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**International Relations in the Contemporary World.  
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**Collaboration of Western Balkans Countries, An Essential Element in  
Promoting Peace and Prosperity in the Balkans Region**

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**Abstract:** Western Balkans, due to its positioning in the geographical area makes it an unsettled region, given the general view of security, while we can mention the several wars that this region has experienced over the decades; meanwhile, the risk of wars and conflicts has always been present, use of force and diplomatic pressure between countries, as well as internal issues of the states have failed to be settled and they still do not have a correct relationship between them. Basically, in the aftermath of the Cold War and even after 2000s international political and social climate aimed at promoting inclusive peace through building and consolidating both the rights and obligations of the states in the international relations, state building, stability, etc. This paper tries to analyze and describe the environment of internal and external security in which countries of the Western Balkans are, as well as obstacles that prevent a closer and long-term collaboration between Western Balkans in advancing towards an organization of great importance for security, such as NATO. The main method employed in this paper is the observation and the analyzation of such an important tool as the diplomacy between the WB countries to install peace and security for the population of the WB region.

**Keywords.** Geopolitics; stability; diplomacy; regional politic relations; NATO

## **1. Historic Background**

Balkans, on its historic journey, has been an unsettled and invaded region for centuries. Since XV century, when the Ottoman Empire blossomed with its invasions, conquered the majority of the Balkan regions, exploiting the lack of nation unions that lived in this region, lack of communication and national organizations in order to unite and resist to the common risks. Compared to the other nations of the Europe, Balkans region, due to the underdevelopment, objections and disagreements, mainly ethnic and territorial ones, could never find a common way to solve the internal issues and those with the neighbors. It seems that since then, Balkans countries have not found the solution for a peaceful cohabitation yet. There are numerous issues related to cultural, economic, social, political development, government-building, creating national institutions and especially in the proper development and formation of education structures. At the beginning of the XIX century, with the support of the great European countries a new era for Balkan region began, i. e. state-formation. A long and difficult way for some Balkan states. During XX century, many Balkan states gained independence, while many others

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continued to be under the Ottoman ruling, like Albania. The region experienced two great Balkan wars which dimensioned and threatened the structure of the nations within the region where territorial changes that happened caused dissatisfaction among states, leading so to a climate of hatred, revenge and war. The two wars left irreversible consequences in the following Balkan relations between nations, as well as great European powers. World wars had severe consequences throughout the world and especially in the Balkan region where industrial and economic development was slow, there was a lack of adequate structures based on collaboration and peace, further worsened the hard situation, particularly with the crisis of 1930s. The Treaty of Versailles which lasted until 1945 created an isolation for this area, leading to elections of totalitarian, dictatorial political regimes which did not reflect the principles and freedom of Western Europe; on contrary, they violated the freedom of speech and press, isolation of people under constant threat by using propaganda. Economic underdevelopment, political and uncoordinated disputes between states, ethnic conflicts in the region have produced a free space to be exploited by the interventions and influence of other states to exert their influence. Various issues related to the corruption of political classes, bad governing according to European standards lead to the lack of settlement and exploitation of Balkan territorial space by external actors that are aware of the much favorable economic and geopolitical position that this region provides. Throughout '30, in the Balkan region we recall the interventions and divisions by external actors which, positioned in blocks, affected the fate of Balkan nations, constantly urging divisions and disagreements on issues related to strong national interests, which have been passed down to the present. France, Soviet Union, England, Italy, Germany have had their influence in the Balkan region, as catalysts of division and conflict triggers. World War II had another strong impact on Balkans in all aspects, social-economic and political. A considerable number of Balkan countries chose and installed socialist political regimes on the basis of the Soviet model which was characterized, among others, by a centralized and totalitarian economy. World wars exhausted Europe economically and divided it, leaving it insecure and unclear on the political course to follow. Economic and political destabilization, as well as American and Soviet political ideological interference, brought polarization and division of Europe. Of course, efforts of these two superpowers to gain terrain and influencing areas enabled the implementation of supportive policies in countries that tried to influence. Communist regimes in Balkans found terrain and blossomed fiercely in Albania, Bulgaria, Romania and Yugoslavia with its People's Federation Republic. Socialist regime led these countries during '80 into extreme underdevelopment and severe economic crisis, while as a solution, former Soviet Union decided to reform the socialist system by making non-essential changes, changes that aimed at keeping the class of political leaders and not a change of the nucleus of the political system and economic development of socialist countries. It was only former Yugoslavia which had followed a different economic and political course, which was more moderate, more open to trade and more open to the relations with the Western Europe, while in all socialist countries the feeling of dissatisfaction and poverty had aroused the spirits of the nations which started to protest and rebel to the lack of change and lack of adaptation of the political system with new platforms which would bring improvement of life quality for Balkan nations. Immediately after the Cold War all the countries of the Southeastern Europe were in different social-political levels, had economy at different stages of development, problems with installation of institutions and problems with the law and order functioning. This was exactly the most delicate and bloody period of the region. Former Yugoslavia dissolved and new states formed from it, states which had insecurities and problems in creating and advancing their politics as a result of some decades inherited from politics, regimes, alliances and conflicts of the past. As mentioned above, former Yugoslavia practiced the regime of an open socialist system, which, after the Cold War and formation of the new states, entered a political, economic and inter-ethnic crisis. Union of the nations which lived

with the slogan “unity-brotherhood” under the umbrella of former Yugoslavia, which for many years had shared a common fate, symbols and historic events, did not serve to keep these nations connected; on contrary, at the first moment, they sought to build separate and independent states, by re-vindicating myths, culture, history and separate and identifying gastronomy. It was the moment of nationalist feeling that pretended independence and acknowledgment. Bloody conflicts of 1999 switched the world reflectors in this region, which, left ignored and neglected in its fate; a region not located in a distant continent, but close to the Western Europe, now asked for the end of the “prohibition of popular claims of the urban cleansing” (Glass, 2019) which were happening exactly so close to Europe. “Campaign of bombing by NATO marked the second greatest military operation in the history of the alliance, after that which started in 1995 in Bosnia-Herzegovina” (Glass, 2019) and this fact proves that the alliance was late to undertake an important military action since its creation to face an ethnic cleansing and Russian influence since the beginning of the Cold War. Dramatics and the priority of events in Kosovo threatened peace and security in the whole region by escalating the situation. Even though there have been some decades since the war-related events in Kosovo, still Western Balkans remains under threat and insecure towards conflicts which could generate and involve the whole region although, in the last 20 years Western Balkans worked to guarantee “sustainable peace” through different bilateral or multilateral initiatives to develop collaborative policies and agreements in certain fields that provide and legalize the legislative asset of the countries for a rapid integration into NATO (countries which are not members of alliance yet) and EU (an “on bloc” integration of the 6 countries of the Western Balkans). International factor has intervened in the region to guarantee and install “sustainable peace, aka positive peace”, but this situation has its conditions to be accomplished, like the author (Weber, 2007, p. 5) states; peace is a stakeholder of social harmony, economic equity and political justice”.

## **2. Security Environment in the Region of the Western Balkans**

Region of the Western Balkans has continuously faced several challenges which, at different moments, have been solved or not, influencing so on the creation of a safe environment of security. Countries of the Western Balkans look forward to the help from the West, their international powerful alliances, like NATO and EU. Some of these countries, including Albania, are already part of NATO, while others are waiting to be members; also, all these countries hope for their integration into the big European family, European Union, and all of them, despite being in different conditions and political stages, are willing to collaborate to accomplish the on bloc membership in EU. Influenced by the international factors, countries of the Western Balkans have made progress regarding the installing of good neighbor relations, collaboration and recognition of territorial sovereignty, there is still much work to be done since the process of reconciliation is still an unfinished job. Case of the newborn country of Kosovo is the best example in the region. An important and somehow common issue in the region is the challenge of the court system and the fragile functioning of the law, which lacks the ability and equipment to face, fight and neutralize the corruption at all social, political, economic levels. “Western Balkans left the rest of Eastern and Central Europe since the economic transition after the Cold War; while the rest of the Eastern and Central Europe has filled the gap of the inequality at the level of incomes with the Western Europe, Western Balkans has headed on the opposite direction”(Larssonneur 2020, p. 4). Pandemics was another historic moment which, like several world and regional wars, directly influenced by hitting the region, underdeveloped economies of these countries by facing them with “the considerable decrease in the internal and external demand during pandemics” (worldbank.org); a great influence had even tourism in the coastal countries, like Albania. At the same time, “decrease in remittances”, “decrease in the export entries” (Collaku 2020, p. 8), “limitations with liquidity and acute insecurity

have asphyxiated investments” (worldbank.org) also predicts “to extend” “fiscal deficits” and “it is expected that the countries increase their accounts of debts which will remain high; a debt that will be paid by future generations” (Collaku 2020, p. 13). Pandemics, as mentioned above, was a historic moment, a powerful crash, taking into consideration the underdeveloped economies and health system which needs much to be done about. When the vaccine became the subject for life saving in the region of the Western Balkans “other geopolitical players appeared, mainly in terms of race for the vaccine, while China and Russia and United Arab Emirates were not absent” (Dzihic & Schmidt, 2021). Countries of the Western Balkans, although contest about the political willingness for common initiatives for progress and effectivity in terms of European values, international experts notice that “the main problem of Balkans are the authoritarian governments which are not fully committed to democratic liberal values of EU and USA” (Bieber, 2019). Power of law is one of the most important aspects of advancement of these governing systems. In the case of Montenegro, power of law shows problems and issues and “reforms of EU have no influence on this aspect in Montenegro” (Marovic j. 2019). In Kosovo also “independence of judicial system continues to be under threat of the unnecessary political influence and high levels of corruption” (K4D; 6) war against organized crime and corruption, empowerment and force of law are the most important aspect that turn on the green light to the process of integration of these countries in EU. Another important field is even Media which in Western Balkans does not mark any visible progress. For 2021 “in April, Limitless Reporters Organization (RSF) published the index of freedom of the press which highlighted the way pandemics gave authoritarian regimes a justification to attack medias”. Countries of Western Balkans have made progress in this aspect, and this case of the ineffective use of medias can be used for “exploitation by foreign authoritarian powers such Russia and China, which seek to expand their malevolent influence in the region of Southeastern Europe” (CSD; 14) through propaganda and disinformation. Various reports and opinions (Larssoneur 2020; Wentholt 2020; Biepag 2021) study and reflect that there are not only internal structural problems from which serious threats postpone the European perspective. But, there are also other generalizing elements and connectors between countries in the region, like terrorism, organized crime, creating a well-structured network that interferes and postpones the European perspective.

### **3. Conclusions**

Nowadays, a problematic which postpones the whole region towards the progress and reciprocal collaboration is the implementation of reciprocity Kosovo-Serbia. Serbia must acknowledge the sovereignty of the state of Kosovo. Dialogue between these two countries and deciding on the common spirits to face the wounds of the past, to recognize the goods and mistakes, as well as to publicly punish the macabre figures of history of these two countries, would be very positive to maintain and sustain the longevity of the relationships between them and directly create a climate of security and stability for the whole region. Support of EU and NATO in the region is very necessary to orientate and provide the needed suggestions to the countries of the region for discussions and settling old and new conflicts. Analysis of strategies of security for countries of Western Balkans is necessary to understand the values and priorities to which these countries are directed and whether there is overlapping between them in order to outlook the course of the security climate in the region based exactly on the strategies of the national security. Reforms are necessary to increase the trust and security of Western Balkans citizens in their governments, to believe in the war against corruption and organized crime. Regional collaboration is necessary as it was mentioned at the beginning of this paper, to advance on bloc towards

important international platforms, exchange of rational and objective ideas by experts and academics from different fields would be of a great value and necessary to bring sustainable alternatives towards progress and deeper and deeper cohesion of these countries to each-other.

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