

## *Revisiting Balkans: Between the West and the Rest*

The Balkans, a region often caught in the crosscurrents of global power dynamics, stands as a testament to the intricate and evolving geopolitical landscape. Historically a bridge between East and West, the Balkans today are a focal point of strategic interests from major global players, including the European Union, NATO, Russia, and Turkey. The region's journey through the post-Yugoslav era, marked by its aspirations for Euro-Atlantic integration and the persistent influence of external actors, underscores the complexity of achieving lasting stability and development.

Considering recent geopolitical shifts and the region's enduring vulnerabilities, this special issue of TPQ aims to explore the multifaceted realities and future prospects of the Balkans. The contributions in this issue delve into the political, economic, and social dimensions of the region, examining the interplay between internal dynamics and external interventions. The overarching goal is to provide a nuanced understanding of the Balkans' position at the intersection of Western and non-Western influences, and to stimulate thoughtful discourse on the path forward for this historically significant region.

This issue stands out by offering a diverse array of perspectives and articles, featuring prominent voices from academia, bureaucracy, and policy-making. Moreover, this is the first issue in TPQ's recent history, where we provide Turkish and Russian translations for our articles. In the coming months, we are planning to include Spanish and other languages to further expand our reach to the globe.

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to every single author for their invaluable contributions and guidance in shaping this special issue. It has been an honor to collaborate with them, and we are deeply thankful for their unwavering support for our journal. Our contributors hail from a variety of influential countries and regions engaged in the Balkans' discourse, including Bosnia and Herzegovina, Greece, New Zealand, the North Macedonia, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Türkiye, among others. Through this issue, TPQ aims to foster constructive conversations and provide a platform for meaningful dialogue on the future of the Balkans and its place in the broader global context.

Professor Milenko Petrovic's study analyzes the lack of progress in the European Union's expansion into the Western Balkans, comparing it to the successful inclusion of post-communist countries in East Central Europe (ECE) and the Baltics. He argues the EU's actions, or lack thereof, are mostly to blame, even if other academics and EU officials blame the delay on the political unrest and refusal to accept EU norms in the Western Balkans. Despite the initial progress made after the 2003 Thessaloniki agenda, which offered EU membership to Western Balkan states, the EU became less enthusiastic and more cautious due to doubts about its ability to handle new members and a general weariness towards expansion. As a result, the

EU imposed stricter standards for countries seeking admittance. He criticizes the EU's strategy, arguing that it has exploited enlargement pledges as a tool for foreign policy to further the geopolitical objectives of its member states, as evidenced by the unexpected candidate status granted to Moldova and Ukraine amidst the ongoing Russian invasion. Professor Petrovic asserts that the European Union's expansion into the Western Balkans primarily serves the purpose of safeguarding the stability and security interests of its existing member states, rather than solely focusing on granting membership to the candidate states.

Professor Biljana Vankovska asserts that the Macedonian elites have consistently followed the TINA principle (There Is No Alternative) throughout the majority of the state's history as an independent entity. Irrespective of their ideological stance on the issue, they all agreed that the country's future and economic success depend entirely on joining NATO and the European Union. She contends that although full membership in NATO was attained in March 2020, it was accompanied by a significant national cost. Attaining EU membership continues to be as difficult to achieve as it has always been. Meanwhile, the world has undergone a significant revolution characterized by a complicated multipolar shift. She emphasizes North Macedonia's lack of ability to develop a separate and autonomous foreign and internal policy. Professor Vankovska stresses that the fundamental assumption is that the country has positioned itself in accordance with the diminishing and armed Western powers, frequently disregarding its own national interests. She argues that this alliance positions Macedonia in an adversarial position against the Rest, resulting in significant harm to its national interests. According to her, this predicament is a no-win scenario.

Professor Zlatan Begic provides an analysis of the current situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, in the context of the relationships and the influence of the pro-Russian political factor, the hegemonic policies of official Belgrade and Zagreb towards Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as the Western political influence. He focuses on the flaws in the Dayton Peace Agreement and the Bosnian Constitution, which he claims support the hegemonic policies of official Belgrade and Zagreb (Croatia) and Russian influence. Professor Begic also examines the perplexing acts of the Western powers in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which he asserts continue to exert a significant impact on domestic political developments.

Professor Oya Dursun-Özkanca argues that the Western Balkans region holds vital strategic importance for transatlantic security. She holds the belief that after the collapse of the Former Yugoslavia, the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) have played an active role in promoting regional stability. This has been achieved through peace missions and by providing integration opportunities to the countries in the region within the transatlantic structures. In the midst of a long period of exhaustion from expanding, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has emphasized the importance of integrating the Western Balkans into transatlantic

institutions. She looks at current events in the Western Balkans and assesses the likelihood that the countries in the region will integrate into the European Union.

On behalf of Transatlantic Policy Quarterly, I would like to express my gratitude to all the contributors who committed a significant amount of effort and work. Moreover, we are grateful for our Premium Cooperative Sponsor for this issue, Tüpraş. We also like to thank our other sponsors, TEB and Uluslararası İlişkiler Dergisi for their ongoing support.

Aybars Arda Kılıçer

**Editor-in-Chief**