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DMITRY EFREMENKO. BOSNIAN AND ALBANIAN QUESTIONS THREE DECADES AFTER THE BREAKUP OF YUGOSLAVIA\* // *Article was written for the bulletin "Russia and the Moslem World."*\*\*

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*Abstract. The article examines the dynamics and prospects of the settlement of the main conflicts in the Western Balkans region. Three decades after the breakup of Yugoslavia, the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina remains explosive, and the Albanian question has not yet been resolved. The most important factors influencing the conflict dynamics in the region are ethnic homogenization and external interference. The intervention of the West allowed to stop the military actions, but at the same time it actually consolidated the results of ethnic homogenization. The prospect of integration of various countries in the region into Western alliances does not eliminate the remaining conflict potential. Rather, Western alliances are following the path of internalizing these conflicts. In these circumstances, there is a high probability of further changes in the borders between the Western Balkan states.*

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The events of the late 20th century in the Western Balkans are often described in the literature as the war of the Yugoslav succession [15]. Although in this case we are talking about a metaphor, in our opinion, it is quite capacious, including a reference to the common source of the Western Balkan conflicts, as well as to the fact that extra-Balkan forces are deeply and, obviously, irrevocably involved in these conflicts.

The collapse of empires and large multi-ethnic State entities only in a minority of cases leads to the resolution of conflicts that have proved detrimental to the existence of these polities. Basically, it becomes possible to overcome conflicts when several small states appear in place of the "mother" state, which are relatively homogeneous in terms of ethnicity and religion and do not dispute the territories of each other or third countries. Much more often, conflicts do not end, but evolve with the possibility of moving to the "hot stage". The impact of external state actors may contribute to reducing the severity of conflicts or fueling them (especially if the new states and / or the region as a whole remain the object of geopolitical rivalry), but it also has an impact on the processes associated with the consolidation of statehood and the transformation of macropolitical identity.

External interference, even disguised as peacemaking or arbitration, can lead to informal "assignment" of roles for states and communities - "victim" / "executioner", "winner" / "loser", etc. We are speaking, of course, about creating the image of states and communities by the mainstream of leading Western mass media and electronic mass communication media, which have a powerful influence on the formation of international public opinion. This is also reflected in the practice of inter-state interactions, when, for example, the inclusion of a State in military-political unions and supranational associations is conditioned by the fulfillment of not only general standard conditions, but also special conditions, such as full cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former

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Yugoslavia, the introduction of institutions and procedures for transitive justice, a certain orientation of the memory polices, etc.

In the case of the Balkan Peninsula, it is safe to say that the assignment of roles was due to a kind of path dependency, the presence of stereotypes already established in the West in relation to the Balkan peoples. As shown by M. Todorova, a characteristic feature of Western stereotypes of representation of these peoples is the focus on the role of primordial factors in the formation and even the current state of their identity [17]. One of the most striking examples of this vision is the well-known work of R. Kaplan, which makes a radical “extension” of the conflicts in the Balkans up to the era of the collapse of the Roman Empire [9]. J. Kennan, drawing parallels between the Balkan wars of 1912–13 and the bloody conflicts that accompanied the collapse of the SFRY, also made references to ancient times, pointing out that long before the arrival of the Ottomans, a non-European civilization with special customs, ideas about itself and the outside world [10] had entrenched in the eastern flank of Europe. In multiple variations, such views often led to conclusions about the “immaturity” of the Balkan identity, the need for external leadership for the period of completion of modernization, the full perception of liberal values and principles of civil society; in addition, if external arbitration was accepted (voluntarily or involuntarily), the arbitrators had the opportunity to announce the “progress” of Europeanization (Westernization) of some ethnic groups or polities and the “lag” of others.

External interference has led to the fact that in several post-Yugoslav countries, the current stage of nation-building takes place in conditions of long and stable frustration, when political elites are forced to demonstrate loyalty (using the terminology of A. Hirschman [8]) to the rules dictated from the outside, while a number of public groups (including mass groups) are focused on defending the right to vote in discussions about the past, present and future of their country, or on demonstrating readiness to exit the system of rules and assessments imposed on the elite. Despite

the informal nature of “prescribing” roles, they are usually very difficult to refuse. More often, one has to “get used” to them, try to match (imitate) or, on the contrary, convince external factors and your own population that the prescribed role does not correspond to the real actions and aspirations of a particular group within the community or the community as a whole.

If we try to assess the changes in the Western Balkans region over the three decades after the collapse of the SFRY, the triumph of ethno-nationalism will certainly come first, while the development of a market economy and institutions of pluralistic democracy looks mostly secondary, largely due to the need to demonstrate loyalty to the normative attitudes of the European Union and NATO. This does not mean that the political, economic and socio-cultural changes in the Western Balkans can be treated with disdain. No way. The region has changed, and some changes can be considered almost as an opportunity to get out of the rut of intraregional confrontation, which is most often meant when talking about the “Balkan fate” or “Balkanization”. The question, however, is the causes and conditions of the changes that have most profoundly transformed the face of the region.

In addition to the West, other major state actors have an impact on the region – Russia, China, Turkey, the monarchies of the Arabian Peninsula. For all these actors, the Balkans is the periphery, in whose affairs all of them (now even China) are seriously involved. At the same time the involvement of the European Union is of critical importance for the region itself, and for Brussels it is becoming both a matter of honor and a heavy burden that cannot be left on the sidelines. The Western Balkans are the region where the EU, almost first of all, must and can confirm its international subjectivity. At the same time, the United States is deeply involved in the affairs of the region, and Washington's activity in some significant aspects means a competitive challenge for the European Union, but still a common result of their efforts (largely through the mechanisms

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of the Euro-Atlantic Pact) can be seen as the absolute dominance of the West in determining the fate of the Balkan peoples over the past thirty years. This does not mean that the West completely determines the entire course of events – despite all efforts, something is always going “wrong” in one or another part of the former Yugoslavia. Moreover, the West's intervention was justified by the need to stop the bloodshed and ethnic cleansing, and then to ensure the democratization and economic transformation of the region. At the same time, some of the most significant and irreversible changes have occurred as a result of military actions, the deaths of tens of thousands and the forced displacement of millions of people, and not as a result of “peacemaking” and transformational efforts of the EU and the West as a whole. The latter led mainly to a different composition of “winners” and “losers”, fundamentally different from what seemed most likely at the beginning of the armed conflicts in the post-Yugoslav space. Both the European Union and the United States continue to declare their commitment to the principle of multi-ethnic statehood, but in fact a higher level of stability has been achieved in the part of the post-Yugoslav space where ethnic homogenization took place at a terrible cost of blood, suffering and humiliation [14]. Conversely, those countries and territories that have managed to avoid these processes or where Western intervention prevents what can be called the final balance of ethnic division remain areas of increased risk of new outbreaks of violence and inter-communal hostility.

### **The permanent crisis of Bosnian statehood**

Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) are among the countries that are very vulnerable to the stability of inter-community relations. The Dayton Peace of 1995 not only put an end to the bloodshed and launched the implementation of an extremely problematic model of consociational State structure in the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina, but actually recorded ethnic homogenization

as a result of war, ethnic cleansing and the exodus of refugees. Table 1 shows the dynamics of ethnic homogenization in Bosnia and Herzegovina from 1991 to 1997, i.e. from the breakup of Yugoslavia and the beginning of a series of military operations to the implementation of key provisions of the Dayton Agreement, and up to the last census of 2013.

Table 1

**Ethnic homogenization in Bosnia  
and Herzegovina after 1991 [7]**

|                    | Moslem-Croatian<br>Federation |       |       | Republika Srpska |       |               |
|--------------------|-------------------------------|-------|-------|------------------|-------|---------------|
|                    | 1991                          | 1996  | 2013  | 1991             | 1996  | 2013          |
| Moslems (Bosniaks) | 52,30                         | 72,61 | 70,40 | 28,08            | 2,19  | 13,99 (12,69) |
| Serbs              | 17,62                         | 2,32  | 2,41  | 55,43            | 96,79 | 81,51         |
| Croats             | 21,90                         | 22,27 | 22,44 | 9,19             | 1,02  | 2,41          |

Thanks to Dayton, the boundaries of the entities are drawn, which are unlikely to become the object of new disputes between Bosnian Serbs and Croats precisely because of ethnic homogenization. The legacy of ethnic cleansing is such that the Serbs who left the territory of the Moslem-Croatian Federation, overwhelmingly do not consider it possible to return there. Almost as unattractive was the Republika Srpska for Croats. Moslem refugees are more willing to return to the Republika Srpska, but the number of those who returned did not exceed 50% of the number of Moslems living in these territories in 1991. We are not talking about a significant change in the post-war ethno-confessional balance in the entities of BiH, but the fundamental problem is the stability of the entire Dayton model of statehood of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Dayton Constitution of BiH, for the implementation of which only one “directive of the international community” was enough [4, p. 139] without the procedures of democratic legitimization in the Serbian and Moslem-Croatian entities, was inspired by the ideas of consociational democracy by A. Lijphart [11], which assumes

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the organization of governance in the territorial polity through the full-scale inclusion of ethno-cultural communities in this process. In fact, we are talking about ensuring the stability and internal security of such a polity on the basis of institutional transactions of actors representing competing ethno-cultural communities. However, the principal feature of the situation in BiH, which diverged from the ideal model of Lijphart, was the reluctance of the elites representing Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats to cooperate with each other. The interaction was and remains forced, carried out under external control and pressure. This is what makes the Bosnian version of consociational democracy extremely problematic.

To ensure its stability, there are not enough internal resources, and only external management (first by NATO, then by the European Union) allows to maintain relative stability, although at the expense of the effectiveness and functionality of state institutions. The factors that work more effectively in this structure function at the levels of the entities and cantons that make up the Moslem-Croatian Federation (there are no cantons in the Republika Srpska, which makes the management system less cumbersome). There is an obvious asymmetry between the two entities – the federal nature of the territorial-political structure of one of them and the centralization in the other.

At the top level of BiH state institutions, the adoption of significant political decisions is often blocked by a particular community, and the institution of the EU High Representative, who is endowed with a large amount of arbitration, administrative and restrictive powers in relation to entities, in fact turns out to be not so omnipotent when the efforts of specific political emissaries in this position, aimed at changing the status quo, increase the risk of a resumption of inter-communal conflict. Nevertheless, external governance remains the main anchor that prevents the collapse of a political structure that does not satisfy any of the communities, and this discomfort does not weaken over time.

Even more significantly, after Dayton, is the fact that there is not a convergence, but an increase in divergence at the level of identities, values, and historical narratives of the three ethno-confessional groups. Although the Treaty of Dayton significantly reduced the territory controlled by the Serbs, there is considerable scope within the current borders of the Republika Srpska to strengthen the Serbian identity, while common Bosnian values are often perceived as imposed from the outside. The political elites of the RS, who are by no means united in everything, strive to preserve to the maximum extent the powers granted by Dayton to the Serbian entity. Among the Serbs, discontent with Dayton is primarily due to the restriction of their rights to self-determination, as well as to their stigmatization as the main culprits of the 1992–1995 bloodshed, reaching the point that even the very existence of the Republika Srpska is interpreted as a direct consequence of the mass massacre of Moslems in Srebrenica [5]. Despite the fact that M. Dodik and a number of other RS politicians are increasingly strongly declaring their readiness for secession with the subsequent reunification with Serbia, it is the Serbian side that is a consistent defender of the “original Dayton”. Most likely, the Serbs will take practical steps towards secession only in the conditions of a sharp aggravation of the crisis in inter-communal relations.

Divergence also occurs within the Moslem-Croatian federation, since Islam in its various manifestations, including radical trends remains the basis for strengthening the identity of the Bosniaks. The appeal to Islam as a marker of identity has inevitably led to a religious revival, which has an increasingly strong impact on the everyday practices of the Bosniaks. Many representatives of the Croatian side, in turn, are growing dissatisfied with the forced attachment to the Moslem community, and there is a growing desire for the constitution of the third, Croatian entity of Herzeg-Bosna. The degradation of living standards in BiH, which has increased significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic, further highlights the disparity in the economic situation of Bosnian Croats compared to

those in EU-member Croatia. The political legitimacy of the Croatian representation at the top level of the BiH authorities is also very problematic. Thus, Ž. Komšić, a member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina from the Croatian community, was elected to this position several times by Bosniak votes with little support from the Croatian population itself.

Thanks to this kind of electoral manipulation [3, p. 501], which undermines the principles of consociational democracy, the Bosniaks actually get a second vote in the triple leadership of BiH, while it is difficult for the Croats to count on representation in the Presidium that is not mediated by the influence of B. Izetbegović. Komsic's relationship with Zagreb is also very strained. In general, the situation in BiH in the areas of civil liberties and electoral democracy has been stagnating for a number of years, despite Sarajevo's desire to integrate into the EU.

If for the majority of Bosnian Croats the preferred option would be the creation of a third entity, i.e. the revision of the Washington and Dayton agreements, then most Bosniaks are focused on the centralist project, or the revision of Dayton with the opposite sign.

For the younger Izetbegović and other representatives of the Bosniak political elite, the ideal is the abolition of entities and the actual acquisition by the Moslem community on the scale of BiH of advantages similar to those they have within the framework of the Moslem-Croatian Federation.

However, the Bosniaks do not have sufficient resources of their own to achieve this goal. It can be achieved only if there is strong and long-term support from outside, which, even if it is provided, does not guarantee a peaceful revision of the Dayton model according to the centralist scenario.

The ongoing consideration of BiH's application to join the European Union and the possible launch of the country's accession to NATO are hypothetically capable of leading to a Unitarian revision of Dayton. However, integration into the EU and joining NATO in the Bosnian case may have fundamentally

different consequences for each of the ethnic communities. The European Union led by Germany prefers to avoid the disintegration of BiH, first, as an extremely dangerous precedent for the whole of Europe, and, secondly, as the prospect of the appearance on the ruins of BiH of a small Moslem state, open to the influence of Turkey, the monarchies of the Persian Gulf and radical Islamist movements. The agreement on stabilization and association between the EU and BiH, which was signed in 2008, but came into force only in 2015, the conditions of Brussels accompanied the acceptance for review in 2016 of the application of Sarajevo to join the EU and the new strategy of the European Commission in relation to the Western Balkans (2018) [1] set high the bar to the requirements to quality and stability of political institutions, to overcoming inter-communal disunity and real shifts in the political sphere from ethno-nationalism to civic values. Although the prospect of BiH joining the EU enjoys support in all communities, attempts to use the demands of Brussels to dilute the powers of the entities, not to mention their abolition and transition to centralization, are met with strong resistance from the Republika Srpska. The efforts of the current EU High Representative V. Inzko, trying to use his broad powers to change the position of the Serbian side, give, rather, the opposite effect. This situation is not new, it can even be called the "High Representative's dilemma": having great opportunities to put pressure on the Serbs and other communities of BiH, the High Representative, as a rule, does not dare to use them to the maximum extent, for fear of provoking a new outbreak of inter-communal violence and being accused of purposefully destroying the entire Dayton structure. It will not be resolved, at least until it receives an unambiguous mandate for such action. But the EU in its current state is not ready to accept the risk of destabilizing Bosnia just for the sake of a sharp weakening of the position of the Serbs, and, accordingly, will not provide such a mandate. So far, the European Union prefers the lesser of evils – to state the insufficient progress of Bosnia and Herzegovina in

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meeting the conditions for granting membership in the EU [6]. In fact, the admission of BiH to the EU has been shelved and will informally be linked in one way or another to the accession of Serbia to the EU, which, in turn, depends on the settlement of relations between Belgrade and Pristina.

The situation with the admission of Bosnia and Herzegovina to NATO, at first glance, is significantly different from the unpromising prospect of joining the EU. Both the US and other members of the North Atlantic Alliance adhere to the course of maximum absorption of the territories of the former Yugoslavia. However, the main obstacle to the accession of BiH to NATO is also inter-communal differences. From the point of view of the Serbs, joining NATO can lead to a very unfavorable change in the balance of forces for them, since BiH will find itself inside the security loop, outside of which Serbia will remain. Only the admission of Serbia itself in NATO could ease the concerns, though not completely, since the autonomy of the Alliance's members in matters of security and relations with each other is in any case limited not only by formal allied obligations, but above all by American dominance.

In fact, no one is satisfied with Dayton today, either inside or outside of Bosnia and Herzegovina. But the differences regarding the ways of transforming the state structure of BiH are so great that the maintenance of the artificial structure of Dayton is so far considered by the majority of actors as the lesser of evils. This situation is unstable, and it can change kaleidoscopically due to unforeseen events, comparable in scale of consequences, if not with the terrorist attack of Gavrilo Princip, then with the shooting at a Serbian wedding in Bashcharshia on March 1, 1992. At the same time, it is also likely that the current semi-paralytic state of Bosnian statehood will be prolonged, after which some of the main external and internal actors will again begin to consider alternative strategies, provided that their implementation will permit to avoid serious outbreaks of violence.

## **The Albanian question**

Western intervention has led to the emergence of a second Albanian state in the Western Balkans – Kosovo, which so far remains partially recognized. This alone poses numerous challenges to regional balance and security. Together with the problems of interaction of the Albanian ethnic minority with other ethnic groups in Northern Macedonia, Montenegro, Southern Serbia (without Kosovo) and the north Greece, the Albanian issue is becoming a major factor of uncertainty, already localized on the territory of the North Atlantic Alliance too. The entry into the EU of any new country in the Western Balkans (with the exception of Bosnia and Herzegovina) will mean the internalization of the Albanian issue by the European Union.

As a sponsor of Kosovo's independence, the West is also exacerbating the problems in the sense that, on its initiative and under its control, institutions that were previously virtually unknown on this ground are being transplanted in Kosovo. The situation for the West in the entire post-Yugoslav space looks very ambiguous: at first, under its pressure, they expand the possibilities of revision of borders and "exit" of actors, then these opportunities are practically closed, and the internal actors of the Western Balkan polities, deterred from the outside from new attempts to "exit", try to find a "voice" within the borders declared inviolable. In theory, the struggle of various actors for the right to "vote" should accelerate the processes of structuring the political space and functional specialization of power [2, p. 29]. In the Western Balkan and, in particular, Kosovo realities, the weakness or lack of institutional traditions leads to the fact that the introduction of formal institutions from the outside actually activates political structuring, but it occurs in such a way that the informal structures and relations that are familiar to the corresponding society are not displaced, but mimic and, ultimately, replace the content of formal institutions. In Kosovo, where the party and political structures develop largely on a clan

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basis, this is particularly pronounced [13]. So the functioning of traditional Albanian law against the background of the introduction of pluralistic democratic institutions in Kosovo, regulating patron-client relations and protecting the special role of the tribal community [16], should not seem like something out of the ordinary.

The Serbian and other ethnic minorities are in fact marginalized in Kosovo, but where there is an opportunity to rely on external support (in the northern regions), they form alternative structures and institutions. Ethnic homogenization took place very intensively in Kosovo back in the days of socialist Yugoslavia; in the 1990s and especially after the military intervention of the NATO countries, the exodus of the non-Albanian population sharply sped up. As a result, the number of Albanians exceeds 9/10 of the total population. Their dominance in Kosovo cannot be challenged; the provision of legal guarantees and parliamentary representation to ethnic minorities does not pose a risk of changing the status quo, and the presence of small Serbian enclaves in southern Kosovo can rather be interpreted as a confirmation of Pristina's willingness to preserve the remnants of ethnic diversity. However, contrary to the 2013 Brussels Agreements between Serbia and Kosovo, the Association of Serbian Municipalities is still not functioning and, obviously, in any case, will not have executive powers. North Mitrovica and surrounding areas of Kosovo, with its predominantly Serb population, as well as a significant proportion of the Albanian population in the Serbian communities of Preševo and Bujanovac, remain potential arenas of inter-ethnic confrontation and escalation of the conflict between Serbia and Kosovo. Ultimately, Western control is the main factor preventing such an escalation.

By providing military support for the so-called "humanitarian self-determination" of Kosovo [18, p. 86], NATO has dealt a final, decisive blow to the regime of S. Milošević and the project "Great Serbia". Does it follow from this that instead of the "Great Serbia" project, the United States, NATO and the West

as a whole chose the "Greater Albania" project? There is no doubt that, having received military support from NATO in 1999 in Kosovo and political and diplomatic support in 2001 in Northern Macedonia (the result of Western mediation was the Ohrid Agreement), the Albanians up to this day are distinguished by the maximum compliment in the Balkans in terms of relation to the North Atlantic Alliance. However, they have their own agenda, which is only to a certain extent compatible with the agendas of the US and the EU. Thus, for the United States the support of the Kosovo Albanians allowed to consolidate the unconditional dominance of NATO in the region and to create in Kosovo the most important stronghold – the base of Camp Bondsteel. However, this does not mean that Washington's main goal was or is to ensure the success of the Albanian irredenta. The creation of a Great Albania in one form or another or the conclusion of a union only between Albania and Kosovo will create an existential threat to several NATO members, will cause an acute crisis within the Alliance, the result of which may be its further loosening (up to now the main contribution to this process is made by Erdogan's Turkey with its own geopolitical ambitions). Rather, the United States is satisfied with the status quo, when the final goals of the Albanian irredenta are quite close, but not achieved, and the United States itself acts as the main armed guarantor of stability in conditions when the probability of sudden destabilization in the region still persists or even increases. The European Union is in an even more vulnerable position in the case of the Albanian irredenta. Most of the EU countries agreed to the recognition of independence of Kosovo, but they are not ready for the fact that this independence will only be an intermediate stop on the way to unification with Albania, and in the foreseeable future they will seek to prevent the emergence of this precedent by political means. As in the Bosnian case, for Brussels the prospect of recognition of the redrawing of borders on the results of violent ethnic homogenization is highly undesirable. Albanian irredentism,

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along with criminal activity and the channels of Islamic radicalism passing through the Albanian-populated parts of the Balkans, can overturn the entire EU strategy towards the region.

Meanwhile, such a position of the West, which has already made important steps towards Albanian interests, may push Albanian actors (not only political elites, but also clan structures and criminal groups) to a series of new steps that transform the regional political reality. This is exactly what happened after the completion of the NATO military intervention in Kosovo and eventually ended with the unilateral declaration of independence in 2008. In the face of increasing uncertainty about the prospects for full integration into the EU of the part of the Western Balkans, most of which was formerly controlled by the Ottoman Empire, Albanian players may try again to actively use the previously successful tactics.

For both the US and the EU, the priority is a format for the settlement of relations between Kosovo and Serbia, which will mean full recognition of the international subjectivity of Pristina and, if possible, will not lead to the collapse of the regime in Belgrade, which agreed to such recognition. On the one hand, such recognition is only a statement of existing and, obviously, irreversible realities. Hypothetical exchange of territories with a predominance of Serbian and Albanian populations between Belgrade and Pristina, could also eliminate new hotbeds of potential destabilization. On the other hand, the historical and symbolic significance of Kosovo and Metohija for the Serbs so far outweighs all the practical benefits of recognizing the political reality.

During the presidency of Donald Trump, there were certain shifts in the American approach to the Kosovo problem and to relations with Serbia. If previously Serbia was seen as a party that suffered both military and moral and political defeat, which must accept its consequences, then under Trump, the understanding of the importance of including Belgrade in the pool of regional actors, whose interests the United States is ready to support to a

certain extent, has clearly increased. In the materials of influential American think tanks devoted to the Western Balkans, there were calls for a “historical” rapprochement with Serbia and restoration of the reputation of the United States as an honest partner [12]. There is no doubt that Washington’s main motivation was related to the desire to establish NATO control over all countries in the region, as well as to weaken the positions of Russia and China in Serbia. At the same time, Trump has strengthened the motive of competition with the European Union.

The agreement on the normalization of relations between Serbia and Kosovo, signed in Washington in September 2020, involves a number of steps towards the interests of Belgrade, primarily in the economic sphere. At the same time, both Serbia and Kosovo are “integrated” into the American strategy not only in the Western Balkans, but also in the Middle East and in relations with China. At the same time, this agreement is supposed to create the conditions for even more significant changes in relations between Belgrade and Pristina. However, here the degree of consistency of the American approach becomes a factor of uncertainty, and it may again undergo changes under Joe Biden. At the moment, the demand for Serbia to recognize Kosovo's independence is stated as a priority of the policy of the 46th president of the United States in the Western Balkan region. Accordingly, the prospects for a new agreement between Serbia and Kosovo remain uncertain. Aleksandar Vučić is forced in his policy to constantly seek a balance between the almost sacred attitude of the majority of Serbs to Kosovo and Metohija as a hotbed of national statehood and culture and very unfavorable political realities. Restoration of Belgrade's de facto control over most of the territory of Kosovo (with the exception of the likely “exchange” of Northern Mitrovica and several adjacent Kosovar areas for territories in Preševo with a predominance of the Albanian population) is not possible; in the long term Kosovo is likely to form such a dense network of ties with Albania that recognition of their unity will be a matter of

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time and political expediency for individual states and supranational associations. In essence, Serbia's stability will largely be determined by the extent to which the "Albanian question" is considered a matter of internal control and the extent to which it is considered a matter of international relations. Vučić's efforts, aimed at finding a *modus vivendi* with the Kosovo Albanians and Albania, at pragmatizing interaction with them, even if forced, are justified in the international context in which Serbia finds itself. This does not mean that all such efforts should automatically be supported by Moscow, but at least Russia needs to strive for a greater understanding of the real conditions and prospects that determine policy of Belgrade.

Apparently, the United States (at least under Donald Trump) has begun to make steps towards Belgrade, seeking a general and controlled rebalancing of forces in the region, the need for which increases in view of the prospects for the completion of the "Great Albania" project.

It is significant that the proven instruments of influence on the Western Balkan elites – the ICTY and its functional successor – the Hague division of the International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals – have begun to be used much more actively against influential Kosovar politicians. In addition, the possibility of external control over political processes in the Albanian-speaking area of the Western Balkans is associated with the use of inter-clan contradictions, the degree of determination in the fight against criminal activity, the presence of socio-cultural, economic and institutional differences between different parts of this space. However, neither the US nor the EU can be completely sure that they fully control the situation in the Albanian-speaking region.

The situation in Northern Macedonia is the most unpredictable, and with the general political destabilization in Montenegro increasing, it is likely that tensions will increase in the areas adjacent to Albania. The situation is far from ambiguous in those areas of Greece where a large number of Albanians live. Almost everywhere, the Albanian minority is characterized by a

high degree of cohesion and insufficient integration into the social structures of the respective countries [19].

The rapid expansion of NATO at the expense of the small Western Balkan countries – Albania, Montenegro and Northern Macedonia – meant, first, the interiorization by the North Atlantic Alliance of the smoldering conflicts related to the situation of the Albanian ethnic minority in the post-Yugoslav space. Secondly, unlike in the cases of Slovenia and Croatia, when membership in NATO preceded the crucial stage of European integration, in the current conditions, membership in the alliance can perform a compensatory function, when the final accession of other states of the Western Balkans to the European Union is postponed for many years.

North Macedonia's accession to NATO would hardly have taken place without the active support of the Albanian population and Albanian elites. Now, however, any destabilization of relations between the two main ethnic groups of Northern Macedonia can be seen as a blow to the reputation of the Alliance, which, in theory, should ensure internal stability and the security of its recruits. If, instead, events develop in the direction of the Kosovo scenario and the actual emergence of a state within a state, then NATO should block the activity of local Albanians or sign its impotence to prevent the slide of Northern Macedonia to a state of failure. By absorbing together with the Western Balkan states their contradictions, NATO, of course, does not risk to weaken significantly the allied unity (at least not for this reason), but it will be forced to divert additional resources to maintain regional stability. With its reputation as a provider of security, NATO, in the case of the Western Balkans, runs the risk of having to prove that reputation in practice.

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The scenarios of the future of the Western Balkans, which are guided by the European Union and the United States, do not

lead to the elimination of the causes of the main conflicts in the post-Yugoslav space and, obviously, in significant points differ from the images of the desired future, which correspond to the aspirations of a significant part of the population of the countries of the region. The consequences of ethnic homogenization and ethno-nationalism is a harsh reality that forms the practical politics in and around the post-Yugoslav space. In the long term, two or three irredentist projects may be implemented in the region in one form or another. On the contrary, the chances that the Serbs, Croats, Albanians will completely abandon these aspirations, all together finding themselves within the common borders of the European Union, do not seem very high. Even if the EU's political elites decide to fully and unconditionally integrate all the territories of the Western Balkans, there is no guarantee that already inside the EU, taking advantage of a new status, regional actors will forever be satisfied with the narratives of harmonious coexistence within a multi-ethnic and multicultural space. If the efforts of external players to block the new rise of Serbian, Croatian or Albanian irredentism prove futile, such a development can be considered as the finalization of the military conflicts of the 1990s.

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