



In Quest of a New World Order

Edited by:

Biljana Vankovska

Richard Sakwa

Weiwei Zhang

Toni Mileski

**Cooperative
Multipolar
System:**

**In Quest of a
New World
Order**

The Western Balkans in the Multipolar Puzzle: Navigating Between the West and the Global Majority

Biljana Vankovska

Introduction

In geopolitical discourse, cardinal directions—traditionally capitalized in writing—carry connotations that are both historically entrenched and inherently arbitrary. These labels often embed biases with implications ranging from subtle to overtly political. As Edward Said (1977) observed, neither the “Orient” nor the “West” possesses inherent ontological stability; both are human constructs, shaped by processes of affirmation and the identification of an “Other.” While this critique could theoretically extend to all four cardinal directions, the geopolitical lexicon remains stubbornly anchored to outdated hierarchies. Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of the political power of “naming” still dictates perceptions of where nations belong and the roles they are expected to play globally—a dynamic that resists alignment with today’s need for a holistic worldview.

We inhabit a Gramscian interregnum, where the old order is dying and the new struggles to be born—a transitional phase marked by metaphorical (and often literal) “monsters.” Declining powers cling fiercely, even violently, to the remnants of their dominance. Yet despite sweeping transformations in economic, political, technological, and cultural spheres, the “West” (or “collective West”) retains rhetorical and material hegemony.

Historically, the term “West” has been synonymous with civilizational superiority, positioning itself hierarchically above “the Rest.” This framing has profoundly shaped global epistemology and academic discourse. During the post-Cold War “unipolar moment”—marked by the ascendancy of the U.S., NATO, the EU, and allies like Japan and South Korea—resistance to Western hegemony was often flattened into a binary of “the West versus the Rest.”

Today, as the West’s normative and moral authority erodes, the narrative is shifting. The “West” is increasingly juxtaposed against a “global majority” or “world majority.” Yet these categories remain fluid:

many states resist alignment, hedging their interests in an uncertain geopolitical landscape.

This analysis focuses on a critical dimension of this transition: the predicament of small states and regions caught at the fault lines of an emerging multipolar order. The Western Balkans—a region whose tumultuous history epitomizes perpetual reinvention—serves as a striking case study.

Long perceived as a crossroads of civilizations and competing geopolitical currents, the Balkans have undergone radical transformations over the past three decades. After the Cold War and Yugoslavia's dissolution, external actors redefined the region as a "sub-region," imposing identities that frequently disregard historical, geographical, and cultural realities. Such top-down redefinitions—driven by strategic interests—reshape how the region and its people are perceived and engaged globally. This underscores the profound implications of external influence in a multipolar era, where power is diffuse but asymmetry persists.

The Invention of the "Western Balkans"

Being from the Balkans has rarely been regarded as a source of pride or a compliment. In her influential book *Imagining the Balkans* (2009), Bulgarian historian Maria Todorova examined how the Balkans have been perceived and represented for centuries, often characterized as a harsh and uncivilized threshold to Europe. Todorova coined the term "Balkanism" to describe this discourse. In addition, she rightly points out:

"Balkanization" not only had come to denote the parcelization of large and viable political units but also had become a synonym for a reversion to the tribal, the backward, the primitive, the barbarian. In its latest hypostasis, particularly in American academe, it has been completely decontextualized and paradigmatically related to a variety of problems. That the Balkans have been described as the "other" of Europe does not need special proof. What has been emphasized about the Balkans is that its inhabitants do not care to conform to the standards of behavior devised as normative by and for the civilized world. As with any generalization, this one is based on reductionism, but the reductionism and stereotyping of

the Balkans has been of such degree and intensity that the discourse merits and requires special analysis.” (p. 3).

Todorova’s book was published during a time of smoldering conflicts on the territory of the former Yugoslavia. At that time, it seemed as though the peoples of the Balkans were widely viewed as primitive and belligerent by nature, at least by some Western experts and media. Few questioned the root causes behind the bloody collapse of Yugoslavia—a state that had once provided a peaceful framework for interethnic and political cooperation among diverse groups (TFF 2014). Nevertheless, the West positioned itself as a “savior,” peacemaker, and state-builder (Pardew 2018), while NATO found a new purpose in reviving its (already diminished) geopolitical relevance (Vankovska 2020). The EU, too, embarked on a new foreign and security policy, with missions across the region, though these often resulted in little more than the façade of democracy or the freezing of conflicts (Chandler 1999). Despite decades of (un)successful “Europeanization” of the newly recognized states, “gratuitous References to war, violence, or poverty still characterize vast swathes of articles about the modern Balkans” (Garcevic 2017). In short, the narrative of the Balkans remains dominated by the West, full of stereotypes and even racism. Even when the most pro-EU scholars and pundits acknowledge the failure of the EU’s enlargement policy in this region, the blame is almost always placed on the locals, rarely on the internationals (Bieber 2020, Chandler 2006). In this context, NATO and EU membership is often seen as a marker of civilization. Stefanescu rightly points out that “the West uses a fictionalized discourse on the European other to perpetuate its hegemonism and justify its colonial and imperialist tactics in the region.” (2013, p. 96).

The countries still considered “not quite European” have effectively been grouped into an invented sub-region, widely known as the Western Balkans. The term was officially introduced in 1998 by the Austrian Presidency of the EU, after Bulgaria and Romania were granted permission to begin membership talks with the EU. Initially, it included Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Croatia—until the latter joined the EU in 2013. In essence, it refers to what could be described as “ex-Yugoslavia minus Slovenia and Croatia, plus Albania.” As some authors suggest, what unites these countries is

that they all underwent similar processes of state-building (after violent conflicts or state collapse), delayed transitions, and an EU integration perspective that remains in progress, though at varying speeds and stages (Jano 2008).

Austria's proposal aimed to provide a European response to the geopolitical challenges resulting from the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the need to stabilize the region. It sought to transform the process of "Balkanization" into "Europeanization"—essentially, to incorporate the so-called primitive Balkans into the civilized European fold. At that time, Austria (ironically governed today by a far-right party), historically tied to the Balkans through the Austro-Hungarian Empire, had a vested interest in ensuring stability in its neighborhood, while also proving itself as a constructive and capable member of the EU, which it had joined just a few years earlier. Vienna was also motivated by its own security concerns: the region's instability had, and could continue to have, repercussions for Austria through migration flows, trade disruptions, and other security risks.

Just five years later, in 2003, another pivotal event occurred in Greece, on the southern part of the Balkan Peninsula. The EU-Western Balkans Summit in Thessaloniki concluded with a Declaration in which the EU expressed its "unequivocal support for the European perspective of the Western Balkan countries." Indeed, since 2003 the WB political reality changed significantly. Ever since, two new states appeared on the scene: Montenegro (2006) and Kosovo (2008). Croatia was the only one to join the EU in 2013, while, Albania, Croatia, Montenegro, and Macedonia became the NATO members. Yet, none of the EU promises made during that summit have been fulfilled. In short, there is no realistic time frame for completing the negotiation process. Many experts and politicians argue that this limbo fuels Euroscepticism and populism in the region.

In reality, the notion of the WB allowed Brussels to draw a line between the EU and its immediate periphery, signaling which countries were on the EU's radar for potential membership. However, in doing so, it grouped countries with vastly different historical, cultural, and political trajectories into a single bloc. This homogenization overlooked the internal diversity of the region and created a 'sub-region' with an externally imposed identity—one that aligned more with EU policy goals than with

the lived realities of the people in those countries. The EU's objective was to frame the most problematic countries, those less likely to become EU member-states, into a manageable bloc that could be governed through EU-led initiatives and reforms. The insistence on using the "Western Balkans" label allowed Brussels to control the narrative, defining the region in terms of its need for Western intervention and guidance, thus reinforcing its dependency on EU structures. Additionally, the region has become a buffer zone between the EU and potential 'threats' from the east, such as Russian influence, migration flows, or political instability. The Western Balkans often served to contain regional aspirations for integration, with the EU setting (special) conditions for membership that enabled it to delay full accession indefinitely, leaving the region in a state of limbo. The Macedonian case is the best example of this thesis: the country's alleged membership has been largely contingent on compromising its constitutional sovereignty, national identity, and cultural heritage due to the ultimatums of two EU member-states.

The Re-Colonization of the Balkans by the West

The implications of inventing the sub-region of the WB are multifold. By pushing them into a special "folder" of EU integration, the respective Balkan states have again become an object of Balkanism (in Todorova's terms) for the second time. This treatment results into reinforcement of stereotypes and even self-degradation. The imposed identity of the region emphasizes its instability, backwardness, or need for modernization, perpetuating negative stereotypes that hinder its global standing and self-confidence. Instead of sharing a common vision and destiny, the artificial grouping reinforce mutual distrust and divisions, as states are pitted against each other in competition for resources, recognition, or accession progress. On the political level, one of the key effects is loss of (popular and constitutional) sovereignty. By framing the region as dependent on external guidance, local actors are stripped of agency, as their development becomes tied to the strategic interests of external powers. Economically, there is stunted development. The focus on meeting external criteria or aligning with the imposed policies (in the economic and international field) diverts attention from addressing genuine local needs and aspirations. Especially, in this respect, the WB

states are literally limited in the search for better economic development and progress, because Brussels determines with whom they may or may not collaborate.

As already mentioned, the West has treated the entire post-socialist world as its own backyard, even though not everyone has been welcome to join the club. Geopolitics have always played a crucial role in the EU enlargement process, while the Copenhagen criteria played a symbolic and decorative role.¹ Pänke (2018) argues that “the European Union (EU) is an imperial power. Building on the EU-as-empire paradigm and Manners’ concept of ‘normative power’, this article argues that owing to the institutional set-up of its governance and its discursive strategies, the Union resembles an imperial polity which has to adopt an interest- and norm-driven ‘dual strategy’.” The analysis of EU policies show that there has been a continuous quest of justification of its hidden nature – i.e. being “ambition of being a non-imperial empire” (or as Chandler puts it – empire in denial). The efforts were invested into presenting the idea of EU as ‘empire’ by distinguishing between benevolent and ruthless forms of imperialism.” (Neyer 2012).

The premise that the Ukraine war helped the EU (and the political West in general) get back overtly to classical geopolitical thinking has become conventional truth. Yet the various corners would disagree about the root causes and timeline of the war. The real nature of Western liberal expansionism and imperialism was exposed during the Euromaidan (colored) revolution of 2014. The events of 2022 are just a follow-up of a self-fulfilling prophecy of the US/NATO/EU policies of expansion of Western influence and control. Paradoxically, the passionate wish to join the ‘peaceful, democratic and developed’ Europe led Ukraine and its people to a disastrous course, which is not over yet. In addition to its political and military assistance (or better, the proxy war carried out on the Ukrainian territory), the EU rushed to embrace not only Ukraine but also Moldova and Georgia. Todorova (ibid, p. 139) was right saying that “Europe” ends where politicians want it to end, and scholars should be at least aware of this and of how one’s research can and is being used.”

The decision of the European Council to open the negotiation process with Ukraine amidst war (in the mid 2024) in the WB was received

¹ The Serbian scholar, Dušan Proroković, however, disagree with this conclusion. In his mind, the EU did not deal with geopolitics until the beginning of the Ukraine crisis (2016, p. 13).

as adding insult to injury.² This is particularly true about Macedonian Sisyphus' 20-year long path with no positive result due to the imposition of various demands that had no connection to the Copenhagen criteria. Numerous think tanks and commentators rushed to the conclusion that the war in Ukraine made the EU include geopolitics in its enlargement policy optics. Lippert (2024) – a researcher from the esteemed German think tank *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik* - defined EU Enlargement in the following way: geopolitics meets integration policy. The truth is a bit more complex than that: geopolitics has been embedded into the foundations of the EU as such, which has always been reflected into its enlargement (as in many other) policies. The Ukraine war has only been a catalyst for what was already there. Double standards and criteria were already used during the accession of other countries, such as inclusion of Romania and Bulgaria (despite not meeting the Copenhagen criteria – and far before that, inclusion of Spain and Portugal) and dismissing Turkiye (mostly because of cultural racism and fear of its geopolitical weight that could provoke disbalance within the predominantly Christian Union).

The Ukraine war and sanctions against Russia have caused a serious setback for many of these countries. In addition to increased military expenses and support for Ukraine, these underdeveloped states have to obey the sanctions against Russia which causes serious deficits in agriculture and other spheres. The antipathy against China is the second example, which explains that they are all expected to stay as far as possible from non-Western economic alliances and funds.

Reclaiming Agency and Multipolar Opportunities: Is It Possible?

Hypothetically, in a multipolar world, the WB states would have an opportunity to redefine their place—not as an artificial sub-region imposed by Brussels, but as a crossroads of civilizations with its unique contributions to make on the global stage. But in the dominant political discourse, the aspiration to join the West—embodied by NATO and the

² Indeed, after Ukraine applied for membership on the fourth day after the Russian invasion, the EU took a positive decision with extraordinary speed and granted Ukraine candidate status in June 2022. On 14 February 2023, the European Council gave the green light to the opening of accession negotiations with Ukraine, which started on 25 June 2024.

EU—remains steadfast, despite significant geopolitical shifts in Europe and beyond. Even amid the turmoil of 2024, which saw the escalation of the war in Ukraine, genocide in Gaza, and the disintegration of Syria, Balkan leaders focused primarily on the so-called unfinished “European symphony,” citing delays in the EU integration process (quoting Macedonian president Siljanovska-Davkova; see Ocvirk 2024; Sloboden pečat 2024). On the other hand, the incoming Trump administration and the new NATO Secretary General have announced plans to increase military spending to as much as 5 percent of GDP. Such a policy would place an unbearable burden on already impoverished and heavily indebted countries across Europe, particularly in the Balkans. NATO’s justification that “security comes with a cost” aligns with Trump’s stance that the United States will not defend Europe without adequate compensation, further emphasizing the increasingly transactional nature of transatlantic security commitments. In essence, the West appears to be reverting to a pre-Cold War mindset, where military security and the protection of the state took precedence above all else.

While leaders in the Western Balkans continue to idealize the West as a beacon of prosperity, the decline of the U.S. Empire and its allies has become a common theme in analyses. The West’s military superiority, notably through nuclear power, remains intact. However, its hegemonic role has weakened. Since the 2008 economic crisis, the West’s decline has become apparent in several ways. Geopolitical overstretch, especially NATO’s interventions in Libya and Afghanistan, has exposed the limits of Western military power. The proxy war in Ukraine has further strained European allies militarily and economically. Trump’s controversial global policy will apparently have a negative impact even on the Western allies, which shows the depth of the internal fractures. The “West” is not a monolithic entity, despite all the talks about geostrategic unity and common values.

Another facet of Western decline is the erosion of liberal democracy in both the U.S. and EU nations. Some argue that the West’s moral and value system, once central to its self-declared righteousness, is now suffocating from within. Furthermore, increased militarization has deepened socio-economic divides, particularly within Western societies, exemplified by growing tensions in Germany and France. The EU itself has struggled with internal cohesion, as Brexit, migration crises, rule-

of-law disputes, and the rise of far-right politics have highlighted deep fragmentation.

Amid the decline of Western dominance, a Global Majority is emerging—a term increasingly used to describe nations across Asia, Africa, Latin America, and parts of Eastern Europe that are pushing back against Western hegemony. Various scholars and commentators have noted the shift toward a multipolar world over the years. For example, Dalip Hiro accurately anticipated these developments as early as 2010 in his book *After Empire: The Birth of a Multipolar World*, offering a prescient analysis of the key trends driving this transformation. Today’s world displays the contours of the emerging order in the following facts, to mention just a few:

- China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has expanded Beijing’s presence in the Balkans through infrastructure projects and investments. Russia similarly maintains strong ties with Serbia and other parts of the region, offering economic aid without the conditionalities typical of Western institutions.

- The BRICS Plus bloc and regional coalitions are advancing a vision of global governance that challenges Western monopolies on decision-making.

- Countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, having experienced colonialism and neocolonialism, are strengthening ties with emerging powers and seeking a more inclusive global order that challenges Western dominance in international institutions.

The West’s response has been to intensify its influence over what it considers its sphere of geopolitical interest, preserving the narrative of being the “good guys” in contrast to the “bad guys” (e.g., China, Russia). This strategy manipulates the Balkans’ insecure structures, presenting them with a stark choice: remain loyal to the West to be recognized as “good” Europeans or align with autocratic powers. The EU has explicitly stated that the Western Balkans now serve as a frontline in Russia’s confrontation with the West (EP Briefing 2023). According to Diesen (2016), “European integration” subsequently became a zero-sum process where the shared neighbourhood was asked to choose between “Europe” by decoupling from Russia. NATO’s official doctrine treats emerging powers, like Russia and China, as security threats, creating an atmosphere of fear and repression against those questioning the West’s unchallenged

supremacy. Recent threats (for instance, to the Georgian prime minister) and even assassination attempts (such as the case of Slovakia's Prime Minister Fico) illustrate how the West treats its satellites in times of war crisis.

The Western Balkans, still recovering from the wars of the 1990s, are now coerced into focusing on enemies rather than economic recovery and regional cooperation. The EU hypocritically demands that these societies confront their violent pasts and reconcile for peace, a principle never applied to European and American colonizers. Furthermore, while enforcing sanctions on Russia, Western countries continue to profit from trade with both Russia and China.

Despite these realities, political leaders in the Western Balkans remain reluctant to acknowledge the shifting global order. The EU's stagnation and de-industrialization offer little hope for the region's impoverished nations, prompting countries like Serbia to balance their foreign and economic policies. Serbia, for instance, has maintained strong ties with both the EU and Russia, benefiting from Chinese investments. The region remains economically dependent on the EU, but China's Belt and Road Initiative, which focuses on infrastructure, energy, and telecommunications, is beginning to shift the balance of power. As Western economies stagnate, China's offers—without the human rights and governance conditions imposed by the EU—are increasingly attractive.

The evolving geopolitical landscape presents the Western Balkans with critical questions about its future trajectory, particularly whether deeper economic engagement with the East and the Global South could offer a more sustainable path to development. Historically, the region has viewed integration into Western institutions, such as NATO and the EU, as the cornerstone of its security and prosperity. However, the ongoing war in Ukraine has exposed the limitations of NATO membership as a comprehensive security guarantee, while the EU's internal challenges and slow enlargement process have left the region in a state of prolonged uncertainty. Compounding these issues is the shifting priorities of the United States under its new administration, which has increasingly favored military spending over addressing basic human needs, further complicating the Western Balkans' prospects for stability and growth.

In this emerging multipolar world, the WB must navigate a delicate balancing act, leveraging its historical and cultural ties with the

West while exploring new diplomatic and economic opportunities elsewhere. Surprisingly, the first test for these states will be managing their relationships with Washington, D.C., and Brussels, as these traditional power centers remain influential despite their shifting priorities. Only after addressing these dynamics can the region fully turn its attention to the broader global arena, where rising powers like China, India, and others are reshaping the international order.

Until recently, Serbia's "multi-vector diplomacy" offered a potential blueprint for the region, as the country successfully balanced relationships with the EU, Russia, and China. This approach allowed Serbia to capitalize on opportunities in a rapidly changing global landscape, securing investments and partnerships that bolstered its economic and political standing. However, by the end of 2024, the geopolitical environment is undergoing radical changes. The threat of externally imposed regime change, often referred to as a "colored revolution," has heightened tensions and forced regional leaders to reassess their strategies. Simultaneously, the prospect of strategic cooperation with a potential Trump administration in the U.S. has introduced new variables into the equation, creating both risks and opportunities for the Western Balkans.

As the region grapples with these challenges, it must also contend with internal divisions and the lingering legacy of past conflicts. The Western Balkans' ability to forge a cohesive and forward-looking strategy will depend on its capacity to reconcile these internal tensions while adapting to external pressures. This will require not only skillful diplomacy but also a renewed focus on economic diversification, regional cooperation, and the strengthening of democratic institutions. By doing so, the WB can position itself as a bridge between East and West, leveraging its unique geopolitical position to secure a more stable and prosperous future in an increasingly complex world.

Conclusion: From a Pawn to a Player

The Western Balkans occupies a critical yet precarious position in the shifting multipolar global order, situated at the intersection of declining Western dominance and emerging alternative frameworks. Historically shaped by external powers, predominantly from the West, the region remains entangled in complex geopolitical dynamics, com-

pounded by its peripheral status within Europe. The legacy of Western hegemony, including the EU's unfulfilled integration promises and NATO's contested security frameworks, stands in stark contrast to the transformative shifts underway in global power structures.

In this chapter, we argue that the WB states have gradually relinquished their sovereignty and policy-making autonomy, leaving them unable to define their interests or navigate the intricate "multipolar puzzle." Small states and regions are compelled to balance precariously between competing power centres. The region now faces a profound dilemma: whether to align with the fragmented, often interventionist "collective West" or to embrace the rising "Global Majority," which advocates for a multipolar world rooted in mutual respect, equality, and cooperation. The stakes are high—this is not merely a geopolitical decision but a choice between perpetuating conflict-driven hegemonies or fostering a more peaceful and equitable global order.

The transition toward multipolarity—or perhaps a reimagined, inclusive multilateralism—presents both formidable challenges and unique opportunities for the WB. To move forward, the region must chart a clear and pragmatic path, anchored in a steadfast commitment to its own agency. The Western Balkans must go beyond its historical role as a passive recipient of external influence and assert itself as an active participant in shaping its future.

To achieve this, the region should adopt a dual-track approach. On one hand, it must maintain and deepen constructive ties with the West, particularly its progressive and anti-war forces, which remain crucial partners for stability and democratic development. On the other hand, the Western Balkans must proactively engage with rising powers and the Global South, exploring new economic, political, and cultural opportunities. By leveraging its strategic geography, cultural diversity, and historical connections, the region can transform into a dynamic bridge between competing global powers, fostering dialogue, cooperation, and mutual understanding.

However, reclaiming agency begins at home. The WB must address internal vulnerabilities, including corruption, weak governance, and fragmented institutions, to strengthen its sovereignty and resilience. This requires a renewed focus on sustainable development, transparency, and the rule of law. Equally critical is the cultivation of a shared

regional identity and common interests that transcend divisive historical narratives. By fostering genuine cooperation and solidarity, the region can overcome internal fragmentation and present a united front in its interactions with external actors.

In the emerging multipolar order, the Western Balkans' strategy must rest on a firm commitment to multilateralism and the principles of the UN system. Advocating for a world order grounded in ethics, international law, and mutual respect will enable the region to contribute to a more balanced and equitable global framework. By prioritizing inclusivity and collaboration over competition, the Western Balkans can redefine itself—not as a pawn on the global chessboard but as a proactive and influential player in shaping the global agenda.

The world today does not need a hegemon or multiple hegemons; it needs a system that values peace, equity, and cooperation. The WB, with its unique history and strategic location, is well-positioned to contribute to and thrive within such a system. By embracing its role as a bridge between East and West, North and South, the region can play a meaningful role in building a more just and peaceful global order.

The journey will not be without obstacles, but with determination, regional unity, and a clear vision, the WB can transcend its historical constraints. It can transform itself from a region shaped by external forces into one that actively shapes its own future—and, in doing so, contributes to the flourishing of humanity in a multipolar world.

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