

RESEARCH STUDIES 23

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**The Integration of the Western
Balkans in NATO: a Logical Step
in the Strengthening of the
Regional Security Community in
South East Europe**

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The Beginning of the Regional Security Community Build-Up in the Balkans

In the Spring of 1991 Mette Skak, a Danish political scientist, and the author of this article, discussed in Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridsky” during a Bulgarian-Danish conference the possibilities of building a security community in the Balkans – in a similar way as it has been created in the Nordic region of Europe and in the territory covered by NATO and then European Community (EC). The core idea of this concept, elaborated during the 1960s by the American political scholar Karl Deutsch, was to get rid of war as a method of solving conflicting interests between states. It is unthinkable and inapplicable for the member countries of the security community to use force in case of a dispute among them. Of course, certain preconditions are to be met by the participating states and key among them is compatibility of the values of the societies and the states in the group¹.

The discussion led to naming this idea of the two scholars as ‘political science fiction’. To some extent this assessment was true – the wars in a dissolving Yugoslavia had not yet started, the former federation has been lured by the EC, USA and still existing USSR to preserve at any cost its integrity, the animosities of the Cold War Balkan international relations were still persisting, the national democratic transformations in the former totalitarian states were just beginning to toddle.

This idea, however, received in principle practical stimuli even in 1991 by NATO. When the Soviet Union dissolved on 8 December 1991, a few days later, on 20 December 1991 in Brussels was created NACC – the North Atlantic Cooperation Council as an institutional opportunity to bring together former enemies from the non-existing Warsaw Pact Treaty Organisation and NATO.

This was a clear sign for the countries of South East Europe that there were real chances of coming together without going to war in solving the post-Cold War issues. The idea of a regional security community received a strong institutional impetus by

¹ Plamen Pantev, Building a Balkan Security Community, in: Plamen Pantev et.al., Bulgaria and the Balkans in the Common Foreign and Security Policy of the European Union, Publ. by the Institute for Security and International Studies (ISIS), Sofia, July 1995, p. 30-33.

NATO as well as by the EC with the perspective of enlargement to the East and South East of Europe. The institutional opportunities of giving flesh and bones to the concept by NATO, the Western European Union (WEU) and the EC were equally possible for all Balkan states.

Unfortunately, the choice by Yugoslavia of Milosevic and his lieutenants (some of them still at the helm of the Serbian state), was in the opposite direction – wars with former “brothers”, ethnic cleansing of Kosovo Albanians, mean plans to export the domestic fire to neighbouring countries, exploiting ethnic and religious differences and tensions. The effect in the end of the day was postponing the progress of the Serbian society for decades. This might be witnessed in the intellectually and politically formulated and implemented geopolitical mess in the negotiations of Serbia for EU membership today, kind of schizophrenic wish to be both an EU member and a strategic ally of Russia and China.

The promise of creating new relationships and hence – a peaceful future for the whole region of South East Europe, by practically realising the various aspects of the concept of regional security community build-up, received from the very first days of its birth support by NATO through its NACC, Euro-Atlantic Cooperation Council, the Partnership for Peace Program and the “open doors” policy of enlargement. Bulgarian governments recognized the opportunities and launched in 1995-1996 the so called “Sofia Process” – practically implementing the ideas of the construction of regional security community in South East Europe. This initiative was followed upon Bulgarian proposal and US Department of Defense support by the so called South East European Defense Ministerial Meetings. Presently the continuation of this bottom-up process is the so called SEECP – South East European Cooperation Process, in addition to the broad membership of Balkan states in NATO and the European Union (EU).

The End of the Beginning of the Regional Security Community Build-Up in the Balkans and the Benign Role of NATO during the War in Kosovo

The catalyzing role of NATO in the institutional strengthening of the Balkan regional security community continued during the efforts of NATO and the larger part of the UN-based international community to stop the ethnic cleansing in Kosovo, launched earlier but intensified in a Nazi manner by the regime of Serbian president Slobodan Milosevic in 1998-1999. A great insider of Balkan affairs as Daniel Serwer wrote that “the results of intervention in the Balkans may be ugly, but the results of non-intervention would have been uglier”². Blocking the strategic goal of Belgrade to broaden the internal conflict to the rest of the Balkans, giving the chance of displaced Kosovo Albanians to return to their homes provided opportunities for all Balkan peoples to intensify their activity in re-writing the history of the region. The image of the Balkans as the “powder keg” of Europe, symbolizing such a level of fragmentation that periodically inevitably has been leading to wars started to wither away faster than the inertia of using the term “Balkanization”. This tendency started to prevail especially after the ousting of Milosevic of power in 2000.

With the end of the war in Kosovo NATO’s support was decisive in the policy of disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR). The Partnership for Peace/NATO Consortium of Defense Academies and Security Studies Institutes was particularly helpful in conceptualizing and implementing the security sector reforms (SSR) in the countries of South East Europe. This was a major step in realizing by the local countries the meaning and benefits of good governance of the security sector and its influence on the process of maturing of the regional security community³.

² Daniel Serwer, *From War to Peace in the Balkans, the Middle East and Ukraine*, Palgrave Critical Studies in Post-Conflict Recovery, Open Access Publication, Washington, D. C., Cham, Switzerland, 2019, p. 4.

³ See for example: Plamen Pantev (Ed.), *Civil-Military Relations in South-East Europe: A Survey of the National Perspectives and of the Adaptation Process to the Partnership for Peace Standards*, IIF, Vienna, ISIS, Sofia, NDA, Vienna, 2001, 218 pp.; Philipp Fluri, Gustav Gustenau, Plamen Pantev (Eds.), *The Evolution of Civil-Military Relations in South East Europe: Continuing Democratic Reform and Adapting to the Needs of Fighting Terrorism*, Physica-Verlag, A Springer Company, Heidelberg, 2005, 276 pp.; Jean-Jacques de Dardel, Gustav Gustenau, Plamen Pantev

The presence of NATO's KFOR in Kosovo continues to be a reliable guarantor the positive, constructive processes of filling with contents the regional security community will not stop. A major issue that creates obstacles on the road to a fully fledged peaceful Western Balkans is the opportunistically exploited by the remnants of the Milosevic regime in Serbia and created by this very regime negative image of NATO – the aggressor that destroyed the “happy” Yugoslav state of Slobodan Milosevic and his collaborators in Republika Srpska Karadjic and Mladic.

NATO's involvement in 1999 was not the Alliance's best dream but a necessity to remind the Belgrade regime and its supporters the world has changed and will no longer tolerate the atrocities in Kosovo and earlier – in Bosnia and Herzegovina, carried out by this same regime. It is high time for a historical re-consideration by the Serbian society that the real enemy of the Serbian people was the chauvinistic regime of a dictator, no matter so broadly supported by many Serbs, and not the 19 NATO members and the Alliance at that time or ever before and after that.

No great intellectual effort is needed to understand that the persisting anti-NATO narrative, preached by the Serbian governments after 1999 is to exploit a political and psychological advantage by this invented image of the Alliance. The purpose is to continue the chauvinistic attitudes in the Serbian society and to sustain a base of continuing the foreign policy of the times of Josip Broz Tito: equally distancing Serbia from the EU (the predominant economic partner of this country), US, Russia and China – with some additional military privileges by the way for Moscow. While this feeds the nostalgic and chauvinistic inclinations in Serbian society in the short term, it is a way to nowhere in the long term – both for Belgrade and for the Western Balkans as a consequence.

(Eds.), Post-Conflict Rehabilitation: Lessons from South East Europe and Strategic Consequences for the Euro-Atlantic Community, NDA, Vienna/Sofia, 2006, 235 pp.

The Breakthrough with NATO's Enlargement to South East Europe

NATO was based in South East Europe since the 50s of the XXth century. Greece and Turkey were projecting the Alliance's strategic culture in the region and even more actively after the systemic changes of the international relations system in the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s. Turkey, for example, was the member country which adopted a law obliging any Turkish government to support Bulgaria's and Romania's candidatures for membership in NATO – a political decision well remembered and respected by Sofia and Bucharest.

In 2004 Bulgaria, Romania and Slovenia joined the Alliance. Albania and Croatia became NATO members in 2009. In 2017 Montenegro was the next country to which the Alliance was enlarged. And in 2020, after regulating its relations with Greece and after promising to implement earlier treaty arrangements with Bulgaria the Republic of North Macedonia (RNM), became the 30th member of NATO.

The regional security community in South East Europe was developing gradually its institutional profile through the most successful military-political alliance in history – the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation. The process of drifting away from the image of the Balkans as the “powder keg” of Europe persisted, developing the new image of the region as contributor to European and global security. NATO was the guarantor that no great power of the world would dare use the smaller Balkan states in grand strategic schemes of pushing them one against the other, usually historically meaning participation in wars against each other. NATO allies do not go to war against each other, though conflicting interests in international relations have never been canceled by any authority in the world. The values that generate this capacity of the Alliance are practically operationalised by the member states – old and new, in their relations.

Efforts to destabilise the security situation of individual NATO member countries and of the region in general persist ever since the policy of enlargement by NATO was accepted with gratitude by the local new member states and in which the sovereign national will of these countries was displayed. Russia, an old geopolitical player in the

Balkans, portrayed this enlargement policy of NATO as a threat to Russian security – a rather naïve strategic argument, but doing a good propaganda job for domestic Russian consumption and aiming to keep the spirit of militarisation of Russian society alive. Since Russia’s soft power is limited to the unattractive concept of the “Russian world” (separated from the rest of the world), more political dynamism and social mobilization of Russian society is achieved through generating hate against the hostile “abroad”, read mostly as the threatening Russia’s security West (NATO, EU, USA, etc.).

The Russian Federation was carrying out this policy directly, using its gas and other energy supplies tool in combination with active intelligence and covert operations in all new NATO states. A special attention Moscow devoted to its staunchest allies in the region – Serbia and Republika Srpska of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Nourishing the narrative of “NATO’s cruelties” during the Kosovo crisis in 1999, forgetting about the multitude of international legal violations by the Belgrade regime of Milosevic, sticking to the traditional imperial style of preserving and intensifying animosities on various grounds Russia of Putin is keeping the progress of Serbian society hostage to Moscow’s own interests.

Of course, this would not have been possible without the “friendly” support by political leaders recruited by Milosevic and still in power in Belgrade and Pale/Banja Luka. To guarantee this policy would not be short-lived, Moscow provides state rewards to Serbian politicians in both capitals, arms heavily Serbia and to make sure – builds military bases on Serbian territory.

From the experience of other former close allies to the Soviet Union – the imperial predecessor of Putin’s Russia in Eastern Europe, it is a matter of time for Serbian people to awake to the realities, including the missing validity of the exercised presently social, political and historical stereotypes and to grasp what are the country’s long-term interests. It will not be an easy task bearing in mind the decades of brainwashing, the prints on Serbian people’s conscience moulding the perception and deep rooted belief about its incomparable uniqueness and greatness.

Issues That Need to be Tackled to Guarantee the Integration of the Western Balkans in NATO

For sure, the list could be a long one. Let me concentrate bluntly on the following few ones:

First, the key factor for the future destiny of the Western Balkans is the national development and attitude of Serbia. Four concrete issues need to get ripe for solution:

- a. Finding the courage to name the 1999 developments in Kosovo as THE historical blunder of the then Serbian regime and assess fairly NATO's involvement as inevitable and not aiming the punishment of the people of Serbia.
- b. Finding the wisdom to recognize the independent and sovereign state of Kosovo, crush in this way all outside manipulations and exploitation of the false emotions and stereotypes of the Serbs about their national destiny and accelerating the Euro-Atlantic integration of Kosovo. There are real opportunities to boost the Kosovo integration in both NATO and EU⁴.
- c. Using to the best Serbia's levers of influence on Pale/Banja Luka in a way that would open the Euro-Atlantic future of Bosnia and Herzegovina – the country which had suffered enough thanks to the policy of Belgrade.
- d. Considering the positive consequences of applying for membership in NATO and closing all Russian military facilities on Serbian territory. This would be vital for the future of Serbia in light of what Andrej Marković and Jeronim Perović from the Centre for Eastern European Studies at the University of Zurich wrote: “In recent years, states in the Western Balkans have increasingly rearmed. The arms purchases – often accompanied by nationalist rhetoric – endanger the fragile trust in a region where conflicts remain unresolved. Serbia plays a key role in these dynamics. Belgrade also uses arms purchases to deepen its relations with Russia and China”⁵.

⁴ See, for example: Kimberley Kruijver and Visar Xhambazi, Kosovo's NATO Future: How to Square the Circle?, Policy Brief, December 2020, Clingendael – The Netherlands Institute of International Relations/Democracy for Development, p. 8.

⁵ Andrej Marković and Jeronim Perović, Undermining Trust: Rearmament in the Western Balkans, CSS Analyses in Security Policy, CSS ETH Zurich, No. 282, April 2021, p.1.

Second, the re-consideration by four NATO members – two of them from the region of South East Europe, their attitude to Kosovo. Non-recognition of the state of Kosovo by Slovakia, Spain, Greece and Romania objectively works for the prolongation of the unstable security situation in the Western Balkans and in the broader region whose eastern-most part is the Western coast of the Black Sea, where a new strategic dynamics has evolved in recent years.

And third, the members of NATO from the Balkan region should not use the alliance interconnectedness as an excuse for not fulfilling bilateral treaty obligations. The attitude of the RNM towards the first state that formally recognized its independence in a very dramatic period for the young state, also a neighbour, namely Bulgaria, is a negative example.

In addition, as two prominent authors, Rachel Ellenhuus and Pierre Morcos, wrote recently in the “Texas National Security Review” Journal, “democracy remains fragile in Montenegro, Albania, and North Macedonia. As a result, internal corruption or malign influence could readily unleash new instability”⁶.

That is why it is so important to hold NATO members accountable to the values that guarantee the cohesion of our Alliance. We need to speak up in case a member state backslides from democracy and human rights. Open and sincere dialogue among NATO members for clarifying interests and positions is a must in the relations within the Alliance. Schemes and covert actions, using third states against an ally as was the case of the diplomatic offensive of the RNM against Bulgaria in connection with the application for membership of Skopje in the EU, is unacceptable and has nothing to do with the NATO founding principles.

Furthermore, burning publicly on many occasions the Bulgarian national flag in the RNM, violating human rights of Bulgarians in the RNM, using on a regular basis anti-Bulgarian hate speech not only by the media but also by politicians and in school textbooks, publicly insulting Bulgarian officials by politicians in Skopje, shaping anti-

⁶ Rachel Ellenhuus and Pierre Morcos, NATO Should Finally Take Its Values Seriously, in: Texas National Security Review, www.warontherocks.com, June 9, 2021, p.1.

Bulgarian stereotypes in young people and society in general, violating a long list of commitments as provided in the bilateral treaty of 2017 between Bulgaria and the RNM – all this has nothing to do with relations between ‘comrades-in-arms’ that share the principles outlined in the Washington Treaty of 1949.

The young state of RNM should be periodically reminded that Bulgaria is in this part of Europe for more than 13 centuries and that we shall stay as neighbours in the future. Any negative anti-Bulgarian activity will be an obstacle in the bilateral relations as well as in the integration of Skopje in the EU – before starting the negotiations or after their launch.

All members of NATO should be well informed of the non-disputable and vital Bulgarian interest to have all Balkan states as allies in both NATO and the EU, especially the neighbouring countries of Bulgaria. In 2018 it was Sofia in its capacity of six months presiding country of the European Council to reanimate the process of EU enlargement, forgotten for more than a decade. Bulgaria continues to insist on RNM’s and Albania’s integration in the EU as soon as they have been prepared to start negotiations. NATO membership of these countries is a major factor for orientation when, possibly, the right path has been lost by the candidate states for accession of the EU. The RNM has to start behaving as a good neighbour thinking of the fact it is a NATO ally to Bulgaria too. This is a guarantee that before this country has started negotiations it will be prevented from importing practices and attitudes that are inconsistent with EU membership criteria, NATO values and standards and bear the potential of poisoning the atmosphere and the relations of the Union’s integration community in the future.

Conclusion

The regional security community in South East Europe will not be complete until all countries of the Balkans, as stipulated in the EU Thessaloniki summit decisions of 2003 are not integrated in the Union. NATO has proved throughout its history that it is the indispensable catalyst and navigator in all processes of embetterment of the security situation in Europe, including in guaranteeing the smooth enlargement process of the EU. The Western Balkans are historically doomed to profit from this great opportunity and should not miss the chance.

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