

Balkan Politics Between East and West

Due to their location as an important route leading to Europe, the Balkans have been home to several different nations during the migration of tribes, resulting in a multi-national ethnicity consisting of a mixture of different peoples living among each other. The fact that the line dividing the Western and Eastern Roman Empire ran through these lands, and that this is the meeting point between the civilizations of Latin-Catholic Western Europe and Orthodox-Slavic Eastern Europe has caused the already complex multi-national structure to be more complex. With the addition of Islamic civilization in the following period, three important civilizations that are represented across the world started living altogether in this very tight geographical space. This led to the multi-national and multi-religious structure we see in the Balkans today.

In this region hosting three different civilizations, international players followed active policies to support their cognates or coreligionists living in the region in line with their own interests, and took steps that influenced the politics of the states that declared their independence during and after the breakup of Yugoslavia, which served as a buffer state between East and West. The international players that still have a high influence on the politics of region today can be divided into three groups. These are; the Western world including the European Union (EU) and the USA, Russia which is the cognate and coreligionist of most of the community living in the region, and lastly, Turkey and other Islamic countries that safeguard the benefits of Muslims which have a considerable population in the region.

Today, politicians of the countries in the region claim that international players lie at the bottom of internal political problems and economic failures in their countries. In most of the countries within the region, what matters in the elections is which country they have close relations with rather than the investments and reforms made by the competing parties and candidates of a member of parliament.

International Actors

Even though Russia lost its dominance after the disintegration of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, it started to regain its influence in the international arena especially after Putin came to power in the 2000s. In recent years, Russia has been trying to increase its activity in the Balkans, expand its zone of influence, protect its economic interests, and reduce the effectiveness of important players in the region such as Turkey. Within the scope of these policies, Russia supports the EU membership of new countries established in the region on the one hand, and tries to prevent them from being a member of NATO on the other hand. The reason behind Russia's support for the EU membership of these countries is its trust in the fact that these countries will follow pro-Russian policies within the EU thanks to its influence on the Balkan states. For the sake of achieving its mentioned targets, Russia is especially supporting Serbia intensively and explicitly. Furthermore, it is trying to create an "Orthodox Solidarity" by building close relations with Greece, Macedonia, Bulgaria and Montenegro, which have overwhelmingly Orthodox populations. It also aims to establish a "Slavic Solidarity" by retaining close ties with the countries where the majority of the population is Slavic, rather than Orthodox. [\[1\]](#) In these countries, Russia generally cooperates with oligarchs that are involved in corrupt activities.

On the other hand, aiming to limit and even end the effectiveness of Russia in the Balkans, the USA uses its economic power to achieve its target, and supports the expansion of the EU, which is a politically important soft power figure, towards the East. Besides this, it also works to create pro-US governments in the region, and thus lead these governments to conduct their political activities in line with its interests. For this purpose, it builds close relations with the political parties or figures that are in power or opposition. For instance, it is said that the US government is in close contact with the local parties and politicians through George Soros, who is a famous finance speculator from the USA, considered as the architect of "Colorful Revolutions" seen in most of the Balkan countries, and the founder of Open Society Foundations that operate actively in most of the countries.

Among the Balkan countries, Bulgaria and Romania are particularly important for the US and other Western countries as they have coasts on the Black Sea. The USA wants to gain access to the Black Sea where it has never been able to establish any activity, and follow an effective foreign policy on the lands surrounding it in order to eliminate its disadvantageous position against Russia in this region.[\[2\]](#)

Carrying out more than half of their foreign trade activities with EU states, the Balkan countries need the support of the EU for their economic development. Therefore the EU is another effective international player in the region while the Balkan countries seek membership. The EU is also trying to develop policies to expand towards the Balkans within the ideal of "United Europe". In line with these policies, the EU requests that the Balkan states make certain reforms to reach targets, such as improvement of democracy and economy-oriented development. Apart from these requests for reform, the EU plays an active role in most of the unresolvable crises across the region, including political ones.

The decision of the United Kingdom to leave the EU, the rise of ultra-nationalist parties in Europe, debt, refugee crises, and the absence of a new expansion plan for the near future have all led to the decline of the EU's influence on the Balkan states.

Another powerful international player in the region is Turkey. Turkey aims to protect the presence and rights of Turkish and Muslim communities in the region. Economic, political, military and cultural initiatives were taken especially after 1990 for this purpose. Having a large number of cultural investments in the region, Turkey has increased its influence on the Balkan countries thanks to the economic initiatives it has taken recently. The Western states and some countries in the region that are uncomfortable with such initiatives accuse Turkey of aiming to re-establish the Ottoman Empire in the region as its successor.

Regional Crises

It is apparent that the above-mentioned international players are just as responsible as the local players for the crises experienced in the Balkan states. Bosnia and Herzegovina is the primary hotbed for the region's crises. The source of these crises is the Dayton Agreement signed in 1995 under the supervision of international players to end the terribly bloody Bosnian War that occurred during the breakup of Yugoslavia, and which forms the text of the current constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Even the fact that the agreement was named after the city of Dayton in Ohio, USA, where the agreement was signed, is a factor that reveals the American influence on the region. Although the Dayton Agreement ended this bloody war that took place in the early 90s, it caused the tension between the three nations living in the region to get more intense in the long term. The three nations mentioned have different supporters in the international arena.

As one of the entities founded as a result of the Dayton Agreement, the Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where voices in support of independence have been quite raised lately, is supported unconditionally by its coreligionist Russia. Being a member of the same religion is not the only reason behind the Russia's support for the Bosnian Serbs. Russia's support stems from Russian investments in the Republika Srpska and Russia's desire to further expand its sphere of influence in its global competition with the EU and the Western states. Another supporter of the Bosnian Serbs in Bosnia and Herzegovina is naturally Serbia, as it recognizes this area as their homeland. However, since Serbia is in the process of becoming a member of the EU, it has to withhold its support for the Bosnian Serbs.

On the other hand, the EU and other Western states constantly condemn the Bosnian Serbs that live in Bosnia and Herzegovina and want independence and declare that they defend the unity of the country. Turkey has a clear attitude against any actions that would lead to the breakup of Bosnia and Herzegovina and harm the Muslims in the region. Lastly, the EU took up a clear position against the idea of having an independence referendum in Republika Srpska. However, even though the EU is thought to be influential in the region, it turned out that it has no power of sanction to stop such a referendum.

Another example of the EU's weakened power of sanction is the political crisis in Macedonia. Although the USA and EU seem to be mediating between local players in order to overcome the said crisis, they are actually the ones responsible for the emergence of the crisis in the first place. The voice recordings that prove the corruptions of the Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity, which has been in power for many years, were provided to the leader of the opposing party by the Western states. Following the leak of the voice recordings, it was believed that the crisis could be resolved by the last elections, however, the result was contrary to what was expected and led the country into a new crisis. After the election, the leader of the opposing party put together a coalition to form a government as a result of negotiations made with other parties. However, the President of Macedonia does not give the opposing party a mandate to form a government on the grounds that a coalition government formed by a platform of Albanian parties in Macedonia under the initiative of the Prime Minister of Albania on a matter of internal politics would threaten the unity and sovereignty of the country. Even though the EU authorities exert pressure on the

President to give the opposing party a mandate to form a government, its sanctions fall short as in the Bosna and Herzegovina example.

Another crisis that is actively affected by the international players is the one in Kosovo. There are two obstacles blocking the EU's decision to give Kosovo visa liberalization. The first is the problem of defining the borders between Kosovo and Montenegro. The other is the formation of "Alliance of Serb Municipalities" that will grant certain privileges to the Serbians living in Kosovo. While it is still uncertain as to whether there will be a loss of land as a result of the border agreement to be made with Montenegro, we can be quite sure that the formation of the Alliance of Serb Municipalities will lead to loss of land on the part of Kosovo. On the other hand, the recent efforts made to transform the Kosovo Security Force into the Kosovo Army are supported by the US and Western states, while Serbia and Russia are against this attempt.

Another issue opposed by Russia is Montenegro's NATO membership. It is even claimed that an ultra-nationalistic group which staged an attempted coup during the last elections in the country was supported by Russia and that the group confessed that they were planning to form an anti-NATO government. After the failed coup attempt and formation of a pro-NATO government, another development was the signing of Montenegro's NATO Accession Protocol by US President Trump.

In Serbia, which has played a direct or indirect role in most of the crises emerging within the states in the region and is among the strongest economies in the region, the winner of the presidential election was former prime minister Aleksandar Vucic who maintains good relations with Russia, even though he has adopted pro-Western policies. Claiming that the elections were rigged based on the fact that there were 6.7 million voters in a country whose population is only 7 million, some of the public became organized on social media under the slogan "Protest against dictatorship" and started to hold demonstrations.

Another country which has seen organized protesting is Albania. The protests organized by the opposing Democratic Party, which demands the formation of an interim government until the general elections to be held on June 18, have continued since February 18. Declaring that they will boycott the elections if they are held under the supervision of the current government, the Democratic Party claims that Prime Minister Edi Rama and the government have been involved in corruption, and have taken no precautions against drug trafficking. The EU stated that the country would not be able to make the judicial reforms that are essential for their EU membership and thus the membership process will be extended if the said political crisis is not resolved.

Conclusion

Regional and international players have as much a role as local ones in the crises that emerge in the region's states. On the side is Russia supporting the Slavs/Orthodox people in the region as its coreligionists/cognates, on the other is the EU as the largest trade partner of the regional states, and lastly there is the USA, which played an active role in ending the bloody wars of the 1990s. Though not as influential as the players mentioned, Turkey has also started to increase its influence in the region thanks to its initiatives in recent years, historical bonds, and a determination to protect the interests of the Muslims in the region.

It is also true to say that the USA, EU, and Russia also act as the triggers of the crisis that have emerged in this region. However, these triggering crisis players also show up as the mediators after the outbreak of a crisis. The wars of succession that are fought between Eastern and Western forces in many parts of the world have transpired as succession crises in the Balkans. Actions taken to resolve these crises mostly deepen the crisis rather than overcoming it.

While it is a fact that the crises in the region will not be resolved in the short term, the policies that Western and Eastern international players implement will determine the direction of the evolution of such crisis in the long term.

[1] http://www.tasam.org/tr-TR/lcerik/3790/balkanlar_ve_bosna_-_hersekin_jeopolitigi

[2] <http://akademikperspektif.com/2012/05/27/abdnin-balkanlar-politikasi-2/>