

RESEARCH STUDIES 20

ISIS

**THE WESTERN BALKANS
AT THE END OF THE 2010s –
BEYOND THE SECURITY DILEMMA?**

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Introduction

Christopher Nolan's film *Inception* creates a mesmerizing maze where each action of the protagonists has a ripple effect down through the whole fabric of the story. Making one's way through the maze, though only in one's own imagination, leaves the viewer disoriented. The film is all about process, about fighting one's way through enveloping sheets of reality and dream, reality within dreams, dreams without reality. There is no time or place synchronization; architecture has a way of disregarding gravity where buildings tilt, streets coil and characters are adrift in what is more an emotional than a rational 'ball of thread' of experience.

In a similar fashion, a complex network of events envelops the Western Balkans since the neologism's ambiguous inception in the early 1990-s. For nearly three decades the region has been misperceived as stuck-in-the mud, criticized for being entangled in a desynchronized microcosm, involved in a set of flashbacks to archetypal conflicts on identity grounds and doomed to stagnated Europeanization. Both material facts such as cost-benefit calculations and ideational categories such as perceptions, beliefs, values, narratives are at play here. Almost like a Wiki-article, this paper attempts a disambiguation of several key assumptions about the Western Balkans so that it advances the argument that the Western Balkans region is inevitably on its way out of the shoals not least due to the European and Atlantic perspective for its future as offered by the European Union and NATO. It tackles three highly contentious statements: first, it refutes the proposition that the Western Balkans are entrapped in a specific ethnic security dilemma that offers no exit; second, it contends that at the moment the region is caught in a vicious circle of hard security threats (territorial conflicts) and soft security threats (radicalization, populism, corruption and organized crime); third, it holds a moderate optimistic view that the region is likely to be involved in a process of socialization within a vaster security community. The course of reasoning follows the case study of Serbia's political and social development in the last decade; the theoretical framework is influenced by the security dilemma debate in International Relations literature.

Redrawing the contours of the ethnic security dilemma

The end of the Cold war saw the simultaneous end of the state of anarchy in the international system and the accompanying catch-all concept of the **security dilemma**. The outburst of the

remnants of ethnic and religious contradictions in the two main geopolitical areas formed after the collapse of the respective Yugoslav and Soviet post-modern empires – the Western Balkans¹ and the Caucasus – nourishes a negative stereotyped labelling of conflict-prone areas. Balkanization, a term quite frequently decontextualized and dogmatized, denotes ‘*the parcelization of large and viable political units*’ but has also become a synonym for ‘*a reversion to the tribal, the backward, the primitive, the barbarian*’.² The region has been at the outpost of the bipolar confrontation during the Cold war (previously – the clashes between the Ottoman, Russian and Habsburg empires); ironically, it perpetuates in its sway between the two competing narratives of neoliberal Euro-Atlantic values of global entrepreneurship, sustainable development, democratization and rule of law, on the one hand, and more conservative and traditionalist multipolar world of spheres of influence and geostrategic dependence, for example on Russian energy supplies or Chinese investment in infrastructure and industrial facilities. The Western Balkans region is perceived to be susceptible to the charm offensive of four geopolitical concepts: Euro-Atlanticism with the EU and USA and NATO, Continentalism (especially with its German Mittel Europa version), Putin’s Euroasianism and Erdogan’s Neo-Ottomanism. The latter two are good examples of mythological conceptions of mutual, centuries’ old, Serbian-Russian or Bosniak-Turkish, relations.

Apart for this ethical dilemma in the Western Balkan countries’ foreign policy orientation, there has been an overlapping ethnic security dilemma. *Posen (1993)* explains it through the emergence of nationalist, ethnic and religious conflict in the region with variable intensity of the intergroup relations. The conventional security dilemma posits that in a ‘*bipolarized and atom bomb-blessed world*’ states are ‘*concerned about their security from being attacked, subjected, dominated, or annihilated*’ by others and are therefore ‘*driven to acquire more and more power in order to escape the impact of the power of others*’ which brings about the ‘*the vicious circle of security and power accumulation*’.³ The main trigger for its reformulation is undoubtedly the transformation of the essence of the international system out of a bipolarized (in the sense not

¹ The Southeastern reaches of the former Eastern bloc have been categorized as South Eastern Europe (SEE) so as to be differentiated from Central Europe (former classical geopolitical term *Mittel Europa*) in their two-speed accession process to the European Union; in recent years a third concentric circle to the periphery has been designated as the non-Europeanized or behind-Europeanization Western Balkans (Albania and former Yugoslavia except Slovenia).

² TODOROVA, M. (2009): *Imagining the Balkans (Updated Edition)*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 3

³ HERZ, J. H. (1950): Idealist Internationalism and the Security Dilemma. *World Politics*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Jan.), p. 157.

only of a superpower antagonism but in the Cold War binary opposition between conflict and peace) into **multilevel transactions between state and non-state actors**.

The reason why the ethnic security dilemma appears is the fact that groups undergo **double emancipation** – at the first level they emancipate from the loyalty to former federative structures into the loyalty to a particular group; at the second level they ‘*suddenly find themselves newly responsible for their own security*’⁴. The threat is therefore reoriented from the ideological foe in an anarchical state-centric system to the neighbouring group in the region which takes the contours of the new enemy. Boundaries of identity enmity, instead of an ideological hostility, are thus redrawn. Uncertainty produces the unfounded fear in both parties that the other wishes to harm them⁵. Beside the realm of imagination, reality is also vulnerable to insecurities.

The means to tackle with this identity insecurity are prevalently provided by non-state actors in lieu of a Great power, a bloc/alliance or a centralized authority in a federation. With all that said, it is self-evident why independent states or autonomous units, even though lacking the full attributes of statehood, resort to a spiral of violent measures such as ethnic cleansing at quite a premature stage. Their threshold of survival is lower than that a fully-fledged sovereign state which accounts for the despair with which they sometimes tackle the problem of their mere existence, thus aggravating the context of a hypothetical co-existence.

Roe (2000) contends that ‘*compatible and incompatible security requirements*’ are at play when discussing intrastate security dilemma intent. The new security dilemma shifts the focus to how each side defines its security requirements, the so called **identity concerns**. He alludes to the relationship between identity and the security of ethnic groups as laid out in *Barry Buzan*’s work on the concept of societal security in *People, States and Fear* (1991). Although society was originally a dimension of state security which consisted of five sectors (the others being military, political, economic and environmental), it was later reframed as a referent object of security in

⁴ POSEN, B. R. (1993): The security dilemma and ethnic conflict, *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, 35:1, p. 27.

⁵ See *Butterfieldian* interpretation of the security dilemma in the behavioural terms of misperception (apart from Posen’s structural Realist ones) in:
ROE, P. (2000): Former Yugoslavia: The Security Dilemma That Never Was? – *European Journal of International Relations* 6 (3). London: SAGE Publications, p. 377.

its own right.⁶ While the survival of the state depends on the maintenance of its sovereignty in the classical sense, the survival of the society depends on the maintenance of its identity. Politically significant ethnic/national and religious groups can therefore be involved in security dilemmas. By combining the concept of the security dilemma with that of societal security, Roe declares an (inter-) **societal security dilemma** to exist when the actions of one society, in trying to increase its societal security (strengthen its own identity), causes a reaction in a second society, which, in the end, decreases the first society's own societal security (weakens its identity).⁷ In this way, societal security requirements are far more specific and contextual than those relating to the state in an international environment of reversed hierarchies and flexible boundaries. The security threats are no longer conditioned by territorial integrity of the state but by the way a group identifies risks and potential harms, specifically amplified by chauvinist, if not xenophobic, public discourse. For example border disputes can be seen either as a disintegrative impulse in a self-righteous political rhetoric or as integrative options in a more moderate foreign policy discourse.

This is the paradox of the security dilemma – *what one does to enhance one's own security causes reactions that, in the end, can make one less secure*; prospects at cooperation are vague because it is perceived as vulnerability. Posen (1993) contends that sometimes neighbours are 'unaware that their own actions can seem threatening' because 'the nature of the situation compels them to do so'⁸. For example, Croats and Serbs in the 1990s found each other's identity a threat because of the military capabilities they could wield and the burden of their historical relationship.

I argue that the ethnic security dilemma is applicable for an early phase of the conflict; at later stages like in the 2000s and 2010s it is more about a deliberate refusal of populist political elites to instill **a culture of empathy** and not so much about ethnic or religious animosity. Therefore, when conflicting or even traumatic historical narratives are reconciled, such as in the Macedonian-Bulgarian case of the Bilateral Commission of historians pursuant to the Treaty of

⁶ BUZAN, Barry, (1993): 'Societal Security, State Security, and Internationalisation', in Ole Wæver, Barry Buzan, Orten Kelstrup & Pierre Lemaitre, eds., *Identity, Migration and the New Security Agenda in Europe*. London: Pinter (41–58)

Cit. in: ROE, P. (1999): The Intrastate Security Dilemma: Ethnic Conflict as a 'Tragedy'. *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 36, No. 2, pp. 192-193.

⁷ ROE, P. (1999): *Op. cit.*, pp. 194–200

⁸ POSEN, B. R. (1993). *Op. cit.*, p. 28

Friendship, Good neighbourliness and Cooperation (2018), the ethnic security dilemma becomes obsolete. A future solution to the security equation should be offered not by self-interested political elites who are eager to securitize people's memories, but within an independent epistemic community such as the Bilateral Commission. Sometimes outside diplomatic leverage such as the pull factor of integration in a security community (NATO in the Macedonian case) also facilitates an integrative solution.

The vague outlines of the security context in a border dispute

The **volatile security context** in the Western Balkans region of recent years exposes several types of soft security threats. With the military antagonisms already behind their back, states now are confronted with security issues outside of military conflict, or the threat of military conflict. Such threats either involve non-state actors or harm in an indirect way, for example by dependence on resources or by the sensitivity of markets.

One of the most illustrative examples of transformations of conventional threats into non-conventional ones is the border dispute between Serbia and Kosovo. Hard security threats are related to sovereignty and national survival and quite often involve intervention, breach of territorial integrity or violation of independence. In August 2018 a proposal by political leaders in Kosovo and Serbia was made for an exchange of territory: Serb-populated municipalities in the north of Kosovo to be under Belgrade's administration whereas Albanian-populated municipalities in the south of Serbia to be given to Pristina. The omission of consideration of the respective populations' interests (the inhabitants of the provinces) actually reflects a dangerous presumption: *'that the basic desire of both Serbs and Albanians is little more than to be united with ethnic co-nationals'*.⁹ The problem is that **the territorial swap solution** is only compatible with the schemes of nationalist politicians and not with the deep-rooted needs of the citizens.

A solution to the security dilemma based on a simplistic zero-sum game on a state-centric level is a myopic one. It doesn't settle the durable concerns related to **human security**, such as

⁹ GORDY, E. (2018). Why Borders Are Not the Problem—or the Solution—for Serbia and Kosovo. In the Balkans, Redrawing Maps Serves Politicians, Not Citizens. *Foreign Affairs Online Edition*, available at: <<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/kosovo/2018-10-10/why-borders-are-not-problem-or-solution-serbia-and-kosovo>>

freedom, human rights, rule of law, trust, pluralism and welfare. A cartographic quick fix promises stability only in terms of instant dividends for political elites; it involves instability in terms of legitimacy and popular credit. Moreover, stability in this particular case involves alarming democratic backsliding which is the underlying **soft security risk**.

When imposed boundaries of states are discussed they are usually referred to in a colonial or post-colonial context. The Serbia-Kosovo border dispute is devoid of such imperialistic implications and should be analyzed through **the prism of populism, autocracy and illegitimacy** instead. It serves the personal goals and the self-interests of the two political leaders, especially that of the far-right Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic. It is the burden of the populist promise of an easy settlement of a complex security issue that urges Vucic to trade sparsely developed villages for industrial centers and to demand a veto power over what constitutes the territory of Kosovo in the haste of some primordial calculations.

Kupchan (2018) praises the proposal's pragmatism as it would '*secure a deal that promises to bring a close to the years of bloodshed and border changes that have resulted from the collapse of Yugoslavia*'¹⁰. Still he points out no feasible arguments how this redrawing of boundaries on a state-to-state basis would render Serbia the role of a regional stakeholder. There is no automatic causal link between a hypothetical territorial settlement with Kosovo and a discouraging effect on Republika Srpska, the Serb-dominated region of Bosnia, to abandon its claims for independence. The problem is the sacrifice of pluralist principles in territorial disputes and the polarized political context of the rise of right-wing populism which doesn't foster an atmosphere of reconciliation. All this explains the impasse in the implementation policy of granting autonomy, further aggravated by Kosovo's failure to meet its obligations under the 2013 Brussels Agreement about forming the Community of Serb Municipalities.

Another complication of the 'knot' is Kosovo's unilateral imposition of 100 percent tariff on goods in November 2018. This restrictive measure actually brings to a halt the normalization talks between the Western Balkan neighbors, which according to Kosovo's Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj are not based on principles of mutual recognition. The tariff issue is further

¹⁰ KUPCHAN, Ch. A. (2018): An Offensive Plan for the Balkans That the U.S. Should Get Behind. *The New York Times* Online, available at: <<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/13/opinion/kosovo-serbia-land-swap.html>>

entangling the parties into a **spiral of hostility of negative reciprocal measures**, which very much resembles the classical security dilemma situation.

What is more, as far as Kosovo declaration of independence constitutes a precedent in secessionism, the territorial exchange may entail domino-effect claims for autonomy in **an escalating tendency of irredentism**. As Gordy (2018) emphatically asks: “*Are there people living in the territories where a trade is suggested who would very likely be forced out of their homes, jobs, and livelihoods to accommodate the border pencillers’ dreams?*”¹¹ The fragile peace in the region is very much like a house of cards (and unfortunately in the Realpolitik sense) which means that any disruption of the fundamentals of human rights and liberties is like pulling the bottom card from the tower. The logical fallacy here lies in the assumption that ethnically and religiously homogeneous communities co-exist in the region and that an arithmetic solution would satiate political appetites. The national territory zero-sum solution is simply not working in a highly diverse region. Furthermore, multiculturalism constitutes a basic factor in the vaster context of a surrounding integrative community (the EU) with guarantees on the freedom of movement.

The Western Balkans’ nationalism of the 1990s was conceived as internal homogenization by an external threat or internal dangers, but all orchestrated by political elites.¹² Nowadays’ nationalism, in the form of far-right populism, tries to destroy this liberal tenet by attacking the inefficiency of multicultural regimes, especially in the wake of the heavy repercussions of the migration and refugee crisis. Quite often it is namely some discriminatory practice or economic suffering that encourages diverse people to shift their identities and to position themselves against the dominant group as cross-border enclaves. This is more like an act of **resistance** against imposed nationalistic discourse. The transposition of borders is just one vehicle to sustain violence on a structural level by educational, political, social and other institutions of chauvinistic propaganda. Still the legitimacy of a state lies not on imposing control through violence but by meeting vital needs in the areas of human security (individual, societal, political, economic, among others). It correlates to the effective functioning of the state institutions, especially in the northern municipalities of Kosovo where governance has been surrendered into

¹¹ GORDY, E. (2018). *Why Borders Are Not the Problem...*

¹² BABIĆ, M. (2015): Defining Political Extremism in the Balkans. The Case of Serbia. *International Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 1, p. 81.

the hands of shadow economy and transnational criminal networks. The threats should therefore be reformulated as **non-conventional threats ‘once removed’** – they consist not in ethnic disparities, but in the incapacity of the state to reestablish **trust** due to its obsession with the stability of the power structures and the personal loyalty to the incumbent regime.

The paradox with Serbia’s rule (*‘soft autocracy’*¹³) is that, on the surface, it offers stability in a turbulent region by restructuring the economy aimed at meeting EU enlargement criteria. Deeper below, what is troubling for the EU and makes it be cautious as to not exert too much pressure, is the close affiliation with the Kremlin. The Kosovo question, as cunningly exploited by Russia in the Caucasus frozen conflicts, slightly tips the balance in favour of the radical discourse. It is an ambiguous relationship – a mix of leverage against Brussels in a pragmatic stance on the regional balance of power and an allegedly principled pro-Russian (Slavophil and pro-Orthodox) sentiment. Yet, the latter affectual explanation is flimsy against the Realist logic of being surrounded by members or member-to-be of NATO. The attempts at counter-balancing are at all events futile although they may temporarily garner some popular support. Other failures at obstructing foreign policy orientation such as the Montenegro coup attempt in 2016 are only a reminder that soft subversive tactics of the so called non-linear (hybrid) warfare are at stake, involving both states (Russia) and non-state actors. Russia is just one of the alternatives. Or is it rather a non-alternative?

A dim or a reasonably bright future ten years from now

The authentic transformation of the Western Balkans elites (and not some accommodation with vague Eurasian bloc) is expected to come in the form of socialization into the Euro-Atlantic security community. Both NATO and the European Union are specific security communities. It is *Karl Deutsch*’s belief that states in security communities can overcome the security dilemma¹⁴ and the recurring fear to be attacked, subdued, or annihilated. Social networks of communication are formed that help states walk all the way from the logic of anarchy, self-help and survival to

¹³ EROR, A. How Aleksandar Vucic Became Europe’s Favorite Autocrat. *Foreign Policy*, available at: <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/03/09/how-aleksandar-vucic-became-europes-favorite-autocrat/>>

¹⁴ ADLER, E. and M. Barnett, eds. (1998): *Security Communities*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 5

the logic of community, especially in cases of contested statehood and hesitant autonomous status.

In theory, security communities disseminate norms and practices of good governance, democracy, rule of law, individual liberties among actors. Candidate states rely on the experience of other countries to estimate the likely consequences of policy change (i.e. learning), they could also copy the majority behaviour of other countries (i.e. emulation); or they anticipate or react to the behaviour of other countries in order to attract or retain the benefits associated with accession (i.e. competition).¹⁵ All three mechanisms can lead to positive (enhanced compliance) or negative (free riding) outcomes in state behaviour, and they might even interact.

But is it so in practice especially in the case of states with problematic sovereignty?

In practice, the three approaches may be exemplified by **the regatta approach within the EU**. The individual **competition** is being encouraged by the Stabilisation and Association Process. The Stability Pact was superseded by the Regional Cooperation Council in 2008, which now oversees regional cooperation and supports the European and Euro-Atlantic integration of the Western Balkans region. According to the regatta approach each country tries to avoid being the last to complete negotiations on the various chapters with the EU. With four candidate countries to enter the EU (Montenegro, Albania, Serbia and North Macedonia) and two (Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo) potential candidates, though, the process follows the ambiguous paths of the Central and Eastern Europeans enlargement as a whole and its current dubious ramifications, which partially account for Euroscepticism. There is some **lag in the speed** of integration. *Rupnik* (2010) points out that enlargement fatigue within the EU (further prompted by disintegration incentives such as Brexit) meets “accession fatigue” in the Balkans. He explains it by the figure of double-faced policy: *‘the political elites in the region sometimes using verbal commitments to EU accession as a smokescreen for politics as a business model’*.¹⁶ No less important is the erosion of popular support for EU accession in correlation to the nationalism and populism rise in some countries. *Rupnik* raises the question of corruption and

¹⁵ GILARDI, F. (2012). ‘Transnational Diffusion: Norms, Ideas, and Policies’, in Walter Carlsnaes, Thomas Risse, and Beth Simmons (eds.), *Handbook of International Relations*. Thousand Oaks: Sage, pp. 453–477. Cit. in: BÖHMELT, T. & T. Freyburg (2014): Diffusion of Compliance in the ‘Race towards Brussels?’ A Spatial Approach to EU Accession Conditionality, *West European Politics*, p. 6

¹⁶ RUPNIK, J. (2010): Reassessing European Challenges in the Balkans. *European Perspectives*. Journal on European Perspectives of the Western Balkans, Vol. 2, No. 2, October, pp. 7-14.

clientelism by addressing its main sources: the legacies of war economy (getting around the embargoes through parallel networks), the legacies of socialism (with a fairly corrupt privatization process) and the use of public sector employment for political patronage and state capture. On the EU side, visa liberalization, which bears a great symbolic and political importance, also follows an ambiguous logic of equalized development, as far as there are three states Kosovo, Albania and Bosnia left behind.

Emulation is compliance driven through a process of observation and inference in situations of uncertainty. One of the stimuli is ‘following the herd’ – complying with norms simply because a critical number of other candidates already do so. Either fear of being the laggard or an ambition to be attractive lie at the roots of such conformist behaviour. The successful solution of the name dispute between Macedonia and Greece by compromise and strong political will is a viral example to follow. The ripening moment came with the ground-breaking Friendship Agreement between Bulgaria and Macedonia, signed in 2017 and marking the start of the restoration of the region which only several years before was in nearly a complete shambles. Yet emulation is not as simple and as straightforward as that. The Serbia-Kosovo border dispute, as depicted above, which is inseparable from the Bosnian one, is one and the same pre-accession negotiation linkage issue – *vague statehood*. Obscurity can be diagnosed not only in the unresolved territorial disputes, but also as the inability of the political elites to handle soft security threats.

No simple answer to the effectiveness of the practice of **learning** can be given. There aren’t any predetermined patterns to be literally implemented as a ready lesson in social interactions on so many levels as in the sovereignty disputes. The EU mediation in the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue is a case in point as it hasn’t led to a comprehensive conflict settlement and goal attainment. *Bergmann and Niemann* (2015) blame the interventionist strategy for the failure to be fostered mutual confidence as a basis for a long-term cooperation.¹⁷ The ambiguous (‘hybrid’) negotiation strategy, although designed purposefully to trigger a spillover effect as the parties build trust and local ownership along the way, has resulted in a slow and inconsistent progress, which enables local actors’ strategies of resistance, as pictured in the tariff levy. Credibility is also related to definite and steady criteria as an integral part of any learning process. The

¹⁷ BERGMANN, J. and A. Niemann (2015): Mediating International Conflicts: The European Union as an Effective Peacemaker? – *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 53, No. 5, pp. 957–975

inconsistent use of membership conditionality does not only mitigate the transformative power of the EU in the Western Balkans; it damages its international credibility as a “**normative power**”.¹⁸ Moreover, each step related to the issues of ‘territory’ and ‘sovereignty’ becomes a ‘hot potato’ in the hands of the EU which alone, in the course of the last ten years, has been confronted with an identity crisis. The ‘credible enlargement perspective’, as articulated by the EU Commission in its *6.2.2018 Communication*, remains more of a perspective (indefinite vision) than a goal due to the self-obsession of both parties with their own identity crisis.

Conclusion

In sum, the tortuous course of the recent Western Balkans development may lead to further entanglement of the security knot. The wakening should happen more on a state-to-state level where the lack of communication prevents the formation of a ‘we-feeling’ which constitutes any viable security community. And yet, the ongoing process of building trust and long-term relationships between some countries in the region holds the promise that ten years from now these issues will be just a small part of the common historical narrative.

¹⁸ BÖRZEL, T. A. (2011). *When Europeanization Hits Limited Statehood: The Western Balkans as a Test Case for the Transformative Power of Europe* (KFG Working Paper Series, 30). Berlin: Freie Universität Berlin, p. 14.

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