

The Eagles Belt:

The Unsuspected Stage of the Great Power Competition

Ms. Emanuel Pietrobon

Political Scientist and Geopolitical Analyst¹, Italy

Abstract

The Balkans are one of the main stages of the so-called Cold War 2.0 between the United States and the Russo-Chinese axis, but, to a greater extent, they are also an important battlefield of the broader great power competition, a hegemonic confrontation fought by a number of European and non-European powers and only partly tied to the aforementioned Cold War 2.0.

Just like in the past, the Balkans keep being the powder keg of Europe, but this time, due to a combination of historical events and demographic changes, the veridical beating heart of the region is no longer Serbia, it's a rising geopolitical order based on and centered on Albania: the Eagles' Belt.

Keywords: Eagles Belt; Albania; Kosovo; North Macedonia; geopolitics.

Introduction

It has been four years now that the Kremlin pays homage to North Macedonia on May 24 – the Day of Slavonic alphabet – as the original birthplace of Cyrillic alphabet and literature. And it has been four years now that Vladimir Putin's declarations spark debate across the Balkans, especially in Bulgaria.² Why Russia is willing to enter the North Macedonian issue is clear enough to the Balkan public whereas is less understood across the post-historic and post-identitarian West: it's not about a mere alphabet – and, most importantly, it's not politically irrelevant as it seems to be –, it's about igniting the ever-seething Balkans, Europe's powder keg *par excellence*.

North Macedonia, indeed, is halfway between the former Moscow-ruled Slavic World and the increasingly relevant – both geopolitically and demographically – Albanian world (*Bota shqiptare*), centered on the triangle Tirana-Pristina-Skopje.

Courting North Macedonia means courting the country's Russophile electorate – which is known for its anti-NATO positions –, while, at the same time, widening the gap between the country and Bulgaria and between the country and Albania. Explained otherwise, flirting with North Macedonia's Russophile forces is a way to slow down the EU enlargement process and to sabotage the NATO's agenda

¹ InsideOver – Il Giornale, Osservatorio Globalizzazione, Opinio Juris, Vision and Global Trends.

² Nikolov, K., Russia tries to derail Sofia-Skopje thaw in relations, Euractiv, 25/05/2021 (accessed on 09/06/2021)

in the region in the light of the existing tensions within and outside this dual identity nation.

The North Macedonian issue, at the same time, must be read and framed in a wider context, that is the one of the great-power competition. Because North Macedonia is a *de facto* part of the Bota shqiptare for demographic reasons – one-quarter of the population was of Albanian ethnicity in 2002, year of the last population census, but recent data coming from hospitals and schools suggest that that one-quarter may be a one-third now ³ –, and the Bota shqiptare, also known as the Eagles' Belt (*Rrip i shqiponjave*), is one of the main stages of the current hegemonic confrontation between the West and the East.

The Eagles' Belt: the Balkans' (New) Geostrategic Pivot

No geostrategic pivot is forever. Demographic changes, natural disasters and historical events can change everything, turning a resource-rich place or a strategically fundamental outpost into a desert of no interest. Other times, demographic changes and historical events can turn "normal" or anonymous locations into geostrategic pivots. History is plenty of such examples, especially the Balkans' recent history. It happened when North Macedonia gained independence from Yugoslavia in 1991. It happened when Montenegro gained independence from Serbia in 2006 – and it's now a first-level battlefield between the West and the East (Russia plus China and their allies), as shown by the 2019-20 Orthodox Church-led unrests and by the debt issue with China.^{4 5} And it happened again when Kosovo declared its independence from Serbia in 2008, officially laying the foundations for the birth of the now increasingly visible and tangible Eagles' Belt, that is the long-dreamed-of Albanian civilizational microcosm.

The most far-sighted powers have understood the true meaning and the long-term implications of the paradigm shift that has been reshaping the Balkans' identity in direction of the Albanian civilization – a topic that is going to be discussed more in-depth further on. The aforementioned is the reason why an increasing number of players are battling to carve out a sphere of influence within the Eagles' Belt, most notably Russia, Serbia, the United States, Israel, Turkey, Germany, China and the Holy See.

³ Statistical Yearbook of the Republic of Macedonia, 2018 (accessed on 09/06/2021)

⁴ Vasovic, A. Thousands in Montenegro march against religion law, Reuters, 29/02/2020 (accessed on 09/06/2021)

⁵ Strupczewski, J. EU says it can't help Montenegro on China loan but can on financing, 12/04/2021 (accessed on 09/06/2021)

North Macedonia: the Eagles' Belt soft underbelly

North Macedonia is the Eagles Belt's soft underbelly because of its dual identity, which makes it halfway between the Albanosphere and the Slavic world. The country experienced an ethnic insurgency in the early 2000s and tensions never disappeared completely since then. Here, a lot of players are playing their own game and their reasons vary greatly.

Bulgaria aims at stopping the country's Albanisation process, claiming that is nothing but a Bulgarian land with no previously independent history nor true identity. Passportization and cultural diplomacy are the main means employed by Sofia to attract and "Bulgarize" Macedonian people.

Turkey sees the hegemony over North Macedonia in terms of control over a land that once used to belong to the Ottoman empire. It mainly leverages on the common membership to the NATO and on the presence of about 70,000–200,000 citizens of Turkish origin living in the country, with the latter having their own political parties, their own media and their own schools and mosques.

Russia and Serbia are interested in better ties with North Macedonia with the double goal of worsening its relations with Bulgaria and of slowing down its incorporation into the Albanosphere. Russia is being played the Slav card to court the nationalist electorate and backs the VMRO DPMNE and other Western-skeptic forces.⁶ And Serbia, starting from early 2021, made North Macedonia a primary target of its vaccine diplomacy, sending here tens of thousands of doses of Pfizer/BioNTech, Sputnik V and other vaccines.^{7 8}

Lastly, there is China. Beijing won Skopje's support to the one-China policy and to the Belt and Road Initiative and helped the country during the Covid-19 pandemic. Recently, that is on March 2021, both countries affirmed their commitment to expanding bilateral ties in several fields, including military and defense.⁹

Turkey and the other players competing for Albania

Albania has been forgotten by its oldest and major ally, namely Italy, but, in turn, it has become the object of an increasing interest from two great powers: Germany and Turkey.

Germany entered the ranking of Albania's major trade partners in 2015, and since then it occupies the fourth position, it is more and more present in the investment

⁶ Nikolovski, I. Russia Still Has Cards to Play in North Macedonia, *BalkanCrossRoads*, 27/06/2019 (accessed on 09/06/2021)

⁷ Skopje: Serbia donates 40,000 vaccines to North Macedonia, *N1*, 01/04/2021 (accessed on 09/06/2021)

⁸ Serbia Donates Thousands of Doses of Covid-19 Vaccine to North Macedonia, *RFERL*, 14/02/2021 (accessed on 09/06/2021)

⁹ President, prime minister of North Macedonia meet Chinese defense chief, *Xinhua.net*, 31/03/2021

sector – it's Albania's 11th biggest foreign investor –, it is showing a growing interest in the field of cultural diplomacy and recently it has begun to support loudly the country's adhesion to the European Union.¹⁰

Turkey sees Albania as an indispensable part of its expansionist foreign agenda in the former Ottoman space and is pursuing a strategy of "traversal colonization" by means of trade dominance, penetration into the strategic infrastructures – for instance, Air Albania is a 49% property of Turkish Airlines since 2019¹¹ –, weaponisation of religion – Turkey's Diyanet is funding the Balkans' biggest mosque in Tirana –, politicization of history, security cooperation – a strategic partnership was inked in early 2021 – and humanitarian cooperation – Turkey's TIKA played a key role during the 2019 earthquake and the Covid-19 pandemic, against the background of Recep Tayyip Erdogan's mediation with China to deliver a one million doses of Sinovac in March 2021¹².

The economic ties with Italy are likely to endure over the next years, but the same cannot be forecasted as regard to politics, culture and security, in the light of Italy's retreat from the international stage, particularly from the Balkans, and of its lack of geopolitical farsightedness and imperial *forma mentis* – imperial, not imperialist.

Kosovo at the center of the Israeli-Turkish Cold War

Kosovo is more and more incorporated to Albania by cooperation agreements, from energy to security, and has also become one of the main battlefronts of the Cold War between Turkey and Israel, with the latter acting on behalf of the United States to curb the former's growing influence over the Albanosphere.

Most analysts underscored or completely ignored the importance of the Turkey factor at the time of the Washington Agreement of September 2020, but the deal was actually designed to make Israel enter Kosovo. The post-agreement events, most notably Pristina's recognition of Jerusalem as the capital city of Israel – and Ankara's harsh reaction to it¹³ –, have served as a corroborating evidence of such interpretation.

The Vatican role in the Eagles' Belt

Last but not least, analysts should not underestimate the role played by the Holy See in the Albanosphere, mostly between Albania and Kosovo, as it is a great power with tangible interests in this civilizational microcosm – one must not forget that Albania is

¹⁰ Pietrobon, E., Dalla Germania alla Turchia, tutti pazzi per l'Albania, InsideOver, 31/01/2021 (accessed on 09/06/2021)

¹¹ Pietrobon, E., Il ritorno degli ottomani nei Balcani passa da Tirana, InsideOver, 11/01/2021 (accessed on 09/06/2021)

¹² Pietrobon, E. Albania, ultima chiamata? Osservatorio Globalizzazione, 07/04/2021 (accessed on 09/06/2021)

¹³ Turkey condemns opening of Kosovo's embassy in Jerusalem: An irresponsible and illegitimate step, EuroNews, 15/03/2021 (accessed on 09/06/2021)

10% Catholic¹⁴ – and, overall, in the entire Balkan region – the Vatican diplomacy was very active during the Yugoslav wars and it is now firmly committed to enhancing the interreligious dialogue in the former Yugoslavia.

The Catholic Church keeps being a powerful force within the Albanian society and seems more and more interested in developing ties with Kosovo, despite the risk of repercussions over the relations with the Serbian Orthodox Church (and with the Moscow Patriarchate). The Vatican opened an Apostolic Delegation in Pristina in 2011 – a *de facto* recognition of the country's independence – and Pope Francis met with Kosovo's former president Hashim Thaci in 2017, against the background of the non-stop carrying out of charity and humanitarian cooperation activities.¹⁵

Conclusions

The interests and the leitmotifs of the main powers operating in the Albanosphere have been widely explained, even by resorting to data, facts and numbers, but the reason why this rising civilizational microcosm is of huge importance to all of them has not mentioned yet.

The truth is that whoever is interested in hegemonizing the Balkans – or keeping them under a condition of productive anarchy – is called to build little spheres of influence within the member countries of the Eagles' Belt. Indeed, the veridical keystone to control the Balkans is not Serbia, although it is certainly a game-changer, it's Albania and its two sisters, Kosovo and North Macedonia.

Paraphrasing Sir Halford Mackinder, the founding father of geopolitics, according to whom the ruler of East Europe is destined to rule the Heartland, it is possible to affirm that, thanks to an unpredictable combination of historical events and demographic changes, it is no longer possible to rule East Europe by commanding Serbia. Whoever is interested in hegemonizing Eastern Europe must go through Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia, that is through the Albanosphere, because this geopolitical triangle represents a multidirectional launch pad capable of projecting the player(s) towards a number of destinations: Serbia, Greece, Bulgaria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, the Adriatic Sea and even Italy. Moreover, one must not forget that the Albanosphere is a crossroads of religions and cultures, a place where the West meets the East and where Christianity meets Islam; that's why it is possible to see the Holy See and Turkey in the same competition.

In short, owning a sphere of influence in the two lungs of the Eagles' Belt (Pristina and Skopje), or in its beating heart (Tirana), is equivalent to staking a claim on the

¹⁴ Albania's Population and Housing Census 2011, accessed on 09/06/2021

¹⁵ Pietrobon, E., Il curioso asse tra Vaticano e Kosovo, InsideOver, 15/11/2020 (accessed on 09/06/2021)

Balkans as a whole. This is why Moscow and Belgrade are trying to slow down Skopje's Albanisation process. This is why Washington accorded Tel Aviv the right to enter Pristina to fight the unreliable Ankara. And this is why Berlin is more and more interested in turning into Tirana's major partner within the EU, taking advantage of Rome's apparent death.

The future of Europe, as it has always been, is being written in the Balkans. But, contrarily to the past, the region's epicenter is no longer Serbia, it's the rising Eagles' Belt.

Bibliography

1. *Albania's Population and Housing Census 2011*,
2. Dogar, Nizamettin. "A Cultural Perspective to Leadership Practices in Balkans." *Academicus International Scientific Journal* 12.23 (2021): 110-136.
3. *President, prime minister of North Macedonia meet Chinese defense chief*, Xinhua.net, 31/03/2021
4. *Serbia Donates Thousands of Doses of Covid-19 Vaccine to North Macedonia*, RFERL, 14/02/2021
5. *Skopje: Serbia donates 40,000 vaccines to North Macedonia*, N1, 01/04/2021
6. *Statistical Yearbook of the Republic of Macedonia*, 2018
7. *Turkey condemns opening of Kosovo's embassy in Jerusalem: An irresponsible and illegitimate step*, EuroNews, 15/03/2021
8. Melady, Thomas Patrick. "Albania: a nation of unique inter-religious tolerance and steadfast aspirations for EU integration." *Academicus International Scientific Journal* 4.07 (2013): 12-17.
9. Musaraj, Arta. "Technocracy and the questionable moral philosophy of management. A Southeast Europe inside." *Academicus International Scientific Journal* 10.19 (2019): 37-48.
10. Nikolov, K., *Russia tries to derail Sofia-Skopje thaw in relations*, Euractiv, 25/05/2021
11. Nikolovski, I. *Russia Still Has Cards to Play in North Macedonia*, BalkanCrossRoads, 27/06/2019
12. Pietrobon, E. *Albania, ultima chiamata?*, Osservatorio Globalizzazione, 07/04/2021
13. Pietrobon, E., *Dalla Germania alla Turchia, tutti pazzi per l'Albania*, InsideOver, 31/01/2021
14. Pietrobon, E., *Il curioso asse tra Vaticano e Kosovo*, InsideOver, 15/11/2020

15. Pietrobon, E., *Il ritorno degli ottomani nei Balcani passa da Tirana*, InsideOver, 11/01/2021
16. Strupczewski, J. *EU says it can't help Montenegro on China loan but can on financing*, 12/04/2021
17. Vasovic, A. *Thousands in Montenegro march against religion law*, Reuters, 29/02/2020