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THE MINI SCHENGEN INITIATIVE IN THE WESTERN BALKANS AS A NEW BUFFER ZONE *

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Abstract

This article deals with the significance of the Mini Schengen Initiative in shaping the new geopolitical configuration of the Western Balkans. In theoretical terms, the article discusses the changing meaning of borders in the contemporary world and buffer zones as a subject of research in political geography and geopolitics. In methodological terms, the authors provide an overview of the political-territorial development of the Western Balkans and then implement the theoretical approaches of contemporary political geography and geopolitics in the perspectives of the Western Balkans and its de facto status. Furthermore, analysing media reports related to the Mini Schengen Initiative, the article correlates the mentioned theoretical approaches with the trends in the political geography of the Western Balkans encouraged by the Initiative. Finally, the authors conclude that the Mini Schengen Initiative does not have a strong integration capacity; instead, serves as a waiting room for European Union membership thus shaping the Western Balkans as a new buffer zone.

Keywords: Western Balkans, the EU, the Mini Schengen initiative, Borders, Buffer zone

Yeni Bir Tampon Bölge Olarak Batı Balkanlardaki Mini-Schengen Girişimi

Öz

Bu makale, Batı Balkanlar'ın yeni jeopolitik konfigürasyonunu şekillendirmede Mini Schengen Girişimi'nin önemini ele almaktadır. Teorik olarak makale, siyasi coğrafya ve jeopolitik araştırma konusu olarak çağdaş dünyada sınırların ve tampon bölgelerin değişen anlamını tartışmaktadır. Metodolojik açıdan, yazarlar, Batı Balkanlar'ın siyasi-bölgesel gelişimine genel bir bakış sunmakta ve ardından çağdaş siyasi coğrafya ve jeopolitikaya dair teorik yaklaşımları Batı Balkanlar ve onun fiili statüsü perspektifinden yorumlamaktadır. Ayrıca, Mini Schengen Girişimi ile ilgili medya raporlarını analiz eden makale, bahsi geçen teorik yaklaşımları Girişim tarafından teşvik edilen Batı Balkanlar'ın siyasi coğrafyasındaki eğilimlerle ilişkilendirmektedir. Son olarak yazarlar, Mini Schengen Girişimi'nin güçlü bir entegrasyon kapasitesine sahip olmadığı; bunun yerine, Avrupa Birliği üyeliği için bir bekleme odası işlevi görerek Batı Balkanlar'ı yeni bir tampon bölge olarak şekillendirmekte olduğu sonucuna ulaşmaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Batı Balkanlar, AB, Mini-Schengen girişimi, Sınırlar, Tampon bölge

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The Mini Schengen Initiative in the Western Balkans As a New Buffer Zone

Introduction

The part of Southeast Europe, which has not yet become a full member of the European Union (EU), is covered by the unique name of the Western Balkans. This newly established region is a kind of waiting room for integration into the EU, which is also the only chance to leave this group, as was the case with Croatia. The status of the EU waiting room indicates the temporary nature of this regional construction, which currently includes Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo, Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia. In addition, it should be emphasized that the introduction of the regional concept of the Western Balkans is a precedent in the political-geographical regionalization of this part of Europe, since there is no any historical basis for such a grouping of countries. However, since the enlargement of the EU to the countries of the former socialist bloc in 2004 and 2007, it was quite clear that NATO membership is a necessary precondition for the accession of these countries to full membership in the EU. When it comes to the countries of the Western Balkans, in their relationship with NATO, they are divided into four groups: full members of the alliance (Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia); a country that does not want to be members of NATO (Serbia); a country strongly influenced by NATO, but without being a member state (Bosnia and Herzegovina); and a country strongly influenced by NATO, but with undefined status in international relations (Kosovo).

During the Cold War, in the area of today's Western Balkans, there was a kind of buffer zone or shatterbelt, whereby the former Yugoslavia and Albania remained outside the two opposing military-political alliances of NATO and the Warsaw Pact. Of course, contemporary circumstances are significantly different from the Cold War period, especially since that the power relations of the successors of former rivals have changed significantly and that in the meantime there has been a significant expansion of the geopolitical West to the east. Also, in considering the geopolitical features of the Western Balkans, the impacts of regional powers such as Germany or Turkey, whose interests are traditionally related to this area, should not be omitted. In this context, the article research the significance of the latest Mini Schengen Initiative, which, in addition to stronger

connections between member states, indicates the development of alternative initiatives due to the apparent stalemate on the path of the Western Balkans to the EU. However, the Mini Schengen Initiative should be seen primarily as an alternative blessed by the EU itself, which sees this initiative as an opportunity to keep member states in close relation, but without the obligation of rapid integration into the Union. Therefore, the article seeks to determine whether this initiative forms a new old buffer zone in the form recognized by classical geopolitics or whether this new regionalization should be viewed in a different context. In addition, bearing in mind the exposure of the Western Balkan countries to the migrant crisis, the role of the Mini Schengen zone as a potential buffer zone towards the countries of the EU is further emphasized. Finally, this initiative might be seen in the context of the imposition of leadership within this group by countries that in some way encouraged the formation of the Mini Schengen zone, and thus expect the greatest benefit from the interconnection of Western Balkan countries, especially Serbia and Albania.

There are numerous discussions on the position of the Western Balkans within the contemporary geopolitical image of the world and the economic dimensions of cooperation among the countries of the region. However, due to the recent formalization of the Initiative, it is understandable that there are still no significant number of discussions on all dimensions of this initiative and the geopolitical and economic consequences of its emergence. This issue is of particular importance in the context of European border and security policy and its relations with the countries of the Western Balkans, as the Initiative also implies a higher level of border openness between member states. In order to determine the attitudes of decision makers, as well as priorities and possible support from the political and economic level and by public opinion, the article analyzes 50 electronic media reports from the Western Balkans and Europe in the period from October 2019 until August 2021. Media reports were collected according to the criteria of reporting on the political and economic dimension of the Initiative. The collected reports included news, statements and views of decision makers, and expert analysis. The data processing sought to determine the attitude of each of the countries of the Western Balkans, the EU and other geopolitical factors towards the Initiative. More specifically, attitudes were established on the political, regional, economic, security and other aspects of the potential consequences of establishing the Initiative. Given the potential political tendencies of media reports harmonized with countries of origin, special attention is paid to the critical distance in the analysis of content, as well as the perception of that content as an indicator of opinion. In this way, efforts were made to compensate for the under-representation of academic debates on this initiative, mostly within the countries of the Western Balkans. In addition, based on the level of involvement of the Western Balkan countries in the integration

processes, the article seeks to see the possibilities of developing the Initiative in the context of its relations with the EU, which will essentially determine its destiny. Finally, the article seeks to answer the question of whether more intensive regional cooperation through the Mini Schengen Initiative will accelerate or slow down the accession of the countries of the region to the EU, or shape the Western Balkans as a new buffer zone.

1. Border-Focused Security Concerns

Whether instinctive or learned, security has always been at the centre of people's living arrangements and mankind have always been in search of safety in all terms. Although a common definition of security in the field of international relations were not made until the end of the Cold War, there have been heavy debates on. According to Arnold Wolfers who points out the ambiguity of the concept "security, in an objective sense, measures the absence of threats to acquired values, in a subjective sense, the absence of fear that such values will be attacked" (Wolfers, 1962: 150). The multidimensionality of security is not a new discovery; Wolfers already pointed out the need for specification with respect to which values to protect, from which threats, by what means, and at what cost (Baldwin, 1997: 23). For him, the ambiguity is mainly because of the difference in perceptions of threat which makes it easier to set up security policies for the states. A similar perspective is drawn by Barry Buzan who states that a security issue emerges not necessarily because there is a real existential threat but rather because the issue is presented as a threat, and therefore security is a self-referential practice (Buzan et al. 1998: 24–25). As commonly agreed on; the concept of security is very variable depending on the resource and target, the time and the situation or the case and the parameters. As the security phenomenon is multi-component and might vary from country to country, the threat which derives the security policies is also multi-component and variable which leads us the conclusion that there is not a common and generally-agreed-upon definition of these concepts (Karakoç Dora, 2021: 145-146).

Throughout history, many developments in many areas have been made to improve security of the mankind, but the most orderly steps were taken in parallel with the establishment of the states. Border control, the effort to restrict territorial access, has long been a core state activity (Anderson, 1996) as borders have always been the main factor in ensuring the security of that state in return (Karakoç Dora, 2020: 511). Because, beside physical security and the security of life supplies; a new dimension was on scene with emerge of the states; the security of the borders. Borders have been designed to protect the insiders as well as their wealth and values from the outsiders since the very beginning; in other words, borders have been the concrete lines of security policies. However,

boundaries can be ideological constructions as well. The motives that gave rise to the Great Wall of China and the Roman Limes¹ were both security and ideological (Samardžić, 2017: 65).

Though being a great part of security, borders also have other missions in political, economic, cultural, historical and social areas. By now, border studies has evolved into an interdisciplinary field of study developed in parallel by political scientists, sociologists, ethnologists, psychologists, anthropologists, linguists, economists, geographers and even specialists in more technical sciences (Kolossoy, 2005: 607). Yet, the history of borders has a lot to do with rulers' and governments' attempts to control people's freedom of movement (Sevastianov et al., 2015: 15). Therefore, borders are a crucial geographical manifestation of state control over movement of goods (Flint, Taylor, 2011: 285). However, determining the limits of the possessed lands is not the unique function of borders. Though controlling and in some cases restricting the mobilities beyond borders; states, on the other hand, knew how it was helpful for the further development of itself to open its gates for the newcomers which triggered the process of globalization. As Alan Dowty points out; the most sophisticated civilizations arose where human mobility was the heaviest and where newcomers brought new ideas and change; which, in the end, inevitably developed the welfare of the hosting civilization by contributing to taxes and serving in the army (Dowty, 1987: 22-242). Thus, borders can both be regarded as the primer line of security and the first barrier in front of rapid development. What makes a state successful in border policies, somehow, depends on how it handles and balances this bivalent characteristic of the phenomenon of border. Buffer zones, which might also be seen as different forms of borders, can also exist as a security tool that functions as barriers in front of human mobility. The phenomenon of borderlessness brought about by globalization, today, has turned into a situation requiring new measures to overcome its side-effects and may appear before us as buffer zones as an extended border experiment to construct new security areas.

2. Borders and Their Role in the Contemporary World

The boundaries that draw the outer frame of the owned lands, in every period, correspond to a physical area which "must be protected". Whether designed by geographical landmarks or artifactual, the main logic of determining borders have always been identifying the spaces of autonomy. The borders are, therefore, shaped as the ultimate limits of the territorial homeland. When the French revolution, the industrialization process, the First and later Second World

¹ The word "limes" is the Latin equivalent of the word "frontier".

War, after which ideologies became dominant, destroyed the empires in the first hand; the borders started to come to the fore a little more. The borders, to be protected against and from “others” in an absolute manner, turned into an issue of international security policies in time, peculiarly after the modern state system were launched.

Though the main goal was to end the 30-year-wars between Protestants and Catholics, 1648 Westphalian Peace Treaty played an important role in constructing the structure of the modern nation-state system. The treaty was the beginning of a new process that determined and mostly crystallized borders, the elements that belong to the states and those that do not, rights and obligations of the peoples in the countries. Indeed; the Peace of Westphalia could be counted as the launch of the contemporary political order based upon boundaries of sovereign, internationally acclaimed and territorially demarcated states (Sevastianov et al., 2015: 17). Despite the fact that the Peace of Westphalia was not able to end war in Europe, it opened up the path for the sovereign states to co-exist by supplying a new political system, the extension of which shapes the general politics of today’s Europe.

Since the appearance of modern nation-states, security and border studies have become more and more interlinked. Though the main common point of security policies which could be summarized as “the protection of the states and the people inside it” at all times have remained roughly relict; the way of applying these policies and the perception of the threat have changed from state to state and from time to time. Since the operation and existence of borders are important factors in the way people think of states, borders may be parts of national identity that define the extent and meaning of homeland (Flint, Taylor, 2011: 285). While borders were playing a role of separation of the fields of sovereignty in the ancient times and mostly drawn by primitive tools like plough; with systematization of the states, borders became more important and border policies simply began to base, principally, on economic and military reasons to strengthen and protect the state. Newcomers (or the allowed ones to enter through borders) were to pay taxes and serve in the army, which in the end contributing the maintenance and development of that state. Establishing and controlling the customs have been another and an outstanding economic purpose of the borders by controlling and gaining from the trade. But in time, as new challenges aroused, new pushing factors evenly emerged in shaping the border policies. Beside its traditional missions, borders have become the policy tools of combatting smuggling, terrorism, human trafficking, and illegal immigration as well as being the security barriers against them.

After Westphalia, the world politics witnessed many great crossroads in aspect of security. In the 20th century, events such as the end of colonialism and the emergence of new states have given borders even greater importance in

international relations (Günel, 2002: 69). Primarily, the League of Nations sought to prevent a upsurge of the devastating World War I by replacing the balance-of-power system with one based on the formation of a collective security regime made up of regulations for maintaining peace, led by the notion that trial of aggression by any state would be countered by a collective requital response from the rest; until it failure with the hegemonistic aggression of Germany, Japan, and Italy during 1930s (Blanton et al. 2016-2017: 152). World War II showed that collective security attempts had to be revised. And during World War II, the U.S., British, and Soviet allies began planning for a new international organization, the United Nations, to preserve the post-war peace and establish collective security because it was believed that peace could not be maintained unilaterally by any of the great powers acting alone (Blanton et al. 2016-2017: 152). Though UN has been validly existing since then, it was unable to prevent Cold War, which redealt in security area.

Last century's latest milestone in transmutation of border policies was the Cold War and its subsequent effects. The experience of the world concerning the security during and after the Cold War was the driver of a big change. In the early 1990s security studies turned some of its attention away from arms control, nuclear deterrence, the role of conventional arms, the rise of the electronic battlefield, military alliances, etc. to include a wider range of policy questions (Huysmans, 2006: 30). Of course these facts were of great importance especially during the years of war, but the war started to show its effects on many different areas as well. The Chernobyl catastrophe and great flow of migration featured prominently and got a fair share of the attention mirroring the transformation in Western political agendas at the end of the Cold War (Huysmans, 2006: 30). The end of communism in, specifically, Eastern Europe was symbolized by the loss of control over state borders and offers a dramatic example of the relationship between border control and state strength (Adamson, 2014: 177) which, in the last two decades, changed the border policy of Europe by expanding its policy of free movement over the East side of European territories.

Migration flows, intensively triggered after the Cold War, has increasingly continued since. Though massive migration reached its peak especially after the break out of the civil war in Syria in 2011, it has been occupying the political agenda for some decades. The reasons of mass migration indeed compose a great part of the security threats today. In addition to civil war, local or regional conflicts and terrorism; lack of main sources also cause mass migration. Though; 9/11 consituted another cause of debate in security area. "The global war on terror" declared by the USA with the support of Europe after the 9/11 terrorist attacks has a significant impact on security studies, though not transformed its basic principles (Buzan and Hansen, 2009: 268). After the attacks, the occupations aimed at fighting terrorism and drying out the source of terrorism

created new areas of instability in the Middle East geography. Within the scope of the West's fight against terrorism, existing and new terrorist organizations that wanted to take advantage of the chaos caused by the stability problem in the region following the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan began to narrow the range of action of civilians and threaten their lives, covering a wide geography. At the end of the first decade of the 21st century, when the West was in search of a solution to end the occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq and initiated negotiations, the popular revolts that broke out in Tunisia expanded to include many Middle Eastern countries in a short time and turned into a large-scale management crisis called the Arab Spring. The sphere of influence of terrorist organizations began to expand while the chances of a stable life of the civilian populations began to decrease in correlation. The political chaos, which formed the basis of the migration movement from the Middle East to Europe, brought along the refugee movement at an uncontrollable rate for Europe. The main reason behind the transformation of the borders into fortified lines in the current century is the security-oriented measures to prevent uncontrolled migration from reaching European lands. Since the borders could not be redrawn, the existing borders would be strengthened, and if this would not be sufficient, new buffer zones would have to be created as a defense shield, ultimately for the protection of Western Europe.

3. Buffer Zones As a Subject of Study In Political Geography and Geopolitics

When borders are considered, it is hardly possible to think about it without certain concepts like frontiers, boundaries, security lines, edges, limits, dividing lines, cut-off points, line of demarcations which determine the realm of authority. However, in political geography, there is another term that alludes to a sphere between two or more confrontational powers and functions as physical separators; called buffer zones. Buffer zones could simply be described as specified areas which are designated for various intentions ranging from natural to social from sanitary to economic and/or geo-political purposes. Modelling of the buffer zone is arranged depending on its purpose. Either functioning as a guard against two states engaged in hostilities or serving to contain a civil conflict within one state from spilling into another or allowing states to pursue rebels or terrorists without technically violating their neighbour's sovereignty (Beehner and Meibauer, 2016: 251), buffer zones has long been a very part of geopolitics throughout history.

According to Buzan, the buffer zone is a state or mini complex within the compound of security and abides at the core of a robust form of securitisation of which mission is to discrete competitor powers (Buzan and Wæver 2003: 489).

Spykman, additionally, argues that a buffer state is a relatively weak state that is geographically located among stronger ones (Spykman, 1938: 393-394) and in a classic case of security dilemma, one side would not prefer the other to get benefit from an adjacent ties or line of business of the neighbouring small state (Pedi, 2020: 170). Simply put, buffer states or buffer zones are the areas of weakness that separate areas of strength, reducing the chances of conflict between them (Glassner, Fahrer, 2004: 284-285). However, the buffer state does not always have to be weak when the Belgium case in Europe laid in between Germany and France is considered. Belgium, is a buffer state whose existence is supported despite being a battleground between Germany and France in both world wars and due to the transition position between the control areas of two economic powers, it has taken the advantage and benefited from the commercial traffic (Hoş, 2012: 725).

The term showed up first at late nineteenth century in connection with rivalry between the British and the Russian Empire in the north part of the Indian peninsula and it found an extensive ground of use during the twentieth century (Prevelakis, 2009: 362). Buffer zones might either refer to a specific area or could directly be the state(s) themselves. Buffer states first emerged in Europe in 19th century to succeed the competition among them in Europe, Asia and Africa, as colonial powers; they tried to abstain from direct conflict and keep peace and security amongst (Pedi, 2020: 168). Very much similar to other instruments of foreign policy and martial agenda, buffer zones hold a critical vagueness with regard to their objectives; whether they likely be one of opportunism what might be called as offensive or one of necessity what might be called as defensive (Beehner and Meibauer, 2016: 253). The overall objective of the buffer zones clearly determines the function as well. Though organized for mostly defensive purposes in pre-modern period; they started to play a role to distinct a specific culture and differentiate the inhabitants from those of the core in modern times (Prevelakis, 2009: 363).

Following the collapse of the communism and subsequent opening of the borders in Europe between the East and the West, a wave of migration from relatively underdeveloped East towards the West, which had already laid the foundations of the Union, compelled the attentions. International borderlands inherit the historical tenses relating to the perseverance of geographical elements or to the inaction of cultural geography (Prevelakis, 2009: 366). The cultural and economic map of Europe, whose framework had highly been detailed and defined in Rome Treaty in 1957, then, started to become more transitional and destabilized.

“... the return of war to Europe has led to ethnic cleansing, diminishing again the potential of many areas to function as buffer zones between different national groups. The cases of Croatia, Bosnia, and Kosovo clearly

indicate the trend to reinforce the separation of nationalities and to diminish the intermediary function of residual mixed communities that had somehow survived the homogenizing processes in the Balkans.” (Prevelakis, 2009: 366).

4. The Mini Schengen Initiative As a New Buffer Zone

Following the previously highlighted role of borders in the contemporary World, let us note that European open border policy has forever changed the political map of the Old Continent. Of course, the extension of the integrated European political space to the east is a fundamental precondition for shaping the space of open borders of continental dimensions. However, the EU enlargement to the eastern part of the continent also meant the fulfilment of certain criteria by potential candidates for membership in this club. Acquiescing to the necessities of time and tending to integrate its remaining extent to the West on the way to create a solid Europe, the EU escalated the initiatives of adaptation. For this purpose, after its first enlargement attack towards former socialist bloc in 2004, the EU started to seek for NATO membership of candidate states to become full members which would and did cause many nodes.

The part of Southeast Europe that is not integrated into the EU, but is territorially completely surrounded by its member states, stands out for its specifics as a kind of zone of discontinuity within the integrated part of Europe. Of the Western Balkans countries, including Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo; there aroused four different types of status which makes this geography unique as a buffer zone. Similar to Spykman’s thinking about the buffer zones, although it is a group of countries and not a single country, this region is an area of relative weakness surrounded by a stronger political space, in this case by the EU. Naming this buffer zone as Mini Schengen, it would not be wrong to claim that the Initiative has both offensive and defensive purposes. While on the one hand, this buffer zone is expected to play a role of stopping the migration wave stemming from the Syrian civil war bounding towards the West of Europe; on the other hand the EU pursues to keep them in close relationship without becoming full members on the way of full integration. This is especially important considering that borders are the common denominator of all Balkan conflicts (Samardžić, 2017: 64). With the exception of the dimension of conflict potential manifested through a series of armed conflicts between individual states in the region in the 1990s, the weaknesses of border control essentially correspond to the weaknesses of all post-communist countries, just as we pointed out earlier to what Adamson (2014: 177) warns.

The notion of the Western Balkans was formed during the Austrian presidency of the EU in 1998 and included the countries of the former Yugoslavia minus Slovenia plus Albania. However, this region is defined controversially, as its meaning can be multinomial; geographical unit; a more or less conflicting system of cultural, political and economic interaction; organized cooperation arising from culture, social communication and rapprochement of values; the historical formation of a different identity that acts as a political factor given a certain degree of legitimacy; a region created out of its own request and for its own interest or a political region (Beširević, 2013: 102-103). Simply put, the term of Western Balkans largely refers to the „post-conflict zone of violent disintegration of Yugoslavia” (Samardžić, 2017: 342). With Croatia’s accession to the EU in 2013, the *Limes* that existed until the departure of the Ottomans more or less revived on the western border of the Western Balkans region.

Interpreting the historical failure of Southeast Europe in the context of its peripheral position defined by various limits, Serbian historian Nikola Samardžić points out: „The boundaries are almost cursed: between Rome and the barbarians, Eastern and Western Christianity, the Christian and Islamic worlds, then, in the 20th and 21st centuries, communism and nationalism in relation to liberal democracies” (Samardžić, 2017: 18). Indeed, this area traditionally contains the characteristics of a buffer zone or shatterbelt, especially after the formation of the geopolitical vacuum that arose in the Balkans with the withdrawal of the Ottomans. With the establishment of Yugoslavia in 1918, the territories that had been ruled from Istanbul, Vienna, Budapest and Venice for several centuries were united. The mythical *Limes* that divided civilizations was exceeded. However, Samardžić points out the circumstances that doomed the Yugoslav community to failure in advance: „real and imaginary differences of the Yugoslav peoples, production of their own and denial of other people’s identities, unequal economic, social and political development, disproportions of cultures and mentalities, and finally clashes of foreign, sometimes geographically distant interests” (Samardžić, 2017: 48).

Along with the traditional peripheral position, starting from Rome, through the Ottomans to the Cold War and the Non-Aligned Movement, the peripherality of the position of the Western Balkans is also manifested in the fact that this area is seen as a transitional zone between various geopolitical realms. While American author Saul B. Cohen sees this region as the Heartlandic Periphery, Russian author Alexander Dugin sees the same space as the undoubted Rimland (more in: Botić, 2013b). However, as shown in Map 1, all Western Balkan countries except Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo have candidate status for EU membership, while Albania, Montenegro and Northern Macedonia have already become members of NATO. Moreover, the Orthodox identity of the latter two countries was not as an obstacle to their decision to join NATO. On

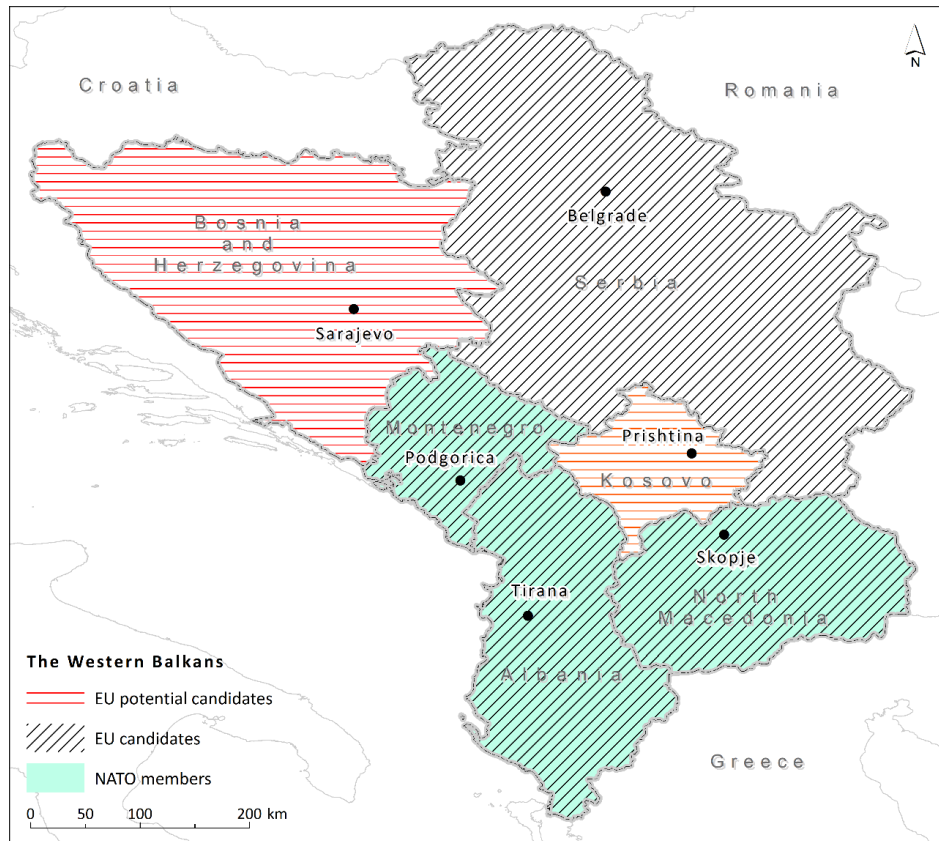
the other hand, the area from the Baltic to the Adriatic through the Three Seas Initiative² is being reshaped as a kind of pro-Western buffer zone or belt border between Russia and the West. Although none of the Western Balkan countries belongs to the group of countries that make up the Three Seas Initiative, the geographical location of the countries in the region potentially points to many common features with the members of this initiative initiated in 2015 by Croatian President Grabar-Kitarović and Polish President Duda.

As a legacy of turbulent history, the Balkans as a whole, and its western part in particular, is an area of marked ethnic and religious diversity. As a result of this ethno-religious mosaic, the Western Balkans is arguably the most politically-territorially fragmented part of Europe. Youth and small area are the basic characteristics of the countries of the region. Kosovo is the smallest in area and Montenegro in terms of population. However, no country in the Western Balkans is larger than 100,000 km², nor has more than 10 million inhabitants (Zupančič, 2015: 187). The countries of the Western Balkans have been burdened by numerous disagreements and open conflicts that have been a fundamental feature of their relations after the end of the Cold War and during the dissolution of Yugoslavia. However, all these countries publicly express their commitment to the European perspective, which they see as an opportunity to solve both internal and external problems. On the other hand, the EU insists on good neighbourly relations and regional cooperation as one of the fundamental preconditions for joining this organization.

Therefore, the European Commission finances numerous cross-border cooperation projects among the Western Balkan countries in the field of economic cooperation, environmental protection, transition support and institution building, development and capacity building of local and regional authorities, regional and rural development, strengthening social cohesion, cultural cooperation, etc. (more in: Sadiković, 2014). The example of Bosnia and Herzegovina shows that one third of foreign direct investment in Bosnia and Herzegovina comes from neighbouring Croatia and Serbia as small economies on a European scale, which nevertheless points to the conclusion that the country has strong economic and political ties with its immediate neighbourhood (Botić, 2013a: 138). This example is not exception in the relations among the countries of the Western Balkans, since all of them, with the exception of Albania, were

2 The Initiative is an alliance of post-communist NATO and EU member states of Rumsfeld's "New Europe", from Estonia in the north to Croatia in the southwest, and Bulgaria in the southeast, plus Austria. The Initiative has goals – containing the influence of Russia and drawing the area between NATO/EU and Russia (Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova) out of Russian sphere of influence. The member states of the Initiative are bandwagoning towards the U.S. and perceive NATO as the guarantor of their security (Kurečić, 2018: 100).

part of the same state, the former Yugoslavia, until thirty years ago. In addition, with the exception of Albania and Kosovo, all of these countries belong to the South Slavic ethnic and linguistic area, which further facilitates mutual communication and potential co-operation, despite inherited unresolved issues.



Map 1. Geopolitical features of the Western Balkans

Nevertheless, the economic orientation of the Western Balkan countries towards the EU is crucial, as the EU is the most important trade export (71.9%) and import (70.6%) partner to the countries of the region (Avioutsii, 2009: 126). According to the Council of the European Union, trade between the EU and the Western Balkans doubled in ten years from 2006 to 2016, amounting to 43.6 billion euros. In addition, the Union accounts for as much as 67% of imports and 83% of exports in the region. The largest share of Albanian imports falls on the EU (62.5%), while only 44.7% of total Kosovo imports come from the EU.

According to the percentage of exports to the Union, Northern Macedonia leads (78.7%), while Montenegro is at the back (35.6%). EU companies are the largest investors in the Western Balkans, and in 2014 they accounted for 72.5% of total foreign direct investment in the region. Individually, the EU is the largest investor in Northern Macedonia, accounting for as much as 81.6% of foreign direct investment, while the least investing in Kosovo (33,8%) (*EU and Western Balkans intertwined*, 2018). Moreover, some scholars consider economically the Western Balkans is already integrated into the periphery of the EU even called as the “super-periphery” of the EU (more in: Bartlett, Ivana Prica, 2017). The process of bringing the Balkans closer to the EU began with the establishment of the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe in June 1999 as an ambitious project to create a free trade zone, i.e. a regional trade integration circle, to prepare these countries for joint EU membership (Beširević, 2013: 264). At the Thessaloniki summit in 2003, the stabilization and association process was launched, which conditioned measures in the field of trade, finance and regional cooperation (Avioutskaa, 2009: 110). The regional approach to EU accession was annulled in 2013, when Croatia was accepted as a full member of the Union as more successful than other neighbouring countries. Supporting the countries of the Western Balkans on their European path and expressing determination in further enlargement of the EU, but without specific deadlines, the European Commission in its reports recognizes the difference in the dynamics of eligibility for each of these countries, especially in Albania and North Macedonia (*Annual Report*, 2019).

However, with the economic crisis of 2008 and austerity measures and the migrant crisis of 2015, it became quite clear that the EU was tormented by internal issues and that enlargement to the Western Balkans would not be on the agenda so soon. Moreover, this non-integrated area has been given the function of a kind of buffer zone within which it is possible to further filter and prevent the flow of migrants to the economic and political core of the EU, keeping a significant number of migrants in very scarce, often inappropriate conditions. It is important to note that the organization of the corridor for the movement of refugees in the culmination of the migrant crisis by the countries of the Western Balkans has reasserted a degree of state control that eventually enabled its closure (El-Shaarawi, Maple Razsa, 2018). However, the role of the buffer zone is particularly evident in its security dimension. Indeed, the existence of a large number of even poorly controlled borders significantly limits the passability of this region for migrant movements. This confirms the assertion that borders, among other things, have become the policy tools of combat smuggling, terrorism, human trafficking, and illegal immigration as well as being the security barriers against them. Therefore, the messages from Brussels to this region were aimed at stronger regional cooperation, telling the time to these countries that

they will remain in the status of a European waiting room for a long time to come. Anyway, the Western Balkans remains, due to geographic proximity and the plethora of issues there, the EU's number one stability concern. Moreover, reinforcing engagement on security and migration is one of the important criteria on the path to membership of the Western Balkan countries in the EU (Smith, Markovic-Khaze, Kovacevic, 2020).

All of the above are strong reasons why the Mini Schengen Initiative (or the Open Balkans) has received strong support since the first idea formulated by Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama in 2019, which was then strongly accepted by Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić (URL 9). The Initiative is conceived as an economic zone of the Western Balkan countries that would strengthen mutual economic cooperation and trade, facilitate border crossings for citizens of member states, but also contribute to faster integration of these countries into the EU (URL 23). Apart from Albania and Serbia, the Initiative was reluctantly accepted by North Macedonia (URL 8), while in other countries the acceptance of the Initiative was more complicated, especially in the case of Kosovo, which at that time started an economic war with Serbia over taxes on imports from this country. In addition, Kosovo opposes any closer ties with Serbia before official Belgrade recognizes the independence of its former province, especially due to the fear that this Initiative potentially represents the establishment of a new creation on the territory of the former Yugoslavia under the domination of Serbia (URL 48). Of course, the possibility of other Western Balkan countries joining this Initiative remains open (URL 3). As a country that has come significantly closer to the EU on its candidate path, Montenegro fears that this Initiative could be an alternative to membership in the Union and slow down the achievement of full membership in that organization (URL 50). Moreover, referring to Croatia's experience, Montenegro emphasizes the possibility of individual accession to the EU, considering it more important to focus on the Berlin Process (URL 14). As the EU does not plan to expand to new members very soon, Brussels supports the regional integration of these countries, emphasizing that this does not change the Union's commitment to further enlargements.

In order to determine the attitudes and evaluation of the Mini Schengen Initiative within the Western Balkans region, but also in Europe, an analysis of 50 electronic media reports³ in the period from October 2019 to August 2021 was conducted. Analysing the media reports, it was determined that the Initiative, with the mentioned exception of Kosovo, mostly received support for its economic dimension. However, the majority of media reports, especially regional, were very sceptical about the political dimension of the Initiative.

³ The list of the 50 media reports is at the end of the article as an appendix to the references.

Indeed, as soon as the Initiative was launched, the criticism was that it was an attempt to create a Greater Serbia, a Greater Albania or the renewal of Yugoslavia. Of course, it is possible that, if it really comes to life in full capacity, the Mini Schengen Initiative would indeed divide the Western Balkans into the spheres of interest of Belgrade and Tirana, but it is hard to believe that the same would mean border changes, especially not under EU auspices. However, the division of the Western Balkans into the spheres of interest of Serbia and Albania potentially means the division of this region into the spheres of interest of Russia and the United States, if the EU's interest in the countries of the region weakens. Still, the question remains where the line of demarcation of the spheres of interest would extend. However, it is important to note that at the time of the Thessaloniki Summit (2003), the EU was undeniably the main player in the Western Balkans security complex, but in the following years Russia and China have increased their presence. In addition, China, more recently, gained a great success in the Western Balkans given its support regarding the COVID-19 outbreak, something which the EU has been heavily criticized for failing to do (about Russian and Chinese impact, more in: Smith, Markovic-Khaze, Kovacevic, 2020).

In such a development, the only objective loser would be the EU, in whose backyard a distinct buffer zone or shatterbelt would appear, which in a way the Union itself created with its long-term hesitation and indecisive political actions towards Western Balkan countries crying out for European interference in their interrelationships and internal issues. However, it should be remembered that the Western Balkans have acquired the outlines of shatterbelt from the very first moment when it became quite clear that the European perspective of the countries of the region is not so close on the horizon. Moreover, today this new European shatterbelt has the additional function of a buffer zone to keep the influx of migrants towards European borders, which further contributes to the development of instability in this area. Therefore, the hypothesis, according to which the Mini Schengen Initiative does not have a strong integration capacity and serves as a waiting room for EU membership thus shaping the Western Balkans as a new buffer zone, has been confirmed. This can be particularly pronounced if relations within the Initiative turn from cooperation to rivalry.

Conclusion

After the Second World War, Europe entered a decisive phase of interconnection, which was crowned with the founding of the EU. Such integration has not only reduced the conflict potential among European countries, but has completely changed the meaning and function of borders within the Union. At the same time, as the European space was uniting, in the European southeast there was a new territorial and political fragmentation in the former

Yugoslavia and the establishment of new borders. Meanwhile, the rest of Southeast Europe, which is not yet covered by EU membership, has been named the Western Balkans. The Mini Schengen Initiative is a new political idea of bringing the countries of the Western Balkans together in a regional initiative that would (temporarily) replace the full membership of the countries of the region in the EU. Like any initiative of this type, and especially bearing in mind the meaning of the Schengen name in its title, the Mini Schengen Initiative would imply a kind of liberalization of border controls of member states in accordance with the already established practice of changing the meaning of borders in the contemporary World.

However, the Mini Schengen Initiative also has a strong geopolitical dimension, as it leaves member states in an undefined status in relation to the organization whose membership they have aspirations. Such circumstances expose the Western Balkans area to numerous geopolitical impacts and make the region even more vulnerable in its efforts to consolidate and overcome a number of outstanding issues. Moreover, the area covered by this Initiative is potentially exposed to new divisions in the form of the formation of new spheres of interest, both regional and non-regional. Indeed, the slowdown in European integration processes and the use of the Mini Schengen Initiative as a temporary substitute for full EU membership open space for further disappointments in the Western Balkans and the search for geopolitical alternatives. In addition, the Initiative can potentially divide the Western Balkans into the zones of interest of leading member states, especially Serbia and Albania, which have been quick to initiate the Initiative by recognizing the potential benefits of this project. Also, the still high level of mutual mistrust is an additional obstacle to stronger mutual integration of these countries within the Initiative. In this way, the Western Balkans remains a zone of discontinuity within the European geopolitical space. Therefore, the Mini Schengen Initiative does not have a strong integration capacity; instead, serves as a waiting room for EU membership thus shaping the Western Balkans as a new buffer zone.

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