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THE INCREASING INFLUENCE OF EMERGING POWERS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS: A BRIEF ANALYSIS

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Abstract: Using four emerging powers as a case study (China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey), this paper examined how the current redistribution of power in the contemporary world has affected the Western Balkan region. The objective was to shed light on the ability of the emerging powers to make use of soft power to increase their influence. This paper demonstrated that the growing presence in the Western Balkan region of these emerging powers occurred to the detriment of traditional actors in the region, in particular to the European Union and the United States. While Russia favored political instability in the region to increase its grip, China proposed a new economic project to reach the European market and expand its own norms. As far as Saudi Arabia and Turkey were concerned, both states privileged the use of religious soft power in Muslim-majority countries. The paper concluded that a rapid European response is required today if the EU wants to remain the most influential actor in the Western Balkans.

Keywords: Emerging Powers; Western Balkans; Power; Influence; European Union

INTRODUCTION

While the fall of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1991 led to the end of the bipolar world and the beginning of the American hegemony, the emergence of new powers marked the appearance of multipolar world order. Using the Western Balkans¹ (WB) as a case study, this work examines the consequences of this shift at the global level through the following question: to what extent does the arrival of emerging powers in the WB influence the redistribution of power in the multipolar world? After a theoretical analysis that develops how these powers have emerged, this research further focuses on the influence in the WB of four powers: China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. Whether for historical, political, economic, or cultural reasons, these four powers mentioned above are the most active in the region. Following a short introduction, the research proposes to study these emerging powers through three transversal sub-questions: (a) How do the emerging powers carry out their economic objectives in the WB?; (b) What strategies do the emerging powers extend their political

¹The Western Balkans consists of 6 states: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia.

influence in the WB?; and (c) Do the emerging powers threaten the EU's influence in the WB? Finally, it is essential to point out that this work is based on qualitative research and conducted through articles, books, chapters of collective books, reports, and publications of research institutes.

THE EMERGENCE OF NEW POWERS

The fall of the USSR disrupted the world order, and consequently, it marked the end of the bipolar world led by the two superpowers: the USSR and the United States (US). The world then witnessed the triumph of the liberal ideology over communism, and the US became the only world superpower, whether in military, economic, or technological terms (Ikenberry 2008, 15). Nevertheless, following the fall of the USSR, a certain global momentum towards multilateralism emerged, and numerous summits were held to this end (Santander 2009, 14).

Several examples can be highlighted: the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio (1992), the creation of the World Trade Organization (WTO 1995), the Kyoto Protocol (1997), and the Rome Diplomatic Conference for an International Criminal Court (1998). However, when joining these new organizations at the beginning of the XXI century, several emerging countries quickly tried to unify their positions to defend their common claims better (Wintgens and Zacharie 2016, 2). According to Carlos Milani (2011), the emerging powers did not aim directly at "radically transforming the world order (...) but rather demanded the reform of global governance by taking into account the new realities of the international configuration" (p. 60). An emerging power is thus "a country which is questioning its place in the established order and which, consequently, shows political ambition" (Milani 2011, 61). Nevertheless, the new world order's configuration only appeared to be possible after the progressive retreat of the US on the international stage.

In this regard, it should be stressed that the attacks of 11 September 2001 deeply questioned for the first time the military hegemony that the US had enjoyed until then and also marked the end of the North American economic expansion (Dabat and Leal 2019, 101). The US was engaged in what Pierre Mélandri (2007) describes as "degraded multilateralism" (p. 208). This phenomenon is marked by a series of unilateral US military interventions abroad. This was the case in Haiti (1994), Iraq (1998), and Kosovo (1998), which confirms, as Sebastian Santander stresses, that the US sought to distance itself from multilateral organizations and the constraints that these imposed (Santander 2009, 15-16). Consequently, the US progressively isolated itself from international organizations (IOs), which increased during the economic crisis that shook the economy of the US (and the world) in 2008 and 2009. Facing a situation close to what Keynes considered "a liquidity trap and consists of low-interest rate which do not generate significant growth in productive investment nor employment" (Dabat and Leal 2019, 101), the US witnessed the emergence of new powers. This is notably the case of the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), a category proposed in 2001 by Jim O'Neill (Le Monde 2021). Thus, the vacuum of power created by the US retreat progressively left space for the emerging powers to gain power on the international stage. At their request, a series of new IOs and intergovernmental forums were created, among which the establishment of the Group of Twenty (G20) remains the most evocative example. Composed of 19 states and the EU, the G20

seeks to integrate the strongest emerging powers into world politics to rebalance the world order (Vercauteren 2015, 102). Hence, it is very interesting to stress that the four emerging countries that this paper will focus on are all members of the G20, which clearly shows that these states are now worldly recognized as influential countries. Nevertheless, two cleavages emerge from this redistribution of power at the global level: the informal/formal and the multilateralism/bilateralism cleavages (Vercauteren 2015, 103).

The first refers to the idea that through their respective participation in informal forums such as the G20 or specific forums between the BRICS countries, the emerging powers indirectly increase their influence and strengthen their position in formal organizations of global governance such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. The second cleavage refers to the regular attempts by China, and in the wake of several emerging powers, to limit the number of multilateral agreements. Above all, these states are trying to promote bilateral exchanges with their partners to bypass the traditional multilateral bodies of the United Nations (UN). Combined, these two phenomena seem to confirm and even reinforce the importance of emerging countries in the new world order configuration.

However, if these countries play such a strong role in global governance today, their influence is inevitably reflected in the WB region. This section examines the influence of four states in the region: China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. To this end, three transversal topics are examined in the form of questions to assess the impact of their arrival in the WB.

How do the emerging powers carry out their economic objectives in the WB?

This section examines the infrastructures set up by the emerging countries in the WB and analyses the various trade agreements. Finally, it emphasizes the WB states' risks in their relations with these powers. Above all, it is crucial to underline that the WB offers many opportunities for the emerging powers active in the region due to their history, culture, natural resources, and geography. In their relentless race for energy resources, which represent a central aspect for a state to ensure economic growth, the emerging countries must inevitably open up to new markets (Milani 2011, 60). This is particularly true for China, which aims to strengthen its economic cooperation through the 17+1 format. Initiated by China, this forum seeks to bypass the EU institutional framework considered too formal and rigid by Chinese leaders. Several themes are addressed: culture, agriculture and forestry, finance, diplomacy, and finally, energy (Veron 2021). The 17+1 format is the continuation of China's previous political approach to the WB states (2000-2020) since, as Ana Krstinovska highlights (2022), "most of the Chinese donations originally concerned education, health, infrastructure, agriculture, and military equipment (to Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia only)" (p. 232).

However, Russia also aspires to establish its grip on energy sectors such as mining and oil. To this end, according to Sergey Sutyurin *et al.* (2019), Russia has recently invested massively in the WB states through foreign direct investment (FDI), in particular in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro (p. 329). Although the authors of this research note the potential imprecision of the available data, they estimate that the Russian petrochemical giants, Lukoil and Zarubezhneft, benefit from an almost monopoly in these countries (Sutyurin *et al.* 2019, 329). As Stanislav Secieru (2019) adds, although Russian state-controlled Zarubezhneft constantly faces

heavy annual losses, the company shows no intention of withdrawing from the WB, which demonstrates, according to the author, that “mercantilism was disguising Moscow's geopolitical objectives” (p. 3).

As a response to Russia and in order to ensure its influence in the WB, ahead of other emerging competitors, China proposed an evolutionary project spread over 36 years (2013-2049): the ‘One Belt, One Road’ (OBOR) project, later renamed as the ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ (BRI) or the ‘New Silk Road’. Announced with great fanfare in 2013 by Chinese President Xi Jinping, this project refers to the historical importance of the traditional Silk Road, which, according to Xi Jinping, “had proved [during its 2000 years of existence] that countries with differences in race, belief and cultural background can share peace and development as long as they persist in unity and mutual trust, equality and mutual benefit, mutual tolerance and learning from each other, as well as cooperation and win-win outcomes” (Jinping 2013).

Concretely, the BRI is a strategy for the global development of infrastructures between Europe (the port of Piraeus in Athens was bought in 2016 by the Chinese company ‘China Ocean Shipping Company’ (COSCO) and China to secure “access to markets and strategic raw materials [to] counter the effects of post-2008 protectionism and US diplomatic offensives” (Carrai, Defraigne, and Wouters 2020, 15). Further, the BRI also seeks to allow the export of a wide range of products to Beijing, such as raw materials (mining, gas, and coal) or transportation means (cars and airports) (Hackaj 2018, 7). Finally, expanding Chinese norms and standards remains one of China’s priorities and gaining privileged access to the European market (Carrai, Defraigne, and Wouters 2020, 15). To this end, the BRI aims to strengthen trade by creating seven corridors, one of which crosses the WB. This is the case of the ‘Balkan Silk Road’ as it is called, a corridor that firstly connects Athens, Skopje, Belgrade, and Budapest, thus promoting trade between the Mediterranean and Central Europe (and so, Western Europe for a second time) (Rencz 2019, 6).

Moreover, while China is investing massively in infrastructure to extend its zone of influence in the WB, this is also the case with Turkey. The attraction of the European market pushes the Turkish authorities to explore new entry points to the EU. To this end, Turkey is financing a highway currently under construction between Sarajevo and Belgrade. This connection is all the more symbolic because of the various wars that the different WB states have undergone at the dawn of the XXI century (Kovacevic 2021). Turkey is also investing in a gas pipeline known as ‘TurkStream’ parallel to the future highway and aims to supply Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia with gas. As far as Serbia is concerned, the authorities have also established a privileged economic partner of Turkey, particularly since the establishment of the Turkey-Serbia High-Level Cooperation Council. Limited to an exchange volume of one million dollars in 2011, the Turkish investments in Serbia reached no less than 1.2 billion euros in 2021, in particular thanks to this Cooperation Council and the free trade agreement between the two parties (Presidency of the Republic of Turkey 2019).

Nevertheless, behind these figures hides another reality; according to Alida Vračić (2016), despite significant investments also coming from the private sector, “the long-promised economic prospects that Turkey pledged to the [WB] region have also not materialized” (p. 6). This situation is similar to China. While the BRI project aims to establish win-win cooperation

through bilateral agreements between China and the other states, not all benefit equally from Chinese investments. The example of Montenegro speaks for itself.

As revealed by the Financial Times, Montenegro, a state in great financial difficulty and unable to pay off its debts to China, officially requested more than one billion euros from the EU on 12 April 2021 (Hopkins 2021). Facing the EU's negative response, the Union reminded Montenegro that the EU was "not repaying the loans they (Montenegro) are taking from third parties", Montenegro is now running the risk of a profound macroeconomic imbalance and dependence on China (Nielsen 2021). Regretting this troubling situation, Florian Bieber and Nikolaos Tzifakis (2019) state that today "[we must] acknowledge that China has not so far advanced any political vision for the (WB) region (...) [and] Beijing has confined itself to the role of an economic partner that seeks new investments and deals" (p. 12).

Finally, Saudi Arabia, just like China, seems to favor bilateral agreements with the WB states, in particular with Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Although most Arab interests in the WB appear to be more political than economic, Saudi Arabia has established a significant arms trade with its Serbian partner. According to data available on the Trading Economics platform, the volume of arms exports from Serbia today amounts to \$2.12 million in 2019, making Serbia the largest arms exporter in the region (Trading Economics 2021).

As for Bosnia and Herzegovina, Saudi Arabia seeks to accommodate an increasing number of Arab investors in the Bosnian capital city. To this end, many air companies now connect Riyadh directly to Sarajevo, and Saudi Arabia has financed several luxury hotels to accommodate Arab investors. In addition, the 'Sarajevo City Center' and the 'BBI Centar', two important shopping malls built with Arab funds between 2008 and 2014, have also led to the rise of Arab tourism in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Martin-Diaz 2021, 119). Thus, it is interesting to note that very quickly, Bosnia and Herzegovina has become one of the most popular destinations for the Arab middle class looking for alternatives to Tunisia, Egypt, or Libya since the beginning of the Arab Spring in December 2010 (Editorial Board 2017).

What strategies do the emerging powers extend their political influence in the WB?

Following the first sub-question that assessed the economic impact of emerging countries and their interests in the WB, it is also essential to analyze in this section the political approaches favored by emerging countries to extend their zone of influence in the region. Of course, since the two sections are strongly linked, both remain interconnected, and links are inevitable. Russia illustrates this phenomenon: as pointed out earlier, while the company Zarubezhneft is in a constant loss in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Secrieru (2019) notes that "profit-making was often of secondary importance: the mercantilist drive sought to create dependencies and endow the Russian state with political influence in the region" (p. 3).

Consequently, through economic dependence, Russia attempts to extend its zone of influence in the WB countries. Moreover, Russia, a historical ally of Serbia (Lika 2016, 557), relies on the Serbian minorities settled in several states in the region to consolidate its influence. Indeed, the Russian authorities revive the nationalist desires of Serbian minorities, whether in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, or Montenegro, to weaken the governments in place in these states (Beha 2015, 105). In this regard, the example of Bosnia and Herzegovina is interesting. In

this country that remains composed of various ethnic groups, Russia encouraged the Serbian minority to organize a referendum in February 2016 to separate its territory from the rest of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Unsurprisingly, 90% of this Serb-originated population showed themselves in favor of the split (Shapiro 2018, 2). Although the EU considered this referendum illegitimate, Russia's strong political influence was still exerted in the WB.

Unlike Russia, China, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey privileged the use of soft power² towards the WB, whether religious in the case of Saudi Arabia and Turkey or cultural in the case of China, in order to increase their visibility on the ground. Historically, during the massacres perpetrated in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the early 1990s, Turkey and Saudi Arabia drew closer to the Muslim-majority WB countries, i.e., Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo (Hänsel and Feyerabend 2018, 7). In these states, both emerging powers have endeavored to restore the Muslim heritage, particularly through the construction of new mosques. Two examples can be highlighted: the construction financed by Turkey of the largest Ottoman-style mosque in the WB region (in Tirana) and inaugurated by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan himself (Rasidagic and Hesova 2020, 108-109) and the fully Arab-funded building in 2000 of the King Fahd Mosque, a gigantic mosque installed in the Alipašino polje district of Sarajevo (Editorial Board 2017). In this particular way, it is also interesting to note that the use of religious soft power is not recent in the case of Saudi Arabia. This strategy finds its roots in the pan-Arabist project of previous Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser to extend, as early as the 1960s, the Wahhabi-Salafist religious influence in Muslim countries (Bayramzadeh 2021). Relying on Arab non-governmental organizations (NGOs) established in the region, the Wahhabi ideology has rapidly spread through the WB (Mouline 2020, 44).

In contrast, China does not articulate its soft power around an ideology but rather favors the spread of its own culture. To this end, education is a key element of China's strategy, which refers somehow to the first pillar of Mao Zedong's approach in the 60s (the two additional pillars being the army and the Communist Party) (Tonchev 2020, 8). Confucius Institutes (CI) is established in most WB states and offer local students the opportunity to discover Chinese culture and language. Run by the Chinese Ministry of Education, these CI promote a positive image of China abroad. They also offer the opportunity to discover Chinese society and politics and, like Saudi Arabia, facilitate academic exchanges between WB countries and universities based in Beijing (Babublik 2021) (or in Riyadh for students from Muslim-majority countries) (Conesa 2016). Finally, politically using health issues, China has become the main donor of Covid vaccines to five WB countries respectively to Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Northern Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia (Hopkins 2021).

The exclusion of Kosovo is not without consequences for this country; unlike Saudi Arabia and Turkey, but in the same way as Russia, China still refuses to recognize the independence of the Republic of Kosovo and consequently limits its investments to the five other WB states. As members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), China and Russia use their veto right at the international level to prevent Kosovo from international recognition of

² The concept of soft power is defined by Joseph Nye as "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. [Thus, soft power] arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies". See: Nye Jr., Joseph, "Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics", New York, Public Affairs, 2004, p. 10.

its territorial sovereignty. However, China and Russia have different reasons for this rejection. On the one hand, and similar to some EU member states (MS) that still refuse to recognize the state of Kosovo³, China is now facing internal tensions. For many years, the Chinese authorities have feared that recognizing Kosovo's independence would create a precedent that could, in the long term, revive the desire for independence of the regions of Tibet and Xinjiang (Tonchev 2017, 2).

On the other hand, Russia seems to be using this right of veto to assert its influence in the region even more. In fact, by preventing Kosovo from being internationally recognized, Russia drastically reduces the chances of obtaining a final agreement between the Kosovar and Serbian authorities in the 2011 EU-initiated normalization process where both Kosovo and Serbia are expected to recognize each other.

Nevertheless, without a formal agreement between the two protagonists, Serbia cannot hope to join the EU since a final agreement remains a condition imposed by the EU in Chapter 35 of the negotiating framework with Serbia. Back in 2012, Wolfgang Koeth (2012) summed up this situation as follows: "without a credible perspective for Kosovo, there is no credible membership perspective for Serbia, [and] without a perspective for Serbia, there is no credible perspective for the rest of the Western Balkans" (p. 36), thus allowing the *status quo* that the Russian authorities pursue (Bieber and Tzifakis 2019, 6).

Do the emerging powers threaten the EU's influence in the WB?

The above example perfectly illustrates a new situation for the EU: while it has always been and is still considered the most powerful external actor in the WB, especially since the implementation of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) (Bretherton and Vogler 2006, 147), the EU is now facing new challenges. Built around the potential integration of the WB states into the Union on the principle of meritocracy (Garde 2017, 69), this policy has proven to be "the major instrument through which the European Union [seeks] to foster democratic reforms in the Western Balkans" (Richter and Wunsch 2020, 41). However, it is clear that today, the project of a possible enlargement seems to be standing still for several reasons.

Firstly, the EU is currently going through 'enlargement fatigue'. The rise of nationalism in the many EU Member States (MS) and the reluctance to integrate states that remain prone to organized crime and have extremely high unemployment rates hold back the MS's willingness to open up to the WB countries. Secondly, and in contrast, the six WB countries are experiencing what scholars call 'waiting fatigue'. This lack of significant progress in the accession process drives the six states concerned to distance themselves from the EU and turn more towards the other powers active in the region. Thirdly, the WB states are witnessing the gradual withdrawal of the EU and the US's traditional powers from their region.

On the one hand, the EU has undergone a succession of economic and financial crises since 2008 that have forced its leaders to opt for austerity policies, which have impacted the WB. Indeed, most WB states are experiencing a strong decline in their respective economies, growth, and social, political, and institutional reforms. As already shown in 2012, their ability to meet the

³Those EU Member States are: Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia, and Spain. For more information, see notably Newman Edward and Visoka Gëzim, "The Foreign Policy of State Recognition: Kosovo's Diplomatic Strategy to Join International Society", *Foreign Policy Analysis*, Vol. 14, No. 3, 2018, p. 380.

EU's membership criteria is undermined, and the implementation of the *acquis communautaire* in these countries is not taking place (Panagiotou 2012, 1-2).

In addition, internal problems such as the Brexit or migration crisis also seem to affect its political will to carry on with enlargement, including the WB. On the other hand, the US is progressively leaving the WB region for Asia, preferring to let the EU tackle the problems that concern it most (Lika 2021).

Faced with the 'power vacuum' that the European and US withdrawal is creating, several authors believe today that the EU must rapidly react: these suggest that if the EU does not rapidly offer new political perspectives to the WB states, in particular by starting the negotiation process with all of them (Dabrowskis 2020), then "Turkey, Russia, and China will continue to pursue their political and economic priorities in the Western Balkans (...) to the detriment of the region itself and EU countries' interests" (Tcherneva and Varma 2019). According to a European diplomat, "if we (the EU) do not act, we allow other actors to exert their political and economic influence in the region, which is not in our interest" (Brzozowski and Makszimov 2021). Nevertheless, it must be concluded that today, the WB states have already changed their approach towards the EU significantly, especially in terms of discourse. The example of Serbia speaks for itself: although it has been negotiating with the EU since 2014, the tone of the Serbian president, Aleksandar Vučić, is hardening, threatening that Serbia will turn even more to Russia and China if the European project does not materialize soon (Gotev 2021). Despite the 82.5% (but only 64.1% in Serbia) of the total population of the WB remaining in favor of EU integration (Stratula *et al.* 2020, 3), such a situation depicts, once again, the growing influence of the emerging powers in the WB and consequently, the clear loss of influence of the EU.

CONCLUSION

This research aimed to examine how the emerging powers in the WB influence the redistribution of power in a multipolar world. Three sub-questions further allowed us to examine specific aspects related to the presence of emerging powers. Several elements can be linked to the theoretical framework to provide an answer, admittedly far from univocal, to the initial research question.

First, emerging countries are questioning their place in global governance. To do so, they seek to increase their visibility abroad, particularly in the WB region. The use of soft power seems to be privileged, whether it is religious in the case of Saudi Arabia and Turkey or cultural and educational in the case of China. Moreover, as this research points out, the EU's position as the main external actor in the Balkans is now threatened by the emerging countries, which confirms the current redistribution of power to the latter's advantage. Several reasons have been mentioned, notably the progressive withdrawal of the US, a traditional power in the region, or the enlargement and 'waiting fatigue' that is taking hold between the EU and the WB countries. Secondly, the formal/informal cleavage can be observed through the growing number of informal forums set up by the emerging powers.

An illustrative example is the 17+1 format supported by China, which aims to bypass the more complex institutional framework of the EU. Nevertheless, it is clear that by including EU MS, China is extending its influence in formal international organizations.

Thirdly, the multilateralism/bilateralism cleavage is strongly tilted in favor of the latter since emerging powers take much more benefits from bilateral agreements with a third country.

From these agreements, a relationship of dependence regularly emerges, with the WB heavily relying on the powers active in the region to supply essential resources and infrastructure. However, this research has shown that depending on emerging powers fragilizes third countries; for example, the case of Montenegro with China. Will the growing influence of emerging powers force the EU to accelerate the integration of the WB states into the Union? What dangers do these WB countries run if they increase their economic and political dependence on emerging powers? Would the emerging powers be able to strengthen the economic development of the WB in the future? Furthermore, how can the current Russian invasion of Ukraine and the economic sanctions impact its influence in the WB?

These questions offer new analytical perspectives on the emerging powers' increasing presence in the WB region.

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