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## Europe... Balkan resemblances?

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### *Europe... Balkan resemblances?*

#### *Abstract:*

*Just after Brexit, and in a complex environment in a Europe full of populisms and disintegrating movements, both internal and external, it may seem that, despite everything, the possibility of the European Union's disappearance, given the importance and significance of that institution, be a somewhat remote possibility*

*With the logical differences and distance, it seems possible to establish a series of common elements and similarities between the birth and rise of Yugoslavia and that of the European Union. And considering that Yugoslavia disappeared, an exercise is carried out to contrast that fact and the current situation in the Union.*

*A final reflection closes the Document.*

#### *Keywords:*

*Europe, European Union, Balkans, Yugoslavia, Brexit, Populism, Union, Secession*

**\*NOTE:** The ideas contained in the **Analysis Papers** are the responsibility of their authors. They do not necessarily reflect the thinking of the IEEE or the Ministry of Defence.

## Europa... ¿Semblanzas balcánicas?

### Resumen:

Recién consumado el Brexit, y en un entorno complejo en una Europa plena de populismos y movimientos disgregadores, tanto internos como externos, puede parecer que, pese a todo, la posibilidad de desaparición de la Unión Europea, dada la importancia y trascendencia de dicha institución, sea una posibilidad un tanto remota.

Con las lógicas diferencias y distancia, parece posible establecer una serie de elementos comunes y similitudes entre el nacimiento y auge de Yugoslavia y el de la Unión Europea. Y considerando que Yugoslavia desapareció, se realiza un ejercicio de contraste entre ese hecho y la situación actual que vive la Unión.

Una reflexión final cierra el Documento.

### Palabras clave:

Europa, Unión Europea, Balcanes, Yugoslavia, Brexit, Populismo, Unión, Secesión.

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## 2021: A turning point for Europe?

With Brexit finally complete on 31 December 2020, after a long, almost agonising process that has lasted nearly four years, the fact is that the decision and materialisation of this British abandonment is a deep blow to a European Union that is going through complex times, not only due to the harshness of the pandemic and its effects on a continental and global scale, but above all because of the Member States' different visions and perceptions of it and the powerful wave of Euroscepticism that is sweeping Europe amidst the growth of populisms and various trends which, like centripetal forces, are powerfully damaging the extraordinary project of a united Europe.

But also, a little over a month before the completion of Britain's withdrawal, it was the 25th anniversary of the Dayton Accords –dated 21 November 1995– which put an end to the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina and seemed to be the solution to the succession of conflicts generated by the disintegration of Yugoslavia... although they certainly were not, as the war episodes in the region continued. One need only recall the conflict in North Macedonia in 2001 –a veritable attempt at civil war and the partition of the country– or the war in the Serbian province of Kosovo that led not only to the first armed intervention by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in its history, but also to the self-proclamation of independence as a state of a territory seceded from Serbia in 2008 (Kosovo), without forgetting that disputes and differences in many regions of the former Yugoslavia are far from being a thing of the past.

The Balkans and Europe –the European Union– are part of the same reality, as it is not possible to understand Europe without the Balkans, and it is not possible to understand the Balkans without the rest of Europe; and, therefore, geography and history, together with other aspects, make it possible to establish a series of similarities between the two areas.

Yugoslavia was an invention, a "lucky experiment", just as the European Union is, that grand idea of unifying all or a large part of the European continent into a common institution, in both cases making their citizens live in peace, being more prosperous and more visible in the world. And although there are obviously many differences, there are also many similarities, as was pointed out with extreme simplicity and clarity a few years ago by the mayor of the town where Titus, the great Yugoslav leader, was born:

"Although they are very different entities, there are some parallels between the EU and socialist Yugoslavia: Both operate as a united market to compete in the international market."<sup>1</sup>

In addition to this great similarity –which is a powerful *raison d'être* in itself– it may be that the genesis of Yugoslavia and the European Union also had other aspects in common. And if the birth of both realities was full of coincidences... could it be that the current situation in the European Union also has parallels with that which led to the break-up of Yugoslavia?

### **The Balkans: a complex and key area**

The term "Balkans", which means "mountains", refers to the peninsula located in the east of the European continent; a peninsula, albeit with limits that vary according to the analysts, which is similar in size to the Iberian peninsula and encompasses, to a greater or lesser extent, the current countries of Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, Albania and the precedents of the break-up of Yugoslavia (Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Northern Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia) and, also from Yugoslavia, the territory of Kosovo.

And this peninsula has been a territory in permanent struggle, both due to external and internal actors, disputed both by the powers of the moment and by its own inhabitants.

The fact that it is the natural land bridge between Europe and the Middle East, as well as providing the outlet to the Mediterranean Sea from Central Europe and the relatively nearby Russian steppes, has led to a desire for control of this area by nations and empires throughout history, whether remote in time or, among others, from the Persian or Roman empires to those chronologically closest to them, such as the Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian, Russian, German, French and British empires. And even in these most recent disputes, and despite diplomatic negotiations and political actions to

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<sup>1</sup>EL MUNDO, "Yugonostalgia" in EU Croatia, 29 June 2013. Available at <https://www.elmundo.es/elmundo/2013/06/29/internacional/1372490660.html> NOTE: All web links in this document are active as of 22 January 2020.

"reorder" the region, the truth is that "there was hardly any part of the area that was not claimed by at least two empires"<sup>2</sup>.

The struggle of these great powers of the past for this key space for their purposes –to obtain freedom of land movement and/or access to the sea, or to deny it to their adversary– always involved the possibility of seeking allies in the area, human groups who, in a highly compartmentalised environment, were constantly disputing among themselves over religious, economic and ethnic issues... human groups that were essentially united on the basis of their identity and who often willingly accepted, or actively sought, the help of these empires, of these great powers, to receive support in their local disputes. In this way, local conflicts ended up as regional or quasi-global conflagrations; or, on other occasions, conflicts on the international scale of the powers, by employing their "delegates" in the peninsula, dragged these small communities into disputes in which, in reality, it was not their interests that were being settled<sup>3</sup>, but those of the empires.

Given this situation of constant disputes... wouldn't it be better to look for other options?

### **Was anyone interested in a united Balkans?**

In addition to the scant –nil– interest on the part of external actors in the Balkan area being "dominated by someone else", there was also no interest in the peninsula, or much of it, being united; there was no desire to try to get the different groups, nationalities and entities to overcome their differences, cease their permanent wars and unite, as this would enable them to achieve a critical mass that would give the Balkan peninsula a power in all areas (political, diplomatic, economic, military, etc.) that would enable them to speak with their own voice in the international arena, cease to be

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<sup>2</sup>As the International Commission set up to investigate the causes of the Balkan Wars would later point out, "There is hardly any part of the territory of the Ottoman Empire in Europe that is not claimed by at least two competitors" Report of the International Commission to Inquire into the Causes and Conduct of the Balkan Wars, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1914, page 38.

<sup>3</sup> This situation constitutes a paradigmatic case of "war by proxy". In this connection CALDERÓN PONTIJAS, José Luis, Tendencias en la guerra por delegación (proxy warfare), Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies, Analysis Document 09/2020, 30 March 2020. Available at [http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs\\_analisis/2020/DIEEEA09\\_2020JOSPON\\_proxy.pdf](http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2020/DIEEEA09_2020JOSPON_proxy.pdf)

"delegates of others" and focus their efforts and interests on improving their standard of living and quality of life once the cycle of perpetual conflicts had ended.

Since the 19th century there have been several attempts<sup>4</sup> to bring together the whole peninsula, to create a Balkan Federation<sup>5</sup>, a supranational framework that would bring together the different states and territories of the peninsula. And at times when the major reorganisations of the area –and the world– are taking place, usually in the wake of the great wars, the idea of creating this united bloc gains strength. Thus, in the years prior to World War I, in an environment of struggle between all the players –Balkan peoples and empires– trying to advance positions in the area against the decadent Ottoman Empire, the Balkan League emerged.

This League, born in 1912, enjoyed great success against the Ottoman Empire, which it almost expelled from the last territories it held on European soil in the so-called "First Balkan War". This union of peoples was viewed with concern by most of the empires of the time, but the disputes between the recent allies, between the members of the League over the distribution of the territories liberated from the Ottomans degenerated into a new conflict, this time essentially between them, which would be called the "Second Balkan war" (1912-1913), a conflict that not only led to the end of the League – to the delight of the external empires– but also allowed the Ottoman Empire to recover part of the lost territory.

It seemed that no one, neither at home nor abroad, was interested in a united Balkans.

### **An "intermediate" attempt: Yugoslavia**

After the end of World War I, a conflagration which, in addition to witnessing the disappearance of four empires (Russian, Austro-Hungarian, German and Ottoman), witnessed the redesigning of borders throughout Europe and a new drawing of those of the Balkans, as well as the birth on the peninsula of a new state entity in 1918, the

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<sup>4</sup>KOUTALIS, Vangelis, Internationalism as an alternative political strategy in the modern history of Balkans, Greek Social Forum, Thessaloniki, 2003. Available at [http://www.okde.org/keimena/vag\\_kout\\_balkan\\_inter\\_0603\\_en.htm](http://www.okde.org/keimena/vag_kout_balkan_inter_0603_en.htm)

<sup>5</sup>STAVROS, Leften, Balkan Federation: a history of a movement toward Balkan unity in modern times, Archon Books, Hamden, 1964.

Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, which years later, in 1929, would be called Yugoslavia (Kingdom of the South Slavs), thus bringing together part of the territories and nationalities present on the peninsula as an intermediate compromise between excessive fragmentation, between a "balkanisation"<sup>6</sup> of the territory that would make it possible to return to the previous scenario of constant disputes and between the option (not desired by the powers) of a united peninsula or one in which there was a state that dominated most of the territory.

Once again, the external players, the winners of World War I, are limiting the possibility of the existence of a potential rival of sufficient size, although, on the other hand, the internal players, not satisfied with the situation, continue to generate powerful tensions – including the assassination of the then King of Yugoslavia Alexander I<sup>7</sup> – called "The Unifier"– in Marseilles on 8 October 1934; tensions that would lead to new conflicts that would reach paroxysm in the framework of World War II (1939-1945).

The invasion by German Reich troops of a large part of the Balkans (Mussolini's Italy also had a presence and appetite for the area), with the support –or no opposition at all– of some of the Balkan peoples led to an atrocious war on the soil of the former Yugoslavia, The war against the Nazi invader and two civil wars<sup>8</sup> (one "ethnic", between the different nationalities that made up Yugoslavia, and the other "political", between the partisans led by the communist Josep Broz "Tito" and the anti-communists) were superimposed on each other. Finally, Tito's partisans emerged from the conflict as the great victors, a human group united by a political rather than an ethnic ideology –in fact, they were the only force that brought together people of all the nationalities of Yugoslavia– although the country is totally destroyed, with a very high death toll (estimated at 11 percent of the population) and a vast baggage and memory of atrocities committed by all sides.

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<sup>6</sup>The vicissitudes of the peninsula have been so complex and harsh that the term "balkanisation" has become part of the popular heritage with the general meaning of the dismemberment of a larger entity into opposing territories. As an example: REAL ACADEMIA ESPAÑOLA DE LA LENGUA, "Balcanización", Dictionary, 2020. Available at <https://dle.rae.es/balcanizaci%C3%B3n>

<sup>7</sup>A brief review of King Alexander I can be found at [https://www.biografiasyvidas.com/biografia/a/alejandro\\_i\\_karageorgevich.htm](https://www.biografiasyvidas.com/biografia/a/alejandro_i_karageorgevich.htm)

<sup>8</sup>DENITCH, Bogdan, Nacionalismo y Etnicidad. La Trágica Muerte de Yugoslavia, Siglo XXI editores, Madrid, 1995, pages 43-44; "The civil war within a war" in DJILAS, Milovas, Wartime, First Harvest/HBJ editions, 1980, pages 91-186.

## Yugoslavia: from success to failure in three generations

Under the slogan "Brotherhood and Unity", under the effects of the catharsis generated after the war episode and with strong leadership by Tito, Yugoslavia is being rebuilt; and the success of the renewed structure is such –a standard of living and freedom far superior to that of most Eastern European countries, a high level of international representation by leading the "non-aligned" movement, a high level of world prestige by developing the so-called "third way of socialism"... Yugoslavia was something very special, a reference point in the world and a source of pride for its citizens.

The death of the great Yugoslav leader in 1980, a powerful economic crisis that soon became social, and the appearance in some of the republics that formed the great Yugoslav state of new elites, sometimes defined as "provincial demagogues"<sup>9</sup>, who used nationalism to achieve their ends, simply to accumulate more personal power, began to break the successful project.

At the same time, following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the end of the East-West confrontation, the geopolitical reason for Yugoslavia's success as a non-aligned state disappeared, as there were no longer any major rivals between whom it could profitably navigate between two waters. There was only one federal country left, a large federation, which would depend essentially on itself.

But the new leaders, the new elites, employed a narrative of victimisation, hatred and fear that resulted in the polarisation and fracture of the once proud and cohesive Yugoslav society, employing a dialectic of "mine" and "the others" of such intensity that it eventually led to a person only feeling "safe among his own"<sup>10</sup>. From there to fracture, secession and armed conflict –given the ethnic mosaic that made up much of Yugoslavia's land– there is only one step. And the declaration of unilateral secession by the republics set the fuse in motion, triggering dramatic actions and events –just

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<sup>9</sup> ULLMAN, Richard, *The world and Yugoslavia's wars*, Council of Foreign Relations, New York, 1996, page 9.

<sup>10</sup> IGNATIEFF, Michael, *Sangre y pertenencia. Viajes al nuevo nacionalismo*, El Hombre del Tres, Barcelona, 2012, page 13.



remember the massacre at Srebrenica<sup>11</sup>– which were not supposed to happen in Europe.

The situation became so complex during the disintegration of Yugoslavia that during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina –to date the bloodiest war of the disintegration process– the various peace plans presented directly proposed the division of the Bosnian country into provinces or cantons linked to the ethnic majorities present<sup>12</sup> – now divided into two entities and at risk of permanent fracture in a third. Also, in another sample of geopolitical imagery, at certain times it was alleged that these partitions were intended to further fragment Yugoslav lands –thus facilitating the possibility of increasing the areas of influence of external actors– and even accusations were made that this favoured ethnic cleansing to bring populations into line with the provisions of the partitions.

Finally, Yugoslavia disappears, and the once proud federal state is divided into countries made up of its former constituent republics plus a territory seeking full recognition as a state (Kosovo), in addition to several regions in the new countries that periodically raise the possibility of secession. And the nostalgia grows; yugonostalgia<sup>13</sup> is present in many of the Balkan people in contrast with the reality that in most cases they have to live.

From the resurgence of Yugoslavia after World War II to the disintegration of that great country, whose point of no return is usually in 1991, with the secession of part of its constituent republics –a process of disintegration not yet definitively closed in 2021–, it is feasible to contemplate, in the course of a few generations, how it is possible to go from destruction and death to reconstruction, peace and prosperity and, again, blowing in the embers of real or fictitious differences, back to destruction –to a greater or lesser

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<sup>11</sup>The report drawn up by the United Nations on this subject is both enlightening and devastating: UNITED NATIONS, La caída de Srebrenica, Asamblea General, paper A/54/549, 15 November 1999. Available at <https://undocs.org/pdf?symbol=es/A/54/549>

<sup>12</sup>GERBET, Pierre, The vain attempts of the European Community to mediate in Yugoslavia, CVCE, 6 July 2016. Available at [https://www.cvce.eu/content/publication/2003/5/15/cf4477b6-87a5-4efb-982d-fb694beac969/publishable\\_en.pdf](https://www.cvce.eu/content/publication/2003/5/15/cf4477b6-87a5-4efb-982d-fb694beac969/publishable_en.pdf)

<sup>13</sup>In that sense SÁNCHEZ HERRÁEZ, Pedro, Yugoslavia y yugonostalgia: ¿Europa y euronostalgia?, in Panorama Geopolítico de los Conflictos 2019, Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies, Madrid, 2019, pages 107-142. Available at [http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/panoramas/panorama\\_geopolitico\\_conflictos\\_2019.pdf](http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/panoramas/panorama_geopolitico_conflictos_2019.pdf)

extent depending on the area—, to conflict and practical international irrelevance... and to the prosperity promised by the new elites?

### **Better off alone?**

The instrumentalisation of nationalism by the new elites not only enabled them to gain access to power, but was also used to continue to hold on to it; to this end, no attempt was made to lessen the divergences and differences between the different groups, no attempt was made to eliminate hatred between citizens of the same country, and the discrimination carried out in a nationalist key, on the contrary, it was exacerbated when the latter took power. And these facts, added to the fact that the new leaders give less specific weight to democratic values and economic development, by focusing their efforts on consolidating nationalism, end up creating a strong distinction and distance between the state and its political elites on the one hand and most of the citizens on the other, making the Balkans currently into one of the most unstable regions in all of Europe<sup>14</sup>.

On the other hand, in this context, the development of illegal and criminal activities is usually covered under the cloak of "nation building" or "ethnic issues", establishing strong links between the political authorities and organised crime, and creating a high degree of criminalisation and illegality within the states themselves. A common phrase in the region is "Every country has a mafia, but only in ours does the mafia have a country."<sup>15</sup> And, faced with the promise of renewal, of change in the system every time new elections are called, the new governments that seem to promise to end the clientelist systems fall into the same uses and practices as their predecessors<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup>DEMIRI, Betjulla, Political complexity in western Balkan countries, International Conference of Socio-economic researchers, 2016, Serbia, pages 152-153. Available at [https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/4b42/e80ffbccc1d7532dc99a00d1adfe5ec08e60.pdf?\\_ga=2.109787525.1871020273.1607071608-1183021865.1607071608](https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/4b42/e80ffbccc1d7532dc99a00d1adfe5ec08e60.pdf?_ga=2.109787525.1871020273.1607071608-1183021865.1607071608)

<sup>15</sup>DEMIRI, Betjulla, Political complexity in western Balkan countries, International Conference of Socio-economic researchers, 2016, Serbia, page 156. Available at [https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/4b42/e80ffbccc1d7532dc99a00d1adfe5ec08e60.pdf?\\_ga=2.109787525.1871020273.1607071608-1183021865.1607071608](https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/4b42/e80ffbccc1d7532dc99a00d1adfe5ec08e60.pdf?_ga=2.109787525.1871020273.1607071608-1183021865.1607071608)

<sup>16</sup>COURRIER DES BALKANS, Monténégro: le nouveau gouvernement et l'spectre du népotisme, 19 January 2021. Available at <https://www.courrierdesbalkans.fr/Montenegro-nouveau-gouvernement-et-le-spectre-du-nepotisme>

For example, following the earthquake in Croatia on 29 December 2020, many of the buildings rebuilt with public money after the war have collapsed, generating a new controversy that has turned into an investigation into what could be one of the biggest scandals of misappropriation of public funds in independent Croatia<sup>17</sup>.

Moreover, the new nations that have emerged are too small to be able to compete in a regional market, let alone in the global market; Neither in terms of population –none of them has more than 8 million inhabitants, and in some cases they do not even reach 1 million– nor in terms of economic capacity do they generate an adequate structural framework to be competitive countries, as they lack an economy of scale and do not offer sufficient attractiveness for foreign investment due to the excessive fragmentation of the Balkan market<sup>18</sup>, a fragmentation that greatly weakens their bargaining power vis-à-vis powerful players who, as in the past, come to the area in search of opportunities and to obtain advantageous positions, such as China, which takes advantage of the differences between the various national policies<sup>19</sup>.

While these new, strongly nationalist states are erecting borders and rules as a way of showing and demonstrating "their sovereignty", it should be considered, on the other hand, that in such small nations the cost of maintaining full state structures is disproportionate. Just look at the dispute in Slovenia, the richest of the former Yugoslav republics, over defence spending<sup>20</sup> and the difficulty of dealing with it.

This reality means that the promised "El Dorado" does not exist. Unemployment is very high, expectations are low and emigration, especially of the younger and more educated population, is a very serious problem –especially in a generalised environment, with some exceptions, of a very low birth rate in the region–, since the average number of

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<sup>17</sup>COURRIER DES BALKANS, Sisme en Croatie: pourquoi les bâtiments reconstruits après la guerre se sont ils effondrés?, 6 January 2021. Available at <https://www.courrierdesbalkans.fr/Seisme-Croatie-batiments-reconstruits-guerre-effondres>

<sup>18</sup>NUTALL, Clare, Western Balkans: too small to be the next big thing?, BNE Intellinews, 5 April 2020 Available at <https://www.intellinews.com/western-balkans-too-small-to-be-the-next-big-thing-158760/>

<sup>19</sup>SHOPOV, Vladimir, China goes granular: Beijing's multi-level approach to the western Balkans, European Council on Foreign Relations, 12 November 2020. Available at <https://ecfr.eu/article/china-goes-granular-beijings-multi-level-approach-to-the-western-balkans/>

<sup>20</sup>BALKAN INSIGHT, Slovenia opposition seeks referendum on defence spending hike, 27 November 2020 Available in <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/11/27/slovenia-opposition-seeks-referendum-on-defence-spending-hike/>

emigrants for the so-called Western Balkans (former Yugoslav territory plus Albania, without Croatia and Slovenia) was 19% five years ago<sup>21</sup>, in a trend that has been growing and represents a genuine loss of human and intellectual capital. And even other aspects related to quality of life, such as pollution, reaches very high levels in many areas<sup>22</sup>, endangering people's health.

Meanwhile, the new nations remain, to a large extent, trapped in the rhetoric of the past, of "old debts and grievances" as a way to mobilise their followers and as a way to make people forget the hard day-to-day and justify everything that has been achieved<sup>23</sup>.

The disappearance of Yugoslavia led to the extinction of the Federal Development Fund, the tool which had enabled the country to develop more harmoniously and which was the subject of harsh criticism, attacks and boycotts by nationalist regional leaders, who accused the country's government of paying the most and receiving the least, the elimination of which was a very important step in the disintegration of Yugoslavia. Indeed, at present the financial needs of these countries are so pressing that, to a large extent, the European Union ends up assuming the role of the extinct Federal Fund, and in addition to the Balkan Union member states –and everyone's aspiration is to be part of it<sup>24</sup>– it has to make heavy disbursements in the area –recently 3.3 billion euros have been approved to mitigate the effects of COVID-19<sup>25</sup>– in order to improve its possibilities and capabilities and reinforce the complex stability of the region.

On the other hand, and as a sign of the associated effects of a process of disintegration and secession, it is worrying to note that the new nation states<sup>26</sup> that have emerged

<sup>21</sup>OECD, The COVID-19 crisis in the Western Balkans, 2020, page 8. Available at <https://www.oecd.org/south-east-europe/COVID-19-Crisis-Response-Western-Balkans.pdf>

<sup>22</sup>BALKAN GREEN ENERGY NEWS, Western Balkans suffocating from air pollution as heating season starts, 23 October 2020. Available at <https://balkangreenenergynews.com/western-balkans-suffocating-from-air-pollution-as-heating-season-starts/>

<sup>23</sup>DIZDAREVIC, Zlatko, Europe and the Western Balkans: dull reality and unrealistic expectations, Heinrich Böll Stiftung, 25 November 2015. Available at <https://eu.boell.org/en/2019/11-25/europe-and-western-balkans-dull-reality-and-unrealistic-expectations>

<sup>24</sup>RIVELLINI, Matteo, Hope and strength in the Western Balkans, European Investment Bank, 2020, page 9. Available at [https://www.eib.org/attachments/thematic/eib\\_big\\_ideas\\_hope\\_and\\_strength\\_in\\_the\\_western\\_balkans\\_en.pdf](https://www.eib.org/attachments/thematic/eib_big_ideas_hope_and_strength_in_the_western_balkans_en.pdf)

<sup>25</sup>EUROPEAN UNION, COVID-19: €3.3 billion EU package for the Western Balkans, European Council, 06 May 2020 Available at <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/es/infographics/economic-support-to-western-balkans/#>

<sup>26</sup> BABIC, Marko, Understanding the complexity: Europeanization in the Western Balkans, Horyzonty Polityki, volume 5 issue 10, 2014, pages 85-104, page 12  
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from the process that have been most successful on their path towards the European Union are those that have managed, through ethnic cleansing both physically and by means of legal and economic tools, to maintain "manageable minorities" on "their" territory. Is this the right message in the face of growing internal tensions and populist and separatist groups in the rest of Europe? And, to make matters worse, the very existence of Kosovo<sup>27</sup>, this territorial entity that arose by force of arms and foreign geopolitical interests, continues to constitute a Damocles' sword for all the values that the European Union represents and defends.

But, it is argued, these are "exceptionalities", "differential facts" that have exclusivity, pointing out that "their" case is special and different from the rest. And in the Balkans, which let us remember means mountains... are there two valleys alike; and after a rich and complex history, full of settlements of peoples and cultures, empires and wars... is there any space that cannot be searched for a "different past", any area or human group that cannot "create arguments" to justify a "balkanisation"? And there will always be those on the outside who will welcome and instigate fragmentation. Divide and conquer.

But although the Balkans is Europe, Europe, the European Union, it is very different. Or is it?

### Europe: a complex and key area

The term "Europe" has various meanings and interpretations in its origin and meaning<sup>28</sup>, from reflecting the name of a goddess in classical mythology to referring to the place where the sun sets –as seen from the East– to a meaning that verbalises the vastness of the continent's coastline. And the European space, its extent and limits, is also subject to controversy, even to the point that it would not be a continent as such, but simply a part of Eurasia.

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98.[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/261513605-https://www.researchgate.net/publication/261513605\\_Understanding\\_the\\_Complexity\\_Europeanization\\_in\\_the\\_Western\\_Balkans/link/0f3175347b38c43fce000000/download](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/261513605-https://www.researchgate.net/publication/261513605_Understanding_the_Complexity_Europeanization_in_the_Western_Balkans/link/0f3175347b38c43fce000000/download)

<sup>27</sup>SÁNCHEZ HERRÁEZ, Pedro, Kosovo: ¿Un serio escollo para una Europa más unida?, in Panorama Geopolítico de los Conflictos 2018, Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies, Madrid, 2019, pages 17-40. Available at [http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/panoramas/panorama\\_geopolitico\\_conflictos\\_2018.pdf](http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/panoramas/panorama_geopolitico_conflictos_2018.pdf)

<sup>28</sup>As a simple sample CASANOVA, Félix, ¿Cuál es el origen del nombre Europa?, Historias de nuestra Historia. Available at <https://hdnh.es/origen-nombre-europa/>

Controversies are not only relegated to the academic sphere... the European space has been a territory in permanent dispute, both by external and internal actors, both by the dominant powers or peoples of each moment and by its own inhabitants.

Europe is the natural area of exit from Asia to the ocean from the west, as well as having a relief and geography absolutely favourable to access the sea; it faces several seas simultaneously (Arctic, Atlantic, Mediterranean, etc.), a fact that gives it a geopolitical advantage over areas located in or with access to a single sea. And its geographical position also makes it possible for European soil to be a natural land bridge with Africa, with the Middle East and with the Asian depths and steppes; a space that also has a great diversity of climates and lands that give it great economic possibilities. Therefore, throughout history, many foreign empires and civilisations have attempted to occupy it, from the Persians to the Huns, passing through African and Ottoman empires...

Moreover, the history of Europe is full of disputes between its constituent peoples: a quick look at the evolution of the political entities in Europe over the last 1000 years –or even less, since it should be remembered that today's Germany or Italy were born as the culmination of a process of reunification of different territories in the last part of the 19th century– is enough to visualise this reality.

And it was these disputes that led to a Europe (the European powers) that dominated the world and was the point of reference for centuries to exhaust itself in these internal struggles which, with the end of the world wars, saw the disappearance of the European powers as the main players of reference in the international order, to such an extent that European soil became yet another "battlefield" of the powers that emerged after World War II, the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). The "balkanisation" of Europe led it to irrelevance.

## Is anyone interested in a united Europe?

After World War II, Europe was divided not only between the areas of influence of the two great powers, but also by the quarrels and grudges of the opposing sides and groups.

In Western Europe, the need to strengthen countries and democratic systems economically in the face of the Soviet threat led to the development in 1947 of the so-called Marshall Plan<sup>29</sup>, while Eastern Europe, on the other side of the Iron Curtain, maintained a different reality and dynamic.

And in the context of the Cold War, both powers continued to wage the war on European soil, counting and using their allies and satellites respectively. The fragmentation of Europe provided each power with a space suitable for its interests, in a world in which "Europe" as such was largely a buffer zone, a buffer against the "expansionist" efforts of each of the powers and a space in which to wage the land battle between the two. It seemed that no one was interested in a united Europe.

## An "intermediate" attempt: the European Community

Within this framework of European division, a group of people in the western part of the continent were spearheading the project to create a peaceful, prosperous and united Europe. The catharsis generated after the two world wars and a firm exercise of leadership by the champions of the European Union managed to align wills and desires and gradually advance the project.

Thus<sup>30</sup>, the Coal and Steel Economic Community (ECSC) was born in 1950 as the first forerunner of an economic and political union, which would become the so-called "Common Market" or European Economic Community (EEC) in 1957, whereby Europe, at least in certain areas, began to play a certain role in an increasingly global world, albeit within the bipolar framework of the Cold War.

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<sup>29</sup>A brief note on it can be found in PLAN MARSHALL, Enciclopedia de la Historia. Available at <https://enciclopediadehistoria.com/plan-marshall/>

<sup>30</sup>A more extensive outline can be found in EUROPEAN UNION, History. Available at [https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/history\\_es](https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/history_es)

The EEC was very attractive, and new European countries were joining the project at different stages of enlargement, even having to undergo severe structural adjustments in order to meet the requirements of the Community.

The EEC was beginning to be a point of reference in the world and a powerful asset for its citizens; so much so that, after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the end of the Soviet Union, in what has already been known since 1993 as the European Union (EU), the Eastern European countries joined it in new and extensive phases of integration.

The real possibility of uniting the whole continent was beginning to emerge... will the European Union finally be a success story?

### **Europe: from success to failure in three generations?**

The Soviet Union falls, the Cold War ends... the world enters a new stage, the risks and threats change and so do international relations and global power relations; but at the same time the geopolitical reason for the powers –and the material possibility in the case of the former USSR– to continue supporting their allies and satellites ends, which in the case of the Europeans, and now essentially depending on themselves, seem to be firmly committed to the Union.

However, in the course of these rapid EU enlargements, differences of opinion and perceptions of what the Union should be and what it should be like as a Member State are beginning to emerge; and while times are good and money and prosperity are flowing, to a greater or lesser extent, despite the existence of this existential debate, the situation is continuing... until the very hard global economic crisis that began in 2008 and quickly became a social crisis, saw the emergence of new elites and the growth of populisms<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>31</sup>A brief overview of this concept can be found in THE CONVERSATION, ¿De qué hablamos cuando hablamos de populismos?, 20 June 2019. Available at <https://theconversation.com/de-que-hablamos-cuando-hablamos-de-populismo-118861>



Moreover, generational change and the intervening years, both in Europe and across the Atlantic, mean that people not only have no vivid memories of the world wars, but even of the Cold War.<sup>32</sup> And for this reason, in addition to others, in this global planet in the midst of its reconfiguration, the transatlantic link, one of Europe's cornerstones, is greatly weakened: from the growth of populist tendencies in the United States of America (USA) to Washington's demand for freedom from the burden of largely supporting Europe's defence, all this contributes to the growing remoteness of both Atlantic shores.

And while it can be argued that many of these issues were maximised in the Trump era –indeed, the US president supported Brexit without a doubt<sup>33</sup>– the fact is that the expected further regionalisation of the economy (one of the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic), together with the growth of protectionism in the US and its shift towards the Pacific and competition with China<sup>34</sup>, among other issues, suggest that the belief that the transatlantic link will be as strong and robust as it has been in the past may be a chimera<sup>35</sup>, although there is some euphoria in this respect with the recent appointment of Biden as US president.

Moscow regards Europe as a continent in decline, and less and less relevant from a strategic point of view. Therefore, although a powerful economic relationship with the European Union continues to exist, the Russian Federation is seeking alternatives to Europe, especially China and other rising nations<sup>36</sup>. And the powerful China, the second world economy, takes advantage of Europe's weakness to take control of strategic sectors on the continent<sup>37</sup>, to such an extent that there is a re-evaluation of policies

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<sup>32</sup>LASCHET, Armin, Relaciones trasatlánticas y poder difuso, Política Exterior issue 199, 1 January 2021. Available at <https://www.politicaexterior.com/articulo/relaciones-transatlanticas-y-poder-difuso/>

<sup>33</sup>EL PAÍS, Trump alienta el Brexit duro y promete un acuerdo comercial “fenomenal” con EEUU, 5 June 2019. Available at [https://elpais.com/internacional/2019/06/04/actualidad/1559636528\\_775905.html](https://elpais.com/internacional/2019/06/04/actualidad/1559636528_775905.html)

<sup>34</sup>TOCCI, Nathalie, Autonomía europea y vínculo trasatlántico: dos caras de la misma moneda, Política Exterior, 13 November 2020. Available at <https://www.politicaexterior.com/autonomia-europea-y-vinculo-transatlantico-dos-caras-de-la-misma-moneda/>

<sup>35</sup>EL MUNDO, Bruselas: “Estados Unidos está de vuelta y Europa está lista”, 22 January 2020. Available at <https://www.elmundo.es/internacional/2021/01/21/6008758efdddf85958b45c5.html>

<sup>36</sup>EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, Russia's national security strategy and military doctrine and their implications for the EU, Brussels, 2017, pages 19-20. Available at [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2017/578016/EXPO\\_IDA%282017%29578016\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2017/578016/EXPO_IDA%282017%29578016_EN.pdf)

<sup>37</sup>THE NEW YORK TIMES, Europe takes steps to block Chinese bargain hunters, 17 June 2020. Available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/17/business/european-union-china-deals.html>

regarding the challenge posed by China<sup>38</sup> and the need to safeguard European security and public order in relation to foreign direct investment<sup>39</sup>... the various European nations are weak, in isolation, in the face of the great Asian giant. It is thus pointed out that China is an "economic competitor and systemic rival", and that "both the EU and its Member States can only achieve their goals in relation to China if they show unwavering unity"<sup>40</sup>.

Strategic autonomy and non-dependence on external actors are essential to institutional survival, though this requires a high degree of internal cohesion to enable it to become an international player of such weight that it can be regarded and valued as an "important ally" or, at least, not as an area "of empire expansion" by exploiting existing weaknesses and cracks.

But is this what Europeans want?

### **Better off alone?**

The polarisation of societies is a growing phenomenon throughout the planet; the effects of globalisation, economic crises and the prospect, real or induced, of the impossibility of improving standard of living if there is no change in the socio-economic model generate strong tensions in populations, in which movements of "indignation" arise and institutions are increasingly questioned at all levels –including the EU–, facts which, added to a great absence of leadership, allow this polarisation and the consequent fracture of societies to increase<sup>41</sup>, and the cohesion of these societies to be seriously damaged, weakening them increasingly.

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<sup>38</sup> <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/05/09/on-china-s-expanding-influence-in-europe-and-eurasia-pub-79094>

<sup>39</sup>EUROPEAN COMMISSION, EU foreign investment screening regulation enters into force, Press Release, 10 April 2019. Available at [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP\\_19\\_2088](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_19_2088)

<sup>40</sup>EUROPEAN COMMISSION, Commission reviews relations with China, proposes 10 actions, Press release, 12 March 2019. Available at [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/es/IP\\_19\\_1605](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/es/IP_19_1605)

<sup>41</sup>In this sense SÁNCHEZ HERRÁEZ, Pedro, Era COVID: ¿un nuevo paradigma de seguridad?, Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies, Analysis Paper 36/2020, 18 November 2020, pages 4-7. Available at [http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs\\_analisis/2020/DIEEEA36\\_2020PEDSAN\\_eraCovid.pdf](http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2020/DIEEEA36_2020PEDSAN_eraCovid.pdf)

It is no coincidence that the overall strategy for the European Union's foreign and security policy, published in 2016<sup>42</sup> and very shortly after the Brexit referendum, was entitled "Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe", which states in its prologue, and as an opening sentence, that "the purpose, even existence, of our Union is being questioned".

And the situation is increasingly complex for the European Union in the face of the rise of populism<sup>43</sup>, since disenchantment with traditional parties is growing, as repeatedly stated in the headlines and analyses that European politics is breaking down<sup>44</sup>, in the same way that Brexit represents a certain fracture in Europe or as shown by the request made in the European Parliament regarding the recognition by the Union of the right to universal secession<sup>45</sup>.

The narrative constructed in relation to the European Union is largely one of "regaining control and sovereignty", concepts that in today's hyper-connected and interdependent world could be mythologised as dreams of past imperial glories; and therefore it is repeated that "the Brexiters did not tell the truth before the 2016 referendum"<sup>46</sup>, as well as that "British citizens have been victims of populism and the lies of their leaders"<sup>47</sup>.

Against this background of internal and external complexity, it is interesting to recall the phrase "The Union as a safeguard against internal factions and insurrection"<sup>48</sup>. You might think these are recent words... but they were uttered in 1787, as part of the

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<sup>42</sup> Available at [https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top\\_stories/pdf/eugs\\_es\\_.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top_stories/pdf/eugs_es_.pdf)

<sup>43</sup>DUMITRASCU, Alexandra, La Unión Europea ante el ascenso de los populismos, Atalayar, 13 May 2019. Available at <https://atalayar.com/content/la-uni%c3%b3n-europea-ante-el-ascenso-de-los-populismos>

<sup>44</sup>GRAMER, Robbie, How European politics is fracturing, Foreign Policy, 28 May 2019. Available at [https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/05/28/how-european-politics-is-fracturing-european-union-elections-rise-of-far-right-greens-liberals-centrist-parties/?utm\\_source=PostUp&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=13354&utm\\_term=Editor&#39;s%20Picks%20OC](https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/05/28/how-european-politics-is-fracturing-european-union-elections-rise-of-far-right-greens-liberals-centrist-parties/?utm_source=PostUp&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=13354&utm_term=Editor&#39;s%20Picks%20OC)

<sup>45</sup>EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, Amendment 38, document A9-0226-/38 of 20 November 2020. Available at [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2020-0226-AM-035-038\\_ES.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2020-0226-AM-035-038_ES.pdf)

<sup>46</sup>LA VANGUARDIA, Un Brexit bajo tutela francesa, 21 December 2020. Available at <https://www.lavanguardia.com/internacional/20201221/6137712/brexit-reino-unido-francia-china-boris-johnson-ue.html>

<sup>47</sup>LA VANGUARDIA, Macron cree que el pacto del Brexit ayuda a la UE a avanzar "unida y fuerte", 25 December 2020. Available at <https://www.lavanguardia.com/internacional/20201221/6137712/brexit-reino-unido-francia-china-boris-johnson-ue.html>

<sup>48</sup>MADISON, John, The same subject continued: the Union as a safeguard against domestic faction and insurrection, Library of Congress, Federalist Papers issue 10, 23 November 1787. Available at <https://guides.loc.gov/federalist-papers/text-1-10#s-lg-box-wrapper-25493273>

drafting of a series of essays to support the ratification of the nascent United States Constitution. And as a sign of the Union's strength, on 30 December 2020 a global investment agreement was signed between the European Union and China, to "rebalance the trade and investment relationship between the two"<sup>49</sup>. Would we be better off without the European Union?

### **Did Yugoslavia matter, does Europe –the European Union– matter?**

Beyond all the important geopolitical issues at the time, Yugoslavia was born when its citizens believed in it, having suffered the consequences of disunity and strife. And when that life experience became a somewhat distant memory, the use of the right narrative by new leaders made it possible to exchange that memory for another, so that people stopped believing in Yugoslavia. And since no powerful outside actor had any special interest in its existence, which was rather to seize some of the spoils, Yugoslavia fell.

Fragmentation and division are the breeding ground for intervention, interference and even domination by large and powerful actors. One way of rewriting "divide and conquer" is "if you divide, you will lose", a corollary and consequence of the above, and a truth that has been contrasted throughout history.

The in the struggle, especially if it is a global one, the aim is to divide the adversary in order to win, can enter into an illogical logic of a zero-sum game. But the fact that there is a self-division, a fragmentation, thus pretending to win... is, besides an exercise in hypocrisy, an absolute deception.

But the power, the real power, lies in the citizens, in their faith in a common project. This is how Yugoslavia was consolidated, this is how the European Union was built. It is they who should care about the project, if they know and are aware of its transcendence and meaning.

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<sup>49</sup>EUROPEAN COUNCIL, Meeting by videoconference of the leaders of the EU and China, 30 December 2020. Available at <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/es/meetings/international-summit/2020/12/30/>

And so, when the Yugoslavs stopped believing and followed "the calls of the sirens", Yugoslavia disappeared... and the Yugoslavs lost. While it is true that there are those who won, some small elites won and the outer powers also won.

Will we stop believing in Europe, in the European Union, and follow new siren calls? Hopefully the title of this document will never be a reality, but simply a science fiction story.

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