

FROM BALKANIZATION TO EUROPEAN INTEGRATION. THE MANAGEMENT OF INTERNATIONAL CONFLICTS IN SOUTH-EAST EUROPE

Liviu Bogdan VLAD^{a}, Adrian Lucian KANOVICI^a*

^b The Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania

ABSTRACT

The present article aims to approach and clarify the importance of the Balkanization phenomenon from a conceptual point of view in order to understand the geopolitical evolution of the South-Eastern European space during the last 30 years. Although surrounded by states belonging to the Euro-Atlantic structures, the Western Balkans region continues to be perceived as a space of conflict, in which inter-ethnic tensions continue to exist and to generate a state of regional insecurity. In this context, the European Union is the main geopolitical actor interested in the management of intra- and international conflicts in this region. Thus, the importance of the European Union becomes even greater as in the last years we have been witnessing a return of the Russian Federation and Turkey to the international arena through an increasingly active political, economic and social involvement in the Western Balkans. On the other hand, keeping the Western Balkans on the outskirts of Europe may have the effect of reactivating some ethnic and religious lines that had been temporarily blurred and which, now, amidst territorial fragmentation in smaller and less functional states, are likely to endanger the security of the whole region. The research helps to understand the role of Balkanization phenomenon in shaping the recent geopolitical trends in the region, in the context of the European Union's expansion process.

KEYWORDS: *balkanization, European integration, geopolitics, international conflict, territorial fragmentation.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the centuries, the great powers have constantly intervened in shaping the destiny of the Balkanic peoples and on many occasions their interests as well, something that underlies problems that have not been solved to this very day.

In this article we aim to address what the Balkanization process means. It is a concept that has been used more and more frequently over the past 30 years, after the fall of the Iron Curtain and as a result of territorial fragmentation in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe. The breaking apart of Yugoslavia after violent conflicts and the enlargement of the EU and NATO towards the East are two phenomena that have put a mark on the geopolitical evolution of the ex-Yugoslav space in recent years.

The integration of Croatia in the European Union in 2013 has given new life to the region; however, the spectre of regional tensions still looms. The integration of new Western Balkans states to the EU is constantly being postponed. (Council of the European Union, 2019). The integration of Serbia and Kosovo in the European Union remains highly unlikely in the near future as a result of a stalemate of negotiations between the two parties, and the political situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina remains at a standstill. On the other hand, negotiations between Greece and Northern Macedonia have generated

* Corresponding author. E-mail address: liviubogdanvlad@yahoo.com.

a positive solution that could help push negotiations regarding the latter's joining of the Euro-Atlantic structures.

2. BALKANIZATION AND EURO-ATLANTIC INTEGRATION

The term *balkanization* has a strong connection to the events that happened in the Balkan Peninsula at the turn of the 19th century. Strong turmoil in the territory that was under Ottoman domination, the involvement of major European powers in forming nation-states in South-East Europe as well as divergencies between these new states generated two Balkan Wars and preceded the beginning of the First World War. Some renowned American geographers consider that the concept of balkanization has its origins in the geopolitics of movements towards national autodetermination in the Balkan Peninsula in the context of rivalries between the great European powers at the end of the 19th century (Gregory et al., 2009) and of the internal problems that the Ottoman Empire was facing during the same period of time.

2.1 Definition and characteristics

A concise definition of balkanization, one that encompasses the majority of its characteristics, was given by geopolitician Oleg Serebrian (2006), who thinks that balkanization is a “geopolitical term used to describe the process of fragmentation or violent division of a state in smaller entities, usually hostile towards one another”. He goes on by reminding that the concept originates from the events that happened during the Balkan Wars (1912-1913), the outcome of which was the political and geographical division of the Balkan Peninsula on ethnic grounds, a process that led to bloody actions of ethnic cleansing.

The balkanization process firstly requires the existence of a large administrative and territorial formation consisting of a high number of territories inhabited by ethnic minorities. The fact that ethnic diversity could be a catalyst for political fragmentation and that it was of particular importance in the balkanization process was also evidenced by Yves Lacoste (1995), who defines balkanization as a “process of territorial division based on ethnic criteria”.

Yves Lacoste (1995) also points out the negative connotation of the term, an aspect that has determined it to be used when characterizing armed, drawn-out conflicts, the result of which was the forming of new states on the world map (often times instable and poorly functional from an institutional standpoint).

The American professor Robert W. Pringle (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Balkanization>) sees balkanization as a process that characterizes the slipping of a multinational state on the path to *civil war*, *ethnic cleansing* and *dictatorship*.

The attempts on the part of the multinational state to oppose centrifugal movements and stop balkanization may very well accelerate it, while the radicalization of citizens who want to break away from the territory of the multinational may be reflected in a high level of armed confrontations. To support this affirmation, Pringle brings into discussion the example of Yugoslavia, where repressive actions meant to stop the secession of Bosnia and the Kosovo province actually accelerated their breaking off and signaled the international community to intervene and support them.

In the famous geographical work, *The Dictionary of Human Geography*, edited by a collective of renowned British geographers, balkanization is defined as “the fragmentation of a larger political entity into smaller, mutually hostile units” (Gregory et al., 2009). The authors stress the fact that the term is geopolitical in origin and that it appeared in the context of national self-determination movements in the Balkan space at the end of the 19th century. Balkanization is also a process not unknown to the interests of great powers, while also being a term contested for its negative connotations.

The repeated fragmentation and reorganization of ethnic groups into separated states in the Balkan Peninsula thus gave birth to the concept of balkanization. It can now be extrapolated to any situation where a territory is broken up into smaller units with a high level of mutual hostility, fueled by territorial rivalries (Marston et al., 2010).

Often times, this fragmentation brings about the emergence of enclaves and exclaves, which then continue to be a hotbed for conflicts, with a high chance of generating armed confrontations. In the Balkans, Bosnia and Herzegovina is the most eloquent example, with the three large communities (Serbians, Croats and Bosnian Muslims) that live in the territory intermingling, thus giving birth to a true ethnic and religious mosaic. Balkanization has also been associated with the frequent redrawing of borders and frontiers, as well as with massive population movements that have been reflected by a sudden change in the ethnic component within the affected territories, with the strongest tendency being the ethnic homogenization of said territories.

One example is the situation of the Srpska province in Bosnia and Herzegovina where, as a result of the 1992-1995 war, the proportion of the Croat and Muslim population has dramatically decreased in comparison to the Serbian population. According to data from the Federal Office of Statistics of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (2008), the Serbian population increased within the territory of the Srpska Republic from 55.4% in 1991 to 96.8% in 1996, while at the same time the proportion of other ethnicities (Bosnian Muslims, Croats as well as other minorities) has drastically decreased.

Another example is the province of Kosovo, where the Serbian population dropped to under 10% of the total population after the start of the conflict between Albanians and Serbs, with the majority of Serbs fleeing to Serbia or to the north of the province, where they have remained the ethnic majority after the end of the war in the spring of 1999. We have to point out, however, that while Kosovo declared its independence in February 2008, its territory still holds Serbian localities protected by troops of the international community, as well as the Orthodox churches around which these localities have formed and developed over the centuries.

Coming back to the main characteristics of balkanization, we must observe the difference in approach between West-European and South-East European geographers. While the former consider balkanization an endemic process typical for the mentality and socio-economic attributes of the peoples in the Balkans, the latter – including Jovan Ilic (1995), professor emeritus of economic and political geography at the University of Belgrade – highlight the fact that balkanization is a process profoundly encouraged and determined by the permanent intervention of great powers from outside this region and by their attempts to intervene, influence and control the destiny of the Balkan peoples.

2.2 Stages in the use of the term “balkanization”

There are several major stages in the use of the term “balkanization”. From one stage to another, the concept has seen variations in the way it was used. During the first stage, the beginning of the 20th century, balkanization was used strictly when referring to a consequence of armed confrontations during the First and Second Balkan War.

The First Balkan War (1912-1913) was fought between the Balkan League (Serbia, Montenegro, Bulgaria and Greece) and the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman Empire was defeated, and its territories divided between the four victors. However, as a result of dissensions between the states of the Balkan League (Bulgaria thought it was wronged by the way Greece and Serbia decided to split the Macedonian territory), the Second Balkan War began (June-July 1913), where Bulgaria lost several territories to its former allies, but also to Romania and the Ottoman Empire.

The reason for these armed conflicts from the beginning of the 20th century was mainly the fact that important minorities in the newly-emerged Balkan states continued to live in territories still under the domination of the Ottoman Empire. The fact that after these confrontations Serbia would

become a strong political center on the borders of the Austro-Hungarian Empire will later become one of the catalysts for the start of the Great War.

Another period that would breathe new meaning into the concept of balkanization were the 1960s and 1970s, two decades marked by the ample destructuring of the colonial empires (the English and French empires especially) in Africa. Balkanization would be used as a means to describe the reconfiguration of the political map of Africa, as the emergence of new states on the African continent would be marred by bloody civil conflicts, many of them with effects still manifesting themselves to this day and responsible for the highly unstable political, economic and social situation in the region (Lacoste, 1995). In the period between 1951 and 1968, no less than 39 states on the African continent gained their independence. Many of them were multi-ethnic states, with a high diversity of tribal structures and with no institutions capable of managing or controlling the entire territory.

Adding to the suboptimal mechanism of central administrative institutions, the drawing of the borders of the new states – often times arbitrary, with no regard to the geographical reality of Africa, to the territorial distribution of the population or to the cultural, religious and ethnic differences and affinities – became the premise for long-lasting civil wars. Again, it was said that the subpar economic and political development of African populations was the reason for these conflicts and that the heritage of the former colonial empires had no part to play in them.

The third major stage in the use of this concept was the last decade of the 20th century, when Yugoslavia underwent a long and turbulent disintegration process in which the intervention of the great powers and the international context played a huge part.

While in the 1990s the Balkans only meant Bulgaria, Greece, Albania and the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, the political map of the region gradually began to change, with more states appearing. 1991 marked the declaration of independence by Slovenia, Croatia and the Republic of Macedonia. In 1992, Bosnia and Herzegovina also declared its independence, which caused the start of a long war right at the borders of a Europe that was attempting to accelerate the process of economic and political integration, contrary to the process of balkanization which was frequently used during this period as a way to express the opposite of *Europeanization*. The fragmentation and dissolution of the Yugoslavian space continued, and in 2006 Montenegro gained its independence from Serbia peacefully, following a referendum. On 17 February 2008, the province of Kosovo unilaterally declared its independence, which to this day has been recognized neither by Serbia nor by the United Nations Security Council.

Internal tensions that currently affect Bosnia and Herzegovina (in the Srpska Republic there still is a great support for the union with Serbia), Serbia (the Presevo Valley and Vojvodina), the province of Kosovo (Northern Kosovo is inhabited by a mainly Serbian population that wants this territory back under the jurisdiction of Belgrade) and North Macedonia (where the latest tensions between the Albanian minority from the eastern part of the country and the majority of Slavic origin have escalated in 2012 (Berg, 2012) give the territorial fragmentation of the ex-Yugoslav space a tendency to continue.

We can therefore say that, despite attempts to Europeanize this space, to integrate it both economically and politically, the secessionist inclinations based on ethnic criteria still persist in the Balkans – especially in the Western Balkans – and are a strong factor of instability.

The fourth major stage in the use of the concept of balkanization is the current period, when the term has started to be used globally and extrapolated to other geographical spaces in order to describe violent processes of territorial disintegration in any corner of the world. At the same time, balkanization has extended its semantic coverage to other fields as well.

2.3 Extrapolating the concept of balkanization to other geographical spaces

The geopolitical term of balkanization is a concept deeply rooted in the history of the Balkan Peninsula, but its characteristics have determined its use on a global scale. Whether used by

geographers, historians, sociologists, journalists, diplomats or politicians, it always refers to the following realities:

- ✓ the process of territorial fragmentation and division of a state or region;
- ✓ predominance of ethnic conflicts in order to gain territories and international recognition;
- ✓ emergence of new, small, autonomous states or provinces with subpar performing institutions;
- ✓ the rise to power of leaders and parties with nationalistic discourses;
- ✓ the tendency to homogenize the new autonomous states or provinces from an ethnic standpoint (through ethnic cleansing and as a result of massive waves of refugees);
- ✓ a high degree of hostility between the resulting territorial and administrative units;
- ✓ chaos, economic and political instability.

During the Cold War it was thought that *debalkanization* had prevailed as a result of the Soviet Union attempting to promote and impose through communism equalitarian societies based on proletarian solidarity in the Balkans, weakening and trying to outright dismantle any nationalistic excess. But when the bipolar world order fell apart, balkanization was revitalized. The geopolitical earthquake caused by the fall of the bipolar world and its transformation, for a short period of time, into a unipolar world, with the United States of America as the main actor, created a global power vacuum in all the regions formerly under the control of the Soviet Union that were now trying to redefine their identity, their priorities and their geopolitical and geostrategical direction.

We could say that the frequency with which the concept of balkanization appears in literature and in the universal vocabulary began to rise as in an increasing number of regions the ideological battle was replaced by ethnic and religious conflicts.

In Europe, in 2007, in the context of an imminent referendum that raised the question of the independence of Scotland and the ultimate fragmentation of Great Britain (as secessionist views existed also in Wales and Northern Ireland), the former British prime-minister, Gordon Brown, used the term balkanization in an interview for (BBC News, 2007) where he drew attention to the fact that Great Britain was not a state built upon ethnicity or race, but rather on the basis of common values, while also underlining the fact that the British society should oppose any nationalistic slippings that could cause *a balkanization of Great Britain*.

The balkanization of Spain was also frequently mentioned amid the actions of the terrorist organization ETA that for decades has militated for the independence of the Basque Country (a region in northern Spain, on the border with France), as well as amid attempts from Catalonia to obtain autonomy from Madrid, in this case the main reasons being of economic nature (McLean, 2005).

On the African continent, the process of decolonization meant the start of balkanization, a struggle for territories and resources, often times within a state, between different ethnic groups. The fact that on the African continent civil wars tend to spread very fast (as a result of tribes or ethnic groups being spread across the territories of several neighbor states) accounts for a great similarity with Balkan conflicts and, therefore, justifies the use of the term balkanization in order to describe them.

We find an example where the term balkanization is used for realities of the African space in an article written by analyst Charles Onyango-Obbo (2011), an expert in East-African geopolitics, who was drawing attention to the danger represented by the conflict between Sudan and Southern Sudan (a region that would become an independent state on 9 July 2011) over the control of the oil-rich region close to the town of Abyei. The climax in the balkanization of Sudan is considered to be the country's fragmentation into five independent states (Southern Sudan, Northern Sudan, Darfur, Blue Nile and Southern Kordofan) after confrontations that could have seen the involvement of neighbor states (Uganda, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Chad and Kenya) and could have caused a massive wave of refugees, a high number of human casualties and a state of general chaos in Eastern Africa. The ethnic and religious mosaic present in most African states made it so that, over the years, the term balkanization was assigned to secessionist movements in Somalia and Nigeria as well as to states in the north of the continent that since 2010 have seen several revolutions whose purpose was

to change the dictator regimes that had been in power for decades. The whole world watched the struggles for power (in Egypt and Lybia especially) between various groups (tribal, military, political and religious) that tried to rise to power in these states. A very pertinent analysis underlining the similarities between the ex-Yugoslav space and the state of conflict in Northern Africa, the Near East and the Middle East was given by Octavian Manea (2011), geopoliticalanalist for *Foreign Policy*. He says: *"Not just the present, but also the future of the East seem to stand under the shadow of ex-Yugoslavia, that is, under the sign of «balkanization». It is an image that takes ever more shape in the minds of the Tel Aviv decision-making elite. With the exception of Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco, almost every other Arab country, on a smaller scale, copies the fissures and centrifugal forces that dynamited Yugoslavia at the beginning of the 1990s."*

With regards to the Asian space, the main theatres of conflict of the last century, Iraq and Afghanistan, are geographical territories that fell under the stigma of balkanization as well. In the context of the possibility that the whole region succumb to war as a result of the arms race and the internationalization of terrorist attacks, Pakistan and India were also seen as spaces with a high risk of balkanization. In fact, a fragmentation/balkanization of Pakistan and India is considered by the geopolitical analyst Michael Hughes (2010) to be a continuation of the disintegration of this space, a process that began the moment the Indian subcontinent became free from the domination of the British colonial empire at the middle of the last century.

What's remarkable is the fact that the term balkanization started being used in the European space on a conceptual level as well, not only with regards to secessionist and autonomist movements, but also with regards to differences in opinion and the gap between Northern and Southern Europe in the context of the economic and financial crisis. Starting from late 2008, the European Union and especially states in southern Europe (Greece, Italy, Spain and Portugal) were strongly affected by the economic and financial crisis originating from the USA and quickly spreading on a global level. The fact that states in Central and Northern Europe were forced to intervene and create a series of instruments and strategies by which to save Greece from going bankrupt on the one hand brought back into discussion Greece's being part of the Balkans and on the other gave birth to the expression *balkanization of Europe*.

Serbian journalist Momcilo Pantelic draws attention to the many similarities between Tito's Yugoslavia and the European Union in its current state. He says that both political formations are asymmetric confederations where decision making is very bureaucratic and complex and that there is a big difference in the level of development between newly-adhered states and states that have been in the European construct for a much longer time. He goes on to say that this difference can degenerate into an escalation of diplomatic conflicts that can threaten the stability of the Euro zone and the cohesion of the European Union.

The geopolitical and geoeconomic effects of the economical and financial crisis that hit Europe at the end of the last decade are also reflected in the emergence of nationalistic discourses and authoritarian models specific to the Balkans of the 90's even in the Central-European states. This is something that a known Polish politician, Adam Michnik, also drew attention to near the end of 2011, when he said that the popularity of extremist leaders in countries like France, the Netherlands, Austria or Hungary was increasing (which was later confirmed, in the case of France, by the excellent results obtained by Marine Le Pen during the presidential elections in the spring of 2021). He thought that: *"Right now, all of us, Europeans, or almost all of us, risk balkanization in the sense of the victory of nationalism, populism, authoritarian models, a triumph of selfishness. Yesterday, in the Balkans, they were called Milosevic or Tudman, today they have other names, and live in the very heart of the European Union. We don't know what the future holds, but against the threat of balkanization, against the threat of a victory of selfishness across the whole of Europe, the common priority should be the fight for the common constituent values of democracy."* (Financiarul, 2011).

We can see that, in the context of an ample debate and of a complex process that began at the end of the 1990s and aims to expand the European Union and reunite Europe through the modernization and *Europeanization of the Balkans*, the expression *balkanization of Europe* has become prominent in the public and political discourse in the course of only one decade.

The causes for this are extremely diverse, but the global geopolitical context and the lack of understanding of the realities and complexities of the situation in the Balkans carry quite significant importance

The geopolitical tectonic of this space, stable during the Cold War, when the two main geopolitical blocks (under the security umbrella of the USA and the USSR) were trading spheres of influence in the Balkans, was profoundly shaken by the earthquake caused by the fall of the communist regimes. The change in the balance of power in the Balkans, the emergence of a multitude of micro tectonic plates (states that are heterogeneous from an ethnic and religious standpoint, led, however, by leaders with nationalistic views) that have separated and then crashed together as a result of opposite interests gave birth to the tragic events in former Yugoslavia.

As such, the European Union saw only one solution to pacify the conflicts and ensure safety at its borders: to encourage all the Balkan states on their road towards European integration. They were hoping to achieve ethnic and religious reconciliation under the umbrella of the European Union, a Europeanization that has generated a necessary framework for observing the rights of minorities, for solving territorial conflicts and for unitary economic development of the entire region.

The interest shown by the great powers for the destiny of these states can stimulate their efforts towards Euro-Atlantic integration. The fact that after 9/11 NATO's geopolitical interest shifted from the Balkans to the Middle East and Central Asia or the fact that the Republic of Macedonia was refused the right to be a part of this political and military organization at the NATO summit in Bucharest (due to strong Greek opposition) were two moments of recoil that produced concerns regarding the Euro-Atlantic future of the Balkans.

As to the European Union, the rise of extremism, the enlargement fatigue manifested by the citizens of the European Union, the high degree of unemployment in Western-European states affected by the economic and financial crisis, the fear of the waves of immigrants from the Balkans and South-East Europe, the difficulties faced by the European currency and the increasingly complex Community *acquis* cause justified concerns against the initial enthusiasm of the citizens in the Western Balkans towards adherence to the European Union.

2.4 European integration of the Western Balkans

Any Balkan conflict that shows a tendency to escalate not only affects one of the Balkan states or the entire region – it also threatens the security of the whole of Europe. The closeness of Balkans to the current borders of the European Union compel the member states of the Union to intervene when there is a risk of intra- or inter-state tensions to escalate in the Balkans. As such, the EU has become in great part responsible for assuring a climate of stability and order, as well as having to take all possible and necessary measures in order to stop the flux of illegal migration coming from Asia Minor, the Near East and the Middle East.

The involvement of the European Union in the stability, state of peace and economic development of the Western Balkans has become all the more important because, after Hungary and Slovenia joined the Union in 2004 and Romania and Bulgaria in 2007, the states in the Western Balkans became geographically surrounded by the European Union. In 2013, Croatia as well became a part of the EU. It is therefore evident that, should great crises arise in this space, the European Union is the most vulnerable – and that is why the EU should be interested in the Western Balkans.

But this relationship also goes the other way around. In other words, the geographical proximity of the EU acts as a magnet for the states in the West Balkans. Economically and politically, the European Union is the only viable long-term choice for them. From a military point of view, the options of the states in the Western Balkans are still diverse. Serbia is the only state in the West

Balkans that has openly manifested its option to maintain strong relations with the Russian Federation and the lack of interest to join NATO, while all the other states have expressed their desire to become members of NATO and are in various stages of the adhesion process, many of them already sending troops to theatres of operations of the Alliance in Afghanistan.

For the states in the Western Balkans, the process of integration in the EU continues to be the main geopolitical objective. The requirements that these states have to meet in order to finalize the process imply measures that would reflect in the improvement of inter-ethnic relations, as well as a better regional collaboration.

The states in the Western Balkans face numerous internal problems (observing the rights of national minorities, brining about reforms that consolidate the rightful state and the democratic institutions and the freedom of the press, arresting war criminals) as well as numerous external problems (enlargement fatigue – reflected in the states being discouraged from applying the necessary reforms – as well as territorial conflicts and the expansion of international crime networks).

Over the last 12 years, the objective of European integration was the key-catalyst of promoting democratic changes, stability and prosperity in South-Eastern Europe. The waves of successive expansion in 2004 and 2007 have also contributed to increasing the importance of the European Union in the global arena. However, after Romania and Bulgaria joined the Union in 2007, the expansion of the EU seemed to enter a standstill. The economic and financial crisis started in the USA that hit European economies in 2008 made the expansion towards the Western Balkans, which was already on the public European agenda, lose an increasing amount of importance compared to the very concrete realities of the crisis. Croatia joining the Union seemed to breathe new life in the expansion process, but Brexit, the crisis of immigrants from the Middle East and the rise to power of nationalist currents in the European states caused the expansion to stop again.

For citizens of Western Europe, the expansion of the European Union by adding new states from the Western Balkans means:

- ✓ increasing competitiveness on the work market due to waves of immigrants from all member states;
- ✓ allocating new European funds in order to reduce economic and social discrepancies between member states and newly added countries;
- ✓ importing organized crime from the Balkans as a result of free circulation between member states.

At the same time, we must acknowledge that, for Western Balkan states, the process of joining the European Union is much more complex and difficult than it was for the 12 states that joined during the waves of 2004 and 2007, to which we can add Croatia in 2013.

This is due to:

- ✓ long-lasting conflicts that have destroyed the industry and infrastructure of many of the Balkan economies. The gap between them and the states of the European Union have proven to be much larger than was the case of the countries accepted in the Union after 2000;
- ✓ the increased complexity in the ratification process of admitting new countries. If for receiving 12 states the approval of only 15 member states was required, now, in the case of any new candidate, the Adherence Treaty would have to be ratified in no less than 28 National Parliaments.
- ✓ the Community acquis which candidate states must adopt. It has grown considerably since 2007. The longer it takes for them to join, the greater the volume of legislation which states in the Western Balkans must align to.
- ✓ the decreasing enthusiasm of the peoples in the Western Balkans towards the necessity of European integration. The longer it takes for countries in the West Balkans to join the Eunion, the less enthusiastic they become about doing it. This is caused mainly by the particularities of the process. If at first negotiations take place over aspects that do not have a direct impact on the common citizens, as negotiations advance the governments of the candidate states are compelled

to apply a series of reforms in sensitive areas that have direct impact on the population (health, education, agriculture, justice). Therefore, as the population becomes more aware of the sacrifices needed to enter European space, the less it is inclined to support integration.

- ✓ problems specific to this space, generated by inter-ethnic, intra- and inter-statal conflicts, which are a serious obstacle on the path of joining the EU.

3. CONCLUSIONS

Balkanization is a geopolitical process that appears to be far from over. Ethnic and religious tensions underlined by territorial and economic interests maintain a climate of instability in the region, and leaders with nationalistic and populist discourses continue to enjoy a high level of trust from citizens in most Balkan states.

We must also acknowledge the geopolitical moves made by regional powers (such as Turkey) and by major powers (such as the Russian Federation) that are trying to keep or even regain their spheres of influence in the Balkans and could have a decisive influence on freezing the Balkan borders and stabilizing the entire region or, on the contrary, could contribute to the redrawing and maintaining of a geopolitical gap between the main geopolitical actors in the Balkan Peninsula.

The two geopolitical actors that have been in a constant race for the Balkans make their presence increasingly felt in the Balkans. On the one hand, Turkey shows it's ready to become the new protector of the Muslim community in the Balkans (the relations with Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo are very tight, especially from an economic point of view), while the Russian Federation continues to see itself as a defender of the Orthodox peoples and especially of Serbia, a country that, due to its geographical position, can play an extremely important part in the Russian Federation's energetic geopolitics, in the context of the European Union's attempts to gain relative independence from the Russian supply of natural gas and oil.

Although balkanization is treated in literature as a phenomenon of negative consequences, characterized by the spreading of violence and by starting conflicts that are devastating for the actors involved, there are approaches that attempt to highlight some beneficial qualities to it. One of these approaches (Perish, 2010) points out that smaller states are much more willing to negotiate and develop cooperation with other states because they are much more aware of the fact that they cannot maintain territorial independence and integrity without good cooperation with their neighbors and in the absence of a security umbrella that can protect them from potential aggressions. From this point of view, balkanization is considered a beneficial option if it is the only solution that can ensure peace in a region.

On the other hand, the same author draws attention to the fact that a greater number of state-actors could increase the difficulty of negotiations should a crisis occur, because the greater number of actors that are trying to find a solution means a greater number of different regional stakes and interests.

Not least, there are many analyses which identify a strong connection between globalization and balkanization. For some authors (Bjelić and Savić, 2002), balkanization is only a reaction to globalization. In other words, globalization can trigger and promote balkanization by revitalizing nationalistic sentiments. Therefore, although embracing many of the benefits brought about by globalization, smaller communities like the ones in the Balkans feel their identity is threatened and try to redefine themselves not in the manner they have done until now, by differentiating from one another, but they try differentiate themselves from American, West-European and even Asian cultural elements.

Balkanization remains an extremely controversial process, fueled by periodic changes in frontiers, by the permanent intervention of the great powers in the Balkan conflicts, as well as by recent events that have drastically undermined the trust between the diverse communities that live in this space. Therefore, understanding this complex phenomenon as well as the factors that generate

instability becomes a necessity, so that the processes meant to stop balkanization – such as the Euro-Atlantic expansion – have a positive outcome, bringing about a collective management of the problems and a long-term stability of the borders, thus implicitly diminishing the mutual fear that scars the region.

REFERENCES

- Berg, A. (2012). *Skopje: violențele între albanezi și macedoneni continua*. Retrieved October 6, 2019 from <http://karadeniz-press.ro/kara/skopje-violentele-intre-albanezi-si-macedoneni-continua/>.
- Bjelić, D. & Savić, O. (2002). *Balkan as metaphor. Between Globalization and Fragmentation*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Council of the European Union (2019). *Enlargement and Stabilization and Association Process. Albania and the Republic of North Macedonia – presidency conclusions*. Retrieved October 17, 2019, from <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/41067/st13155-en19.pdf>.
- Federal Office of Statistics of The Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. (2008). *Population of The Federation Bosnia and Herzegovina 1996-2006*. Sarajevo. Retrieved October 7, 2019, from <http://www.fzs.ba/Dem/stanovnistvo-bilten110.pdf>.
- Financiarul (2011). *Europeenii riscă balcanizarea, în sensul victoriei naționalismului și modelelor autoritare*. Retrieved October 6, 2019 from <https://financiarul.ro/2011/10/12/europeenii-risca-balcanizarea-in-sensul-victoriei-nationalismului-si-modelelor-autoritare/>.
- Gregory, D., Johnston, R., Pratt, G., Watts, J.M. & Whatmore, S. (2009). *The Dictionary of Human Enciclopedy*. 5th edition, United Kingdom: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Hughes, M. (2010, July 6). *Balkanizing Pakistan: A Collective National Security Strategy*. In *Huff Post World*. Retrieved October 7, 2019 from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/michael-hughes/balkanizing-pakistan-a-co_b_635950.html.
- Ilic, J. (1995). *The Balkan Geopolitical Knot and the Serbian Question: Characteristics and Importance of the Geographical Position of the Balkan Peninsula*. In *Serbian Questions in the Balkans*, Belgrade: The Faculty of Geography, Belgrade University. Retrieved October 8, 2019, from http://balkania.tripod.com/resources/history/ilic_balkan_knot.html.
- Lacoste, Y. (1995). *Dictionnaire de Geopolitique*. Paris: Flammarion.
- Manea, O. (2011, March). *Balceni deja vu*. In *Revista 22*, București: Grupul pentru Dialog Social.
- Marston, S.A., Knox, P.L., Liverman, D.M., Del Casino, V.L. & Robbins, P. (2010). *World Regions in Global Context: People, Places, and Environments*. 4th edition. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.
- McLean, R. (2005) *Catalonia steps up to challenge Spain*. In *New York Times*. Retrieved October 6, 2019 from <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/29/world/europe/catalonia-steps-up-to-challenge-spain.html>.
- Onyango-Obbo, C. (2011, May 29) *Sudan: Why Kenya and Uganda should shiver over the Abyei crisis*. In *The Eastafrican*. Retrieved October 6, 2019 from <https://www.theeastafican.co.ke/news/Why+Kenya++Uganda+should+shiver+over+Sudan+Abyei+crisis/-/2558/1171346/-/cdudq3/-/index.html>.
- Perish, M. (2010). *A free city in the Balkans. Reconstructing a divided society in Bosnia*. Londra: International Library of War Studies.
- Pringle, R.W., *Balkanization in Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Retrieved October 02, 2019, from <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/50323/Balkanization>.
- Serebrian, O. (2006). *Dicționar de geopolitică*. Iași: Editura Polirom.
- UK's existence is at risk – Brown (2007, January 13), In *BBC News*. Retrieved October 5, 2019 from http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/politics/6258089.stm.