

1. Title of the Research Project and keywords

The Eu-enlargement process in the Western Balkans through the Multi-level governance: the EUSAIR strategy and the influences from Russia and China in the region

Keywords: EU enlargement process, Western Balkans, Chinese and Russian influence, multi-level governance, EUSAIR strategy.

2. Research Area (please specify the discipline)

Within the thematic area "International Economic Policy Business and Governance", attention will be focused in particular on "Geo-political processes and political choices of European, international, regional and national institutions for the governance of globalization and international relations".

The main discipline covered by this is project is SPS/04 Political Science.

3. General presentation of the project and state of the art

The EUSAIR is a macro-regional strategy of concerted actions between a few EU member states (Croatia, Greece, Italy, Slovenia), San Marino and a few countries that are part of the spatial category of Southeast Europe (Albania, Montenegro, Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Republic of North Macedonia), also identified by the term "Balkans" (Hösch, 2006). This strategy adopts the approach of a "multi-level governance". In this case, the multilevel governance means acting under the coordination of the European Union, the member states, and regional and local authorities throughout partnerships aimed at defining and implementing EU policies. This mode of governance implies the shared responsibility of the different levels of power involved and is based on all sources of democratic legitimacy and representativeness of the different stakeholders.

The purpose of this research project is to analyze the role that the EUSAIR strategy may play in the EU-enlargement process in the Western Balkans; theoretically, the EUSAIR strategy has the potential to be one of the most realistic instruments of "Europeanization" in the Balkan region than and has the potential to give the Balkan region the impetus it needs in key areas to achieve European integration. Though, in fact, is it effective?

In order to try to answer this question, it is necessary to analyze the political geography and the actual socio-economic performance of the EUSAIR partner states that are candidates for the EU membership<sup>1</sup>, with the aim of concretely ascertaining whether in recent years there has been a general rapprochement or distancing of these EUSAIR countries with respect to European principles, the EU foreign policy and the possible integration into the EU. Crucial is also the analysis of the influence of other powerful actors in the Balkan region, namely Russia and China.

Indeed, at the level of political orientation, the Balkan states have an ambivalent attitude, "*typical of economic-political peripheries*" (Giordano 1995: 95). Tito's Yugoslavia, for example, always held a "*multivectoral*" (Boeckh, 2014) attitude in foreign policy, that is being able to juggle between the two blocs - from which it

---

<sup>1</sup> North Macedonia since 2005, Montenegro since 2010, Serbia since 2012, Albania since 2014, Bosnia-Herzegovina since 2022.

received support, but which it did not hesitate to criticize - and to place itself at the head of the Third Worldist movement. At the disintegration of Yugoslavia, which took place between 1991 and 1995, which began with the abandonment of Croatia and Slovenia (June 1991) and followed by the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina (1992 - 1995) and the Dayton Accords (1995), each country took its own peculiar direction, in the face of multiple interests converging in the area: the most active players in trying to grab this region as a sphere of influence were and are the European Union, Russia and, more recently, China.

Today, Serbia seems to be heir to the "two-chair policy" (Kovacevic, 2019), designed to try not to displease either the European Union or Russia. Serbia, in fact, is the only country in Europe, along with Bosnia and Herzegovina and Belarus, that has not joined the sanctions against Russia for its 2022 invasion of Ukraine. While Chinese investments grow, the negotiations slow down and Russia continues to be present and to split public opinion between "Russophiles" and "Russophobes" (Jovanovic, 2010).

Slovenia and Croatia, the first two states of the former Yugoslavia to join the European Union, aim to put themselves forward in foreign policy as a "bridge between the European Union and the other Balkan states" (Bojinović Fenko et al., 2023: 9), presenting themselves as "European" rather than "Balkan" countries. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Russia continues to wink at Serbian separatists (Ruge, 2022). North Macedonia and Montenegro willingly accept Chinese aid, particularly when related to the construction of important infrastructure or linked to the Covid-19 emergency (Krstinovska, 2022). Albania - the only Balkan country investigated which was not part of Yugoslavia - is an EU ally and seems, for the moment, not interested in obtaining Eastern support, since all the efforts are dedicated to be admitted to the European Union (Musabelliu, 2022).

For China, each of these countries is placed on the trajectory of the New Silk Road leading from Piraeus to Central Europe and Peking is therefore interested in upgrading its infrastructure as well as penetrating it economically; for this reason, in 2012 it started the *China-CEEC cooperation*, a macroregional strategy that could be seen as the rival of the EUSAIR.

#### 4. Research Objectives

The objective of this research project is to analyze how the European Union is putting into practice its process of enlargement through a strategy of multilevel governance (the EUSAIR) in the post-Yugoslavian countries (+ Albania), and how the EU tries to subtract this region from the influences of eastern actors like Russia and China. Also, the EU try to take maximum advantage of the geographical location of the Western Balkans, an "economically peripheral region" which is crucial in the migration route towards the EU.

Moreover, it would be interesting to understand how the Western Balkan states exploit their peripherality (both geographical and economic) in order to obtain the best from both sides; What are the factors that determine the membership in one of the two (or more) realities that seek to influence them? What have been - historically - and what are the choices of each of the former Yugoslav countries today, in terms of foreign policy?

#### 5. Methodology and Expected Results

The research methodology would encompass a literature review upon the following issues: the EU-enlargement process the recent history, political geography and geopolitics of each of the countries under investigation (Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Slovenia).

This must be complemented by a period of on-field research, in which primary sources would be collected both at the qualitative level (semi-structured interviews) and more quantitative, *i.e.* surveys and structured interviews which are more easily comparable materials. The actors that would be involved in these rounds of interviews would be academic experts from each country/region, local policymakers as well as actors related to the strategies that each power is implementing in the Western Balkans (European, through the EUSAIR strategy and Eastern - e.g. Chinese, through the "China-CEEC cooperation" strategy).

In terms of the expected outcomes, the research project would be useful in understanding how and why major powers focus on regions of geographic and economic periphery, but also how these periphery regions react by exploiting in a multifaceted, multi-sectoral and liquid way the possibility of belonging from time to time to a major power's sphere of influence or simultaneously to the spheres of influence of two or more major powers, thus seeking to make the most profit. In particular, the research, developed over the course of 3 years, could keep track of the evolution of influences on the Western Balkan countries of the European Union (engaged with the enlargement campaign to the east), as well as of Russia and its presence in Serbia and Republika Srpska of Bosnia, and of China.

On the other hand, it would be possible to identify the evolution of each country's behavior and how, from time to time, it may begin to turn their gaze to the east or west, so as to draw the best for themselves.

## 6. Bibliography

**Boeckh, K.** (2014). *Allies Are Forever (Until They Are No More): Yugoslavia's Multivectoral Foreign Policy During Titoism*. In: Keil, S., Stahl, B. (eds) *The Foreign Policies of Post-Yugoslav States. New Perspectives on South-East Europe*. Palgrave Macmillan, London.

**Bojinović Fenko, A., Keil, S. & Šabič, Z.** (2023). *Europeans from the Start? Slovenia and Croatia Between State-building, National Identity and the European Union*, in *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*,

**Giordano, C.** (1995). *The Balkans: European Periphery, Epicentre of Ethnicity and Landscape of Feuds*, *Anthropological Journal on European Cultures*, 1995, Vol. 4, No. 2, *Ethnicity Nationalism Geopolitics in the Balkans (II)* (1995), pp. 95-106.

**Hasan, S.** (1981). *Yugoslavia's foreign policy under Tito (1945-1980) — II*, in *Pakistan Horizon*, Fourth Quarter 1981, Vol. 34, No. 4 (Fourth Quarter 1981), pp. 62-103

**Hösch, E.** (2006). *Storia dei Balcani*, Il Mulino, Bologna.

**Jovanovic,** (2010). *Two Russias: On the Two Dominant Discourses of Russia in the Serbian Public*, in *Russia Serbia Relations at the beginning of XXI Century*, - essay compendium – ISAC fund, pp. 11-18, Belgrado

**Kovačević, M.** (2019): *Understanding the marginality constellations of small states: Serbia, Croatia, and the crisis of EU–Russia relations*, *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* Krstinovska, (2022). *Chinese Influence in North Macedonia*, August 30, 2022, Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA)

**Krstinovska, A.** (2022). *Chinese Influence in North Macedonia*, Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA), 30/08/2022, <https://cepa.org/comprehensive-reports/chinese-influence-in-north-macedonia/>

**Musabelliu, M.** (2022). *Albania's Demeanor in the China-CEEC Cooperation: Overcoming the "3S" Dilemma*, in Horváth, L. (ed.) Results and challenges: ten years of China-CEEC cooperation, Eurasia Center, John von Neumann University, Budapest.

**Ruge, M.** (2022). *The past and the furious: How Russia's revisionism threatens Bosnia*, European Council on Foreign Relations, policy brief, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/the-past-and-the-furious-how-russias-revisionism-threatens-bosnia/>

**Todorova, M.** (1997). *Imagining the Balkans*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1997, xi, 257 pp

#### 7. Description of the research in the three-year period (feasibility)

In the three years made available by the doctoral fellowship, the program of work could be conceived as follows: a first year in which the foundations of the more theoretical issues are laid through an in-depth literature review on the following macro-themes: 1) the multilevel governance strategies 2) the EU-enlargement process in the Western Balkans 3) the political orientation of each Balkan country member of the EUSAIR strategy and its commitment in the EUSAIR strategy 4) The influence of Russia and China in those countries.

Then, during the second year, the idea is to spend about 7 months (one for each country) on on-field research, by interviewing the identified actors. The following 5 months would be spent in Italy to analyze the results obtained.

The third year and last year could be used to request new interviews or second interviews when needed. Upon return from the second round on the field the rest of the time would be mainly devoted to analyze the results and to write the final dissertation.