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THE IMPACT OF THE UKRAINE CRISIS ON THE BALKANS

| Abstract

- ▶ *Goal* – to analyze the political, economic, military, and social effects of the Ukraine Crisis on the Balkan Geography.
- ▶ *Research methodology* – the article includes an analysis of the available literature. A comprehensive press review of the Balkan countries was made and the study was shaped by qualitative data analysis.
- ▶ *Score/results* – the conducted analysis allowed us to verify the research hypothesis positively. The Ukraine Crisis reactivated the Cold War practice within the Balkan countries and increased the polarization among the Balkan countries. In the article, it was emphasized that the ethnic and religious fault lines between the countries of the region became more visible. It has been foreseen that the uncertainty in the region will pave the way for the Kosovo Crisis to come to the fore again in the upcoming period.
- ▶ *Originality/value* – the article was performed by the author independently, without outside help. The article contains links to quotes, as well as links to legislation. In essence, the article is an overview report. In the study, it was predicted that the Ukraine Crisis could act as a lever in the enlargement process of the European Union and NATO. In addition, it was emphasized that within the framework of the 21st-century digital world order, the Ukraine Crisis may have new consequences in addition to the previous crises. Energy transformation and cryptocurrency markets are examples of this situation.

| **Keywords:** Ukraine Crisis, European Union, United States, Russia, NATO.

1. Introduction

Due to its geostrategic location and cosmopolitan structure, Balkan geography has a special position in the global system. As a natural consequence of this position, it has been the field of application of the policies implemented by global powers throughout history. During the Cold War, while the countries in the region were divided between the USA and the Soviet Union, this practice came to the fore once again with the outbreak of the Ukraine Crisis. As a result of Russia's military intervention in Ukraine, some countries in the region approached the European Union and NATO when the Serbian Autonomous Region in Bosnia Herzegovina and Serbia showed a diplomatic stance in favor of Russia. The possibility that Russia and the NATO alliance, the two largest nuclear powers in the world, will enter into a conventional war with each other can have devastating consequences. Therefore, for this reason, the orientation of the parties to such a war is very unlikely among the available options. The USA's declaration that it will not fight directly with Russia and the current developments in the region increase the possibilities of the parties in the Ukraine Crisis to make new political moves in the Balkan geography in the upcoming period. This crisis, which is expected to last for a long time, will have consequences in the Balkan geography in the short term that will shake the balance in the region in terms of politics, economy, military, and society.

2. Political impacts

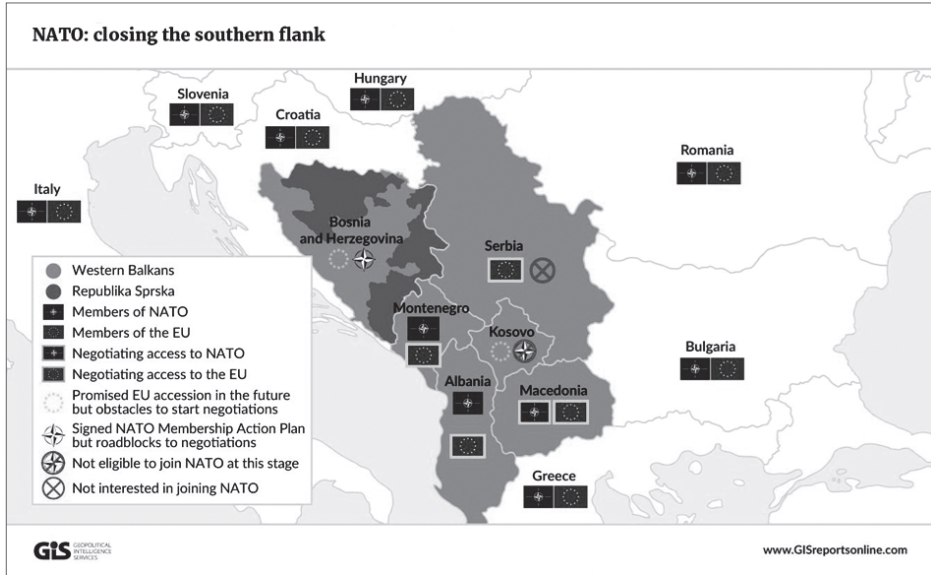
The psychological superiority that Russia has achieved in the field of the Ukraine Crisis also shows its effects on the Balkan geography. The Ukraine Crisis had a deepening impact on the current political polarization in the Balkan countries. Albania and Kosovo, which have had close relations with the USA throughout history, followed a Western-oriented policy in this process. Albanian President Ilir Meta stated that his country will support Ukraine in line with the European Union and NATO [*Albania Will Continue...*]. Besides, The Kosovo Government has decided to impose sanctions on Russia for its military intervention in Ukraine. Prime Minister Albin Kurti stated that these sanctions are in line with those imposed by the USA and the European Union, emphasizing that today's decision is an extension of Kosovo's political and diplomatic orientation [*Kosovo Imposes Sanctions...*]. The influence of Albanians in the recently established

government has increased significantly in North Macedonia. The fact that Foreign Minister Bujar Osmani is of Albanian origin undoubtedly brought this country closer to Albania and Kosovo, whose populations are mostly Albanian. North Macedonia has come a long way in improving its relations with Bulgaria, which is the most important obstacle in the process of full membership to the European Union. It adopted pro-Western policies just like Albania and Kosovo with the outbreak of the Ukraine Crisis. Foreign Minister Bujar Osmani, participating in the extraordinary meeting of NATO Foreign Ministers in Brussels, expressed Macedonia's support for Ukraine before the meeting. Moreover, he stated that the European Union enlargement has now become a vital issue in terms of security [*Osmani in Brussels...*]. In Montenegro, where the pro-Russian government fell and the government crisis continues, it announced that he had declared a Russian diplomat "persona non grata" in the past few days [*Karadađ, Rus Diplomati...*].

While the Albanian presence in the Balkans takes a position in the Western camp, Serbia has a lot of trouble in taking a position. President Vucic stated that shortly before the Ukraine crisis broke out, their countries had no intention of joining NATO [*Vucic: Srbistan...*]. Serbian President Vucic condemned Russia's attack but declared that he did not agree with the sanctions against Russia. Considering the elections to be organized in Serbia in April, it is a matter of curiosity to what extent the current administration can maintain the balance between the West and Russia. Serbia is protecting the power of other Serbs living outside its borders, just like Albania. At the forefront of these are the Serb entity operating in Bosnia Herzegovina and the Serb ethnic minority remaining in Kosovo. Therefore, the attitude that Serbia will take will have an impact on these regions as well. Although Serbia takes a more moderate position in order to pursue a global balance policy, it can lead to more hawkish pro-Russian policies, considering that it will cost it less in these regions. In this context, the Serbian member of the Presidency of Bosnia Herzegovina, Milorad Dodik, cooperated with Russian diplomats to prevent Bosnia Herzegovina from voting in favor of the resolution condemning Russia at the United Nations General Assembly [*Dodik Attempts To Block UN Vote...*]. Besides, Serbian members of the Kosovo Parliament boycotted the vote on the resolution condemning Russia's aggression against Ukraine. It received the support of all parties in Kosovo, except the Lista Srpska party, which has close relations with the Belgrade administration [*Kosovo Serbs Boycott Vote...*]. The country's European Union membership process will probably become isolated in the region which will

separate it from other candidate countries in the upcoming period. In Bosnia Herzegovina, the Serbian entity in the country is expected to voice their separatist demands more loudly. The Serbian region within Kosovo will be affected by this polarization and will continue to be “the soft belly” of the Balkan geography.

Figure 1. NATO: closing the southern flank



Source: Reka.

3. Military impacts

The Ukraine Crisis seriously disturbed the Balkan countries militarily. The countries of the region began to be more willing to cooperate in the new military cooperation in order to ensure their security. In parallel with this situation, it is extremely important for the USA to send troops to Albania and Kosovo. Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama announced that the USA will establish a special operations base in the country under the umbrella of the European Special Operations Command (SOCUER). There is no definite information about what kind of mission the US armed forces to be stationed in Albania will undertake [ABD, *Arnavutluk'ta Özel...*]. In parallel with this situation, the USA decided to send approximately 200 soldiers to Kosovo. It was stated that the soldiers will form

a “Mountain Warrior Task Force” to provide security operations throughout the region. Moreover, it was also announced that the military police of the US army will be stationed in Kosovo [ABD, *Kosova’ya 200...*]. Besides, Kosovo demanded the acceleration of NATO membership and the establishment of a permanent US military base on its territory after Russia’s military intervention in Ukraine [*Kosovo Asks...*]. The Kosovo government, which has serious problems with the Serb minority in its country, also decided to increase the police capacity in the Serb-populated region in the north of the country [*Serbia Lashes Out...*]. It is among the possibilities that Albanian-Serb tensions will occur in the region in the coming period. The Ukraine Crisis has created a leverage effect on the “close of ranks” among ethnic elements in the Balkans.

Figure 2. United States Soldiers in Albania



Source: Kote.

The government of North Macedonia announced that it will donate military supplies and equipment to Ukraine. While there is no clear information about the content of the donation so far, the government spokesman emphasized that their stance is in line with those of NATO allies and European Union partners [*Skopje Will Donate...*]. North Macedonia has declared that it will engage in military conflict if NATO requests it. Albania, the oldest NATO member in the

region, similarly expressed its readiness to participate in any future military mission in Ukraine. Albanian President Ilir Meta said: “We share the concerns of our NATO partners over the unprecedented increase in the number of Russian troops and military equipment on the Ukrainian borders and the threat of military aggression against a friendly country”. As a result of the Ukraine Crisis, while the countries of Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia became closer to each other in pursuing a common foreign policy, these countries have evolved into a much more willing position in terms of NATO and European Union memberships due to their concerns about the spread of the war to the Balkan geography.

Bosnia Herzegovina has difficulty in taking a position due to its hybrid structure. The division between the Western and Russian allies among the members of the three-member Presidency has long been known. Serbia, which is expected to become politically isolated in the Balkans in the coming period, has military costs of this isolation. Russia’s military demands from Serbia will continue to increase. Discussions on the deployment of Iskender-M tactical nuclear ballistic missiles to Serbia will come to the fore after the following days. In this case, Serbia’s European Union process may be suspended. If Iskender-M missiles are deployed in Serbia, a new balance of terror may occur in the region. This situation may result in a new Serbian-Albanian local tension.

4. Economic impacts

The major impact of the Ukraine Crisis on the Balkans is the rising energy prices and the parallel increase in inflation to a level that reduces the purchasing power of the people. Balkan countries are highly dependent on Russia in terms of natural gas. According to the data of the European Union Energy Agency, North Macedonia, Bosnia Herzegovina, and Moldova are among the countries that are 100 percent dependent on Russia in terms of natural gas. Besides, Serbia’s dependence on Russian natural gas, which is one of the countries in the region, is 89 percent, while this rate is 77 percent in Bulgaria [*ACER: Kuzey Makedonya,...*]. Russia is a state that earns about 65 percent of its national income from oil and natural gas exports. For this reason, it is highly unlikely that Russia will be able to cut natural gas shipments to Europe as long as it gets its money because in such a case its own economy could go into more bottlenecks. In addition, Western countries are in need of Russia’s natural gas,

and therefore they are exempt from energy-related sanctions. It is unlikely that Russia will impose sanctions on natural gas, especially on countries with strong industries such as Germany and France. However, when it comes to small Balkan countries, even if Russia cannot attract these countries, it can make these countries abstain in the international arena, especially the United Nations. Although Serbia is dependent on Russian natural gas, there is a significant number of German investors in the country and it is a question of interest how it will maintain the economic balance in question.

Another situation that will impact the region economically is the issue of agriculture. The outbreak of the crisis in a country like Ukraine with large agricultural lands will negatively affect the inflation in the region and serious difficulties may be experienced in finding basic foodstuffs. Serbia has been stockpiling food for a long time and North Macedonia recently requested 50 thousand tons of wheat and 25 thousand tons of corn from Serbia [*Macedonia Requested 50,000 Tons Of Wheat...*]. Serbian President Vucic said that those basic foodstuffs would be delivered immediately and added that they could meet this need for other Balkan countries as well. With the Ukraine Crisis, it seems that there may be difficulties in accessing many basic foodstuffs. In this context, Serbia can create a new attraction for the Balkans in terms of food and basic nutrients until the Ukraine crisis subsides.

The cryptocurrency market is another significant economic reflection of the Ukraine Crisis in the region. Russia can respond to sanctions with cryptocurrencies. The Russian invasion of Ukraine, along with the economic sanctions imposed on Moscow, increased the importance of crypto money. In the early days of the war, bitcoin rose over 15 percent. On Tuesday, it exceeded 44 thousand dollars. Ethereum also gained more than 10 percent [*Bitcoin Gibi Kripto Paraların...*]. The cryptocurrency market is an important instrument for Russia in ensuring the entry of Russian capital abroad into the country. However, Russia has lost its proxy in the Balkans in this regard. The cryptocurrency market in Kosovo was largely in the hands of Serbs living in the north of the region. The Serbs were earning serious money from the cryptocurrency market and not paying electricity fees to the central government. Recently, Kosovo has completely banned cryptocurrencies and conducted operations in Serb-populated areas, confiscating computers used for mining crypto-assets [*Kosovo Police...*]. It is among the high possibilities that new political and economic crises will emerge in the coming period in the region where Serbs live in Kosovo.

5. Social impacts

The Ukraine Crisis had a significant social impact on the Balkan geography. Balkan countries have faced a serious population problem in recent years. There is a notable amount of immigration from Balkan countries to the European Union countries, especially Germany and France. The population of the Balkan countries decreased significantly due to the labor shortage in these countries. With the low birth rate added to this situation, the Balkan countries, which are small in terms of population, are struggling to exist. In such a conjuncture, the Balkan countries see the wave of immigration from Ukraine as an opportunity. They welcome immigration from this region, keeping them separate from immigrants from the Middle East. The Kosovo Parliament adopted the resolution on accepting 5000 refugees from Ukraine [*Kosovo Parliament Passes...*]. Also, Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama stated at a press conference on February 26 that their country was ready to accept Ukrainian refugees fleeing the war [*Albania Ready to Receive Ukrainian Refugees*]. The government of North Macedonia emphasized that its doors were open to refugees from Ukraine [*Macedonian Government...*]. Serbia announced that it would accept refugees from Ukraine after Kosovo, Albania, and North Macedonia, although they are geographically closer to the crisis than these countries [*Srbistan: Ukraynalı Mültecileri Almaya Hazırız*]. The Ukraine crisis, in which approximately 1 to 1.5 million refugees are expected, will lay the foundations of new sociology, especially in the Balkan geography.

6. Conclusion

The Balkan geography, which was instrumental in the start of two world wars in the past, is feeling the effects of the Ukraine Crisis on its neck with each passing day. With the deepening effects of the crisis, the region turns into a chessboard in the new struggle between the USA and Russia. We are at the beginning of a process where global powers, who are afraid to fight each other directly, can send messages to each other through the Balkan geography. The possibility of a crisis that will break out in the region creating a domino effect and hosting the power struggle of global and regional powers should not be underestimated. The military and political picture in the Balkans is quite favorable in this respect. In particular, a conflict that will arise as a result of Albanian-Serbian tension has the potential to lead to the establishment of a regional and even global equation in a short

time. Despite the increasing influence of Russia and China in the region in recent years, the US troop shipments to the region caused a new global security dilemma to come to life in the Balkan geography. In the upcoming period, the most fragile countries of the Balkans will be North Macedonia and Bosnia Herzegovina. There is a risk of disintegration of North Macedonia, a significant part of whose population is Albanian, and Bosnia Herzegovina, which struggles with the separatist Serbian Entity. These countries are far from being able to cope with this situation on their own. In addition, within the scope of the Serbian-Albanian tension in the region and the latest developments, the Serbian region within Kosovo has the potential to be affected by a possible provocation very quickly. In this context, the current crisis can act as a lever in the enlargement process of the European Union and NATO. Both the Ukraine Crisis and the current problems in the Balkans are waiting to be resolved in the direction of regional stability through diplomatic methods and within the framework of international cooperation.

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