

BOOK REVIEWS

GEOPOLITICAL INFLUENCES OF EXTERNAL POWERS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

Arlinda Rrustemi, Rob de Wijk, Connor Dunlop, Jovana Perovska, Lirije Palushi, *Geopolitical influences of external powers in the Western Balkans*, The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2019, pp. 207.

This study analyses the influence of external powers in the Western Balkans region in various spheres of influence. It considers economic, political, religious, cultural, and security-related factors and their impact on the future of peace and state-building processes. This report examines how and to what extent multiple external actors are increasing their influence over the political elites and peoples of the Western Balkans countries.

The Eastern actors have been increasingly using hybrid threats (disinformation warfare, covert operations to win the hearts and minds of the population by Russia), spreading violent extremism (Gulf countries), potentially debt-trapping some Western Balkans countries (China), violating the EU laws on arms trade (Gulf countries) and implementing identity reengineering (Gulf countries, Iran, Russia, Turkey) in order to advance their geopolitical interests. Indeed, the Eastern actors often adopt a holistic approach in focusing on winning the hearts and minds of the Western Balkans population.

These security risks can derail the stability of the region in the long term with negative ramifications towards the EU and NATO integration processes as well as EU regional policies. It has been found that for political reasons, the West is now less attractive to the Western Balkans. Engagement with Eastern partners often seems more appealing: it is easier to obtain grants for projects, leadership styles are more similar, and local elites feel more secure about their own positions and the maintenance of the status quo, effectively perpetuating the grip on power by illiberal elites.

This book provides an analysis of how influential powers use various foreign policy tools – whether military/security, economic, political/diplomatic, or cultural/religious – in the region and how it impacts the Western Balkan countries, but also the EU and NATO in terms of their enlargement.

The central objective of this report is to outline policy recommendations that can holistically deal with the challenges posed by the Western and Eastern actors in

the Western Balkans region. In aiming to bolster peace and security in the Western Balkans region, the policy recommendations are grouped from general to specific, focusing on aspects of law, economic, security, and social affairs.

Generally, the region may be at a turning point where populations torn between the West and the East may begin gravitating more towards the latter. The West, therefore, needs to craft a response soon to avert further instability in the region.

The first part of the book called *Understanding Geopolitical Influences of External Powers in the Western Balkans* is actually an introduction. It includes a brief historical overview of the wartime events in the Western Balkans in which were involved many of the great powers of the time. Historically, the Western Balkans was at the heart of war from Kosovo Polje to battles between the Russians and Ottomans in the 19th century, to the First and Second World Wars, and lastly the 90's wars.

In this section, the authors define the future relationship of the forces of the great powers in the Western Balkan countries as the subject of research. Previously, it seemed clear that the future of this region was the integration into the European Union. Today, this scenario is completely uncertain. The main reasons for this are the lack of economic progress, the lack of consolidation of democracies, but also the loss of perspectives towards the EU integration due to the slowing down of the process of EU enlargement. Overall, the region seems to be prone to insecurity and instability and may be susceptible to outside influences. Therefore, the main task of the research is to identify the mechanisms of influence of major international actors in the Western Balkans. International influencers in the region vary: some promote liberal values, such as democracy, the rule of law and open society; others instigate non-democratic values, focusing power on a few individuals. "The changes of global international order and the competition between democratic and non-democratic values are mirrored in the Western Balkans" (p. 13).

The impact of the EU and the US is not analyzed separately, only this introductory chapter provides an overview of the investments, loans and financial support they have provided so far. These key influencers have not been explored by a complex methodology, which has underpinned the influences of other entities. Joining the Balkans with this political current is the right way forward for the authors of this book, and the impacts of non-Western actors were analyzed to determine ways to diminish them.

Theoretical approaches in current research areas in geopolitics: first, hybrid threats and political warfare, and second, identity politics in post-conflict zones.

The methodology used in this book combines qualitative and quantitative methods. Qualitative methods are life story interviews with local and international authorities. The report qualitatively employs a minimum of 100 life story interviews with local communities (governments, NGOs, IOs, academia, journalists, and

community representatives) as well as IR and regional experts to provide in-depth analysis of influential powers' foreign policy in the Western Balkans.

Quantitative methods are specific and complex. They are based on five data sets not widely available. Those are: Formal Bilateral Influence Capacity (FBIC Index), Integrated Conflict Early Warning System (ICEWS), Temporally Extended, Regular, Reproducible International Event Records (TERRIER), the Phoenix Dataset, and Global Database of Events, Language, and Tone (GDELT).

The book focuses on the impact of the following countries on the Western Balkans: Bahrain, Oman, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, as the Gulf Cooperation Countries (GCC), as well as Iran, China, the Russian Federation, and Turkey. The impact of each of these countries has been analyzed from several aspects: impact trends in the Western Balkans, as measured by quantitative methods, and separately by economic, political, security and cultural influence trends, based on qualitative methods.

Following these analyzes, a comparative account of the influence of the West and the East on the Western Balkans is given. The authors state that the West is not as engaged in the Western Balkans as it used to be. "While the West lacks a coherent policy towards the region's progress, other Eastern powers are using the momentum to promote their foreign policy and shift the region toward their strategic interests" (p. 150).

Despite a strong pro-Western and pro-NATO context, this book can potentially be very meaningful to key actors in the Western Balkans, dealing with international relations in the fields of politics, economics, religion and culture. This is particularly true of the abundance of data and summaries of each individual aspect of the international relations of each of the Western Balkan countries, which are based on extensive qualitative research. It is even more relevant to researchers dealing with international relations and in particular the Western Balkans countries. Researchers able to access databases from different institutions can use this book as a methodological guide for deep exploration of layered international interactions and influences. The book can be used in a methodological sense as a guide to any region or country to explore. To researchers engaged outside institutions with access to these specific databases, this book can be used as a source of data in further research of the Western Balkan countries in their abundance of international interactions and influences.

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