

## ***Western Balkans and the Geopolitical Turmoil***

***Dragan Petković, Ph.D.***

*(The author is an independent analyst and a former Defense Attaché of the Republic of Serbia in Athens. He was directly involved in the area of international military cooperation during the long period of time – for more than ten years. In addition, he has acquired his doctoral degree in the area of military-technical sciences)*

**Copyright: @ 2024 Research Institute for European and American Studies ([www.rieas.gr](http://www.rieas.gr))**  
**Publication date: 1 July 2024**

**Note: The article reflects the opinion of the author and not necessarily the views of the Research Institute for European and American Studies**

### ***Abstract***

*Western Balkans is inevitably affected by the geopolitical turmoil. Numerous challenges for the peace and stability worldwide are reflecting on almost all countries of the said region. War between Ukraine and Russia and the Israeli operations against Hamas as well as the rise of the right movements after the elections for the European Parliament are for sure the most influential among other issues in the said region and wider. The Republic of Serbia is still trying to find the political solution for the issue of Kosovo and Metohija without the disturbance of the internal stability, the Republic of North Macedonia is on the new crossroad after the recent elections in that country while the Hellenic Republic is warning their northern neighbors about the obligations from the Prespa Agreement. Finally, Bosnia and Herzegovina is again in the state of reevaluation after the Resolution of the United Nations General Assembly concerning Srebrenica. Consequently, Western Balkans needs to find new balances in order to empower peace and stability in the heart of the European continent.*

These days we all are witnessing the worldwide rising trend of “solving problems” by force: Russia and Ukraine, Israel and Hamas, and even France and New Caledonia (but – to be completely frank – much less violently)<sup>1</sup>.

It seems that democracy and freedom are somehow pushed to be reborn through the fire of new confrontations and wars and it looks like the most important global players are very determined in that sense – no matter how destructive this could be for the world as a whole.<sup>2</sup>

The best example (and certainly one of the most dangerous) is the ongoing Israeli war against Hamas, which is threatening to confront the Muslims from all over the world (and not only them)<sup>3</sup> against the State of Israel, having on mind great civilian casualties in Gaza Strip.

Without any tendency to spread pessimism it is obvious that the security situation in the Middle East is very close to the point of no return.<sup>4</sup> In that kind of development no country in wider neighborhood is safe, including even Cyprus – the country that desperately seeks for peace since the year 1974.

To be more concrete – Hezbollah chief Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah said on 19<sup>th</sup> June 2024 that “the Cypriot government must be warned that opening Cypriot airports and bases for the Israeli enemy to target Lebanon means that the Cypriot government has become part of the war, and the resistance (Hezbollah) will deal with it as part of the war”.<sup>5</sup>

From his side, Israeli Minister of Foreign Affairs twitted on 21<sup>st</sup> June 2024 “Israel cannot allow the Hezbollah terror organization to continue attacking its territory and citizens, and soon we will make the necessary decisions. *The free world must unconditionally stand with Israel in its war against the axis of evil led by Iran and extremist Islam. Our war is also your war, and Nasrallah's threat to Cyprus is just the beginning. Evil must be defeated, as history has proven in the past*”.<sup>6</sup>

In the spirit of the same narrative, the Turkish-Cypriot leader Ersin Tatar even earlier (in April) said that “If you shoot one Turkish soldier you will have 10,000 soldiers on the ground”. He then

---

<sup>1</sup> President of the Republic of France Emmanuel Macron decided on 27<sup>th</sup> May 2024 to lift the state of emergency in the French Pacific territory of New Caledonia in order to allow political dialogue after the unrest that left destruction and nine people dead. However, 12 hour’s curfew during the night will remain on power (at least until 8<sup>th</sup> July 2024), as well as the ban on public gatherings, transport, carrying of weapons and sale of alcohol, too. Also, the international airport will remain closed to commercial traffic until further notice.

<sup>2</sup> [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/speech-president-von-der-leyen-european-parliament-plenary-strengthening-european-defence-volatile-2024-02-28\\_en](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/speech-president-von-der-leyen-european-parliament-plenary-strengthening-european-defence-volatile-2024-02-28_en)

<sup>3</sup> Spain, Ireland and Norway have recognized a Palestinian state on 28<sup>th</sup> May 2024 in order to accelerate efforts to secure a ceasefire in Israel's war against Hamas after the broad international outrage over the civilian suffering and humanitarian crisis in Gaza Strip. Only few days later Slovenia also recognized Palestine, on 4<sup>th</sup> June 2024.

<sup>4</sup> António Guterres in April said that the people of the Middle East are facing a real danger of a devastating full-scale conflict, while urging “maximum restraint”.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2024/06/19/hezbollah-to-attack-cyprus-if-it-lets-israel-use-airports/>

<sup>6</sup> [https://twitter.com/Israel\\_katz/status/1804180246800834610](https://twitter.com/Israel_katz/status/1804180246800834610)

concluded “A little flare-up, that is what people are fearing. Look at what happened in Gaza. And before that, Ukraine. Before that, Bosnia”.<sup>7</sup>

Having on mind above mentioned standpoints of all interested sides it is inevitable not to be optimistic about the future prospects in the Gaza strip (and Middle East, too). Peace initiatives are too weak in comparison with the “war hawks” calls from all sides and the crisis could easily overflow anywhere – especially to multi-national and multi-confessional Western Balkans.

In the same time, the author of this article just don’t believe that the calls from the International Criminal Court for arrest warrants (for Hamas leader in Gaza Yahya Sinwar as well as for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu) on charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity will do any good. On the contrary! What is needed over there is the understanding between all sides, as well as the talks and the good political will to negotiate and overcome the problems. This kind of behavior will be healing for the Middle East but also for our region – bearing on mind well deserved Western Balkans’ nickname (“barrel of gun powder”). And that is not happening!

What happened instead – approximately one month ago – was the adoption of the Resolution of the UN General Assembly that instructed the commemoration of the 1995 Srebrenica genocide<sup>8</sup>, that somehow and (un)intentionally revived happenings from former Yugoslavia (from the end of last century). It is absolutely obvious that the said resolution for sure will not bring needed reconciliation of three constitutive peoples in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but – more probably – will bring new divisions and will open old wounds leading to new frictions and misunderstandings.

Furthermore, there is no doubt that the Republic of Serbia will also be affected by this new politically triggered instability in the closest neighborhood. The best proof for this statement is the terrorist act of a “lone wolf” Miloš Žujović who adopted his new name Salahudin<sup>9</sup>. He has seriously injured a police officer in the neck with an arrow after crossbow attack in front of the Israeli Embassy in Belgrade on 29<sup>th</sup> June 2024. Police officer immediately reacted following the procedures in self-defense and shot and killed the attacker. After this act of terrorism the investigation is still ongoing while multiply arrests of the so called “Islamic State” followers in Belgrade and Novi Pazar occurred including arresting of the attacker’s wife who fled to Monte Negro two days prior to attack.

In addition, and still trying to solve the long lasted issue concerning its own sovereignty and territorial integrity – caused by illegal proclamation of the so called “Kosovo” – the Republic of Serbia is under the great pressure from the international community (predominantly from the

---

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2024/04/04/turkey-cyprus-ersin-tatar-trnc-gaza-war/>

<sup>8</sup> The resolution received 84 votes in favour and 19 against, with 68 abstentions. This fact implicitly launched impartial questions about the legitimacy of the resolution (because 87 countries in total were opposed or abstained compared to 84 countries that voted for – not to mention those countries which didn’t take part in voting at all).

<sup>9</sup> Miloš Žujović changed his name after converting to Islam. He also changed his place of living and moved from Mladenovac (near Belgrade) to Novi Pazar – cultural and socio-political center of the Muslims in Serbia.

collective West) to accept this (as it is put) “new reality” and to recognize the said entity that is desperately trying to become a regular state, which certainly is not. In addition – and as it is well known – “the normalization of the relations between Belgrade and Priština” has become one of the most complex conditions under the Chapter 35 in Serbian efforts to gain the fully membership of the European Union (EU). On the other hand, it is also well known that the provisional institutions of self-governance in Priština simply don’t want to form the Association of Serbian Municipalities – which they are obligated. And it is also known that the Serbian population in Kosovo and Metohija is under the great pressure because of constant threats, arrests, violence and systematic oppression by the Albanian provisional institutions of self-governance. The “cherry on the top of the cake” was the expulsion of the Serbian currency (dinar) from Kosovo and Metohija – as previously unwanted and now even forbidden currency for Priština. Unfortunately, the EU still is persevering on “inviting both sides to find the solution and de-escalate the tensions”, prolonging “boiling of the frog” in order to achieve so called “Kosovo independence”. Consequently, the only possible result was – and still is – nothing else but the continuation of provocative and very often dangerous behavior of the provisional institutions of self-governance in Priština while the Serbs in the meantime are leaving their homeland forever in searching for a new place to live – anywhere else but in Kosovo and Metohija.

The situation in the Republic of North Macedonia doesn’t seem to be much better and it looks like the trends are not promising. After the latest elections in this country tensions between neighboring North Macedonia and the Hellenic Republic bursted almost very intensively because of the likely intentions from Skopje to neglect the Treaty from Prespa by omitting the word “North” from the constitutional name of the country. The result was immediate reaction and warning from Athens that bilateral relations will be seriously jeopardized including blocking of the Republic of North Macedonia in their European integrations. Specifically, Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis symbolically – but very clearly in the same time – stated that the “road towards Europe and progress also passes through Greece and could be cut short”.<sup>10</sup>

Among many reactions from Athens, even the former Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Hellenic Republic Nikos Kotzias had to mention that “*Contributing to stability in a troubled region and to emancipation from the bonds of history, the Prespa Agreement is of the utmost geopolitical importance. It means security for Greece and the broader region, as much as it does for the Republic of North Macedonia. The latter exists under the constant threat of those aggressive circles which aspire to a “Greater Albania” and a “Greater Bulgaria,” meaning the partitioning of North Macedonia. Greece, in contrast, has every reason to want stability in that country.*”<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.ekathimerini.com/politics/foreign-policy/1239239/pm-kyriakos-mitsotakis-sends-message-to-north-macedonia-from-thessaloniki/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.ekathimerini.com/opinion/1239136/why-the-prespa-agreement-is-important/>

Therefore, and similar like it was stated for the case of Gaza Strip (or any other heated spot), what is essentially needed for the whole region of the Western Balkans are understanding, compassion (and not only for the victims of your own people), forgiveness, cold headed expertize of the impartial and objective scientists and historians and – at last but not less important – very carefully shaped public opinion about open issues created by the distinguished and appreciated persons and institutions from all interested sides (and for the longer period of time, too). The process of healing has to be very carefully fulfilled because the wounds are not too old and they are in the same time still deep and painful.

It is of the utmost importance to comprehend that there is no UN resolution or any kind of court decision that could make peace between different peoples if there is no sincere and good will between those peoples. If the peace and reconciliation is really in stake – then we need the political will to find the mutual cornerstone for all Serbs, Bosniaks, Croats, Albanians and others to recognize, honor and mourn victims from all sides so they could be truly free and relieved from the burden of the past.

*Therefore, it is more than obvious that the new balances have to be found in the region of Western Balkans as well as worldwide in order to preserve and empower peace and stability.*

If this is not the case, peoples will forever cherish their own truths and remain confronted to other peoples. Also, they will be trapped by their own ideas as well as by interests of third sides (which are mainly motivated by hegemonic aspirations of the great powers or by particular and selfish interests of the multinational corporations) and will never be truly sovereign and free.