieurs peuvent aider à comprendre les choix pris entre l'intensification de l'alignement sur l'UE et la poursuite de politiques plus opportunistes par certains. L'approche libérale a pour avantage d'inclure différentes explications dans l'analyse de politique étrangère, dans l'objectif de corriger et dépasser les limites du néoréalisme (du réalisme structurel).

Ainsi, le modèle théorique génère les arguments suivants, expliqués en détail dans la partie empirique. Premièrement, la globalisation et la dépendance économique expliquent à la fois l'accroissement des relations avec les puissances non-occidentales et les objectifs stratégiques en faveur de l'intégration européenne. Deuxièmement, les structures politiques internes expliquent les tentatives d'autonomisation et d'éloignement ponctuels sur les positions de l'UE de certains États.

Les sections suivantes s'attachent à examiner empiriquement l'énoncé théorique. Nous verrons ainsi dans quelle mesure les variables libérales permettent de comprendre la politique étrangère des États des Balkans occidentaux à l'égard des puissances internationales.

Évidences empiriques de l'approche libérale

Tous les États des Balkans occidentaux ont accru leurs relations avec les puissances internationales et cherchent à satisfaire leurs intérêts politiques et économiques. Bien qu'ils ne coordonnent pas leurs politiques et soient en désaccord sur plusieurs enjeux régionaux importants, depuis la fin des guerres des années 1990 dans les Balkans occidentaux, les objectifs stratégiques fondamentaux des six États étaient similaires : l'intégration européenne. Tous se sont également engagés vers l'intensification des relations avec l'OTAN ; trois y ont adhéré à savoir l'Albanie, le Monténégro et la Macédoine du Nord ; le Kosovo a exprimé sa volonté d'y adhérer ; la Bosnie-Herzégovine ne pouvant pas en raison de la complexité de l'architecture décisionnelle ; et la Serbie étant le seul État ayant mis en œuvre une politique de neutralité militaire.

En ce sens, tous les États continuent de respecter ce cadre stratégique général vers l'intégration européenne qui implique un alignement sur la politique étrangère de l'UE. L'accroissement des relations avec la Russie, la Chine et la Turquie n'est pas susceptible de menacer sérieusement à ce stade les intérêts européens. Cependant, les politiques ambiguës de la Serbie et de la République serbe de Bosnie-Herzégovine se révèlent

plus autonomes et remettent ponctuellement en cause les liens avec les structures euro-atlantiques.

La globalisation et les dépendances aux fondements des orientations extérieures des États des Balkans occidentaux

Le processus de globalisation a entraîné une extension des domaines de la politique étrangère. Désormais, elle inclut les considérations de développement économique, mais aussi de culture, d'éducation, ou encore de santé. Dans un monde marqué par la libre circulation des capitaux, des biens, des services et des technologies, les acteurs sont en quête permanente d'investissements étrangers et d'acquisition de parts de marché mondiales indispensables pour assurer la croissance économique.

C'est dans ce contexte « globalisé » qu'il faut d'abord comprendre la politique étrangère des États de la région : l'impératif économique les amène à multiplier et diversifier les interactions avec l'extérieur. L'intérêt porté à l'accroissement des investissements directs étrangers et des partenariats économiques est justifié par de nombreuses attentes : les apports en ressources financières, l'augmentation de la productivité, l'ouverture aux marchés internationaux, l'amélioration des capacités de gestion locale, les transferts de technologie, et leur impact sur la croissance. Cela peut potentiellement contribuer au développement économique de la région, servant ainsi les intérêts de ces États dont il est estimé selon un scénario de la Banque européenne pour la reconstruction et le développement (BERD) qu'ils atteindront le Produit intérieur brut (PIB) par habitant actuel de l'UE dans 60 ans (Sanfey et Milatovic, 2018). Souvent ces investissements des États non-occidentaux visent à combler un vide laissé par le désintérêt d'investisseurs occidentaux (Vangeli, 2020, p. 215). Ils ont permis de contribuer à la restructuration et à la modernisation de nombreux secteurs. Le soutien turc dans la rénovation de l'héritage historique de la période ottomane peut contribuer à l'effort des États des Balkans occidentaux pour devenir une destination touristique (Bieber et Tzifakis, 2019).

La Chine est ainsi devenue le deuxième partenaire commercial pour l'échange des biens en 2019 (6,5 %), suivie par la Turquie (4,5 %) et par la Russie (4,3 %) (European Commission, 2020a, p. 8). La stabilité politique et les réformes économiques libérales initiées depuis la fin des conflits ont permis une augmentation et une diversification des investissements directs étrangers (IDE) vers les Balkans occidentaux. Les IDE russes ont principalement été concentrés en Serbie (énergie, produits chimiques), et en Bosnie-Herzégovine (en priorité dans la *Republika*

Srpska, dans le secteur de l'énergie), au Monténégro (immobilier) ; les IDE turcs en Albanie (construction, télécommunications), au Kosovo (transport, électricité et finance) et en Bosnie-Herzégovine (finance) (Bieber et Tzifakis 2019, 2020).

Les États des Balkans occidentaux ont également accueilli favorablement l'initiative chinoise de « nouvelles routes de la soie »⁷. Le cadre politique de ses activités est articulé autour de l'initiative 17+1, regroupant tous les États des Balkans occidentaux, à l'exception du Kosovo. Le fait que ces États y participent démontre que ces derniers perçoivent cette initiative comme étant positive (ou gagnant-gagnant). Ceci est d'autant plus vrai pour un État comme l'Albanie qui tend à inclure dans sa politique étrangère les intérêts du Kosovo : sa participation est un élément de preuve qu'elle attend des externalités positives de la coopération avec la Chine, sans craindre que cela puisse l'amener à infléchir sa politique étrangère⁸.

Par ailleurs, les buts de la politique étrangère sont multiples et fonction des situations : les considérations sécuritaires demeurent souvent prioritaires dans des contextes post-conflit. Pour consolider l'indépendance et affirmer davantage sa position sur la scène internationale, le Kosovo est amené à accroître ses relations avec les puissances extérieures comme la Turquie (Visoka, 2020). Le soutien à l'indépendance du Kosovo issu principalement du bloc occidental crée une relation de dépendance et l'amène à s'aligner systématiquement sur la politique extérieure des États-Unis et de l'UE. L'opposition active d'un certain nombre d'États puissants sur la scène internationale, comme la Russie et la Chine, constitue à la fois une contrainte dans les options envisageables⁹ et une incitation à multiplier ses relations bilatérales pour assurer un soutien le plus large

⁷ Sur la période 2005-2019 on estime à 14,6 milliards de dollars les investissements et contrats chinois dans les Balkans occidentaux, la Serbie dominant avec 10,3 milliards de dollars. Ils représentent 20 % des stocks d'IDE en Europe du Sud-Est. Les financements se font principalement en prêts, ce qui explique le faible montant des IDE comptabilisés dans les statistiques régionales pour la Chine (Zeneli, 2020).

⁸ Pour rappel, les relations entre l'Albanie et la Chine sont anciennes. À la suite de la rupture sino-soviétique des années 1960, l'Albanie communiste changea de patron géopolitique en substituant l'aide bien plus importante provenant de l'URSS par celle de la Chine. La motivation principale de ce changement n'était certainement pas la qualité des biens fournis par la Chine (incomparable avec l'URSS) mais la détermination de l'appareil politique d'Albanie de purger les rivaux politiques et les voies les plus réformistes à l'intérieur du parti communiste albanais en s'opposant à la déstalinisation entreprise par Nikita Khrouchtchev. La Chine devint le principal partenaire commercial, avec 80 % du total du commerce extérieur, jusqu'à la rupture de la fin des années 1970. Voir à ce sujet Mëhilli (2017).

⁹ Par exemple, le Kosovo a fait acte de prudence en ne cherchant pas à approfondir les relations avec Taiwan pour ne pas froisser la Chine.

possible. L'accroissement des relations diplomatiques avec la Turquie s'explique notamment par ces éléments¹⁰.

L'approfondissement des relations avec la Turquie est observable chez tous les États de la région : le degré varie d'un pays à l'autre. Les relations sont aussi particulièrement interpersonnelles, facilitées par le type de gouvernance concentré autour de dirigeants forts : on observe des liens étroits entre le président turc Recep Tayyip Erdoğan avec les dirigeants des Balkans occidentaux (notamment le Premier ministre albanais Edi Rama, le dirigeant du Parti d'action démocratique (SDA) bosniaque Bekir Izetbegovic, et le président serbe Aleksandar Vucic).

L'émergence de nouveaux acteurs crée potentiellement des opportunités pour les petits États pour accroître leurs demandes et optimiser leurs politiques étrangères. Mais, l'intégration aux structures euro-atlantiques, notamment à l'UE, demeure aux fondements des stratégies nationales des États de la région. La dépendance économique et financière à l'égard de l'UE est sans égal : elle demeure le principal partenaire commercial des Balkans occidentaux (69 % du total des échanges). Le soutien populaire à l'intégration européenne demeure élevé, surtout en Albanie et au Kosovo, suivi de la Macédoine du Nord et du Monténégro, mais faible en Serbie et dans une certaine mesure en Bosnie-Herzégovine. Lors de la crise de la covid-19, l'UE a apporté un soutien essentiel, notamment financier, aux Balkans occidentaux : un nouveau plan d'investissement de 9 milliards a été prévu sur la période 2021-2027 (European Commission, 2020b). Les États de la région continuent de se reposer sur l'UE et l'OTAN pour assurer leur sécurité et leur développement économique. Les élites politiques ont fait de l'intégration dans l'UE une politique nationale prioritaire, malgré les difficultés et les contraintes dans la mise en œuvre des réformes imposées dans le processus. Afin d'avancer vers l'intégration européenne, sous la médiation de l'UE, le Kosovo et la Serbie ont signé 33 accords visant à normaliser leurs relations interétatiques. Certes, la Serbie est le seul pays qui s'est positionné contre l'adhésion à l'OTAN : elle hérite de la tradition militairement neutre de la Yougoslavie communiste, et continue d'avoir en mémoire les frappes aériennes de l'OTAN

¹⁰ Le Kosovo perçoit la Turquie comme un allié solide pour faire avancer sa politique étrangère. En 2012, les deux pays ont signé un accord de coopération militaire incluant l'approvisionnement de matériel militaire et d'entraînement pour les Forces de sécurité du Kosovo (FSK). La Turquie, membre de l'OTAN, est aussi un partenaire stratégique pour l'Albanie : un accord de coopération militaire a été signé dès 1992 (l'Albanie a aussi rejoint le Conseil de partenariat euro-atlantique de l'OTAN en 1992), incluant un entraînement des officiers albanais par la Turquie, l'assistance technique, l'échange d'informations, suivi d'une déclaration de partenariat stratégique en 2013, et plus récemment, en février 2020, d'un plan de coopération en matière de défense (Visoka, 2018 ; President of the Republic of Kosovo, 2013).

vingt ans auparavant. Mais, elle ne s'est pas opposée à l'élargissement de l'OTAN dans la région et elle a noué des partenariats avec l'Organisation¹¹.

L'amélioration des relations bilatérales entre la Serbie et l'Albanie, les compromis de la Serbie et du Kosovo dans le dialogue sous l'égide de l'UE, les concessions de la Macédoine du Nord à l'égard de la Grèce s'expliquent pour l'essentiel par la perspective d'adhésion à l'UE et à l'OTAN. La dépendance du Kosovo à l'égard de l'UE et des États-Unis rendent quasi-impossible la constitution d'une politique étrangère indépendante : ses vulnérabilités en matière de sécurité sont compensées par un alignement sur les puissances occidentales.

Par ailleurs, les investissements économiques chinois et turcs, bien qu'étant moins importants que ceux des États-membres de l'UE, suscitent un fort impact sur l'opinion publique. Ils provoquent des controverses et sont perçus avec suspicion par une partie des citoyens, des intellectuels, ou encore des politiques. Les sociétés civiles organisées, souvent financées par les puissances occidentales, jouent un rôle clé dans l'activisme politique à travers leurs fonctions de protection, de monitoring, de plaidoyer ou encore de socialisation. Elles soutiennent l'ordre idéologique libéral de l'intérieur et surveillent si les relations de leur État respectif avec l'extérieur menacent cet ordre. En ce sens, elles sont particulièrement attentives au rôle des investissements chinois dans l'alimentation des systèmes de corruption (Makocki et Nechev, 2017), ou encore aux effets pervers du néo-ottomanisme dans les Balkans occidentaux (Shipoli, 2018).

Alors que la globalisation et les formes de dépendance économiques et politiques poussent les États à privilégier l'intégration euro-atlantique, l'approfondissement ponctuel des relations de certains acteurs avec les puissances non-occidentales peut révéler des politiques extérieures plus opportunistes. Ces différences s'expliquent principalement par des facteurs internes.

Facteurs internes et différences dans la politique étrangère

Les nombreuses crises qu'a traversées l'UE depuis 2008 ont contribué à détourner relativement son engagement à l'égard des Balkans occidentaux. En conséquence, les changements nécessaires pour avancer vers

¹¹ Les États-Unis et l'OTAN sont les principaux donateurs financiers des forces armées serbes ; en 2019, la Serbie a entrepris plus d'exercices avec l'OTAN (13) qu'avec la Russie (4 sur 17 en tout) (EWB, 2019).

l'intégration européenne ne se sont pas opérés aussi vite qu'attendu. Dans le cas des Balkans occidentaux, le paysage politique à l'intérieur des États marqué par la polarisation extrême entre les factions et les tensions bilatérales qui persistent rendent d'autant plus complexe les développements politiques, économiques et sociaux favorables. Face au ralentissement et aux difficultés de l'UE dans son engagement régional, des puissances non-occidentales ont saisi l'occasion pour mettre en place des organisations, pratiques et stratégies susceptibles de défier l'hégémonie européenne dans la région¹². Une partie des gouvernements des États des Balkans occidentaux, pour des considérations de politique intérieure, percevant les demandes de l'UE comme une menace pour leurs intérêts, ont soutenu activement cet engagement venant des puissances émergentes. Ils ont entrepris ponctuellement des actions internationales contraires à celles promues et voulues par l'UE et les États-Unis.

La Serbie a poursuivi une politique qui s'apparente à du *hedging* en cherchant à profiter des bénéfices de l'économie chinoise et turque, et du soutien politique russe, tout en poursuivant son cheminement vers l'adhésion à l'UE et en maintenant une politique militaire neutre. En demeurant au milieu du jeu entre grandes puissances, elle tente de gagner des deux côtés. D'abord, la Serbie s'oppose frontalement à la position des principales puissances occidentales ayant reconnu l'indépendance du Kosovo : elle continue de revendiquer sa souveraineté sur ce jeune État et de contester sa reconnaissance sur la scène internationale. Pour renforcer sa position, la Serbie essaye de nouer des relations avec les grandes puissances internationales susceptibles de soutenir sa politique. En ce sens, elle a développé ses relations avec la Russie (Vuksanovic, 2020). Ensuite, l'approfondissement des relations bilatérales avec la Russie permet non seulement de mieux servir les intérêts du pouvoir, mais il garantit aux partis politiques de rester compétitifs sur le marché politique intérieur. En raison des affinités historiques et culturelles entre les deux pays, et du fait que la Russie de Poutine jouit d'une grande popularité auprès de la population serbe, obtenir son soutien devient nécessaire pour sortir victorieux des processus électoraux (Vuksanovic, 2020). Enfin, l'intensification de la coopération avec la Russie et la Chine permet aux autorités locales de montrer à l'UE qu'elles peuvent se tourner vers d'autres patrons régionaux afin de négocier à la baisse les demandes de réformes démocratiques qui risquent de menacer les pratiques informelles sur lesquelles repose en partie leur pouvoir politique (Richter et Wunsch, 2020).

¹² Nous entendons par hégémonie la mobilisation du leadership par une puissance prédominante pour ordonner les relations entre les acteurs.

Ainsi, la Serbie a intensifié sa coopération avec la Chine, comprenant une dimension sécuritaire ; entre autres, le projet de *safe city* (ville sûre) lancé avec l'entreprise chinoise Huawei prévoit de monter des centaines de caméras de surveillance à Belgrade et de mettre en place un logiciel de reconnaissance faciale. Ce projet suscite des inquiétudes concernant l'exportation de « l'autoritarisme numérique » pouvant constituer un changement subtil dans l'ordre européen. Ces effets ne seront visibles qu'à long terme. Mais le soutien serbe apporté à la Chine dans les instances onusiennes concernant les camps d'internement du Xinjiang conforte cette interprétation (la Serbie est le seul pays des Balkans occidentaux à soutenir la Chine (Nexon, 2019 ; Nooten, 2019).

L'accroissement du partenariat entre la Russie et la Serbie est encore plus visible : en 2012, les deux pays ont mis en place un « centre humanitaire russo-serbe » à Nis (Marciacq, 2020). La Serbie bénéficie du statut d'État observateur au sein de l'Organisation du traité de sécurité collective (OTSC), une organisation illibérale sous domination russe. Elle a procédé à l'achat d'armement militaire auprès de la Russie, risquant des sanctions américaines (Georgievski, 2020). La Serbie a aussi signé un accord commercial avec l'Union économique eurasiatique (UEEA) en devenant membre de celle-ci en octobre 2019. Afin de maintenir une bonne relation avec la Russie, elle a apporté son soutien à Moscou lors de la crise en Ukraine.

Ainsi, l'approche libérale fondée sur les facteurs internes permet d'expliquer de manière solide le comportement des acteurs locaux. En ce sens, la paradiplomatie de la République serbe de Bosnie-Herzégovine repose sur le nationalisme : il agit comme un facteur structurant l'intensité, l'orientation et les modalités pratiques. Son but politique varie en faveur d'une plus grande autonomie, sans écarter des velléités sécessionnistes. Ce désir d'autonomie s'étend sur son comportement international. L'obtention du soutien de puissances émergentes constitue à la fois un caractère symbolique de son insatisfaction à l'égard des accords de Dayton (1995), mais lui permet aussi de se renforcer en interne vis-à-vis des ambassades occidentales et de l'État fédéral, sans chercher à infléchir sa politique étrangère. Cela explique l'orientation prise par ces entrepreneurs identitaires en faveur d'un accroissement de la coopération avec la Russie. L'arrivée au pouvoir de Milorad Dodik en 2006, partisan du sécessionnisme, a favorisé cette paradiplomatie identitaire : l'appel au nationalisme et le développement de cette posture, y compris dans les relations internationales, lui permettent de consolider son pouvoir sur l'espace territorial qu'il revendique. L'accroissement des relations permet aussi à la Russie de miner la perspective euro-atlantique de la

Bosnie-Herzégovine. Ces liens sont multidimensionnels : politiques, économiques et culturels. Cela va des contacts et visites réguliers des dirigeants politiques de la Russie et de cette entité serbe de Bosnie-Herzégovine à la mise en place d'accords bilatéraux en matière de coopération policière, en passant par des investissements économiques et la coopération entre Églises orthodoxes. Cela permet à cette entité fédérée bosnienne de réduire sa dépendance à l'égard du centre et des puissances occidentales.

La polarisation entre factions explique le positionnement contraire de la Macédoine du Nord entre 2014 et 2016 notamment en rapport à la crise en Ukraine, concernant l'alignement sur les mesures restrictives à l'égard de la Russie promues par l'UE. La crise politique qu'a traversée le pays, opposant le Premier ministre Nikola Gruevski au leader de l'opposition Zoran Zaev, a entraîné une politique internationale à certains moments contraire à celle de l'UE. Bloquée dans la perspective euro-atlantique par le veto de la Grèce, percevant les demandes de l'UE en matière de respect du pluralisme comme une menace pour son pouvoir, le gouvernement dirigé par l'Organisation révolutionnaire macédonienne intérieure – Parti démocratique pour l'unité nationale macédonienne (VMRO-DPME) a pu être tenté par des politiques d'équilibrage, d'autant plus qu'il a bénéficié du soutien russe pendant ce temps (Nechev et Nikolovski, 2020). Ce n'est qu'avec l'arrivée au pouvoir du gouvernement pro-occidental de Zoran Zaev en 2017 que le niveau d'alignement sur les demandes de l'UE a pu augmenter.

Compte tenu de ce qui précède, il s'avère que l'approche libérale permet de mettre en évidence des aspects importants de l'analyse, aidant à mieux comprendre pourquoi les petits États des Balkans occidentaux sont devenus plus actifs et ont entrepris des politiques quelque peu différentes à l'égard des grandes puissances. Les acteurs accroissent les relations avec les puissances non-occidentales, parfois au détriment de l'UE, pour différentes raisons qui sont souvent fonction des enjeux et des contextes : la globalisation, les dépendances et les caractéristiques du paysage politique intérieur.

Conclusion

Dans cet article nous avons présenté les principales approches qui permettent d'expliquer le rôle international des petits États des Balkans occidentaux, notamment leurs orientations stratégiques à l'égard des puissances extérieures. Nous avons essayé de comprendre cette triple évolution : une ouverture vers les puissances émergentes présente chez

tous les acteurs ; le maintien de l'intégration euro-atlantique comme priorité stratégique et l'analyse des différences dans leur comportement.

Nous avons également essayé de tester les principales explications théoriques qui se proposent de rendre compte de la politique étrangère des États. Malgré sa popularité, le néoréalisme ne permet pas à lui seul d'expliquer les développements clés à l'œuvre : l'hégémonie européenne n'est pas remise en cause dans la région, les États demeurent largement dépendants de l'UE. Ni la Chine, ni la Russie et ni la Turquie ne constituent une alternative crédible à la relation de patronage qui existe entre l'UE et les Balkans occidentaux.

Comparativement, l'approche libérale apporte une meilleure explication. D'abord sur la pluralité des buts de la politique étrangère : ils ne se réduisent pas à la sécurité ou à la puissance, mais peuvent inclure d'autres considérations, en particulier économiques (Keohane et Nye, 1977). La hiérarchisation des objectifs dépend des situations et contextes, elle est traitée comme une question empirique, au lieu d'être systématiquement subordonnée aux considérations de puissance et de sécurité (Keohane et Nye, 1977). En ce sens, le contexte post-conflit, la libéralisation économique, les paysages politiques internes permettent d'expliquer les enjeux des comportements internationaux des États.

Les dysfonctionnements institutionnels en Bosnie-Herzégovine et les enjeux politiques en Serbie impactent leurs orientations internationales. Cette situation est susceptible de durer tant que les pathologies internes demeurent. Nous pouvons aussi nous attendre à ce que l'alignement sur la politique étrangère de l'UE s'accroisse à mesure que ces États se rapprochent de l'intégration européenne : c'est une condition indispensable pour être admis. Tant que les différends politiques bilatéraux et les problèmes économiques n'auront pas été réglés, ces États seront constamment tentés de poursuivre des politiques d'équilibre entre l'Ouest et l'Est. La résolution des différends bilatéraux et le renforcement des principes démocratiques peuvent contribuer à écarter les dernières résistances locales.

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The Berlin Process for the Western Balkans. What is in a name?

VJOSA MUSLIU¹

Abstract

This article discusses the potential impact of the Berlin Process in the European Union (EU) integration prospects for the countries of the Western Balkans. The first part of the article discusses whether the Berlin Process can be read as a replacement for the actual EU enlargement to the Western Balkans. The second part of the article discusses how orientalist/balkanist tropes are yet again part of discourses emanating from the EU towards the Western Balkans. The article makes two central arguments. First of all, the idea behind the Berlin Process seems to be a replacement of the EU enlargement to the Western Balkans, even if temporarily. Secondly, the Berlin Process is used, yet again to reinstate orientalist and balkanist tropes for addressing the EU with respect to the Western Balkans. To do this, this article uses document analysis and speech acts of heads of states from the twelve countries of the initiative between 2014-2019.

Keywords: Berlin Process, Western Balkans, EU integration.

Introduction

The Berlin Process was initiated by the German Chancellor Angela Merkel in 2014 and initially includes twelve states: six Western Balkan states which are at different phases in their EU integration process (Albania,

¹ Dr. Vjosa Musliu is Assistant Professor at the Department of Political Science, Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB). She is co-editor of the Routledge Series of Intervention and Statebuilding Studies. Her research focuses on EU's relations with its 'others', primarily focusing on the Western Balkans and Ukraine. Her recent book called "Europeanization and Statebuilding as Everyday Practices. Performing Europe in the Western Balkans" is out in 2021 with Routledge Series of Intervention and Statebuilding.

Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia) and six EU member states (Austria, Croatia, France, Germany, Italy, United Kingdom (UK) and Slovenia). It is an intergovernmental diplomatic initiative that emerged following the decision of 2014 of the former President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker (2014-2019). The Berlin Process set out several broad and ambitious goals, such as stepping up regional cooperation, resolving bilateral questions for good neighbourly relations and stability, strengthening good governance, carrying out reforms aimed at reinforcing the independence of the judiciary and increasing competitiveness, boosting investments and economic growth in the region as well as transport and connectivity in the energy, transport and digital sectors. The focus was put on economic and regional integration, in the hope that a redefined common purpose would consolidate and increase regional cooperation.

Most countries in the Western Balkans have bilateral disputes² all of which hamper proper bilateral relations and even more so any prospects for regional cooperation. Most of these bilateral disputes stem from the recent historical developments that led to the breakup of former Yugoslavia, such as: border demarcation, property rights recognition, minority rights and mobility. The European Union (EU) has engaged intensively with the countries of the Western Balkans and the former Yugoslav countries more generally. Following the breakup of Yugoslavia, the EU has been an essential actor in the post-war reconciliation of the newly independent countries emerging from the federation. Since the Thessaloniki Summit in 2003, the EU has reiterated its support for the countries of the Western Balkans as future members of the Union. In Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo more specifically, the EU has been involved in what Soeren Keil and Zeynep Arkan have called “its future member states” (Keil and Arkan, 2014). To that end, the Berlin Process cannot be decoupled from the EU’s commitment to resolving the ongoing political disputes in the region. At the forefront of this process was the resolution of the long-standing Serbo-Albanian dispute, a further act of normalization of bilateral relations between Serbia and Kosovo, among others. The Albanian Prime Minister, Edi Rama, and the Serbian Prime Minister, Aleksandar Vučić became the main figures of such a resolution. In terms of process, the Berlin Process is marked by yearly summits to underline the commitment to EU enlargement towards the Western Balkans. The first summit took place in Berlin in 2014; followed

² For example, post-war reconciliation in Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as in Serbia and in Kosovo, Kosovo’s disputed sovereignty, secessionist claims in Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the name issue between North Macedonia and Greece resolved in 2018.

by the second summit that took place in 2015 in Vienna focusing primarily on infrastructure and connectivity, regional cooperation, youth and the refugee crisis. The following summits have taken place in Paris (2016), Trieste (2017), London (2018), and Poznań (2019). The summits are not only organised with the leaders or public institutions of the respective countries: more than 100 civil society activists, members of think tanks and media from the countries of the Western Balkans join in these activities in each consecutive summit (Kmežič and Bieber, 2016). However, as the annual country reports from the European Commission have highlighted, the region has witnessed a dramatic deterioration in democratic governance and the rule of law, despite the fact that in 2011 rule of law issues were placed at the heart of the accession process. In its 2016 “Communication on the EU enlargement policy”, the European Commission referred to several countries in the region continuing to show “clear symptoms and varying degrees of state capture” (Fouéré and Blockmans, 2017).

This article will show not only what the Berlin Process is. Rather, what is its impact on the broader set of relations between the EU and the countries of the Western Balkans? To that end, the article makes two central arguments. First of all, the idea behind the Berlin Process seems to be a replacement of the EU enlargement to the Western Balkans, even if temporarily. Second, the Berlin Process is used, yet again, to reinstate orientalist and balkanist tropes from the EU concerning the Western Balkans.

In what follows below, this article will first analyse how the Berlin Process is, in fact, a signal of the death of the EU enlargement as we know it. It draws on a longitudinal analysis of EU-Western Balkans relations since the breakup of Yugoslavia to showcase the fading and ultimately, the death of enlargement. In the second part, it analyses how the Berlin Process is a platform for the EU to reinstate and continue with the orientalist and balkanist tropes concerning the Western Balkans. To do this, this article deconstructs the discourse emanating from the subsequent summits of the Berlin Process, from the first summit in Berlin in 2014 to the last summit in Poznań held in 2019.

Understanding the Berlin Process. A look at the literature

The Berlin Process received little attention in the academic literature, mainly because it is a recent and a moving target. Local think-tanks and non-governmental organizations (NGO) in the Western Balkans have been more interested to study the process (see for more the works of Development and Cooperation Institute), focusing on a variety of themes,

including its impact in the area of internal security as an essential component for building solid economies in the region (Klemenc and Pulko, 2018), regional cooperation (Cooperation and Development Institute/ShtetiWeb, 2016), enlargement studies as well as geopolitics. There is a group of scholars who insist that the Berlin Process is a result of political changes in the EU and geopolitical changes in the world at large. For Richard Grievson, Julija Gruebler and Mario Holzner, the Berlin Process was a natural outcome to the changing political landscape, namely the migration crisis of 2015, the concern in the EU that some of the intra-regional conflicts in the Western Balkans were heating up, growing influence of other powers in the region (e.g., Russia, Turkey and China) (Grievson *et al.*, 2018). Eamonn Butler zooms in on Brexit to argue that the UK's withdrawal from the EU will lead to pushing back the accession of the Western Balkan countries to the Union. The UK's withdrawal from the EU has the potential to impact EU enlargement to the Western Balkans in a multitude of ways, writes Butler. He argues that, while EU leaders have reaffirmed their commitment to enlargement, accessions are likely to be pushed back several years and the remaining EU may itself seem a less attractive prospect for the Western Balkan states, although it is still necessary (Butler, 2017). James Ker-Lindsay also argues that the UK has become somewhat irrelevant for the Western Balkans due to Brexit, which was followed by Germany taking the leading role for the EU integration process of the countries in the Western Balkans (Ker-Lindsay, 2017). For Tobias Flessenkemper, the Berlin Process is the latest incarnation of such a member state-driven, intergovernmental approach, whereby Germany, in contrast to the 1990s, has come to openly play a pivotal leadership role (Flessenkemper, 2017). For Theresia Töglhofer and Cornelius Adebahr, the Berlin Process is, on the one hand, an indication of Germany's active commitment towards the EU accession prospect of the Western Balkans. On the other hand, this commitment goes hand in hand with Germany's rigid accession conditionality which, the authors add, not only fosters transformation in the states of the Western Balkans, but also counters widespread enlargement skepticism amongst the German public (Töglhofer and Adebahr, 2017).

Further there are those who cast a rather positive light on the Berlin Process suggesting that it can play a significant role in setting up favorable conditions for resolving and subsequently implementing and sustaining solution of any bilateral issue (Djolai and Nechev, 2018). Matteo Bonomi argues that a major achievement of the Berlin Process has been its contribution to boost the interest of the Western Balkans and EU stakeholders regarding regional cooperation (Bonomi, 2017). For Flessenkemper, its limitations notwithstanding, the Berlin Process has managed to keep

the key member states focused on the region and fostered their cooperation against the backdrop of politically weakened European institutions (Flessenkemper, 2017). Ardian Hackaj and Krisela Hackaj argue that the process can lead to resilience and further consolidation of the cooperation among the countries in the Western Balkans (Hackaj and Hackaj, 2019). Andrea Frontini and Davide Denti suggest that the Berlin Process has purposefully intended to provide a renewed impetus to the inter-governmental dimension of EU-Western Balkans relations (Frontini and Denti, 2017). Likewise, for Donika Emini, as well as Marko Kmežić and Florian Bieber, the Berlin Process is thought of as a tool to alleviate the enlargement fatigue in the EU (Emini, 2016; Kmežić and Bieber, 2016), while Sabina Lange argues the process tackles the symptoms of malaise in the region in order to keep up the reforms required for EU membership (Lange, 2016).

Lastly, there is a group of authors who have shed light on the limits of the Berlin Process in so far as the impact of it for the individual countries of the Western Balkans goes. It has been suggested that unless it is broken down into tangible projects to be tackled, the Berlin Process risks remaining a detached project from the local populations of the countries in the Western Balkans (Frontini and Denti, 2017) or yet another vector of the process of re-nationalization of EU enlargement (Denti, 2015). The re-nationalization would, in turn, strengthen the relations between Western Balkan countries and the biggest EU member states, but such a dynamic would not amount to the enhancement of the relations between the states of the Western Balkans and the EU as a whole. Relatedly, the potential lack of an implementation and/or monitoring strategy to oversee the actualization of the commitments made in the respective summits can pose a serious challenge for the entire process (Emini, 2016). Mario Holzner suggests that since the Berlin Process is an intergovernmental process and not initiated by the EU, it naturally has certain limitations. To that end, he argues that for the most part the Berlin Process is aimed to sensitive the EU member states for the continuation of the enlargement process, rather than being directly aimed at the countries of the Western Balkans (Holzner, 2016). Along similar lines, Töglhofer and Adebahr argue that Germany's approach to the EU's enlargement policy is not only about the Western Balkans per se but is contingent on current affairs: be they the influx of refugees from the Middle East passing through this region or the perceived growing influence of Russia far beyond the violent conflicts in Eastern Europe (Töglhofer and Adebahr, 2017). Erwan Fouéré and Steven Blockmans point out that beyond the "annual pageantry", there has been little follow-up at the intergovernmental level (Fouéré and Blockmans, 2017). According to them, the EU in fact degraded its profile at the high-

est political as heads of state of 21 governments of other EU countries have not owned up to the Berlin Process. Tena Prelec asks whether the Berlin Process is being used by the EU to pacify the region while not giving it “the real thing”, namely enlargement (Prelec, 2017). Gazmend Qorraj asks a similar question, namely whether the EU will continue the integration process in the Western Balkans or backlash on regional cooperation instruments and initiatives within the framework of the Western Balkans. He argues that countries of the Western Balkans need the EU’s direct support since regional initiatives and regional instruments cannot enforce or monitor reforms in the region (Qorraj, 2018). Others point out that, more than complementing the enlargement, the Berlin Process de facto uses its achievements (Cooperation and Development Institute/ ShtetiWeb, 2016). To that end, it is an outcome-oriented process focused on reconciliation, connectivity and regional political cooperation. Its endeavors do not aim specifically the establishment of the rule of law, adoption of the “*acquis communautaire*”, institution building or market economies in the Western Balkans (Hackaj and Hackaj, 2018).

This article is on par with the above-mentioned analyses as far as the limitations and the risks of the process are concerned. Differently, from the previous works, the article will showcase that the Berlin Process is a creative adjustment of the EU to still keep the enlargement spirit alive among and within the countries of the Western Balkans, while at the same time officially not pursuing an accession or enlargement agenda as such.

The Berlin Process: the death of enlargement?

As showcased in the introduction, the EU has been actively involved in the Western Balkans since the 1990s dealing with peace agreements, conflict management and resolution, economic development programs, rule of law and democracy programs, EU enlargement, EU police and military missions, and mediated dialogues between parties among others. The common denominator of all these programs has been “bringing the region closer to the EU” (as is commonly referred to among EU officials) that would eventually make the Western Balkan countries members of the EU. Granted, the relations between the two stretch out well beyond the EU accession process. With a plethora of EU-led programs for the region, why then build another initiative such as the Berlin Process?

To understand the logic behind the Berlin Process, we need to consider both spectrums: how can we understand the process from the current situation in the Western Balkans on the one hand, and from that of the

EU on the other. Countries of the Western Balkans are at different phases in their trajectories of becoming members of the EU. Albania started its negotiations on the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) in 2003 and since 2014 it is an official candidate for accession to the EU. Bosnia and Herzegovina remains a potential candidate country for EU membership. The problems with the country's constitutional reforms and other legal and political conundrums deriving from the Dayton Peace Agreement have impeded the country from submitting a formal application until 2016. Kosovo is also a potential candidate for EU membership. Following the declaration of independence from Serbia in 2008, the EU did not issue a recognition *en bloc* for Kosovo as five of its member states (Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia, Spain) do not recognise it as an independent state. The unclear stance did not impede the EU from entering into contractual relations with Kosovo though when both parties signed and ratified the SAA in 2016. Montenegro started its negotiations for EU membership in 2006 following its independence from Serbia in the same year with the official accession negotiations starting in 2012. In the assessment of the accession progress issued by the European Commission in 2016, Montenegro is praised for having the highest level of preparation for membership among the negotiating states. North Macedonia was the first country of the region to become a candidate country in 2005, but remained stuck in this process due to the name dispute with Greece over the country's former official name "Macedonia". A resolution was reached between Greece, Macedonia and the EU over the adaptation of the name "North Macedonia" in 2018. Serbia initiated the SAA with the EU in 2007 and has been an official candidate since 2011 and opened its negotiations for accession in 2014. The EU has a visa liberalisation policy with Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina since 2010 and Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia since 2009. The visa regime is still in place for Kosovo due to political problems, initially being the border demarcation with Montenegro, and later the ongoing frictions between the government of Kosovo and the government of Serbia over the decision of the former to issue a 100 % tax on Serbian imports in Kosovo.

Other than the official enlargement process, the EU and the countries of the Western Balkans have been engaged in several other related programs and initiatives. For instance, the EU has been at the forefront of the idea of having the countries of the region cooperating with the International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia (ICTY). Since 2004, the EU has been present in Bosnia and Herzegovina with its "Operation Althea", officially known as the EU Force Bosnia and Herzegovina (EUFOR), whose purpose is to oversee the military implementation of the Dayton Agreement (Merlingen and Ostraukaite, 2005). Since 2009,

the EU has deployed the biggest and most expensive mission of its sort in the history of the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), known as European Union Rule of Law in Kosovo (EULEX) (Usanmaz, 2018). EULEX describes its mission statement to "monitor, mentor and advises Kosovo's justice system". The mandate of EULEX is, however, far more comprehensive. It includes the works and activities typically carried out by several government ministries, departments and agencies in a particular country (Musliu, 2020). In ten years of its operation, EULEX's annual budget has been 50 million euros (Haxhijaj, 2018), a budget approximately 45 % higher compared to EU's Instrument for Pre-accession (IPA) funds for Kosovo (Kursani, 2012). Since 2011, the EU facilitates the Belgrade-Prishtina dialogue in Brussels, the first negotiations between the two parties since the declaration of Kosovo's independence in 2008. Since then, the negotiations have had seven rounds focusing on three primary areas: regional cooperation, freedom of movement and rule of law. The EU is the biggest donor and investor in the Western Balkans and the biggest trading partner for the countries in the region. Between 2014 and 2020, EU's investments per country in the region are over 4.1 billion euros in key developmental areas³: democracy and governance; rule of law and fundamental rights, competitiveness and innovation; environment (flood recovery), transport, agriculture and rural development, education, employment and social policies (European Commission, 2018). EU companies are also the biggest investors in the Western Balkans, with over 10 billion euros of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) between 2013 and 2018 alone (European Commission, 2018a). Such a comprehensive involvement and investment notwithstanding, the progress reports issued yearly by the European Commission, have systematically indicated poor standards of rule of law, democratic consolidation, human rights and economic indicators.

Academics and practitioners alike have showcased how the process of EU enlargement towards the Western Balkans has become multi-layered with several structural-developmental problems. For instance, unlike in previous rounds of enlargement, in the Western Balkans, the EU started the SAA negotiations with chapters 23 and 24 (Pozantov and Milevska, 2014). As these chapters deal with the rule of law and the democratic order, they are considered to be the most important ones and having to tackle them first thus represented an increased difficulty in the process of gaining membership. For Stephan Renner and Florian Trauner, the slowing down of membership with the additional conditions exemplifies

³ Out of 4.1 billion euros, 1.5 billion are financed in Serbia, 649.4 million in Albania, 608.9 in North Macedonia, 573 in Kosovo, 530 in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and 279 in Montenegro.

a “creeping of membership of South East European countries” (Renner and Trauner, 2009, p. 454). For other scholars of EU enlargement, the extra conditions are the result of the internal political peculiarities of the relevant countries (cooperation with the ICTY, regional cooperation, Kosovo-Serbia bilateral disputes), rather than extra requirements actually specified by the EU (Lavenex, 2004).

When it comes to the EU, over the past ten years, the Union has been facing several integrationist challenges. The two-speed Europe, the financial crisis, the refugee crisis, Brexit, the rise of right-wing and populist political parties and movements in EU member states, have only naturally decreased the enthusiasm for further EU integration. The closing of Directorate-General (DG) Enlargement and its subtle substitution with DG for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR) was yet another sign of not only putting the enlargement on hold but also about creating a new imaginative geography of “neighbours” of the Union. In February 2018, the European Commission published its enlargement plan to cover the six countries of the Western Balkans after 2025 (European Commission, 2018a). While the document confirms the “European path” for the region, at the same time it also says that no enlargement can take place until 2025:

However, our Union must be stronger and more solid, before it can be bigger. This is why, in line with its Roadmap for a More United, Stronger and more Democratic Union, the Commission will throughout this year put forward several initiatives aimed at improving the democratic, institutional and policy framework for the Union of 2025, based on the current Treaties. In particular, these initiatives will include proposals to improve the effectiveness of decision-making within the EU by enhancing qualified majority voting in areas such as foreign policy or internal market matters (European Commission, 2018a, p. 3).

It is unclear though whether the reason for the reconsideration of the enlargement process is the not as strong EU in its current form as suggested in the quote above, whether it is because the countries of the Western Balkans are not ready (European Commission, 2018a, p. 4), or whether it is a combination of both. The document, however, suggests that the eventual membership “will depend fully on the objective merits and results of each country” (European Commission, 2018a, p. 3). To that end, at the EU spectrum, the Berlin Process, initiated and led by still pro-integrationist forces within the EU looks more like a “stall” for the enlargement until the EU turns into a more favourable position to discuss the future of potential further enlargement. Through the Berlin Process, countries of the Western Balkans are still receiving verbal support to

their EU integration, but in the meantime, they are asked to cooperate amongst each other until more favourable conditions in the EU come to the fore. Over the past two decades, the EU has reiterated its support for the countries of the Western Balkans, systematically repeated in EU's summits. What is more, for the EU senior officials, the EU integration has been presented as a hegemonic project for the region (Bulley, 2009; Musliu, 2019). However, since the EU membership of Slovenia in 2004 and Croatia in 2013, the EU has been working to fulfil these promises. Concretely, in 2009 the EU deployed in Kosovo its largest CSDP mission (EULEX) and EU officials have reiterated EU's willingness to see Kosovo part of the EU in the future. However, to this day the EU has kept in place its visa regime for Kosovo, thus making it impossible for the later to create a tangible experience with the promised "European future". Further, upon reaching an agreement with the name deal between Greece and North Macedonia in 2018, EU leaders hailed the 27-year-old name dispute with great enthusiasm. The then head of EU foreign policy, Federica Mogherini, said that the block fully supports the deal and "remains firmly committed to continue to fully support and accompany country towards its common strategic goal of EU integration" (cited in Testorides and Paphitis, 2018, p. 21). Despite promises and enthusiasm from the EU side for North Macedonia to start membership talks in the event of a name deal between the later and Greece, France and the Netherlands unexpectedly blocked the start of EU talks for North Macedonia, seeking more reforms. The same decision followed for Albania, asking for further reforms in key sectors such as the rule of law and corruption. The decision was met with criticism in both countries. Albania's deputy minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs, Sokol Dedja declared that it was time for the EU "to stop using the need for preparatory reforms as a way of keeping countries outside of the European Union" (cited in Emmott and Baczynska, 2019, p. 3).

To conclude this section, on the one hand, we have the change of DG Enlargement to DG NEAR and the halt of the enlargement process for the Western Balkans. On the other hand, we have the reiterated position of the EU that the future of the Western Balkans is in the EU and the creation of yet another program such as the Berlin Process. This way, more than replacing the enlargement with the Berlin Process, the EU seems to be simulating enlargement via the Berlin Process. Unlike with programs of EU enlargement, with the Berlin Process, the EU is not engaged institutionally or procedurally towards bringing the countries of the Western Balkans to the EU. Rather, it allows the EU in Brussels to "outsource" the major part of the "integration" talk to the local authorities in the Western Balkan countries and by extension, the responsibility for the integration.

This way, even though the success or the failure for the integration of the Western Balkans in the EU depends on inner developments within the EU and the progress made in each of the respective countries, the responsibility will be placed on the progress countries of the Western Balkans will make. The Berlin Process aims to create a mini-EU like cooperation structures in the Western Balkans, thus replacing the EU enlargement as a process, even if temporarily. More than a process on its own, the Berlin Process seems to unofficially proliferate further standards before considering conditioning the full membership of the Western Balkans. This way, the region is rendered further as a place where the EU has to create and sponsor further initiatives with no real or tangible membership prospects. Through the membership process, the EU creates, maintains and reifies its “others” by keeping them inside the abundantly clear boundaries of the “other”. The conditions on which the EU is willing to accept the countries of the Western Balkans in the EU is if they stop being Balkans and become more European in turn, however elusive and ambiguous that is.

Reinforcing “the Balkans” narratives

The Berlin Process presented an opportunity to “restart” a new set of relations between the countries of the Western Balkans and the EU: Slovenia and Croatia are already members of the EU; North Macedonia and Greece have already solved the name issue; the EU mediated dialogue between Belgrade and Prishtina continues, all the while still suffering from problems with implementation (Visoka and Doyle, 2018; Gashi *et al.*, 2017); Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro are advancing in their talks with the EU, even though to different degrees (Kmežić, 2019). The new context in the region notwithstanding, looking at EU’s discourse produced throughout the sessions of the Berlin Process, one can discern how the EU reverts to orientalist and balkanist tropes and discursive strategy when addressing the countries of the region. Similar to orientalist tropes, balkanist tropes suggest an image of the Balkans is still trapped in deep-seated hatred and inter-ethnic conflicts which make the mere fact of leaders of these countries sitting together at a summit a newsworthy event. The EU has often been criticized for addressing the countries of the Balkans through orientalist tones largely criticized for their colonial frameworks in the work of Edward Said (Said, 1979) and Maria Todorova (Todorova, 2009). Similar discourse has also been evidenced in the speech acts of the former EU High Representative, Federica Mogherini (Ghekiere, 2017). Even though direct balkanist tropes are not as rampant in discourses of the Berlin Process, the overall narrative and tone remain largely tied to it.

For instance, the keynote speech from the first summit of the Berlin Process that took place in Berlin in 2014 referred to the events that led to the World War I (WWI) and the recent violent past of the countries of the Western Balkans:

A hundred years after the outbreak of the First World War, the heads of government, foreign ministers and economics ministers of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, the FYR of Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Slovenia, as well as representatives of the European Commission, the future host Austria, and France, met in Berlin on 28 August 2014 for the first Conference on the Western Balkans (European Union, 2014).

The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo in 1914 is seen as the symbolic reference for the start of WWI. The fact that heads of states from the countries of the Western Balkans were meeting again, in an occasion of peace, was supposed to signal the progress that the Western Balkans and more generally Europe have made. Even though there has been progress in the region in more recent past – the last two decades for instance – it is interesting how the theme of WWI comes back even after one hundred years.

In the Summit of Vienna that took place in 2015 reference was made to the troubled past that led to the breakup of former Yugoslavia:

The Western Balkans region has come a long way since the violent breakup of former Yugoslavia, notably in the areas of political and economic stability, as well as in regional cooperation. All of the countries in the Western Balkans firmly believe that their future lies in the European Union (European Union, 2015).

The trope of the “violent past” or the “horrific events” in the former Yugoslavia is an indispensable part of the communication of the EU with the Western Balkans. Irrespective of the content of the communication, the violent past of the 1990s in the former Yugoslavia acts as a natural adjacent to each country of the Western Balkans. To that end, in EU’s narrative, the normalcy, the development or simply the state of being in the region do not exist in and of themselves. Rather, they are always accompanied or next to (a reminder) of the violent past. It is unclear though whether such systematic reminder of “violent past” in EU’s discourse serves to remind countries of the Western Balkans of how much progress they have achieved since then or to caution on the potential risk of such a troubled past.

The same trope of the violent past and “healing of old wounds” featured in the final letter of the Paris Summit that took place in 2016:

Today in Paris, a major step was taken to heal the wounds of the past in the region with the signature of the agreement establishing a Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO). Building on the 50-year experience of the Franco-German Youth Office for youth cooperation, the mission of the new office will be to support activities that promote reconciliation of the peoples as well as programmes on remembrance, diversity, intercultural exchange, regional mobility, citizen participation and the promotion of democratic values (European Union, 2016).

For the past thirty years, the structures of liberal democracy have been involved in the Western Balkans promoting reconciliation, good neighbourly relations and multi-ethnic cohabitation. To that end, it is unclear whether it is the inability of the EU – along with other structures of liberal democracy – “to heal” the wounds of the ethnic conflicts in the Western Balkans, or whether it is the inability of the countries of the region to work towards reconciliation, the support of the EU notwithstanding.

The inability of the countries in the region to join the EU seems to further reinforce the orientalist tropes through which the EU sees and addresses the region. Being two anti-words, the Balkans (or Western Balkans) will continue to be outside of the EU as long as it continues to be the Balkans. The strategy for the Western Balkans issued by the European Commission in 2018 on the decision to resume the enlargement talks with the countries of the region in 2025 states:

All the Western Balkan countries must now urgently redouble their efforts, address vital reforms and complete their political, economic and social transformation, bringing all stakeholders on board from across the political spectrum and from civil society. Joining the EU is far more than a technical process. It is a generational choice, based on fundamental values, which each country must embrace more actively, from their foreign and regional policies right down to what children are taught at school (European Commission, 2018a, p. 3).

In this particular quote, the EU places the responsibility to the institutions and the populations at large in the countries of the region. It even suggests that becoming part of the “fundamental values” of the EU is a choice and one that needs to be made across all levels of society.

The use of orientalist and/or balkanist tropes from the EU is not new. In fact, such tropes have been quintessential to individual Western European countries since the beginning of the 20th century. For one, the persistence of such tropes utilized from the EU towards the region may reflect the EU’s continued vision of the Western Balkans as a region that is beyond repair, irrespective of European and international donors’

help and support. Further, by reinforcing such tropes, the EU in turn self-legitimizes its presence and interference in the region as well as the creation of new instruments and programs.

Conclusion

As an intergovernmental diplomatic initiative, the Berlin Process emerged following the decision of the former President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker (2014-2019), to halt the EU integration process until 2020. From the outset, the Berlin Process decided a series of broad and ambitious goals, such as stepping up regional cooperation, resolving bilateral questions for good neighbourly relations and stability, strengthening good governance, carrying out reforms aimed at reinforcing the independence of the judiciary and increase competitiveness.

This article problematized the potential impact of the Berlin Process in the EU integration prospects for the countries of the Western Balkans. On the one hand, by giving more incentives for regional cooperation and thus functioning as an EU microcosm, the Berlin Process can contribute to more regional and local ownership of the EU integration. On the other hand, by “outsourcing” the EU integration process to Berlin Process, the EU seems to be withdrawing from the Western Balkans. This article developed an argument to showcase how the very idea of the Berlin Process, adjacent to the change of DG Enlargement with DG NEAR, the amputation of EU enlargement, were signs of the EU structurally rethinking and even withdrawing from further enlargement. To do this, this article relied on document analysis and speech acts of heads of states from the initial twelve countries of the initiative. The article found out that first there is reasonable evidence that the Berlin Process is ultimately replacing EU’s enlargement towards the countries of the Western Balkans until further notice otherwise. More than a process in itself, the Berlin Process is yet another strategy to create and proliferate further conditions, requirements and additional reforms that countries of the region have to tackle before even beginning the official accession talks. This way, countries of the region are further rendered as sites where the EU enacts and performs programs and policies that further legitimize the EU’s intervention in the region and yet, they do not allow for countries of the region to advance in the process of their EU membership. Second and relatedly, the Berlin Process is used as a platform where orientalist and balkanist tropes are reinstated, (re)created and reinforced. The same tropes are in turn used to explain and legitimize the “lack of progress”, the need for “further reforms” for the countries of the region.

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Le renouvellement stratégique de l'Union européenne dans les Balkans occidentaux : une asymétrie d'approches entre les différentes institutions européennes

Antoine DELENS¹

Résumé

La perspective européenne des pays des Balkans occidentaux a été confirmée à de nombreuses reprises par les institutions européennes depuis une vingtaine d'années. Dans les faits, l'UE connaît une érosion graduelle de sa politique d'élargissement, faisant le jeu des puissances (ré)-émergentes comme la Russie, la Turquie ou la Chine, en quête d'une influence croissante et multidimensionnelle dans la région. Afin de pallier cela, la Commission européenne a présenté en 2018 un renouvellement stratégique offrant une perspective d'élargissement crédible ainsi qu'un engagement de l'UE renforcé pour les Balkans occidentaux. Cet article étudie d'abord en profondeur le positionnement des institutions européennes concernant le renouvellement stratégique de l'UE et les impacts éventuels pour la région. Par la suite, l'article cherche à démontrer que l'asymétrie existant dans les approches des différentes institutions européennes supranationales (Commission européenne et Parlement européen) et intergouvernementales (Conseil de l'UE et Conseil européen) est la conséquence d'une renationalisation

¹ Antoine Delens est diplômé d'un master en Sciences politiques à finalité Études Européennes de l'Université de Liège (ULiège) en Belgique et détenteur d'un *postgraduate certificate* en Conflits Internationaux et Coopération de l'Université de Stirling au Royaume-Uni. Actuellement officier de protection spécialisé dans les Balkans occidentaux auprès du Commissariat Général pour les Réfugiés et les Apatrides (CGRA), il a auparavant travaillé auprès du Service public fédéral (SPF) Affaires étrangères et au sein de la Représentation Permanente de la Belgique auprès de l'UE entre 2017 et 2019. Il a également eu l'occasion de servir plusieurs mois au sein de la mission État de droit de l'UE (EULEX) au Kosovo.

du processus d'élargissement. La réaffirmation du rôle central des États membres dans le processus décisionnel et la gouvernance de l'UE est illustrée notamment par l'analyse du blocage institutionnel concernant l'ouverture des négociations d'adhésion pour l'Albanie et la Macédoine du Nord.

Mots clés : Élargissement de l'UE, Balkans occidentaux, Processus décisionnel.

Introduction

L'idée d'un élargissement de l'Union européenne (UE) aux Balkans occidentaux (Albanie, Bosnie-Herzégovine, Kosovo, Macédoine du Nord, Monténégro, Serbie) n'est pas nouvelle. Le Conseil européen de Thessalonique des 19 et 20 juin 2003 affirmait déjà que l'UE était résolue à soutenir pleinement la perspective européenne des États des Balkans occidentaux. Lors du Conseil européen de décembre 2006, les dirigeants de l'UE confirmaient que l'avenir des Balkans occidentaux était dans l'UE et qu'ils en feraient partie intégrante une fois qu'ils rempliraient pleinement les critères d'adhésion, mieux connus sous les critères de Copenhague (politiques, économiques et acquis communautaire), ainsi que les conditions fixées dans le cadre du Processus de stabilisation et d'association (PSA).

Même si le Monténégro (2012) et la Serbie (2014) ont officiellement lancé les négociations d'adhésion avec l'UE, force est de constater que cette dernière a connu une érosion graduelle de sa crédibilité pour sa politique d'élargissement dans les Balkans occidentaux, faisant le jeu des États tiers comme la Russie, la Turquie ou la Chine, en quête d'une influence croissante et multidimensionnelle dans la région. Cette érosion est notamment due aux crises internes et externes multiples qui ont frappé l'UE, augmentant les facteurs d'imprévisibilité du processus d'élargissement et douchant sérieusement les espoirs des États des Balkans occidentaux engagés à des degrés divers sur le chemin de l'intégration européenne (Mirel, 2018, p. 2). Depuis 2008 et la crise économique et financière, la question du Brexit, la crise migratoire et la montée en puissance des populistes et des eurosceptiques, le processus d'élargissement est en panne, faisant naître un certain désenchantement ainsi qu'une frustration chez les citoyens et dirigeants politiques des États des Balkans occidentaux.

Afin de pallier cela, la Commission européenne (ci-après Commission) a présenté en février 2018 une stratégie intitulée « Une perspective

d'élargissement crédible ainsi qu'un engagement de l'Union européenne renforcé pour les Balkans occidentaux » (Commission, 2018a, pp. 1-10). Cette stratégie vise à donner une nouvelle impulsion aux réformes dans la région afin de relever certains défis importants auxquels sont confrontés les Balkans occidentaux. De son côté, le Conseil de l'UE (ci-après Conseil), sous l'initiative de la Présidence bulgare, a décidé d'organiser un sommet UE-Balkans occidentaux à Sofia en mai 2018. Lors de ce sommet, les dirigeants de l'UE se sont mis d'accord sur la déclaration de Sofia, à laquelle les partenaires de la région se sont ralliés. Ils ont également adopté un programme d'actions prioritaires qui expose de nouvelles mesures visant à renforcer la coopération avec la région.

Pourtant, si les différentes institutions partagent la volonté de relancer le processus d'élargissement, dans les faits on constate une asymétrie d'approches entre d'une part, l'inter-gouvernementalisme du Conseil européen et du Conseil et d'autre part, le supranationalisme de la Commission et du Parlement européen (ci-après Parlement).

Cet article a donc pour objectif d'étudier le renouvellement stratégique de l'UE vis-à-vis des Balkans occidentaux afin de déterminer les divergences d'approches entre les institutions européennes et l'impact du processus décisionnel sur la stratégie d'élargissement dans les Balkans occidentaux. En quoi les différentes approches institutionnelles influencent la politique d'élargissement de l'UE dans les Balkans occidentaux et quels sont les impacts de celles-ci dans la région ? Après une nécessaire mise en contexte théorique du processus décisionnel européen de la politique d'élargissement, la deuxième partie traitera du renouvellement stratégique de l'UE dans les Balkans occidentaux et de la position des différentes institutions européennes. La troisième partie analysera en détail la question de l'ouverture des négociations d'adhésion avec l'Albanie et la Macédoine du Nord. Enfin, la quatrième et dernière partie reviendra sur l'impact du processus décisionnel de l'UE et sur le rôle grandissant joué par les États membres dans les blocages institutionnels existants.

Le processus décisionnel et la politique d'élargissement de l'UE

L'UE a toujours considéré le processus d'élargissement comme une occasion de promouvoir la stabilité et la prospérité en Europe. L'UE constitue un partenariat économique et politique représentant une forme de coopération unique entre ses 27 États membres (Archick, 2017, p. 4). Dans son histoire, l'UE a toujours laissé la porte ouverte à d'autres pays européens et les élargissements successifs ont joué un rôle essentiel

dans la promotion de la démocratie, la stabilisation du continent européen et la prospérité économique. Construite à travers une série de traités créant un système politique propre en constante évolution, l'UE s'est dotée d'une stratégie d'intégration se caractérisant à la fois par une méthode communautaire supranationale et par la coopération entre les États membres (Quermonne, 2011, p. 34). Par sa construction politique atypique, à mi-chemin entre une organisation internationale et un État de type fédéral, l'espace politique créé par l'intégration européenne est unique et évolue constamment car l'Union est en construction permanente (Montagner, 2005, p. 3). En effet, suite à l'absence d'un acteur central responsable de la légitimité des politiques élaborées et caractérisé par une articulation spécifique des différents niveaux de gouvernements, l'UE représente un système politique unique (Saurugger, 2013, p. 326). La notion de gouvernance semble mieux à même de comprendre le système politique européen car le pouvoir, au lieu d'être la propriété d'un seul acteur, résulte plutôt d'une négociation permanente entre un ensemble d'acteurs que sont principalement les institutions européennes et les États membres mais également les acteurs régionaux (régions, villes, ...) ou encore les acteurs privés (organisations non-gouvernementales (ONG), groupes de pression, société civile, ...). La notion de gouvernance correspond dans cette approche à :

un mode de gouvernement, dans lequel la mise en cohérence de l'action publique ne passe plus par l'action d'une élite politico-administrative relativement homogène et centralisée mais par la mise en place de formes de coordination multi-niveaux et multi-acteurs dont le résultat, toujours incertain, dépend de la capacité des acteurs publics à définir un sens commun, à mobiliser des expertises d'origines diverses et à mettre en place des formes de responsabilisation et de légitimation des décisions (Muller et Surel, 1998, p. 47).

Dès lors, le processus d'élaboration des politiques européennes semble caractérisé à la fois par l'interaction entre une pluralité d'acteurs étatiques et non-étatiques, par la complexité des processus de négociation à différents niveaux, mais aussi par la formalisation relativement faible des procédures de décision (Saurugger, 2013, p. 327). Le pouvoir résultant d'une négociation constante entre les différents acteurs de l'UE, rien ne semble figé et définitif (Montagner, 2005, p. 3). Le processus décisionnel et le rôle des institutions de l'UE varient notamment selon les domaines et les compétences visées. En effet, la répartition des compétences est le résultat d'une délégation successive des compétences des États membres vers l'UE au fur et à mesure des traités (Oberdorff, 2013, p. 43). Ainsi, les États membres ont transféré au fil du temps une partie de leur souveraineté à l'UE en lui accordant notamment des compétences à caractère

supranational, juridiquement contraignantes, exclusives et réservées ainsi que des compétences partagées ou encore des compétences complémentaires et d'appui sur une multitude de politiques économiques et sociales (TFUE, articles 3, 4 et 6). Néanmoins, les compétences dites de souveraineté sont globalement restées sous le contrôle des États membres. En ce qui concerne les questions relatives à la Politique étrangère et de sécurité commune (PESC), les États membres ont certes accepté de coopérer, mais la plupart des décisions résultent toujours d'un processus intergouvernemental qui requiert l'accord unanime de l'ensemble des pays membres de l'UE. Reprise sous ce chapitre dans le Traité de Lisbonne, la politique de l'élargissement est en grande partie dépendante d'un processus décisionnel intergouvernemental au sein duquel le Conseil joue un rôle essentiel et dans lequel les gouvernements nationaux peuvent opposer un veto à toutes décisions. D'un point de vue juridique et normatif, la politique d'élargissement de l'UE se base sur le Traité de l'UE (TUE) et plus particulièrement sur son article 49 qui souligne que :

tout État européen qui respecte les valeurs visées à l'article 2 et s'engage à les promouvoir peut demander à devenir membre de l'Union. Le Parlement européen et les parlements nationaux sont informés de cette demande. L'État demandeur adresse sa demande au Conseil, lequel se prononce à l'unanimité après avoir consulté la Commission et après approbation du Parlement européen qui se prononce à la majorité des membres qui le compose. Les critères d'éligibilité approuvés par le Conseil européen sont pris en compte. Les conditions de l'admission et les adaptations que cette admission entraîne en ce qui concerne les traités sur lesquels est fondée l'Union font l'objet d'un accord entre les États membres et l'État demandeur. Ledit accord est soumis à la ratification par tous les États contractants, conformément à leurs règles constitutionnelles respectives (article 49, TUE).

Le processus d'élargissement a toujours été sous le contrôle des États membres (Avery, 2015, p. 16). Les procédures internes de l'UE en la matière n'ont pratiquement pas changé depuis leur formulation en vue des négociations d'adhésion du Danemark, de l'Irlande et du Royaume-Uni en 1973 et sont presque entièrement inter-gouvernementales. En effet, toutes les décisions relatives à l'élargissement dépendent du Conseil qui décide à l'unanimité et toutes les décisions importantes à ce sujet sont prises au Conseil européen par les chefs d'État et de gouvernement. Néanmoins, des arrangements institutionnels sont apparus au fil du temps, donnant une influence de plus en plus importante à la Commission et au Parlement (Hillion, 2015, pp. 21-24). Tandis que la Commission joue notamment un rôle essentiel dans la définition des critères d'adhésion et l'évaluation de ceux-ci, dans la préparation des négociations interé-

tatiques et du traité d'adhésion ou encore dans la rédaction d'avis et de recommandations à l'attention du Conseil, le Parlement doit également donner son approbation à la signature d'un traité d'adhésion. De même, l'élargissement de l'UE ne peut plus avoir lieu sans l'approbation des institutions supranationales européennes, enracinant le caractère hybride du processus d'élargissement de l'UE et tempérant la position prépondérante des États membres (Hillion, 2015, p. 23). Le processus d'élargissement est devenu une politique européenne à part entière caractérisée par une gouvernance à niveaux multiples, régie par ses propres règles institutionnelles visant à préparer l'adhésion du pays candidat, et élaborée principalement par les institutions de l'Union qui y jouent un rôle prépondérant (Hillion, 2015, p. 22).

Néanmoins, si l'étude de l'UE comme système de gouvernance informe très peu sur la constitution de hiérarchies d'acteurs et d'intérêts et occulte souvent la question de l'autorité, il paraît important de démontrer que la hiérarchisation des acteurs fait toujours l'objet de négociations permanentes, impactant le fonctionnement du processus d'élargissement. En effet, s'il est vrai que les institutions supranationales jouent un rôle plus important dans le processus d'élargissement, on constate une certaine renationalisation du processus depuis une dizaine d'années avec pour conséquence une asymétrie d'approches entre le Conseil et les institutions supranationales de l'UE. Cette renationalisation du processus d'élargissement se caractérise par un renforcement du rôle du Conseil dans la prise de décision, n'hésitant pas à aller à l'encontre de l'avis des autres institutions, une influence croissante de la politique intérieure des États membres ainsi qu'un renforcement des garde-fous nationaux afin de mieux contrôler la politique d'élargissement (Balfour et Stratulat, 2015, p. 16). Ainsi, si la nature de l'article 49 du TUE est en principe interinstitutionnelle, dans la pratique, elle reste fortement intergouvernementale (Hillion, 2015, p. 26). Cette asymétrie entre les institutions européennes et le rôle prépondérant des États membres dans le processus décisionnel va s'illustrer notamment à travers le renouvellement stratégique de l'UE vers les Balkans occidentaux et se cristalliser sur l'opportunité d'ouvrir les négociations d'adhésion à l'Albanie et à la Macédoine du Nord.

Le renouvellement stratégique de l'UE dans les Balkans occidentaux

À la suite de l'impuissance de l'Union à jouer un rôle pacificateur lors des conflits et des guerres des années 1990, les États membres et les institutions européennes ont décidé d'ouvrir une perspective européenne à

tous les pays de la région dès qu'ils respecteront les critères d'adhésion (Drevet, 2014, p. 207).

La stratégie de l'UE pour les Balkans occidentaux se concrétise réellement lors du Conseil européen de Cologne de 1999 qui adopte le PSA, constituant le cadre de la politique de l'UE à l'égard des pays de la région. Ce Processus sera confirmé lors du Conseil européen de Feira et du Sommet européen de Zagreb en 2000, où l'ensemble des États de la région reçoivent le statut de « candidats potentiels à l'adhésion » (Conseil européen, 2000, §67). Le PSA se caractérise par les instruments d'aide de préadhésion (IAP) et par la signature d'Accords de stabilisation et d'association (ASA), qui mettent particulièrement l'accent sur le respect de principes démocratiques, les droits fondamentaux, la coopération et le développement, ainsi que la création progressive d'un espace de libre-échange via l'application des normes européennes (Toegelhofer et Wunsch, 2010, p. 3).

Le Sommet de Thessalonique de juin 2003 est considéré comme le sommet fondateur de la politique d'intégration européenne des Balkans occidentaux car il formalise le processus d'adhésion, réaffirme la perspective européenne et définit l'agenda pour la région. Lors de ce sommet, l'UE renforça le principe de conditionnalité qui est au cœur de son processus d'intégration. Aux critères d'adhésion de Copenhague de 1993, qui définissent les conditions et principes à respecter pour tout pays qui souhaite devenir membre de l'UE, s'ajoutent des conditions spécifiques pour chaque pays de la région liées aux réformes démocratiques, au respect des droits de l'homme et des minorités, ainsi qu'aux réformes économiques et régionales (Mirel, 2018, p. 4). De même, des critères spécifiques sont fixés dans les ASA pour chaque pays candidat concernant notamment les relations de bon voisinage, la coopération régionale ou encore la coopération avec le Tribunal pénal international pour l'ex-Yougoslavie (TPIY). Bien que l'approche soit régionale, chaque pays avance à son rythme et passe les différentes étapes vers la signature de l'ASA conformément à ses spécificités et ses conditionnalités propres.

Si l'ensemble des pays des Balkans occidentaux ont pu se rapprocher de l'UE, l'hétérogénéité des processus d'adhésion, déterminés par le principe de double conditionnalité, provoque des asymétries entre les pays candidats. Plusieurs raisons peuvent expliquer les différentes évolutions, comme l'existence de niveaux de développement économique et politique inégaux, des différends bilatéraux et politiques ou l'absence d'une volonté constante de se rapprocher de l'UE. Pour la Serbie, la perspective d'adhésion est conditionnée à la normalisation des relations avec le Kosovo. Pour la Macédoine du Nord, elle était grandement liée à la

résolution du conflit avec la Grèce, alors que pour l'Albanie, l'ouverture des négociations est conditionnée à la réalisation des progrès dans les domaines de la réforme électorale, de la justice, de l'administration et dans la lutte contre la corruption et le crime organisé (Ioannides, 2018, pp. 26-27).

Du côté de l'UE, les problèmes internes, la crise économique et migratoire, l'euroscepticisme, le Brexit ou encore les trois précédents élargissements ont créé une certaine fatigue de l'élargissement auprès des États membres et une passivité des autorités européennes qui ont quelque peu délaissé la région des Balkans occidentaux. Toutefois, en 2018, la Commission a renouvelé la stratégie de l'élargissement pour la région, obligeant les autres institutions européennes à prendre position.

La Commission européenne : prise de conscience de la nécessité d'accélérer le processus

La Commission a décidé de réagir en proposant en février 2018 un renouvellement stratégique offrant une perspective d'élargissement crédible ainsi qu'un engagement de l'UE renforcé pour les Balkans occidentaux (Commission, 2018a, 48p). Lors de son discours sur l'état de l'Union en 2017, l'ancien Président de la Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, réaffirmait l'avenir européen des Balkans occidentaux :

si nous voulons plus de stabilité dans notre voisinage, nous devons aussi offrir des perspectives d'élargissement crédibles aux Balkans occidentaux. Il n'y aura pas de nouveaux pays membres durant le mandat de cette Commission et de ce Parlement, parce que les critères d'adhésion ne sont pas remplis. Mais dans les années qui viennent l'Union européenne comptera plus de 27 membres. Pour tous les pays candidats à l'adhésion, une priorité absolue doit être donnée, dans les négociations, au respect de l'État de droit, de la justice et des droits fondamentaux (Juncker, 2017).

Son discours contraste avec les propos tenus au début de sa présidence, démontrant la prise de conscience de la Commission de ne plus délaisser les pays de la région sous peine de voir réapparaître une zone d'instabilité aux frontières de l'UE. La stratégie vise à donner une nouvelle impulsion aux réformes dans la région afin de relever les défis importants auxquels sont confrontés les Balkans occidentaux. Elle insiste sur le fait que les pays des Balkans occidentaux ont vocation à rejoindre l'UE, conformément à la promesse qui a été faite au sommet de Thessalonique en 2003. Pour la première fois, elle fixe un horizon déterminé autour de 2025 pour la Serbie et le Monténégro (Commission, 2018a). Néanmoins, la Commission souligne que cette perspective éventuelle pour 2025 est

donnée à titre purement indicatif et fondée sur le scénario le plus favorable (Commission, 2018a). Elle n'a aucun caractère automatique et le processus d'adhésion reste basé sur le mérite de chaque pays en fonction des progrès accomplis et des critères à remplir. Ainsi, selon cette stratégie, la perspective d'élargissement des Balkans occidentaux reste avant tout dans les mains des pays eux-mêmes, dans leurs capacités à mettre en œuvre des réformes fondamentales et d'instaurer des relations de bon voisinage. La Commission réaffirme également qu'une intégration groupée, totalement ou partiellement, comme cela a pu être le cas lors de précédents élargissements, est écartée au profit d'une intégration au mérite. Cette stratégie a notamment pour objectif de créer une saine compétition entre les pays des Balkans occidentaux censée tirer l'ensemble de la région vers des standards plus élevés. Néanmoins, dans une région post-confliktuelle fragile où de nombreux litiges bilatéraux sont encore présents, cette compétition peut également entraîner des tensions entre les États de la région (Marciacq, 2017, p. 17).

Le renouvellement stratégique de la Commission comprend également un plan d'action qui prévoit six initiatives concrètes sur des domaines spécifiques d'intérêt mutuel comme l'État de droit, la sécurité et les migrations, le développement socio-économique, la connectivité en matière de transport et d'énergie, la stratégie numérique ou encore la réconciliation et les relations de bon voisinage. Enfin, elle propose d'augmenter progressivement les fonds alloués au titre de l'IPA (Commission, 2018b).

Dans ses rapports de suivi, la Commission a également recommandé aux États membres l'ouverture des négociations d'adhésion avec l'Albanie et la Macédoine du Nord, soulignant les efforts qui ont été faits sur le chemin des réformes (Commission, 2018c). Comme le souligne alors l'ancienne Haute Représentante pour la politique étrangère et de sécurité de l'UE et Vice-Présidente de la Commission (HR/VP) Federica Mogherini :

la décision se fonde sur une évaluation des progrès réalisés par ces deux pays sur les recommandations faites en 2016 et sur un examen des mesures mises en œuvre par Tirana et Skopje. (...) Cette décision constitue un message d'encouragement à ces pays de poursuivre les réformes. (...) Il revient aux États membres d'évaluer ces progrès et de prendre une décision (Mogherini, 2017).

Le changement de direction opéré semble reconnaître que la stratégie méritait d'être réadaptée aux réalités et attentes régionales. En effet, après vingt ans de perspective européenne, un certain désenchantement s'est installé dans la région des Balkans occidentaux. Si encore une partie importante de la population souhaite adhérer à l'UE, plus de 25 % des

citoyens estiment que cela n'arrivera pas (Balkan Barometer Public Opinion, 2018, p. 51). Dès lors, en ouvrant la voie aux négociations d'adhésion avec l'Albanie et la Macédoine du Nord, la Commission démontre son niveau d'ambition élevé pour les Balkans occidentaux et sa volonté de répondre aux attentes régionales.

Le Parlement européen : soutien indéfectible des Balkans occidentaux

Si le Parlement n'est pas un acteur prépondérant dans les négociations, il est néanmoins pleinement impliqué dans le processus d'élargissement. Sa fonction principale est de ratifier les traités d'adhésion conclus avec les pays candidats à la fin des négociations (article 49, TUE). Il a également son mot à dire sur les aspects financiers d'une adhésion puisque le Traité de Lisbonne soumet à son approbation l'adoption du cadre financier pluriannuel (CFP) de l'Union.

De même, ses pouvoirs budgétaires lui permettent d'exercer une influence directe sur les montants réservés à l'IPA. Le Parlement exprime ses positions sur l'élargissement sous la forme de résolutions adoptées à la suite des rapports annuels élaborés par la Commission et débattues au sein de la Commission des Affaires étrangères du Parlement. Enfin, le Parlement entretient régulièrement des relations bilatérales avec les parlements des États des Balkans occidentaux par l'intermédiaire de ses délégations qui débattent avec leurs homologues des questions ayant trait au processus d'adhésion. Elles permettent notamment aux parlementaires d'échanger des informations et de procéder à un exercice de contrôle conjoint au cœur du système politique du pays candidat (De Munter, 2017, p. 5). Elles représentent également un forum d'échanges afin de discuter des progrès accomplis au regard des critères de Copenhague. Ces échanges se révèlent particulièrement utiles car les réunions au niveau ministériel ou diplomatique n'en donnent pas toujours l'occasion, tandis que les négociations d'adhésion se déroulent à huis clos.

En ce qui concerne le document de stratégie relatif à l'élargissement vers les Balkans occidentaux, le Parlement a débattu de celui-ci et soutenu à une large majorité l'initiative de la Commission en insistant sur l'importance de réformes dans les pays de la région lors de la plénière du 6 février 2018 (Parlement, 2018a). Si le Parlement ne peut être appréhendé comme une entité unique car les décisions qui y sont prises résultent d'un vote à la majorité et d'un débat d'idées entre des députés provenant de 27 pays différents et engagés dans des partis et groupes politiques idéologiquement différents, il est néanmoins important de consta-

ter qu'une large majorité des députés et des partis politiques européens sont favorables au renouvellement stratégique de la Commission relatif à l'élargissement de l'UE vers les Balkans occidentaux.

De même, lors des débats sur les rapports de suivi (*progress reports*) en novembre 2018, le Parlement a également adopté à une très large majorité plusieurs résolutions favorables aux pays des Balkans occidentaux. En analysant de plus près les votes des députés européens, les deux grands groupes politiques européens que sont le Parti populaire européen (PPE) et les Sociaux-Démocrates (S&D) soutiennent très largement les conclusions des rapports de suivi à l'instar des membres du parti de l'Alliance des libéraux et des démocrates pour l'Europe (ALDE), des écologistes (Verts/ALE) ou encore d'un certain nombre de députés du parti de l'Alliance des Conservateurs et Réformistes Européens (ECR). Seule une centaine de députés s'y sont opposés pour des raisons souvent très différentes dont notamment les nationalistes, souverainistes et eurosceptiques de l'Europe des Nations et des Libertés (ENL) et de l'Europe de la Liberté et de la Démocratie Directe (ELDD), ainsi qu'une partie des membres de l'ECR et de l'extrême gauche, représentée par la Gauche Unitaire Européenne/Gauche Verte Nordique (GUE/NGL)².

Les résolutions finales sur le Monténégro et la Serbie entrevoient la possibilité d'adhésion à l'horizon 2025 si les deux États continuent à mettre en place de réelles réformes et résolvent les différends bilatéraux avec leurs voisins (Parlement, 2018b, §2 et 3). De même, si les députés ont souligné que la mise en œuvre des réformes restait un indicateur clé du succès de l'intégration, le Parlement a cependant invité la Commission et le Conseil à prévoir au sein du prochain CFP une disposition permettant de tenir compte d'une adhésion éventuelle du Monténégro et/ou de la Serbie (Parlement, 2018b, §3).

De son côté, si la résolution finale sur le rapport de suivi concernant la Bosnie-Herzégovine se montre particulièrement critique vis-à-vis du manque de progrès et de réformes, en ce qui concerne le Kosovo, le Parlement se félicite de l'adoption de certains textes législatifs importants et de l'accord de démarcation de la frontière avec le Monténégro même s'il souligne la lenteur de la mise en œuvre des réformes fondamentales due notamment à l'absence de consensus entre les partis et à une polarisation

² L'ensemble des résolutions sur les rapports de suivi ont été adoptés lors de la plénière du Parlement européen au mois de novembre 2018, à l'exception du rapport sur la Bosnie-Herzégovine qui a été adopté lors de la plénière de février 2019. L'ensemble des détails des votes nominatifs pour les rapports de suivi sur les pays des Balkans occidentaux sont disponibles et consultables sur le site du Parlement européen à l'adresse suivante : <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/plenary/fr/votes.html> (consulté le 26 février 2021).

politique continue (Parlement, 2018c, § 1,2 et 5). Néanmoins, les députés ont estimé qu'il était nécessaire d'accorder sans délai la libéralisation du régime des visas au Kosovo car les critères de référence ont été remplis (Parlement, 2018c, §12). Dès lors, le Parlement soutient la Commission et invite le Conseil européen à adopter rapidement son mandat afin de progresser vers l'adoption d'un régime d'exemption des visas qui devrait rapprocher le Kosovo de l'UE (Parlement, 2018c, §13).

Enfin, en ce qui concerne les résolutions sur l'Albanie et la Macédoine du Nord, les parlementaires européens soutiennent également la Commission et invitent le Conseil à ouvrir sans délai les négociations d'adhésion dans le but d'encourager davantage les réformes, d'offrir de nouvelles incitations en faveur du processus de démocratisation et de renforcer le contrôle et la responsabilisation³. Ils soulignent que les deux pays ont continué à progresser sur la voie du respect des critères politiques et des grandes priorités pour l'ouverture des négociations d'adhésion ainsi que concernant l'harmonisation de la législation avec l'acquis de l'Union (Parlement, 2018e, §10). Le Parlement a également salué la signature historique de l'accord de Prespa, conclu le 17 juin 2018 entre la Grèce et la Macédoine du Nord, ayant résolu la question du nom de cette dernière (Parlement, 2018d, §2).

Le Conseil de l'UE : entre divisions, frilosités et fatigue de l'élargissement

Quinze ans après le 1^{er} sommet UE-Balkans occidentaux de Thessalonique, un nouveau sommet s'est tenu à Sofia en mai 2018 sous l'initiative de la Présidence bulgare du Conseil. La volonté de la Présidence bulgare était de relancer le processus européen dans les Balkans occidentaux et d'avoir une discussion stratégique au niveau des chefs d'État et de gouvernement quelques semaines après le document stratégique proposé par la Commission. Lors de ce sommet, les États membres de l'Union ont réaffirmé leur soutien sans équivoque à la perspective européenne des Balkans occidentaux sans toutefois mentionner la question de l'élargissement de l'UE. Les dirigeants européens se sont mis d'accord sur la déclaration de Sofia, à laquelle les États des Balkans occidentaux se sont ralliés. Ils ont également adopté un programme d'actions prioritaires qui expose de nouvelles mesures visant à renforcer la coopération avec la région.

³ La résolution de suivi concernant le rapport 2018 sur la Macédoine du Nord a été adoptée à 470 voix contre 116 et 46 abstentions tandis que la résolution de suivi concernant le rapport 2018 sur l'Albanie a été adoptée à 459 contre 112 et 62 abstentions.

En vue de préparer le sommet de Sofia, l'ancien président du Conseil Donald Tusk s'est rendu dans les capitales de la région. Lors de sa tournée, le Président n'a jamais mentionné explicitement la question de l'élargissement de l'UE, se contentant de mentionner la perspective européenne des Balkans occidentaux :

je suis venu dans les Balkans occidentaux avec un message clair de la part des dirigeants de tous les États membres de l'Union européenne : nous restons déterminés à offrir une perspective européenne à la région (Tusk, 2018).

Dès lors, si le Sommet de Sofia a permis le retour des Balkans occidentaux dans l'agenda européen, il a surtout démontré l'incapacité des États membres à répondre aux attentes des pays de la région sur la poursuite concrète de l'élargissement, se contentant d'évoquer une perspective européenne pour les partenaires de la région. Comme le souligne l'ancien commissaire européen à l'élargissement et à la politique européenne de voisinage, l'autrichien Johannes Hahn :

il y a encore des réticences dans les États membres à accepter de nouveaux membres. (...) Nous devons expliquer les avantages de l'élargissement et de l'intégration des pays des Balkans occidentaux (Hahn, 2018).

Malgré les initiatives de la Commission, les dirigeants européens préfèrent tempérer les propositions de celle-ci car ils ne sont pas tous favorables à un élargissement rapide vers les Balkans occidentaux. En effet, le vocabulaire choisi lors de la déclaration de Sofia n'est pas anodin et démontre la prudence du Conseil à la suite de la réticence de certains États membres concernant l'évocation de la question de l'élargissement. Cette différence rhétorique sur le renouvellement stratégique de l'UE entre le Conseil et les autres institutions européennes démontre déjà l'asymétrie d'approches existante entre le caractère supranational de la Commission et le fonctionnement intergouvernemental du Conseil. Alors que la Commission favorise la mise en place de stratégies ambitieuses, le fonctionnement du Conseil, freiné par sa procédure de vote à l'unanimité, l'empêche d'avancer au même rythme lorsqu'un État membre décide de s'y opposer, obligeant à trouver le plus petit dénominateur commun entre les États membres. Pour maintenir une certaine unité au sein de l'UE, les États membres réticents à une stratégie ambitieuse d'élargissement vers les Balkans occidentaux ont plutôt insisté sur leur soutien sans équivoque à la perspective européenne de la région.

Pourtant, quelques semaines plus tard, les divergences existantes au sein du Conseil se sont cristallisées lors des discussions concernant

L'ouverture du processus des négociations d'adhésion avec l'Albanie et la Macédoine du Nord.

L'ouverture des négociations d'adhésion à l'UE pour l'Albanie et la Macédoine du Nord : une asymétrie d'approches entre les institutions européennes

Malgré la volonté et les initiatives prises par la Commission et le Parlement, le Conseil a décidé de reporter à plusieurs reprises l'ouverture des négociations. En juin 2018, le Conseil des Affaires Générales (CAG) décida de reporter une première fois l'ouverture des négociations à juin 2019 sous réserve de la poursuite de réformes concernant le système judiciaire, la lutte contre la corruption et le démantèlement des réseaux criminels (Conseil de l'UE, 2018, §38-39). Cette décision fut la conséquence de l'unanimité requise du processus décisionnel du Conseil et des réticences françaises et néerlandaises à l'issue d'une discussion interne de plus de 10 heures entre les ministres européens des Affaires européennes. Un an plus tard et malgré les efforts de la Commission pour convaincre les États membres réticents, l'incapacité de ceux-ci à s'accorder sur une position commune lors d'un nouveau CAG en juin ainsi qu'en octobre 2019 obligea l'UE et la Présidence finlandaise à mettre le sujet à l'agenda lors d'un Conseil européen quelques jours plus tard à Bruxelles. Malgré l'initiative conjointe des Présidents du Parlement, du Conseil et de la Commission d'inviter les États membres à respecter les promesses faites aux pays des Balkans occidentaux, la France refusa de nouveau de se prononcer en faveur de l'ouverture de négociations d'adhésion avec la Macédoine du Nord et a été rejointe par les Pays-Bas et le Danemark en ce qui concerne l'Albanie.

Selon le ministre des Affaires étrangères néerlandais Stef Blok, les deux pays doivent en faire plus en matière de lutte contre la corruption et le système judiciaire albanais doit d'abord être réformé (Blok, 2019). Pour le Président français Emmanuel Macron, l'ensemble des critères fixés en 2019 ne sont pas totalement remplis, et surtout l'UE n'est pas prête à un nouvel élargissement et le processus d'adhésion lui-même doit être révisé (Macron, 2018). Pourtant, l'immense majorité des États membres plaident pour démarrer le processus d'élargissement, afin notamment d'empêcher la projection d'influences russes, turques et chinoises. Comme le mentionne le ministre allemand des Affaires européennes, Michael Roth :

nous devons reconnaître que l'Albanie et la Macédoine du Nord ont accompli des efforts énormes. J'appelle la France et les Pays-Bas à faire

preuve de bonne volonté (...). La stabilité, la paix et la démocratie dans les Balkans occidentaux sont un enjeu crucial pour nous tous (Roth cité par Stroobants et Ducourtieux, 2018).

Alors que de son côté, la Commission a dénoncé une « lourde erreur historique » et une perte de crédibilité de l'UE dans la région (Juncker, 2019), le Parlement nouvellement élu a réitéré en plénière son soutien à l'Albanie et à la Macédoine du Nord. En effet, les députés européens ont voté à une très large majorité une résolution faisant part de la profonde déception existante face à l'incapacité de l'Union à s'accorder sur l'ouverture des négociations d'adhésion du fait du blocage de la France, du Danemark et des Pays-Bas, étant donné que ces deux pays des Balkans occidentaux ont déployé des efforts considérables pour satisfaire aux exigences de l'Union pour l'ouverture des négociations d'adhésion. De même, le Parlement rappelle les engagements des États membres et le consensus sur l'élargissement approuvé par le Conseil européen en décembre 2006 puis celui réaffirmé et adopté dans les conclusions du Conseil européen de juin 2016 et souligne que :

cette absence de décision est une erreur stratégique et nuit à la crédibilité de l'Union, étant donné que l'intégration des pays admissibles permet à cette dernière de conserver son rôle sur la scène internationale et de protéger ses intérêts, et que les progrès réalisés en vue d'adhérer à l'Union ont également un effet transformateur sur les pays candidats eux-mêmes (Parlement, 2019).

La résolution s'inquiète également du risque de voir d'autres acteurs étrangers, dont les activités ne cadrent pas nécessairement avec les valeurs et les intérêts de l'Union, resserrer leurs liens tant avec l'Albanie et la Macédoine du Nord. L'incapacité de l'UE à prendre une décision pourrait également freiner la mise en œuvre de réformes pro-européennes dans d'autres pays en voie d'adhésion. Face à la volonté française énoncée par Emmanuel Macron de réformer le processus d'élargissement, le Parlement soutient que cela ne devrait pas entraver les pays qui ont déjà rempli les conditions d'ouverture des négociations d'adhésion et que les pays candidats doivent être évalués à l'aune de leurs mérites propres, sur la base de critères objectifs et non de considérations politiques nationales dans les différents États membres (Parlement, 2019).

Pourtant, à la suite des blocages au sein du Conseil concernant l'ouverture des négociations d'adhésion avec l'Albanie et la Macédoine du Nord, la Commission décida de proposer le 5 février 2020 un renforcement du processus d'adhésion. Cette dernière souligne qu'il devait être plus prévisible, plus crédible, plus dynamique, fondé sur des critères objectifs,

sur des conditions positives et négatives rigoureuses, sur le principe de réversibilité et qu'il fasse l'objet d'un pilotage politique plus déterminé (Commission, 2020).

Cette nouvelle méthodologie, impulsée par la France auprès de la Commission, a été adoptée par le Conseil en mars 2020 et marque un changement important dans le processus d'élargissement. En renforçant le rôle des États membres dans le processus d'adhésion, il permit de débloquent le veto des pays réticents à l'ouverture des négociations d'adhésion avec l'Albanie et la Macédoine du Nord. Ainsi, dans ses conclusions du 25 mars 2020, le Conseil, avec l'approbation de l'ensemble des membres du Conseil européen, décida d'ouvrir les négociations d'adhésion avec l'Albanie et la Macédoine du Nord (Conclusions du Conseil, 2020).

En ce qui concerne les raisons qui ont poussé plusieurs États membres à repousser l'ouverture des négociations et à modifier le processus d'adhésion, elles s'inscrivent dans un cadre plus large de renationalisation de la politique d'élargissement de l'UE.

Le blocage institutionnel de la procédure d'adhésion au Conseil de l'UE : la renationalisation du processus d'élargissement et le rôle prépondérant des États membres

Depuis plusieurs années, on constate une renationalisation du processus d'élargissement vers les Balkans occidentaux caractérisée par un contrôle de plus en plus important des États membres et une augmentation de l'influence des considérations de politiques internes au détriment des institutions supranationales de l'UE (Avery, 2015, p. 16). Un des principaux risques de cette renationalisation est le blocage du processus d'élargissement. Ils se sont illustrés dans les Balkans occidentaux par l'utilisation du veto de la Grèce contre la Macédoine du Nord avant la résolution du différend sur le nom de cette dernière. Ils se sont caractérisés ensuite par le blocage de certains États membres à l'ouverture des négociations d'adhésion pour l'Albanie et la Macédoine du Nord, la libéralisation des visas kosovars ou encore la modification du processus d'adhésion en mars 2020. Alors que les institutions européennes avaient pris l'habitude de parler d'une seule voix et qu'une interdépendance positive s'était créée au fil du temps concernant le processus d'élargissement, depuis une dizaine d'années, les États membres réticents n'ont pas hésité à contester de plus en plus publiquement les avis et recommandations d'ouverture des négociations d'adhésion de la Commission, contredisant par la même occasion les résolutions du Parlement. C'est une façon pour les États membres de réaffirmer leurs autorités par rapport aux institutions

supranationales et de rappeler que dans la pratique, la procédure de l'article 49 du TUE reste avant tout une prérogative intergouvernementale.

La volonté de certains États membres de contrôler le processus d'élargissement peut s'expliquer par un certain nombre de facteurs internes comme la situation économique toujours fragile et très marquée par la crise financière de 2008, les élargissements de 2004 et 2007, des perceptions sécuritaires et géopolitiques différentes, l'influence des partis populistes et eurosceptiques, la question migratoire ou encore l'opinion publique de certains États membres très opposés à l'idée d'élargir l'UE. Ce n'est pas un hasard si, selon le sondage de l'Eurobaromètre 2018, la France, les Pays-Bas et le Danemark ont une opinion publique majoritairement opposée à l'élargissement de l'UE à d'autres pays dans les années à venir. En effet, ces trois États membres ont respectivement 61 %, 51 % et 59 % d'opinions défavorables alors que le soutien à l'élargissement de l'UE est majoritaire dans 16 États membres avec notamment plus de 67 % d'opinions favorables en Espagne et 65 % en Pologne et en Roumanie (Eurobaromètre, 2018, p. 27). Il n'est pas étonnant non plus de constater que les pays qui s'opposent à l'ouverture des négociations d'adhésion étaient déjà les États membres les plus réticents concernant la reconnaissance du statut de candidat à l'Albanie ou encore à la libéralisation des visas pour la Bosnie-Herzégovine et l'Albanie, repoussant la décision du Conseil plusieurs fois malgré les recommandations positives de la Commission. Les trois États membres ne sont pas favorables non plus à une libéralisation rapide des visas pour les Kosovars et ce, malgré le rapport de la Commission confirmant que le Kosovo avait satisfait aux deux dernières exigences nécessaires pour la libéralisation du régime des visas, à savoir la ratification de l'accord sur la démarcation de la frontière avec le Monténégro et la réalisation de meilleurs résultats en matière de lutte contre la criminalité et la corruption (Commission, 2018d).

En ce qui concerne les Pays-Bas et le Danemark, s'ils sont caractérisés par une opinion publique relativement sceptique à de nouveaux élargissements, ils sont surtout des défenseurs inconditionnels du strict respect des critères d'adhésion, n'hésitant pas à marquer leurs désaccords concernant certaines décisions s'ils estiment que les conditions ne sont pas remplies. Au Danemark, les succès retentissants des eurosceptiques du Parti populaire danois (Dansk Folkeparti) aux élections européennes de 2014 devenant par l'occasion le 1^{er} parti du pays avec 26,6 % et aux élections régionales de 2015 avec 21,1 % a également eu pour conséquence un durcissement de la position nationale danoise sur les questions d'élargissement (Martens, 2015, pp. 191-196). En ce qui concerne les Pays-Bas, si la montée en puissance du Parti eurosceptique pour la

liberté (PVV) a joué un rôle en forçant les autres partis politiques à renforcer leurs positions concernant la politique d'élargissement, c'est surtout l'échec des réformes en Bulgarie et en Roumanie après leurs adhésions en 2007 qui a conduit à un durcissement de la politique néerlandaise sur la question (Blockmans, 2015, pp. 211-212). Les eurosceptiques néerlandais considèrent que l'adhésion dans l'UE de la Bulgarie et de la Roumanie était prématurée suite aux lacunes dans les domaines de la réforme de la justice, de la lutte contre la corruption et, en ce qui concerne la Bulgarie, de la lutte contre la criminalité organisée (Blockmans, 2015, p. 216). Pour justifier l'élargissement de 2007, la théorie défendue par l'UE considérait que l'adhésion dans l'UE incitera les pays adhérents à rattraper leur retard en ce qui concerne le respect des critères d'adhésion, ce qui ne fut pas vraiment le cas (Parlement, 2018f)). Les Pays-Bas sont très critiques concernant le mécanisme de coopération et de vérification post-adhésion (CVM) mis en place par l'UE comme mesure transitoire afin d'accompagner la Bulgarie et la Roumanie à remédier à ces lacunes, estimant qu'il n'a pas porté ses fruits (Blockmans, 2015, p. 216). Depuis cet échec, les Pays-Bas défendent une position beaucoup plus dure sur la politique d'élargissement caractérisée par une application « stricte et juste » (*strict and fair*) des critères d'adhésion avant toute ouverture des négociations d'adhésion (Blockmans, 2015, pp. 215-217).

Pour la France, les réticences concernant l'ouverture des négociations d'adhésion sont en grande partie marquées par des considérations internes liées au manque d'intérêt pour la région, à la perception négative de l'élargissement pour des enjeux migratoires et à la méfiance générale de la population vis-à-vis du projet européen qui influent sur la position française à l'égard des futurs élargissements (Wunsch, 2015, p. 42). La libéralisation des visas pour la population albanaise a également laissé des traces puisque ceux-ci représentent le deuxième pays demandeur d'asile en France en 2019 (Eurostat, 2019). La peur d'un flux migratoire à la suite d'une plus grande ouverture des frontières sur le long terme, et amplifiée par l'élargissement de 2007, est également une des raisons internes évoquées par la France pour justifier son opposition (Wunsch, p. 43). Au cours des dix dernières années, le pays a aussi renforcé sa position vis-à-vis de l'élargissement, en introduisant un certain nombre d'obstacles pour les futures adhésions, notamment l'obligation constitutionnelle récente d'organiser un référendum national pour les prochains élargissements (Wunsch, 2015, p. 44). De même, la France a toujours été particulièrement attachée au processus intergouvernemental de la procédure d'adhésion et plutôt critique envers les institutions supranationales de l'UE qu'elle perçoit également comme non-partiales et favorables à l'élargissement à n'importe quel prix (Wunsch, 2015, p. 51).

Cette renationalisation du processus d'élargissement s'est également caractérisée par la modification de la procédure d'adhésion. Par ses efforts diplomatiques importants auprès des institutions européennes, la France a obtenu de la Commission une révision des règles qui président aux négociations d'adhésion. Elles ont ensuite été adoptées par l'ensemble des États membres lors du Conseil européen de mars 2020. Cette révision a pour objectif de mettre au premier plan le caractère politique du processus et de garantir un pilotage plus déterminé et un engagement à haut niveau de la part des États membres. Les nouvelles règles visent également à renforcer le rôle des États membres dans la procédure en participant plus systématiquement au processus d'adhésion, y compris au moyen d'un suivi sur le terrain effectué par leurs experts, et en contribuant de manière directe aux rapports annuels et dans la mise à disposition de leur expertise sectorielle (Commission, 2020). Les États membres ont aussi la possibilité d'examiner et de suivre plus régulièrement les progrès globaux réalisés, renforçant encore plus leur rôle dans le processus d'adhésion par rapport aux institutions supranationales européennes.

Conclusion

La perspective d'intégration des Balkans occidentaux à l'UE a été un des plus grands moteurs de stabilité et de paix, de développement, de progrès politiques et économiques dans la région ces vingt dernières années. Pourtant, l'ambivalence de positions sur la stratégie d'élargissement entre les différentes institutions pèse sur la crédibilité de l'UE dans les Balkans occidentaux où les citoyens et dirigeants politiques ont du mal à comprendre la complexité du processus institutionnel européen.

Le double discours porté par les différentes institutions empêche l'UE de parler d'une seule voix et engendre une incompréhension de la part des pays candidats et candidats potentiels. Le Conseil semble moins prédisposé que les deux autres institutions européennes à une adhésion rapide des États des Balkans occidentaux, comme l'ont démontré les oppositions française, néerlandaise et danoise à l'ouverture des négociations d'adhésion avec l'Albanie et la Macédoine du Nord. Or, le Conseil est l'acteur clé du processus décisionnel car ce sont les États membres en son sein qui décident unanimement d'ouvrir les négociations d'adhésion, de fixer les conditions et la date d'ouverture et d'approuver les traités d'adhésion. Une solution présentée par la Commission vise à solidifier l'Union d'un point de vue institutionnel par une possible extension du vote à la majorité qualifiée, notamment pour l'ouverture des négociations d'adhésion. Dans le contexte européen actuel, cette solution semble peu réaliste. Au contraire, le blocage institutionnel du processus

d'élargissement est plutôt la conséquence d'une renationalisation de celui-ci et de la réaffirmation du rôle central des États membres dans la politique d'élargissement. Cela s'est illustré par la révision du processus d'intégration et la modification de la procédure d'adhésion en renforçant davantage le rôle des États membres au détriment des institutions supranationales de l'UE. Défendue ardemment par la France et mise comme condition préalable à toute ouverture des négociations d'adhésion avec l'Albanie et la Macédoine du Nord, la Commission n'eut d'autres choix que de s'aligner sur la position française et de proposer une modification des règles en vigueur afin de satisfaire les États membres récalcitrants et d'enfin ouvrir les négociations d'adhésion avec l'Albanie et la Macédoine du Nord.

Néanmoins, il est important de rappeler que les positions des États membres sur l'élargissement restent fortement limitées par le cadre juridique de l'UE. En effet, le processus d'élargissement est défini par les traités et un engagement politique a été rappelé à plusieurs reprises par les institutions européennes, notamment dans les conclusions du Conseil. Bien que les critères d'adhésion de l'UE se soient considérablement durcis avec le temps et qu'un principe de double conditionnalité et de réversibilité ont émergé, les États des Balkans occidentaux peuvent raisonnablement s'attendre à ce que l'UE respecte ses engagements malgré les blocages politiques de certains États membres. Si l'approche d'intégration à l'égard des Balkans occidentaux est aujourd'hui moins affirmée que par le passé, souvent pour des raisons de politiques internes propres à l'UE et à certains de ses États membres, l'engagement politique reste néanmoins valable.

L'ancrage européen des Balkans occidentaux n'est pas remis en question et les liens historiques, culturels et géographiques rendent ces pays naturellement éligibles à l'article 49 du TUE, position unanimement adoptée par l'UE à de nombreuses reprises. Dans ses conclusions adoptées lors du Conseil des affaires générales de juin 2019, le Conseil a d'ailleurs réaffirmé son engagement en faveur de l'élargissement, qui demeure une politique essentielle de l'UE. Elle est indispensable à la crédibilité de l'UE, à sa réussite et à son influence dans la région, surtout en cette période de concurrence géopolitique exacerbée. Ainsi, à l'heure où les défis et les divisions se multiplient à l'échelle de la planète et dans le voisinage de l'UE, cette perspective reste plus que jamais un investissement géostratégique dans une Europe stable, solide et unie.

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La rivalité entre la Turquie et l'Arabie Saoudite dans les Balkans occidentaux et son impact pour l'Union européenne

Kamal BAYRAMZADEH¹

Résumé

Depuis plusieurs années, la région des Balkans occidentaux connaît une augmentation de la présence des puissances émergentes et régionales. Il s'agit notamment de la Chine, de la Russie, de la Turquie et de l'Arabie Saoudite qui veulent y accroître leurs influences politiques, économiques, culturelles, etc. La rivalité entre la Turquie et l'Arabie Saoudite dans les Balkans occidentaux se manifeste en particulier par les activités des réseaux religieux qui contribuent à l'augmentation de l'influence de ces deux pays qui mettent en œuvre la stratégie de *soft power*. Après le sommet de Thessalonique de 2003 et l'instauration d'une stabilité relative, les pays des Balkans occidentaux ont progressivement commencé des réformes pour adhérer à l'Union européenne (UE) ; et comme la région se situe dans son voisinage immédiat, il s'agit pour elle d'une question stratégique majeure, tant sur le plan de sa sécurité que sur celui de sa stabilité. Dans un contexte marqué par l'interdépendance sécuritaire, l'UE a entrepris plusieurs actions politiques afin de jouer le rôle d'acteur dans la reconstruction et la stabilisation de cette région. Les États des Balkans

¹ Kamal Bayramzadeh est enseignant en Relations internationales à l'Université Sorbonne Paris Nord (Paris 13) et chercheur invité au Département de Science politique de l'Université de Liège (ULiège). Il est membre associé de l'Institut de Droit Public, Sciences Politiques et Sociales de Paris 13 (IDPS), membre du *Center for International Relations Studies (CEFIR)* de l'ULiège et membre associé de la Chaire Raoul-Dandurand en études stratégiques à l'Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM), Observatoire sur le Moyen-Orient et l'Afrique du Nord. Son dernier article est publié dans les Cahiers de Science Politique de l'ULiège en février 2021 : « La limite de puissance de l'Union Européenne dans les relations internationales » : consultable sur le site web suivant : <https://popups.uliege.be/1784-6390/index.php?id=998>

occidentaux doivent encore progresser afin de remplir les conditions d'adhésion prévues par les critères de Copenhague (politique, économique et acquis communautaire). Dans cette perspective, la lutte d'influence entre la Turquie et l'Arabie Saoudite dans les Balkans occidentaux peut avoir des conséquences négatives sur le processus d'élargissement de l'UE aux pays de cette région en raison du développement des courants religieux radicaux notamment le *wahhabisme* qui s'oppose aux valeurs politiques et culturelles de l'UE.

Mots clés : Turquie, Arabie Saoudite, Balkans occidentaux, Union Européenne, *Soft power*.

Introduction

Le présent article se penche sur les enjeux politiques, économiques, religieux, militaires, et sécuritaires liés à la compétition entre la Turquie et l'Arabie Saoudite dans les Balkans occidentaux (Albanie, Bosnie-Herzégovine, Kosovo, Macédoine du Nord, Monténégro, Serbie) afin d'examiner les implications pour l'Union européenne (UE). La Turquie et l'Arabie Saoudite, en compétition pour le *leadership* du monde musulman sunnite, ont accru leurs activités dans les Balkans occidentaux, notamment en Albanie, en Bosnie-Herzégovine, au Kosovo, en Macédoine du Nord et en Serbie. Contrairement à la Turquie, qui avait maintenu une présence régionale dans le sillage de l'Empire ottoman, la présence de l'Arabie Saoudite n'a débuté qu'après 1992, dans le contexte de la guerre en Bosnie-Herzégovine. Le présent article entend également montrer que la stratégie de ces deux États est liée à une politique de *soft power*² dans deux émanations de l'islam politique, l'une liée au *wahhabisme* et l'autre à l'islam politique turc proche de l'organisation transnationale islamique sunnite des « Frères musulmans ». L'essor des activités de ces acteurs, notamment par le biais des réseaux religieux et culturels saoudiens, constitue une menace sécuritaire, dans la mesure où Ryad contribue au développement d'un islam radical de type *wahhabite* (néo-salafisme), en particulier dans les pays précités. La question centrale qui anime cette recherche est de déterminer dans quelle mesure l'accroissement de l'influence de la Turquie et de l'Arabie Saoudite dans les Balkans occidentaux présente un défi politique et sécuritaire pour l'UE ? Cette interrogation peut se

² Selon Joseph S. Nye, le *soft power* (puissance douce) représente un pouvoir de séduction ou de cooptation qui repose sur des ressources intangibles comme la culture, les institutions et les idées, alors que le *hard power* (puissance dure) représente les aspects tangibles de la puissance (Nye, 2002).

décliner en plusieurs sous-questions. Dans quelle mesure l'élargissement de l'UE aux Balkans occidentaux est lié à la sécurité et la stabilité politique dans cette région ? Quels sont les liens entre la politique étrangère turque depuis 2002 et le renforcement de la présence de celle-ci dans les Balkans occidentaux ? Quelles sont les différences entre les islam turc et saoudien ? Quelles sont les spécificités de l'islam des Balkans ? Quels sont les relais d'influence d'Ankara et de Riyad dans les Balkans occidentaux ? Nous répondrons à ces questions en quatre parties. Dans la première, nous montrons les enjeux d'élargissement de l'UE à l'endroit des Balkans occidentaux. Nous examinerons en deuxième partie les deux déclinaisons islamiques en présence et la rivalité turco-saoudienne pour le *leadership* des citoyens de confession musulmane sunnite dans les Balkans occidentaux. Nous démontrerons en troisième partie les effets de la politique étrangère du Parti de la justice et du développement (AKP) dans les Balkans occidentaux. Enfin, dans la quatrième partie il sera nécessaire d'expliquer la politique de l'Arabie Saoudite notamment sur le plan de la diplomatie religieuse dans plusieurs pays de la région.

Les enjeux principaux d'élargissement de l'UE aux Balkans occidentaux

L'UE est une organisation internationale à vocation régionale et fondée sur des valeurs démocratiques. L'élargissement de l'UE s'inscrit dans une démarche historique débutée en 1950 avec la déclaration de Robert Schuman qui avait proposé une coopération économique entre la France et l'Allemagne afin de juguler toute velléité guerrière entre les deux pays : « le gouvernement français propose de placer l'ensemble de la production franco-allemande de charbon et d'acier sous une Haute Autorité commune, dans une organisation ouverte à la participation des autres pays d'Europe » (Déclaration de Robert Schuman de 1950). La perspective historique de cette déclaration était la construction d'une Europe fédérale ouverte à tous les pays européens partageant des valeurs démocratiques. Depuis la fondation de la Communauté européenne (CE), l'Europe communautaire a connu plusieurs vagues d'adhésion en fonction de l'évolution du contexte européen et mondial. L'effondrement de l'Union soviétique en 1991 a permis quelques années plus tard la dernière grande vague d'adhésions : celle des pays de l'Europe centrale et orientale. Après l'éclatement des guerres dans l'ex-Yougoslavie, l'UE a été confrontée aux conséquences sécuritaires et politiques de ces conflits. Mais en raison de l'absence d'une politique étrangère commune, elle n'a pas pu jouer un rôle effectif pour mettre fin aux conflits. Toutefois, à partir de la fin des conflits, l'UE s'est impliquée davantage dans la construction et

la stabilisation post-conflit via des opérations de maintien de la paix et de la consolidation de l'État de droit (Petiteville, 2017, p. 122). Les objectifs principaux des actions menées par l'UE dans les Balkans occidentaux étaient de contribuer à la sécurisation et à la stabilisation de cette région qui se situe dans son voisinage. Dans ce nouveau contexte, l'UE a élaboré une nouvelle stratégie à l'égard de Balkans occidentaux basée sur la puissance normative (*normative power*) pour européeniser cette région. Pour réaliser cette stratégie, elle a proposé en 1999 le Processus de stabilisation et d'association (PSA) afin d'encourager la démocratisation et la transformation « [...] des Balkans occidentaux en une région de paix, de stabilité, et de prospérité économique, dont l'objectif final serait sa pleine adhésion à l'UE » (Lika, 2018, p. 42). Le Conseil européen de Thessalonique de 2003 a confirmé que les pays des Balkans occidentaux étaient des candidats potentiels à l'adhésion à l'UE. Pour devenir membre de celle-ci ces États doivent remplir les trois critères de Copenhague (1993) : le critère politique ; le critère économique et le critère de l'acquis communautaire. En dépit de plusieurs progrès tangibles, la Croatie est le seul pays des Balkans occidentaux qui est devenu membre de l'UE en 2013. L'Albanie, la Macédoine du Nord, le Monténégro et la Serbie ont obtenu le statut des pays candidats. En ce qui concerne la Bosnie Herzégovine et le Kosovo, ils sont des candidats potentiels pour l'adhésion à l'UE. Par ailleurs, il est important de préciser que plusieurs pays comme la Turquie, l'Arabie Saoudite, l'Iran, la Chine et la Russie ont augmenté ces dernières années leur présence dans les Balkans occidentaux. Parmi ces pays, la Turquie constitue un cas particulier, car elle veut d'une part, devenir membre de l'UE, et d'autre part, elle est en compétition avec l'UE dans les Balkans occidentaux. De ce fait, nous constatons qu'il y a plusieurs enjeux dans cette région, mais l'interdépendance sécuritaire joue un rôle important dans la politique d'élargissement de l'UE aux pays des Balkans occidentaux. À partir de ces observations, nous allons à présent examiner la rivalité entre la Turquie et l'Arabie Saoudite dans les Balkans occidentaux.

La rivalité turco-saoudienne pour le *leadership* des citoyens de confession musulmane dans les Balkans occidentaux

La Turquie et l'Arabie Saoudite sont deux puissances régionales du Moyen-Orient. En dépit de leur appartenance au monde musulman sunnite, leurs relations sont marquées par des formes de dégradation et de tension, notamment au cours des dernières années. Dans le cadre du conflit en Libye, les divergences, liées à des facteurs politiques et religieux entre les deux pays, ont montré à quel point la compétition hégémonique

caractérise leurs rapports : en effet, souligne David Rigoulet-Roze, « une concurrence, à la fois politique et religieuse, semble désormais marquer les relations entre deux pays, d'obédience sunnite certes, mais rattachés à des écoles de droit musulman (*Fiqh*) somme toute très différentes, l'école *hanafite*, pour la Turquie, et l'école ultra-orthodoxe *hanbalite*, pour l'Arabie Saoudite » (Rigoulet-Roze, 2019, p. 76). Dans l'exercice de la politique étrangère de ces deux pays, le *soft power* occupe une place importante notamment à l'égard des pays ayant des communautés de confessions musulmanes sunnites (Mervin et Mouline, 2017, p. 27). Dans cette perspective, la région balkanique demeure une zone d'influence pour le déploiement de la stratégie de *soft power* de la Turquie et de l'Arabie Saoudite en raison de la présence des populations de confession musulmane ; par exemple : « [d]ans des pays comme l'Albanie ou le Kosovo, une véritable rivalité oppose la *Diyanet* à d'autres vecteurs d'influences, principalement issus du monde arabe, pour le contrôle des structures officielles des communautés islamiques » (Dérens et Geslin, 2013, p. 27).

Historiquement, le développement de l'islam dans les Balkans est lié à la période ottomane. Mais l'islam des Balkans est marqué par la diversité et il est difficile de parler d'un courant confessionnel homogène : « [...] on observe des différences notables entre une majorité sunnite (de rite hanéfite) et des groupes alévis-kizilbash (en Thrace grecque et en Bulgarie) ou bektachis (en Albanie méridionale et centrale, dans quelques régions de Macédoine occidentale et dans celle de Gjakovë au Kosovo), qui ont en commun certains rites, ainsi qu'une dévotion particulière pour Ali – le gendre du prophète Muhammad [...] » (Clayer, 2004, pp. 18-19). Dans la construction de l'identité nationale de certaines nations balkaniques, comme chez les Bosniaques en Bosnie-Herzégovine, l'islam a été une composante importante, tandis que chez les Albanais en Albanie, au Kosovo, en Macédoine du Nord ou encore au Monténégro, l'ethnicité, la langue, et la nationalité ont primé sur la religiosité (UNDP, 2018 ; Krasniqi, 2008). Une étude consacrée au sujet montre que, dans l'ensemble, l'islam des Balkans occidentaux est marqué par une tradition de laïcité due à la nature des régimes politiques antérieurement vécus ; par exemple : « l'islam pratiqué dans les pays de l'ancienne Yougoslavie porte avant tout la marque du socialisme, qui lui a permis de trouver un compromis spécifique avec la modernité » (Dérens et Geslin, 2016, pp. 1 et 12-13).

Mais depuis l'effondrement de l'Union des républiques socialistes soviétiques (URSS) et l'éclatement de l'ex-Yougoslavie, l'islam politique a émergé dans la région, notamment avec le déclenchement de la guerre en

Bosnie-Herzégovine qui a fourni à Ryad une occasion d'investir les lieux par le biais d'une politique d'aide aux forces bosniaques ; selon Pierre Conesa, « [l]'Arabie Saoudite aurait recueilli plus de 373 millions de dollars pour le djihad bosniaque dans les années 1990. Les moudjahidines, le personnel des actions humanitaires et les Bosniaques formés à l'étranger constituèrent l'avant-garde d'un mouvement *wahhabite* local » (Conesa, 2016, pp. 159-160). De ce fait, le courant *wahhabite* s'est développé depuis en Bosnie-Herzégovine, et après les années 2000, dans plusieurs autres pays de la région en crise sur les plans socio-économiques ; et en particulier auprès des jeunes qui ne trouvaient pas de travail. Aujourd'hui encore, « [l]e chômage est l'un des principaux freins au développement. Il frappe surtout les jeunes générations, touchant plus d'un jeune sur deux (50 %) en Macédoine du Nord, en Bosnie-Herzégovine et au Kosovo » (Pierre, 2019, p. 84). Il est important de préciser que l'islam sunnite détient en Arabie Saoudite le statut de religion d'État ; il « est inspiré depuis 1932 par un pacte politico-religieux qui fait toute sa singularité. Il a été contracté entre la famille Al Saoud et la prédication *wahhabite*. Issu de l'école de jurisprudence islamique la plus orthodoxe du sunnisme, le *hanbalisme*, le *wahhabisme* va encore plus loin au sens où il se revendique comme plus authentique » (Dazi-Héni, 2017, p. 11). Le *wahhabisme* saoudien se rapporte à une forme du *salafisme* qui veut restaurer le califat sur l'ensemble du monde musulman. Dans ce sens, il demeure un élément décisif de *soft power* de l'Arabie Saoudite (Sur, 2018, p. 4), ce compris à l'égard des pays se composant des populations de confession musulmane et dans certains pays européens dans le cadre d'une stratégie d'influence globale, « l'Islam sert de moyen pour les relations étrangères de l'Arabie Saoudite afin de promouvoir son leadership : assurer la stabilité à l'intérieur du royaume et maintenir son influence régionale et mondiale » (Preuschaft, 2016, p. 26). Dans ce dessein, les organisations politiques, sociales, éducatives et religieuses (la Ligue islamique mondiale (LIM), l'Université islamique de Médine (UDM), l'organisation de la coopération islamique (OCI)) ont joué un rôle important au nom de la « solidarité islamique » (Mouline, 2017, p. 58). Ces dernières années, les réseaux d'influence saoudiens ont accru leurs activités dans les pays des Balkans occidentaux. Ces relais d'influence feront l'objet du développement de la quatrième partie.

La présence de l'islam turc dans les Balkans occidentaux remonte à l'Empire ottoman mais dans le nouveau contexte international, le renforcement du rôle de la Turquie est intimement lié à la politique étrangère de l'AKP depuis 2002. L'AKP est un parti conservateur au point de vue social et culturel, et libéral au point de vue économique (Schmid, 2018, p. 14). Il convient de préciser qu'il se réclame de racines

islamiques (Parlar Dal, 2012, p. 11) qui conditionnent la conception politique de ses dirigeants qui évoquent adéquation de l'islam et de la démocratie : « à Tunis, Erdoğan affirme que l'islam et la démocratie ne sont pas incompatibles comme le montre la réussite du processus électoral en Tunisie » (Djalili et Kellner, 2012, p. 59). Plusieurs études ont été réalisées sur l'islam politique et en particulier sur le cas de la Turquie afin de déterminer la nature et le fondement idéologique de ce parti. Selon Thierry Zarcone, on peut parler de « néo-islamisme » (Billion, 2010-2011, p. 44). Didier Billion partage ce point de vue en insistant sur la différence entre deux types d'islam politique : « [a]lors que l'islam politique traditionnel cherche à islamiser la société par le haut, les néo-islamistes visent, pour leur part, à répondre aux besoins de spiritualité de la population en se qualifiant de démocrates conservateurs » (Billion, 2010-2011, p. 44). Dans une autre étude relative à l'AKP, l'auteure le qualifie de courant post-islamiste fondé sur : « une identité politique conservatiste démocrate. Ses principes sont : une modernité qui n'exclut pas la tradition ; une universalité qui accepte le national ; une rationalité qui ne rejette pas le surnaturel ; un changement qui n'est pas radical » (Tinas, 2012, pp. 92-93). Pendant quelques années, « le modèle turc » lié à l'islam politique a remporté quelque succès dans certains pays avec des citoyens de confession musulmane, mais depuis le conflit syrien, il a montré ses limites en raison de la politique interventionniste de la Turquie, qualifiée « d'impérialiste » par une partie de l'opinion publique, notamment dans les Balkans occidentaux (Öztürk et Akgönül, 2020, p. 237). La rivalité turco-saoudienne dans les Balkans occidentaux montre que le champ d'attraction du *soft power* turc est plus large, l'Arabie Saoudite, pour sa part, contribue au développement d'un islam radical, en contradiction avec les valeurs de la population de cette région, qui pourrait impacter négativement le processus d'adhésion des pays balkaniques à l'UE. Quant à la Turquie, elle s'emploie à reconquérir les zones d'influences de l'Empire ottoman par le *soft power*, en mobilisant aussi l'élément religieux, et consolide son rôle en utilisant la région balkanique comme un levier d'influence vis-à-vis de l'UE dans le processus de négociation d'adhésion avec elle (Rrustemi *et al.*, 2019, p. 130).

Cet examen préalable de deux formes d'islam politique, et de la compétition qui en résulte à travers deux puissances régionales, nous amène à présent à nous pencher sur les effets de la politique étrangère activée par la Turquie depuis 2002 sur ses relations avec les États des Balkans occidentaux.

La politique étrangère de la Turquie depuis l'arrivée au pouvoir de l'AKP et la place des Balkans occidentaux dans cette diplomatie

Depuis l'arrivée au pouvoir de l'AKP, la Turquie a mis en œuvre une politique étrangère élaborée par Ahmet Davutoğlu qui l'a qualifiée de proactive alors que certains auteurs ont préféré utiliser le terme de « néo-ottoman » (Rigoulet-Roze, 2019, p. 79). Selon Davutoğlu, auteur de *Profondeur stratégique : la position internationale de la Turquie*, cette dernière devrait d'abord s'affirmer en tant que puissance régionale et ensuite comme puissance globale. D'après lui, la Turquie doit devenir un acteur incontournable des relations internationales en accédant au statut de puissance centrale (Jabbour, 2019, p. 17). L'évolution des relations internationales, en particulier au Moyen-Orient, a permis à la Turquie de devenir une puissance régionale active. Cette doctrine de politique étrangère met l'accent sur la reconquête des zones d'influence de l'Empire ottoman par le *soft power*, et, dans cette perspective, les Balkans occidentaux font partie des zones de déploiement de cette stratégie politique dans la mesure où ils ont été placés sous domination ottomane pendant plus de cinq siècles, du XIV^e au XX^e (Ollier, 2019, p. 122). La politique étrangère turque, théorisée par Davutoğlu, insiste sur les principes suivants : « l'équilibre entre la sécurité et la démocratie, zéro problème avec les voisins, le développement des relations avec les régions voisines afin de faire rayonner l'influence de la Turquie des Balkans à l'Asie centrale en passant par le Moyen-Orient, l'adhésion à une politique extérieure multidimensionnelle, et enfin une diplomatie rythmique visant une représentation effective dans les organisations et conférences internationales » (Davutoğlu, 2008, pp. 82-83). Dans son livre, Davutoğlu montre que la profondeur stratégique turque repose sur deux piliers, historique et géographique, et que celle-ci doit intensifier ses activités dans ces zones par le biais du *soft power*. D'après lui, « la profondeur historique de la Turquie réside essentiellement dans l'héritage ottoman, mais aussi dans la modernisation qu'elle a connu lors de la sortie de l'Empire. (...) Cet héritage doit être exploité dans deux sens : sur le plan régional, il donne à la Turquie une responsabilité vis-à-vis des minorités musulmanes dans les Balkans et au Caucase, qu'elle doit protéger et dont elle doit se servir comme d'un levier pour accroître son influence, en particulier son influence culturelle » (Garapon, 2010, p. 5). L'application de cette politique a, un temps, contribué à l'amélioration des relations entre la Turquie et certains pays, dont la Syrie ou l'Iran, mais depuis 2011 et l'expansion du conflit syrien, la politique de « zéro problème avec les voisins » a montré ses limites. Et les conséquences de

cette doctrine sur les relations avec les États des Balkans occidentaux sont importantes et, avant de les examiner de plus près, il convient de rappeler les positions prises par la Turquie durant les guerres des années 1990 (Slovénie, Croatie, Bosnie-Herzégovine, Kosovo) lors desquelles Ankara a accentué sa médiation diplomatique en vue de mettre fin aux conflits (Lika, 2016, pp. 240-241). En effet, la stabilité et la sécurité des Balkans est cruciale pour elle, et ce pour plusieurs raisons : la question des réfugiés, l'insécurité régionale (Buzan et Waever, 2003, p. 393), la proximité géographique, la présence des diasporas balkaniques en Turquie et des minorités turques dans certains États de la région (Lika, 2016, pp. 240-241). La Turquie a reconnu l'indépendance de ces pays en dépit des conséquences probables sur les revendications de sa propre minorité kurde.

Depuis 2002, la Turquie a décuplé ses activités diplomatiques, économiques, politiques et culturelles dans les Balkans occidentaux – en Albanie, en Bosnie-Herzégovine, au Kosovo, en Macédoine du Nord et en Serbie – en mettant l'accent, selon elle, sur ses « responsabilités » à l'égard des musulmans de cette région. C'est pourquoi « Ankara vise tout d'abord à affirmer une posture de défenseurs des musulmans à travers le monde entier. Ainsi, les États indépendants à forte majorité musulmane (...) sont considérés comme des alliés naturels, qui doivent être soutenus » (Ollier, 2019, p. 125). La stratégie de *soft power* turc est fondée sur des éléments politique, culturel, humanitaire, sécuritaire et économique. Dans ce sens, plusieurs relais d'influence sont mobilisés : les écoles turques, l'Agence turque de coopération et développement internationale (TIKA), l'échange des étudiants, l'attribution de bourses, la diffusion de feuilletons télévisés turcs et la construction de mosquées et de routes. Le gouvernement turc mobilise de même la Direction des affaires religieuses (*Diyanet*) en tant qu'instrument d'influence sur les communautés de confession musulmane (Ollier, 2019, p. 126). Par ailleurs, les instituts *Yunus Emre* contribuent à la promotion de la langue, de la culture et de l'histoire turques dans les Balkans. Un programme de Turcologie a été ajouté aux cours de l'Université de Tirana où la langue turque est enseignée (Abazi, 2020, p. 174). Durant les années 2000, la Turquie a produit des efforts considérables pour améliorer des liens culturels et religieux avec l'Albanie. Ainsi, la TIKA a financé la rénovation de l'héritage de la période ottomane en Albanie : les mosquées, le Bazar et la madrasa de l'époque ottomane ont été restaurés (Abazi, 2020, p. 174). En matière économique, la Turquie est le sixième partenaire de l'Albanie où les entreprises turques ont considérablement développé leurs activités ces dernières années. En ce qui concerne le Kosovo, la présence turque est visible dans plusieurs domaines. Depuis 2008, quelque trente accords

bilatéraux, afin de promouvoir les coopérations culturelles, économiques et politiques, ont été signés. La Turquie a investi, entre 2004 et 2014, près de 360 millions de dollars dans les différents secteurs, notamment la construction, la communication et les banques (Visoka, 2020, pp. 116-117). En matière culturelle, les instituts *Yunus Emre* se montrent actifs au Kosovo où trois centres ont été implantés. Pendant longtemps, les écoles turques dans les Balkans ont été dirigées par des membres du mouvement de Fethullah Gülen, mais depuis le coup d'État de 2016, le gouvernement turc mène une lutte acharnée contre les membres de ce mouvement, et réclame leur extradition auprès des gouvernements du Kosovo, d'Albanie et de Bosnie-Herzégovine. Les écoles turques sont désormais dirigées par la fondation *Maarif*, créée en 2016 par le régime d'Erdoğan ; celle-ci a déjà ouvert des écoles en Albanie, en Bosnie-Herzégovine, au Kosovo et en Macédoine du Nord et vise également à faire la même chose en Serbie. Les coopérations économiques sont également en augmentation constante : « entre 2002 et 2012, le volume du commerce entre la Turquie et les Balkans occidentaux a augmenté de 307 % (Lika, 2016, p. 249). Entre 2009 et 2012, les IDE turcs se sont constamment accrus, passant de 50 millions de dollars (2009) à 187 millions (2012). L'aide turque au développement est également passée de 8,67 millions de dollars américains (2002) à 70,05 millions (2012), et les plus grands bénéficiaires ont été la Bosnie-Herzégovine, le Kosovo et la Macédoine du Nord (Lika, 2016, p. 249). Parallèlement, Ankara développe des activités diplomatiques pour contribuer à la réconciliation entre Belgrade et Sarajevo. Par ailleurs, ces dernières années, la Turquie a augmenté ses coopérations militaires (Firat Büyük *et al.*, 2020), et économiques avec la Serbie et est « devenue le septième fournisseur de la Serbie, soit 3,5 % de ses échanges avec l'extérieur. Fin 2017, les deux pays ont signé un nouvel accord de libre-échange, supprimant les droits de douane à l'exportation » (Ollier, 2019, p. 128). En tant que membre de l'Organisation du Traité de l'Atlantique Nord (OTAN), la Turquie soutient l'adhésion à celle-ci des pays des Balkans occidentaux, notamment la Bosnie-Herzégovine (Huskić, 2020, p. 89) et, en ce qui concerne l'élargissement de l'UE aux pays balkaniques, elle se montre également favorable. Nous observons donc que, depuis l'effondrement de l'URSS jusqu'à aujourd'hui, la Turquie a augmenté son poids dans les Balkans occidentaux, en particulier depuis l'arrivée au pouvoir de l'AKP. Elle est présente dans tous les pays de la région, et d'aucuns estiment que « la Turquie peut jouer un rôle complémentaire dans les efforts d'intégration et de transformation de l'UE dans les Balkans » (Ekinci, 2019, pp. 47-48). Cependant, en dépit d'un discours turc fondé sur le « principe de responsabilité » à l'égard des Balkans occidentaux, la politique turque

n'est pas appréciée unanimement, une partie de l'opinion publique se méfiant d'une forme d'ingérence dans les États de la région (Lika, 2020). C'est pourquoi la projection de la puissance turque constitue un défi politique pour l'élargissement de l'UE aux Balkans occidentaux dans la mesure où la Turquie mène des politiques qui ne sont pas en harmonie avec celles pratiquées par l'UE.

La politique étrangère de l'Arabie Saoudite à l'égard des Balkans occidentaux

La politique de l'Arabie Saoudite dans les Balkans occidentaux présente un caractère multidimensionnel sur le plan des relations politiques, culturelles, militaires, diplomatiques et économiques. Cette politique est fondée en partie sur le principe de la « solidarité islamique » pour soutenir les communautés de confession musulmane de cette région. Durant la guerre froide, la diplomatie religieuse *wahhabite*-salafiste de facture saoudienne s'est développée, d'abord dans le monde arabe dans le dessein de rivaliser avec le panarabisme prôné par le président égyptien Gamal Abdel Nasser (Mouline, 2020, p. 44). Après l'effondrement de l'Union soviétique, le régime saoudien a développé cette diplomatie en direction des pays des Balkans occidentaux, notamment en Bosnie-Herzégovine de 1992-1995 (Conesa, 2016, p. 143). Progressivement, après les années 2000, les autres pays de la région ont été touchés par les activités des groupes *néo-salafistes* soutenus par l'Arabie Saoudite dont le *wahhabisme* s'apparente à un instrument diplomatique d'influence. Selon Conesa, « [l]a diplomatie religieuse de l'Arabie Saoudite est une mécanique soutenue par le système politique, mue par un groupe religieux à l'ambition planétaire, les oulémas *wahhabites*, et dotée d'une idéologie rigide mais toujours adaptable quand il s'agit de secourir le régime » (Conesa, 2016, p. 23). D'après Fatiha Dazi-Héni, « l'État saoudien a conçu son *soft power* religieux par l'intermédiaire d'Organisation non-gouvernementales (ONG) locales et d'organisations islamiques internationales dont les plus importantes sont la LIM, établie à la Mecque par le prince héritier Faysal en 1962, et l'OCI créée également à son initiative, en 1969 » (Dazi-Héni, 2017, p. 82). Riyad investit dans plusieurs secteurs pour propager l'idéologie du *wahhabisme* dans des pays comme l'Albanie, la Bosnie-Herzégovine, le Kosovo et la Macédoine du Nord, à travers, plus particulièrement, la construction de mosquées, la formation d'imams en Arabie Saoudite, des aides financières suite aux catastrophes naturelles, d'appuis au développement économique, des soutiens matériels aux groupes islamiques et l'attribution de bourses étudiantes. Ainsi, « les quelques 25 000 boursiers étrangers, venus

de 160 nationalités différentes, passés par les universités islamiques saoudiennes en une trentaine d'années sont les nouveaux *apparatchiks* en charge de propager le dogme. Riyad continue à payer des salaires à certains d'entre eux repartis faire de la prédication dans leur propre pays (Conesa, 2016, p. 22). Depuis la fin de la guerre en 1999, plus de 240 mosquées ont été construites au Kosovo en grande partie avec les financements de l'Arabie Saoudite et de la Turquie (Rrustemi *et al.*, 2019, p. 52 ; Ergil, 2018, pp. 125-126). Par ailleurs, les centres culturels arabes dans les Balkans occidentaux participent à l'enseignement de la langue arabe. Les réseaux saoudiens incitent la population à changer de mode de vie et de style vestimentaire (Rrustemi *et al.*, 2019, p. 52). Par ces activités, l'Arabie Saoudite a introduit une interprétation islamique rigoriste, à savoir une doctrine et une pratique *wahhabite* (Lilyanova, pp. 1-2). L'objectif poursuivi par l'attribution de bourses est d'influencer les élites de la future génération. Depuis 2019, selon un accord entre Tirana et Riyad, les citoyens saoudiens peuvent entrer en Albanie sans visa (Rrustemi *et al.*, 2019, p. 52). La politique de l'Arabie Saoudite à l'égard des Balkans occidentaux ne se limite pas seulement à la diplomatie religieuse, car elle développe aussi des relations économiques, commerciales, sécuritaires et militaires. Sur le plan des relations économiques, l'Arabie Saoudite a soutenu, en 1992, l'établissement de la banque de développement islamique (BID) à Tirana (Abazi, 2020, p. 176). Rappelons que ces dernières années, l'Arabie Saoudite a développé des coopérations commerciales avec certains pays de la région en particulier la Bosnie-Herzégovine. « L'un des plus remarquables est le centre-ville de Sarajevo, le plus grand centre commercial de Bosnie-Herzégovine, financé par l'Arabie saoudite » (Rrustemi *et al.*, 2019, p. 60). Par ailleurs, l'Arabie Saoudite participe aussi à la construction des hôtels dans plusieurs villes dans le cadre des coopérations en matière de tourisme. Un autre exemple de l'évolution des liens financiers est la formation d'un comité trilatéral entre la Serbie, la Bosnie-Herzégovine et l'Arabie Saoudite (Rrustemi *et al.*, 2019, p. 60). En matière du commerce des armes, l'Arabie Saoudite a développé des bonnes relations avec la Serbie depuis quelques années. La Serbie demeure un exportateur d'armes, et une partie des pays arabes en particulier l'Arabie Saoudite font partie de ses clients. Selon un rapport sur les exportations annuelles d'armes en 2016, « la Serbie, le Monténégro, la Bosnie-Herzégovine, l'Albanie et la Macédoine du Nord ont vendu à l'Arabie Saoudite pour plus de 118 millions d'euros d'armes et de munitions cette année-là » (BalkanInsight, 2018). En 2018 et 2019, des ventes d'armes ont également été effectuées entre la Serbie et l'Arabie Saoudite. Il semble que l'Arabie Saoudite a utilisé une partie de ces armes dans la guerre au Yémen (Čubrilo-Filipović, 2019).

La présence économique saoudienne dans les Balkans occidentaux est cependant moins importante que celle de la Turquie. Cette situation témoigne de la faiblesse de l'interdépendance économique entre l'Arabie Saoudite et les pays des Balkans occidentaux.

Les conséquences du développement de l'idéologie *wahhabite* en Albanie, en Bosnie-Herzégovine, au Kosovo et en Macédoine du Nord sont multiples. Cette diplomatie religieuse constitue une forme d'ingérence dans les affaires internes de ces pays et affaiblit leur souveraineté en plus de contribuer à la fragmentation culturelle, religieuse et politique de ces sociétés. C'est pourquoi l'augmentation de l'influence de l'Arabie Saoudite dans les Balkans occidentaux demeure une menace sécuritaire de type politique et sociétale. Dans ce sens, le conflit en Syrie a montré que de nombreux djihadistes originaires de la région et issus des courants *salafistes* s'étaient impliqués dans diverses opérations, soit « un millier de combattants des Balkans [qui auraient] participé aux combats en Irak et en Syrie » (Pierre, 2019, p. 85). Le retour de ces combattants n'est pas sans conséquences sur le plan sécuritaire et ceci produit un impact négatif sur les relations avec l'UE.

En théorie, l'Arabie Saoudite avance la notion de « solidarité islamique » à l'égard de ces pays, mais en fait cette diplomatie est au service d'un agenda expansionniste qui traduit, à travers différentes politiques, un intérêt croissant au service d'ambitions hégémoniques à peine voilées. Au regard de la réalité des relations internationales, ni la Turquie, ni l'Arabie Saoudite ne peuvent instaurer leur hégémonie dans les Balkans occidentaux dans la mesure où ni l'une ni l'autre ne disposent des éléments constitutifs d'un hégémon³. L'UE, quant à elle, continue de demeurer l'acteur principal ou le plus visible dans les Balkans occidentaux.

Conclusion

Dans cet article, nous avons analysé les politiques turque et saoudienne à l'endroit des Balkans occidentaux afin de souligner les impacts politiques et sécuritaires de cette rivalité sur les rapports entre les pays de cette région et l'UE. Les résultats de nos recherches nous amènent à affirmer que la compétition entre ces deux puissances régionales du Moyen-Orient s'inscrit dans une stratégie de *soft power* déployée afin d'augmenter leur influence respective dans le cadre d'une lutte hégémonique pour la direction du monde musulman sunnite. Les deux pays mènent une diplomatie multidimensionnelle sur le plan politique, économique,

³ Il s'agit d'une puissance hégémonique qui dirige ou domine une région sans partage avec d'autres puissances régionales.

militaire, religieux et culturel dans les Balkans occidentaux, notamment en Albanie, en Bosnie-Herzégovine, au Kosovo, en Macédoine du Nord et en Serbie. La comparaison entre les politiques saoudienne et turque montre que l'influence de cette dernière est plus importante en raison de l'expérience issue de la période ottomane, la proximité géographique et les effets de la politique étrangère élaborée par Davutoğlu qui a insisté sur la reconquête des zones d'influences de l'Empire ottoman par le *soft power*. Dans cette perspective, Ankara a mobilisé différents relais d'influence. Les résultats de notre recherche montrent que la politique d'influence de ces deux pays dans les Balkans occidentaux pose un problème pour la souveraineté nationale des pays comme l'Albanie, la Bosnie-Herzégovine, le Kosovo et la Macédoine du Nord, en raison de l'ingérence dans leurs affaires internes.

Cette contribution nous amène à constater que le développement des activités de ces deux pays impacte significativement la situation politique, économique et culturelle des pays balkaniques. Le développement d'un islam *wahhabite* (néosalafisme) est l'une des conséquences de la diplomatie religieuse de l'Arabie Saoudite dont le *soft power* est traditionnellement lié au *wahhabisme* qui contribue à la fragmentation religieuse et culturelle des sociétés des Balkans occidentaux. D'un point de vue sociologique, le *soft power* saoudien trouve un écho favorable dans les pays en crise socio-économique. C'est pourquoi la diplomatie religieuse de l'Arabie Saoudite dans les Balkans occidentaux constitue une menace politique et sécuritaire pour l'UE. Dans ce nouveau contexte, le retour des djihadistes d'Irak et de Syrie complique la situation. En ce qui concerne la Turquie, son islam politique est au service du renforcement de son influence dans les Balkans occidentaux ; elle utilise cette région comme un levier d'influence vis-à-vis de l'UE dont elle ambitionne d'être membre ; cependant la poursuite de cette politique paradoxale l'en éloigne. Par ailleurs, les événements politiques de ces dernières années, notamment en Libye et en Syrie, montrent que lorsque la Turquie estime que c'est nécessaire, elle n'hésite pas à utiliser son *hard power* pour défendre ses intérêts dans ses zones d'influences. Par conséquent, cette approche diplomatique présente un défi politique pour l'UE dans les Balkans occidentaux et peut impacter les relations de la Turquie et de l'UE.

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Connectivity and international production networks in the Western Balkans: to what extent can China erode the economic dominant position of the EU?

Jean-Christophe DEFRAIGNE¹

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to assess the impact of the Chinese economic penetration in the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia) on the relation of this region with the European Union (EU) and on the role of this region in the international division of labour. Using international economics and international political economy theoretical concepts, this article outlines an interpretation of relevant quantitative data and a qualitative analysis of the Chinese economic flows in the Western Balkans. The results highlight that China is unlikely to challenge the economic hegemonic position of the EU in the region. The article also shows that the Chinese economic flows and development projects, notably the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), are not significantly transforming the peripheral role of the Western Balkans in the international division of labour. It explains why Chinese economic

¹ Jean-Christophe Defraigne is professor in International and European Economics at the Institute for European Studies of Université Saint-Louis – Bruxelles and at the Louvain School of Management UCLouvain. He is also a research fellow at the Leuven Centre for Global Governance Studies of the KULeuven University. He has been visiting scholar and professor at UIBE Beijing (Jing Mao Da Xue) and Zhejiang Da Xue. As an academic expert, he has participated to numerous international research projects for various international and EU institutions. Among recent publications on related topics: *The Belt and Road Initiative and Global Governance*, Edward Elgar, Cheltenham, 2020; *Introduction à l'Economie Européenne*, 3^{ème} édition, De Boeck, Louvain-La-Neuve, 2021.

flows do not contribute substantially to the insertion of these economies in the international production networks set up by Chinese firms.

Keywords: International Political Economy, China international relations, European integration, Western Balkan economies.

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to assess the impact of the Chinese economic penetration in the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia) on the relation of this region with the European Union (EU). Using international economics and international political economy theoretical concepts, this article outlines an interpretation of relevant quantitative data and a qualitative analysis of the Chinese economic flows in the Western Balkans. It will analyse the rise of Chinese Outward Development Investment (ODI), trade and Official Development Aid (ODA) in the region and then attempt to show if the Chinese investments, infrastructure projects, notably since the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), can change substantially the traditional role of the Western Balkans in the international division of labour and challenge the EU hegemonic position in this region in terms of economic influence.

All these elements highlight the rise of China's influence in the region and raises important questions. What will be the impact of these economic flows coming from China on these domestic economies in terms of development? In terms of economic interdependency with China and with the other trading partners of the Western Balkans? Will it generate financial dependency *vis-à-vis* China? Will it significantly facilitate the integration of this region to the global economy? Will it generate a change for the Western Balkans in the international division of labour thanks to Chinese investment, technology transfers and ODA?

To address these questions, this article will start with a first section that will outline what China's motives behind the creation of a Balkan Silk Road. Then the second section will put China and EU economic penetration in the region in perspective, revealing that the EU remains by far the largest economic partner of the region. The third section will demonstrate that China's BRI has not managed to move the Western Balkans out of the EU economic periphery. The fourth section will assess the level of Chinese influence in the regions and the limits of its attractiveness for the

Western Balkans economies relatively to the EU. These different sections will enable to develop robust concluding remarks on our research questions.

China marches West...to Europe and builds a Balkan Silk Road

China's global commercial expansion accelerated in the early 2000s with its accession to the World Trade Organisation (WTO). At the run of the millennium, the government adopted a go-global strategy to encourage the internationalisation of China's largest firms in key strategic industries (Economy and Levi, 2014; Kroeber, 2016). Despite four decades of economic reforms that moved away from central planning and state-controlled trade, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) continues to develop a global economic strategy inspired from Marxist theories on imperialism and similar to the approach taken by Friedrich List in his national system (Defraigne and De Meulemeester, 2009). Under this prism, the multinational enterprises (MNE) from the most advanced economies dominate the world economy through their control on international production networks (IPN) thanks to their innovation capacities and management know-how. To preserve national sovereignty from economic imperialism, the Chinese state is pursuing an active industrial policy to enable national champions in strategic industries to move up the value chain (Nolan, 2012). The state has rationalised production capacities by merging national firms to create Chinese global competitors aiming at setting up their own IPNs and challenge the Western and East Asian MNEs (Defraigne, 2020). A way to acquire faster technology for these Chinese champions was to engage into strategic-assets (Foreign Direct Investment (FDI)) and try to capture management and innovation know-how by taking over firms from more advanced economies (Clegg and Voss, 2014). Not all Chinese ODI in Europe are strategic-asset-seeking. Some are resource-seeking, notably in mining and energy, other are market-seeking to serve local markets better. Some Chinese investors are simply rent-seekers trying to diversify geographically and to secure their assets by investing out of China where property rights remain insecure and where the domestic economic slowdown has generated numerous manufacturing overcapacity and real estate instability (Magnus, 2018; Defraigne and Nouveau, 2017).

The Chinese ODI flows began to accelerate after 2008 and reached a peak in 2016 (Huang *et al.*, 2019), Europe becoming one of the most targeted regions by Chinese MNEs mergers and acquisitions (Sepulchre

and Le Corre, 2018). However, the Western Balkans remained a marginal destination in the 2000s as China's ODI in Europe (Hanemann and Huotari, 2018; Central Bank of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2019; Bulgarian National Bank, 2019; Bank of Albania, 2019; Croatian National Bank, 2019; Holzner and Schwarzhappel, 2018). They did not constitute an important market and had barely any strategic assets in terms of technology and management know-how, the most important determinants for Chinese ODI in Europe (Defraigne and Nouveau, 2017).

The Western Balkans gained in importance in the aftermath of the 2008 global crisis and of the slowdown of the Chinese economy after 2012. With outbursts of protectionism across the globe and rising trade frictions with the United States (US), securing the access to European markets became increasingly important in the eyes of Chinese authorities. In the early 2010s, the US under the Obama administration developed a commercial and security diplomacy that could be perceived as a strategy to keep its economic and geopolitical hegemonic position by isolating China (Wouters *et al.*, 2020). From the "Pacific Century" concept development by the secretary of state Hillary Clinton and Obama's "pivot to Asia" to the launching of the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) and the inclusion of Japan in the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), the US were developing a strategy that would guarantee a privileged access to the most important markets compared to Chinese competitors while strengthening the US geopolitical position in Pacific Asia (Clinton, 2011; Defraigne, 2020). This development prompted reaction in Beijing, prominent scholars such as Beida's Wang Jisi began to argue for a diplomatic and commercial to the Western (西进 or March West) to counter's Obama's pivot in Asia Pacific (Yu Sun, 2013).

In 2011, the Chinese authorities developed the 16+1 framework to strengthen economic cooperation between China and the "European Community" (a China-made label) which included the new EU member states from Eastern Europe and most of the non-EU Balkans states². In the spring of 2019, Greece formally joined the group re-labelled Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries (China-CEEC) (Xinhua, 2019).

In 2013, Xi Jinping announced the One Belt, One Road (OBOR) project that was relabelled as the BRI or the New Silk Roads. This ambitious project aimed at fostering the economic integration of the Eurasian continent by improving transport and energy infrastructure across more than

² Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia and Slovenia.

60 countries, on the Eurasian continent and its neighbourhood (Southeast Asia islands and some close African countries) over a 36 years period (2013-2049) (Griffiths, 2017; Rolland, 2017). OBOR and BRI constitute a long-term strategy rather than a precise framework with clear budgets and targets. Different Chinese official sources have mentioned different amounts when they refer to the BRI-related funds to be spent and the list of recipient beneficiary countries has been evolving over time. However, relying on various Chinese and Western sources, the amount of BRI allocated funds is important. Relatively to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the recipient countries, there are below those spent by other important regional infrastructure projects such as the Marshall Plan (1947-1952) or the EU pre-accession to the new East European member states (2000-2007) (Defraigne, 2020).

The BRI focused on the development of seven corridors to facilitate trade. BRI had a range of various motives. Some motives were domestic driven like the better integration of China's Western provinces (and particularly of the politically unstable province of Xinjiang) or creating outlets for industries burdened by overcapacity after the Chinese economic slowdown (Rolland, 2017; Clark, 2019). Some others were geopolitical like finding alternative routes (notably to the Strait of Malacca) to secure China's access to markets and strategic raw materials in case of tensions with the US (Rolland, 2017). Some were part of a strategy to counter the US trade diplomacy and to provide a privileged access to markets across the Eurasian continent, including the EU (Wouters *et al.*, 2020).

Because of this last objective, there have been claims that the Western Balkans suddenly gained in importance for the Chinese state and the Chinese investors. Indeed, since China Ocean Shipping Company (COSCO) took over the Piraeus port in 2016, it has climbed up from behind the 20th to the 7th in the ranking of the most important ports of Europe as Greece has become a major entry point for Chinese exports to the EU. A BRI related scheme has started the building of a Piraeus-Skopje-Belgrade-Budapest corridor also called the "Balkan Silk Road" that would connect its Mediterranean access to central Europe and notably Germany (Bastian, 2017). In terms of ODA, China has become an important donor to develop transport and energy infrastructure projects in the Western Balkans, notably in Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina (Holzner and Schwarzhappel, 2018; Beckmann-Dierkes, 2018; Le Corre and Vuksanovic, 2019; Sabbati *et al.*, 2018).

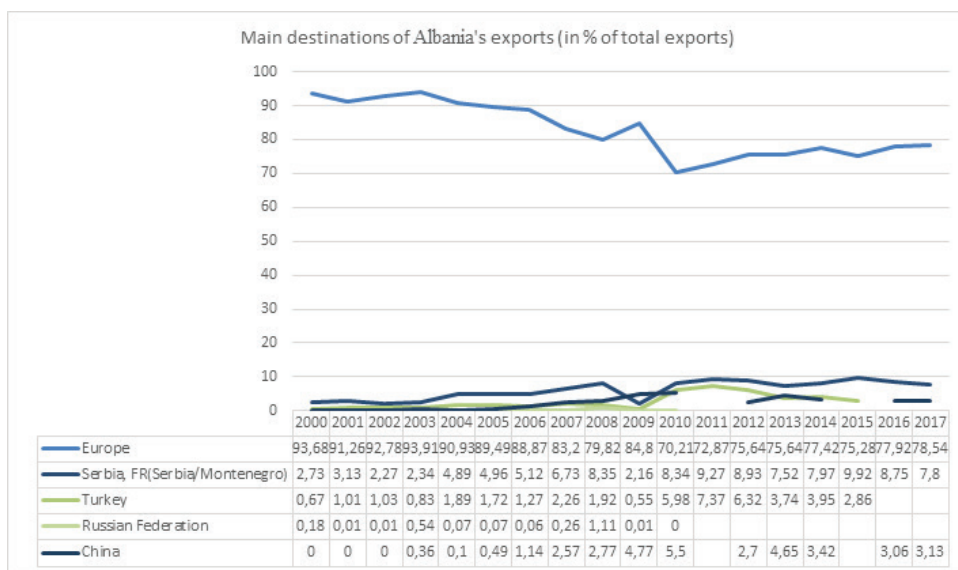
Putting the Chinese and EU economic penetration in the Western Balkans in perspective

The economic flows that assess the level of China’s and the EU’s economic penetration in the Western Balkans can be divided in four main categories: trade, FDI, remittance and labour, and ODA.

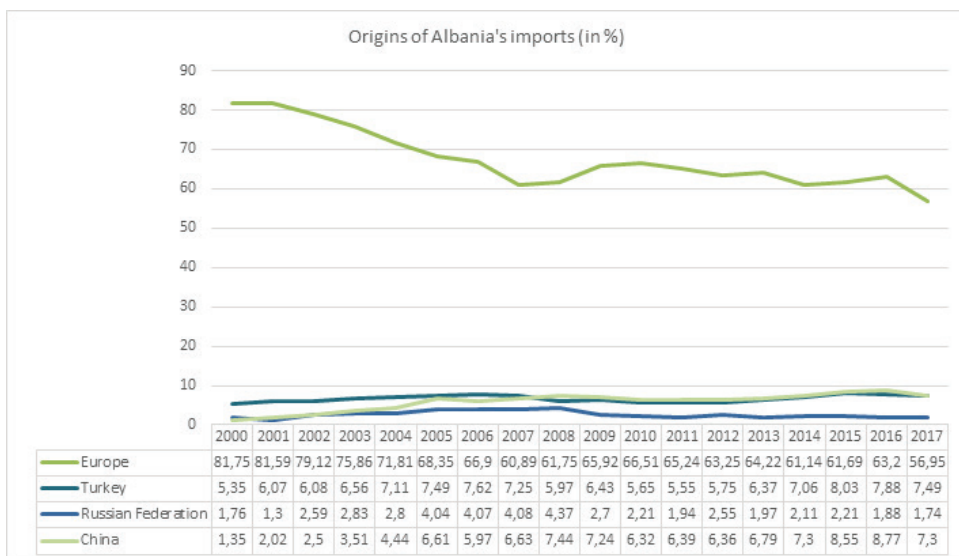
Trade flows³

The most obvious is trade and it clearly shows the rise of China’s share in the imports of the region at the expense of other trading partners, notably EU member states (OEC, 2019). This is a global phenomenon reflecting the competitiveness of Chinese manufactured exports. China is an increasingly important trade partner for the economies of the Western Balkans but still remains far behind the EU as a source of imports or as a destination for Western Balkans exports (OEC, 2019).

Table 1. Albania’s trading partners.

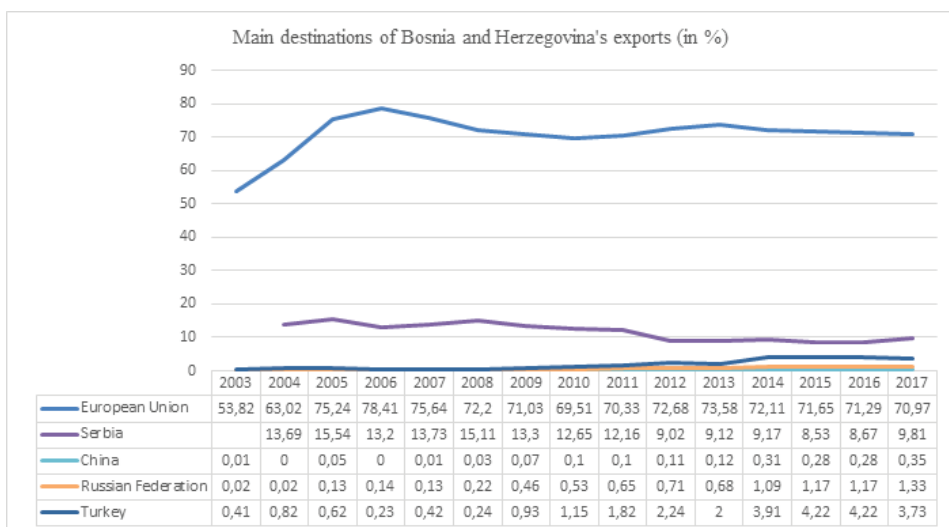


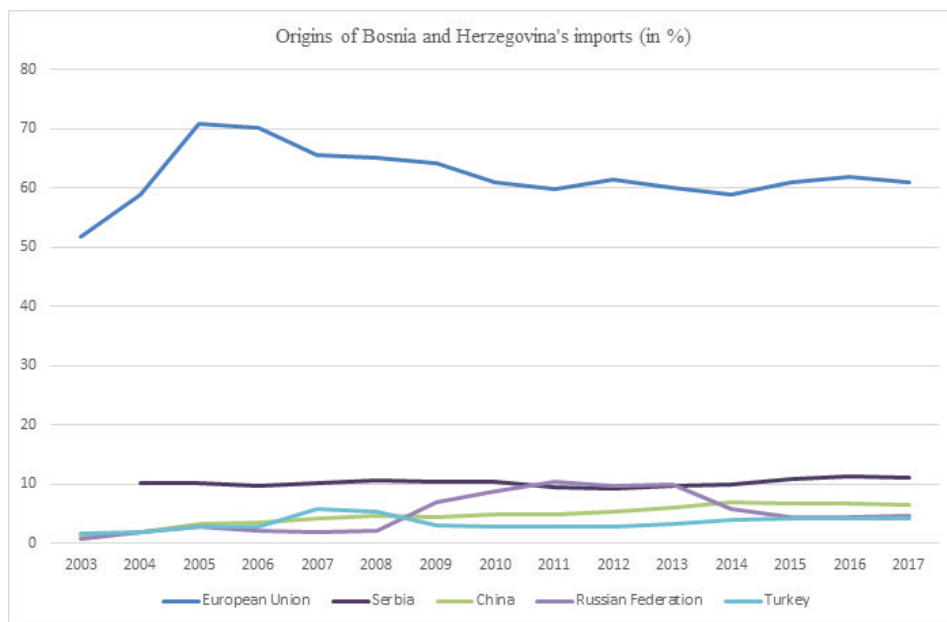
³ Statistics on Kosovo’s trading partners are not available on the Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC) and cannot be presented here with a similar methodology regarding data collection.



Source: OEC, 2019.

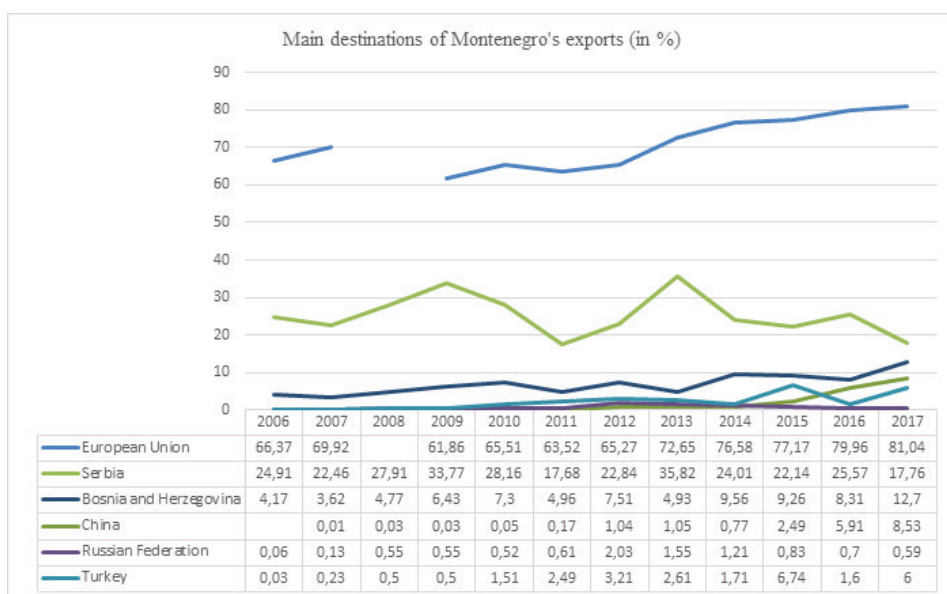
Table 2. Bosnia and Herzegovina's trading partners.

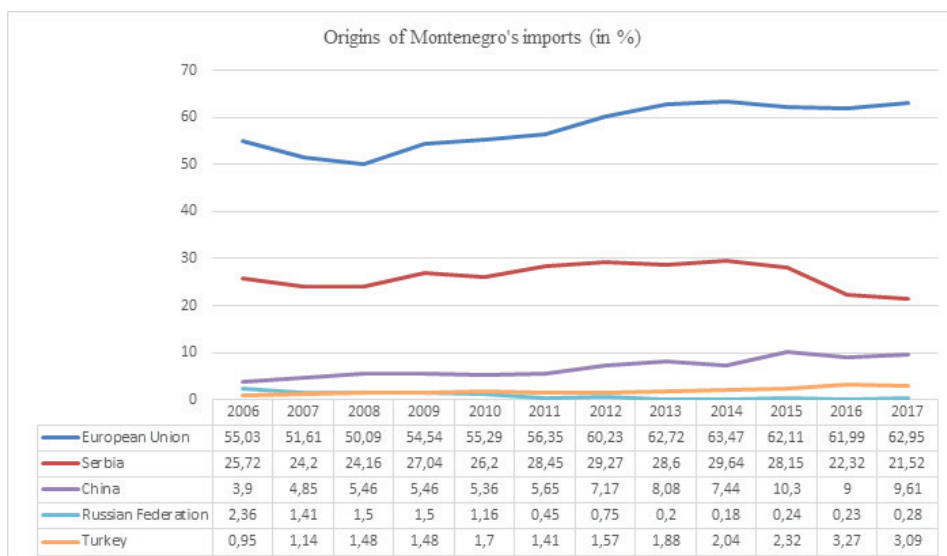




Source: OEC, 2019.

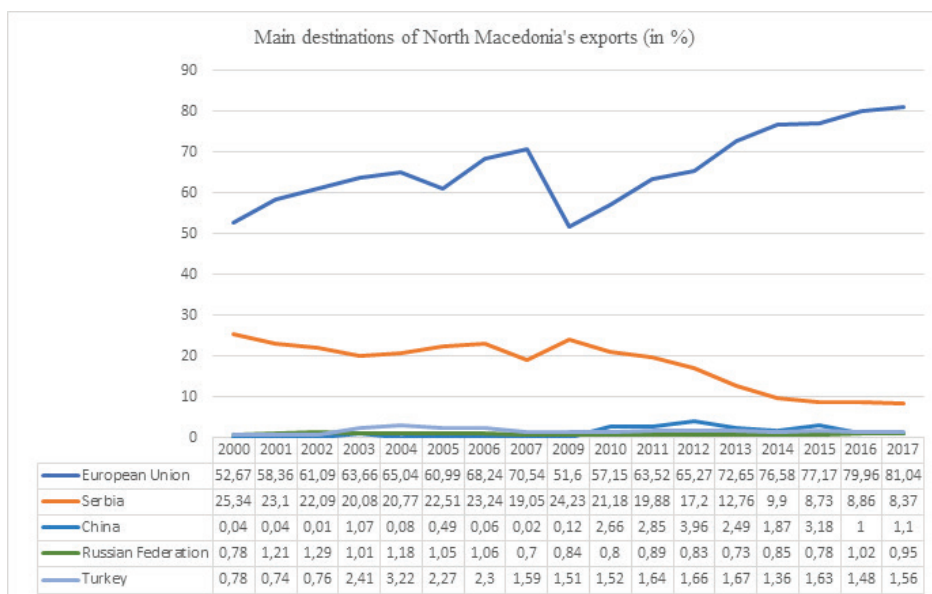
Table 3. Montenegro's trading partners.

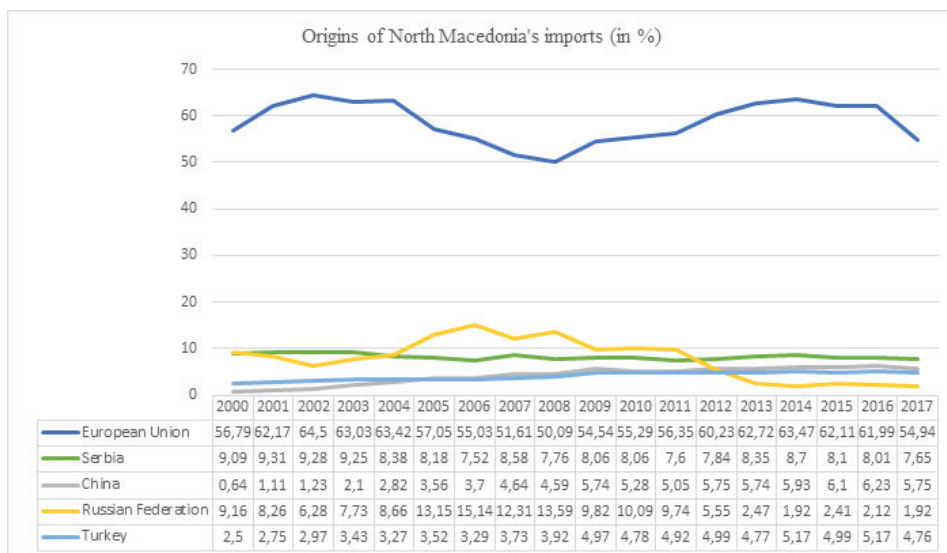




Source: OEC, 2019.

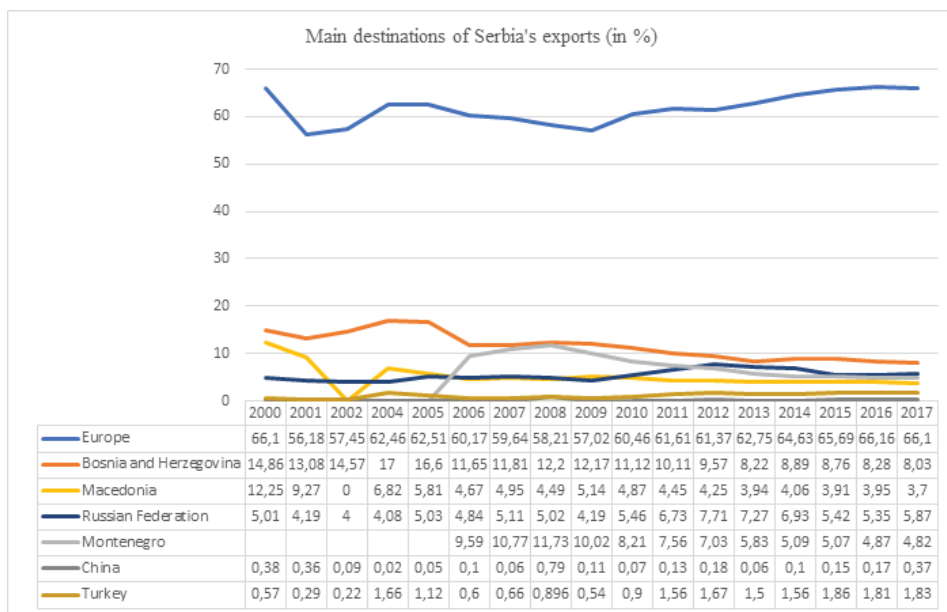
Table 4. North Macedonia's trading partners.

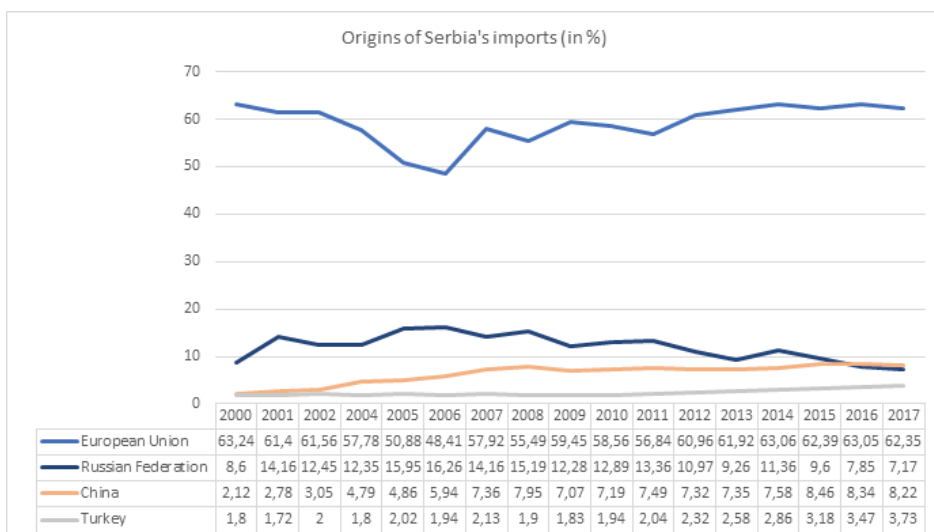




Source: OEC, 2019.

Table 5. Serbia's trading partners.





Source: OEC, 2019.

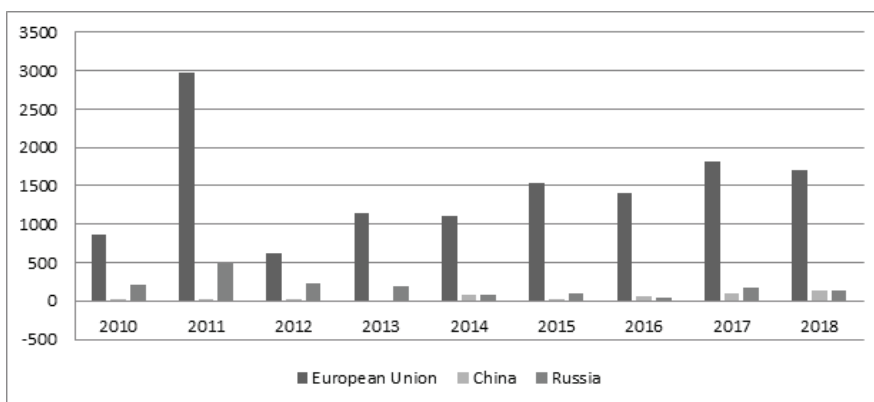
The trade between the Western Balkans and China is characterized by Chinese basic manufactured products exchanged against Western Balkan raw materials, notably mineral products and tobacco. This reflects only a limited degree interdependency between these partners as most of this trade consist of relatively low-tech products widely offered on world markets. The Western Balkan trade with Western European countries includes more vertical intra-industrial trade due to the regionalization of the production process of Western MNEs. For example, the intrafirm trade organized by the Western European producers of cars (notably Fiat between Italy and Serbia), machine-tools, apparels and software that are relocating labour intensive activities to Serbia (OECD, 2018; Herasymchuk, 2019).

FDI

In terms of FDI, some statistical sources are contradictory or incomplete. Despite significant discrepancies between standard sources on FDI (the national central banks of the Western Balkans, European Statistical Office (Eurostat), the Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies (wiiw), the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) world investment report), the main trends are very clear. Despite an

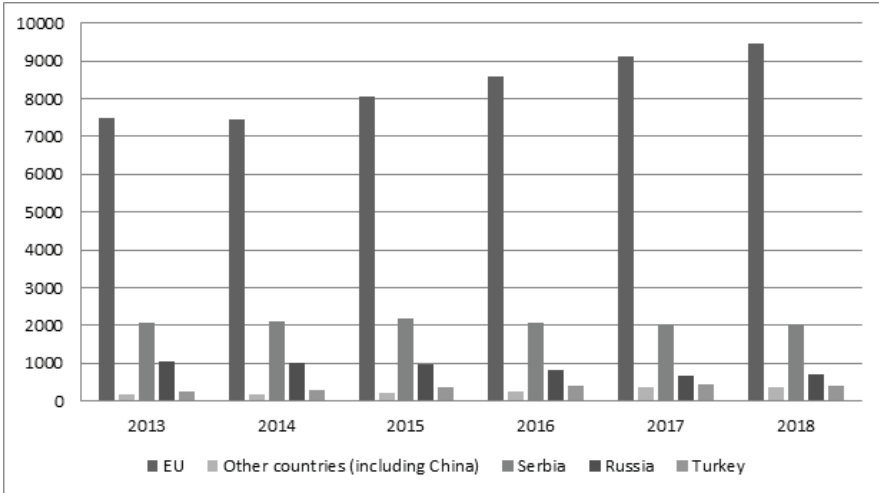
increase in the 2010s for some countries, notably Serbia and Albania, China's presence is very limited and not comparable to EU member states, Russia and Turkey (OECD, 2018; Central Bank of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2019; Bulgarian National Bank, 2019; Bank of Albania, 2019; Croatian National Bank, 2019; Holzner and Schwarzhappel, 2018). The EU accounts for 82 % of the North Macedonia FDI stock in 2018 and was its largest investor in 2018 (European Commission, 2019). The EU was again the largest source of FDI for Montenegro between 2016 and 2019 before Russia, Serbia, Switzerland and Turkey; China not being present in the top ten investors (Mirkovic, 2019). China is therefore not even in the top five investors for any Western Balkan countries except possibly in Serbia if the recent promised investments materialize effectively (see tables 6 to 8 below).

Table 6. Origins of Serbia Inward FDI.



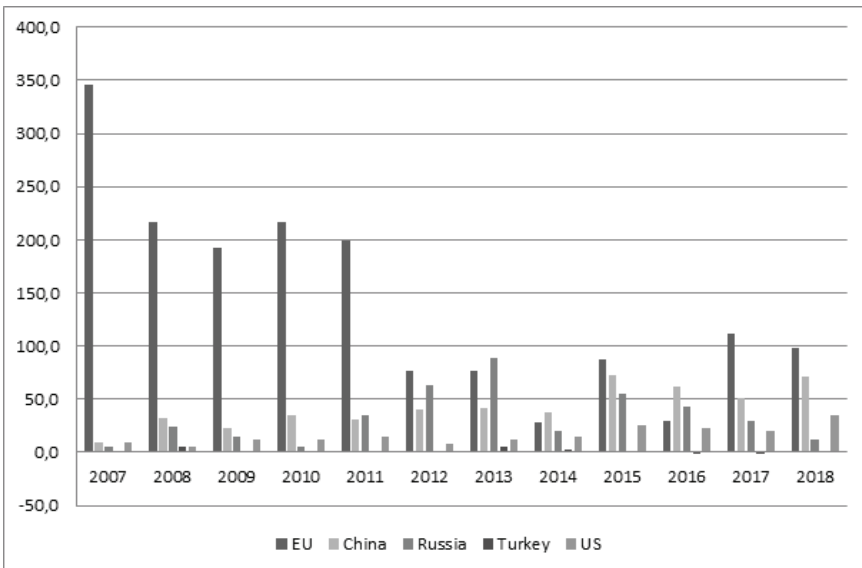
Source: National Bank of Serbia, 2019.

Table 7. Origins of Bosnia and Herzegovina Inward FDI.



Source: Central Bank of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2019.

Table 8. Origins of Kosovo Inward FDI.



Source: Central Bank of the Republic of Kosovo, 2019.

The EU dominance in terms of FDI should not be surprising. The size of the EU single market and its geographical proximity make it the natural economic centre of Eastern European and the Mediterranean regions. This economic importance of the EU comes from a flow of trade and investment that China cannot match. Firstly, there are the traditional medium-distance regional trade flows with EU member states neighbours. Secondly, EU Western member states, notably Germany, Italy and Austria have national firms that have outsourced some of their labour-intensive activities to the Western Balkans to benefit from their relatively cheap and more flexible labour force. MNEs but also many Small Multinational Enterprises (SME) have inserted the Western Balkans into the regionalization of their production process because of their geographical (and sometime cultural) proximity, their weaker labour and environmental standards and their relatively low wages (Defraigne and Nouveau, 2017). These Western European firms keep the activities that require a high level of Research and Development (R&D) and management know-how, and outsource to local subcontractors and subsidiaries the labour-intensive activities, generating a regional division of labour based on complementarity between North Western Europe and Eastern Europe, including the Western Balkans.

Because it is still not as developed as the most advanced Western economies or Japan, the Chinese economy cannot offer a similar level of complementarity. Only a handful of large and experienced Chinese MNEs willing to organize a production network to serve the European market could also engage into efficiency-seeking FDI across the Western Balkans like some Western European MNEs. However, when compared to the Chinese economy, the small wage differential and the limited competitive advantages offered by the Western Balkan region does not encourage the Chinese firms that are exporting to the European markets (the EU and the European Free Trade Area (EFTA)) to insert the Western Balkans into their production networks and relocate labour-intensive activities in this region. In the future, as more very large Chinese firms will gain intangible assets in management know-how and in innovation such as Huawei, one should expect more Chinese efficiency-seeking investment across Europe as the large Chinese MNEs will follow their Western European, East Asian and US counterparts into regionalizing their production process across Europe to serve the European markets. Then, these Chinese MNEs might insert the Western Balkans into their international production network. However, only a handful of Chinese MNEs have reached this level of sophistication so far and they have chosen other European states than the Western Balkan economies to build their regional production networks across Europe. For these reasons Western Balkans' intra-industrial vertical

trade is mostly directed to Western European economies and remains insignificant with China in the 2010s.

Chinese investments in the Western Balkans are mostly resource-seeking and market-seeking. Important resource-seeking ODIs have taken place in Albania and Serbia. In Albania in 2014, Jiangxi Copper Company has acquired a 50 % stake in Beralb Ltd specialized in copper mining for 65 million dollars. In 2016, for 575 million dollars, Geo Jade, specialized in oil, gas and property, has acquired a concession for the largest Albanian oil field, accounting for over 95 % of the national production of crude oil (Hackaj, 2019). In Serbia, the Zijin Mining Group acquired in 2018 63 % of RTB Bor, specialized in copper mining and smelting for 1.26 billion dollars (Jamasmie, 2018). Part of these raw materials are sent to fulfil the important needs of the Chinese economy. These Chinese ODIs have enabled to save some of these mining activities whose sustainability was threatened by the lack of investment to modernize their equipment and by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) demands for reduced government subsidies. However, this type of ODI has traditionally limited spill over effects on the domestic economy. It tends to reinforce the role of commodity provider played by Western Balkan economies towards China and therefore block it in a low-tech position in the international division of labour.

Some significant Chinese ODI were also made in manufacturing activities in Serbia. In metallurgy, Zelezara Smederovo was bought by Hebei Iron and Steel (HBIS) that invested in the production sites over 150 million dollars between 2016 and 2018. The modernization enabled this company to become one the largest source of Serbia's manufactured exports (Hackaj, 2019).

Other investments have been made in car manufacturing, an industry for which some of the Western Balkans, notably Serbia and North Macedonia, have already developed an expertise and attracted numerous investors (UNCTAD, 2019). Shandong Linlong, a major Chinese tire producer has built a new production unit for 800 million euros (Bjelotomic, 2019a). The Chinese car parts supplier Meita has made modest but numerous investments in Serbia since 2004 (EBRD, 2018). It can take advantage of a relatively qualified and cheap labour force to supply the main EU automotive producers like Citroen, Peugeot, Volvo, BMW and Mercedes Benz (EBRD, 2018). This type of investments could facilitate the insertion of the Serbian economy into the International Production Networks (IPN) of the global carmakers operating in the EU. These Chinese ODI in the automotive sector should let one overlook that non-Chinese investors remain dominant in the car industry of the Western Balkans. Fiat already

has been producing cars in Serbia for over a decade. The cable producers Essex Europe (owned by the Korean Chabol LS) and Yazaki (Japan) have invested in Serbia in 2018. The German tire maker Continental has built a R&D centre in Novi Sad (UNCTAD, 2019). Van Hool and Dräxlmaier are also present in North Macedonia (Macedonia free zones authority 2019). Kosovo steel group supplies car parts for Western EU firms (OECD, 2018). VW is considering Serbia as a choice for the relocation of some of its production capacities from Western Europe (Bjelotomic, 2019b). Despite the presence of major producers and car part suppliers, to what extent can the Western Balkans manage to host a major sustainable business cluster in the automotive industry remains uncertain at this stage. Fiat's plant in Serbia has experienced severe overcapacities since 2018 and the merger with PSA (*Peugeot Société Anonyme*) Group could jeopardize this production site (Facchini, 2019). VW's decision to build a new plant in Serbia is still uncertain. The initial choice for this new car plant was Turkey but it has been changed due to geopolitical considerations and Romania as Bulgaria are also competing with significant subsidies to attract VW. The US car parts manufacturer Dura Automotive Systems that had promised to build a new plant in North Macedonia's Skopje 2 Free Zone has filed for bankruptcy in the fall of 2019 (Church, 2019).

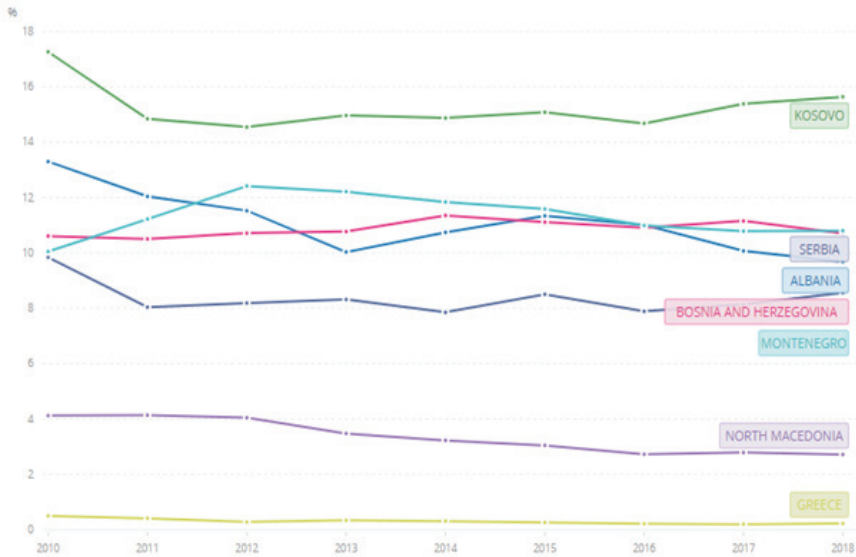
Chinese firms have also taken over some activities in services, notably in banking and transport. One of the largest has been the acquisition of a concession on Tirana International Airport SHPK in October 2016 by China Everbright Limited but the airport was eventually sold by the Chinese investors to the Albanian conglomerate Kastrati in December 2020 (Tonchev, 2017; Petrushevska, 2020). Again, EU firms are also very present in banking and Vinci Airport investing in Tesla Belgrade airport (UNCTAD, 2019; Mešić, 2018). These market-seeking FDI in services might generate the Chinese commercial penetration of the Western Balkans but are unlikely to transform their role in the international division of labour as it did not for other developing countries in the last two decades in Latin America, in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) or on the African continent (Defraigne, 2016).

Overall, Chinese firms ODI flows remain modest across the Western Balkans except in Serbia and Albania. Only the investments made in the steel and car industries, with their spill-over and potential technological upgrading could modify significantly Serbia's export structure and facilitate its insertions in IPNs.

Remittances and labour flows

In terms of remittances and labour flows, the EU remains the most important destination for the Western Balkans labour force and the most important source of remittance. China's contribution is insignificant for all of the Western Balkan economies. Remittances are decisive as they constitute between 8 and 16 % of the GDP of these economies except for North Macedonia (see tables 9 and 10 below). This is much higher than Greece, a relatively poor EU member state. Geographical, linguistic and cultural proximity; the existence of the EU's large immigrant communities originating from the Western Balkans; a better recognition of Western Balkans diplomas are factors that give again the dominant role to the EU and only a very marginal one for China. Labour emigration and remittances are essential for economies characterized by extremely high levels of unemployment and by structural trade deficits such as the Western Balkans.

Table 9. Contribution of remittances to the GDP of Western Balkans economies.



Source: World Bank Open Data, 2019.

Table 10. Origins of remittances⁴.



Source: World Bank Migration and Remittances Data, 2019.

⁴ Origins of remittances for the Republic of Kosovo are not available on World Bank Data and cannot be presented here with a similar methodology regarding data collection.

ODA

In terms of aid flows, the comparison is difficult as China does not abide by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development – Development Assistance Committee (OECD-DAC) methodology to assess ODA flows. The EU structural funds and various bilateral aid schemes between individual member states and Western Balkans economies are more important than the funds provided by China’s infrastructure projects backed by state-owned companies or China public financial institutions (Godement, 2016). The Western Balkan states benefit from Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) and other EU aid schemes. Chinese amounts spent on infrastructure projects compare with EU aid flows only for Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina (Holzner and Schwarzhappel, 2018; Beckmann-Dierkes, 2018; Le Corre and Vuksanovic, 2019; Sabbati *et al.*, 2018).

Regarding the degree of Chinese economic penetration, the Western Balkans are very heterogeneous (OEC, 2019; Holzner and Schwarzhappel, 2018). This is explained by economic and by geopolitical factors. From an economic standpoint, the region does not constitute a major and well-integrated market. For the Chinese authorities and even for other European actors, it is mostly seen as a transit route or as a pool of cheap labour by European standards. In the BRI, the Balkan Silk Road is one among others to reach the Western European market (one goes through Poland, another through Italy). Given the topography which makes connection costly and the limited size of local market, the Athens-Skopje-Belgrade-Budapest corridor is seen mostly as a mean to transit goods from the Piraeus Port to Central Europe. The linkages with the local economies of the Western Balkans are likely to be very limited except in the large industrial and populated area on the corridor itself (such as Athens, Belgrade or Budapest). Countries out of the axis and not well integrated such as Albania, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro offer little interest in efficiency-seeking FDI and in logistics-related FDI, notably because of power shortages, weak infrastructure and unclear property rights (OECD, 2019). There are minor, by international standards, market-seeking investments in the less connected countries but these are unlikely to generate important spill-over in terms of innovation and management know-how. Geopolitically, Kosovo is not recognized by China⁵ who has chosen to privilege its relations with Serbia. Furthermore, Kosovo’s economy is fragile and is supported by international aid, specifically by the US and the EU. It has therefore not been seen as a priority for Chinese investors.

Overall, the analysis of economic flows provided in this section clearly indicates that if China has become a significant economic partner of the

⁵ Even though there are some commercial relations between the two countries.

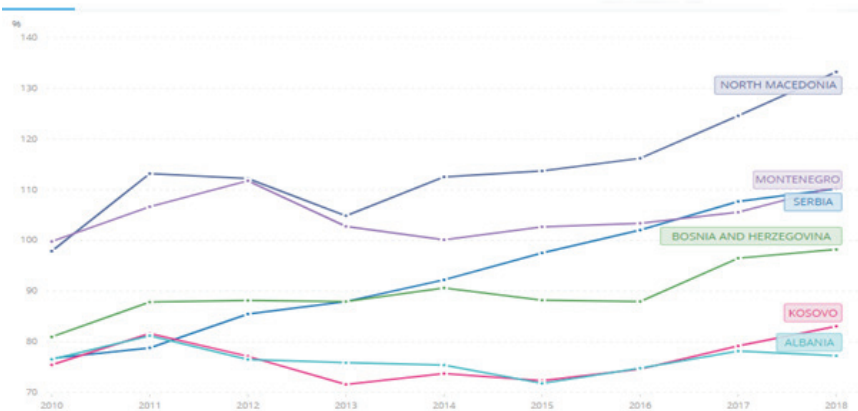
Western Balkan economies mostly in terms of trade and ODA, the EU remains by far the most important economic partner of the region.

The BRI has not moved the Western Balkans out of the EU economic periphery

Five years after the launching of the BRI in 2014 and their related infrastructure projects, it is too early to assess the final impact of the 36-year-long BRI and to what extent the improvement in terms of connectivity has facilitated the insertion of some Western Balkan economies into IPN. Nevertheless, it is possible to look at the evolution of key economic indicators of the most important beneficiaries of Chinese economic flows between 2014 and 2018 to see if they have experienced a major structural change that would upgrade their technological capacities, their level of income and substantially change their position in the international division of labour.

Firstly, an analysis of the trade structure reveals few major changes. The opening of the economy (% of export to the GDP) does not seem to have accelerated after the BRI implementation in 2014. There is no obvious correlation between the opening of Western Balkans and the amount of Chinese ODI and BRI-related infrastructure projects. The opening trend started in Serbia, before Chinese investment became significant, and North Macedonia, where the opening has been the fastest, has not been a significant recipient of Chinese flows in the region (see table 11 below).

Table 11. Exports as % of GDP.

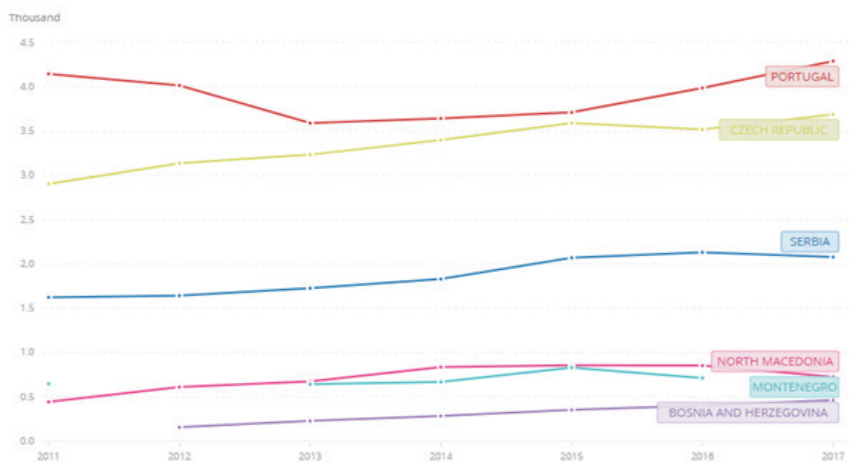


Source: World Bank Open Data, 2019.

Western Balkans-China trade continues to be characterized by the exchange of raw materials versus manufactured products. The trade with Western Europe is somewhat more differentiated with significant levels of low-tech manufactured products exports from the Western Balkans, notably in garment and wires. This is consistent with qualitative studies highlighting the phenomenon of outsourcing of labour-intensive activities from Western European firms to the Western Balkan, as a periphery of EU. One important structural change in the exports of Serbia is the rise of automotive products but this is mostly explained by Italy's Fiat greenfield FDI to build a new plant in the early 2010s (Harper, 2018). Some additional automotive equipment companies followed but remain predominantly European except for one recent Chinese firm of modest size by global standards (Ralev, 2019).

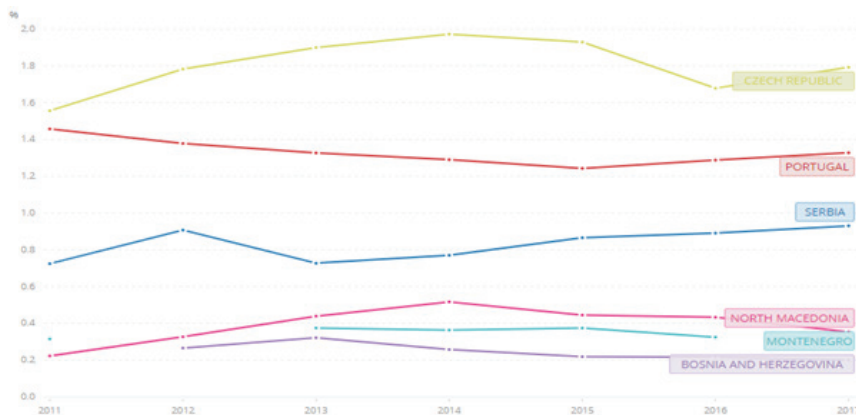
Secondly, in terms of technological upgrading, the gap between the Western Balkans periphery and Western European firms has not been significantly reduced. On the contrary, for many of the Western Balkan countries, it has been widening after the 2008 crisis due to the economic slowdown; the public spending cuts in higher education; and the brain drain of the qualified labour forces attracted by the higher wages and better career's prospects offered by the high-tech business cluster located in Western Europe and the US (Defraigne and Nouveau, 2017). Simple indicators such as the absolute amount of R&D spending, the share of GDP allocated to R&D and the number of top universities (not a single Western Balkan university make it to the Shanghai or Times Higher education rankings) all point out to an economic periphery status (see tables 12 to 14 below). Even though the recent progress in infrastructure like energy and transport should facilitate the insertion of the Western Balkan economies into Global Production Networks (GPN), their position in the international division of labour and therefore their standards of living have not increased significantly.

Table 12. Number of researchers per millions of people⁶.



Source: World Bank Open Data, 2019.

Table 13. R&D spending in % of GDP⁷.

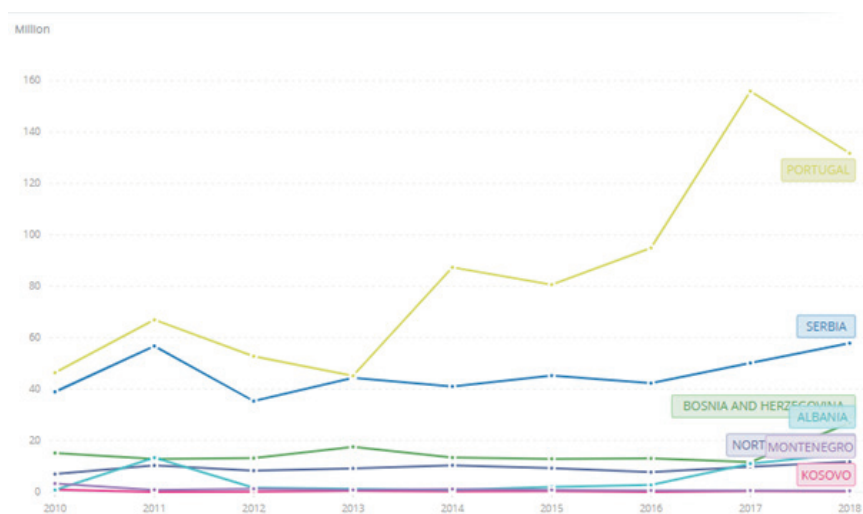


Source: World Bank Open Data, 2019.

⁶ Data for Albania and Kosovo are not available in the World Bank data set.

⁷ Data for Albania and Kosovo are not available in the World Bank data set.

Table 14. Receipts for the use of intellectual property in millions of current dollars.



Source: World Bank Open Data, 2019.

In the short and medium run, economic structural factors outlined earlier show why China is unlikely to replace the EU as the main economic centre for the Western Balkan periphery. The EU remains the largest and closest market, it hosts the largest recipient of the extra labour force from the Western Balkans, it provides most of the investments made in the region and insert some Western Balkan economies into IPNs better than Chinese firms and investments. This situation seriously reduces the room for manoeuvre of the Western Balkan governments *vis-à-vis* the EU and limits the extent of China's economic and geopolitical influence.

China's attraction and the limits of its influence

Despite the central economic role of the EU, many governments in the Western Balkans have welcomed the BRI and have signed various economic agreements with China. This can be explained by various factors.

Firstly, Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans have been particularly hit by the 2008 crisis. In 2009, it experienced a major credit crunch as a

large part of their banking system was relying on Western European banks for credit access. Western European banks reduced the amount of loans in the region and their local subsidiaries in the South-Eastern Europe transferred liquidities to their headquarters in Western Europe. Faced with trade deficit that could not be financed, many of the South-Eastern Europe economies had to follow a painful adjustment characterized by austerity policies (Greece, Romania, Hungary) which explains the lack of investment that these countries experienced in the early 2010s. In this context, the Chinese project could fill an investment gap. Secondly, the EU aid is submitted to relatively strict conditionality and procedure imposed by the *acquis communautaire*. For some projects, the Chinese procedure is less demanding and therefore swifter. Thirdly, Western Balkan governments could also play the Chinese card to improve their bargaining position when negotiating economic agreements on EU market access, labour mobility, aid or even in renewing their case for an EU membership. Last but not least, many of the Western Balkans are characterized by weak states (Berend 2003). Historical path dependency explains the weakness of the civil society, of the labour movement and of the press. This situation has favoured the development of corruption, enabled a high degree of concentration of power and foster far right nationalist populism. These patterns have generated numerous tensions between the EU supranational institutions and many South-Eastern Europe governments, including EU member states like Romania and Hungary. Some Western Balkan governments challenged by EU institutions can use China's aid and BRI-related projects as leverage in negotiations with the EU by showing that they can rely on an alternative source of funds. However, this deterrent has obvious limits as EU officials are aware of the EU central role. Nevertheless, it can increase the room for manoeuvre of some political elites. Corrupted governments might consider greater kickbacks by Chinese firms used to work in highly corrupted economies (Wedeman, 2012). One should not overstress the specificity of Chinese business in this domain as recent scandals in some Balkan economies have highlighted corruption practices in procurement involving Western EU member states or Russian firms and EU funds (Angelos, 2015; Rankin, 2017).

These three factors explain why the Western Balkans, like some other Eastern European and Mediterranean economies, can be seen by the Chinese authorities as a vacuum to penetrate the EU markets in order to strengthen the economic integration between China and Europe and develop the BRI. Some Western officials, politicians and scholars have therefore highlighted the risk that China is increasing its geopolitical influence in the economic periphery of Europe (Hillman 2020; Prestowitz, 2021). Other examples of Chinese aid recipient countries have shown

that it could well be the case (Goh, 2016) but two factors limit the rise of China's influence in the region.

Firstly, Eastern Europe, and the Western Balkans are seen as a natural export markets for the export-oriented economies, notably by Germany. Through their traditional lobbying, private firms from Western Europe are likely to pressure the EU and their member states governments to keep a privileged access to these markets and defend their market share versus Chinese competitors. For example, the German federation of industries (*Bundesverband der Deutschen Industrie*) has been very active in promoting the EU new connectivity strategy as a response to China's BRI. The French state and the French business have a long tradition of diplomatic and commercial presence in Serbia that resumed after the collapse of the former Yugoslavia. These powerful member states will very likely limit the Chinese influence in the area.

Secondly, some of the Western Balkan states have clearly opted for a strong alliance with the US. This has been the case of Albania, Kosovo and more recently Montenegro as it joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) (although Russian influence remains very significant in the latest case) (Feyerabend, 2018). Despite numerous tensions with the EU and important Chinese investments since 2008, Greece's Tsipras government remains firmly in the West in the geopolitical field. The Tsipras government has confirmed the importance of its strategic ties with NATO and the US in 2017, committing to spend more than 2 billion dollars on US military equipment (Hope, 2017). The relatively small Western Balkan countries belonging to NATO and hosting US military bases have limited options in terms of foreign policy. The Chinese authorities are unlikely to confront the US directly in a fight for political influence. In this case, China tends to adopt a low-profile diplomacy focusing on strengthening economic ties to generate an increasing level of interdependency.

Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia have been important recipient of Chinese aid (Holzner and Schwarzhappel, 2018) but are still seeking accession to the EU. Most Chinese projects in these two countries are made in energy and transport infrastructure. Some of these projects generate better infrastructure links between the Western Balkans and the EU. For this reason, Chinese authorities have an interest that these two countries reach the best possible economic agreements with the EU and possibly a full EU membership. This will maximize the efficiency of the Balkan Silk Road, starting from the Piraeus harbour in Greece to reach Central Europe. However, it will also mean that these countries will have to adopt an increasing part of the EU *acquis communautaire*, creating an EU controlled institutional framework on key issues such as local governance,

state aid control, procurements access and competition law. These new standards and rules will be imposed on Chinese firms operating in these countries. This institutional transformation should increase the level of transparency, facilitate the Western European firms lobbying to shape local economic policies through European directives and regulations. On the one hand, the adoption of the EU *acquis communautaire* should contain China's political leverage in these states. Yet, on the other hand, this phenomenon should increase the transit of trade from China to the EU Western member states through the Balkan Silk Road. These countries should experience an increasing economic interdependency with China but with the EU remaining the most influential power in the region.

Conclusion

Given these elements, China is unlikely to become a major influential power in the region even if its trade will continue to grow. China remains a small investor and a less important donor than the EU, except maybe for Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Along with Greece, Serbia is the country of the South-Eastern Europe where Chinese economic penetration is the most important for geographical reasons (Serbia lays at the centre of the Balkan Silk Road) and economic reasons (Serbia is already more industrialized, better connected and with a large pool of qualified workers). However, China's influence is likely to be stronger in Serbia than in Greece because of the geopolitical and historical context (Serbia adopts a neutrality strategy and refuses to join NATO and has strategic and economic ties with Russia) but it could be reduced in the future if Serbia joins the EU (Beckmann-Dierkes, 2018).

The EU is still the economic regional centre for the Western Balkans that remains in its periphery. The EU economic magnet is so strong that it does not allow other powers such as China, Russia or Turkey to challenge substantially its hegemonic position. Economic dependency *vis-à-vis* the EU considerably restricts the diplomatic room for manoeuvre of local governments. As for Russia and Turkey, Chinese economic presence can be used as leverage to improve Western Balkan governments' bargaining position when negotiating with the EU, but only marginally. It has not prevented in autumn 2019 the refusal of French president Emmanuel Macron to consider the launching of an EU enlargement towards Albania and North Macedonia. Due to long term structural historical and geographic factors, they remain in the periphery of the large and more advanced Western European economies and China's magnet cannot yet challenge this situation in the short or medium run.

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From Connectivity and Security to Regional Integration? The “Central Asian corridor” region¹

Noemi M. Rocca²

Abstract

This article argues that the “Central Asian corridor” – a region including Iran, China, and the five Central Asia (CA) post-Soviet states, that is Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan – is experiencing an informal process of region-building. Its internal drivers are represented by China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and an Iranian renewed Eastward attitude. Although the BRI’s main goal is that of constructing a wide transports infrastructure for connecting Chinese goods with Western markets, it also has the potential of enhancing connectivity and economic growth in CA. Iran can make its huge gas and oil reserves available as well as its already existing transports network capable of connecting land-locked Western China and CA to the Persian Gulf. Together such drivers could increase

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² Noemi Maria Rocca is PhD Candidate in International Relations–International Politics and Conflict Resolution, at the Faculty of Economics of the University of Coimbra, Portugal. Her dissertation is about American foreign policy towards the Islamic Republic of Iran. She holds a post-graduate diploma in International Relations from the University of Coimbra and a Master of Arts in International Business and Finance from the University of Reading, United Kingdom (UK). She has been a visiting professor of Monetary Economics at the Faculty of Economics of the University “Eduardo Mondlane” in Maputo, Mozambique, and contract professor of International Economics, from 1995 to 2000, at the Faculty of Economics of the University of Bergamo, Italy. Her main research areas are: foreign policy analysis, global political economy, Central Asia geopolitics, Islamic terrorism. Her latest publication is: “The evolution of the crime-terror nexus in Europe”, *Nação e Defesa*, April 2020, n° 155, ISSN 0870 – 757X.

energy self-sufficiency of the region and lead it to economic interdependency. Moreover, given that all of these seven states share regional stability and security as main policy concerns, their mutual engagement can help to avoid inter-state and intra-state conflicts within the region. The first part of the article is devoted to the theoretical debate about regionalism, in particular in CA. The second one deals with the main features of the integration process under construction in the “Central Asian corridor”.

Keywords: Central Asia, regional integration, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Introduction

The research problem this article intends to address is represented by the existence of processes of regional integration different from the institutionalized ones as represented, for instance, by the process of integration experienced by Western Europe since the end of the Second World War. Its research question is the following: is a kind of informal, not completely institutionalized regionalism arising between the seven countries belonging to the “Central Asian (CA) corridor” region, that is the region made up by the five CA post-Soviet states plus Iran and China? The first hypothesis on which this article is based is that every process of regional integration represents an historically determined experience and that consequently different empirical forms can emerge in different political, social, and economic environments. According to the second hypothesis, the internal drivers of such “loose” kind integration process can be represented not only by commercial and economic commonly planned objectives, but also by the *de facto* economic and infrastructural interconnections which empirically arise between a group of states. Finally, another hypothesis is the one according to which common and shared security concerns also can contribute to pushing states towards informal forms of regional integration. The steps which this article will follow to answer its research question can be summarized in the following ones. Firstly, a review of the theories regarding the “new” forms of regionalism. Secondly, an analysis of the China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in CA, and of the implications of the Iranian renewed “Eastward attitude” in terms of economic and political relations with China and the five CA states. Thirdly, an analysis of the security policies bilaterally or multilaterally developed by the states of the “CA corridor” for addressing common security concerns.

Regional integration as an historically determined experience

What regionalism

Regionalism appears as increasingly questioned. From a theoretical point of view, the problems that social scientists face in studying regions and regionalism don't seem completely solved (Hettne, 2005). Concerning in particular the European Union (EU), critical "stand-by" situations abound. The Turkish assertive behavior versus the EU after many years of "courting" for accessing it, and the slowdown in the Western Balkan states (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia) process of EU access, are just two striking cases. However, it is within the EU itself – so far still one of the most successful examples of regional integration – that an increasing number of disconnecting phenomena are challenging its model of regionalism. In fact, the "Brexit breakout" concluded in 2020, the ongoing political tensions between the EU Commission and some members' governments (as the Hungarian and the Polish ones), the rise of populist anti-EU parties calling for Brexit-like national referendums, and, finally, institutional crises inside the member states (as the one between the Spanish central government and its Catalan regional parliament and government which dramatically erupted in 2017) can be seen as disintegrating forces at work inside the European regional integration process. Yet, drawing ultimate conclusions about the future of regionalism by focusing on the European case can be misleading. As Shaun Breslin argued "the EU as an exercise in regional integration is one of the major obstacles to the development of analytical and theoretical comparative studies of regional integration" (Breslin, 2002, p. 11). The reason why the EU can no longer represent a model of integration is represented by the absence, in the current international context, of two of the main features which characterized the political and economic context within which the European integration process took place: bipolarity and a limited internationalization of industrial production. Western regional integration empirical cases and the so-called "old" regionalism theoretical framework were indeed deeply linked to bipolarism (Ethier, 1998). Whilst the so-called "new regionalism", with its minor emphasis on institutions and causal relations, is related to multilateralism and economic liberalization. In addition, in Europe, "conditions of democracy and pluralistic representation" had represented a necessary factor for spill-over effect and, therefore, for processes of increasing integration (Schmitter, 2019). In other words, it is important to contextualize the European highly institutionalized, "hard"

form (Fawcett, 2004) of regional integration. This contextualization means to acknowledge that the European process of regional integration represents an historically determined experience and that other empirical forms can emerge in political, social, and economic environments which are different from the European one. For instance, Peter J. Katzenstein pointed out the differences between Western and Asian processes of regional integration, the former characterized by formal and exclusive patterns, the latter by informal and inclusive networks (Katzenstein, 1996). Alisher Faizzullaev, by considering in particular interstate relations in CA, argued that:

[...] neighboring states with underdeveloped institutional ties but common culture, tend to enter into informal interactions by using cultural codes and patterns. [...] Institutional based interstate interactions can be verifiable for external observers, but cultural based international interactions require knowledge of that cultural. In other words, those who are not familiar with a particular culture may have difficulties even in noticing the cultural based interactions (Faizzullaev, 2014, pp. 17-18).

The EU, in some of its foreign and security policies documents devoted to its relationship with external areas as the CA, stated that:

[v]oluntary forms of regional governance offer states and peoples the opportunity to better manage security concerns, reap the economic gains of globalization, express more fully cultures and identities, and project influence in world affairs. [...] Regional orders do not take a single form. [...] Cooperative regional orders [...] are not created only by organizations. They comprise a mix of bilateral, sub-regional, regional and inter-regional relations. They also feature the role of global players interlinked with regionally-owned cooperative efforts. Taken together these can address transnational conflicts, challenges and opportunities (Mogherini, 2016).

Such statements are important since they indirectly recognize that informal, loose patterns of regionalisms do exist in CA, that they can be effective for addressing social and political issues, and, therefore, that they deserve to be supported by the EU. For Chinara Esengul, the main characteristic of the East Asian regionalism is the fact that planned and formalized actions finalized to regional integration overlap with informal ones which are market-driven instead of being politically planned (Esengul, 2011). This article argues that it is such a form of regionalism that can potentially emerge in CA. The importance of considering informal institutions as drivers of political behavior was already argued by Gretchen Helmke and Steven Levitsky (Helmke and Levitsky, 2004). Moreover, Anna Grzymala-Busse and Pauline Jones Luong stressed that

informal institutions, together with external pressure and historical speed, represent key-concepts to be taken into account in the assessment in particular of the post-Soviet states' state-building process (Grzymala-Busse and Luong, 2002). This article emphasizes that such a theoretical frame should also be applied for investigating processes of region-building which take place within the CA post-Soviet space. In fact, "most international relations scholars analyze regional cooperation and integration through the prism of institutional engagement. [...] However, regional institutions' role in interstate relations may vary, depending on different political, economic and social factors" (Faizullaev, 2014, p. 18). Similarly, although the five CA post-Soviet states – that is Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan – can be said as being at a "pre-negotiation situation", a regional integration process is nevertheless taking place among them in which China and Iran play a crucial role. A process which has the potential to develop furtherly, even with an only partial institutional engagement.

Regionalism and CA: a debated issue

This article does not intend to prove nor to contest the effectiveness of the many regional organizations which have been established between all or some of the five CA post-Soviet states with or without external actors – as the Central Asian Commonwealth (CAC), the Central Asian Economic Union (CAEU), the Central Asian Economic Community (CAEC), the Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO), the Eurasian Economic Community (EAEC), the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), and the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) – some of which have already ceased to exist³. Such complex dynamics of appearances/disappearances of regional groupings can indeed be considered as symptoms of a potential capability of integration which, so far, could not take advantage of favorable contextual conditions. Rather, by looking at the increasing diplomatic, military, economic, industrial, infrastructural and commercial ties between the countries of what herein is defined as the "CA corridor" – consisting of the CA post-Soviet states plus Iran and China – this article argues that a "loose regionalization" process (Anoushiravan, 2015a) is currently under way. According to academic literature on regionalism in CA, the concept of regionalism itself can hardly be used in all senses (Esengul, 2009). In fact, according to

³ CAC, CAEU, CAEC and CACO.

that literature, regional cooperation in CA, although potentially attractive, would be negatively affected by various factors. Among them there are leadership rivalry as well as dissimilarities in the distribution of resources and in the political and economic strategies chosen by the five states' governments. Additionally, CA political elites are supposed to perceive a deep dichotomy – influenced by their former Soviet experience – between statehood and regional security as well as between nationalism and regionalism (Esengul *et al.*, 2015). Such and other constraints would obstruct top-down state-centric forms of regionalism as well as informal regionalist processes “from below” (Bohr, 2004). From a different perspective, Roy Allison underlined that the only regional integration experiments between the five CA post-Soviet states which until now have been effective were those aimed to security (Allison, 2004). Therefore, for that author, the CA regionalism is a virtual one, finalized only to regime security (Allison, 2008). John Heathershaw and Alexander Cooley made a critical assessment of the poor results obtained in the process of regional integration of the CA post-Soviet states by comparing them with the high level of their elites' global integration (Heathershaw and Cooley, 2017). This article makes a departure from such a literature. In fact, it argues that since 2013 an informal, loose process of integration has been taking place in the region made up by the five CA post-Soviet states plus China and Iran, which here is defined as the “CA Corridor”. In 2013 Chinese President Xi Jinping announced his One Belt One Road (OBOR) project which envisioned the participation, among other states, of the five CA states and Iran⁴. In addition, in July 2015, the nuclear dispute between Iran and the international community ended (yet followed, three years later, by its dismissal by the Trump administration).

Regionalism in the “CA corridor”

The “CA corridor”

Svetlana Gorshenina described in detail the complex historical genesis of the notions which have tried to define CA. At the same time, her research demonstrates the difficulties still existing in achieving a univocally accepted definition of CA (Gorshenina, 2014). In this article, the “CA

⁴ Later re-defined as Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). For a detailed description of the BRI and its significance for all of the countries involved, see Griffiths (2017). For an updated, insightful assessment of the BRI from a geoeconomic and geopolitical angle, see Cavanna (2019). During the 19th Congress of the Communist Party of China, in October 2017, President Xi Jinping's political economy thought has been enshrined into the Chinese Communist Party charter (Xinhua, 2017c) and this decision represents a deeper, further support by Chinese political elites to Xi' BRI.

corridor" region is intended as including the territories of the five CA post-Soviet states (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan) plus Iran and China. Such a "stretching" of the definition of CA is possible by relying on new regionalists' argument according to which regions – as well as definitions of regions – are not territorially defined in absolute terms, but are socially and politically constructed (Hettne and Söderbaum, 2000; Hurrel, 1995). Björn Hettne summarized new regionalism's approach by stating that regions are "created and recreated in the process of global transformation" and acknowledges that, although a region is a territorially based subsystem of the international system, there are "many varieties of regional subsystems with different degrees of 'regioness', that is the degree to which a particular region in various respects constitutes a coherent unit" (Hettne, 2016, p. XVIII). The definition of the "CA corridor" as a region is also justified from a geopolitical and geoeconomic point of view. In fact, Iran represents the easiest accessible coastal terminal for the long landlocked corridor constituted of the five CA states plus the China's Xinjiang region, where China's export-oriented industrial activities are concentrated. China has indeed to turn to its CA neighbors for land-transport corridors, and then to Iran for a maritime hub. Additionally, it is along this corridor – more precisely, in Iran, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, and, to a lesser extent, Uzbekistan – that a relevant part of the gas and oil reserves needed by Chinese economic growth and industrial production are situated. In the recent years China has indeed been increasingly engaging with the hydrocarbons reach states of the region for assuring its energy security (Chow, 2010; Paramonov and Stokov, 2015; Madiyev, 2017; Xinhua, 2017a). This article adopts Paul Evan's definition of regionalism as an "expression of increased commercial and human transactions in a defined geographical space" (Evan, 2005, p. 196) which overcomes the dichotomy between regional integration and cooperative regionalism existing in functionalist and neo-functionalist approaches. Additionally, such a definition doesn't necessarily frame a region-building process as a linear, incremental, and automatic one. Therefore, it can be applied to cases like the one considered in this article which, although characterized by a defined territorial dimension, nevertheless have an institutionally "loose" form and a rather discontinuous evolution along time. What the "CA corridor" is experiencing is indeed precisely such a kind of regionalism. In fact, it is made up by the various bilateral/multilateral agreements and the bilateral/multilateral formal as well as by the informal relations, mainly of economic and security nature, put in place by the region's seven members between them, under both bilateral and multilateral frameworks. Most of such relationships have been initiated under the umbrella of the Chinese

BRI⁵ or as a consequence of the Iran's post-Joint Comprehensive Plan Of Action (JCPOA)⁶ engagement in the region. The extension and the complexity of these ongoing relations are such that they are not merely connecting the involved states with the world economy, but they also have the potentiality to inflate a region-building process. For example, it has been demonstrated that the BRI and Kazakhstan's "Bright Path" economic policy are underpinned by complementary ideas and projects, and consequently they are potential forces of integration (Kassenova, 2017; Satke and Galdini, 2016). Additionally, the development of deeper economic relations between China and the five CA post-Soviet states are "relatively easy because Chinese and Central Asian economies are complementary" (Indeo, 2016, p. 4). The entities at play in this process are state actors. This fact is due to the peculiar features of the institutional, economic, industrial and financial systems of the seven states involved, in which the state plays a prevailing role and, consequently, the sub-state actors' agency is heavily bounded. Arguably, the whole process is going to be a long-term and uneven one because of the same constraints suffered by the previous experiences of CA regional integration. Nevertheless, its development is worth of being investigated.

Economic and political factors at play

The loose regionalism which is growing in the "CA corridor" is the consequence of two main external and interrelated forces acting on a global level. The first one is of political nature and is represented by the gradual shift from a unipolar, US-led world towards a multipolar one (Santander, 2016) within which various global – as China – and regional – as Iran – actors coexist and interplay. The second one, of economic nature, is what Anoushiravan Ehteshami defines the "Asianization of globalization" (Ehteshami, 2015a), that is a change at the core of the world economic system. Such a structural and long-term shift has given rise to the Middle East-East Asia (ME-EA) nexus (Ehteshami, 2015b), that is an entanglement of the industrial and economic systems of the states belonging to these

⁵ "At its core, it [the BRI] seeks to use trade and foreign direct investment, most of which emanate from state-owned banks, to build connectivity across Eurasia. [...] As formalized in March 2015, Beijing intends to develop transport, energy, and telecommunication infrastructure to bolster commerce, financial integration, policy coordination, and 'people-to-people bonds'" (Cavanna, 2019). Concerning in particular the BRI's implications for CA, see Indeo (2016); Fallon (2015). Regarding, in particular, Uzbekistan's and Turkmenistan's relationship with China, see Samokhvalov (2016).

⁶ The JCPOA, signed on July, 15, 2015 by Iran, US, Germany, France, UK and EU, is the agreement which, by ending the sanctions regime against Iran and its diplomatic isolation, untapped Iran's potential for an internationally acknowledged regional role. For an assessment of Iran's role in CA and its relationship with China after the JCPOA signature, see Milani (2016) and Rocca (2017a).

two areas. In other terms, notwithstanding an overall and irreversible process of globalization, regionalism in the ME-EA is growing since some economic activities, as well as energy and mining resources, are geographically localized and “clustered” (Ehteshami, 2015b). This means that the ME-EA nexus is a product of globalization and, as such, confirms Shaun Breslin, Richard Higgott, and Ben Rosamond’s argument for which regionalism and globalization are “mutually reinforcing and co-constitutive rather than contending processes” (Breslin *et al.*, 2002, p. 8). Political multipolarity plays a key role in making regionalism and globalization two complementary instead of antagonistic processes (Santander, 2018). In a way, the peculiar regionalism that the “CA corridor” is experiencing can be seen as a result of the adaptation of CA to globalization (Laruelle and Peyrouse, 2015). Concerning the internal drivers of the “CA corridor” process of regionalization, they bear both political and economic features. Regarding the former, a crucial role is played by the Chinese ambition to play a leading role in CA (Laruelle and Peyrouse, 2012).

For Beijing, the BRI represents indeed a unifying frame for the different initiatives it has undertaken or planned to carry out with the members of the “CA corridor” in various fields: cultural exchanges, direct investments, financial assistance, and security cooperation. Additionally, Tehran’s willingness to reassess its regional role – which was earlier precluded by the long nuclear dispute (Rocca, 2017a), and, later, by the US Trump administration decision to withdraw from the JCPOA by imposing a new, tough round of sanctions (BBC News, 2018; Sullivan, 2018)⁷ – has to be considered. Yet, such reiterated assertive American stances are pushing Iran to furtherly strengthen that “Eastward posture” which it had already developed during the thirteen years of the “nuclear impasse” (Guldimann, 2007) for escaping diplomatic isolation and internal economic stalemate (Al-Monitor Staff, 2018). In fact, since 2015, and even more actively after the Trump administration’s reimposition of sanctions, Tehran has been establishing strong diplomatic and economic relationships with all the five CA post-Soviet states. For example, in less than one year, from April 2018 to January 2019, Iranian Foreign Minister met Tajik President and reportedly conferred on bilateral relations as well as regional and international developments; on May, he met his Turkmen counterpart and conferred about bilateral, regional and

⁷ As a reaction to the US’ assassination of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard General Qassem Soleymani, head of the strategic elite Quds Force, on January 3, 2020, Iran itself decided to conclusively withdraw from the JCPOA and on January 5, 2020, it announced its fifth step away from its commitments under the 2015 nuclear deal (MEHR News Agency, 2020).

international issues. Finally, in January 2019, he met Turkmen Deputy Foreign Minister Wafa Hajjive and reportedly said that “Iran always calls for expansion of relations and cooperation with Turkmenistan in various fields, and hopes to take advantage of all our capabilities in broadening such cooperation and friendship relations” (The Iran Project, 2019a). Concerning bilateral agreements, in March 2018, Iran and Turkmenistan signed 13 cooperation documents and memoranda of understanding in cultural, artistic, scientific and educational fields. In August 2018, the Iranian First Vice President reportedly said that Iran is ready to enhance cooperation with Uzbekistan in all fields of mutual interest noting that “Iran and Uzbekistan are two key players in the region which share common interests and threats. Cooperation between the two countries in security areas can help regional stability” (The Iran Project, 2019b). In November 2019, Iran and Uzbekistan drawn up a roadmap for industrial, technical, engineering and tourism cooperation. In December 2019, the Iranian First Vice-President reportedly proposed the idea of using national currencies in trade transactions between Iran and Kyrgyzstan in a bid to broaden mutual economic exchanges, whilst Iran and Tajikistan agreed to use local currencies for bilateral trade to increase economic and energy cooperation despite American sanctions. On January 2020, Tajikistan Ambassador to Iran, Nizzamudi Mahedi, reportedly said that his country is interested in using high capacities and potentials of Iranian Chabahar port on the Persian Gulf (The Iran Project, 2019b). With China, during and after the end of the nuclear deal, Iran has increasingly been deepening a cooperative relationship which has grown without interruption since the Iranian Islamic Republic’s birth in 1979⁸. In August 2019, during an official trip to Beijing, Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif announced that he has proposed a 25-year roadmap for bilateral cooperation – beyond the BRI framework – finalized to “consolidate the comprehensive strategic partnership between Iran and China” (Faghihi, 2019). The pragmatism Iran has showed in its CA foreign policy after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Prifti, 2017; Shaffer, 2016; Hunter, 2003; Koepke, 2013; Rocca, 2017b), coupled with the support assured to Tehran by China for avoiding economic crises and financial isolation⁹,

⁸ On the strategic importance of Iran-China relationship after the US’ withdraw from the JCPOA, see Kaplan (2019).

⁹ Significantly, on November 2019, Iran and China were reportedly working out a barter system for trade whose aim was to bypass restrictions on dollar-denominated transactions imposed by US sanctions (The Iran Project, 2019c) whilst, one month later, the Chinese ambassador to Iran said the two countries had agreed on “new banking mechanisms that could facilitate bilateral trade, although he insists that the initiatives would remain confidential to avoid the American sanctions imposed on Iran” (The Iran Project, 2019d). Concerning, in particular, China’s reactions to Trump administration’s assertive stances against Iran, see: Reuters Staff (2018); Noack (2018); Nseien (2020).

can enhance Iran's role within the region-building process. The inner economic engine of the "CA corridor" regional integration consists in the interdependent needs of its seven states. In fact, whilst all the five CA Republics and Iran lack financial resources, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and, especially, China – which imports oil from Kazakhstan and Iran, and gas from Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan and has increased its energy connections with them (Shustor, 2017; Bisenot, 2018; Chen, 2018) – need energy resources. Moreover, all of them have an urging need of infrastructural connectivity for their industrial and economic development.

The role of security concerns and of cultural sedimentation

Arguably, such mutually interdependent needs are not going to produce what Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye have defined as a "complex interdependence" leading to regional integration – which consists basically in multiple channels of communications, absence of hierarchy among issues, and a diminished role for military force (Keohane and Nye, 1977). This is because all the "CA corridor" states share a quest for regional stability conceived as a "pre-condition" for economic development and growth. Such an exigency is mainly pursued through national security policies and bilateral/multilateral agreements and informal relations carried out between the seven states. For instance, in 2019, China deployed paramilitary forces in Tajikistan (Tanchum, 2019) and signed an agreement of military cooperation with Kazakhstan (Defence Azerbaijan, 2019). Already in 2014 China and Iran started to hold joint naval drill in the Strait of Hormuz (Panda, 2014) which they repeated in June 2017 (IRNA, 2017) and, joined by the Russian Navy also in 2019 (Reuters Staff, 2019a). In June 2018, Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Javad Zarif met the Secretary of the National Security Council of Uzbekistan Viktor Makhmudov and agreed to boost cooperation, finalized to stability and security in the region (The Iran Project, 2018). In August 2018, Abdulla Aripov, the Uzbek Prime Minister, reportedly said that Iran and Uzbekistan should continue bilateral and multilateral cooperation to uproot extremism in the region and in April 2019, the Defense Ministers of Iran and Uzbekistan, Amir Hatami and Bahodir Qurbonov weighed plans for close cooperation between the two countries' defense and security forces, particularly in the fight against terrorism (The Iran Project, 2019b). In September 2019, Iran and Kyrgyzstan signed a security deal, according to which, reportedly, they "will boost cooperation in the fight against illicit drugs, terrorism, extremism, and organized crimes, and exchange information and training in operational fields" (Tasnim News Agency,

2019a). In October 2019, during a meeting with his Kazakh counterpart Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, Iranian President, Hassan Rouhani, reportedly said that “Iran is fully prepared to work with Kazakhstan in the battle against terrorism and narcotics and in the establishment of sustainable security in the region” (Tasnim News Agency, 2019b). In other terms, security concerns and policies do not allow that minor role reserved to military issues in the region’s agenda which constitutes a pillar of the Keohane-Nye’s “complex interdependence”. The security concerns that Iran, China and the five CA states share, although at different degrees, consist mainly in the contrast, first, to Islamic terrorism (Belek, 2016; Idrees, 2016), whose real dimensions are difficult to disentangle from what some analysts consider a politically manufactured threat (Heathershaw and Montgomery, 2014; Standish, 2015)¹⁰. Second, to transnational organized crime, especially that one dealing with drug trafficking¹¹ and potentially entangled with terrorism (Reyes and Dinar, 2015; Omelicheva and Markowitz, 2019)¹². For Iran, in particular, the fight against terrorism in the Caucasus and in CA represents the basic condition for its internal security and the survival of the regime (Tabatabai, 2017; Esfandiary and Tabatabai, 2015). Concerning China, it considers the “regional security-regional stability” equation as fundamental and necessary for its plans of long-term economic growth (ICG, 2013; Peyrouse *et al.*, 2012; Indeo, 2015). Additionally, through the BRI, China is continuing with its CA neighbors¹³ a security strategy initiated after the fall of the Soviet Union which appears as aimed at containing the Islamic radicalization of its Uighur¹⁴ population in the Xinjiang region, which it perceives as a threat

¹⁰ See the debate which took place in 2017 between the International Crisis Group (ICG) and a group of academicians (The Diplomat, 2017).

¹¹ In 2014, it was assessed that the 25 % of the whole Afghani opium production was passing through CA (Rosen and Katzman, 2014). According to the United Nations Organization for Drug and Crime (UNODC), CA is the key to Afghan heroin smuggling (UNODC, 2012).

¹² For instance, in 2018, Iran’s Deputy Interior Minister for Security Affairs held a meeting with his Turkmen counterpart and reportedly discussed opportunities for extending partnership to combat drug trafficking, terrorism and illegal immigration (IRNA, 2018). In June 2018, Rouhani and Xi Jinping reportedly signed a number of pacts “in the field of joint research projects, preventing and fighting illegal production, trafficking and misuse of narcotics, psychotropic drugs and precursors, and cooperation and technical help in the field of securities” (The Iran Project, 2018) In August 2019, it was launched the China-Kyrgyzstan “Cooperation-2019” joint counter-terrorism exercise (Xinhua, 2019). On the China-CA state’s security cooperation and jointly fight against threats of the so-called “three evil forces” of terrorism, separatism and extremism, as well as transnational organized crime, see also Xinhua (2016); CGTN (2019); Fdi (2015).

¹³ It is worth of note that Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan share a 2,050-mile border with China’s Xinjiang.

¹⁴ Several international reports highlight a serious violation of human rights in China, in particular discriminatory policies against Uighur population (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

to its territorial integrity (Zhuangzhi, 2007). Some authors even argue that the BRI is actually a long-term China's strategy for integrating its Xinjiang region (Clarke, 2016).

Although a mechanism of "threat construction" as well as a diversion of the perception of threats from outside to inside (as predicted by the Job's "insecurity dilemma" paradigm (Job, 1992)) could have taken place (Fumagalli, 2010), nevertheless security needs finalized to counter Islamic terrorism and organized transnational crime are leading the "CA corridor" states towards a growing security cooperation. Their process of integration can also rely on the social and cultural sedimentation produced by millennial interactions between the populations of that area. It was indeed on this pre-existent, ideational context that China could insert and formalize its BRI by evoking the ancient Silk Roads which connected China to Europe through CA for more than seventeen centuries. Significantly, the former OBOR initiative was publicly exposed for the first time by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013, in a speech to CA leaders at Nazarbayev University, in Astana, during his first trip to CA. From then on, in all the official Chinese documents that have developed the BRI project there have been reiterated references to ideological sources different from liberalism and neo-liberalism, the political economics thoughts which have underpinned Western democracies experiences of regionalism¹⁵.

In fact, the Chinese leadership seems to be offering the five CA countries not just material resources, but also a well-defined political economy and an ideological model finalized to economic development and growth which are not tailored on liberal democracies. Moreover, China's emphasis on sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs can enhance its appeal to Iran and CA states. The former, in fact, has made such principles the two pillars of its international policy stance; the latter have always rejected international organizations' criticisms and interferences about their poor results in combating corruption and improving human rights situation. However, for historical reasons related to the Russian empires and Soviet Union's past dominance, all the five CA states share a rejection of an eventual neo-imperialist influence – or what can be perceived as such by them. This attitude can negatively influence the popular and the elites' perceptions of Iranian and Chinese roles in the region.

¹⁵ See, for instance, the President Xi's speech at the opening of the 2017 Belt and Road forum (Xinhua, 2017b).

The strained Iran-Tajikistan relations are a reminder of such possibility¹⁶. Similarly, the attacks to the Chinese embassy in Bishkek in August 2016 (Phillips, 2016), as well as the popular protests in Kazakhstan (Reuters Staff, 2019b) and in Kyrgyzstan against Chinese presence (Reuters Staff, 2019c; Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2019), are symptomatic of how problematic could become the eventual China's leading role in the CA corridor regionalism. It has been noted that popular fear of China can be an obstacle for the reception of BRI in Kazakhstan (Kassenova, 2017), and that, meanwhile CA elites generally welcome Chinese investments, large parts of the population are suspicious of Chinese penetration (Peyrouse, 2016). Chinese political influence in the region can indeed be an unavoidable by-product of its huge investments in critical infrastructure as energy and transports. According to Joseph S. Nye, China's foreign behavior still relies more on hard power – which is related to military capabilities – than on the soft one – which is defined as “the ability to affect the behavior of others to get the outcomes one wants” (Nye, 2007, p. 389) without using coercion and is based on a state's cultural attractiveness. Consequently, “as China's hard military and economic power grows, it may frighten its neighbors into balancing coalition” (Nye, 2017, p. 2). However, “[i]f it can accompany its rise with an increase in its soft power, China can weaken the incentives for these coalitions” (Nye, 2017, p. 2). In other terms, a stronger, better conceived Chinese soft power can weaken the incentives for disintegrating forces which could arise within the “CA corridor” because of the unbalanced distribution of power and resources within it¹⁷.

However, economic strength is a precondition for exerting soft power (Nye, 1990), then, the promise of delivering economic growth through investments and loans represents indeed the ultimate source of China's soft power (Barker, 2017). Given that social cohesion represents a key-resource for achieving long-term regionalism's sustainability, the economic progress in the CA corridor related to its region-building process could enhance the Chinese soft power and therefore the “CA corridor” regionalism coherence. Pragmatism, which has so far characterized Iran's (Prifti, 2017; Shaffer, 2016; Hunter, 2003; Koepke, 2013; Rocca, 2017b) and

¹⁶ However, the past frictions between the two countries appear more as a tentative by Tajikistan to sideline with Saudi Arabia in the confrontation taking place between the two rivalries than a rejection of Iran's supposedly assertive role in Tajikistan's internal affairs, as it is portrayed by some narratives (Eurasia Staff, 2017). In fact, Tehran has been successfully restoring cooperative relations with Dushanbee (The Iran Project, 2015b, 2015c; Tehran Times, 2019).

¹⁷ For an insightful comparison between Russian and Chinese soft power's potentiality in the process of CA region-building process, see Samokhvalov (2018, in particular pp. 35-37).

China's (Laruelle and Peyrouse, 2015) approaches towards CA, can mitigate the possible negative effects due to the eventual arising of Chinese economic and Iranian religious leadership¹⁸.

Conclusion

The loose process of regional integration which is taking place in the "CA corridor" is a consequence of recent developments in global economy and global governance represented by the "Asianization" of the international economy and the evolution towards multipolarity in international politics. In addition, shared needs of regional stability – conceived as obtainable through security – and of economic interdependence – in terms of financial resources flows, infrastructural connectivity, energy supply, and wider markets for consumers' and industrial goods – furtherly push the region members towards seminal, although partial, forms of integration. The final result is a *de facto* informal regionalism. Nevertheless, it is not characterized, as some authors would expect, by "complex interdependence" between the participants, since security concerns play an overwhelming role in the agendas of all the states of the region. Recent changes in Uzbekistan's, Kazakhstan's, and Kyrgyzstan's leadership can represent an additional factor contributing to further developments in the regional integration. In fact, they could eventually remove that leadership rivalry which many analysts identified as one of the main constraints impeding an effective CA regionalism. China is playing the leading role in the integration process of the "CA corridor" not only from an economic, industrial and financial point of view, but also from an ideological one by providing the ideational source necessary for a long-standing success of the process. As long as this regional experience is capable of delivering the economic development it envisions, the process will gain traction and will become self-reinforcing. For example, a potential positive by-product of the increased connectivity and interdependence between the seven states could be that one of stopping the outflow of human resources from the five CA states.

In turn, the precious human and social capital retained within those states can play a key-role in a further economic and cultural development of the region. Yet, a crucial aspect of the process is that represented by the internal relationships which will be forged between the seven states. In particular, how CA states will engage and interact with Iran and China

¹⁸ For example, according to Akbarzadeh (2015), CA Republics are against full Iranian SCO membership because of its theocratic form of government. However, some statements by CA states' political authorities would question such an argument (The Iran Project, 2015b, 2015c).

depends on many elements. Among them – and apart from external players' (Russia¹⁹, US and EU) influence – the elites' and populations' perceptions and misperceptions about possible gains and losses appear as factors which will play the most important role in determining the success or the failure of the “CA corridor” process of integration. Concerning the role of Iran and China, it seems that in order to make the “CA corridor” integration successful, Tehran and Beijing should be able to offer an enhanced version of their soft power instead of relying only on economic strength, natural resources availability, and a favorable geographical location. To conclude, the eventual success of this peculiar regional integration experience would represent a viable empirical and ideological alternative to the European one.

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¹⁹ Regarding in particular Russia, it is interesting to note that, according to Vsevolod Samokhvalov “Russia did not oppose Chinese economic expansion into Central Asia. But when China sought to officially expand the mandate of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation to include an economic dimension, Russia blocked it” (Samokhvalov, 2018, p. 36).

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Book reviews/Comptes-rendus



La Coopération de Shanghai. Conceptualiser la nouvelle Asie, par Pierre Chabal, Liège, Presses Universitaires de Liège, 2019, 271 p. (ISBN : 9 782875 622167)

Cet ouvrage se trouve à l'intersection des Relations internationales et des études sur le régionalisme comparé, et traite de la construction de la « nouvelle Asie » au travers de la construction et l'évolution de l'Organisation de coopération de Shanghai (OCS). Il s'agit d'une monographie inédite qui se donne pour ambition de comprendre comment les Relations internationales évoluent dans un contexte d'après-guerre.

L'enseignement majeur de cette recherche tient dans l'idée que les périodes d'après-guerre constituent des moments particuliers dans l'histoire dans le sens où les changements systémiques, dont elles sont porteuses, sont propices à l'essor de dynamiques régionales et, partant, à la régionalisation des affaires internationales. En témoignent les transformations encourues par l'Asie durant ces trente dernières années qui, plutôt que de sombrer dans une anarchie post-soviétique, est parvenue à se réinventer en épousant la voie de la coopération régionale et en donnant naissance à une « nouvelle Asie ». Le changement systémique que provoque le phénomène régional vaut tant pour l'Asie que pour l'ensemble de la planète. En d'autres mots, la refonte de l'ordre mondial dans l'après-guerre froide n'est ni celui de la fin de l'histoire, ni celui de l'universalisation de la démocratie de marché à l'occidentale, ni celui de la lutte des civilisations de type hungtintoniennes, mais celui de la multi-régionalisation du monde (p. 173).

Le monde tout comme l'Asie se structurent ou s'organisent toujours davantage en régions, en témoignent l'Association des nations d'Asie du Sud-Est (ASEAN) ; l'Association sud-asiatique pour la coopération régionale (SAARC), l'Organisation du traité de sécurité collective (OTSC) ou

¹ Sebastian Santander, professeur ordinaire, directeur du *Center for International Relations Studies (CEIR)*, directeur de la revue *Journal of Cross-Regional Dialogues (JCRD)*/*Revue de Dialogues Inter-Régionaux (RDIR)* et président du Département de Science politique de l'Université de Liège (ULiège), Belgique.

l'Union économique eurasiatique (UEEA). Bien que le monde soit de plus en plus structuré par les dynamiques régionales, l'ouvrage démontre que ces dernières ne se développent pas de manière uniforme et que chaque projet évolue selon un contexte qui lui est propre. L'analyse comparative mobilisée atteste de l'existence d'une multiplicité de formes d'intégration et de coopération régionales. Pour ce faire, l'ouvrage a fait le choix de se concentrer sur l'Organisation de coopération de Shanghai (OCS). L'intention de l'auteur est de parvenir à conceptualiser la nouvelle Asie à partir de l'OCS. Celle-ci intègre les pays d'Asie centrale aux côtés des grandes puissances rivales (Chine, Inde, Russie, Pakistan) et a pour vocation de s'étendre toujours davantage vers d'autres pays d'Asie et d'Eurasie. Le premier mérite de cet ouvrage est de faire la lumière sur l'OCS qui est fort mal connue en Europe et plus particulièrement dans le monde académique francophone.

La méthodologie privilégiée est triple. Tout d'abord, il s'agit de s'en tenir à la neutralité axiologique. Celle-ci permet à l'auteur d'évacuer toute interprétation eurocentrée et tout jugement de valeur vis-à-vis de l'objet étudié. Ensuite, bien que l'analyse se focalise plus particulièrement sur l'OCS, elle garde un œil sur les projets régionaux d'autres continents. En effet, l'auteur fait des « incursions » comparatives en se focalisant sur la nature et la dynamique (fonctionnement, accomplissements, limites) d'autres organisations régionales avec une attention particulière pour l'Union européenne (UE). L'analyse comparative lui permet de mieux saisir les spécificités de l'OCS ainsi que de démontrer que cette organisation ne reproduit pas un modèle de coopération extérieure et n'obéit pas à des règles occidentales. Enfin, la troisième méthode est de type « *intermes-tic* » dans le sens où l'ouvrage voit comment la dynamique de la politique interne aux États influe sur la nature et la construction de la région, et comment cette dernière contribue à la multilatéralisation des préférences nationales et partant au repositionnement régional de ses membres.

Pour comprendre l'OCS, l'ouvrage octroie une place centrale à la réflexion théorique. Selon l'auteur, cela se justifie par le fait que « [...] l'Asie [...] change plus vite que l'observateur n'en a (souvent) conscience » (p. 50). La théorie lui permettrait donc de donner une intelligibilité à son objet d'étude ; ce qui amène l'ouvrage à appréhender l'OCS par approches théoriques successives. Cet exercice lui permet de démontrer les sérieuses limites de toute une série de théories de Relations internationales et d'en privilégier d'autres. Il écarte les approches fonctionnalistes, mondialistes et néo-marxistes mais non sans retenir l'interprétation de l'économie-monde telle qu'élaborée par l'école des annales de Fernand

Braudel. Ces approches, à l'exception de celle de F. Braudel, sont dans l'incapacité de comprendre la nouvelle Asie et sa place dans les Relations internationales. La démarche théorique développée par l'ouvrage pour expliquer le phénomène de l'OCS renvoie à une interprétation de type syncrétique dans le sens où elle cherche à construire une interprétation à partir de théories initialement considérées comme incompatibles et basée sur le réalisme structurel, l'interdépendance complexe et le transnationalisme.

L'approche réaliste est celle qui permet de déceler le mieux les acteurs qui exercent un poids et qui jouent un rôle prépondérant dans la construction de la région. Contrairement à d'autres projets régionaux dans le monde, ce ne sont pas les institutions à caractère supranational ni les acteurs transnationaux qui déterminent le processus de l'OCS, mais bien l'État. Ce dernier ainsi que ses intérêts et sa préoccupation pour la sécurité se trouvent au cœur du projet régional asiatique. En outre, toute possibilité d'interventionnisme extérieur dans les affaires intérieures des États membres est catégoriquement bannie. Toutefois, l'auteur récuse le réalisme classique car seul le réalisme structurel (ou néoréalisme) est à même d'expliquer le passage de l'« État égoïste » à l'« État coopératif » en Asie. L'interprétation néoréaliste permet à l'auteur de démontrer que l'OCS constitue une organisation qui dépasse la logique réaliste traditionnelle du jeu à somme nulle, de l'équilibre des puissances propre au XIX^e siècle et de la jungle des souverainetés de l'état de nature. L'OCS témoigne d'une réalité particulière, celle d'une Asie modelée par un système semi-institutionnalisé qui n'est ni tout à fait anarchique ni tout à fait hiérarchisé.

Toutefois, l'ouvrage assume que l'OCS crée une dynamique exceptionnelle qui permet à des anciens ennemis de dépasser la logique de la confrontation pour mettre en place une coopération permanente, créant ainsi un ordre nouveau en Asie qui mêle des intérêts sécuritaires réalistes mais au service de dépendances mutuelles (énergétiques, logistiques et régulatrices). En d'autres termes, il y aurait un dépassement de l'anarchie qui s'illustre par un « intergouvernementalisme post-anarchique ». Mais pour pouvoir démontrer cela, l'auteur a besoin de sortir d'une simple interprétation stato-centrée, dépasser la démarche néoréaliste et mobiliser d'autres approches théoriques. Pour récuser l'idée que l'OCS est un phénomène éphémère et réversible, l'auteur se penche sur l'approche transnationaliste et de l'interdépendance complexe. Ceci étant, ces dernières ne sont pas mobilisées pour contester le rôle déterminant de l'État dans la construction de la nouvelle Asie, d'autant que l'ouvrage souligne avec

emphase le caractère fort et autoritaire de l'État ainsi que son emprise sur la société, l'économie et sur le jeu des relations entre voisins. Le recours à ces interprétations théoriques non-réalistes permet de saisir les enjeux ou les fléaux communs (terrorisme international, séparatisme territorial et extrémisme politique) qui guettent tous les États de la région et de voir comment ils façonnent les préoccupations de la coopération régionale et alimentent l'essor d'un esprit commun de bon voisinage (« esprit de Shanghai ») (p. 123).

L'ouvrage de Pierre Chabal est extrêmement intéressant, captivant et fouillé. Il repose sur une bibliographie multilingue impressionnante de plus de 40 pages. En outre, la réflexion qui est proposée sur la nouvelle Asie par l'intermédiaire de l'étude de l'OCS est stimulante et rafraichissante d'autant qu'elle propose une lecture originale et différente de celle à laquelle la littérature spécialisée est habituée. La recherche est bien amenée et repose sur une solide maîtrise du débat théorique en Relations internationales. Par ailleurs, la connaissance du terrain de l'auteur est particulièrement fine. Il s'agit d'une contribution conséquente à la discipline. Elle enrichit substantiellement la littérature scientifique existante sur le phénomène des dynamiques régionales ainsi que sur l'OCS qui demeure un projet régional peu ou mal connu, pour le moins en Europe. Il s'agit donc d'une recherche qui est la très bienvenue.

Antonios VLASSIS¹

***Commercial Realism and EU Trade Policy: Competing for Economic Power in Asia and the Americas*, by Katharina L. Meissner, London, Routledge, 2018, 215p. (ISBN: 9780367666484)**

This book seeks to understand the external trade relations of the European Union (EU), by challenging the liberal-institutionalist approach, which is dominant in the literature on EU foreign relations. Thus, the book explores why and how the EU systematically engages in trade relations and it analyzes the motives regarding the varying modes – bilateralism, inter-regionalism, multilateralism – of EU trade diplomacy. More specifically, the author emphasizes two key questions: firstly, she focuses on why the EU has turned from interregional to bilateral modes of external trade relations and secondly on why the EU restricts some of its relations to specific issues, while other external trade relations are comprehensive, by targeting investments, services, and regulatory standards. In order to develop a relevant answer to these questions, Katharina L. Meissner presents an approach drawing largely on core features of realist thought and calling it ‘commercial realism’. As such, she aims to develop a consistent theoretical framework, challenging competing theories on EU external relations rooted in liberal-institutionalist international relations theorizing, such as commercial liberalism (Moravcsik, 1997; Dür, 2010; Meunier and Vachudova, 2018) and the principal-agent approach (Pollack, 2003; Da Conceição-Heldt, 2010; Andriansen, 2016).

The issue of whether internal/domestic or external factors linked to the international system shape an actor’s foreign policy is among the most stimulating topics in the international relations literature. Against a set of EU internal factors that are lobbying activities by European interest groups and the heterogeneity or homogeneity of EU member states’ preferences, commercial realism points out that these factors are not the only

¹ Antonios Vlassis is a senior researcher at the Center for International Relations Studies (CEFIR), lecturer at the Department of Political Science, University of Liège (ULiège) (Belgium) and editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Cross-Regional Dialogues (JCRD)/Revue de Dialogues Inter-Régionaux (RDIR)*.

possible explanation of EU external trade action, paying special attention to factors located at the international level. K.L. Meisner assumes that external factors have a key impact on the modes of EU trade relations. She argues that the EU reacts to changes in the global economy when making decisions about its foreign trade relations. As stressed by the author, “the different modes the EU applies in external trade relations are a result of Europe’s attempt to secure its economic and regulatory power” (Meisner, 2018, p. 7) and they are strongly rooted both in the practices of rival actors such as the United States (US) and China in other world regions and in the varying degrees of cohesion of these regions. In this view, the EU seeks to promote an interregional mode of trade relations, when a region is highly cohesive, whereas a bilateral agreement is more likely to be successful with a region with less team spirit. Likewise, if the US and China have broad trade relations with a region that is cohesive, the EU is expected to promote a comprehensive interregionalism.

The book’s research design is articulated around five cases. Main cases are drawn from the regions of Southeast Asia and South America, focusing on EU external trade relations towards Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR). Secondary cases deal with the regions of Africa, Latin America and the Middle East, analysing the EU trade relations with the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the Andean Community (CAN) and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). As such, the author argues that rival actors – the US and more recently China – had a strong impact on EU external trade relations and their modes towards Latin America. The EU promoted broad trade relations with MERCOSUR in order to secure its regulatory and economic powers vis-à-vis rival actors. However, the EU started to negotiate interregional agreements, and then switched to bilateral negotiations with Brazil, because MERCOSUR’s low cohesion was influential regarding the EU’s decision to choose a bilateral mode in exercising its trade relations. Moreover, according to the author, Europe’s turn from interregional to bilateral negotiations on comprehensive free trade agreements (FTAs) with CAN’s member states Colombia, Ecuador and Peru also confirms that the trade action of the US and China and the cohesion of a regional organisation have a key impact on the design of EU external trade relations and the EU’s use of bilateralism. In addition, K.L. Meissner argues that the rivaling activities of China and the US, as well as of Japan in combination with the breakdown of the World Trade Organization’s (WTO) Doha Round made negotiations on a comprehensive FTA with ASEAN’s economies an EU priority. However, the author suggests that the EU opted for bilateral agreements, such

as those with Singapore or Vietnam deviating from its commitment to interregionalism, because the EU regional comprehensive ambition would clash with ASEAN's lack of cohesion.

Taken as a whole, the book succeeds in providing an integral and convincing analysis on why the EU has increasingly made use of bilateral trade relations, despite a normative commitment to support regional integration beyond Europe. The author develops a theoretical model based on commercial realism and it offers a parsimonious and relevant approach on EU external trade relations. Instead, three key points should receive more attention from the author.

Firstly, K.L. Meissner considers the EU trade partners as passive actors, without concrete influence, trade agendas and specific interests. Instead, their role is to be subject to the international competition between strong trade powerhouses such as the US, the EU and China. However, the trade agreement between EU and MERCOSUR concluded in June 2019 reveals that the EU external trade relations are not only rooted in European internal factors or external ones located at the international level, but they are also strongly linked to the agenda of trade partners. A key reason for the conclusion of EU-MERCOSUR agreement after twenty years of negotiation is the convergence of trade interests from the two powerful economies of the organisation. In this respect, the arrival in power of Macri and Bolsonaro in Argentina and Brazil respectively made the EU-MERCOSUR interregional agreement an economic priority. Likewise, the bilateral trade agreement between EU and Singapore is also rooted in the ambitious trade agenda promoted by Singapore over the last twenty years and comprising in total 25 regional and bilateral FTAs.

Secondly, the author considers bilateralism and interregionalism as conflictual EU trade practices, pitting these activities off against each other. In other words, when the EU opts for the bilateral way, it puts in question its interregional commitment. However, bilateralism and interregionalism could be complementary activities in the EU toolbox. In this respect, it would be interesting to explore if the EU started negotiating a trade agreement with Brazil in order to exert more pressure on the other MERCOSUR members and to use a potential bilateral agreement as a driver for an interregional partnership. In a similar vein, today the EU is negotiating trade agreements with ASEAN's member states, while at the regional level, the European Commission and the ASEAN's members are exploring the prospects towards the resumption of region-to-region negotiations through a joint EU-ASEAN Working Group.

Thirdly, in 1997, regarding Andrew Moravcsik's approach on liberal intergovernmentalism, Andy Smith and Christian Lequesne argued that "due to excessive rationalization, this theoretical enterprise is limited to be monocausal and therefore it only partially understands the originality of politics within the European Union" (Lequesne and Smith, 1997). As such, even though a parsimonious approach provides scientific rigor, it presents analytical limits in order to explore the complexity of the EU trade policy and the interlinked factors shaping the design of EU external relations. Thus, a multidimensional analysis, which finely balances internal and external factors is necessary for assessing the way the EU goes in asserting its trade powers in foreign affairs (Santander and Vlassis, 2020). For example, following a strong controversy about the powers and role of national and sub-national parliaments in the process of the EU-Canada Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA), the EU recently considered addressing investment provisions in separate agreements with EU partners. Put differently, an internal institutional factor had a clear impact on the design of EU external trade relations. Likewise, today the reinforcement of Eurosceptic parties in the European Parliament and of political groups reluctant to and critical about the promotion of trade agreements could shake up the design of the EU's trade agenda. It is revealing that in the conclusion, the author acknowledges the importance of a complementary multi-causal approach, combining EU-external and EU-internal factors, in order to analyse "how rival actors, the counterpart region, EU member states, and interest groups operate together in explaining trade decisions" (Meissner, 2018, p. 207).

To conclude, the book expands existing scholarship and opens up a much-needed conversation with respect to the factors shaping EU foreign policy and to the deep mutations underway in the EU external trade relations. There is no doubt that the book is a solid piece of work and can be recommended as key reading for scholars, researchers and practitioners in various areas, such as foreign policy, regionalism, international political economy, as well as EU external action.

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Name/Nom :

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The field on regionalism studies has long been centered and dominated by the study of European integration. The intention of this scientific journal is to go beyond the euro-centric perspective and open up to the comparative analysis of the phenomenon of regionalization and the regional organizations that structure the international scene, as well as the study of their respective interactions. The journal aims to study the regional phenomenon from the inside-out and outside-in perspective in order to better understand its internal dynamics, the external influences (globalization, multipolarization) of which it is the object and its role in international relationships. The project is open to interdisciplinarity and aims to provide multi-thematic analyzes of regional experiences in Africa, Latin America and North America, Asia, Eurasia and Oceania without neglecting study of European regionalism.

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