

CHINESE IMPACT IN THE WESTERN BALKANS: THE EFFECT OF THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE ON THE EU'S NORMATIVE ROLE

Göktürk TÜYSÜZOĞLU 

Giresun University (Türkiye)

E-mail: gktrkt@gmail.com

Abstract: *China, which shows signs of trying to create an integrated historical bloc, also supports a process that will lead to the consolidation of authoritarian political patterns in parallel with its increasing investments and financial support in the frame of the Belt and Road Initiative. This study argues that China's approach to the Western Balkans is an extension of the hegemony-building process. It brings the question of geopolitical concern regarding the enlargement strategy of the EU, which is seen as a normative power. Although this concern has been observed much more in the EU, it emphasises the reform process rather than enlargement. This situation, which could also be defined as a stability-democracy dilemma, not only undermines the normative power of the EU but also leads to the consolidation of illiberal regimes.*

Keywords: *China, Western Balkans, EU, Hegemony, Illiberal Regimes, 17+1 Cooperation, Differentiated Integration.*

Rezumat: *Impactul chinez în Balcanii de Vest: efectul inițiativei "Centura și Drumul" asupra rolului normativ al UE. China, care dă semne că încearcă să creeze un bloc istoric integrat, susține și un proces care va duce la consolidarea modelelor politice autoritare, în paralel cu creșterea investițiilor și a sprijinului financiar în cadrul Inițiativei Belt and Road. Studiul susține ideea că abordarea Chinei față de Balcanii de Vest reprezintă o extensie a procesului de construire a propriei sale hegemonii. De asemenea, aduce în discuție problema geopolitică legată de strategia de extindere a UE, în calitate de putere normativă. Deși această preocupare poate fi observată de ceva timp în cadrul UE, în prezent se pune accentul mai degrabă pe procesul de reformă decât pe extindere. Această situație, care ar*

putea fi definită și ca o dilemă stabilitate-democrație, nu numai că subminează puterea normativă a UE, dar duce și la consolidarea regimurilor iliberale.

INTRODUCTION

The Belt and Road Initiative has been one of the most visible manifestations of China's growing economic strength. As part of this initiative, Beijing wants to create integrated trade corridors specific to a geography reaching Europe from its borders. It is known that the Balkans, which include some member states, fall within the scope of the EU's enlargement strategy. The Western Balkans¹ have been at the focal point of the enlargement strategy declared in 2003.

Many studies discuss the Western Balkans on the axis of the EU and China. Petrovic and Tzifakis stated that the Enlargement Strategy Document in 2018 might lead to an assessment that the EU is considering the region on a geopolitical axis.² On the other hand, Smith, Khaze and Kovacevic state that the EU's perspective on The Western Balkans has been reduced from playing the role of a democratic transformer to an actor seeking stability.³ Gafuri and Müftüler-Bac also underline the same situation and state that the dilemma of stability and democracy affects Brussels even while other players from diverse areas, such as the Balkans, pursue EU membership.⁴ Pastore assesses the illegal migration and the refugee crisis. According to him, the Western Balkans have become a migration corridor. This situation directly affects the EU's enlargement strategy regarding the region.⁵ Webb also discusses the same subject in the context of creating a transformative

¹ Western Balkans consists of Albania, Northern Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo. Western Balkan countries all want to be a member of the EU and some are continuing the accession negotiations. This region is also abbreviated as WB6.

² Milenko Petrovic, Nikolaos Tzifakis, *A Geopolitical Turn to EU Enlargement, or Another Postponement?* "Journal of Contemporary European Studies", Vol. 29, 2021, No. 2, p. 160.

³ Nicholas Ross Smith, et al., *The EU's Stability-Democracy Dilemma in the Context of the Problematic Accession of the Western Balkan States*, in *ibidem*, p. 178-179.

⁴ Adea Gafuri, Meltem-Müftüler Bac, *Caught between Stability and Democracy in the Western Balkans: A Comparative Analysis of Paths of Accession to the European Union*, "East European Politics", Vol. 37, 2021, No. 2, p. 270.

⁵ Ferruccio Pastore (Ed.), *Beyond the Migration and Asylum Crisis. Options and lessons for Europe*, Roma, Aspen Institute Italia, 2017, 121 p.; Ferruccio Pastore, *From Source to Corridor: Changing Geopolitical Narratives about Migration and EU-Western Balkans Relations*, "Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies", Vol. 21, 2019, No. 1, p. 17.

impact that affects the EU's enlargement strategy and puts geopolitical factors ahead of democratic functioning.⁶ Belloni states that the rising "anti-EU" sentiment in the Western Balkan countries, where the EU membership process has slowed significantly, is a significant problem that should be evaluated on behalf of Brussels.⁷ Looking at some of the articles that analyse the Chinese influence in the Western Balkans, Przychodniak states that China's investments and commercial and financial impact are minimal compared to the EU. According to him, China invests in the future of the EU-China connection by developing close cooperation with states that are expected to become EU members.⁸ Shopov states that China has become the third most influential actor in the Western Balkans.⁹ A report prepared by the Clingendael Institute shows that China's pragmatic attitude has transformed the Western Balkan countries, contrasting Brussels' rules and norms for different policy areas.¹⁰ Rustemi et al. also discussed Beijing's increasing influence in the Western Balkans regarding political, economic and cultural aspects.¹¹ China's economic mobility aims to expand the discussions focused on integration and enlargement to divide the EU.¹² Pavlicevic evaluated the reflection of China's structural power on the Western Balkans and underlined that this would make Beijing a regional actor in the medium term.¹³

This study focuses on the steps taken by China in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative, especially in the frame of the Neo-Gramscian approach. These manoeuvres will further reveal how the EU's Western Balkan strategy has been affected by these manoeuvres. The impact of China's efforts on the EU's normative

⁶ Jonathan Webb, *The Refugee Crisis and Its Transformative Impact on EU-Western Balkans Relations*, "Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies", Vol. 48, 2020, No. 6, p. 1365.

⁷ Roberto Belloni, *The European Union Blowback? Euroscepticism and Its Consequences in the Western Balkans*, "Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding", Vol. 10, 2016, No. 4, p. 534-536.

⁸ Marcin Przychodniak, *The Importance of the Western Balkans in China's Foreign Policy*, "PISM Bulletin", 9 June, 2020, No. 123 (1553), p. 1.

⁹ Vladimir Shopov, *Decade of Patience: How China Became a Power in the Western Balkans*, "ECFR Policy Brief", 2021, No. 371, p. 2.

¹⁰ Wouter Zweers, et al., *China and the EU in Western Balkans: Different Strings Attached*, "Clingendael Institute Report", 2020, p. 41-43.

¹¹ Arlinda Rustemi, et al., *Geopolitical Influences of External Powers in the Western Balkans*, "Hague Centre for Strategic Studies", 2021, p. 2-3.

¹² Heather A. Conley, et al., *Avenues of Chinese Influence in the Western Balkans*, in *China's "Hub-and-Spoke" Strategy in the Balkans*. "CSIS Europe Program Report", April 2020, p. 9-11.

¹³ Dragan Pavlicevic, *Structural Power and China-EU-Western Balkans Triangular Relations*, "Asia-Europe Journal", Vol. 17, 2019, No. 4, p. 458-460.

role will be explored in this context. Despite Beijing's increasing economic visibility, the EU is still the region's most important partner. The change in Brussels' enlargement strategy will be revealed within the scope of the content analysis.

REFLECTIONS OF THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

China's interest in the Western Balkans has increased significantly after the 16+1 (later 17+1 with Greece) Cooperation. This move aims to expand the contact and cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries (CEEC), most of which are also EU members.¹⁴ With the Belt and Road Initiative launched in 2013, the Balkans have become an essential connection in terms of financial and commercial manoeuvres integrated with the infrastructure, energy and communication investments that Beijing put forward in a global context. Western Balkans is a component of the land corridor that connects to Europe via Central Asia-Western Asia and Turkey, which is seen as the "middle corridor" of the Belt and Road Initiative.¹⁵ In addition, the "sea route", named the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, opens to the Adriatic and the Western Balkans via the Red Sea-Mediterranean connection.

All Western Balkan countries except Kosovo have signed cooperation agreements with China. The 17+1 Cooperation, which Beijing has included in the Belt and Road Initiative, brings together the heads of state of 17 nations, including those of the Western Balkans, at annual summits.¹⁶

China's economic activity in the Western Balkans is quite inadequate compared to the EU. However, given that China's interest in the area grew significantly after 2013, this position might be considered rational. In 2019, the ratio of the region's imports from China to the total imports was 10 per cent. In addition, the balance of the same countries' exports to China in total export volume is only 2 per cent. The EU-specific equivalents of these figures are around 60 per cent and 70 per cent, respectively.¹⁷ Beijing is trying to prioritise its investments in the re-

¹⁴ Andreea Brînză, *The 17+1 Mechanism. Caught Between China and the United States*, "China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies", Vol. 5, 2019, No. 2, p. 226-229.

¹⁵ Erik Brattberg, et al., *Southeastern, Central and Eastern Europe. Vulnerabilities and Resilience in Four Countries*, Washington, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 2021, p. 1-3.

¹⁶ Andreea Brînză, *op. cit.*, p. 214.

¹⁷ Marcin Przychodniak, *The Importance...*, p. 1.

gion. However, a significant part of these investments has not been realised yet. Only 24 per cent of a net direct investment volume of \$2.4 billion contracted as of 2020 has been completed.¹⁸ It is known that the infrastructure loan that Beijing plans to transfer to the region is 6.8 billion dollars. Apart from that, China gave 14 billion dollars of loans to all countries to overcome financial difficulties between 2012 and 2019 (only 60 per cent of this amount was given to Serbia, with whom Beijing has the closest ties in the region). The proportion of direct investments made by China has increased, but even in Serbia, between 2010 and 2019, this ratio was three per cent of total foreign direct investment. In the same period, the rate of direct investments of the EU in Serbia was 70 per cent. Between 2013 and 2019, the total investment of EU-based companies in the Western Balkans exceeds 11 billion dollars.¹⁹ China's investments are mainly within the framework of the credits given to infrastructure projects. Beijing attributes this support to the involvement of Chinese companies and workers in the implementation of the projects. In other words, conditional assistance is provided.

The main reason why China's economic impact grows is the development gap between the Western Balkans and the EU, which is relatively high. This situation will give Beijing a chance for more economic presence in the coming period. Today, China's share in total commercial operation is only six per cent.²⁰ Western Balkan countries generally have a "manageable" debt load. However, it is possible to state that China has an important role in this debt burden. Fifteen per cent of the state debts of Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina belong to China. This rate, which is calculated as more than 20 per cent in North Macedonia, has reached 40 per cent in Montenegro. The debt of this country to China has reached 80 per cent of its GDP.²¹ Based on the economic difficulties caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, there are concerns that Montenegro will not be able to pay this debt, and Podgorica will be dragged into the "debt trap".²² There is a possibility that a

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Nina Markovic Khaze, Xiven Wang, *Is China's Rising Influence in the Western Balkans a Threat to European Integration?*, "Journal of Contemporary European Studies", Vol. 29, 2021, No. 2, p. 235.

²⁰ Vladimir Shopov, *Decade of...*, p. 10.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 10-11.

²² Within the scope of the Belt and Road Initiative, the debt trap approach, which means the transfer of the most important facilities, ports or investments to the control of China in return for debt, after the countries that China supports by using its credit and debt opportunities become unable to pay their debts. This topic has received a lot of attention in publications. It is claimed that China's Belt and Road Initiative has devel-

similar situation may apply to other Western Balkan countries. Concerned about the monopoly of the Chinese company that built the international terminal of the airport in Tirana in terms of controlling international flights, Albania revised the contract with this company in its favour.

In Bosnia, a Chinese company began the renovation of the country's largest power plant in Tuzla. In addition to various energy and infrastructure investments in Serbia, China also makes direct investments by acquiring certain companies. The steel plant in Smederovo and the Shandong Linglong Tire Factory attract attention as two important ventures invested by Chinese companies. Huawei has come to the fore as Belgrade's communication and technology partner. Huawei is also renewing its digital and telecommunications infrastructure (5G investments).²³ This company is also taking initiatives to regulate the 5G infrastructure of other Western Balkan countries. However, the US is also putting political pressure on the Western Balkan countries to reduce Huawei's visibility in Central and Eastern Europe.²⁴

Beijing strengthens its economic, commercial and financial outlook by establishing close relations with political and economic elites in the Western Balkans. This process, which has been shaped by intergovernmental contracts, which have been criticised for being non-transparent, is generally maintained by the loans provided to infrastructure investments and the financial support provided to overcome the problems. In this process, trade also stands at a critical point. Of course, Beijing profits from the commercial operations. The steps we mentioned earlier that might lead to a "debt trap" may also result in China gaining control or functioning of critical infrastructure facilities in the region.

Especially after the financial crisis of 2008, China's infrastructure investments in the Western Balkans increased significantly. The Belt and Road Initiative has also brought this process into a coherent and planned context. China also started investing in the Western Balkans maritime transport infrastructure.

oped a debt and credit strategy that would make participating countries economically dependent and control their important assets in the long term. China's acquisition of Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port due to Colombo's inability to pay its debts is seen as a pioneering example in this sense. See: Deborah Brautigam, *A Critical Look at Chinese Debt-Trap Diplomacy: The Rise of a Meme*, "Area Development and Policy", Vol. 5, 2020, No. 1, p. 1-14.

²³ Vladimir Shopov, *Decade of...*, p. 10-11.

²⁴ Stefan Vladislavljev, *Surveying China's Digital Silk Road in the Western Balkans*, "War on the Rocks Commentary", 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/08/surveying-chinas-digital-silk-road-in-the-western-balkans/> (Accessed on 17.01.2022).

Beijing, which first bought the shares of Piraeus Port of Greece, the gate of the Balkans, thus made its investments in the land corridor from Piraeus to the Western Balkans meaningful.²⁵ In addition to the investments made in Durres Port in Albania, interest in Vlore has also begun. However, Tirana's encounter with Washington's pressure on China's port investments after NATO membership creates an important problem for Beijing. Within the scope of 17+1 Cooperation, a Chinese consortium has undertaken the construction of a new terminal at the Port of Rijeka in Croatia. Beijing also has shares in Zadar Port by Chinese companies. Beijing has also embarked on constructing railway lines connecting Croatia's ports on the Adriatic coast, especially Rijeka and Zadar, to Central and Eastern Europe.²⁶ The modernisation of the railway connecting Belgrade to Budapest and the construction of the Surcin-Obrenovac Highway in Serbia are also being implemented with Chinese investment. The coal mine in Kostolac was also implemented with the investment of the Chinese company. The copper mine investment in Zijin is also among Beijing's plans. Chinese companies are building the Preljina-Pozega Highway.²⁷ China, eager to develop road and railway infrastructure in North Macedonia, is negatively affected by the political instability and the political change brought by NATO membership.

Miladinovci-Stip and Kicevo-Ohrid Highway projects can be seen as projects postponed due to corruption allegations and instability in the country. In Albania, a Chinese company, which bought the Patoz Marinza field in the south of the country from a Canadian company, extracts a certain amount of oil. In Republika Srpska, a Chinese infrastructure firm is also carrying out Banja Luka-Prijedor Highway, although its completion is delayed. Chinese companies have also undertaken the Bar-Boljare Highway, which is under construction in Montenegro.²⁸ Analyses expressing that Podgorica may face a "debt trap" also mention the ever-increasing costs of this highway connecting Bar to Boljare. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, similar to North Macedonia, highway and railway investments are on China's agenda. As we mentioned earlier, Beijing's primary

²⁵ Vladimir Shopov, *Decade of...*, p. 11.

²⁶ Nebojsa Koharovic, *Croatia, China Hitting the Fast Lane of Cooperation*, "China Today", 2019, http://www.chinatoday.com.cn/ctenglish/2018/ii/201904/t20190429_800166589.html (Accessed on 17.01.2022).

²⁷ Jacob Mardell, *Beijing Fills Gaps Left by Brussels in the Western Balkans*, "MERICS", 2021, <https://merics.org/en/short-analysis/beijing-fills-gaps-left-brussels-western-balkan> (Accessed on 17.01.2022).

²⁸ *Ibid.*

goal is to build and control transport corridors that will connect ports such as Piraeus on the Aegean coast and Bar, Rijeka, Zadar and Durres on the Adriatic coast to the inner parts of the Western Balkans and Central Europe. Thus, the sea and land corridors of the Belt and Road Initiative will be integrated into the Western Balkans and reach the EU market.

Part of Beijing's pursuit of effectiveness in the Western Balkans is academic and scientific cooperation. This issue is carried out in parallel with the Belt and Road Initiative and as an extension of the 17+1 cooperation. The partnership between the Chinese Academy of Sciences and the academies of sciences of the Western Balkan countries grows.²⁹ Beijing employs Confucius Institutes to foster academic collaboration and to attract Western Balkan experts and students to study in China. It also supports establishing Sinology departments in prestigious state universities in these countries or ensures the development of existing ones.³⁰ The increase in the rate of Chinese-focused research and lectures by Banja Luka University in the Republika Srpska and its academic connections with China through the Confucius Institute can be cited as an example.³¹ The officials of these institutes frequently visit secondary education institutions in Western Balkan countries, especially Serbia and Bosnia, to make presentations and organise courses on the Chinese language and culture. There are also initiatives that direct students to study in China. There are Confucius Institutes in all Western Balkan countries except Kosovo. In Belgrade, besides the institute, there is also the Chinese Cultural Centre, which incorporates almost every element of Chinese culture and promotes it to the public through various fairs, courses, screenings, competitions and festivals.³² The number of these centres is planned to increase over time.

Private universities in the Western Balkans are more flexible and successful in establishing relations with their Chinese partners. Donja Gorica University in Montenegro hosts a large number of Chinese lecturers. The opening of China-oriented master's programs there can serve as an example. The cooperation projects developed by the Zagreb Business School in Croatia with Chinese universities are

²⁹ Vladimir Shopov, *Decade of...*, p. 6-7.

³⁰ Ljiljana Stevic, *The Evolution of Chinese Cultural Diplomacy and Its Impact on the BiH Perception of the Belt and Road Initiative and China CEE Cooperation*, "China CEE Institute Working Paper", No. 22, 2020, p. 13-20.

³¹ Vladimir Shopov, *Decade of...*, p. 7.

³² *Chinese Cultural centre to Open Soon*, "eKapija", 2021, <https://www.ekapija.com/en/news/3266437/chinese-cultural-centre-to-open-soon-office-space-on-5500-m2-restaurant> (Accessed on 18.01.2022).

also valuable in showing the ties of an EU member with China. It is also an important detail that students who graduate from universities in the Western Balkans are provided with the opportunity to study in China.³³ Some of these students are recruited as lecturers at Chinese universities, and some as specialists in projects of Chinese companies in the Western Balkans. Chinese universities have opened regional departments or research centres. There are 23 departments or research centres related to the region in Chinese universities today. Apart from universities, there are nearly 30 research programs related to the area.³⁴ The China-CEE Institute, located in Budapest, has become one of the most important research centres in the region.

One of the most critical legitimators of the Belt and Road Initiative in the Western Balkans is the media. For example, the number of news articles focused on the Belt and Road Initiative in Albania increased from 42 to 194 between 2016 and 2019.³⁵ However, analysis of the shortcomings and adverse effects of the initiative (such as the debt trap) is scarce in news content. The Western Balkans media portrays China as a friendly and cooperative economic actor. The focus of news content is that Beijing's financial and technological resources should be utilised. The important point is the governments want to direct the media to show China as a friendly and cooperation-oriented actor.³⁶ Considering that there are problems in media independence and states have a serious steering power in this sense, it can be understood how critical China's ties with governments are in manipulating the media.

Recently, China has made agreements with official and private news agencies to try to direct the news in its favour. China provides these agencies with information and content directly, primarily through its embassies and its agencies. Trying to get a place in Western Balkan countries through pro-Beijing writers and reporters, China also allocates a significant amount of funds to these actors.³⁷ These writers and reporters, who make study visits to China, meet directly with the Chinese authorities and are informed about Beijing's approach to certain is-

³³ Vladimir Shopov, *Decade of...*, p. 9.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

³⁶ Xhorxhina Bami, *China Increasing its Footprint in Balkan Media, Study Concludes*, "Balkan Insight", 2020, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/12/09/china-increasing-its-footprint-in-balkan-media-study-concludes/> (Accessed on 18.01.2022).

³⁷ Vladimir Shopov, *Getting on the Radar: China's Rising Media Presence in South East Europe*, "Konrad Adenauer Stiftung. Media Programme SEE", 2020, p. 1-3.

sues. Chinese ambassadors are also trying to establish links with important journalists of the Western Balkans. For example, China is attempting to acquire an important media group in Croatia. It is essential in this sense to produce a news content that will introduce the Chinese lifestyle, culture, food and the Belt and Road Initiative.³⁸ The Chinese ambassadors' attempts to use social media applications (especially Facebook and Twitter) in a friendly and collaborative way are also part of the importance given to the media. This trend has increased significantly during the Covid-19 pandemic.

**EVALUATION OF CHINA'S APPEARANCE IN THE WESTERN BALKANS
THROUGH THE NEO-GRAMSCIAN APPROACH**
Neo-Gramscian Approach and Hegemony

Gramsci tried to explain how social groups seize and maintain power in a given society. In this context, he wanted to explain how to oppose the actors who took power and construct the power against them. In Gramscian terms, hegemony is a social and political control method that brings together physical (material) power and the consent factor.³⁹ However, consent is much more critical at the stage of providing and maintaining control in the hegemonic sense. The moral, cultural values, practical relationships and worldviews of the dominant classes and groups should be internalised in a social sense with the consent of the secondary groups or classes. The content of the ideology is based on the association of the interests of the controlled classes with the interests of the politically leading actors or groups.⁴⁰ This process is shaped within the framework of voluntary acceptance. In addition, it is confirmed by the controlled classes that the social-political values reflected by the dominant group are correct for them. The hegemon group operates within a broad social framework and legitimises its goals by paying attention to particular demands and rights of the secondary classes. However, the dominant group's understanding of using "force" does not completely disappear.⁴¹ Robinson characterises hegemony as "consensus positioned

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 12-13.

³⁹ Vasilis Maglaras, *Consent and Submission: Aspects of Gramsci's Theory of the Political and Civil Society*, "SAGE Open", January-March Issue, 2013, p. 2.

⁴⁰ Quentin Hoare, Geoffrey Nowell Smith (Eds.), *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, New York, International Publishers, 1978, p. 328-329.

⁴¹ William I. Robinson, *Globalization, World System and Democracy Promotion in US Foreign Policy*, "Theory and Society", No. 25, 1996, p. 627-628.

in the shadow of the element of oppression” and views this condition as a distinct instance of social dominance.⁴²

While describing the concept of hegemony, Gramsci sees the social structure known as the “historical bloc”, which can be defined as a stable coalition shaped around the leader group, as one of the most important tools in producing consent.⁴³ The formation of historical blocs also depends on the ideological background and the transnational integration shaped in this context. Media, education and material elements have a founding role in forming historical blocks. The function of historical blocs is to establish the link between political and civil society or to strengthen the organic relationship. This will also be feasible because these blocks will include the interests of secondary actors—what Gramsci refers to as “moral hegemony”- into the system.⁴⁴ The relationship style based on cheating and deception, on the other hand, is an expression of domination, not hegemony, due to the lack of moral dimension. In Gramscian hegemony, the interests of a group or class are not given importance when establishing institutions and developing ideology. At this point, an understanding develops that is universal and opens space for secondary actors.⁴⁵

Gramsci, who sees organic intellectuals as social groups that eliminate the need for the use of force by giving morality to hegemony, states that the process of understanding the truth and acquiring knowledge is integrated into hegemony through an ideological and cultural context.⁴⁶ According to Gill and Law, the issue of “consent” should dominate relations between the state and civil society in establishing hegemony, rather than the element of “force.”⁴⁷ Hegemony creates its system of knowledge and conveys it to the consent of secondary groups through organic intellectuals. With this aspect, Gramsci states that there is no independent

⁴² Mehmet Akif Okur, *Gramsci, Cox ve Hegemonya: Yerelden Küresele, İktidarın Sosyolojisi Üzerine* [Gramsci, Cox and Hegemony: From the Local to the Global, On the Sociology of Power], “Uluslararası İlişkiler”, Vol. 12, 2015, No. 46, p. 137.

⁴³ Darrow Schechter, *The Historical Bloc: Toward a Typology of Weak States and Contemporary Legitimation Crises*, in Mark McNally (Ed.), *Antonio Gramsci: Critical Explorations in Contemporary Political Thought*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, p. 179-180.

⁴⁴ Mehmet Akif Okur, *Gramsci, Cox...*, p. 138-139.

⁴⁵ Robert W. Cox, *Gramsci, Hegemony and International Relations: An Essay in Method*, “Millennium: Journal of International Studies”, Vol. 12, 1983, No. 2, p. 164.

⁴⁶ Mehmet Akif Okur, *Gramsci, Cox...*, p. 140.

⁴⁷ Stephen Gill, David Law, *Global Economy and Structural Power of Capital*, “International Studies Quarterly”, Vol. 33, 1989, No. 4, p. 476.

intellectual class and that the intellectuals of the hegemonic class create philosophical, cultural and political content that persuades other groups and brings their wishes and the interests of the dominant class together.⁴⁸ Gill also states that media and education have a very important place in the hegemony formation, which is shaped in the long term by the “organic intellectuals” that it includes.⁴⁹

Cox, who shaped his approach based on Gramsci’s ideas, mentions that power is shaped by consent and the struggles and overlaps in civil society are very important in this sense.⁵⁰ Arrighi handled this situation at the state level. According to him, the main element that distinguishes hegemony from domination is the relationship of consent, which manifests itself not only with the possibilities of material power but also with the influence of the community through the perception of interest.⁵¹ In other words, an actor, who proves that his power is increasing in proportion to particular or all states, will reflect positively on citizens of other states and can have hegemony.

In this context, the most critical issue is to ensure “trust”. According to Cox, hegemony is established through a three-pillar structure of ideas, material capacities, and institutions.⁵² The opinion is the key element in gaining the consent of other societies. Cox defines this situation as a set of values and perceptions regarding the nature that permeates the structures created by states and non-state actors. According to him, hegemony in the system would be strengthened if the set of values and perceptions mentioned were stable and coherent. This will point to the internalisation of hegemony. The idea will shape the formation of hegemony. According to Cox, material factors will support this. These material elements are technological and organisational infrastructure, natural resources, industrial infrastructure and military equipment. When these factors are brought together, they are supported by the component of welfare and material power is formed.⁵³ Although hegemony is generally based on consent, material power can increase the probability

⁴⁸ Mehmet Akif Okur, *Gramsci, Cox...*, p. 140.

⁴⁹ Stephen Gill, *Hegemony, Consensus and Trilateralism*, “Review of International Studies”, Vol. 12, 1986, No.3, p. 210-211.

⁵⁰ Robert W. Cox, *Gramsci, Hegemony...*, p. 164.

⁵¹ Giovanni Arrighi, *The Three Hegemonies of Historical Capitalism*, in Stephen Gill (Ed.), *Gramsci, Historical Materialism and International Relations*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 148-150.

⁵² John S. Moolakkattu, *Robert W. Cox and Critical Theory of International Relations*, “International Studies”, Vol. 46, 2009, No. 4, p. 441.

⁵³ Robert W. Cox, *Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory*, “Millennium Journal of International Studies”, Vol. 10, 1981, No. 2, p. 136.

of coercion through political, economic, military and psychological (social) effects it creates. The possibility of pressure is one of the basic elements of material power. The strong actor can impose his will on the weak if necessary. However, the relationship between the use of force and hegemony is negative. The more successful the hegemon is in obtaining the consent of others, the less likely it will resort to coercion.⁵⁴ Arrighi states that this dominance can trigger a counter-hegemonic alliance against itself.⁵⁵

Institutions are the third pillar of hegemony. These elements, which are created by combining ideas and financial power, have the potential to increase the effectiveness of both. The primary mission of the institutions is to legitimise the effectiveness of the hegemon and to ensure the values reflected by the hegemon are rooted in the international system. However, as Cox mentioned, institutions can turn into a battleground of opposing ideas over time, and even new institutions that reflect different understandings can be formed.⁵⁶ As Okur points out, Cox mentions that social forces influence how societies are incorporated into hegemony. This process, which points to a transnational phase, constructs consent. That is, power is not just a given element. At the same time, hegemonic relations are transformed into a whole with a socially constructed persuasion process. Thus, a link is established between the local, the national and the global. Because civil society acting in a transnational context gives substance to norms, institutions and material elements that support hegemony.⁵⁷

Cox utilised Gramscian references to highlight civil society's power to shape states. To establish global hegemony, the actor gains acceptance in civil society and effectively manipulates the states and the system. As Stephen Gill mentioned, this move can also be considered as the shaping of hegemony within a moral dimension.⁵⁸ That is, the interests of secondary groups will be included in the system, and a general legitimacy will be established. For such a process to be experienced, as Laclau and Mouffe mentioned, the dominant bloc needs to be at a specific intellectual level.⁵⁹ Okur describes this situation as the formation of civil society complexes emerging initially at the national level and then starting to compete

⁵⁴ Mehmet Akif Okur, *Gramsci, Cox...*, p. 144-145.

⁵⁵ Giovanni Arrighi, *The Three...*, p. 150.

⁵⁶ Robert W. Cox, *Social Forces...*, p. 137.

⁵⁷ Mehmet Akif Okur, *Gramsci, Cox...*, p. 145-147.

⁵⁸ Stephen Gill, *Gramsci and Global Politics: Towards a Post-Hegemonic Research Agenda*, Stephen Gill (Ed.), *Gramsci, Historical Materialism and International Relations*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 3.

⁵⁹ Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, London – New York, Verso, 2001, p. 67.

with one another to create hegemonic spheres of influence.⁶⁰ Cox explains this situation through Gramsci's concept of "historical bloc". He stated that hegemonic networks go to a hegemonic coalition over material power, ideas and institutions.⁶¹ In the relationship between the state and the historical bloc, the state has some autonomy in its actions toward the historical bloc. The state does not prioritize the defence of subjective interests while acting by the political interests of the historical bloc and regards this class from a "holistic" perspective. Actors whose special interests come to the fore weaken and move away from the role of hegemon actor. Hegemony should be viewed as a paradigm and disseminated to other system actors through historical blocks. In this framework, the hegemon should have a global project that other states can share or see as legitimate and be able to renounce its short-term interests if necessary.

Cox evaluates the expansion of hegemony from the centre to the periphery within the frame of Gramsci's conceptualisation of "passive revolution". According to him, actors who want to integrate into the hegemonic order will encounter large-scale economic, political and social problems in this process. The biggest problem will be to transform the political structure.⁶² At this point, Cox states that the ruling class can reduce the reaction by making economic and political concessions to resist the pressure of change from the secondary groups. Thus, the "revolution" demand of secondary groups to have their interest dominate the system will be answered by long-term reconciliation in the form of concessions and new articulation processes from the secondary groups to the ruling class. According to Okur, hegemony is a broad-based consent coalition with a particular ideology and integrated institutions. The controlling power can be a single state, a group of states or an alliance of state-private actors.⁶³

China and Western Balkans within the Frame of the Neo-Gramscian Approach

China is uncomfortable with the international system and wants to see it transformed into a multipolar structure.⁶⁴ As mentioned by Mearsheimer, who

⁶⁰ Mehmet Akif Okur, *Gramsci, Cox...*, p. 139.

⁶¹ Robert W. Cox, *Gramsci, Hegemony...*, p. 165-170.

⁶² Robert W. Cox, *The International in Evolution*, "Millennium Journal of International Studies", Vol. 35, 2007, No. 3, p. 516.

⁶³ Mehmet Akif Okur, *Gramsci, Cox...*, p. 144-145.

⁶⁴ Ciwan M. Can, Anson Chan, *Rethinking the Rise of China and Its Implications on International*

emphasises the continuity of the power struggle within the framework of aggressive realism and prioritises the role of regional hegemons, Beijing is aware that it must first strengthen its regional hegemony.⁶⁵ The Belt and Road Initiative will also serve to increase Beijing's global influence and transform the international system in terms of China's economic, commercial, institutional and ultimately political values or expectations. Thus, in the end, a global activity similar to that of the US will be created.

In Gramscian terms, establishing hegemony on behalf of China is the best strategy given the nature of its worldwide dominance. Beijing wants to show how a counter-hegemony can be established against the US and its allies, which China thinks to hold power in a systemic sense. By keeping the opposition under control and including the individuals that can be expected to be opposed to the CCP, it largely concentrates on its political issues. Especially in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, the repression policies against the Uyghur minority and the security moves that are said to have emptied Hong Kong's political autonomy can be evaluated within this framework.⁶⁶ The development of a "Chinese" style of religion as well as diplomatic and military actions that Taipei perceives as "the pressure of occupation" can also be taken into account in this regard.⁶⁷ The recruitment of business people who have the potential to be dissidents to the CCP can also be read as a step taken to show that investment opportunities will increase if they act in the direction desired by the state.⁶⁸ With these moves, Beijing wants to prevent the formation of a possible "counter-hegemony".

While China is integrating into the existing neoliberal institutionalist structure through various organisations (especially the World Trade Organization-WTO), on the other hand, it has an understanding that emphasises dependency relations and makes all the regions with which it interacts, especially the Indo-

Order, "Chinese Journal of International Review", Vol. 2, 2020, No. 1, 2050005, p. 13.

⁶⁵ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Gathering Storm: China's Challenge to US Power in Asia*, "The Chinese Journal of International Politics", Vol. 3, 2010, No. 4, p. 387-391.

⁶⁶ Human Rights Watch Report, "Break Their Lineage, Break Their Roots". *China's Crimes against Humanity Targeting Uyghurs and Other Turkic Muslims*, Mills Legal Clinic, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/04/19/break-their-lineage-break-their-roots/chinas-crimes-against-humanity-targeting> (Accessed on 20.01.2022).

⁶⁷ Xinhua News Agency, *Xi Jinping Stresses Developing Religions in Chinese Context*, 2021, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2021-12-04/Xi-Jinping-stresses-religions-in-China-must-be-Chinese-in-orientation-15ILYigIo7e/index.html> (Accessed on 22.01.2022).

⁶⁸ Robin Brant, *Why is Jack Ma a Member of the Communist Party of China?*, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-46353767> (Accessed on 20.01.2022).

Pacific, dependent on itself. While realising this through bilateral ties, it tries to make institutional structures such as 17+1, Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and Silk Road Fund, which can be seen as an extension of the Belt and Road Initiative, inclusive and effective.

When it comes to the Western Balkans, Beijing tries to use its “physical capacity” above all else. This capacity manifests itself in foreign direct investment support, loans and technology aid given to the infrastructure projects. The increasing visibility of Chinese goods also shows the importance Beijing attaches to the “infrastructure” elements described by Althusser.⁶⁹ In the Gramscian sense, it is vital to develop investment opportunities that will create economic and technological transformation in favour of the people and not dependent on large-scale “transformation costs”. Therefore, the EU accession process, which Western Balkan societies see as their main future goal, is highly dependent on political, social and economic conditions. China’s unconditional support to the region is a positive step toward the formation of regional efficiency. Considering the “consent” factor is the most critical condition in the creation and maintenance of hegemonic control, the unconditional relationship to be established with the Western Balkan societies will be in favour of China. Especially in parallel with the 17+1 initiative, China is trying to transform investment, infrastructure development and business practices in the Western Balkans. Despite criticism from Brussels regarding public tenders and the uncertainty of the content of the agreements, as well as corruption allegations involving political elites, the increasing proportion of Chinese investments and financial support, means that Beijing’s aid, which is not based on legal or financial conditions, proves to be important in meeting the needs of the Western Balkans.⁷⁰ Addressing immediate financial needs and a deficit of investment with Chinese capital and support will assist in building social consent. In the end, this may open the door to a counter-hegemony concerning the EU.

When Chinese influence, which is claimed to remain under the control of the political and economic elites and perpetuate the rule of the “authoritarian” leaders in the Western Balkans, turns into a permanent anchor in meeting the economic, technological and financial needs, the “secondary” groups (different interests and

⁶⁹ Louis Althusser, *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)*, in Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, London, New Left Books, 1971, p. 166-176.

⁷⁰Rade Rankovic, *China Grows Balkan Investments by Asking Less Than EU, Say Experts*, 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/a/china-grows-balkan-investments-by-asking-less-than-eu-say-experts-/6349558.html> (Accessed on 20.01.2022).

positions) may also begin to receive support.⁷¹ These societies see EU membership as the main factor that will increase their socio-economic level. If the EU accession process does not materialise in the medium term, China's activity may achieve broader social consent in the end. In such a case, the leaders of the Western Balkan countries, who have been subjected to intense criticism and accused of authoritarian political patterns, corruption and nepotism, may claim a broad spectrum of legitimacy. There may be a connection of interests between authoritarian political patterns and large segments of society.⁷² However, as Robinson mentioned, the possibility of using force will never be removed from the table.⁷³ Serbia's recent armament move confirms this understanding.

China's manoeuvres in the Western Balkans create new "historical blocs" that will be effective in contact with China. The Progressive Party, which previously carried out an EU-oriented policy, and the Socialist Party of Serbia, which undertook the legacy of Milosevic (can be called a tandem of Aleksandar Vucic and Ivica Dacic), are in power in Serbia. This political bloc created serious support in bureaucracy, academia and the media and developed a political understanding accused by the West of being authoritarian and populist.⁷⁴ Although this structure receives strong economic support from the West as membership negotiations are carried out with the EU, Serbia has received large-scale investments and financial support from China in recent years.⁷⁵ A similar situation existed before in Montenegro under the leadership of Milo Djukanovic. Although Djukanovic lost his control over the government, one of the issues that the new Montenegrin government had to deal with the most was the agreements with China.⁷⁶ China is in

⁷¹ Samuel Rogers, *liberal Capitalist Development: Chinese State-Owned Capital Investment in Serbia*, "Contemporary Politics", Vol. 28, 2022, No. 3, p. 349-350.

⁷² Marko Kmezic, *Rule of Law and Democracy in the Western Balkans: Addressing the Gap Between Policies and Practice*, "Southeast European and Black Sea Studies", Vol. 20, 2020, No. 1, p. 184-185.

⁷³ William I. Robinson, *Globalization...*, p. 628.

⁷⁴ EWB, *Serbian Ruling Parties Four Times More Present on Media Portals Than the Opposition*, "European Western Balkans", 2020, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/11/20/serbian-ruling-parties-four-times-more-present-on-media-portals-than-the-opposition/> (Accessed on 20.01.2022).

⁷⁵ Tena Prelec, *Our Brothers, Our Saviours: The Importance of Chinese Investment for the Serbian Government's Narrative of Economic Rebound*. Policy paper, Prague Security Studies Institute, Prague, 2020, p. 12-13.

⁷⁶ Tijana Okić, *The Debt of Integration: Montenegro's Chinese Loan and the Traps of Europe*, 2021, <https://www.cadtm.org/The-debt-of-integration-Montenegro-s-Chinese-loan-and-the-traps-of-Europe> (Accessed on 20.01.2022).

close contact with Milorad Dodik, the leader of the Republika Srpska, in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and with the Rama government in Albania. Beijing tends to create a “historical bloc” in the Western Balkans with the help of integrated politicians.

On the other hand, it opens the door for these countries to form historical blocs compatible with China. As we have mentioned before, the direct and indirect contacts that Beijing is trying to establish with the academies and media organizations of these countries help to create a historical bloc. Sinology departments opened in Western Balkan universities, language-teaching initiatives through Confucius Institutes, and Chinese Cultural centres are certain moves of Beijing, including the academy.⁷⁷ The increase in the number of news related to the Belt and Road Initiative (from 42 to 194 between 2016 and 2019) and media trips to China are important.⁷⁸ It is the function of historical blocs to establish the link between politics and secondary groups (civil society). The Chinese Government aims to create the ideological infrastructure that will enable it to gain social “consent” through the media and academia. Through building an integrated “organic intellectual” class, it aims to create societies that are integrated with Beijing or consent to China’s activity through the education and media sectors, in line with the contact of this class with governments that will establish close relations with China. This situation may be implemented not only in the Western Balkans but also in larger geography, in parallel with the Belt and Road Initiative. In current conditions, it can be stated that the West is much more powerful and legitimate in the eyes of the Western Balkan societies. It can be seen that the process of reacting to authoritarian, populist governments by taking to the squares, which has been seen frequently in the region recently, has been implemented with a strong emphasis on the EU and the West.⁷⁹ In the end, Beijing aims to transform this strong “Western” social infrastructure in its favour through strong and new “historical blocs” to be constructed. As Gill stated, the free will and expectations of the people must be directed for the formation of hegemony.

Cox’s Neo-Gramscian analysis, while focusing on civil society, actually describes this aim of Beijing. The Belt and Road Initiative aims to show that China follows a “win-win” strategy by transforming its increasing economic power into infrastructure needs, technological transformation (especially 5G) and direct in-

⁷⁷ Vladimir Shopov, *Decade of...*, p. 9.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 12-13.

⁷⁹ Irina Neshikj, Biljana Spasovska, *Filling Democracy Gaps in the Western Balkans*, 2020, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2020/12/07/filling-democracy-s-gaps-in-western-balkans-pub-83147> (Accessed on 20.01.2022).

vestments that provide employment to a certain extent.⁸⁰ It tries to do this by developing cooperation with the governments, constructing an integrated “civil society” in bureaucracy, academia, media and business, and by relying on their “persuasion capacity”. However, the biggest problem is the EU and NATO activity, which was structured right after the collapse of the Eastern Bloc and has built itself a strong “organic intellectual” class at an early date. Beijing needs to create a “counter-hegemony” to combat this class. China has put the financial capacity underlined by Cox into effect in the Western Balkans. However, statistics show that the increasing Chinese activity is far behind the visibility of the EU.⁸¹ In any case, the material capacity is not enough for counter-hegemony. Within the framework of institutions, no new organisational phase has been created outside of the 17+1 initiative. The 17+1 initiative is also an initiative that functions within the framework of summits and does not have an organisational infrastructure. Although the Belt and Road Initiative has institutional extensions such as the Asian Infrastructure and Development Bank or the Silk Road Fund, it has no institutional extension in Western Balkans or Eastern Europe. Considering that the EU has a supra-national structure within itself, it is evident that Beijing needs an institutional structure that will use ideas and material capacity as transformative aspects. Institutions that emerged as an extension of the liberal institutionalist approach may turn into a field of opposing ideas, as Cox mentioned. The new organisational infrastructure that Beijing has created concerning the Belt and Road Initiative will be able to open up space for the construction of a China-oriented counter-hegemony, based on Arrighi’s thought. Analyses have begun to show that AIIB may compete with the World Bank.⁸²

As Cox mentioned, the relationship between the state and the historical bloc, which is an extension of civil society, is important in the formation of hegemony because the state can act within a certain autonomy compared to the historical bloc. State and civil society in China are highly integrated, and in fact, the historical bloc was built by the CCP. There is a structure in which even businessmen become

⁸⁰ Jens Bastian, *Is China’s Win-Win Cooperation a Loss For Europe?*, 2020, <https://reconasia.csis.org/chinas-win-win-cooperation-loss-europe/> (Accessed on 20.01.2022).

⁸¹ European Commission, *Questions and Answers: Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans*, 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/qanda_20_1819 (Accessed on 20.01.2022).

⁸² Ming Wan, *The AIIB Versus the World Bank and the ADB*, in Ming Wan, *The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank: The Construction of Power and the Struggle for the East Asian International Order*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, p. 78-80.

members of the CCP, and the bureaucracy, media and academy are completely directed by the state. This situation is also an extension of the “passive revolution” put forward by Gramsci and emphasised by Cox. Anticipating the discomfort that business people, highly educated groups and secondary group members will feel towards the ruling class, steps are taken to include them in this class. It is well known that Chinese intellectuals or civil groups that were excluded from the current historical bloc were also oppressed, as they were perceived as opposition. There is no overlap in the Western Balkans as there is in China. It is possible to say that the civil structure integrated with the West is more robust, and no distinct bloc formation exists (in the recent period, Serbia can be excluded to a certain extent).⁸³ In this context, the biggest challenge for China in penetrating the region is the change of this Western-oriented civil structure through passive revolution. By constantly explaining that it is not in conflict with the West and trying to show this to the Western Balkan countries, China also wants to show that global hegemony does not have to be under the control of a “single” actor, as the Neo-Gramscian approach underlines. At this point, Beijing tries to show that it can act in cooperation with the EU in the Western Balkans.

CHINESE INFLUENCE IN THE EU’S WESTERN BALKANS STRATEGY: THE STABILITY-DEMOCRACY DILEMMA

The EU, which promised that the Western Balkan countries would be an integral part of a united Europe at the Thessaloniki Summit in 2003, has not been able to take care of this promise over time.⁸⁴ In 19 years following, Croatia was the only Western Balkan country to join the EU at the Thessaloniki Summit. The accession process of Zagreb, which became an EU member in 2013, has gone a long way compared to the 2004 and 2007 enlargements. The economic and structural problems within the EU, as well as the economic and structural problems of the Western Balkan countries, stopped the enlargement process.⁸⁵ In addition, the damage caused by the BREXIT and the crisis created by the “migration waves” that increased after 2012 did not favour Western Balkan

⁸³ Natasha Wunsch, *EU Enlargement and Civil Society in the Western Balkans. From Mobilisation to Empowerment*, Zurich, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, p. 13.

⁸⁴ Milenko Petrovic, Nikolaos Tzifakis, *A Geopolitical...*, p. 157.

⁸⁵ Milenko Petrovic, Garth Wilson, *Bilateral Relations in the Western Balkans as a Challenge for EU Accession*, “Journal of Contemporary European Studies,” Vol. 29, 2021, No. 2, p. 201-204.

integration. After 2017, Brussels started paying attention to the expansion process. The call of EU Commission President Juncker at the “state of the union” in September 2017 for a proper enlargement perspective to be provided to the Western Balkans represents the first step in this direction.⁸⁶ Then, in February 2018, the EU Commission’s strategy document was published to accelerate the enlargement of the Western Balkans. Although this document sets the goal of membership in 2025 at the earliest, the criterion that all the countries that will become members should solve their problems with each other is introduced (any candidate country has previously made no request in this direction), making the membership processes much longer and more complex.⁸⁷ The political elites of the Western Balkan nations were disappointed by Macron’s statement that the EU should complete the current reform procedures before enlargement.⁸⁸ At the EU-Western Balkans Summit in May 2018, the Council’s refusal to start membership negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania, despite the Commission’s proposal, was another development that dragged the process into negativity.⁸⁹ Although the “name problem” was resolved with the Treaty of Prespa, the failure to start negotiations with North Macedonia created the image that Brussels was not ready for enlargement. Adverse developments in the Pristina-Belgrade Dialogue were carried out under the EU’s supervision. The disagreement between the EU and the member states on what to do in this regard also pushed the enlargement move into negativity.⁹⁰

As Manners states, the most critical feature of the EU is its normative power.⁹¹ What Manners wants to talk about is not only that the EU is based on common values such as peace, freedom, democracy, the rule of law and respect for fundamental rights. The EU is working to disseminate these values in its immediate vicinity to make them a worldwide standard. While the EU tries to protect its interests, it also systematically focuses on broader foreign policy goals and values. Many experts find the normative aspect of the EU quite controversial. Hyde-

⁸⁶ Milenko Petrovic, Nikolaos Tzifakis, *A Geopolitical...*, p. 159-160.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 160-161.

⁸⁸ Srdjan Cvijic, *A Ship Without a Rudder? The EU Strategy in the Western Balkans*, in *IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook 2020*, Barcelona, European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed), 2021, p. 206.

⁸⁹ Nicholas Ross Smith, et al., *The EU’s...*, p. 175-176.

⁹⁰ *Serbia-Kosovo Talks Fail to Make Progress despite EU Optimism*, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-kosovo-eu-talks/31308422.html> (Accessed on 20.01.2022).

⁹¹ Ian Manners, *Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?*, “*Journal of Common Market Studies*”, Vol. 40, 2002, No. 2, p. 238-244.

Price states that the ethical dimension attributed to the EU by realists is debatable.⁹² Sjursen, on the other hand, says that the values that the EU reflects in the normative sense are likely to have a positive or negative effect on other actors with different social, socio-cultural and political backgrounds.⁹³ Fisher-Onar and Nicolaidis underline that the normative power of the EU can be used to hide European neo-colonial desires.⁹⁴ On the other hand, Casier states that the normative initiatives of the EU towards its immediate vicinity manifest themselves in different countries within the framework of different approaches and evaluates that this situation creates a double standard.⁹⁵ On the other hand, Forsberg states that the normative power of Brussels is fundamentally reflected in the enlargement strategy.⁹⁶ However, differentiation in the approach to the Western Balkans, in particular, requires a re-evaluation of this issue.

Emphasising the rule of law, democracy, human and minority rights and fundamental freedoms within the scope of its enlargement strategy, the EU states that countries wishing to become members must be in full compliance with the Copenhagen criterion. Actors who became members after 1993 joined the Union after the completion of this negotiation process, known as *acquis communautaire*. However, especially after the 2004 and 2007 enlargements, the EU's problems have increased, and severe failures in compliance with normative elements have been observed due to developmental differences between new and old members. Following the constitutional debates and the ensuing 2008 financial crisis, the union's West-East split worsened. Rising "xenophobia" and "far right" movements in Europe distanced even the most pro-enlargement actors. Countries that were members before the 2004 and 2007 enlargements consider that others, almost all former Eastern Bloc members, are still in transition. Therefore, before a new enlargement wave, some argue that administrative reforms should be made to enable the mentioned countries to comply with EU norms at an advanced level. They think this will overcome the political fragmentation that the union is facing. As

⁹² Adrian Hyde-Price, *A Tragic Actor? A Realist Perspective on Ethical Power Europe*, "International Affairs", Vol. 84, 2008, No. 1, p. 30-36.

⁹³ Helene Sjursen, *The EU as a Normative Power: How Can This Be?* "Journal of European Public Policy", Vol. 13, 2006, No. 2, p. 246-248.

⁹⁴ Nora Fisher-Onar, Kalypso Nicolaidis, *The Decentring Agenda: Europe as a Post-Colonial Power*, "Cooperation and Conflict", Vol. 48, 2013, No. 2, p. 292-296.

⁹⁵ Tom Casier, *The EU-Russia Strategic Partnership: Challenging the Normative Argument*, "Europe-Asia Studies", Vol. 65, 2013, No. 7, p. 1383-1385.

⁹⁶ Tuomas Forsberg, *Normative Power Europe. Once Again: A Conceptual Analysis of an Ideal Type*, "Journal of Common Market Studies", Vol. 49, 2011, No. 6, p. 1198-1200.

Warleigh-Lack points out, it is also stated that the approach called for “differentiated integration”, which is claimed to have given importance to geopolitics beyond EU norms, opens up space for the aforementioned “double-speed” view.⁹⁷ The approach, which envisages the full implementation of the Copenhagen criterion and the integration of new members into the union by solving their existing problems with any EU member, aims to eliminate the problem of differentiated integration. For this reason, the accession processes of the Western Balkan countries are constantly delayed, and the spirit of the 2004-2007 enlargements cannot be made visible in the Western Balkan enlargement. Because a new wave of enlargement towards the Western Balkans will probably transform the “double-speed” view into a “multi-speed” one since the region is also behind the developmental average of countries that joined the union in 2004-2007.⁹⁸

Since 2017, senior EU officials appear to have expressed their concerns about the decreasing effectiveness of the union in the Western Balkans and the increasing visibility of external actors such as China and Russia. Federica Mogherini, High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy at the time, stated that she was concerned about Western Balkans becoming an area where global tension turned into a chessboard. Johannes Hahn, the Representative of the Neighbourhood and Enlargement of the period, also stated in 2018 that the Western Balkan enlargement should be fulfilled in the union’s geopolitical interest.⁹⁹ A brief analysis of the Enlargement Strategy Papers dated 2015 and 2018 shows the integration of the normative and geopolitical aspects of the EU’s approach to the area. While the 2015 document mainly refers to criteria such as democracy, human and minority rights, freedoms and the rule of law, it is seen that in the 2018 document, the geopolitical interest of the EU is underlined.¹⁰⁰ In the enlargement document of 2015, it is written that the aim of the EU’s enlargement to the Western Balkans is to ensure peace, security and stability in Europe. It mentions that EU membership will create economic and commercial opportunities for both the union and the region and will transform the Western Balkan societies in the context of democratic rights and freedoms. EU’s 2018 Strategy Paper reveals the enlargement for the Western Balkans in a more assertive language. It states that

⁹⁷ Alex Warleigh-Lack, *Differentiated Integration in the European Union: Towards a Comparative Regionalism Perspective*, “Journal of European Public Policy”, Vol. 22, 2015, No. 6, p. 874-877.

⁹⁸ Michael Emerson, *Scenarios for a Wider Europe*, “CEPS Policy Insights”, No. 2, 2019, p. 14-17.

⁹⁹ Milenko Petrovic, Nikolaos Tzifakis, *A Geopolitical...*, p. 160.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

the Western Balkans is a part of Europe, geographically surrounded by EU member states. Its integration into the union is in the EU's political, security-based and economic interests. This move, which is seen as a geostrategic investment to create a stable, strong and united Europe based on shared values, is also considered an action to protect the Union's citizens. Although it meets the same points as the 2015 document (the rule of law, fundamental rights, economic development, competitiveness, democratic institutions, accessibility, good neighbourly relations and regional cooperation), it is emphasised that the reforms should be carried out in an "urgent" manner. In a parallel and increasingly successful framework, it focuses on political and economic collaboration as well as the implementation of reforms.

The main reason why the EU has prioritised the Western Balkans enlargement is the uncertainty arising from the structural problems of the union. Nevertheless, the reservations of the member states are regarded as clearing the way for China and Russia.¹⁰¹ The increase in the amount of financial support, especially with the infrastructure investments made by China, as an extension of the Belt and Road Initiative, created awareness in Brussels. Although this activity has not yet been at a critical level to be compared with the EU, the Chinese movement, which will appear in issues such as market economy, legal regulations, investment and tender processes, poses the risk that the region will undergo a Beijing-oriented transformation. Beijing is developing a Western Balkan move centred not only on investment and financial support programs but also on issues such as media and education. This has put the enlargement strategy in Brussels in the immediate context. The EU has taken action to avoid losing its effectiveness in the Western Balkans, which it has enjoyed since the Thessaloniki Summit and which Culpepper has described as a "structural power."¹⁰² Keukeleire defines structural power as "the capacity to determine and shape the structures, rules and institutions in which other states will act".¹⁰³ This position may also be understood in terms of the EU's "normative power" in the Western Balkans. States will follow the route drawn by Brussels, especially the Copenhagen criterion, to increase the level of welfare and accelerate democratic development. However, the EU's decision to push the enlargement strategy into the background and to place new criteria in front of

¹⁰¹ Nina Markovic Khaze, Xiven Wang, *Is China's...*, p. 236-238.

¹⁰² Pepper D. Culpepper, *Structural Power and Political Science in the Post-Crisis Era*, "Business and Politics", Vol. 17, 2015, No. 3, p. 391-394.

¹⁰³ Stephan Keukeleire, *The European Union as a Diplomatic Actor: Internal, Traditional and Structural Diplomacy*, "Diplomacy and Statecraft", Vol. 14, 2003, No. 3, p. 45-47.

membership processes created a situation that allowed for Chinese action. The structural power of the EU has faced a pragmatist challenge from China. To maintain its structural influence, Brussels is attempting to build a connection between normative and geopolitical requirements. It will be straightforward to distinguish Chinese influence from infrastructural components reflected in economic methods to the political context if there is a greater misunderstanding in this regard.¹⁰⁴ The rise of illiberal regimes in the Western Balkans seriously disturbs the EU. At this point, China is in close cooperation with governments based on an illiberal understanding.¹⁰⁵ The tension between the EU and the Vucic government in Serbia, which has established very close relations with Russia and China, is a relevant example.¹⁰⁶ In addition, the EU's criticisms of the Rama administration in Albania for not strengthening the concept of the "state of law" and the Bosnian Serb leader Dodik's relations with Russia and China, who intervened in Bosnia and Herzegovina with separatist intentions, should also be front and centre.¹⁰⁷ In addition to the increasing Chinese influence in economic and commercial life in Montenegro (the danger of the debt trap previously mentioned), the visibility of Serbian and Russian influence in politics is also an issue that leads to political polarisation.

The EU emphasises the understanding of "stability" rather than the discourse of democracy to limit the rise of illiberal regimes, protect its structural power and limit China's increasing influence in the Western Balkans.¹⁰⁸ There are geopolitical concerns behind this. With some of its members having closer ties to Russia and China than others do, the EU is struggling to combat "differentiated integration" and illiberal regimes that have been on the increase, especially since the migrant crisis. Hungary, in particular Orbán's Fidesz, and Poland, controlled by Kaczyński's Law and Order Party, have come to the fore in this sense. This un-

¹⁰⁴ Dragan Pavlicevic, *Structural Power...*, p. 458-460.

¹⁰⁵ Henrik Larsen, *NATO in an Illiberal World*, "The RUSI Journal", Vol. 166, 2021, No. 3, p. 87-89.

¹⁰⁶ Vujo Ilic, *Serbia's Vucic Takes an Illiberal Turn*, "Balkan Insight", 2021, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/10/11/serbias-vucic-takes-an-illiberal-turn/> (Accessed on 20.01.2022).

¹⁰⁷ The participation of the Ambassadors of Russia and China in 2022 to the celebration of the Day of the Bosnian Serb Republic on January 9, which was declared illegal by the Constitutional Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina, is an important aspect that demonstrates this bond. See: *US Calls For Probe into Banned Bosnian Serb Commemoration, 2022*, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/us-calls-probe-into-banned-bosnian-serb-commemoration-2022-01-11/> (Accessed on 20.01.2022).

¹⁰⁸ Nicholas Ross Smith, et al., *The EU's...*, p. 178-179.

derstanding, which creates problems even within the EU, has gained serious visibility in the Western Balkans (Serbia is the leading country). This also inspired the idea that China may gain from this problem. As a result, it is reasonable to state that, in terms of the Western Balkans, Brussels continues to be a part of the “stability-democracy dilemma” strategy after 2018.¹⁰⁹ In this context, it is obvious that the EU followed a more normative line until the 2015 enlargement report, but after China and Russia began to penetrate more into the Western Balkans, it became attached to prioritised geopolitical concerns. In other words, due to the predominance of geopolitical concerns, there are criticisms that Western Balkan countries see the failures of democratic pluralism as secondary. There is also a split between Macron, who wants the EU to complete its structural reforms and integrate its enlargement strategy into a normative approach, and pragmatists who stress geopolitical concerns. In this respect, the EU bureaucracy has a more significant expansion propensity than the governments of member states.

CONCLUSIONS

When evaluated in a neo-Gramscian sense, China is trying to build a counter-hegemony through the integration of multilateral and institutional elements into the Belt and Road Initiative, in addition to its material capacity and an approach focused on transforming (and leading, although it does not accept) Western hegemony in the frame of multipolarity. It actively uses the Belt and Road Initiative, and besides the investment initiatives and financial support, organic intellectuals are attempting to create a Beijing-oriented civil society. This civil society will expose the country to the Chinese influence by political and economic elites within a framework Gramsci refers to as the “historical bloc”.

The visibility of the Belt and Road Initiative in the Western Balkans is the subject of various studies. Beijing has created a pragmatic strategy for Central and Eastern Europe on the axis of the 17+1 cooperation, focusing on the infrastructure, financial support and direct investment needs of Western Balkan countries. This situation, which is stated to affect business logic and legal infrastructure negatively and is in violation of EU regulations, also consolidates illiberal regimes. These regimes are brought to the forefront by Russia’s and, to a lesser extent, China’s ideological, economic, and political support, as well as structural

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

challenges inside the EU. Although it is ineffective in comparison to the EU's economic power and efficiency, some studies suggest that China can compete with the EU in Western Balkans in the future. This situation has also led to a change in the EU's perspective toward the Western Balkans. This change was even reflected in the enlargement documents dated 2015 and 2018.

The EU maintains its structural power in the Western Balkans. To keep Chinese influence under control, the EU must overcome the tensions between normative and geopolitical approaches and clarify the direction of its enlargement strategy. After the 2004 and 2007 enlargement waves, there is real discomfort in the EU, which has been criticised for "differentiated integration". As a normative power, the EU can bring geopolitical preferences to the fore to avoid China's pragmatist counter-hegemony in the Western Balkans. Because the confusion, often known as the "stability-democracy dilemma", also creates problems between the member states and the EU. Naturally, this situation also disturbs the Western Balkan countries and brings China's easy-to-implement projects closer.

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