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### Western Balkans: External Actors Before and During the Current Crisis

**Elena S. Arlyapova<sup>1</sup>** , **Elena G. Ponomareva<sup>2</sup>**  <sup>1</sup>Institute of System-Strategic Analysis, Moscow, Russian Federation<sup>2</sup>MGIMO University, Moscow, Russian Federation [nastya304@mail.ru](mailto:nastya304@mail.ru)

**Abstract.** The Western Balkans has been and remains a particularly dense zone in terms of the number of actors present, where the interests of all the leading actors in world politics are bizarrely intertwined. The Ukrainian crisis has added spice to the Balkan agenda, reviving “frozen conflicts” not only within the borders of the region but also beyond its perimeter. Directly dependent on the outcome of the armed confrontation in Ukraine and separately from it, a clash or, at least, an intensification of external actors in the Balkan direction seems inevitable. The historical-systemic approach used in the study and the paradigm of multipolarity made it possible to trace the probable directions of activity of both regional and external actors. Based on a wide range of sources, the work provides a panorama of the foreign policy positioning of regional capitals; identifies major and minor external actors; shows the transformation of approaches and practical steps of key actors through the prism of the ongoing crisis. External actors — the European Union (EU), China, Great Britain, Russia and the United States — are divided into groups in accordance with their positions regarding the pre-crisis Balkans and the Balkans in the face of the fierce confrontation between Russia and the West. Among Western interests, special attention is paid to Great Britain, whose activity in the Western Balkans after Brexit is affiliated with the West in general, but not with the United States (despite all the history of strategic partnership in the region) and, moreover, with the EU separately. Against the background of the dominance of Western institutions in the region, the paper traces, however, the growing role of China, as well as external actors of the “second plan” with an oriental flavor: Türkiye, Iran, and the states of the Persian Gulf. An analysis of Russia’s prospects in the region has shown that the crisis in the system of international relations has largely nullified the results achieved earlier. The degree of Russia’s involvement in the crisis raises the question of its resource capacity, the ability to further maintain its own positions. Additional difficulties will be associated with the consolidated efforts of the Western allies and other external actors, including China, to balance Russian influence and presence in the Western Balkans.

**Key words:** Ukrainian crisis, China, European Union, EU, Great Britain, Russia, USA, external actors, foreign policy

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## Западные Балканы: внешние игроки в преддверии и в ходе текущего кризиса

Е.С. Арляпова<sup>1</sup> , Е.Г. Пономарева<sup>2</sup>  

<sup>1</sup>Институт системно-стратегического анализа, Москва, Российская Федерация

<sup>2</sup>МГИМО МИД России, Москва, Российская Федерация

nastya304@mail.ru

**Аннотация.** Западные Балканы были и остаются особенно плотной по числу игроков зоной, где причудливым образом переплетаются интересы всех ведущих акторов мировой политики. Украинский кризис добавил остроты балканской повестке, оживил «замороженные конфликты» не только внутри границ регионального поля, но и за его периметром. В прямой зависимости от исхода вооруженного противостояния на Украине и отдельно от него столкновение или как минимум активизация внешних субъектов на балканском направлении выглядят неминуемыми. Примененные в исследовании историко-системный подход и парадигма многополярности позволили зафиксировать вероятные направления активности внешних субъектов разного уровня. На основе широкого круга источников дана панорама внешнеполитического позиционирования региональных столиц, определены ключевые и пока второстепенные внешние игроки, показана трансформация подходов и практических шагов ключевых акторов сквозь призму текущего кризиса. Внешние игроки (Европейский союз (ЕС), КНР, РФ и США) разбиты на «лагеря» в соответствии с занимаемыми позициями относительно докризисных Балкан и Балкан в условиях ожесточения противостояния РФ и Запада. Отдельное внимание уделено Великобритании, чья активность в регионе после «брекзита» аффилирована с Западом в целом, но не с США и тем более с ЕС. На фоне доминирования в регионе западных институций прослежена усиливающаяся роль КНР, а также внешних игроков «второго плана» с восточным колоритом: Турции, Ирана, государств Персидского залива. Анализ российских перспектив показал, что кризис в системе международных отношений во многом обнулил достигнутые ранее результаты. Степень вовлеченности РФ ставит закономерный вопрос о ее ресурсности, способности к дальнейшему удержанию собственных позиций. Дополнительные трудности будут связаны с консолидированными усилиями западных союзников и всех иных внешних игроков, включая Китай, по нивелированию российского влияния и присутствия в регионе Западных Балкан.

**Ключевые слова:** украинский кризис, Великобритания, Европейский союз, ЕС, Китай, Россия, США, внешние игроки «второго плана», внешняя политика

**Заявление о конфликте интересов.** Авторы заявляют об отсутствии конфликта интересов.

**Вклад авторов.** Авторы внесли равнозначный вклад в разработку дизайна, проведение исследования и подготовку текста статьи.

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### Introduction

With all the severity of the confrontation we are witnessing in Ukraine, there is another problem zone in Europe, where the historical and geopolitical contradictions of the leading world powers could lead to open conflict. This is the Balkans. Extremely diverse in ethnic,

religious and political terms, densely populated, mosaic peninsula has been and remains a mini-arena for the clash of great powers. Surprisingly, even today, after almost a century and a half since the Berlin Congress of 1878, one can repeat with confidence that “the largest states, international military-political blocs, and

economic unions, in accordance with their interests, have drawn and draw borders here, have defined and define the face of political regimes, ideologies and economic systems, have tried and are trying to settle interethnic and interstate conflicts generated by their own actions” (Romanenko, 2021, p. 24).

Not surprisingly, against the backdrop of growing international tensions and mutual threats between global actors, Balkan politicians openly express fears that in case of a protracted Ukrainian conflict, “both the South (of Europe) and the Western Balkans”<sup>1</sup> could be included in its orbit. Some of the leaders are actively adding fuel to the fire with statements about Russia’s intentions to spread the conflict to other parts of the world and expectations that the Western Balkans will be declared one of the goals in an effort to destabilize Europe.<sup>2</sup> In turn, the domestic and foreign media regularly identify “Balkan motives” in the ongoing confrontation.<sup>3</sup>

At the current moment, the analytical focus is entirely on the Ukrainian theater of political and then opens military actions. But regardless of the armed confrontation’s outcome, the activation of the leading external actors in the Balkan direction seems inevitable. With this in mind, our study is to identify the regional strategies of the main, but still minor external actors, and to trace the transformation of their

visions and practical steps against the background of the ongoing crisis.

Geographically, the analysis covers the Western Balkans region: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and the partially recognized “Republic of Kosovo.” The key external actors represented by the European Union (EU), China, the Russian Federation, and the United States, are divided into “camps” according to their positions in and towards to the Western Balkan region. For this reason, the EU and the U.S. are often united under the name of the “collective West.” A distinct issue within this group is the United Kingdom, whose activity in the field of international relations and security is undoubtedly associated with the West as a whole, but not with the United States (with all the history of their strategic partnership in the region) and, moreover, with the EU separately. Türkiye, Iran, and the Persian Gulf countries are currently listed as the “second plan” actors. The case of Japan also stands out with its own specific interest in the region.

### Sources and Methodology

Official documents of the Western Balkan states, international organizations and supranational bodies; public rhetoric of their officials; national strategies and budgets; statistical materials; results of surveys on the problem of foreign presence and influence in the Balkans form the source base for this research.

The most acute confrontation between external actors in the region — Russia and the West (China is also expected to join the “big game” in the future) — determines the methodological choice. The historical-systematic approach has a priority, allowing us to consider processes and key events in the appropriate spatial and chronological context, without strict reference to any of the existing paradigms.

However, in the context of the analysis of the Western Balkans, and especially when

<sup>1</sup> The President of Slovenia Fears the Continuation of the Ukrainian Crisis in the Balkans // Radio Sputnik. August 11, 2022. (In Russian). URL: <https://radiosputnik.ria.ru/20220811/balkany-1808770006.html> (accessed: 01.12.2022).

<sup>2</sup> Tharoor I. Russia’s War in Ukraine Finds Echoes in the Balkans // The Washington Post. August 1, 2022. URL: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/08/01/western-balkans-kosovo-ukraine/> (accessed: 09.12.2022).

<sup>3</sup> See: As Russia Expands Its War in Ukraine, Will the Delicate Peace in the Balkans Be Disrupted? // CBC. September 23, 2022. URL: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/balkans-russian-influence-1.6593195> (accessed: 11.12.2022); Sysoev G. Balkan Motifs in the Ukrainian Way // Kommersant. February 22, 2022. (In Russian). URL: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5228293> (accessed: 11.12.2022).

focusing on external presence and influence, it is necessary to make a number of important reservations. Firstly, both the Balkan (post-Yugoslav) crisis of the 1990s and the prolonged (since 2014) Ukrainian conflict have demonstrated that the regional balance can differ significantly from the global one, while at the same time reinforcing the need to find alternative guidelines to Western foreign policy. Therefore, striving for the most objective analysis, it was necessary to rely on the multipolarity paradigm, actively developed by Russian domestic scientists (Bazavluk, Kurylev & Savin, 2022; Degterev, 2019).

Secondly, at the moment it is difficult to resist the temptation to look at things from the standpoint of the followers of realists who have developed the ideas of Thucydides (and we agree, simplified in some way (Alekseeva, 2015, p. 18)). With all the reservations and risks of not always correct interpretations, against the background of the dramatic development of relations between the Russian Federation and the West, the problem of simplifications temporarily loses its relevance. Those of the thinker's theses that formed the basis of realism (power as the key factor in the interaction between states, fear as one of the strongest motivations, and security as the most important sphere of activity), on the contrary, become relevant again (Thucydides, 2021). Moreover, today they take on a new and, to some extent, empirically confirmed tone: "The Thucydides trap refers to the natural, inevitable confusion that occurs when a rising power threatens to displace the ruling power" (Allison, 2017, pp. XV—XVI).

Neoclassical realism is one of the most relevant research directions, suitable both for considering the issues of the foreign policy of the Western Balkan governments and for analyzing the political subjectivity of the regional states in the international arena. Much has already been written about its methodological advantages, the main one of which is the position of "the middle point between the tradition of realism, on the

one hand, and liberalism, including neo-institutionalism and constructivism, on the other" (Romanova, 2012, p. 10), in relation to the study of the Balkans (Entina, 2022, pp. 95—97).

In the context of the tasks we have set, the possibility of taking into account a wide range of national and intraregional factors is of particular value: the presence of nonstandard actors in the form of, for example, the polity of Kosovo, or a dispersed Serbian community,<sup>4</sup> and on the external contour, it is the recognition of the EU and NATO as full-fledged elements of the system, without which consideration of the foreign presence and influence issues in the Western Balkans at the modern stage does not make sense.

Thus, the chosen methodological guidelines allow us to cover a wider range of significant internal and external factors that were difficult or not at all amenable to study using other approaches.

### **"The Balkan Quintet": EU, UK, USA, Russia, and China**

Although the determining role of external actors in the Balkans is not disputed by the expert community, the estimates of their influence on the region vary significantly — up to severe polarization and antagonism. There is also no consensus in determining the composition of key external actors in the region (Arlyapova, Ponomareva & Proroković, 2022). The number of unambiguously defined in this capacity includes, perhaps, only Russia and the United States. Russia acts "solo," which is due, among other things, to the trend of recent years to isolate it from former Western partners.

The United States, of course, is playing its own game in the Balkans, but among the main subjects of geopolitical rivalry, it appears most often in conjunction with its NATO allies under

<sup>4</sup> It is not only about Serbs living in Serbia, including Kosovo, but also in the Republika Srpska (Bosnia and Herzegovina), Montenegro and North Macedonia.

the very understandable and nowadays relevant name of the “collective West.” The “best” supporting actor here is, of course, the European Union. The EU’s position looks the most vulnerable compared to others, since it bears the full responsibility for the actions of the whole coalition on the “weakest flank of Europe,”<sup>5</sup> and to be more precise, this burden is fully taken by the “old-timers” of the EU (in the Balkan context, these are Germany, Italy and France).

This problem leads us directly to the issue of open and/or latent competition among external actors. Their interaction in the Balkan region is highly competitive, even if we are talking about nominal allies in the face of the EU and the United States. Western analysts, as a rule, draw a watershed without taking into account the competition between Europe and the United States. In analytical reviews, taking into account the events in Ukraine, the Balkans appear as a “favorable environment” for the Kremlin’s retaliatory strike against the United States and the EU in order to destroy the European order<sup>6</sup> established after the end of the Cold War. The United States is often seen here as a party supporting Europe and guaranteeing its interests.

As far as the approach of domestic and some Balkan experts is concerned, they fixate the differences in the goal-setting of the Western allies much more confidently. The role of the United States in the Balkan vicissitudes, especially on the Kosovo issue, is Washington’s “own game” playing “often in opposition not so much to the policy of Brussels, but Berlin, London and Paris” (Ponomareva, 2020, p. 165). By the way, the logic of neoclassical realism

<sup>5</sup> Massara G. How the Ukraine War Deepens Divisions Across the Balkans // *Aspenia Online*. April 28, 2022. URL: <https://aspensiaonline.it/how-the-ukraine-war-deepens-divisions-across-the-balkans/> (accessed: 11.12.2022).

<sup>6</sup> Stronski P. Russia in the Balkans after Ukraine: A Troubling Actor // *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. September 20, 2022. URL: <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/87959> (accessed: 30.12.2022).

successfully explains both the aspirations of the United States and the “balancing policy of NATO allies” against the hegemon (Konyshev, 2020, p. 98). In the Balkans, the divide goes much deeper than just the U.S. — EU axis. The official Russian rhetoric captures and reflects this feature.<sup>7</sup>

The UK is a “historically independent actor” in the Balkans (Entina, 2019, p. 79), and because of this, it is unlikely that the UK will ever leave the list of the main external actors in the region. Although the UK is often only implicitly present in the informational issues of the Balkan foreign policy agenda, it is in fact still actively involved in its formation and shaping. It is generally believed that “in economic terms, London has never had a strong position in the region.”<sup>8</sup> However, for some Balkan locations (for example, Kosovo), London has maintained the second place among the top investors for several years, second only to Berlin (Rrustemi et al., 2019, p. 149). In addition, in the Kosovo context, it is appropriate to remind the United States with a truly nominal — 0.1% in some periods (Arlyapova, 2014, p. 110) — trade presence but sustained high political influence. However, the economic sphere is in fact neither a priority of Britain’s interests nor its specialization in the Balkan region.

Brexit has become a key event in the UK — Western Balkans relations. The UK’s withdrawal from the EU meant the “loss of the main advocate of EU enlargement”<sup>9</sup> for a

<sup>7</sup> Putin Accused the Anglo-Saxons of Sabotage on the “Northern Streams” // *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*. September 30, 2022. (In Russian). URL: <https://rg.ru/2022/09/30/putin-obvinil-anglosaksov-v-diversiiah-na-gazoprovodah-sp-i-sp-2.html> (accessed: 12.12.2022).

<sup>8</sup> Reed E. What Has the UK “Forgotten” in the Western Balkans? // *Balkanist*. December 22, 2021. (In Russian). URL: <https://balkanist.ru/chto-zabylya-velikobritaniya-na-zapadnyh-balkanah/?ysclid=lcksecngku729544457> (accessed: 10.12.2022).

<sup>9</sup> Bieber F. Ever Farther Union: Balkans and the Brexit // *Freedom House*. June 2016. URL: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/analytical-brief/2016/ever-farther-union-balkans-and-brexit> (accessed: 10.12.2022).

number of the Balkan countries (Belloni & Brunazzo, 2017, p. 21); this had a negative impact on their ability to obtain membership in the European Union in the near future. This has affected not only Kosovo and BiH, in whose political processes the UK remains most involved,<sup>10</sup> but also Serbia, for example. According to British experts, the desire to join the European Union has done much more than anything else in transforming Belgrade's position on Kosovo. Even at the stage of forecasting the consequences of the upcoming Brexit, experts highlighted that London's loss of the opportunity to offer an accelerated option of joining the EU, "or, perhaps more correctly, the loss of the ability to block this path" (Ker-Lindsay, 2015, p. 26), will lead to the disappearance of its greatest leverage for influence in the region.

Moreover, Brexit has changed the alignment and balance of power. Despite the official commitment to a unified position (or at least without obvious disagreements) with Brussels on the Western Balkans, the UK, which has parted with it, actually plays against the EU, sometimes acting as a real "spoiler" of European initiatives, as does never joined it Türkiye (Dursun-Özkanca, 2019, p. 59).

In an indirect analogy with the United Kingdom, China has been for a long time, if not in the shadows, then at least outside the main focus of the Balkan game. In terms of regional security, until very recently, China was considered and interpreted by the West as one in the general list of the "foreign actors working to undermine progress"<sup>11</sup> and exacerbating the

growth of tensions in the region, of course, along with and even led by Russia. For comparison: in the new strategy of the US policy in the Balkans of 2017,<sup>12</sup> China is mentioned only twice while the entire text of the document is dotted with references to Russia — starting from the second line of the preface, and, in fact, is largely devoted to it and the fight against Russian influence in the Western Balkans. Until now, the inertia of Western analytical and other materials has often presented the Balkan states with a binary choice: the "collective West" or Russia. Even the inclusion of Beijing leaves this scheme without significant changes.

The reason for the "ten-year patience"<sup>13</sup> towards China is seen through the prism of a long-lasting consideration of the strengthening and expansion of Chinese multilateral activity in the region not as part of its consistent strategy, but as a kind of "side effect of the ambivalent attitude of Europe and the United States to the region."<sup>14</sup> Even the large-scale initiative "17+1," which served as "the institutional basis for China's penetration into the Greater Europe" (Ponomareva & Krykanov, 2020, p. 117), was initially perceived as a "simple diplomatic, political and administrative convenience"<sup>15</sup>; until it became obvious that Beijing's actions are an integral part of a "coordinated and moving in a certain direction" geopolitical project with a transcontinental content and a "Balkan link" in its composition

<sup>10</sup> The UK Is Preparing the Large-Scale Provocation in Bosnia and Herzegovina // *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*. December 28, 2022. (In Russian). URL: <https://rg.ru/2022/12/28/prepodavatel-mgimo-oleg-ianovskij-v-interviu-rg-velikobritaniia-gotovit-masshtabnuiu-provokaciiu-v-bosnii-i-gercegovine.html> (accessed: 06.01.2023).

<sup>11</sup> Closing Press Conference by NATO Secretary General J. Stoltenberg Following the Meeting of NATO Foreign Ministers in Riga, Latvia // NATO. December 1, 2021. URL: [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions\\_189152.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_189152.htm) (accessed: 22.12.2022).

<sup>12</sup> Marusic D., Bedenbaugh S., Wilson D. *Balkan Forward: A New US Strategy for the Region* // Atlantic Council. November 2017. URL: <https://css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/resources/docs/Atlantic%20Council-Balkans%20Forward,%20A%20New%20Strategy%20for%20the%20Region.pdf> (accessed: 24.12.2022).

<sup>13</sup> Shopov V. *Decade of Patience: How China Became a Power in the Western Balkans* // European Council on Foreign Relations. February 2, 2021. URL: <https://ecfr.eu/publication/decade-of-patience-how-china-became-a-power-in-the-western-balkans/> (accessed: 21.12.2022).

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

(Ulunyan, 2021, p. 64). The geopolitical fire in Eurasia and the seriously changed general international situation — with the maximum coverage, not limited to the framework of the Ukrainian conflict or the geography of the Balkans, naturally led to a significant revision of the status of the Celestial Empire.

During a very difficult 2022, Russia demonstrated the presence of the Balkan card in its foreign policy agenda. The Western press scrupulously monitored Russian steps in this direction.<sup>16</sup> The greatest concern for Russia's opponents in the West is cooperation between Moscow and Serbia and the Republika Srpska. In the context of the Ukrainian conflict, they widely spread the narrative about the Kremlin's creation of a pretext for further interference in the affairs of BiH. Just like its opponents, the Russian Federation is fully aware of the importance of the Western Balkans. The main question today is whether Russia has enough resources to maintain its influence in the Balkan direction. Perhaps not mentioned at all among the “most costly” foreign policy vectors for Russia in the RAND research,<sup>17</sup> it may ironically become just that.

### Long Bench: External Actors of the “Second Plan”

Türkiye is often referred to as one of the geopolitical rivals in the region, with a demanded role as a “potential mediator”<sup>18</sup> after

<sup>16</sup> See: EU Candidate Serbia and Russia Sign Foreign Policy Agreement // Independent. September 24, 2022. URL: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/serbia-ap-russia-new-york-aleksandar-vucic-b2174618.html> (accessed: 23.12.2022); Karcic H. Why NATO Should Worry about the Balkans // Foreign Policy. March 30, 2022. URL: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/30/bosnia-russia-nato-ukraine-war-dodik/> (accessed: 23.12.2022).

<sup>17</sup> Overextending and Unbalancing Russia: Assessing the Impact of Cost-Imposing Options // RAND Corporation. 2019. URL: [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_briefs/RB10014.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB10014.html) (accessed: 22.12.2022).

<sup>18</sup> Islamov D. “I Want To Be a Mistress of the Sea”: Turkey as a Potential Mediator in the Western Balkans //

the intensification of the Ukrainian crisis. This is facilitated not only by the country's foreign policy ambitions, but also by its pronounced desire to “develop into a global player” (Arežina, 2018, p. 206). Experts on the ground pay increased attention to Turkish activities in the Balkans. For example, Serbian analysts believe that “even a weak Turkish president can try to solve his internal problems by destabilizing the situation in the Balkans” (Kaloeva, 2017, p. 88). All Balkan states, without exception, keep in mind the policy of an ambitious close neighbor. By the way, the works of local authors in this context favorably differ from others in greater specificity, emphasis not on the ideological, but on the pragmatic component. The fact of the general orientation of official Türkiye towards the West does not escape them, while many Western colleagues easily “cut off” Ankara and place it in the category of “Eastern powers” with their destructive influence on the Western Balkans (Arlyapova & Ponomareva, 2023, p. 116). It should be noted that the discourse of Türkiye's “detachment” from Europe and its “coupling” with Russia and China (as translators of negative influence)<sup>19</sup> was actively implemented in the region on the eve of the Ukrainian crisis.<sup>20</sup>

Balkan experts see Türkiye as “clearly a regional power” that “cannot replace the

Russian International Affairs Council. September 22, 2022. (In Russian). URL: [https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/columns/europeanpolicy/khochu-byt-vladychitsey-morskoy-turtsiya-kak-potentsialnyy-posrednik-na-zapadnykh-balkanakh/?sphrase\\_id=95126859&ysclid=lckszv4ke3444890425](https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/columns/europeanpolicy/khochu-byt-vladychitsey-morskoy-turtsiya-kak-potentsialnyy-posrednik-na-zapadnykh-balkanakh/?sphrase_id=95126859&ysclid=lckszv4ke3444890425) (accessed: 06.01.2023).

<sup>19</sup> What Is ‘Malign’ about External Influence in the Western Balkans? // Western Balkans Info Hub. March 15, 2021. URL: <https://wbc-rti.info/object/event/21421> (accessed: 15.12.2022).

<sup>20</sup> Andreev V. Strategy of the Turkish Republic in the Western Balkans // Russian International Affairs Council. March 5, 2021. (In Russian). URL: <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/columns/sandbox/strategiya-turetskoy-respubliki-na-zapadnykh-balkanakh/?ysclid=lckt8h2qda944958590> (accessed: 05.01.2023).

United States or the EU.”<sup>21</sup> It also seems that Türkiye’s international weight does not currently allow it to enter the list of grandees of big politics. Moreover, as experts rightly point out, “the limit and the nearest strategic goal for the Republic of Türkiye is... gaining the status of a multiregional leader” (Lobanov & Shakhov, 2017, p. 60) by restoring the dominant position in the regions adjacent to the territorial borders of the state. Therefore, Türkiye, both before and during the crisis, remains a very significant external, but region-limited actor, along with, for example, Greece.

Having it all said, this should not detract from the importance of the “second echelon” or “bench actors.” Thus, with the appearance of new participants in the Western Balkans’ “geopolitical puzzle”<sup>22</sup> with autocratic regimes, many experts associate the shift in the overall balance between democratic and non-democratic regimes in favor of the latter, and, as a result, predict changes in the regimes of proxy states (Rrustemi et al., 2019, p. 12). From this perspective, they evaluate and assess the presence in the region of a number of Middle Eastern countries, especially Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE as the most involved in the Balkan agenda.

Therefore, despite the foreign policy orientation of the regional heavyweights, almost all of them end up on the same scale with the Russian Federation and China in terms of assessing their activity in the Balkans — under the general name of “Eastern powers” and in opposition to “Western powers.” The first — Russia, China, Iran, Türkiye and the Persian Gulf states (excluding the Kingdom of Bahrain

and the Sultanate of Oman as having little influence) collectively act as a “bad guy” (within the framework of the theory of a democratic world). The second is the United States and NATO allies, within the same theory there are and will always be “good guys.” Accordingly, “Eastern influence” is interpreted only from the position of the harm done, “Western” — on the contrary, in a purely positive way.

To complete the overview of the major and minor external actors in the Balkans, a short stop should be made on Japan. This was prompted by the results of a survey conducted in Serbia (as part of an extensive public opinion survey covering 13 European countries regarding the China’s presence and influence in the region).<sup>23</sup> Formulating their attitude to various countries, Serbian respondents placed Japan in the second (!) place among the most positively perceived states: right after the Russian Federation and before the People’s Republic of China,<sup>24</sup> which surprised a lot the organizers of the research and the expert community in general.<sup>25</sup> It is worth noting that the results of the survey singled out Serbia from all the other European countries that took part in this study. Serbia’s citizens also showed a “drop-out result” in measuring the negative attitude towards the activities and presence of certain foreign actors in the Western Balkans region (in descending order of loyalty): Great Britain, the U.S., North Korea, Israel, Germany, and Vietnam, with a somewhat intermediate position (the share of respondents with the answer “very negative” is lower than that of

<sup>21</sup> Shehu R. Next Generation Turkey and Its Foreign Policy in the Western Balkans // *Eastern Focus Quarterly*. March 2021. URL: <https://www.eastern-focus.eu/2021/03/next-generation-turkey-and-its-foreign-policy-in-the-western-balkans/> (accessed: 23.12.2022).

<sup>22</sup> Bonomi M., Reljić D. The EU and the Western Balkans: So Near and Yet So Far // *SWP Comments*. 2017. No. 53. URL: [https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2017C53\\_rlc\\_Bonomi.pdf](https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2017C53_rlc_Bonomi.pdf) (accessed: 24.12.2022).

<sup>23</sup> Global Views on China // *Sinophone Borderlands Project*. 2022. URL: <https://sinofon.cz/surveys/> (accessed: 20.10.2022).

<sup>24</sup> Serbian Public Opinion on China in the Age of COVID-19. An Unyielding Alliance? // *Central European Institute of Asian Studies*. 2020. P. 7. URL: <https://ceias.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/SRB-poll-report.pdf> (accessed: 29.10.2022).

<sup>25</sup> Serbians Blame US and NATO for Ukraine War // *BNE IntelliNews*. March 14, 2022. URL: <http://intellinews.com/serbians-blame-us-and-nato-for-ukraine-war-237960/> (accessed: 08.07.2022).



Israel and Germany, but the aggregate indicator (“negative” and “very negative”) is higher than that of Germany).

Japan’s case in terms of the influence of external forces in the Balkans has not yet been analyzed at the individual country level (by analogy with the Kingdom of Bahrain and the Sultanate of Oman mentioned above). But since 2018, Tokyo has had a program for the development of bilateral relations with the Balkan region called the *Initiative for Cooperation with the Western Balkans*. The wording of the founding document is very neutral: support for socio-economic reforms, strengthening dialogue, “exchange of knowledge and experience of Japan on common issues” (for example, disaster management, etc.).<sup>26</sup> However, there is a clear focus on Western partners: support for reforms in countries towards the EU accession, promotion of regional cooperation through joint efforts with EU states, possible collaboration with the Berlin Process,<sup>27</sup> etc. The priority European countries for joint work are: Germany, Austria, Bulgaria, the Visegrad Four countries, Slovenia, Romania. Concrete actions were: financial assistance (in the largest volume to Serbia, then to BiH and North Macedonia<sup>28</sup>), the opening of embassies and the appointment of an ambassador for the Western Balkans.

One of these ambassadors, answering a question about the reasons for the interest of geographically remote Japan in the Western Balkans, outlined the direct connection of the initiative with the signing in the same year (2018) of two “epoch-making agreements”

between Japan and the EU: on economic and strategic partnership.<sup>29</sup> Further steps are derivatives of this event and have no independent value for Japan. The main motivation for Japan in the Western Balkans project is a demonstration of loyalty to allies, commitment to their common position in the international arena and a common attitude to the European and global political agenda, where by the start of the Initiative the problem of “the influence of third countries” has become particularly relevant and acute. The Japanese Ambassador for the Western Balkans spoke about this in a very definite way: “If we neglected this, there would be an opportunity to strengthen the influence of countries and forces that do not share common basic values and penetrate into the region.”<sup>30</sup>

## Conclusion

After February 24, 2022, the composition of the key external actors in the Western Balkans remains the same — the United Kingdom, the EU, China, Russia and the United States. At this stage, all major external actors retain their presence and influence in the region. However, the Western bloc and China have the potential to increase their influence in the near future. The capabilities of the Russian Federation in this area are questionable.

The greatest activity of the West and Russia is recorded around Bosnia and Herzegovina. The intensification of efforts on both sides leads to the aggravation of internal contradictions and the escalation of the formally completed Bosnian conflict, which is likely to entail external interference. The main driving force here is the Western bloc — its actions are preventive in nature, while Russian actions (if any) are usually a reaction to the events taking place.

<sup>29</sup> Interview with Mr. Kawazu Kunihiko, Ambassador in Charge of the Western Balkans // 24 Hours Daily (Bulgaria). February 14, 2020. URL: <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100165023.pdf> (accessed: 06.12.2022).

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Western Balkans Cooperation Initiative // Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. November 19, 2021. URL: [https://www.mofa.go.jp/erp/c\\_see/page22e\\_000937.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/erp/c_see/page22e_000937.html) (accessed: 18.12.2022).

<sup>27</sup> The Berlin Process is a mechanism for supporting the European integration of the Western Balkan countries, initiated by Germany in 2014.

<sup>28</sup> Western Balkans Cooperation Initiative. Infographics // Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. URL: <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100139248.pdf> (accessed: 18.12.2022).

The second “knot” is Serbia and the smoldering conflict in Kosovo. During the year, the real or imaginary possibility of the conflict returning to an acute phase has repeatedly arisen. At the same time, Serbia is also in the field of the struggle for the dominant influence between Russia and the West with the involvement of China in this competition. According to the authors, the strength of pro-Russian (or anti-Western) public sentiment has made Serbia to be at the second place after BiH, where there is proportionally less Russian influence, and therefore it is technically easier to handle. Thus, this removes Belgrade from the first strike line in case the external actors see the need for this.

China continues to play its own game in the Balkans. The West openly positions Chinese influence in the region as undesirable and views it in the same vein as the “Russian threat.” The UK and the U.S., together and separately, often

play against the EU. However, in the context of the aggravation of the confrontation with Russia, the position of the allies looks united and strong, at least in the Balkan direction.

The existing cracks and fractures in the “collective” actions of Western countries, their contradictions with the main counterparties represented by Moscow and Beijing, create new opportunities for the “second plan” actors. The role of Türkiye, Iran and the Gulf states will continue to gradually but steadily grow in certain countries of the Balkans and in the region as a whole.

The current crisis has further highlighted the deep dependence of the Western Balkans on external forces. At the same time, the crisis has opened up the possibility of choosing a state-oriented path in the Balkan marathon: many of them still have a chance to take their rightful place in the emerging multipolar world.

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#### About the authors:

Arlyapova Elena Sergeevna — PhD (Political Science), Research Assistant, Institute of System-Strategic Analysis; ORCID: 0000-0002-8095-7229; e-mail: elena.s.arlyapova@gmail.com

Ponomareva Elena Georgievna — Dr. of Sc. (Political Science), Professor, Comparative Politics Department, MGIMO University; ORCID: 0000-0001-8370-8597; e-mail: nastya304@mail.ru