

# Executive Summary

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## The Eastern Question revisited – What can we learn from 19<sup>th</sup> century power politics in Europe for today?

Panel Discussion in cooperation with the Ministry of Defence.

**Panelists:**

**Zeynep Arkan Tuncel**

Visiting Fellow at oiip and Associate Professor at Hacettepe University– Ankara/Turkey

**Philipp Ther**

Professor at the University of Vienna, Head of the Research Center for the History of Transformation (RECET)

**Vedran Džihic**

Senior Researcher at oiip

**Muamer Bećirović**

Author of the book “Clemens Wenzel von Metternich oder Das Gleichgewicht der Mächte“ – Austria

**Moderation:**

**Cengiz Günay**

Director of the Austrian Institute for International Affairs – oiip

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**Summary report authors:** Mariavittoria Maggi and Cengiz Günay

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### **Executive Summary**

The panel discussed whether there are continuities between the so-called Eastern Question, which dominated power politics in 19th and early 20th century Europe for long periods, and today. The Eastern Question emerged from the power vacuum created by the gradual decline of the Ottoman Empire. It was characterised by the struggle for power and influence between the European empires and the aspirations of emerging nations for identity and territory. We can observe similar developments again today. The influence of the European Union (EU) and the United States appears to be waning in the Western Balkans region. In addition to Russia and Turkey, which had been key players also in the 19th century, China is now increasingly coming onto the scene. The panellists largely agreed that the region has hardly learned any lessons from the mistakes of the past. Today, the region is still characterised by nationalism and the pursuit of power maximisation. However, the framework conditions have changed significantly compared to the 19th century. Likewise, even if identity once again plays a key role, it can be assumed that the great pan-movements, such as pan-Slavism, are a thing of the past.

### **Deutsche Zusammenfassung**

Das Panel erörterte, ob es Kontinuitäten zwischen der sogenannten Orientalischen Frage, die über weite Strecken die Machtpolitik im Europa des 19. und frühen 20. Jahrhunderts beherrschte, und heute gibt. Die Orientalische Frage entstand aus dem Machtvakuum, das durch den allmählichen Niedergang des Osmanischen Reiches entstanden war. Sie war gekennzeichnet durch den Kampf um Macht und Einfluss zwischen den europäischen Imperien und das Streben der aufstrebenden Nationen nach nationaler Identität und Territorium. Ähnliche Entwicklungen können wir auch heute wieder beobachten. Der Einfluss der EU und der USA scheinen in der Region des Westbalkans zu schwinden. Neben Russland und der Türkei, die auch schon im 19. Jahrhundert wesentliche Akteure waren, tritt nun auch China verstärkt auf den Plan. Die Panelist:innen stimmten überwiegend darüber ein, dass die Region kaum Lehren aus den Fehlern der Vergangenheit gezogen hat. Auch heute ist die Region von Nationalismus und dem Streben nach Maximierung der Macht geprägt. Allerdings haben sich die Rahmenbedingungen im Vergleich zum 19. Jahrhundert wesentlich verändert. Trotz der Tatsache, dass die Identität auch heute wieder eine tragende Rolle spielt, kann man davon ausgehen, dass die großen Pan-Bewegungen, wie zum Beispiel der Pan-Slawismus, der Vergangenheit angehören.

## Key takeaways

- Geopolitical tensions arise in power vacuums. The declining power of the West has created a **power vacuum** in the Western Balkans. This is reminiscent of the 19th century. Back then, the decline of the Ottoman Empire had created a power vacuum in the region which led to instability and turmoil.
- **Geopolitical tensions** today mirror historical patterns, with similar power struggles among different players like Russia, the West, Turkey, and China.
- Whereas **the United States** maintains significant zones of influence by forming alliances based on economic prosperity and the promise of freedom, **Russia** is seen as reviving aggressive neo-imperialistic ambitions.
- **The EU's** promise of integration for Balkan countries is increasingly seen as insufficient and naive, failing to maintain peace and stability or to prevent other actors, particularly China and Russia, from exploiting the power vacuum in the Balkans.
- **China** is actively filling the power vacuum in the Balkans, increasing its influence through economic investments. For instance, in 2023 China overtook the EU as the first foreign direct investor in Serbia for the first time. Chinese investments often conflict with EU regulations, posing a challenge to the EU's normative power and democratic model in the region. This behaviour aligns with China's long-term ambition to establish a multipolar world order.
- The resurgence of **nationalism and authoritarian tendencies** in the Balkans, particularly in Serbia, echo 19<sup>th</sup>-century nation-building projects and threaten regional stability.
- The metaphysical concept of "Greater Serbia" adds to the ongoing geopolitical tensions in the region and could lead to conflicts if pursued aggressively.
- **Germany** has the economic and political power to play a stabilising role in the region, but it refuses to do so.
- **Austria**, despite its limited size, should seek to play a regional role by engaging Germany in Balkan matters and take a more active role in stabilising the region.
- **For Turkey**, the Balkans have traditionally been of great strategic and political significance. There is also a huge Balkan population within Turkey. However, Turkey is limited in its economic and political capabilities. It seeks to enhance regional stability through flexible engagement with other actors. Due to lacking capabilities, Turkey uses soft power and cultural

diplomacy tools instead. Turkey's approach in the region is not antagonistic to the EU, and the United States. Turkey has supported the NATO membership of Balkan countries, and it supports the EU's efforts to integrate the region. Turkey's flexibility in foreign policy matters is one of its key features and strengths, allowing it to leverage different circumstances to its own benefit.

- The West, and the EU in particular, must learn from **past mistakes** and recognise that promises of EU integration and democracy are not enough to stabilise the region of the Western Balkans if underlying issues remain unaddressed. Preventing the resurgence of nationalism and authoritarianism is crucial to maintaining peace and stability in the Balkans. The EU must abandon its naivety and not allow other actors to exploit the current power vacuum in the Balkans. The importance of strategic engagement, economic influence, and diplomatic efforts to navigate the complex geopolitical landscape in Southeastern Europe is thus underscored.

## **The Eastern Question**

The Eastern Question revolved around the gradual decline of the Ottoman Empire and the geopolitical vacuum this created. Specifically, it highlighted the intense rivalry among the great powers of Europe – Britain, France, Russia, Austria-Hungary – each with its own strategic interests in the Balkans and the Near East, leading to a series of diplomatic and military conflicts. Rising nationalism, territorial ambitions and the struggle for power and influence between those actors fuelled unrest, instability, and conflict, ultimately leading to the First World War.

Today, Southeastern Europe once again seems to be at the centre of European geopolitics and power politics. Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, Russia and the West have been engaged in an indirect struggle for influence in the region, along with Turkey and new players such as China.

## **Great Powers' relations and geopolitical competition**

### **Russia, China and the United States**

Discussing Russia's role and endeavour for influence in the region, Philipp Ther emphasised the inescapable impact of geopolitics on the relationships among great powers, noting how Putin himself popularised the term. Ther underlined that geopolitics is still mostly seen as a zero-sum game, where one side's power gain is inevitably another one's loss. Describing this perspective as one of the tragedies affecting the multilateral peace order of the 19th century, he highlighted how this prevents the adoption of alternative cooperative approaches, which could lead to mutually beneficial, win-win situations. Philipp Ther attributed part of this zero-sum mentality to Russia's behaviour, which fuels a security dilemma; when one actor starts accumulating military power and weapons, others follow suit out of fear of being overcome. This perpetuates a cycle of distrust among great powers and turns international relations into a brutal competition.

Within this competition, China emerges as an actor particularly interested in a multipolar world order in which the United States would no longer be the only hegemon. This appears increasingly likely as

the United States' economic might wanes. Philipp Ther drew a historical parallel with the 19<sup>th</sup> century, noting how multipolarity inherently brings tensions and sometimes wars at the peripheries of these powers' spheres of influence. When the Eastern Question arose, Austria, France, Prussia, Russia, and Britain divided territories among themselves. This resulted in Russia gaining territories both in Southeastern and Eastern Europe. Despite established boundaries and protectorates, conflicts such as the Crimean War broke out when other powers perceived Russia's influence as excessive.

Today, the geopolitical landscape includes another significant power, the United States. Otherwise, the constellation of actors involved mirrors historical patterns, with current Western European powers trying to counter Russia as it pursues its war against Ukraine. The recent invasion underscores the difficulties of reaching compromises with Moscow, as its actions suggest an insatiable desire for expansion, complicating efforts to build trust and achieve diplomatic compromises. The difficulty in achieving stability and building trust had already surfaced when Russia attacked a neutral neighbouring country, Ukraine, in 2014, damaging any potential prospects for its neutrality. Overall, Russia appears to exhibit a persistent drive towards expansionist imperialism. Historically, this tendency has emerged when autocratic regimes faced both internal and external pressures. This is the case in Russia today: the elite perceives itself to be surrounded by the external threat of NATO expansion, and imperialism allows Moscow to export internal tensions. According to Philipp Ther, despite a brief anti-imperialistic moment in Russian history during the 1990s,<sup>1</sup> Russia has reverted to its imperialistic path since 1999.

### **The role of the West**

Muamer Bećirović drew a comparison between the West's and Russia's imperialistic tendencies, underlining that the difference between the two merely lies in how the respective imperialistic strategies are executed. He described the United States' approach as primarily driven by alliances based on economic prosperity and the promise of freedom. In contrast, Russia lacks the resources to replicate this model and thus must rely on more coercive methods. Bećirović emphasised the historical imperialistic drive exhibited by other European powers, such as Germany, during the two World Wars or France under Napoleon. In these power games, the United States emerged as the first empire trying

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<sup>1</sup> Exemplified by Yeltsin's choice to not annex Crimea although the opportunity arose when a pro-Russian movement won the elections by a great margin in 1995.

to win over allies through economic cooperation rather than military conquest. This approach has proven successful and has allowed the United States to establish significant zones of influence. On the other hand, Russia's approach appears as the most aggressive and brutal.

Bećirović argued that the underlying dynamics of power games have remained similar to those observable during the times when the Eastern Question first arose. In his opinion, the West must have the capabilities to deter and counterbalance Russia while avoiding direct confrontations; he believes that a more effective approach would be binding Russia to the West through diplomatic engagement. To motivate this, Bećirović explained that Russia's exclusion from diplomatic tables usually resulted in increased aggressiveness on its behalf. Bećirović believes it is easier to manage Moscow's ambitions from within a diplomatic framework rather than through open confrontation.

**Austria's role**, expertise, and engagement in Southeastern Europe are significantly affected by its relatively limited size. This underlines the need for Austria to involve Germany in regional matters despite its minimal interest in the Balkan region. According to Bećirović, the priority for Balkan countries should not be immediate EU integration, but the establishment of a stable territorial order. Bećirović argues that Germany is the country best positioned to facilitate this, given its resources, influence and geographical proximity. Particularly, in his opinion, Berlin should confront Serbia, which seeks to forcefully expand its influence despite already being the region's dominant power. Germany's unique position to promote stability also owes to it being one of the greatest foreign direct investors in the Balkans.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, Austria should encourage Germany to take a more active stance and leverage this economic influence to press for political change.

### **Turkey's role**

Zeynep Arkan Tuncel emphasised that besides certain continuities which influence the actions of states, it is important to consider the systemic changes that occurred within the international order. The current E of the 19th century, she argued. The EU now represents a collective entity where the traditional idea of balance of (military) power is no longer applicable. The international rule-based

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<sup>2</sup> Vulović, M. (2023). Economic Relations between the Western Balkans and Non-EU Countries. *SWP Comment*, 36. Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP) [https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2023C36\\_WesternBalkans.pdf](https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2023C36_WesternBalkans.pdf)



order has at least partly redefined the norms and standards of states' engagement and actions as well as domestic and international dynamics.

Citing Buzan, Wæver and De Wilde's book "Security: A New Framework for Analysis," Arkan Tuncel noted how these scholars emphasised the responsibility of external powers to shape and integrate the Balkans into the European security complex. The key external power in this regard would be the EU, which has shaped the Balkans as one of its sub-regions. Therefore, the EU's engagement, credibility, effectiveness, and ability to fulfil its commitments towards the region are vital for its stability.

Zeynep Arkan Tuncel then addressed the differences concerning the actors involved in the region today compared to the 19<sup>th</sup> century: today we find the EU, Turkey, Russia and China. The latter being an external actor rather than a regional one. These powers have very different motivations and styles of engagement. The main driver for regional involvement is no longer the power interests that characterised the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but rather a competition for influence.

Turkey emerges as a limited actor compared to the others, both economically and politically. This is partly due to increased authoritarianism and domestic economic and social challenges. Whereas in the past domestic success implied foreign policy success, as former Turkish Prime Minister Davutoğlu argued, today foreign policy is a tool that the elite uses to mobilise the public amid domestic issues and constrained capabilities. Turkey leverages its soft power, drawing on shared culture, history, religion, and identity, and operates through non-traditional agencies that function at the societal level. This underscores another difference between the past and the present regarding the instruments and tools utilised to implement foreign policy on the ground, with military and political dominance mostly replaced by cultural diplomacy, economic engagement and soft power.

Turkey's interests in the Balkans have been constant. The Ottoman Empire's interest in the Balkans was driven by geographical and religious reasons. Today, Turkey still attributes key significance to the region in its foreign policy. Arkan Tuncel emphasised the mutual influence of the Ottoman Empire on the Balkans and vice versa, particularly in terms of population composition and as a model for national identity formation. In both geographies, the Ottoman heritage was blurred and assigned the role of the Other in national identity formation. Stability in the Balkans was vital for the Ottoman Empire and the early Turkish Republic, as it was fundamental for security and stability. Turkey, as a status quo

power, aimed to preserve regional peace and did not pose a threat to its neighbouring countries; this approach was reflected in its bilateral relations and participation in alliances such as the Balkan Pact. However, during the 1960s, Turkey's foreign policy began to shift. Facing increasing international isolation, Turkey sought to complement its security and reduce its reliance on the United States and NATO through a multidimensional foreign policy, which reached its peak under the AKP.

For the ruling AKP, the Balkan region is a significant part of Turkey's "heart and soul geography," reflecting deep historical and cultural connections. Contemporary Turkish foreign policy objectives aim to portray Turkey as a regional power, echoing its imperial legacy and identity. Interestingly, Arkan Tuncel explained that in the pursuit of these goals, Turkey does not directly challenge the EU. For instance, Turkey never voiced concerns against Balkan countries' will to join NATO and the EU, and it never obstructed the EU efforts to integrate them. Moreover, she underscored that part of Erdogan's strength lies in his ability to accommodate and be flexible towards other actors, exploiting different circumstances to Turkey's advantage. As a result, Turkey emerges as a potential ally of the EU rather than a regional contender.

### **The role of nationalism**

According to Vedran Džihčić, interesting similarities between the 19<sup>th</sup> century and today encompass the constellation playing a role in the region, particularly the alliance between Serbia and Russia, and the Serbian nation-building process. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the conservative national elites ruling the country framed the nation-building project under the notion of "Greater Serbia," which entailed territorial expansion into neighbouring regions. This approach regained traction in the 1990s, heavily drawing on mythology, religion, and historical events such as the 14<sup>th</sup>-century Battle of Kosovo. These elements combined create a metaphysical foundation for the Serbian nation, which then interacts with the rational economic and political interests of the country.

Slobodan Milošević came to power right after the Serbian Academy of Sciences published a memorandum outlining solutions for the situation in former Yugoslavia in 1986, echoing 19<sup>th</sup>-century ideas. It advocated for a "Greater Serbia," claiming that all the territories inhabited by Serbs should belong to Serbia. During these nation-building efforts, there was a conflict between national

conservatives, who promoted the metaphysical notion of Greater Serbia, and more liberal factions advocating for constitutionalism. However, the rise of a new Serbian nationalism and the new metaphysics of Milošević eventually took over and led to a tragedy. Metaphysics was combined with the concrete interests of the clientelist circles in Milošević patronage system and political authoritarianism, and culminated in a devastating war, ultimately lost by Milošević following the US-led intervention against his regime in 1999.

The promise of EU integration and democratisation has been seen as a liberal overreach, based on the assumption that the intensification of connections and trade would have led to a better life. However, this did not materialise as expected, and the resurgence of a new metaphysical concept of Greater Serbia or *Srpski Svet* (Serbian World), promoted by Aleksandar Vulin on the mould of *Ruskiy Mir* (Russian World, an expression often used to justify Russian imperialism) is shaping the narrative of foreign policy making. This revives a dangerous constellation, reminiscent of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Serbia invested significantly in its military, and on the 24<sup>th</sup> of September 2023, when the Serbian paramilitaries attacked the North of Kosovo, sent shock waves throughout the region and reminded Europe how quickly the situation can escalate. The situation raises concerns regarding the actions that the West can take in this region, particularly as it is currently already struggling to support Ukraine. The concept of *Srpski Svet*, which Vučić borrowed from Milošević, takes the form of a dense network of clientelist, semi-criminal structures running the society and pushing Serbia towards authoritarian rule. The concept of *Srpski Svet* misuses history to justify and consolidate Milošević's power.

The pan-Slavic ideology and the Serbian orthodox church play a crucial role in establishing and reinforcing the idea of *Srpski Svet*. Vučić recently joined forces with Milorad Dodik, his counterpart in Republika Srpska (Bosnia and Herzegovina). The two went to visit Patriarch Porfirije to get a blessing before heading to the UN Headquarters in New York to fight a resolution on the Genocide of Srebrenica, which was nonetheless adopted.<sup>3</sup> On Instagram, Vučić described the resolution as a Western imposition against Serbia, against which Serbia must proudly stand, forming a new alliance of nations. The narrative and vocabulary he used worryingly resemble those used in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

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<sup>3</sup> United Nations General Assembly (23.05.2024). *General Assembly adopts Resolution on Srebrenica Genocide, designating International Day of Reflection, Commemoration* | Meetings coverage and press releases. GA/12601 (online). <https://press.un.org/en/2024/ga12601.doc.htm> (Accessed: 24.05.2024).

Overall, these similarities imply significant risks for current developments, exemplified for instance by Milorad Dodik's recurrent statements about a possible secession of Republika Srpska. Dodik believes that favourable conditions, such as the rise of the far-right in the EU, Ukraine's defeat, and Trump's re-election, could enable the creation of a "Greater Serbia." This vision encompasses not only Republika Srpska but also Montenegro and parts of Kosovo.

The international rule-based order is currently under threat, with increasing competition within institutions such as the United Nations. The naivety of Western capitals, which still hope that the promise of European integration, democracy, rule of law and a good economy will suffice to avoid conflicts, risks leading them to neglect underlying issues. In reality, a wide majority of Serbs do currently not support EU integration, and it will take a considerable amount of time before any new Balkan country will actually join the EU. Unresolved disputes, coupled with China and Russia's attempts to gain more influence in the region, heighten the imminent threat of crises. In Džihić's opinion, the West should not be so naïve as to believe that the situation cannot deteriorate further.

### **An imminent crisis?**

Philipp Ther argues that pan-Slavism no longer plays a primary role in shaping current events concerning Russian actions. Instead, he sees a grand imperial project being realised through the use of force, as evidenced by Russia's actions in Ukraine in 2014 and 2022. The EU's inability to address these issues, either due to resource constraints or internal resistance, along with the weakening of the United States and Turkey's economic challenges, has created a power vacuum in the Balkans. Other actors, such as China, are taking advantage of it. Indeed, Chinese President Xi Jinping recently visited Serbia and Hungary, tightening China's relationship with the two countries. According to Ther, the EU should intensify its efforts to integrate Balkan countries, starting from those with fewer controversies, such as Montenegro.

Džihić confirmed that Montenegro is an absolute frontrunner in the EU enlargement process, with the newly elected government pushing for membership, supported by both the EU and the United States. Montenegro's small population, its adoption of the Euro, its NATO membership, and the overall favourable conditions of the country make it one of the most promising candidates for EU integration. Džihić further commented on China's role in the Balkans, explaining that it mostly manifests through

economic investment in infrastructure. These investments often conflict with EU environmental rules and regulations and with its tenders. China uses this economic influence to sway incumbent elites by providing them with resources, which ultimately feed their clientelist networks. Notably, in 2023, China overtook the EU as the largest foreign direct investor in Serbia for the first time.

This raises critical questions about how China might promote its political model in the region and whether it will use proxies, such as Hungary and Serbia, to extend its influence. China's long-term ambitions in the region should not be underestimated, and the EU will have to confront China's influence if it wants to expand its normative power and democratic model in the Balkans. The weaker the EU's engagement and approach, the more likely China is to replace it.

Bećirović emphasised the significance of the current power vacuum in the Balkans, noting a key difference from the 19th century: historically, all vacuums were swiftly filled, with immediate and far-reaching consequences. When a country gained independence, it would start seeing itself as a major international actor, leading to disastrous outcomes. Today, if disputes are not carefully and promptly handled, the possibility of renewed conflicts and escalations is however back on the table.

## **Lessons learned from the 19<sup>th</sup> century**

The experts' opinions collectively underscore the lack of critical lessons learned from past geopolitical dynamics. Philipp Ther discussed Russia's apparent failure to learn from its past, reviving instead a neo-imperialistic momentum, and stated that the EU should have learned not to allow other actors to fill and leverage evolving power vacuums. Džihić noted that the Balkans did not internalise lessons on nation-building, with the region reverting to 19<sup>th</sup>-century-like nationalism, and Bećirović echoed the sentiment that no lessons were learned, anticipating a continued cycle of instability. Arkan Tuncel underscored the need to abandon naïvete, pointing out that the previous belief in the sustainability of the current system was misplaced and must be replaced with a more realistic and pragmatic approach. Together, these insights call for a vigilant and proactive stance in contemporary international relations and highlight the need to learn from historical missteps to better manage current and future geopolitical challenges.

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