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THE EU PRIORITIES IN THE WESTERN BALKANS AND POLAND'S RAISON D'ETAT**

Abstract

There is a noticeable increase in Poland's engagement with the Western Balkans. This research aims to explore the compatibility of the EU priorities in the region and Poland's national interests. Embedded in the concept of *raison d'etat* and the realist theoretical framework, this paper traces the evolution of the EU and Poland's approaches towards the region in the pursuit of the level of symbiosis between the two players. The research explores the EU strategic approach towards the Western Balkans, charts a timeline of the Polish involvement dynamics in the region, and compares the arguments behind the strategic nature of the Western Balkans. The findings recognize the incorporation of Poland's priorities into the EU strategy towards the region. However, there is still uncertainty as to the extent, to which the Western Balkans have been included into Poland's highest state interests. The Western

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Balkans can still become a victim of the internal Polish clashes over the main foreign policy priorities. The continuity of the Law and Justice engagement with the region by a non-Law and Justice government and the preservation of the pace of engagement will determine, whether the Western Balkans indeed become a part of the Polish *raison d'etat*.

Keywords: stabilization, democratization, Western Balkans, Poland, Raison D'Etat

INTRODUCTION

The EU policy towards the countries of the western part of the Balkan peninsula that are still not members of the EU (labeled as Western Balkans) is a subject of extensive research interest and deliberations. The aim of this paper is not to provide a new analysis of the EU relations with the region, called firstly Southeastern Europe and subsequently Western Balkans, but to dwell into the coherence of the EU and the Polish approaches towards the region through the prism of their primary interests (*raison d'etat*).

The Meriam-Webster dictionary defines *raison d'etat* is a "justification for a nation's foreign policy on the basis that the nation's own interests are primary". Rooted in Niccollo Machiavelli's reasoning and extrapolated by Friedrich Meinecke (1965) to our times, it is best translated as the idea of national interest (Sullivan 1973 p. 258). However, this definition omits an important aspect, that plays a crucial role in the Polish context. Namely, the *raison d'etat* is superior in the sense, that it overrides the particular group interests within the democratic state *(*Łastawski 2017). The consolidation of these primary interests and their recognition by vast majority of the population, secures greater effectiveness in their pursuit. The *raison d'etat* can be approached also through the perspective of a question, whether the country's actions lead to further empowerment of the statehood (Rzegocki n.d.). Juliusz Mieroszewski's acknowledges that the proper Polish policy is the one that serves best the Polish interests in a particular situation. (Mieroszewski 1997, p. 244). In this research, the idea of primary state interests *(raison d'etat)* will encompass the demand for

popular consent beyond the limits of partisanship and continuity beyond one party's term in office.

The prioritization of national interests places this research within the explanatory potential of the widely defined realist theory of international relations. In that sense, the first aim of the paper will be to identify the nature of EU's primary interests in the region in order to subsequently juxtapose them with the role and place of the region in Poland's *raison d'etat*. This comparison will shed light on the Poland's foreign policy dynamics and will give an answer to the question whether Poland has substantially incorporated the Western Balkans into the list of its primary state interests.

Before we continue, another disclaimer on the EU and the concept of *raison d'etat* is necessary. Since the EU is not a state in itself (Catterall 2019), it will not be accurate to use the term *raison d'etat* to define its priorities in the region. Vimont accurately points out that practically, the conceptualization of EU interests, is often done for academic use, since the member states and the EU institutions "have hardly felt concerned by such agendas, since the feeling of common European interest is still weakly shared, if not contested, by those who primarily look to their own interests." (2016) Still a sense of European interests can be identified as a derivative of the member states approval and support for a particular position conducted by the European institutions towards the region. There is no space for a deeper reflection on the nature of the particular countries' interests in the EU stance towards the Western Balkans, but it is suffice to say, that the EU approach is grounded in the sum of the member states' positions that lead to a joint approach towards the Western Balkans states, steered by the European Commission (EC).

There is a noticeable activization of the Poland's foreign policy towards the Western Balkans. Over the last four years the Western Balkans emerged as one of the important foreign policy priorities to the extent that journalists dared to claim that Poland will be the ambassador of the West in the Balkans (Petrović 2019) and pro-governmental think tanks claim that Poland is building a strategic partnership with the region (Wojtyczka 2019). The aim of this paper is to trace the evolution of Poland's reorientation towards the region, to explore the reasons for this "sudden" prior-

itization of the region and conclude whether the nature of Poland's involvement indeed caries the specifics of a "strategic" partnership or *raison d'etat*.

The first part will elaborate on the EU's approach towards the region with the aim to discover the dominant priorities within the EU stabilization/democratization dichotomy. The second part will focus on the nature of Poland's involvement in the region in order to identify the ground for the recently growing enthusiasm. Ultimately, it will try to answer the raised question. This research is based on a qualitative analysis of available EU and Polish primary sources and accessible secondary literature, and unfortunately, limited by the Covid-19 lockdown.

EU'S PRIORITIES IN THE WESTERN BALKANS – STABILIZATION AND/OR DEMOCRATIZATION?

The disintegration of Yugoslavia was the antithesis of the post-Cold war enthusiasm for Europe's unification. The western political and economic model that prevailed after the Cold War, become the beacon towards which the former communist satellite states started heading. This almost idyllic unison was disrupted by the dissolution of Yugoslavia. However, in the context of the grand political challenges of the collapsing Soviet Union with its nuclear arsenal, the Yugoslav troubles were considered as a secondary concern in the peripheries of the great power politics. The resolution of the Balkan's destabilization was vested in the hands of the United Nations and the European Communities that were just to undergo deep metamorphosis with the Maastricht Treaty. The EC/EU involvement in the conflict resolution efforts, defined by Branislav Radeljić as "highly immature" (2016, p. 2), revealed the limits of its abilities to shape its immediate neighborhood, since it was not until the United States stepped in that the power status quo has shifted to an extent that paved the way to Dayton (Daalder 1998).

At the time, when the integration process was moving to a new level of integration under the Maastricht Treaty, the Yugoslav wars become yet another dimension that confirmed the need for EU's emancipation. Since then, the region has turned to an indi-

cator of the EU's ability to project power abroad. The logic of the regional approach applied since 1996, was visible already in the EU's peace proposals during the war in Bosnia. The Owen-Cutilleiro, Vance-Owen and Owen-Stoltenberg plans were all aiming to keep the mixed character of the population, despite the clear aim of the belligerents to ethnically purge the territory. This EU stubbornness is visible until today within the enlargement policy or the endless efforts for the return of refugees.

The regional approach is also an emanation of the EU's unity itself. The dominant logic, promptly acknowledged by the Visegrad group countries already in 1991, was that countries pursuing membership had to prove their ability to cooperate with their neighbors. Thus, the regional approach and the concept of conditionality were practically framed in the context of integration but were extended and applied to a region that was going through the opposite process of disintegration. Hence, the disintegration experience of former Yugoslavia determined its distinction into a separate region labeled firstly South Eastern Europe (SEE) and subsequently - Western Balkans.

As early as in 1996 the EU formally applied its regional approach towards SEE, where its first and foremost priority was the stabilization of the region. As Grizo and Ananiev stress, "Its main original element was its objective of stabilization, to be achieved through emphasized regional cooperation." (2014) The paradox of this regional approach, just as in the case of Bosnia, was that it was contradictory to the interests of the dominant political forces on the ground. While the region was falling apart, the EU was encouraging its unification. The aim of this approach, was to "reconcile and rehabilitate relations between countries by introducing European values and standards, such as democracy and rule of law, in order to foster their transition to a peaceful, stable and prosperous region." (Vajzović 2014, Žarin 2007, 514). Thus, the main priority of the EU approach towards the region is stabilization through the application of the basic political principles that served well the integration process since the end of the World War II.

Importantly, Grizo and Ananiev acknowledge that despite the numerous changes in the EU policy towards the region after 1999 "a surprising number of its components remained as blueprints"

(2014). It relies on regional cooperation and bilateral relations with the EU, the promotion of political stability and economic development, the EU perspective and conditionality, and finally the "regatta principle" on the road to the EU (European Commission, 1997, 1998).

This is not to say that democratization does not matter. The EU documents monitoring the situation in the region acknowledge every single example of well-organized elections, steps towards expected reforms and emphasis on positive developments. Furthermore, with every next step of the EU relations with the region, the questions of democratic standards, rule of law, human rights and minority were taking more central place. The Stabilization and Association Process (SAP) brought "higher incentives than before to the countries concerned. These stronger incentives would, of course, require compliance with more demanding conditions, both political and economic as well as increased emphasis on the need for regional cooperation" (European Commission 1999). As Vishinova aptly grasps it "… this tailor-made strategy for the Western Balkans clearly states, the goal was at first to stabilize and then to associate the countries on the EU membership track, a two-step policy which did not occur in the previous waves of enlargement." (2018) As Elbasani points out its purpose was not just association, but first and foremost stabilization." (2008, p. 299) The novelty of the stabilization part were, the so-called "Copenhagen plus" criteria (Kmezić 2017 p. 49) encouraging resolution of the post-war legacy and alignment with the Central European candidates.

The essence of SAP's higher incentives was the EU's commitment to eventual membership that since then was consistently reconfirmed in every next summit and official EU document. The complex nature of the rapprochement with the region had its practical dimensions including the internal affairs, as a consequence of the evolving integration process after the Amsterdam treaty. The increased assistance for democratization, civil society, education and institution-building, regional cooperation and the enhancement of the political dialogue framed the new bonds between the EU and the region.

THE EU'S EVOLVING PRIORITIES AND THE ROAD TO STABILITOCRACY

What has changed profoundly since the adoption of the SAP was the environment in which the EU relations with the Western Balkans develop. Since 2003 the integration process has entered a path of growing difficulties caused by internal and external factors. The 2004, and particularly 2007 EU enlargements had a profound impact on the relations with the region. While the awareness of the 2004 enlargement was still in process of uneasy digestion by the member states, the 2007 membership of Bulgaria and Romania revealed the EU's readiness to make concessions with its own values. The 2007 experience left the EU with an enlargement hangover. The establishment of the post-enlargement Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM) for the two countries was an attempt to suppress the "post-enlargement hooliganism" (Ganev 2013) and to provide the EU with the ability to bring internal reforms in the new member states. While, this mechanism largely failed (Dimitrov et. al 2014, Toneva-Metodieva 2014, Gateva 2013) the EU faced new crises. The economic one undermined the EU's image as an endlessly positive project. It also exacerbated the consequences of the fifth enlargement with the Eastern Europeans march to the West in search for better life. At this point, the high tide for enlargements was over.

The post-2007 dynamics in the EU-Western Balkans relations substantially slowed down. Othon Anastasakis succinctly grasped the changing nature of the EU priorities in the accession process that has shifted from the "finish" to the "journey" (2008). In practical terms, the EU's enlargement policy towards the Balkans has changed from a map towards the EU to a tool for regional leverage. The enlargement fatigue was soon followed by an "accession" one (O'Brennan 2014). The region's political elites promptly recognized the *modus operandi* of the post-enlargement relations with the EU. The stabilization of the political situation in the region supplanted by pro-European rhetoric was enough to secure a permanent stream of EU funds.

EU's preoccupation with its crippling problems of the Greek debt crisis, the increasing animosity between the "north" and

"south", the illegal migration, with which Italy was struggling since 2011 and the growing Euroscepticism resulted in the de-prioritization of the Western Balkans. The countries from the region also missed the opportunity to keep the momentum of pro-European enthusiasm. Instead, the political elites used the decreasing EU interest to augment their grasp on power and to instrumentalize the relations with the EU for the sake of cumulating political capital. The bilateral conflicts over history, identity and territory offered fast and easy cumulation of political capital that could not be resisted by the political elites.

Thus, the EU de-prioritization of the region and the demand for stability are aptly encapsulated in the concept of stabilitocracy. Florian Bieber accurately collects its nuances by defining it as "governments that claim to secure stability, pretend to espouse EU integration and rely on informal, clientelist structures, control of the media, and the regular production of crises to undermine democracy and the rule of law." (2018) Interestingly, the concept applies to both, the EU and non-EU countries that suffer a very similar disease.

The fact, that the countries closest to this stabilitocracy in the EU were the two 2007 members, provided the Western Balkans political elites with additional argument about the excessive EU accession demands. Thus, local politicians further strengthened their political grasp of power, as defenders of national interests, this time at the expense of the EU. These trends were even more puzzling, when acknowledging the fact that at the same time the period between 2007 and 2018 practically pushed the region closer to the EU. The SAP process is largely completed, Croatia joined the EU, membership negotiations were started with Serbia and Montenegro, and the migration crisis required more active assistance.

The EU de-prioritization of the Balkans enlargement perspective reached its peak in the eve of the migration crisis. Jean Claude Juncker's political declaration on the freeze of the enlargement perspective during his term, apparently caused by the internal EU problems, was a blow to the whole enlargement policy. The Berlin Process pulled down the Western Balkans from the EU agenda and left it in the hands of the countries with genuine interests in the region (Domaradzki 2019). The consequences of this de-priori-

tization were significant. The Russian and Chinese assertiveness swiftly turned the Western Balkans into another field of geopolitical clash (Bechev 2017, Szpala 2014). It took the EU three years for Juncker to abandon his Western Balkan's policy and to frame a new Strategy for the region. However, neither the 2018 EU "credible enlargement perspective" nor the 2020 new approach proposed by the European Commission, challenged the strategic nature of the EU-WB relations. Although the new approach aims at resolving many of the practical deficiencies in the relations, the essence of the regional approach, grounded in stabilization driven conditionality remained untouched.

Importantly, in the context of the further deliberations on the Polish perspective on the region, the substantial tactical shift that occurred over the last decade in the EU-WB relations concerns the elevation of the rule of law, as a term encapsulating the Copenhagen political criteria, to the forefront of the mutual interactions. Recapitulating, the EU's primary interests in the Western Balkans are embedded in the demand for stability, security of the EU's closest neighborhood and economic entanglement. The spread of the democratic political practices is the road map towards the achievement of these goals. However, as the practice of the EU-WB relations reveals, this road map is quite often set aside for the sake of stability in the region.

POLAND AND THE BALKANS

The conceptualization of the Balkans as a region in Poland's strategic interests is not a new phenomenon. Leaving aside the extensive interaction between the Balkans and Poland in the history (Balcer 2019 p. 21−25), the Peninsula, or substantial parts of it, were part and parcel of various conceptualizations of the Polish security during the last century. These conceptualizations differ in form and were embedded in the then political configurations. They were part of the larger concept of Intermarium (Chodakiewicz 2017). Kowal and Orzelska-Stączek identified four different versions of the concept of Intermarium - the interwar period; the World War II; during the 1980ies; and the most recent Three Seas Initiative (TSI) (Kowal, Orzelska-Stączek, 2019, 21−46). The common denominator for these different strategies was their

positioning in the East-West axis, determined by the perception of Germany and Russia. The Balkans' role, in these concepts, was to increase Poland's power projection, through the establishment of a regional grouping. So far, Poland's intellectual deliberations and political efforts for regional consolidation never materialized and usually collapsed under the weight of regional competition and foreign interests. Contrary to Kowal and Orzelska-Stączek's approach, the current Polish authorities consistently persuade about the lack of any continuity between the XX century Intermarium concepts and the Three Seas Initiative (Dębski 2016).

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the reorientation of foreign policy priorities towards the Euroatlantic integration did not change the axis but shifted the weight towards the West. Already in 1990 Krzysztof Skubiszewski skillfully reoriented Poland's foreign policy westwards (Kuźniar 2010 p. 54, Skubiszewski 1993). Thus, beginning a process of disentanglement of the complex network of the Cold War era dependencies between Poland and the USSR.

The newly emerging post-Soviet independent states not only changed Poland's geopolitical environment, but also created an opportunity for the practical implementation of the Giedroyć-Mieroszewski doctrine. Essentially, the doctrine's main assumption was that the existence of independent and democratic states of Ukraine, Belarus and Lithuania between Poland and the Russian Federation will improve Poland's security environment. The Polish authorities could not remain passive towards the new post-Soviet states also because of the Polish ethnic minority in these countries. Thus, despite the dismantling of the Polish-Soviet dependence, the East remained an area of strategic Polish engagement.

However, the main priority was given to the Western vector aiming at the swift rapprochement with the United States and the Western European countries, under the slogan of "return to the West". Hence, the Western Balkans, or former Yugoslavia, were not a part of the main Polish foreign policy priorities (Podgórzańska 2013, p. 210; Domaradzki and Frączak 2018 p. 29).

After 1989, the Transatlantic area (Skubiszewski 1993), and within it the membership in NATO and the European Union become the two main foreign policy priorities. The former resolving Poland's post-Cold War security concerns and the latter, being

considered as the necessary trampoline for the swift catching-up with the West. After the membership in NATO (1999) and the EU (2004) these strategic priorities did not change. The international dimension of Poland's strategic interests is still concentrated on the EU and NATO (Koziej 2015). The nuances of Poland's internal strategic debate concern the prioritization between the US and the EU.

It is within the framework of this Western vector, that Poland became actively involved in the Western Balkans. However, the nature of this involvement was never a part of a sound and coherent strategy towards the region. Instead, it was a by-product of the prioritization of NATO as the post-Cold War's security pillar in Europe. Important episodes like Tadeusz Mazowiecki's nomination as the Special Envoy for Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1992−1995 together with his sound resignation (Kuźniar 2010, p. 196) did not trigger a demand for a more consistent engagement in the Balkans. Poland's active involvement in the NATO led missions in the war-torn Yugoslavia aimed to increase the country's credibility among the Western partners and to pave the way for the membership in the Alliance. Since IFOR, Poland participates in every single NATO and EU mission in the Balkans.

The 1999 membership in NATO did not change Poland's policy towards the region. The significance of the "NATO first" logic was best visible during the NATO airstrikes on Yugoslavia in 1999, when Poland, joining formally the alliance two weeks earlier, uncritically supported the NATO operation "Allied Force", thus jeopardizing its historically friendly relations with Belgrade. In the aftermath of the war, Poland joined KFOR and remains part of it to this day. Importantly, the legacy of the Polish-Serbian positive relations is visible in the Polish attitude towards Kosovo. Although Warsaw recognized Kosovo's independence, it remains the only country in the Balkans where Poland does not have an embassy. As Przemysław Pacuła deliberates, this might be a consequence of the uneasy dilemma for Poland's diplomacy, where on one hand Warsaw wanted to remain within the political mainstream in the EU and to support the right to self-determination and the promotion of democracy, and on the other, it still wanted to keep good relations with Serbia and acknowledged the dubious legal ground and consequences (2012, p. 120). Balcer goes further acknowledging the

Polish political elites concern that the act of independence "could be treated by Russia as a pretext for playing the separatist card against the countries of the former Soviet Union" (2019, p. 28).

Interestingly, the 2004 membership in the European Union brought an important, although not necessarily immediate change, in the Polish attitude towards the countries from the region that remained outside the integration process. Filip Tereszkiewicz highlights that along with the EU membership Poland had to define anew its international role and at the same time to embed it in the already existing EU external practices (2013, p. 215). As a part of the EU, Poland joined the process of setting up the EU's enlargement and neighborhood policies but at first expressed little interest in the Balkans. Podgórzańska aptly defines Poland's foreign policy towards the region as "…declaratory towards the whole region and pragmatic… and even the Croat membership in the EU should not be expected to bring substantial changes." (2013 p. 208) The Polish unconditional support for the EU enlargement and NATO's "open door" policies did not develop beyond the participation in EU and NATO missions. Still embedded in the East – West axis, the Polish strategic deliberations concerned the approach towards the post-Soviet space within the Eastern Partnership and the prioritization between the United States and the EU, leaving the WB to the V4 partners. Despite the numerous voices for deeper involvement in the Western Balkans (Balcer and Gromadzki 2010; Żornaczuk 2012, Domaradzki 2014) for another decade the region was not considered as important for Poland's decisionmakers.

The Polish presidency in the Council during the second half of 2011, when Croatia was finalizing its negotiations with the EU gives a good example. Although, the successful completion of the negotiations was a part of the Polish priorities (Przewodnictwo, 2012, p. 11) the Polish authorities disregarded the symbolical opportunity to use the conclusion of the negotiations. The official signing of the Accession treaty was held in Brussels and the government was not interested in exploring the opportunity for symbolical involvement of Poland, by inviting the ceremony to Warsaw. At the same time, the government was aware of the need for PR activities in EU context and prepared a YouTube movie welcoming the Croats titled "Dobrodośli" (Przewodnictwo, 2012, p. 121−122). The fact, that this important question never received

public attention epitomizes the secondary role that the Balkans played in Poland's foreign policy debate until 2016.

Another source that sheds light on the Balkan's place in the deliberations over the Polish foreign policy priorities are the government's foreign policy strategies and annual informations to the parliament on Poland's foreign policy. The two strategies published in the second decade of the XX century, in 2012 and 2016 frame Poland's priorities. The 2012 document entitled "Priorytety Polskiej Polityki Zagranicznej 2012−2016" accounts for the Balkans, together with Moldavia and the Southern Caucasus, in the context of prospective EU enlargement and readiness to share experience in political and economic transformation (Priorytety 2012, p. 15). The Balkans are also mentioned in the context of NATO effectiveness (p. 16). However, Poland's southern dimension, focuses primarily on the Visegrad Group (V4) and although it explicitly mentions Romania, Bulgaria and Ukraine, the remaining countries are locked in the wider South-Eastern Europe (p. 20). Importantly, the North-South axis between the Baltic and the Mediterranean seas appears as a source of a new potential for Poland. The strategy acknowledges the need for regional consolidation. Within the recognized demand for the buildup of a joint central European perspective and close cooperation, priority is given to the Visegrad Group (V4), Bulgaria and Romania (p. 20). Hence, it seems that the driving force for this pursuit of regional cooperation was stemming from the need for a stronger voice within the EU. In 2014, the Council of Ministers European Affairs Committee adopted Guidelines for the Polish policy towards the Western Balkans. Unfortunately, during the pandemic, the document is not publicly available, and its content will undoubtedly shed more light on the process of evolving crystallization of the Polish priorities towards the region.

In the meantime, Poland's security environment has changed abruptly. The annexation of Crimea, the war in Donbass, the growing Russian assertiveness in the Balkans and the slipping of the EU enlargement process, were all negative geopolitical developments (Balcer 2015, pp. 44−57). Hence, the Polish authorities had another reason to look at the Western Balkans, since Russia's increased activity is a direct threat to its security (Balcer 2019 p. 26).

Since the early XXI century the Western Balkans entered also the V4 agenda, since they were no longer associated with the conflicts and become part of the European integration framework (Šabič, Freyberg-Inan 2012 p. 261). Among the reasons for the V4 increasing involvement since 2014, Griessler mentions proximity, the demand for regional cooperation, stability, the positive effects of the EU Acquis and the branding of the V4 as a role model (2018, p. 158). The consistently increasing V4 engagement is incorporated into the EU and NATO priorities, and quite surprisingly in the context of the ongoing Polish and Hungarian rule of law boxing with the EU, see their policies as reflective of European values. The share of transformation and enlargement experience is also the V4 stock in trade (2018 p. 141).

THE SOUTHERN TURN

The genuine shift in the Polish approach towards the Western Balkans took place together with the coming into power of Law and Justice (L&J) in 2015. The L&J vision of Poland's foreign policy was a part of the party's program prepared already in 2014. The new perspective was strongly determined by geopolitical considerations of balance of power. The identification of Germany and Russia as the "Concert of powers" threatening Poland's sovereignty required the rejuvenation of the old Intermarium concept (Balcer, Buras, Gromadzki, Smolar 2016 p. 3). It positioned Poland as a catalyst of four concentric circles (Western European, Baltic-Nordic, Eastern and Southern). This vision assumed closer relations with the V4, the Carpathian range, the Baltic Sea and the Balkans (Kowal, Orzelska-Stączek 2019, p. 37). The L&J political strategy of radical change required alternative approach towards the Polish foreign priorities. Among others, this was an opportunity to incorporate the Western Balkans, ignored by the ruling Civic Platform, as a part of a genuinely new vision of the foreign policy that the L&J related think tanks did not miss.

Since 2015, when Law and Justice, for the first time in the post-Cold War Polish history, won a landslide victory by winning the Presidential elections and gained full control over the Parliament, Poland's foreign policy witnessed a substantial, unseen over the last twenty five years, shift with the prioritization of the national

over international policy (Balcer, Buras, Gromadzki, Smolar 2016 p. 2). The break of the Caracal helicopters contract with France, the rejection of the EU migrant quota principle, the rapidly mushrooming anti-German rhetoric constituted a rebellion against the EU expanding competences and the foreign policy priorities of the Civic Platform.

This anti-EU rebellion led to a swift re-alignment within the V4, that suffered from the Polish blacklegging in the context of the EU imposed migrants' quota. However, it took two more years to crystalize the framework of the Polish involvement in the Balkans. The 2017−2021 Poland's foreign policy strategy acknowledges Russia as the main security threat and recognizes the potential destabilization of the East and South neighborhoods. The Balkans are now embedded not only in the context of the EU and NATO enlargements, but also acknowledged as a part of Poland's neighborhood and a part of the regional energy projects (Strategia 2017, p. 11, 16). Although the strategy highlights the duty of solidarity, best exemplified by the Polish medical supplies convoy to the Western Balkans in May 2020, only Romania is a part of Poland's strategic security concerns and contains a declaration of closer rapprochement. Thus, as the strategy acknowledges, the Balkans are at the frontier of Poland's geopolitical outreach.

A comparison of the annual informations on the Poland's foreign policy from 2004 to 2019 confirms the secondary role of the Balkans among the foreign policy priorities until 2016. In the period from 2004 to 2019 the terms related to the Western Balkans and the relevant states appeared rarely. At the early stage of the explored period the region was defined as Balkans and only since 2010 the term Western Balkans is used. Until 2017 the reference to the Balkans was usually in the context of the NATO missions in the Balkans and Poland's military contingents. In the period 2004−2016 the highest number of "Balkan" mentions was 4 in 2013 and 2014. At the same time for four years (2005, 2006, 2009 and 2016) the Balkans and their derivative (Western Balkans and the constituting countries) were not mentioned at all.

Since 2017 there is a noticeable quantitative and qualitative increase in the presence of the Western Balkans in the governments annual information. In 2017 and 2019 the Western Balkans were

mentioned over a dozen times. The context become much more diverse, and while it still referred to the Polish military missions, it emphasized the intensification of relations, the sharing of enlargement experience, and the package of initiatives for the region. The TSI, and the Poland led Skopje, Belgrade and Tirana Conferences sharing Poland's enlargement experience, the Berlin Process and an intensified relation at highest level contributed to the picture.

The post-2017 increasing Polish engagement in the Balkans exists within two frameworks: the Three Seas Initiative (TSI) and the Berlin Process. The former, only indirectly concerns the countries of the Western Balkans, since this initiative gathers only the EU member states from Central and Eastern Europe. While acknowledging the noticeable disparities with "old" EU, TSI aims at improving infrastructure, diminishing energy dependence, increasing north-south connectivity and cohesion. The project is also exclusive, since despite the practical overlapping of the TSI and the Berlin Process priorities, the Balkans' non-EU members are not a part of it. Still, for Poland's authorities see the potential for prospective reconciliation of the TSI with the Berlin Process (Szynkowski vel Sęk 2019).The technical and narrow character of the initiative diminished the internal EU opposition towards it, to the extent that the German foreign minister Heiko Maas declared Germany's will to join the initiative (Deutche Welle, 2018).

When the Berlin Process was set up in the late summer of 2014, Poland was not involved in it. Regardless of the political rhetoric around this initiative, it appeared in the eve of Juncker's decision to freeze the enlargement perspective for his term. The aim of the Berlin Process was to keep the momentum of EU leverage over the Western Balkans, in times when the EU internal problems become so acute, that the perspective of enlargement lost its importance. The framework of the Berlin Process, formally outside the enlargement policy with a handful of states interested in the region aimed to keep pushing for regional rapprochement and Western leverage (Domaradzki 2019; Wojtyczka 2019). Poland was invited to participate in the Process during the Cebit Expo in Hannover in 2018 (Musiałek 2019). The Polish presidency concentrated on the infrastructure, digitalization, the widely defined security, reconciliation and youth cooperation (Czaputowicz 2019). The spread of Poland's transformation and reconciliation experience, and civic

society forum (Musiałek 2019) resemble the activities of Poland's Eastern partnership (Szynkowski vel Sęk 2019).

Although the Western Balkans were constantly present in Poland's foreign policy since 1989, there is a noticeable increased engagement over the last five years. Poland's East-West axis has not changed, but the return to geopolitics, Russia's role in the Balkans, the attitude towards the integration process, Poland's need for North-South investments and the internal policy prioritization, constitute the variables that framed the elevation of the Western Balkans among the Poland's foreign policy priorities.

CONCLUSIONS

The increased Polish interest in the Western Balkans under the Law and Justice is a fact. The reasons for this engagement are manifold, but they were largely possible due to the landslide defeat of the Civil Platform and the revolutionary changes in all dimensions of Poland's politics. In foreign policy terms, Law and Justice prioritization of national politics has a profound impact on the Polish engagement in the Balkans. The internal Polish infrastructural needs were incorporated into the regional initiatives of Via Baltica and Via Caprathia. The need to deter Russian assertiveness, together with the possibilities offered by the new LNG terminal and the demand for regional interconnectedness provided for the framing of the TSI. The Trump backing in that respect was of no lesser importance for its political survival.

The Berlin Process not only increased Poland's presence in the Western Balkans, but also opened a new dimension of joint EU-Polish cooperation, that went beyond the Warsaw-European Commission rule of law conflict. The investment oriented TSI and Berlin Process, together with the pre-enlargement funds provide also more credibility to the Polish led initiatives.

Both the EU and Poland need stable Balkans. Hence, the Polish involvement is grounded in substantial internal change, geopolitical considerations and pursuit of a stronger regional leverage. However, the recent authorities successfully accommodated the Polish priorities within the established EU approach.

In order to come with a valid answer whether the intensified Polish engagement is a part of the Polish *raison d'etat*, there is a need to observe a government change and to see whether the policy towards the Western Balkans will retain its dynamic and engagement. The Law and Justice governments expanded the channels of communication and introduced the region as a part of the Poland's foreign priorities. Importantly, the opposition never criticized the government's increased engagement with the Western Balkans. Hence, the first condition in accordance with our definition of *raison d'etat* is met. Nevertheless, the geopolitical conceptualization, and more importantly the future of the European integration and Poland's role in it, remain contested issues in Poland's politics.

The main question remains, whether Law and Justice will be able to incorporate the perception of the Western Balkans as a part of the *raison d'etat* until the next non-L&J government or the region will become a victim of a domestic "counterrevolution"? Such change can lead to a renewed "return to the EU's core" and can diminish the role of the Western Balkans again, making it simply a "one term" priority.

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ПРИОРИТЕТИ ЕУ НА ЗАПАДНОМ БАЛКАНУ И ПОЉСКИ RAISON D'ETAT

Сажетак

Пораст ангажовања Пољске на Западном Балкану је приметан. Овај рад има за циљ да истражи компатибилност приоритета ЕУ у региону и националних интереса Пољске. Уграђен у концепт *Raison D`Etat* и реалистички теоријски оквир, овај рад прати еволуцију приступа ЕУ и Пољске према региону у потрази за нивоом симбиозе између два играча. Аутор истражује стратешки приступ ЕУ према Западном Балкану, приказује временску динамику пољског укључивања у регион и упоређује аргументе иза стратешке природе Западног Балкана. Налази препознају укључивање пољских приоритета у стратегију ЕУ према региону. Међутим, још увек постоји неизвесност у којој мери је Западни Балкан укључен у највише државне интересе Пољске. Западни Балкан и даље може постати жртва унутрашњих пољских сукоба око главних спољнополитичких приоритета. Континуитет ангажовања закона и правде са регионом од стране владе која не делује у складу са законима и правдом и очување темпа ангажовања одредиће да ли ће Западни Балкан заиста постати део пољске *Raison D`Etat*.

Кључне речи: стабилизација, демократизација, Западни Балкан, Пољска, *Raison D'Etat*

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