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The Rise of Nationalism in the Western Balkans

North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)

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Contents

Introduction - Understanding the issue	2
Importance of the issue.....	4
Relativity to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.....	5
Nationalism In the Balkans.....	5
Serbia.....	5
Croatia	7
Other Balkan States.....	10
Albania	10
Bosnia – Herzegovina	10
Bulgaria	11
Montenegro	12
North Macedonia	12
Current Situation	13
Possible Solutions - Conclusion	14
Bibliography.....	16
Additional Literature	17



Introduction - Understanding the issue

Throughout the course of history right up until the 20th century, the Balkan peninsula was constantly under the occupation or influence of larger foreign powers. In the beginning it was the Roman Empire. The Roman empire was succeeded by the Byzantine Empire which deeply affected the Balkan countries. Finally, the Ottoman Empire from in 1354 until recent years formed an oligarchic system that persisted even long after the states of the western Balkans gained independence. All of them came into contact with peoples of an already rich and long history, which they had managed to maintain even under third party occupation.

The constant turbulence experienced by the entire Old Continent in the 20th century clearly affected the Balkan peninsula which was the epicenter of unrest in southern Europe more than once. The occupation of the Balkans by imperialist forces for almost two millennia, cut off contact with the western world and led to the adoption of characteristics from the east until the advent of the first world war. The end of the aforementioned conflict resulted in further disagreements and political insecurity in the region. The balance was restored under a third superpower, the Soviet Union, which fostered a brief period of stability in some of the Balkan states until its eventual fall in the early 90s. Despite all the relative stability which became evident in the years of Soviet occupation, in 1985 the first signs of internal instability began to be show. More specifically two political waves made their appearance in the Balkan Peninsula and began to affect the political structures of their nations. The first of these political currents was nepotism which affected countries such as Albania, Bulgaria and Romania. Even more relevant however is the emergence of the second political current that reared its head. That of course being nationalism. Nationalism itself played a dominant role in the politics of the Western Balkans in the period before the fall of the Soviet Union. Many analysts have argued that the nationalist tendencies have never been eliminated from within the Balkans society but simply "froze" under the communist occupation.¹

¹ Tchavdar Marinov and Alexander Vezekov, 2014



Herein, we will briefly examine the political landscape in the Balkans after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the long-lasting effects of its brewing nationalism on the economical and ideological state of the region.

Before we do so however, it's crucial that we briefly analyze the key terms of this guide, that being nation and nationalism in a European, neo-liberal context. In the development of the nationalism, we are now familiar with in the western Balkan region, a few different historical factors came into the equation. Possibly the most influential one however was the attempts of certain populations to regain their identity by uniting against a common enemy, that being the traditional empires of the past. This process which aimed at building a proper nation for their people was not only fueled by, but it also emphasized the cultural, religious, linguistic, temperamental and historical differences between the populations in the area. For that reason, even though many spoke of a common Yugoslav nation, that could never materialize, for the separatist voices that didn't want Serbs and Croats to simply exist as partial identities of a larger whole, were just too strong and influential. As one could foresee, by the time Yugoslavia was segmented, the nations that formed became breeding ground for xenophobic and nationalist rhetoric. This attitude and ideological underpinning of the western Balkan nations has always been a crucial part of the political status quo. As a result, viewpoints and rhetoric that is sympathetic towards nationalism have always been quite potent and effective tactics utilized by opportunistic politicians even until today. Further instability or lack of competence on the part of other transnational entities like the EU have certainly not helped in that regard, since many have theorized that today nations of the western Balkans utilize the threat of instability as a bargaining chip for EU integration².

² <https://ifsh.de/file-CORE/documents/yearbook/english/15/Nordman-en.pdf>



Importance of the issue

The actual importance of this issue cannot in good faith be overstated. Many atrocities that took place after the collapse of the Soviet Union in the examined area are the result of the ethnic tensions that have troubled the western Balkans for centuries. Additionally, as was mentioned earlier, politicians have abused said tensions in order to gain influence in an opportunistic and devious manner over the people. Truly the nationalism in the area also strikes at the core of the future that the UN, NATO and other international entities have envisioned for the world³.

On an ideological level, international unity and the transcendence of old-fashioned narratives, ethnic myths and imperialistic visions has been a goal that international bodies have battled for ever since the end of the second world war. This broader international coalition was instituted with the end goal of protecting democracy and the freedom of all people. For that reason, it is easy to see how the inability to control ethnic tensions, xenophobic and nationalistic narratives can lead the western Balkan region and further geographical spots down a dangerous slippery slope that threatens the overarching democratically coalition that has, for the most part, been established till today.

A brief look at history posts the collapse of the Soviet Union reveals the danger behind said nationalistic attitudes purely on a humanitarian level. International organizations have therefore rightfully declared and recognized officially ethnic-related tensions and aggressive nationalism as threats to democracy and international security. Countries such as Serbia, Croatia, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania and others are currently suffering as a result of the instability nationalism has caused in the regions, both on an ideological as well as on an economical and humanitarian level.

³ NATO. 2022. "NATO and the Western Balkans" - Speech by NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen Budva, Montenegro. [online] Available at: <https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_75860.htm> [Accessed 23 April 2022].



Relativity to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization

Rising nationalist tendencies are a matter of utmost importance for the future not only of the region itself, but for the stability and development of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. The reason behind it, is that the presence of nationalism erodes democratic norms, changes the political landscape, weakens institution and thus, hinders a country's potential integration in NATO and damages the reliability of an Alliance member- country.

The criteria of NATO accession include “a functioning democratic political system based on a market economy; fair treatment of minority populations; a commitment to resolve conflicts peacefully; an ability and willingness to make a military contribution to NATO operations; and a commitment to democratic civil-military relations and institutions”.⁴ Thus, it is logical to conclude that any tensions, such as nationalistic tendencies, that lead to instability in the political landscape of a country threaten the cohesion and security of the Alliance itself, should the country be an Alliance Member, and put a halt in the accession process of aspirant countries. Thus, it is significant to analyze the entire Balkan region, with a special interest/focus on the Western Balkans, as the latest countries to join NATO (Albania and Croatia 2009, Montenegro 2017 and North Macedonia 2020) all belong to the aforementioned region following the 2008 Bucharest Summit's plan regarding the enlargement of the Alliance to integrate aspirant countries of the Western Balkans.

Nationalism In the Balkans

Serbia

One of the most affected nations both on an economical as well as on a humanitarian and ideological level has without a doubt been Serbia. Serbia has not only played a substantial

⁴ (NATO Fact Sheet, July 2016)



role in the historical developments in the region but it has also taken the spotlight even as of recent years in terms of how nationalism has affected its current trajectory as a nation.

Ever since the dissolution of the Yugoslavian state, two distinct ideologies characterized the prevailing attitudes towards the Yugoslavia debacle. On the one hand Croatians maintained a separatist's view, while Serbians wanted to hold on to a united Yugoslavia. Both viewpoints teemed from a deep nationalistic view of relations however, since for one Croatia wanted to protect their national identity and Serbia wanted to use a united Yugoslavia as a tool for Serbian supremacy in the region⁵. This major ethnic question was intended to be solved via a social revolution, in an attempt to overcome and transcend old fashioned ideas of ethnic superiority. As predicted by many however, the abstract ideals that lie behind the idea of a "nation" could not so easily be contained.

Overall, one could say that Serbian nationalism was an acute form of ethnic nationalism which strived to achieve, just like many nations before it, a "Greater Serbia". A Serbia that had the main role in a Southern-Slav state. Independence and freedom from foreign control were also factors that influenced this nationalist political movement.

Confidence from the part of the Serbians was also gained as a result of the broader Pan-Slavism movement that had been very popular at the time.⁶ A movement that saw a greater Pan-Slavic empire unfolding and the Serbs saw their future as head of such a state. As a result, being powerful and fully independent from forces that had controlled their futures and interests for so long. Important to note is also that Serbian nationalism was so potent at the times that it contributed to the second most bloody war of the 20th century, the first world

⁵ ("NATO and the Western Balkans" - Speech by NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen Budva, Montenegro, 2022)

⁶ United States Institute of Peace. 2022. Serbian Nationalism and the Origins of the Yugoslav Crisis. [online] Available at: <<https://www.usip.org/publications/1996/04/serbian-nationalism-and-origins-yugoslav-crisis>> [Accessed 25 April 2022].



war, as the assassination of Franz Ferdinand gave an excuse for the war that ensued and many strong nations at the time were preparing for.

The most obvious point of conflict of the Serbians with the “dativization” of all Yugoslav people after the dissolution of the greater Yugoslavian territory was that the sovereignty of Serbia was challenged by the ambiguity surrounding the autonomous province of Kosovo. Of course, the issue around Serbia and Kosovo has troubled the international scene right up until recent years, with various attempts by many actors including NATO to try and maintain peace in the region. According to NATO the development of a “democratic [and] multi-ethnic” Kosovo is a top priority. That is why after decades of instability and conflicts NATO established a multiethnic Kosovo security force in 2009, so as “to maintain a safe and secure environment, freedom of movement for all citizens in Kosovo and to facilitate the Euro-Atlantic integration of the Western Balkans.”

Croatia

In general, the fall of Yugoslavia was followed by the appearance of two predominant entities in the Balkans. Croatia was one of them. During the 90s Franjo Tudjman dominated the Croatian political scene and became a national leader connected to the people and the church despite him being an atheist and a communist.

Tujman has been considered to be both the reason for Croatia’s liberation, as well as its relative “demise”, as his policy making decisions allegedly drove his country into global isolation. More specifically, that occurred due to the continuous violations of human rights, domineering national policies and xenophobia on a national level that was exhibited during his tenure.

To better understand why nationalism rose in the specific region, we need to delve deeper into the roots of the Croatian nation, thus we will briefly analyze and explain why three factors contributed to this rise.

The 1980s were marked with economic stagnation, negative GDP growth, inflation and a negative balance of trade. The economic structure of the Croatian economy was central



planning depending mostly on agriculture and after 1988 in industry. During the transitional period, which officially started in 1989, Croatia's economic development could be characterized as a successful one. At one point it could even be compared to the EU15 countries in terms of commerce. Later on, though, the economic environment became adverse. Firstly, the establishment of an independent economic space produced an economic shock. Secondly, the independence and military costs were high. Lastly, the arms embargo imposed by the international community while Croatia was facing a technically superior army – that of Serbia – was catalytic for the economic downfall that followed. Following a central planning economy, the state needed a legitimizing ideology in order to exercise its authority. According to Keynes' theory of effective demand, a nation can survive in a closed economy without foreign trade and depending exclusively on the internal market. Combined with a few trade agreements, after 1993 and the introduction of a stabilization program, the creation economy started to evolve for the better.

Thus, seeing and comparing the economy of Croatia in 1989 and the one after 1993 with the economic growth of the other Balkan nations in the same period, it can be said that the political actors in Croatia utilized the positive gap that was created between the pre-liberation economy and after their ascension in power in order to remain atop.⁷

After the fall of the USSR and Yugoslavia, we observe a slight turn in what someone may characterize as a democracy. The rise of opportunistic leaders represents the main characteristic of all states. In addition, the election system in the whole Balkan area is heavily influenced by the racial minorities that live in those states. The differences between them, combined with the rampant corruption in the region, do not help with the formation of a united political agenda.

Corruption, opportunistic leaders and flimsiness of the elections system influenced the political culture of all Balkan nations. Illiberal politics were the main aspect of the Balkan political scene during the 1990s until the beginning of the 21st century. With this information

⁷ Ivo Bicanic and Vojmir Franicevic, 2003, *Understanding Reform: The Case of Croatia*, The Balkan Observatory



in mind, it is safe to say that a ‘defect democracy’ had been implemented, guided by the views of one leader who represented the whole nation. Central political planning, control of the media, global marginalization, regional wars and bad treatment of ethnic minorities represent the semi-democratic systems in general that were implemented in the 90s.⁸

In 1991 many Croatian citizens declared themselves to be members of 23 nationalities, 22 of which enjoy the legal status of national minorities. Tudjman’s policies though towards these minorities have been characterized by many as discriminatory and hateful. After the declaration of independence of the Croatian nation, a bloody war erupted between Croatia and Serbia. With the support of the Serbian government, the Serb minority that lived in Croatia’s borders seized the area by force. Due to these events the Croatian government under Tudjman targeted Serbs in the nation. They were exposed to denunciation, harassment, threats and killings. This also resulted in other ethnic groups that lived in the area such as Czechs, Albanians, Bosnians and Hungarians being treated better as the focus shifted towards the Serbs. It follows with logical necessity that when a nation (Serbia) declares war on another nation (Croatia) for a reason (the Croatian referendum which resulted in an independent Croatia and not in a state nation with Serbia) and uses the vast populated ethnic minority in the other’s nation borders (the 200 000 Serbs in Croatia), that the people of the attacked nation rally against not only the opposing force but also the people of that nation that live with them. Thus, the political discrimination of the Serbs (mainly) in Croatia surely contributed in favoring Tudjman’s policies and allowed him to stay in power until his death and marginalized any political opposition.⁹

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Tatalovic S, “National Minorities and Croatian Democracy”, 2006, University of Zagreb



Other Balkan States

Albania, Bosnia – Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Montenegro and North Macedonia all followed a similar path during the 1990s. The same reasons (economical, political and social) represent each nation's path in the end of the 20th century.

Albania

In the southwest part of the Balkans there was a communist Albania, not partaking with the other states of the region. Enver Hoxha implemented his own branch of communism based on authoritarianism and xenophobia. His death resulted in anarchy and mass migration in Greece and Italy. In 1992 the democratic party won the elections. The policies that the government followed consisted of imprisoning dissenters, marginalization of minorities, media control and corrupted elections. All these weakened ever further the Albanian political system and the party itself. The fall of the “Pyramid scheme” which happened mainly due to Albania’s inexperience with financial markets among other factors, had major socio-economic consequences. The democratic party collapsed and the socialist one took over. Ultimately though, even the new government followed the same policies as the previous ones.¹⁰

Bosnia – Herzegovina

The history of Bosnia – Herzegovina (BH) starts with a conflict after the dissolution of Yugoslavia. Many people died and more than 2 million people were displaced. This greatly affected the economy of HB which plummeted with a decline in output estimated at 80% according to the World Bank. Unemployment reached an all-time low and physical infrastructure was decimated.¹¹

¹⁰ Fatos Tarifa, 1995, *Albania’s Road from Communism: Political and Social change, 1990-1993*, International Institute of Social Studies

¹¹ World Bank, “Bosnia and Herzegovina: Two Decades of Peace and Transition”



BH probably represents the most complex governing system. Due to the war the first years of the existence of the nation were marked by political instability. In the first elections in 1990, a coalition of three ethnically based parties was established (Bosniaks, Croats and Serbs). The coalition was dismantled in 1991. The nation declared its independence in 1992. Soon after the war followed. During the war many ethnic crimes against Bosniaks and Croats were noted with the biggest being the Srebrenica massacre which was ruled as a genocide by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia.¹²

Bulgaria

In the beginning, the Bulgarian economy was plagued by negative GDP growth, high inflation and unemployment. The first years of Bulgaria's political life were also marked by insufficient governing, oligarchic capitalism and corrupt economic practices. These practices resulted in the 1996 economic crisis in Bulgaria, one of the biggest – if not the biggest. The nation suffered from a decrease of the quality of life, goods shortages and devaluation of the Bulgarian currency.¹³

The Bulgarian political scene was stigmatized by a socialist party that was against the integration of Bulgaria in the west and a weak democratic party which defended liberal ideas but couldn't exert any power. After the 1996 economic crisis, the democratic party "UDF" won the elections and adopted a new political agenda in favor of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the European Union.¹⁴

¹² Jasna Jelusic, "Nations in Transit", 2007

¹³ Michael Berlemann and Nikolay Nevovsky, 2003, *The Bulgarian Financial Crisis of 1996/1997*, Dresden Discussion Paper in Economics, No. 11/03

¹⁴ Venelin I. Genev, 2006, *Brides and the State Building in Bulgaria*, Vol. 17, No. 1, *Journal for Democracy*



Montenegro

The country of Montenegro also suffered from the same economic problems as the rest of the countries in the region after the collapse of Yugoslavia. The drop of the nation's GDP was immense, inflation and unemployment rose and the trade balance was negative.¹⁵

Inside the political scene of Montenegro, in the beginning there were two parties. A democratic one and a socialist one. The first one advocated in favor of an independent Montenegro without expressing any hostility towards minorities. The communist party was in favor of an alliance between Serbia and Montenegro during the war. In 1990, the communist party was elected. 5 years later and Milo Dukanovic's Democratic Party of Socialists was elected following a more western friendly political orientation.¹⁶

North Macedonia

At the outset of the breakup of the former Yugoslavia, the economy of FYROM (official name before 2018) was characterized by both planned and market policies. More specifically, there was a predominance of social ownership, low level of economic development, high inflation rates and simultaneous existence of unemployment and over-employment.

Ethnic tensions represent the political scene of FYROM during the 1990s. From one side, the embargo that Greece had imposed until 1995 created tensions between the two nations. On the other hand, North Macedonia's large Albanian minority and the de facto independence of Kosovo presented a threat to the nation although Albanian parties have been represented in government and parliament.

¹⁵ Popovic Milenko, "Growth of Montenegrin Economy: 1990 - 2016", 2018

¹⁶ Bieber Florian, "Montenegrin politics since the disintegration of Yugoslavia", 2003



Current Situation

As mentioned before, the analysis of the current situation will focus on the countries of the Western Balkans where nationalist tendencies have been rising.

The echoes of the 1990s ethnic tensions can still be heard today in the Western Balkans. It appears that the ethnic heterogeneity of the countries' populations leads to nationalist tensions and political actions that threaten the region's and the Alliance's stability. The three most affected countries on the region are Serbia, Bosnia - Herzegovina and Montenegro.

In Serbia, the ruling Progressive Party of Aleksandar Vučić promotes a conservative agenda often using nationalist rhetoric and promoting the idea of a 'Greater Serbia' or 'Serbian World', meaning the unification of the ethnic Serbs under one state. This rhetoric encompasses an aggressive approach towards its neighbouring states and reinforces nationalist sentiments among the Serbian population in the domestic sphere as well as in Serbian ethnic groups that reside in different regions. In addition, the foreign policy that President Vučić follows challenges the order that was shaped after the Yugoslavian fall, for example by deploying troops at the border with Kosovo in September 2021 in an attempt to allegedly protect the Serbian population that resides in the former Serbian breakaway region.

Serbian nationalist-separatist groups also cause tensions in Bosnia – Herzegovina by hosting a military parade to honour the 30th anniversary of declaration of their autonomous region "Republic of Srpska" along with Serb nationalist and member of the Bosnian tripartite, Milorad Dodik and Prime Minister Ana Brnabic¹⁷. The celebration of the holiday (banned by the Constitutional Court) triggered negative reactions from ethnic Croats and Muslim Bosnians and boosted Serbian separatist sentiments, thus reinforcing the deep polarization and rising tensions in the country, further destabilizing the region and thus, the Alliance.

¹⁷ Bowden, BBC News 9th of February 2021.



Montenegro did not “escape” the nationalist wave that sweeps the region. The new government coalition, comprised of Serbian nationalists (Democratic Front), moderate pro-Serbian forces (Democratic Party) and a small, pro-European, green-tinged party (United Reform Action – URA), has to face the escalating tensions between civic Montenegrin forces and ethnic Serbian population of the country. The conflict seems to have intensified since 2020 with violent demonstrations creating an even greater division among the population on both ethnic and religious lines.¹⁸

While the Albanian government still strongly supports the country’s alignment with NATO and promotes the idea of EU Integration, Albanian nationalist elements emerge in the political scene and seem to influence not only the Albanian population within the state borders, but also ethnic Albanians in Kosovo and North Macedonia. Specifically, political parties that are present in the three aforementioned regions advocate for the idea of “Greater Albania”, the geographical expansion of the borders and the unification of ethnic Albanian under one state that will be comprised of Albania, Kosovo, the Preševo Valley of Serbia, territories in southern Montenegro, northwestern Greece and a western part of North Macedonia.¹⁹

Possible Solutions - Conclusion

Bearing in mind that out of the aforementioned six Western Balkan countries, four of them are ‘new’ NATO Members and one is an Aspirant country, the resolution of the rising nationalist tensions in the region is of utmost importance and urgency for the stability of the Alliance.

In order for the delegates to provide feasible and meaningful solutions, one needs to understand the importance of stability and peace within the Alliance. Thus, the delegates are required to consider measures for the promotion of NATO Member’s cooperation and better integration of the Western Balkan countries, such as integration of military equipment, joint

¹⁸ Brändle Max, *IPS Democracy and Society*, 2021.

¹⁹ Vaknin 2000, pp. 102–103.



exercises and battalions. Moreover, one should not forget the different aspects of nationalism and social divides, namely economic decline and religious and ethnic differences that may lead to conflict.

How can one tackle nationalist rhetoric or a strong nationalist opposition party? How can the Alliance assist the resolution of the conflict? Does NATO have the right to intervene? Should the criteria of NATO Accession be modified or should the control of the Member Countries afterwards be stricter? Is the cooperation of international organizations such as the United Nations necessary for tackling the issue at hand? Is the rise of nationalism promoted by external factors, such as other states and if so, how should NATO react and limit their strategic leeway? Are bilateral negotiations more efficient or should there be multilateral effort to minimize the deep ethnic, social and cultural divides in the region? These are some of the questions that need to be answered by the resolutions that will be drafted throughout the conference.

The rise of Nationalism is a constant “thorn” in the powder keg of Europe and of the entirety of NATO. Thus, it is of utmost importance to deescalate the regional nationalist tendencies and promote a multiethnic approach, so as for NATO to enhance integration of new Member States and thus, their security capabilities, as well as to strengthen ties between Alliance Members and promote cooperation.



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