



Shifting Dynamics: The International Order in a Post-Pandemic World

— 1st - 2nd of December | 2020 —

Great Power Competition in the Balkans

EXPERT ROUNDTABLES

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Great Power Competition in the Balkans



- Although active conflicts in the Balkans have ended, nationalism continues to be an important issue for the region. States should make the necessary provisions to mitigate the negative effects of nationalism in the Balkans.
- Europe and Russia historically have been more active in the region than the United States and China. Russia stands out in terms of its shared cultural and religious ties to much of the region. Furthermore, Europe's unwilling-to-intervene approach on some issues increases Russia's strength in the region.
- China has recently increased its engagement in the Balkans and has increasingly been welcomed by the countries of the region. Economic factors have played a large role in China's new position in the Balkans.
- Balkan countries should focus on legal reforms, democracy and economic development. They should not be dependent on external actors for these reforms.
- Politicians in the Balkans are ultimately responsible for peace in the region. It is the wrong attitude to avoid responsibility and look to external actors.

Summary of the Session

The panel “Great Power Competition in the Balkans” presented an assessment of the current state of great power competition in the Balkans and discussed its implications for the wider region. The panel also analysed the sustainability of peace and stability in the region.

The world is once again entering into a strategic environment defined by multipolarity. Therefore, competition between great powers such as the US, Russia, China and Europe is increasing. In this regard, the Balkans has become one of the prominent geographies of expanding rivalry. Although Europe and Russia have traditionally held influence in the Balkans, the US and China are increasing their stake in the region.

Ivo Josipović stressed that Balkan countries willing to join the EU must realise that they need to undertake reforms and adopt the political and economic realities of the European Union, and not to act as foreign elements in the bloc. He identified

the main dilemma as whether the countries will join the EU or stay within a sphere of Russian influence.

Economically, Vesko Garčević emphasised two trends since the last economic crisis: the relative retreat of the EU and the US from the region, and the increased penetration of China and Russia. He also added that the region is in need of money and China has been able to provide investment.

Marton Ugrosdy stated that the EU is facing a credibility crisis in the Western Balkans. However, despite the failure of the EU to promote significant and tangible progress in the political or economic prosperity in the region, many central and eastern European countries are still looking for entry into NATO and the EU. Lastly, Emir Suljagić remarked that some countries are very vulnerable due to low levels of democratic literacy. Media outlets, such as Russia’s Sputnik, can easily penetrate markets and societies. There is also a prominent Russian influence in regional elections, especially in the latest election in Montenegro.

Ivo Josipović's Highlights



Former President of Croatia

Ivo Josipović served as the President of Croatia from 2010 to 2015. As a politician, he promoted reconciliation in SE Europe, human rights and the fight against corruption. Before and after his presidential mandate, he has worked as a university law professor and composer. He has published several books and 85 academic papers dealing with international criminal law, criminal procedure and human rights. As a composer, Josipovic has composed some 60 compositions performed and recorded by prominent artists. He has received prestigious domestic and international awards such as the European Medal of Tolerance from the European Union and Premio Galileo 2000 Award for art.

- ” “I would like to stress that the Balkans is in a permanent defence crisis. Still, the fight for peace and the soul of the region is online. Therefore, big powers are definitely included, and they are fighting for their interests in the region.”
- ” “China is very interested in the region. Their dominant interest is economic, not political. China proved itself as a partner to central European countries. They were not always welcomed by other competing states, especially the US.”
- ” “Big powers are trying to poach countries for their space in the region. It is definitely a big fight between the US and the European Union from one side, and Russia from the other. There is also now China, who is very interested to be present in the region, and they are present more and more. However, their interest is [mainly] economic, not political. And I have to stress that China itself seems to have a very correct path towards central European countries and even Croatia, which is now a member of the European Union. Croatia has very good cooperation with China that is not always welcomed in some competing countries, especially in the United States.”
- ” “Great powers have an interest in the region. However, the main responsibility for peace falls on local politicians in the region.”
- ” “The biggest problem in the region comes from the region, from nationalist policies and incompetent leadership.”
- ” “I think that being a part of the total world, we should care not only about the strategic interests of one of the other blocs or countries, but we have to care about our national and economic interests. Energy is the best example of economic interests in the Balkan region: we have difficulty balancing between the United States, Russia and other countries for energy [because of political issues]. I think this needs to be somehow resolved by governments, especially by the Western governments [most involved in these political issues].”
- ” “My position is that the European Union should motivate change in the region, motivate people to quit nationalism and adopt European values. However, the EU and the US are not efficient enough to motivate or to help political forces fighting for European values. Unfortunately, those European values are not now accepted by some of the Balkan countries.”
- ” “States have to undertake reforms and they cannot avoid it. Hence, I personally do not care about a states’ internal relations, but I know that they have to resolve their issues because if you do not resolve them, I am not sure that you will be able to do the job necessary to be accepted by the European Union.”

Vesko Garčević's Highlights



Former Ambassador of Montenegro to NATO and OSCE & Professor, Boston University

Ambassador Vesko Garčević is a Professor of the Practice of Diplomacy and International Relations at the Frederick S. Pardee School of Global Studies at Boston University. Mr Garčević worked as both General Director for NATO and Security Policy in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Montenegro and National Coordinator for NATO. He also served as Ambassador to NATO, Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands. Mr Garčević was also the first Montenegrin Ambassador to Austria and the OSCE. Mr Garčević has published op-eds in numerous European and American publications and co-authored several policy reports about the Balkans and Montenegro. He has also testified before the US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and the European Parliament on Russia's interference in Balkan affairs.

” “The trend in the rise of populism in the region opens ways for China and Russia... The region is in need of money and China provides easy money. The economic motives of China can result in political consequences. Soft loans from China can make regional countries vulnerable.”

” “Enlargement is not a priority for the EU in the Balkans. This makes the regional countries believe that they are not very important in the eyes of Brussels. That is why there are delays to democratic reforms in the [Balkan] countries.”

” “The responsibilities of countries in the region should be to keep doing reforms that lead to the political and economic sustainability of the Balkan region.”

” “I would say there are four major external players in the region: the EU, US, Russia, and China, each with a distinctive presence. In addition, their involvement makes the different consequences for the region enduring. It can be favourable for the aspirations of the Balkan region to become members of the European Union and to reform themselves. However, this can also be disadvantageous for the establishment of a conducive political landscape in the Balkan region.”

” “To be honest, regional and political elites have never been enthusiastic about democratic reforms, but with a strong presence of the EU they embarked upon democratic reforms. A process of reformation that does not have the European Union actively involved means that we can now witness three processes going on in power. Actually, this development has opened the space without the presence of the EU for the rise of authoritarianism in the region. Then, the revival of

nationalism and populism, and aspirations for the redistribution of power in the region, or redrawing of the regional maps that are often presented as the ideas of territorial swaps.”

” “Russia historically has been around for centuries and has many tools to be involved in the region. The role of the Serbian Orthodox Church is particularly important to understand developments in the region, but also its culture, language, and history has been present for centuries.”

” “The involvement of great powers can be favourable or disadvantageous for the region's aspirations. And the regional aspiration is to become fully integrated into European and Euro-Atlantic systems. Therefore, some countries who are external powers do not look at this effort with sympathy. For instance, Russia actually plays on and uses anti-EU and anti-NATO narratives, and play on political actors in the region who have questioned the fundamental values and principles of the EU, and question the need for integration in the Euro-Atlantic.”

The responsibilities of countries in the region should be to keep doing reforms that lead to the political and economic sustainability of the Balkan region.

Marton Ugrósdý's Highlights



Director of the Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Hungary

Márton Ugrósdý is the Director of the Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade in Budapest. His research interests cover transatlantic issues, energy security, and US foreign policy in Central and Eastern Europe. He has served as the director of IFAT since 2018. Before joining the Institute, Márton worked as the Editor-in-Chief and head of the American column of Kitekintő.hu. Márton is a graduate of Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest, where he received the prestigious Republican Scholarship for academic excellence twice during his studies. Márton is a part-time assistant lecturer at Corvinus University of Budapest. He is also an alumnus of the Hungarian-American Enterprise Scholarship Fund, through which he was able to work for the Centre for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, DC.

” Without EU enlargement, we do not have meaningful incentives for Western Balkan countries to carry out reforms that will fundamentally change their economic, political, and social structures.”

” The EU and the European communities before have failed miserably when it comes to maintaining peace and economic prosperity in the Western Balkans. The US has always been dragged back into this theatre. They apply their principles and interests. However, whether that made the situation better when it comes to economic stability and security is a question that we might rightfully ask.”

” What I would like to talk about at length is the credibility of the European Union in the Western Balkans and in southeast Europe because what we have seen is that there are many agreements, many joint summits, many paper signings, but apart from a few countries, we have not seen any kind of significant and tangible process when it comes to integration. I think the EU is also partly to blame for this. There is a great amount of enlargement fatigue when it comes to the internal dynamics of the EU. There is a feeling of regret, if you wish, especially in the founding member states, that the EU was enlarged at such a rapid pace after 2004. Moreover, I think by now it has become visible that by granting accession to so many countries at the same time, that kind of common thinking and common understanding which was characterising the European Union and especially the core countries, is very much different right now.”

” I believe this enlargement is part of the reason that we are having these very political debates about the future of the EU. This is why we have disagreements with the next generation of EU funds. This is why we have political debates on political questions for a long time.”

” NATO has been more of a success story because we have seen that roughly all of the countries which wanted to join NATO recently in the Western Balkans did so. However, if you look at the EU enlargement process, it is absolutely not that encouraging. What is even more problematic that we do not have any credible target dates for enlargement at the moment.”

” We think about the EU as a form of divine intervention, that will all of a sudden reform the internal politics of these countries, which is not true. I mean, if you look at the experience of those EU member states who have joined after 2004, that was not the case. It would be similar in the case of countries which will join in the future. Therefore, the EU is an important stakeholder and, obviously, it is not the only one.”

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Emir Suljagić's Highlights



Academic, International University of Sarajevo & Director of The Srebrenica Memorial Centre

Dr. Emir Suljagić is the director of the Srebrenica Memorial Centre. He survived the Srebrenica genocide in July, 1995 while working as a United Nations interpreter. He defended his doctoral dissertation "Ethnic Cleansing: Politics, Policy, Violence – Serb Ethnic Cleansing Campaign in former Yugoslavia" at the International University of Hamburg. Dr. Suljagić currently teaches international relations at the International University of Sarajevo. He is also the author of two books: *Ethnic Cleansing: Politics, Policy, Violence – Serb Ethnic Cleansing Campaign in former Yugoslavia* and *Postcards from the Grave*.

”The international community took a back seat after another failed attempt to amend the constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina [in 2006] and it created a power vacuum. A power vacuum is not a natural state of affairs, either in nature or international relations, or in politics. The vacuum was filled by other actors and the most important of those actors was and continues to be Russia. This part of the world also plays an important role in whatever the Russian strategy overall is.”

”We see Russian influence manifested in the security sector, the energy sector, and, in my mind, most importantly, in disinformation. Parties in the Western Balkans, Bosnia, Serbia, Montenegro and Macedonia are very vulnerable to disinformation.”

”The other really important aspect of this Russian influence is security. A few years ago, colleagues and I wrote a report that was published by the Foreign Policy Research Institute that showed very extensive links between the Russian government and Russian proxies, and a series of paramilitary groups that are connected to a variety of actors in both Bosnia and Serbia. We have had a very high-profile visit of what are called ‘night wolves’. When you put these things in any combination, you try and see the strategy behind it. What comes to mind, and this is my position, is that Russia is actively trying to keep the Western Balkans destabilised in the belief that the EU and the US are very risk averse. Russia hopes that the US and the EU will not get involved and these countries will not become integrated into Western institutions.”

”If you take a look at the Open Society Index, it actually lists these countries as some of the most vulnerable. The Open Society Institute’s media literacy index includes Serbia, Bulgaria, Montenegro, Bosnia and Macedonia. This is the capital of fake news. In fact, if you look at media outlets, such as Twitter, fake news is very active there, and they [domestic and foreign actors] are using every opportunity to deepen existing divisions within the region.”

We see Russian influence manifested in the security sector, the energy sector, and, in my mind, most importantly, in disinformation. Parties in the Western Balkans, Bosnia, Serbia, Montenegro and Macedonia are very vulnerable to disinformation.



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