

INFLUENCE OF NON-WESTERN ACTORS IN THE BALKANS

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Abstract

In recent years, the balance of power of international actors has changed significantly. The emergence of non-Western powers on the global and especially regional stage is reducing the Western domination in the Balkans. Any weakness or insecurity of the institutions towards its real challenges on the one hand, and the weakening of the role of the European Union in the integration processes with the countries of the Western Balkans, on the other hand, gives non-Western actors a chance to further extend their influence in this region. Russia, Turkey and China are creating a strategic triangle that is openly challenging in some cases the United States and its Western allies, in geopolitical and geoeconomic terms. In this paper we want to emphasise that there is opportunity of the influences of other non-Western actors on the political life in the country in the region.

Keywords: hegemony, non-western actors, geopolitics, geoeconomy, European Union

Introduction

In recent years, the balance of power of international actors has changed significantly. The emergence of non-Western powers on the global and especially regional stage is minimizing Western domination in the Balkans. In this context, Albania is not immune to these influences; on the contrary, any weakness of the institutions towards its real challenges on the one hand, and the weakening of the role of the European Union in the integration processes with the countries of the Western Balkans, on the other hand, gives non-Western actors a chance to exert their influence in the region.

According to Shopov “The development gap between the Western Balkans and the EU is not an abstract concern but a genuine problem. So is Western policymakers’ ambivalence towards the region. While this gap emerged largely due to local deficiencies in governance, repeated delays to the accession process and

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the lack of a realistic road map for convergence between the region and the EU will continue to create openings for third actors. And these shortfalls will encourage Western Balkans governments to adopt a purely transactional approach to foreign policy, in which they grasp every economic opportunity regardless of how it affects the integration into the EU of the region's economies and societies." (2021, p 22).

It is worth noting that Russia, Turkey and China are creating a strategic triangle that is openly challenging in some cases the United States and its Western allies, in geopolitical and geoeconomic terms, which are associated with important implications for the countries of the region and Albania in particular. The struggle for hegemony in the region has begun as the international arena itself has become so in recent years. Ian Bremmer points out that "we have entered a new world: G-Zero with many transnational challenges such as global economic stability, climate change, cyber attacks or terrorism, and the need for international cooperation has never been greater. But cooperation needs leadership. Exactly, this component is missing. "The world no longer has a leader to impose." (2008, p.47).

According to Bremmer, we live in G-Zero world (in contrast to, say, the G-20), a period of „tumultuous transition" in which „many countries are now strong enough to *prevent* the international community from taking action, but none has the political and economic muscle to *remake* the status quo." (2008, p.24). The author describes in cogent detail the various reasons why no one—not the United States, not China, not the European Union or institutions like the World Bank—is presently in a position to provide or impose global leadership. As a result we have entered an unstable time when nation-states will pursue their own interests relatively unrestrained by other nations or alliances. Economic strength, not military strength, will determine the new international balance of power. Some nations—e.g., „pivot states" like Brazil—will thrive by building „profitable relationships with multiple countries without becoming overly reliant on any one of them." States in the shadow of a powerful neighbor, like Mexico, or friendless rogue states will likely wither. The ongoing effects of China's economic expansion and America's response to it will be key factors in determining the world order that will emerge from the G-Zero. Such is the arena even non-Western powers are trying to behaving the Balkan region. To have a clearer geopolitical picture of this arena, we can refer to the scenarios predicted by Ian Bremmer. In *Every Nation for Itself: Winners and Losers in a G-Zero World*, Ian Bremmer predicts five scenarios for the future international relations: G2—a U.S.-Chinese partnership; Concert—a G 20 that actually works; Cold War 2.0—or something worse; a World of Regions—to each his own; and Scenario X—the G-subzero (Bremmer, 2008),

As the European Union seems unable to resolve the frequent crisis in the Balkans, we see the emergence of non-Western actors. Furthermore, the US is being withdrawn from the region and for many security problems declares that these are European problems. In this leaderless world, "there is growing power vacuum in international politics as no country or group of countries has the political and economic leverage to drive an international agenda or provide global



public goods” (Bremmer 2008, p.132). It is very likely that in this scenario the pivot states will be even more successful. The lack of multilateral agreements will enable them to seize opportunities to conclude bilateral agreements with other countries. An essential feature of this system is unilateralism, which essentially means unilateral action without reference to conventions or without respect for multinational institutions. According to Bremmer, emerging powers like Turkey, Russia and China certainly poised to take advantage of new opportunities to play a more prominent diplomatic role in this new order.

The implications of this reality in the global and regional arena are also noticed in Albania. The set of actors that aim to influence and influence is diverse. Precisely to understand how diverse their interests and influences in Albania’s foreign and domestic policy are, it is worth briefly analyzing some of them. For this reason, some of the main actors that have influence in the region and specifically in Albania have been selected. Among the most influential actors in the region besides the EU and the US, are Turkey, Russia and China.

In this paper, we are not going to assess the degree of influence of the countries in question compared to the EU and the US, as the leading role of the EU and the US in the region and in Albania specifically is known, but, more to say that in the region the possibility of influences of other non-Western actors on the political life in the country. Also, to underline that influences are not static but dynamics, and the future perspective does not exclude the possibility of facing another reality of influence of international actors in the region.

1. Russia - a strategy of tension

Analysts argue that Russia is trying to increase its influence in the Western Balkans to slow down EU and NATO enlargement in the region. According to Clark and Foxall (2014), Russia is pursuing a strategy of tension, creating problems in the Balkans, to give importance to itself as a factor in international negotiating tables. They point out that almost all countries in the area have embarked on the path of Euro-Atlantic integration, which must now be accelerated.

Experts in the field of diplomacy in Albania claim that Moscow is using the delays of the Euro-Atlantic integration of the Balkan countries to factorize in the region. Former Foreign Minister Starova, head of the Albanian Atlantis organization, says that „Russia has its influence in the Balkans and is working to expand it in spite of NATO and the EU, insisting on being asked about European issues and world. „ While Murati in his book „Balkanica Russia” argues that „... initially Russia tried to influence the Balkan economy through energy projects with SouthStream and TurkishStream, but after the events in Ukraine Russia’s interest in the Balkans took on a military character and it „I am using Serbia as a base for my goals in the region.” (Murati, 2016, p.2).

The former ambassador of Albania to the Republic of Kosovo, Lauka, says that the Russian influence is significant even in the north of Kosovo to the radical elements. He says: “Russian influence aims to grow, it aims to expand through



many forms; through corruption, money, economic pressure, the use of certain instruments that Moscow has, such as vetoes, for example.” Such forms are seen as a potential danger in Albania as well. According to Bugajski, corruption of elites and the need for support are some of these forms. To influence the Balkans, the Russians are also using the religious factor, such as pan-Slavic ties and the so-called „brotherhood” of Orthodox countries. Scholar Murati argues that “... they are not sparing either with joint landing exercises with Serbia, or with the support of the Montenegrin opposition, or with the procrastination of the 20-year-old problem for the name of Macedonia. Moreover, Russia is not sparing to influence also in Albania, a NATO member country and always closer to the EU.” (Murati, 2016, p.2).

There have been strong statements from the US and the EU about Russian influence in the region. US General in Europe Curtis Scaparrotti has warned that the Balkan region is facing growing pressure from Russia and that Washington and NATO need to do more to keep the region from destabilizing. Foreign policy expert David Phillips also says the danger posed by Russian and Turkish influence in the Balkans is real. „The leaders of Albania and Kosovo must take this threat seriously and must maintain a clear stance on their alliances.” (VOA, 2018) Not without reason, the leaders of NATO intelligence agencies met in Tirana, where they discussed the tensions created in Albania by Russian politics and influence.

The increased Russian influence in the region does not lack the positions of a number of EU countries. One of the reasons that many EU countries were in favor of opening negotiations for Albania and Northern Macedonia, was to limit the possibility of Russian influence in the region. For Chancellor Merkel, „non-opening of negotiations with Tirana and Skopje poses a risk to Russian influence.” (Shqiptarja.com, 2020). The European Council on Foreign Relations says in the report: “In Russia’s eyes, the EU approach to the Western Balkans is neither serious nor systematic, so it offers opportunities for Moscow” (Shqiptarja.com, 2020). Even the former president of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker goes on to say: „If such a complex area of Europe gives the impression that we are not serious about its European perspective, we will experience sooner than we expect what we have seen in the Balkans over the years. 1990.” (Shqiptarja.com, 2020). On the other hand, Russia’s reaction was immediate after the decision of the European Council, where Moscow made an unexpected offer to Tirana and Skopje, inviting them to join the Eurasian Union. (Dosja.al, 2019). The Eurasian Union - in President Putin’s idea - is simply a reconstruction of a Kremlin-led Russian Empire. This “empire” regroups as much as possible the former Soviet states into an economic system based directly on an economy under the control of the state and the oligarchs - a model developed in post-Soviet Russia. Through the realization of this project, President Putin hopes to restore confidence in Russian power and establish a „managed democracy” in which the law protects the state, not the rights and freedoms of the ordinary citizen.



2. China – an ambitious foreign policy

Another important actor in the region is China. China's approach to the Balkans is dualistic. On the one hand, China develops a unilateral policy with the Balkan countries, excluding Kosovo, but, on the other hand, Beijing has built a regional platform known as „16 + 1”. This platform aims to intensify and expand cooperation with 11 EU member states and 5 Western Balkan countries. (Marleku, 2019) The nature of investments is mainly focused on infrastructure: construction of highways, construction of bridges, increase of energy capacities and use of seaports. This strategy commentary in different way. Pepermans (2018) argues that China employs a strategy which combines positive economic statecraft with the cultivation of soft power in order to increase China's economic and political influence in CEE. Jian (2018) argues that the geopolitical connotations of a deeper economic exchange between China and the Balkan countries and the concerns that their own standing and influence in the region will be subsequently weakened, make the EU and other regional powers increasingly uncomfortable about China's involvement in the region, despite Beijing being “the weakest player in this geopolitical game.” Other authors Giusti and Mirkina (2013) argue that on the back of the “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI) China is establishing “a trans-EU political space in the EU neighborhood and re-shaping the political and economic context in the Balkans. This, authors argue, represents a contestation of the EU power in itself, as the regionalization strategies of the EU and China are completely different yet come head-to-head in the Balkans. One is based on the “one-size-fits-all” regionalism and pooling of sovereignty (the EU), while the other one consists of a more flexible and less stringent form of cooperation (as is the case with BRI).

On the other hand, Keukeleire identifies the EU engaging in “structural diplomacy” and “structural foreign policy” in other regions, “pursuing and supporting long-term structural changes, both in the internal situation of these countries concerned and in the inter-state relations and general situation of these regions through transferal of ideological and governing principles” (2003, p.47). Such approach is based on the use of political-diplomatic and economic-financial instruments. The former revolve around the institutionalized form of regular dialogues in a large number of policy areas through which others are persuaded, convinced, and pressurized, while the latter involves financial means put on disposal for support and cooperation programs in a variety of strategically important sectors and areas such as energy, transportation, regional development and the associated trade and investment policies, etc.

Meanwhile, China's approach is bilateral. It does not focus on the standardization of regional parameters but on economic relations with the respective countries without worrying too much about the level of corruption, the low level of law enforcement, informality, low salaries, etc. It exploits the weak level of institutions and investment needs that countries have to attract capital and financing from abroad. Cooperation with external actors such as China seems to

offer these countries a bright future in which they are no longer caught in limbo. In response, the EU should attempt to gain public support in the Western Balkans by establishing a common sense of belonging. There is growing evidence that Beijing is expanding and embedding its presence across the Western Balkans in a variety of sectors, while engaging with an increasing number of local actors. The process appears to be accelerating at a time when there is an emerging Western consensus on the challenges posed by Beijing's forays into the region. Despite the fact that in economic terms, "the position of EU in the region is unrivalled. In 2018, the EU accounted for 71.9 percent of the region's exports in goods and 57.7% of its corresponding imports. On the other hand, China represents 8.2 percent of the region's imports and 0.7 respectively" (Bieber and Tzifakis, 2019, p. 21) It is worth noting an important trend: China is increasingly getting involved in the Western Balkans markets.

Table 1. Western Balkans' trade in goods with the EU and China, as percentage of the total trade, 2019

	EU	EU	China	China
	<i>Imports</i>	<i>Exports</i>	<i>Imports</i>	<i>Imports</i>
Albania	58% (1)	76% (1)	9% (3)	2% (4)
BiH	61% (1)	72% (1)	7% (3)	-
Kosovo	49% (1)	33% (1)	10% (3)	-
Montenegro	47% (1)	37% (1)	8% (3)	4% (5)
N. Macedonia	50% (1)	79% (1)	6% (4)	2% (4)
Serbia	59% (1)	68% (1)	9% (2)	2% (7)

Source: European Commission 2019 factsheets on Trade in Goods

The dynamics of the volume of exports and imports – given above - demonstrates that the region's direct trade exposure to China is consistent among all the countries. While engagement as a percentage of the total trade is less than 10 per cent, China has risen to be the second or third most important import partner. In other words, while the EU is still by far the most important partner, China has managed to offset other traditional partners of the region like Russia or Turkey.

Beijing has exploited the geopolitical ambivalence of many Western capitals, grasping the opportunities to invest in strategically important sectors that arise from the persistent development gap between the Western Balkans and the EU, as well as the region's lack of sustained political and economic convergence with the bloc (ECFR 2017, p. 2) Thus, despite the perceptions of China's growing power in the Western Balkans, Beijing's agenda-setting and implementation ability has actually been substantially weakened by the EU's reinvigorated "structural diplomacy" in the region, and the space for independent action and policy-making of China and the Western Balkans states within their relationship significantly narrowed.

The country that has attracted the most investment so far is Serbia. This includes the 350 km long high-speed railway between Budapest and Belgrade. China is also investing in Belgrade in building a \$ 160m bridge over the Danube River and has given Serbia a 700m-euro loan to build electricity capacity. The same approach, albeit on a smaller scale, has been used with regard to Northern Macedonia. The largest investments are two road projects Skopje-Stip and Kicovo-Ohrid, for the realization of which China has lent Macedonia 580 million EUR. In addition, around € 500 million has been earmarked for the project related to the New Silk Road Initiative. Also in Greece in 2009, COSCO, China's largest shipping and port concern, invested more than 250m euro in the port of Piraeus, and another 650m later to secure a majority stake in the port. Also, President Xi Jinping recently signed 16 economic agreements in the field of agriculture, telecommunications, innovation, tourism, culture and justice worth about 600 million euro and signed the agreement for the opening of two branches of the International Bank and Commercial Bank of China (ICBC) (Top Channel, 2019).

Regarding the presence of Chinese investments in Albania, it is noticed that China has become a valuable trade partner for Albania, as a number of companies such as Geo-Jade Petroleum have found a territory of great interest for investments. The Shanghai-based company bought control of two oil fields in Patos-Marinza for \$ 442.3 million. In 2016, another company took a concession for the next ten years to Mother Teresa Airport. Balancing the development of bilateral relations between Beijing and Tirana, Ambassador Yu stressed that both sides have signed a total of 28 cooperation documents covering 17 areas, while Chinese investment in Albania has increased 40 times. „From 20 million US dollars in 2014, Chinese investments have already reached more than 800 million US dollars, making China the main source of foreign investment in Albania. Tirana became part of the gigantic infrastructure project „One Belt One Road”.

„In the Western Balkans, Chinese investments now make up 20% of the total stock of foreign direct investment, about 14 or 15 billion dollars, with Serbia leading with about 10 billion.” If we compare it with investments in the EU, Chinese investments in the EU make up about 2% of the total stock, while in the Balkans they have reached about 20% mainly in infrastructure”, - says Zeneli (2020, p.1) , The risk of Chinese investment lies in the fact that unlike the EU, for example, in the Balkan countries, Chinese projects have also financed projects that, in technical terms, have not yet matured. In Montenegro, for example, the Bar-Boljare highway has seen its cost increase significantly because access roads to the highway were not foreseen.

These developments have raised EU and US concern about China's growing influence in the region. According to former Enlargement Commissioner Hahn, some Balkan countries are borrowing large sums from China to invest in infrastructure projects which, he said, will increase the risk and potential of damaging their fragile economies. A similar concern was expressed at the Munich Security Conference, held in 2019. Among other things, it highlighted the problems that the Balkan countries may face, which have borrowed from China to develop



their infrastructure projects, but on the other hand they do not have enough capacity to repay these loans. The fear of EU politicians is that this financial cooperation will turn into a political cooperation and will keep these countries under Chinese political influence. US Secretary of State Pompeo also warned Balkan leaders of the potential risks of Chinese investment in technology and major infrastructure projects.

It is worth noting that Chinese investments are also associated with the corresponding risks. The risk of Chinese investments lies in the fact that, unlike the EU, in the Balkan countries, Chinese projects have financed projects that in technical language have not yet matured. The case of contracting the Tirana ring road where the two lots with 20 million euro per kilometre, was cancelled because the preparation of documents was a messy - even ridiculous - process”, says Zeneli (2020, p.1). This is not an isolated case but repeated in other countries other of the region. The EU has warned the Balkan countries and has reiterated the position that every sovereign state has the right to choose partners and investors. But, on the other hand, those countries, if they want to make progress in the EU integration process, must respect the high standards of the bloc, including those for major infrastructure projects. Albania, being in the phase of opening negotiations with the EU and waiting for the holding of the first Intergovernmental Conference of Albania with the EU, has been inclined to take into account this position of the EU.

On the other hand, we cannot help but notice the differences in the way Chinese and EU companies operate, says an expert of „Marshall Center”. The difference in the social, political and cultural context of countries like Albania creates greater opportunities for investment by Chinese companies. Chinese companies have a significant advantage over Western investors. First, they are backed by large government subsidies and state-owned banks. Second, they are willing to build at low cost regardless of environmental or social standards. In the end, the biggest benefits go to Chinese companies because they are the implementers of these projects.

The last few years have marked an increase in China’s media presence across the Western Balkans. For instance, between 2016 and 2019, the number of stories related to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) published in Albania jumped from 42 to 194. Referring to the Albanian Security Barometer 2020, it turns out that although China is among „external actors”, as opposed to the countries of the Euro-Atlantic alliance, it is seen as having a positive impact on Albania’s security – as reflected on a growing percentage of citizens (Dyrmishi, 2021).

A report published by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation highlights China’s growing influence in Southeast European media, including Albania, as well as its expanding presence in the economic, political, social and cultural life over the past decade. In Albania, the greatest influence is evidenced in public media such as the Albanian Telegraphic Agency, ATSH and the Albanian Radio Television, RTSH, which have signed cooperation agreements with respective agencies in China. „A significant amount of products are offered for free by the Chinese. The agreement



also facilitates the broadcast of documentaries on China's system of government, such as „China: Time of Xi,” the report said, referring to TV series about Chinese Communist Party leader Xi Jinping.

3. Turkey – a force to reckon

Turkey is another important influential actor in the region. Based on the „Strategic Depth” doctrine, Turkey has re-dimensioned its foreign policy to increase its influence in the Balkans and beyond. The economic and cultural dimensions have taken on a specific weight in the application of Turkish foreign policy. „As long as the AKP intends to revive the Ottoman past, the Balkans are important to them,” said scholar Gozaydin (2016, p.334). „I also see a revival of Islamic identity and Turkish influence in the region,” said Balkans expert Bagci (2016, p.332).

The budget of the Agency for Cooperation and Coordination (TIKA) has been increased recently. TIKA initiates and assists several projects abroad in the field of health, safety, education, renovation, infrastructure and institutionalization in the Balkans. TIKA is also an important actor in reviving the forgotten Ottoman past in the region. To achieve this, TIKA is renovating old Ottoman monuments, schools (madrasas) and financing the reconstruction of mosques across the Balkans. TIKA also coordinates the financial assistance provided to the Balkan countries, which is estimated at 154 million dollars if we refer to 2015.

The Yunus Emre Institute is another important branch for the exercise of Turkish soft power in the region, whose main task is to spread Turkish culture and language throughout the Balkans. Thanks to their contributions and efforts, today the Turkish language is being taught as an elective subject in primary and secondary schools in many Balkan countries, especially in Bosnia. Through Yunus Emre and other state and non-state institutions, Turkey offers scholarship programs to students from relatively less developed countries in the Balkans.

It is also important to note that similarities in tradition between people in Turkey and the Balkans have made the region a very lucrative market for Turkish companies. According to an EBRD report referring to data from the Turkish Institute of Statistics (TUIK-Turkstat), in 2016, the share of the 10 Balkan countries together in Turkey's total exports was 5.2%, while in total imports was 4.5%. According to the Ministry of Economy, the cumulative value of Turkey's foreign direct investment in 10 Balkan countries, including Turkish investments made through third countries, in 2016 was about \$ 5 billion. In terms of investment, the Balkan country where Turkish firms are most active is Romania. In 2016 the total value of Turkish capital in this country was about \$ 1.2 billion. Apart from Romania, other countries in the region that have absorbed relatively more Turkish capital are Albania with \$ 982 million and Bulgaria with \$ 864 million. The cumulative value of Turkish foreign direct investment in Bosnia and Herzegovina is \$ 256.3m and the total value of Turkish contracting projects is \$ 563.6m (TRT, 2017).



In recent years there has also been a significant increase in Turkish investments in Macedonia, Croatia and Kosovo. In fact, the total value of Turkish direct investment in these three countries from \$ 235 million in 2011 has increased to \$ 1.3 billion by the end of 2016. According to data from the Ministry of Economy of the Republic of Turkey, by the end of 2016, the cumulative value of Turkish capital in Macedonia is estimated at \$ 500 million, in Croatia \$ 430 million and in Kosovo \$ 341 million. In Montenegro, the smallest country in the Balkans in terms of population, Turkish investment has remained at a relatively lower level, \$ 39 million. While in Serbia they have increased from one million dollars in 2011 to 200 million dollars in 2018 (TRT, 2017).

Referring to the presence of Turkish let say that Turkey has great interest in Albania as it is considered the most appropriate state to promote Turkish interests within the Western Balkan region. Though there are several obstacles limiting Turkey's full penetration into Albania, the transformations are increasing gradually (Bagci and Doganlar, 2009, p.14). In related with turkey company in Albania there are more than 400 Turkish companies operating in Albania such as: in the field of energy, mining, telecommunications, textiles, banking system, logistics and health. The Ambassador of the Republic of Turkey in Tirana, Murat Ahmet Yörük said: "The total value of Turkish private sector investments in Albania is close to 3 billion dollars, while our trade volume in 2017 was about 450 million dollars (TRT, 2017).

The above data speak of a cultural, cultural and religious economic presence of Turkey in the Balkans. European leaders have expressed concerns about what they call Turkey's expanding influence in the Balkans on several occasions. French President Emmanuel Macron last year urged the European Union to promote its influence in the Western Balkans, warning that otherwise countries in the region would return from Russia or Turkey.

The former Italian Prime Minister, at the same time the former President of the European Commission Romano Prodi, in a special editorial on the Italian-Albanian relations called on the Italian government to pay more attention to the relations with Albania. The former Italian prime minister was concerned about the growing Turkish influence, which according to Prodi has replaced the former Italian influence. Also, the scholar Cagaptay in his book „Erdogan Empire” argues that the Turkish influence in the Western Balkans is quite stable. There are historical factors that help the presence of Turkey there, there are ethnic, cultural and linguistic ties. „There is also a very coordinated Turkish policy to fill the gap left by the EU absence in the Western Balkans.”(2019, p.34). In the same line, the researcher David Phillips states: „The leaders of Albania and Kosovo must take this threat seriously and must maintain clear positions on their alliances.” (VOA, 2021). As for Bugajski, „Turkey does not represent a political model for these societies. Muslim secularism, and the only way to gain more influence is if these countries are to be abandoned by the EU and the US.” (VOA, 2021).



This context is created by this way of exercising soft power, which is basically about the ability to inform, engage and influence a country. According to the prominent author of this field, Joseph Nye, this is achieved through several characteristics. These include: preferences formatting (the ability to set preferences tends to be associated with assets such as culture, values, and political institutions); attractive power (soft power is more than just persuasion or the ability to change people's perceptions); and the use of soft power resources: a) culture (in places where it is attractive to others); b) political values (when they coincide with the values of another country) and c) foreign policy (when others consider it legitimate and with moral authority).

Referring to the Security Barometer in Albania, conducted by the Institute for the Study of Democracy and Governance, it turns out that Turkey is „one of the friendliest countries” in Albania, as 75% of citizens claim that Turkey has a positive or very positive impact on security of Albania.” (Dyrmishi 2021, p.35). This is a confirmation of Turkey's triumph in its geopolitical strategy and the exercise of public diplomacy. As part of this „major Turkish strategy”, public diplomacy has served as an essential tool for enhancing Turkey's international status through soft power. Specifically, Turkey has exploited two dimensions in this domain: the spread and transmission of Turkish identity and economic projects. These developments have also led to an increase in Turkey's credibility in the international arena, and its acquisition of regional leader status. Another element of the growth of the Turkish stature is the current international order, which is characterized by an attraction of great traditional powers and the emergence in the global arena of what are called emerging economies or powers.

The study of the Institute for the Study of Democracy and Governance finds a correlation between Turkey's role as a developing power and its exercise of public diplomacy - on the one hand - and the growing perception of Albanians of their security in relation to Turkey - on the other hand. This undertaking is part of the Turkish strategic vision, according to which Turkey will become one of the ten largest world economies in 2023. With the end of the Cold War, after the political configurations changed, interactions between Turkey and Albania intensified. Turkey discovered that it could exert its political influence in these areas with a geopolitical vacuum. In a euphoric way, the then president, Sulejman Demirel, often spoke of a „Turkish world from the Adriatic Sea to the Great Wall of China.” Thus, Turkish foreign policy was resized according to a new model. This re-dimensioning became necessary with the emergence of a multi-polar world in the international political system. Considered a bridge between East and West in many ways, Turkey - seeking the widest possible influence in the region - has played an important role in Albania's foreign policy. Turkey as a pivot state, according to Ahmet Davutoglu, should play a proactive role in the political, economic and cultural spheres in the Balkans, and its new geopolitical status should be seen as a means of gradually opening up with the world and to transform regional influence”, based on two main elements: geographical depth and historical depth.

Theoretically, this influence through soft power is the ability to attract and



(inform, engage, influence), instead of imposing (hard power). The soft power of a country relies on its sources of culture, values and policies. In Albania, this diplomacy operates in many fields: on television screens through soap operas; in numerous educational projects; in endless religious programs (whether the erection of mosques or the restoration of places of worship); health assistance (hospital in Fier); earthquake assistance military or police assistance, etc. In fact, Turkey is directly influencing this election campaign, as it has done in previous campaigns.

Conclusions

Thus, the presence of other non-Western factors in the region and specifically in Albania is evident. We are not able to assess the extent of influence for each of the above actors as it requires another study, but at least we understand the risk of the possibility of influencing Albania's domestic and foreign policy. This risk is like a red flag – a warning of EU and US officials, as well as foreign policy scholars. Any weakness or insecurity of the institutions towards its real challenges on the one hand, and the weakening of the role of the European Union in the integration processes with the countries of the Western Balkans, on the other hand, gives non-Western actors a chance to further extend their influence in this region. Russia, Turkey and China are creating a strategic triangle that is openly challenging in some cases the United States and its Western allies, in geopolitical and geoeconomic terms. Under these conditions, the game of local actors in relation to the international community and vice versa becomes very complex and difficult to decipher. Moreover, in recent years there has been an ambiguity of the EU regarding enlargement as well as a different strategy of the US presence in the Balkans and beyond.

China, Russia and Turkey seek to extend its influence in order to increase its superpower status. Western Balkan countries are diverse. For instance, Albania mainly follows a pro-Western line in foreign policy, because for US Albania is part of the development of new European security architecture and the EU monitors the process of Albania's integration into the Union and aims to implement deep reforms for the transformation of the country.

But Albania is pursuing a foreign policy with alternatives. So do the other Balkan countries. Ian Bremer uses the term „pivot state” to describe a state that is able to build profitable relationships with one or more major powers and - at the same time - not become dependent on any of them. This capability helps to avoid the influence - in terms of security and economy - of another single state. This term is mainly used in the literature for medium power, but its application cannot be limited. Therefore, since in today's fragmented world no major power sets the international agenda, winners and losers will be determined by the ability to find and utilize the right alternatives. Western Balkan countries have shown to be open to new alternatives - though with reservations often dictated by the transatlantic geopolitics. This situation is an impetus for reflection and should be a debate for

policymakers and intellectuals. As long as the Western Balkan countries do not have a respective clear strategies or a platform to inform and guide them, they will not be able to position themselves in relations with Russia, China and Turkey.

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