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# GEOPOLITICAL HISTORY OF THE WESTERN BALKANS

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**ABSTRACT:** The “landscape history” of rivalry over the power capacities necessary for territorial possession on the Balkan Peninsula unfolded in two dimensions – at the level of local actors and at that of macro-regional powers. Strategic processes were shaped by the morphological features of the Balkans: the vertical and horizontal characteristics of the geographical landscape determined the framework within which political and cultural space evolved. The cohesive potential of empires proved capable of counterbalancing the centrifugal forces of physical-geographical factors, leading the peninsula to become “dissolved” into an imperial space.

The collapse of the bipolar world order highlighted the geopolitical complexity of the Balkans and the weaknesses in the spatial-retentive and cohesive capacities of its political entities. From the nineteenth century onwards – with the strengthening of regional nationalism and the decline of the Ottoman-Turkish Empire –, the strand of historiography analyzing modern great-power relations increasingly focused on the Balkan region. The so-called “Eastern Question” encompassed not only regional spatial-organizational ambitions but also the (geo)political perceptions of external powers regarding the peninsula. As one consequence of the mutually negating perceptions of rival state spaces, the emerging Balkan political entities came to rely on the support of geopolitical and geo-economic patrons. Following the disintegration of the European Concert of Great Powers, the “distant” great powers were, in certain situations, unable to keep their small-state allies under strategic control due to their conflicting interests. In the historical periods of the so-called imperial interregna, the balance of power in the region had (or would have had) to be maintained by the small states themselves, which defined one another as geo-strategic rivals. The ambitions of regional competitors could only be realized in part, and then only insofar as they aligned with the geopolitical support and current objectives of their respective great-power patrons. In certain phases of Balkan fragmentation, the relatively overt presence of intersecting interest-articulations by external powers was a defining feature.

This remains partly true today, as numerous analysts in the twenty-first century continue to apply the classical Great Game theory when examining the spatial hierarchy of global power. The Western Balkans – primarily through the challenges arising from the fragmentation of the Yugoslav space – came to the fore in the aftermath of the disintegration of the post-bipolar world order.

**KEYWORDS:** geopolitics, regional status quo, imperial hiatus, small state, Great Game, Western Balkans, political entity, rival, great power

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## DEFINITION OF THE WESTERN BALKANS

A key criterion in the delineation of a geopolitical territory is the identification of its boundaries, which – ideally – correspond to natural geographical demarcation lines. In addition to this, region-forming factors encompass the analysis of spatial coherence and fragmentation – namely, the interplay of centrifugal and centripetal forces – alongside the geo-economic characteristics of socio-economic activity within the given area. Furthermore, a comprehensive definition requires the articulation of both internal and external spatial-structuring factors that shape the geostrategic orientation and determine the strategic priorities of the respective territorial unit.<sup>1</sup>

According to the perspective of critical geopolitics, geography constitutes the “landscape history” of the struggle for power capabilities required to control a given territory. In the case of the Balkan Peninsula, this rivalry has unfolded along two dimensions: at the local level and at the level of macro-regional power actors. Strategic processes have been shaped by the morphological features of the Balkans, as the vertical and horizontal characteristics of the geographical landscape have delineated the framework for the development of political, economic, and cultural space. The conglomerates of small territorial units were capable of being integrated into political and economic structures primarily by external geopolitical great powers endowed with empire-organizing capacities. The cohesive potential of these empires proved effective even in counterbalancing the centrifugal forces exerted by physical-geographical factors during the so-called imperial periods.<sup>2</sup>

In various perceptions of geopolitical and geostrategic spatial understanding, the Balkan Peninsula – and the Western Balkans in particular – did not necessarily appear as a distinct entity in the early phases of geopolitical thought. Within the geopolitical spatial frameworks of Mackinder and Spykman, these regions are not portrayed as sovereign territories with inherent strategic value; rather, they are seen as subordinate components of broader spatial structures embedded in the global – or at least interregional – power configuration. This interpretative approach also surfaces in certain Hungarian analyses, in which the peninsula as a whole is conceptually “dissolved” within a so-called macro-regional geopolitical structure.<sup>3</sup>

The regional consequences of the collapse of the bipolar world order highlighted the geopolitical complexity of the Balkan Peninsula – conceptualized in German geopolitical thought as the *Südostraum*,<sup>4</sup> a “complementary” territorial space in which the only cohesive component is spatiality itself. This complexity underscores the weak spatial-retentive and integrative (cohesive) capacities of the region’s political entities. These dynamics contributed to the emergence of localized scholarly platforms dedicated to the study of the region. Recognizing the geopolitical significance of the Balkans, these academic initiatives have

<sup>1</sup> In this sense, we do not consider the definition of mesoterrains used by Hungarian geography to be valid. Szabó 2005; Györi 2005; Nemes Nagy 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Ó Tuathail 1996, 1.; Mazower 2004, 41–50.; Pap 2007, 17–18.; Glatz 2008, 26–27.; Nagy 2012; Kuus 2017; Reményi 2023.

<sup>3</sup> This view is still partly valid today, as many analysts in the 21<sup>st</sup> century continue to apply the classic Great Game theory when analyzing the spatial hierarchy of global power. Nijman 1994a; Nijman 1994b; Tsygankov 2010; Cohen 2015, 17–23., 26–27.; Mainul 2023; M. Takács 2023.

<sup>4</sup> Schumacher 1934, 156–176., 222–239.; Hantos 1938; Miletics – Pál 1998, 220.; Svatek 2010; Orosz 2015; Dövényi 2022.

focused on the strategic perceptions – formulated by both internal and external power actors –, as well as on the articulation of geo-economic interests related to the region’s evolving political and economic landscape.<sup>5</sup>

A similar form of “belatedness” characterizes the historiographical school analyzing modern great power relations, which only began to focus on the Balkans region from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onward – coinciding with the rise of regional nationalism and the concomitant decline of the Ottoman-Turkish Empire. The so-called Eastern Question, associated with the national ambitions of this period, uniquely encompassed not only regional spatial-organizing aspirations but also the (geo)political perceptions of external powers regarding the peninsula. These perceptions were transformed into Realpolitik realities through the destabilization of the regional status quo. This process enabled the emergence of small-state geopolitical units within the region; however, it did not lead to geostrategic stability for either the peninsula or the Western Balkans. One of the consequences of the rival state-spaces’ mutually exclusive perceptions was that the emerging Balkan political entities came to rely on the support of geopolitical and geo-economic patrons. Following the breakdown of the European Concert of Powers, the divergent interests of the “distant” great powers in some cases prevented them from maintaining strategic control over their small-state allies.<sup>6</sup>

All of this also implies that during the historical periods of the so-called imperial interregnums, the maintenance of the regional balance of power – including in the Western Balkans – fell to the small states that defined each other as geostrategic rivals. The ambitions of regional competitors could be realized only to the extent allowed by the geopolitical backing and current objectives of their respective great power patrons. In certain phases of the Balkan fragmentation, the intersecting articulations of interest by external powers were openly and visibly present in the region. When the geopolitical force fields of external great powers induce a regional status quo, they tend to restrain the strategic competition among Balkan states. At present, the geopolitical and geostrategic revaluation of the Western Balkans – linked to the broader regional consequences of the Russia–Ukraine War – is clearly observable. This is intensifying both the rivalry among external power competitors and the competition between them and local states, thereby increasing the potential for localized conflicts.<sup>7</sup>

From the perspective of descriptive physical geography, the Balkans constitute the eastern peninsula of the European continent; however, their delimitation is far from straightforward. Based on the region’s geographical characteristics, its northern boundary is generally associated with the Central European region, though this does not represent an uncontested border – a clearly defined border between two territorially distinct units – but rather a frontier-type zone or belt, indicative, among other things, of the absence of natural boundaries. This ambiguity may be related to the fact that the demand for clear delimitation – and with

<sup>5</sup> Among others, the so-called Copenhagen School’s RBK theory (regional security complex) is worth highlighting, which drew attention to the challenges arising from the fragmentation of the Balkans, primarily the Yugoslav space (later the Western Balkans). In Hungary, it was primarily the Balkan research workshops in Pécs and Budapest that became dominant after the collapse of the bipolar world order.

<sup>6</sup> Hobsbawm 2004, 147–169., 306–332.; Halecki 1993, 263–271., 281–289.; Kissinger 1998, 86–93.; Mazower 2004, 81–183.

<sup>7</sup> Reményi 2023; Dzankic et al. (eds.) 2023, 218.

it, the very concept of the Balkans – only emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in connection with the decline of the Ottoman-Turkish Empire. Initially, natural geographical and topographical elements predominated in defining the regional boundaries of the spatial structure, but over subsequent historical periods, the Balkans gradually acquired a negatively charged political connotation.<sup>8</sup>

The delimitation of the Balkans remains challenging due to the absence of clear natural geographical boundaries, and this dilemma remains unresolved to this day. Somewhat simplified physical geographic analyses have emphasized the boundary delineated by the rivers Soča, Sava, and Danube, while the Odessa–Trieste line has also been proposed. The delimitation controversy can only be partially explained by the region's geomorphological conditions; it is also influenced by geopolitical ambitions and the articulation of interests. Consequently, it is understandable that the definition of the Balkans' territorial extent is not exact, with estimates varying between 470,000 and 800,000 square kilometers.<sup>9</sup>

The increasing significance of the Balkans since the 19<sup>th</sup> century is reflected in the diverse – both geographical and historical – interpretations of its territory. These interpretations, pertaining to the region's political geography, as well as other geographical components, remain eclectic; for example, the German-derived term Southeast Europe is also used as an alternative designation. The delayed emergence of national consciousness (nationalism) on the peninsula, combined with the declining cohesion potential of the imperial powers aiming to maintain the status quo, destabilized the region, thereby creating opportunities for competing European great powers to assert their interests. The support of weak local small states further enhanced the geopolitical value of the Balkans, which became more pronounced than the region's mere geographical significance. This dynamic was clearly reflected in the 1878 Congress of Berlin and the subsequent period characterized by intensive great power strategic activity in the Balkans.<sup>10</sup> With the regional strengthening of political nationalism, the focus of defining the region shifted away from purely geographical considerations towards the complex geopolitical ambitions of both external core powers and emerging local small states with a broader regional outlook. This process laid the historical foundations for the pejorative notion of “Balkanization,” which, fueled by conflicts arising from various causes and the fragmentation of political spaces, continues to burden the (Western) Balkans. Moreover, the absence of a geopolitical and spatial consensus among local ethnic, linguistic, and cultural identities further exacerbates the problems of the Western Balkans region. This is partly reflected in the fact that the region – or its individual political-geographical components – has historically been interpreted as serving different geopolitical functions: crossroads, powder keg, or a civilizational clash zone. Some analysts argue that the objective behind the Balkans – and the Western Balkans – being assigned geopolitical content is to sustain territorial fragmentation and small-state rivalries as a counterbalance to the negative influences exerted by great power centers.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Mazower 2004, 19–25.; Hajdú 2002, 189–192.; Tomic 2006, 35.; Varga – Kovács 2011, 13.; Konkoly 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Hajdú 2002, 191.; Stavrianos 2002, 1–14.; Van Houtum 2005; Sekulić 2008, 128–129.; Reményi 2009, 7–8.; Todorova 2009, 21–37.; Varga – Kovács 2011, 13.; Konkoly 2016; Duskalov 2017.

<sup>10</sup> Efe 2022.

<sup>11</sup> Zizek 1999; Vezenkov 2006; Bideleux – Jeffries 2007, 1–3.; Altić 2011; Somek 2015; Duskalov 2017; Vezenkov 2017; Hamiti – Sadiku 2020; Longley 2022; Sotirovic 2023.

The relatively rapid changes in Balkan borders have often outpaced the dynamics of local nation-building processes, with the territorial extent of political communities frequently undergoing modification. In an effort to expand the radius of political spatial organization, ruling elites – even up to the present day – have drawn upon both the German and French models of state-building.<sup>12</sup>

Due to the complex nature of regional dynamics, this study – somewhat simplistically – conceptualizes the Western Balkans, from an otherwise legitimate political-geographical perspective, as a geographical space composed of state territories. The region is part of a structure embedded within the historical-political-geographical space and is clearly a (geo)-political category. This is reinforced, among other things, by the fact that in the early period of the post-bipolar world order, the geopolitical and geostrategic dilemmas associated with regional transformations – particularly the disintegration of the Yugoslav state-space – constituted a distinct spatial-forming factor, even as classical physical-geographic and morphological dividing lines tend to narrow the spatial definition of the Western Balkans. The region is characterized by fragmentation, the emergence of new political entities, shifting borders, and attempts to deliberately demarcate ethno-cultural spaces – often accompanied by violent assimilation efforts. These developments reflect the intense experience of nation-building ambitions and the specific local perceptions of violence. The Western Balkans, composed of six statist actors – Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro, and Serbia – emerged as a civilizational-geopolitical conglomerate following the dissolution of the Yugoslav state-space, a process burdened by ethnic, religious, and historically-rooted grievances. The outbreak of successive conflicts drew attention to the geopolitical significance of the region's persistent challenges. In response, the Copenhagen School defined the area as a (Western) Balkan subcomplex. The authors Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, based on the historical trajectory of the region, its unresolved demographic and ethnic problems, and the contested nature of state-building ambitions, did not rule out the possibility that the Western Balkans could detach from the broader European regional security complex. These developments disrupted the regional balance of power in much the same way as the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–78.<sup>13</sup> As a geostrategic consequence, the region – experiencing another historical phase of imperial interregnum – once again became a buffer zone for the competing geopolitical interests of external (great) powers. In the context of the Russia–Ukraine war, the localized Great Game among strategic rivals has acquired a unique civilizational, geostrategic, and geo-economic significance, making it a distinct spatial-forming factor in the contemporary configuration of the Western Balkans.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Linguistic and cultural identity, as well as the spatial organizing ideology of the national idea, required the development of an ethno-nationalist state model based on the logic of *cuius regio, eius lingua* and *cuius regio, eius natio*. Miletics 2002, 126–127.

<sup>13</sup> Historymaps 2024; Popek 2021.

<sup>14</sup> Kennedy 1992, 180–240.; Diószegi 1994, 110–112., 164–174., 219–236.; Kissinger 1998, 84–93., 129–195.; Hajdú 2002, 189–224.; Buzan – Wæver 2003, 377–391.; Mazower 2004, 81–208.; Reményi 2009, 9–13.; Varga – Kovács 2011, 13–14.; Mező 2015, 12–31.; Marshall 2018, 129., 214.; Reményi 2023.

## MAJOR HISTORICAL TURNING POINTS IN REGIONAL SPATIAL DEVELOPMENT

The (Western) Balkan region functioned as a crucial geographical corridor connecting the territory of the Fertile Crescent with Neolithic Europe. Along this route, the transmission and exchange of cultural products took place – products the adaptation of which facilitated the diffusion of an agrarian-pastoral civilizational model throughout the continental European space during the 7<sup>th</sup> millennium BCE (Figure 1). The cultural centers that emerged within this region constituted the earliest local core areas of civilization (notably the Starčevo and Vinča cultures), which are also associated with proto-writing systems.<sup>15</sup>



Figure 1 *The Neolithic Expansion and the Balkans*

Source: <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/when-the-first-farmers-arrived-in-europe-inequality-evolved/>

The proto-literacy that emerged alongside socio-economic activity may already suggest a capacity for organizing political space – a phenomenon for which more tangible evidence can be traced to later historical periods. The ancestors of the ethnic communities currently inhabiting the Western Balkans were migrants who settled in the region following the Indo-European migration period. During the Bronze and Iron Ages, the tribal Lebensräume that developed in the Western Balkans – a region characterized by its dual migratory function as both a zone of reception and conflict – served as the territorial core areas of early local state formation. The so-called paleo-Balkan “micro-states” lacked the economic, military, demographic, and civilizational capacity necessary for the establishment of regional polit-

<sup>15</sup> Gimbutas 1963; D'lakonov 1984; Paliga 1993; Kovacevic et al. 2014; Kenanidis – Papakitsos 2015; Porčić et al. 2020; Porčić 2020; Marchi et al. 2022; Lazaridis et al. 2022; Davranoglou et al. 2023; Boroujerdi 2023.

ical integration. The regional conquest attempt by the Achaemenid (Old Persian) Empire in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE, and possibly the rise of Macedonian power in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE, may be interpreted as early imperial attempts at spatial integration. However, the territorial focus of the large-scale spatial organization led by Alexander III (Alexander the Great) was not the Balkan Peninsula; rather, his campaigns aimed to secure the strategic stability of the imperial hinterland.<sup>16</sup>

The process of local spatial organization remained largely unchanged during the Hellenistic period: local political entities, existing at varying levels of socio-economic development, were incorporated into a broader territorial framework by Roman power. The Imperium Romanum was the first external great power actor to possess the cohesive potential necessary to establish and maintain the political-geographical unity of the Western Balkans – and, more broadly, the Balkan Peninsula. The process of spatial integration, which began in the late 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE, unfolded from both the west and the southeast, ultimately resulting in the formation of the administrative units of Illyricum, Dalmatia, and Macedonia.<sup>17</sup>

For centuries, the Roman Empire's ability to maintain territorial cohesion counterbalanced centrifugal geopolitical forces that threatened fragmentation. The crisis of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE<sup>18</sup> elevated the strategic importance of the Danube and Western Balkan provinces, yet despite the structural crisis, the Imperium Romanum's capacity to preserve its territorial integrity proved sustainable until the end of the following century. The political unity of the Roman Empire was founded upon the conglomerate of Hellenistic and Latin civilizations, the continuity of which was interrupted in 395 CE.<sup>19</sup> This political rupture accelerated the disintegration of the civilizational space, reaching its apex in the Great Schism of 1054.<sup>20</sup> The boundary line delineated by Emperor Theodosius I, which assigned the northern territories of the Western Balkans to the Western Roman Empire and the southern regions to the Eastern Empire, corresponds to the Jireček Line (Figure 2).<sup>21</sup> Even during Antiquity, the

<sup>16</sup> Scholarly research on the history of migration in the region assigns particular importance to economic, geographical-topographical, and ecological factors, as well as to one of the principal transversal corridors of the European continent: the Danube Valley. However, in analyzing patterns of human mobility, additional variables must also be considered, including shifts in the demographic weight of particular areas and climatic conditions that may have acted as catalysts for migratory processes. Within the Serbian sector of the Danube Basin and in the Central Balkans – particularly the Morava–Vardar watershed – other distinctive spatial features are also relevant: openness to the north toward the Pannonian Plain and natural linkages to the Eastern Mediterranean, most notably the Aegean region. A comprehensive reconstruction of all aspects of early migratory dynamics is, of course, unattainable. These dynamics encompassed localized movements, the seasonal or long-distance mobility of nomadic pastoralist communities, the diffusion of cultural traits, and military expeditions. From an archaeological standpoint, population movements are particularly significant due to the interaction and intermingling of material cultures and human groups. Such processes frequently occurred in successive waves, especially during the transitional phase between the Neolithic and the Metal Ages, though archaeological evidence also attests to both earlier and later episodes of migration. Olmstead 1948, 147–159.; Hammond – Walbank 1988, 32–55.; Olbrycht 2010, 342–345.; Tasić (ed.) 2014; Stefanovich 1989; Tasić 1989, 29–37.; Friedman 2022, 189–231.

<sup>17</sup> UNRV Roman History: Illyricum [no year]; Dzino 2010, 223.; UNRV Roman History: Macedonia [no year]; Roman History [no year].

<sup>18</sup> Dinabandhu Andrews College [no year]; Ziolkowski 2010, 114–133.; Vučković 2020.

<sup>19</sup> Bury 2011, 2.; Lawrence 2013, 9–10.

<sup>20</sup> Dennis 1990; Bremer 2017; Fairchild 2021; Cox 2018.

<sup>21</sup> Theoretical dividing line in the Balkans region of the Roman Empire between the Latin (Western: Roman) and the Greek (Eastern: Hellenistic) cultural-linguistic territories. Tamás 1935, 113., 128–129., 134., 151., 155.; Niederhauser 2001, 51.



Figure 2 *Jireček Line*

Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jire%C4%8Dek\\_Line#/media/File:Language\\_influence\\_border\\_between\\_Latin\\_and\\_Hellenic.png](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jire%C4%8Dek_Line#/media/File:Language_influence_border_between_Latin_and_Hellenic.png)

Western Balkans – like the broader Balkan Peninsula – remained a significant part (zone of confrontation) of the European historical and spatial development process.<sup>22</sup>

The second historical turning point in the political spatial development of the Western Balkans was marked by the regional supremacy of the Eastern Roman (later Byzantine) Empire. The external imperial center of the previous period (Rome) was replaced by a new internal geopolitical hub (Constantinople). However, during the era of the Migration Period, the imperial limes/ripa was unable to maintain territorial order in all historical situations. The demographic consequences of the Hun, Germanic, and later Avar invasions in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries facilitated the settlement of Slavic tribes, which significantly transformed the ethno-regional spatial structure of the Western Balkans (Figure 3).<sup>23</sup>

Although the Balkan Peninsula held high strategic value for the imperial center, the Eastern Roman-Byzantine conception of imperial territory typically perceived a larger geopolitical expanse. The more favorable geostrategic and geo-economic position of the eastern territories of the universal Roman Empire allowed Constantinople – despite the Slavic settlement that began in the 7<sup>th</sup> century and became widespread – to assert its cultural and civilizational territorial organization in the Western Balkans relatively persistently. During certain periods, it extended its political dominance over the entire Balkan geopolitical space.

<sup>22</sup> Vezenkov 2006; Olalde et al. 2023.

<sup>23</sup> Pohl 1988, 1–236.; Frakes 1989; Birnbaum 1989; Bugarski 2021; Kerényi 2022; Olalde et al. 2023; Dyck 2023.

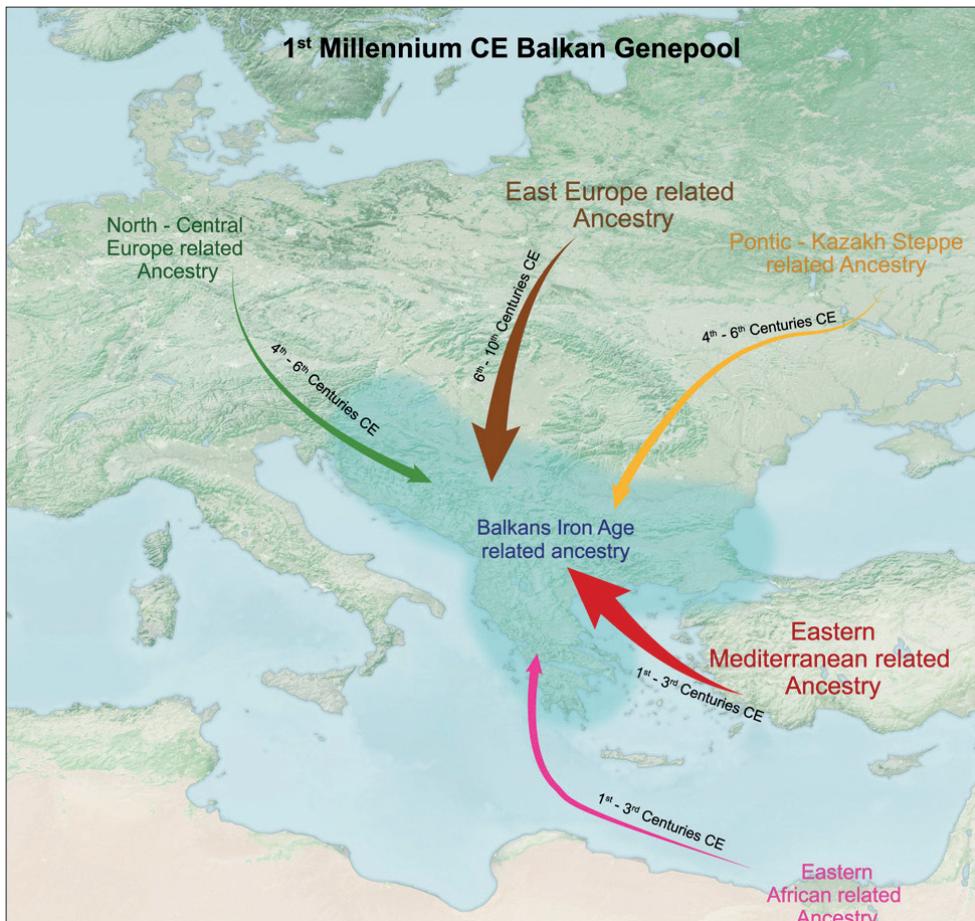


Figure 3 *The Migration Period and the Balkans*

Source: [https://www.cell.com/cms/10.1016/j.cell.2023.10.018/asset/eaceefce-7831-4e42-97c7-828def1e83f6/main\\_assets/fx1\\_lrg.jpg](https://www.cell.com/cms/10.1016/j.cell.2023.10.018/asset/eaceefce-7831-4e42-97c7-828def1e83f6/main_assets/fx1_lrg.jpg)

The arrival of the Slavic tribes, along with the Bulgars/Onogurs,<sup>24</sup> triggered significant linguistic assimilation processes and transformed the previously Romanized and Hellenized imperial spatial structures. This also marked the beginning of the separation of the South Slavic ethnic and tribal settlement areas, which followed the region's geographical features. However, the power reconfiguration of the political space and the process of regional state formation remained dependent on the power potential of Byzantium until the fall of the Komnenos dynasty.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Fine 1991, 66–69.; Fiedler 2008; Kerényi 2022; Juhász 2024, 75–83.

<sup>25</sup> Stanoyevich 1919; Dragojlović 1989; Hajdú 2002, 194–196.; Ćirković 2004, 7–20.; Gregory 2010, 257–297.; Curtis 2012; Hupchick 2017; Harris 2020, 187–205.; Olalde et al. 2023; Roberts 2025.

The final fragmentation of the imperial space began with the Fourth Crusade,<sup>26</sup> an event that even the 1261 Palaiologos restoration<sup>27</sup> was unable to reverse. The Eastern Empire, which deviated permanently from the Western path in 1054, was relegated to the western periphery of Anatolia, while in the Balkans, it faced the state-building ambitions of the Slavs that had settled in the region. Instead of the unity of imperial space, local state-building and spatial organization became dominant in the Balkans and its western territories. Local states began to formulate their own territorial perceptions and great power (imperial) ambitions. During the first period of the historical phase of imperial transformation, the core territories of the Western Balkan states were formed. These states developed from local (tribal) centers of economic and social activity that functioned beneath the level of the Byzantine Empire, often within the framework of significant autonomy on the imperial periphery.<sup>28</sup>

The second period of the imperial hiatus (after 1204), with the exception of the Croatian territorial space,<sup>29</sup> marks the geopolitical peak of the states in the Western Balkans. The power vacuum in the Western Balkans was filled by local political entities, which perceived each other as strategic rivals. The geographical and geopolitical ambitions of local territorial organizations often intersected, resulting in a lack of imperial cohesion, which simultaneously signified an era of confrontation across the entire peninsula, including the Western Balkans. In the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, with the intensification of dynastic ambitions and the geopolitical consequences of the religious heretical movements shaped within the conglomerate of regional cultures, such as the Bogomil/Patarene movements,<sup>30</sup> even the northern mid-power – the Kingdom of Hungary – sought to expand its sphere of influence. The territorial retention potential of the political entities in the Western Balkans, such as the Kingdom of Bosnia (1353–1463) and the Serbian Empire, gradually wore down due to ongoing conflicts, as none of the local political entities were able to stabilize the regional geopolitical status quo of the Western Balkans.<sup>31</sup>

The decline of local statist actors gradually created the geopolitical and geo-economic conditions for an external great power to undertake regional spatial organization. The end of the imperial hiatus – another historical turning point in the region’s spatial development – was marked by the appearance of Ottoman-Turkish power in the Balkans (Gallipoli, 1354). The fragmented local political entities of the (Western) Balkans – briefly forming a buffer zone between Turkish and Hungarian powers<sup>32</sup> – were relatively swiftly integrated, leading to the emergence of an empire with a (renewed) dual geographical focus. The incorporation of the Balkans into the imperial spatial structure was completed by the second

<sup>26</sup> Nicolle 2011, 96.; Gregory 2010, 330–346.; Hegedüs 2023.

<sup>27</sup> Dumbarton Oaks [no year]; World History Edu 2024.

<sup>28</sup> Halecki 1993, 153–160.; Hajdú 2002, 194–196.; Gregory 2010, 257–297.; Curta 2019, 65–77., 307–340.

<sup>29</sup> The Catholicization of the areas inhabited by the Croats was likely facilitated by their incorporation into the influence of the Frankish Empire from the late 8<sup>th</sup> century. The monarchy was established in 925 through the unification of tribal political entities, and then, after a brief period of existence as a sovereign Slavic state, its sovereignty effectively dissolved in 1102, following a succession crisis. More specifically, the monarchy became closely integrated with the medieval Kingdom of Hungary through the person of the monarch. Fine 1991, 248–292.; Curtis 1992, 11–12.; Kristó 2002; Hajdú 2002, 187., 195.

<sup>30</sup> Dragojlović 1974; Peters (ed.) 1980, 104–109.; Hamilton 2004, 1–107.; Ciobanu 2021.

<sup>31</sup> Malcolm 1994, 13–26.; Fine 1994; Hajdú 2002, 194–196.; Ćirković 2004, 20–85.; Bárány 2017, 344–345.; Gál 2013; Pap – Kltanics 2014, 219–220.

<sup>32</sup> Schmitt 2019, 25.

half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Thereafter, the Western Balkans region became part of a power-territorial system that, for several centuries, was able to maintain the regional geopolitical status quo through its capacity to retain territorial control until the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, the spatial structure of the Ottoman Empire – which formulated both Mediterranean and Central European geo-strategic ambitions – represented a far broader geographical framework than the Balkans alone, whose conquest was carried out along historically established routes known from historical geography.<sup>33</sup>

The spatial-organizational ambitions of the Ottoman power were facilitated by the geopolitical fragmentation of the (Western) Balkans. The conquest of Constantinople in 1453<sup>34</sup> established an organic geographical nexus between the Empire's principal intercontinental territorial domains, Rumelia and Anatolia, thereby consolidating the imperial strategic position within the region. Although the ethnocultural populations of the Western Balkans did not, for the most part, regard the Ottoman presence as definitive, they nonetheless accepted, in their own differentiated modalities, the criteria of imperial spatial organization. The new great power, which redefined the equilibrium framework of the geopolitical order, extended to the Western Balkans the complex system of values upon which the Ottoman Empire rested, with particular emphasis on its geostrategic aspirations and the priorities of its military conception of space. For reasons partly attributable to these structural factors, and partly to the relatively weak demographic position of the Turkish population, neither the comprehensive Islamization of the Western Balkans nor the prospect of ethnic assimilation was realized. Ottoman dominance over the region – despite recurrent uprisings, often triggered by increases in fiscal burdens – proved durable, even though the Sunni Turkish population constituted only a pronounced minority. The spatial-retentive capacity of the central authority ensured the geopolitical continuity of imperial territory until the first third of the nineteenth century. The centrifugal tendencies were persistently counterbalanced by realist methods elaborated during the formative phase of Ottoman spatial governance, whose integrative potential – despite the ethnocultural diversity of the Western Balkans – secured the allegiance of the majority of local communities to the Ottoman Empire as the guarantor of the prevailing status quo.<sup>35</sup>

By the end of the eighteenth century, the signs of imperial decline had become unequivocal, a process further anticipated by the trend of wars and territorial losses in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The transformation of an empire forced onto the defensive was rendered impossible by the belated development of its socio-economic structures.<sup>36</sup> Together with the strengthening of national(ist) ideologies in the Western Balkans, these factors eroded the spatial-retentive capacities of the Empire. In international relations, this process

<sup>33</sup> Key milestones of Ottoman-Turkish expansion in the Balkans that consolidated the Empire's dominion over the region include: Adrianople (Edirne) – 1369; Thessaloniki – 1387; the Battle of Kosovo or the First Battle of Rovine – 1389; Nikopol – 1396; the conquest of Serbia – 1439; Varna – 1444; Constantinople – 1453; Athens – 1458; Bosnia – 1463; Herzegovina – 1482; Montenegro – 1499. Perjés 1967, 865–866; Generál 1987, 5–77; Hajdú 2002, 196–199; Judah 2000, 9–34; Réti 2000, 13–24.

<sup>34</sup> Buc 2020.

<sup>35</sup> Kennedy 1992, 8–12; Halecki 1993, 199–206; Hajdú 2002, 196–199; Ágoston 2014, 15–37.

<sup>36</sup> The reasons for this lay partly in the frequency of wars and partly in the relative isolation from the new Atlantic centers of political and geo-economic development. McGowan 1994, 637–645; Quataert 1994, 759–776.

was defined as the “Eastern Question,”<sup>37</sup> accompanied by the characterization of the Ottoman Empire as “the sick man of Europe.”<sup>38</sup> Consequently, the sovereignty aspirations of the ethnopolitical entities in the Western Balkans – typically expressed through the search for great-power protectors in accordance with the prevailing constellation of international relations – were directly intertwined with the Russo-Ottoman wars fought for geopolitical supremacy over the peninsula and the Straits (the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles). The culmination of imperial regression in the nineteenth century was marked by the Balkan crisis of 1875–76, the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–78, and the ensuing Treaty of San Stefano.<sup>39</sup> These conflicts intensified the geopolitical interest of the European great powers in a strategically “vacant” territory expected to be populated by fragile states. As the power potential of the Porte gradually eroded, the challenge of maintaining the regional status quo increasingly fell upon external geostrategic actors, each articulating divergent spatial perceptions. The processes of Western Balkan state formation and great-power rivalry thus became inter-linked. Local nationalisms undermined the regional supremacy of the Ottoman Empire while simultaneously facilitating the entrenchment of great-power influence. The Treaty of San Stefano threatened to destabilize the balance among external centers of power through the prospect of excessive Russian geopolitical gains. Under the pressure of the interested great powers – France, Britain, Germany, and the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy – Russia was compelled to accept new regional spatial arrangements (state borders) at the Congress of Berlin in 1878.<sup>40</sup> After 1878, the state-formation process in the Western Balkans became irreversible, while the restoration of a great-power equilibrium in the region was, at least temporarily, achieved. Yet the settlement failed to mitigate the geopolitical frustrations of the Western Balkan states. Their expansionist ambitions, driven by a territorially defined sense of mission and directed primarily at the expense of the Ottoman Empire, could not be contained by external actors after 1908. This was due to the underestimation of local irredentist ideologies and the collapse of the Three Emperors’ League,<sup>41</sup> which had previously provided an adequate guarantee of the regional status quo.<sup>42</sup>

After 1890, great-power relations were characterized less by equilibrium and more by the search for geostrategic allies, which created an opportunity for the Western Balkan states to pursue their geopolitical ambitions, namely the realization of the great state (a national-imperial spatial construct). By the time of the two Balkan Wars, which served as preludes to the First World War, the Concert of Europe – a geopolitical pentarchy invested in preserving the continental and regional status quo – had ossified into two blocs, drastically narrowing down the possibilities of substantive diplomacy (and turning Realpolitik against itself). For the Western Balkans, the so-called “imperial interlude” entered its early stage: following the transformation of the political and territorial content of local space, the First

<sup>37</sup> Bouquet 2022.

<sup>38</sup> GobalSecurity.org [no year]; Ruggier 2018.

<sup>39</sup> Mazower 2004, 125–144.; Jelavich 1983, 171–380.; Jelavich 1996, 7–19.; Kissinger 1998, 145–146.; Hajdú 2002, 201.

<sup>40</sup> Van den Bogaert 2011; Ozkan 2022.

<sup>41</sup> Goriainov 1918; Keleher – Imholte 2023.

<sup>42</sup> At the great-power conference organized by Bismarck, the Russian variant of nationalism – Pan-Slavism – was ultimately contained. Tarján [no year]a; Tarján [no year]b; Kennedy 1992, 236–243.; Jelavich 1996, 88–93.; Kissinger 1998, 131–161.; Hajdú 2002, 203.; Mazower 2004, 135–157.; Papp 2006; Hall 2014.

World War commenced, in which, for example, Serbia and Montenegro committed themselves to the Entente powers.<sup>43</sup>

The protracted imperial interregnum following World War I fundamentally redrew the structures of the political geography of the Western Balkans: the diktats of the peace treaties, together with the spread of nationalist ideas, dismantled the empires that had previously exerted direct geopolitical influence over the region. The attempt to establish regional equilibrium commenced in connection with French strategic perceptions. The geostrategic constructs of the Cordon Sanitaire<sup>44</sup> and the Little Entente<sup>45</sup> were premised on the assumption that in the Western Balkans, the restoration of a balance previously maintained by great-power cooperation could be achieved through the emergence of a geopolitical middle power. The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes – after 1929, Yugoslavia – was built upon the idea of the integration of the South Slavic peoples. Yet the centrifugal energies of the state's internal fault lines obstructed the formation of a Yugoslav ethnocultural unity, and thus the new polity proved unable to contain the resurgence of revisionism. The orientation dilemmas stemming from divergent historical and civilizational-religious “experiences” were, on occasion, addressed by the Belgrade government in accordance with the Greater Serbian idea.<sup>46</sup> The constitutional crisis of the state was brought to an end by the introduction of royal dictatorship, which, however, also failed to reinforce the state's spatial-retentive potential through the creation of national unity. Despite administrative reforms and the Serbian-Croatian agreement of 1939, the regional middle power, by the 1930s and in the context of a transformed geopolitical constellation, was no longer capable of preserving the Western Balkans status quo. The growing influence of the powers dissatisfied with the Versailles spatial order – namely the Third Reich and the Kingdom of Italy – decisively shaped the trajectory of regional development. As a consequence of the German-Italian ambitions of the Second World War, the Western Balkans were partitioned. Simultaneously, however, alongside resistance against the occupying powers, an ethnically driven quasi-civil war unfolded within Yugoslavia.<sup>47</sup>

In the post-war period, internal conflicts in the Western Balkans and geopolitical rivalries were temporarily “frozen” by the bipolar world order of the Cold War. Soon, however, both the Yugoslav and the Albanian state formulated their own strategic developmental priorities. Belgrade once again attempted to construct a territorial perception of Yugoslav identity, while the geopolitical “weightlessness” of isolated Albania did not affect the regional status quo. At the center of the Western Balkans' geopolitical focus stood Yugoslavia, the regional middle power, burdened by ethnic challenges – primarily Serbian, Croatian, and Bosnian – that worked against the state's spatial-retentive capacities. Demographic processes redrew the internal boundaries of ethnocultural territories, creating a complex source of tensions and

<sup>43</sup> Andrew 1967; Kennedy 1992, 186–260; Jelavich 1996, 99–122.; Kissinger 1998, 162–212.; Keagan 2000; Galántai 2000; Réti 2000, 37–60.; Manatū Taonga – Ministry for Culture and Heritage 2014; Reviakin 2020, 40–47.; Keleher – Cooke 2023.

<sup>44</sup> Soutou 1974; Parker 1994, 52–53.; Kissinger 1998, 239.

<sup>45</sup> Magda 1993; Múlt-kor 2011; Gulyás 2011.

<sup>46</sup> Manetovic 2007; Melichárek 2015; Ljubomirović 2024.

<sup>47</sup> Kennedy 1992, 261–323.; Jelavich 1996, 123–264.; Kissinger 1998, 284–406.; Hajdú 2002, 203–210.; Mazower 2004, 163–183.; Ćirković 2004, 252–274.

laying new foundations for the rise of internal nationalisms. The 1974 constitution,<sup>48</sup> motivated by fears of Greater Serbian ambitions, proved incapable of managing these challenges. This was confirmed – alongside escalating economic problems – by the Kosovo dilemma from the 1980s onward, which resulted in nationalism becoming an integral part of the state's official policy by the end of the decade. In the early 1990s, with the collapse of the bipolar world order and simultaneous regional economic challenges, ethnocultural conflicts escalated, gradually eroding the state's spatial-retentive forces. The opportunity for a multipolar political order benefited nationalist parties in the constituent republics – parties that articulated “greater-space” perceptions<sup>49</sup> – which in turn undermined the integrity of the state territory. The process of geopolitical fragmentation entailed not only the emergence of new states and the redrawing of political dividing lines but also symbolized the disintegration of the previous equilibrium. According to some interpretations, the Western Balkan transformation could foster the homogenization of political territories; nevertheless, the era of diverse and overlapping territorial ambitions have by no means come to an end. In Albania, alongside the challenges of internal development, priority was given to questions of geopolitical orientation and to supporting Albanian communities living beyond the state's borders (although the project of “Greater Albania”<sup>50</sup> never became an element of official policy).<sup>51</sup>

The age of territorial revolution, however, did not render internal actors an absolutely decisive geopolitical force; the establishment of a new regional equilibrium required the involvement of external great-power players. Yet great-power interventions, together with traditional cultural and historical connections, in the absence of a sustained imperial presence, proved sufficient only for the freezing of conflicts. The internal challenges persisted, while certain external powers sought to exploit the geopolitical situation in accordance with their own strategic priorities. This was confirmed by the Russo-Ukrainian War: beyond local antagonisms, the Western Balkans remains burdened by the dilemmas of rivalry among southeastern, eastern, and western geopolitical centers (Figure 4). For the West, the integration of the region – conceived as part of the broader European “greater space” – represents a strategic priority, and its main trajectories can be discerned. What remains uncertain, however, is the orientation of the internal small-state actors, and the degree of their commitment either to the restoration or to the transformation of the political space.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Guzina 2000; Popovych et al. 2023.

<sup>49</sup> Ardolic 2009.

<sup>50</sup> Čanak 1998; Janjević 2017; Karcic 2021.

<sup>51</sup> Jelavich 1996, 265–352.; Hajdú 2002, 211–221.; Mazower 2004, 183–196.; Ćirković 2004, 288–300.; Reményi 2009, 9–13.; Reményi 2023.

<sup>52</sup> Hajdú 2002, 221–223.; Mazower 2004, 197–208.; Khanna 2008; Abazi 2021; Reményi 2023; Sotirovic 2023; McBride 2023; Wunsch Gaermann 2023; IISS 2024, 90–95.; Roán 2025; Zweers – Kelecevic 2025.

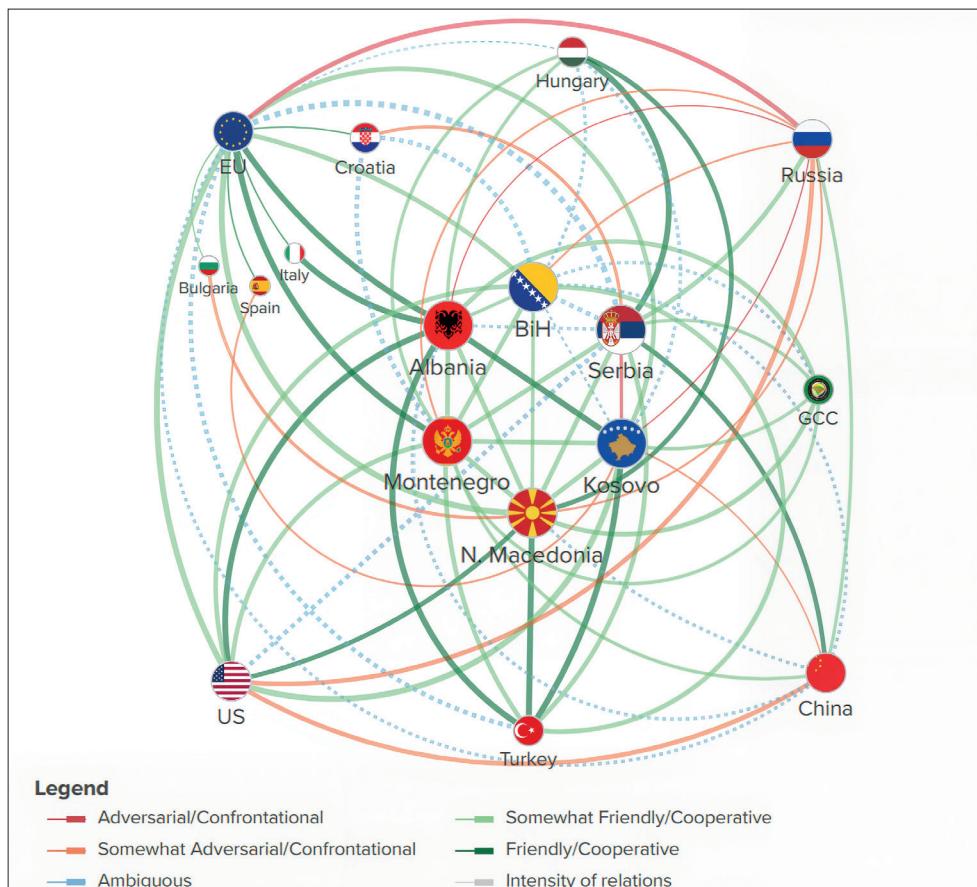


Figure 4 A geopolitical mapping of the Western Balkans

Source: <https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2025-08/geopolitically-mapping-the-western-balkans.pdf>

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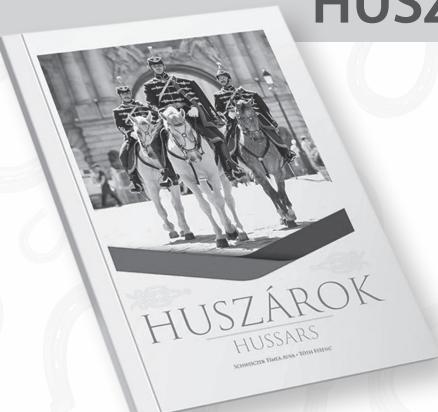
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