

**Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski"**  
**Faculty of Philosophy**  
**Department of Political Science**

Ilche Dimovski

**ABSTRACT**

for a dissertation on the topic

**"The influence of the great powers USA, PR of China and Russia on the political processes in the Republic of North Macedonia in the context of the Western Balkans"**

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**Scientific supervisor: Prof. Dr. Tatyana Alexandrova Dronzina**

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## **GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE DISSERTATION**

The proposed doctoral dissertation examines the influence of the United States of America (USA), the People's Republic of China (PRC), and the Russian Federation on political processes in the Republic of North Macedonia. This is in the context of the contemporary international environment marked by strategic rivalry, asymmetric threats, and the pursuit of influence over unstable and politically tense regions. The research focuses on the period after the signing of the Prespa Agreement in 2018, which represents an important stage in the country's international situation and influences its foreign policy and domestic processes.

The aim of the study is to trace the forms through which these three countries exercise their foreign policy presence in North Macedonia, taking into account their different approaches, interests and channels of influence. The American side is examined in the context of its strategic support for NATO membership and the processes of Euro-Atlantic integration. The Chinese presence is analyzed through the prism of its economic activity and politically neutral rhetoric, as well as through investment initiatives within the framework of the “One Belt, One Road” cooperation. Russian actions have been observed through approaches that combine cultural and historical narratives, informational influence and support for certain political and ideological positions.

The dissertation has both scientific and practical significance, as it brings together the national and regional contexts and offers a conceptual framework for understanding the way in which great powers project their influence on small states. The approach is interdisciplinary, combining political science, international relations and critical geopolitics. Special emphasis is placed on the interaction between external actors and local political elites, as well as on social perceptions, media narratives and expert assessments.

The study uses quantitative and qualitative methods to identify the specifics of external influence, its perception by various social and political groups, as well as the reflection of the internal political dynamics of the state.

The dissertation does not limit itself to a description of the factual situation, but offers a critical analysis of the processes of political and institutional interaction related to external influence. This also opens up possibilities for conclusions of an applicable nature - in the field of foreign policy, democratic development and strategic autonomy of North Macedonia.

As perhaps one of the rare, comprehensive works dedicated to the comparative analysis of the influence of the United States, the People's Republic of China, and Russia on North Macedonia at the doctoral level, it contributes to the expansion of the academic debate on the topic of foreign policy influence in Southeast Europe. It offers an analytical framework for assessing contemporary mechanisms for influencing the policies of states in democratic transition, without using pre-defined categories such as "vulnerable states," but taking into account the specifics of institutional development, international obligations, and domestic political processes.

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **METHODOLOGY and THEORY**

Chapter I sets out the methodological and theoretical framework of the study. The first section is dedicated to the methodology, including the scientific significance, hypotheses, research questions and methods used. The second part develops theoretical concepts and analytical tools through which the influence of the three main forces on the political processes in North Macedonia is analyzed.

The first part, entitled "Methodology", examines:

#### **Topic relevance**

The topic of foreign policy influence on small states and their political processes is particularly relevant in the context of the modern international system, which is characterized by increased competition between great powers and new forms of geopolitical dominance in unstable regions. The Western Balkans region, and the Republic of North Macedonia in particular, represents a specific environment in which the strategic interests of the United States, China, and Russia intertwine, with each of these countries applying different tools and approaches to projecting its influence.

Following the signing of the Prespa Agreement in 2018 and the subsequent accession of North Macedonia to NATO in 2020, the country has found itself in a new political and geopolitical

configuration. While the Euro-Atlantic orientation seems to be formalized, at the same time the presence and activity of third parties – China and Russia – is increasing in the shadow of official commitments. This raises questions about the actual influence of external actors, the ways in which it is exercised, and the role of local political elites as mediators of this influence.

Understanding these processes is of crucial importance not only for the academic community, but also for the institutions, media, and society in North Macedonia and the region. It is for this reason that the topic of this dissertation has high scientific and practical relevance.

**Research object** are the external influences on the political processes in the Republic of North Macedonia.

**Subject of study** The influence of the US, China and Russia on the Republic of North Macedonia.

**Main research question** This dissertation examines how and what influence do the three great powers have on the political processes and security of the Republic of North Macedonia?

**The main goal** The aim of the study is to deepen the understanding of the influence of the United States, China, and Russia in the Republic of North Macedonia after the country's renaming.

**Research tasks** include monitoring the development of ways to directly influence the Republic of North Macedonia through non-standard methods and phenomena of the United States, the People's Republic of China and Russia; analysis of the most important components of the influence of the United States, the PR of China and Russia on political processes in the Republic of North Macedonia and synthesis of analytical information and identification of the most important components of the types of direct influence of non-standard methods and phenomena of the United States, the PR of China and Russia on the Republic of North Macedonia.

### **Hypothesis**

The central hypothesis tested by this study is: The influence of great powers in the Republic of North Macedonia is aimed at achieving geopolitical interests, which is carried out through a wide range of instruments that influence the political situation and prospects of the Republic of North Macedonia.

### **The elements of the general hypothesis are as follows:**

1. The influence of the great powers in the Republic of North Macedonia is aimed at realizing their geopolitical interests in this part of Southeastern Europe.

2. The Republic of North Macedonia faces a permanent political crisis after the period of its renaming for a number of reasons, but also because external influences on its political processes have a contradictory impact.

3. The Macedonian political class benefits from external influences in different ways, sometimes in harmony and other times in contradiction with national interests.

### **Methodological approach**

The study applies a mixed methodological approach, combining quantitative and qualitative methods. The quantitative component is based on a representative sociological survey (survey) among 302 respondents from different demographic groups, with the aim of establishing public perceptions of external influence. The qualitative component includes conducting semi-structured interviews with experts (10 for each country) - university professors, journalists, political analysts, former diplomats and representatives of the civil sector. The interviews provide an in-depth analysis of processes and mechanisms that cannot be established through a survey alone. The study also uses secondary sources - official documents, public statements of international institutions and local authorities, media publications, analyses of independent institutes and academic literature.

**In the second part of the first chapter** entitled “Explanatory Frameworks, Definition of Concepts”, examines geopolitical and geostrategic theories that form the basis for analyzing the influence that the United States, China, and the Russian Federation exert on political processes in the Republic of North Macedonia. They provide an analytical framework for understanding the positioning of great powers in the global and regional context, with a particular focus on North Macedonia.

The beginning of geopolitical theories dates back to the early 20th century, when Halford Mackinder formulated the theory of the "Heartland", emphasizing the strategic importance of Eastern Europe and the interior of Eurasia as the key to controlling world power. According to Mackinder, whoever controls the Heartland will control Eurasia and thus world politics. Nicholas Spykman, on the other hand, developed the theory of the "Rimland", emphasizing that real control lies not in the interior, but in the coastal areas surrounding Eurasia. In his work "The Geography of Peace", Spykman defines the Rimland as a crescent-shaped belt of significant economic, political and military capacity that functions as a buffer zone between the Heartland and the world's oceans, providing a key position for global dominance.

Modern theories expand on this classical understanding, adding new dimensions such as cultural, economic, and strategic factors. Robert Kaplan emphasizes the enduring impact of geographic realities on foreign policy, noting that despite globalization and technological advances, space and physical borders remain key to understanding conflicts—especially in the Balkans, the Middle East, and the Indo-Pacific. Zbigniew Brzezinski, on the other hand, conceptualizes Eurasia as a center of geopolitical competition, developing a model of influence through alliances, economic integration, and partner support rather than direct territorial control. His concept of the “Eurasian Balkans” describes this area as resource-rich but also deeply unstable, making it a field of conflict between great powers.

Critical geopolitics, as a newer strand of theoretical thought, questions traditional state-centric paradigms and views geopolitics as a discursive and ideological construct shaped by media, language, and political narratives. In contrast to classical theories, critical geopolitics considers territory, borders, or "space" to be not objective and fixed, but rather the result of cultural and political frameworks. This approach analyzes how "difference" is created by presenting certain regions as threatening or backward, in order to justify interventions, sanctions, or policy decisions. Giraud O'Toole and Simon Dalby have shown that geopolitical language serves to legitimize political measures and shape public opinion, especially through terms such as the "Iron Curtain" or the "Axis of Evil".

Network geopolitics, on the other hand, broadens the focus of analysis to include non-state actors such as multinational corporations, non-governmental organizations, and global digital platforms. In the age of digital connectivity, issues such as cybersecurity, climate change, and global health crises require coordination through interdisciplinary and transnational networks. Anne-Marie Slaughter develops this perspective, arguing that power today is more horizontal, distributed through global networks of influence rather than through vertical state hierarchies.

Symbolic geopolitics focuses on national symbols, cultural narratives, and historical memories that influence international relations. In the Balkans, symbols such as Kosovo, the Battle of Kosovo, or the Byzantine legacy provide a basis for political mobilization and legitimization of geopolitical goals.

Ethnogeopolitics analyzes the influence of ethnic and religious identities on political processes. In the Balkans, diverse ethnic communities such as Serbs, Croats, Bosnians, and

Albanians create complex networks of interaction that influence the formation of political orientations and alliances, often driven by religious or cultural ties.

Geo-economics, on the other hand, explores the relationship between economic processes and geopolitical goals. Edward Luttwak developed the concept of “geo-economic strategy,” in which economic means are used as a substitute for military power to achieve global influence. China is an example of implementing this strategy through the “One Belt, One Road” initiative, while Russia uses its energy influence as a means of political control in the Balkans. Through economic instruments, these states achieve long-term dependence on smaller actors, which leads to increased political power and strategic advantage.

Economic diplomacy is defined as the use of economic resources, bilateral and multilateral relations to achieve foreign policy goals. China uses it through infrastructure projects in the region, while Russia uses energy deals for political influence.

Soft power, according to Nye (2004), refers to influence through culture, media, and educational exchanges, while hybrid warfare, popularized by Hoffman (2007), combines conventional and unconventional methods of destabilization. This concept includes political, information, cyber, and economic tools that operate in the gray area between peace and conflict. The Russian perspective is associated with “information confrontation,” where media and cyberattacks are used to manipulate public opinion, while the Chinese concept of the “three wars” includes psychological, media, and legal warfare.

Furthermore, the concepts of buffer states and postcolonial geopolitics explain the way in which the Balkans function as a zone of demarcation between great powers. Buffer states, historically positioned as a protective belt, maintain the balance of power and prevent direct confrontation. In the same context, postcolonial geopolitics shows how external influence shapes regional politics and national identities.

Furthermore, the concepts of power projection, control over key territories, strategic depth, and balance of power emphasize the strategic maneuvers of the major players in the region. Power projection allows for direct influence, while control over key territories secures geostrategic positions. Strategic depth increases the resilience of states to external threats, while balance of power prevents the establishment of hegemony in the region.

**Operationalization of the theoretical framework** is developed through analyses of authors and concepts in Chapters 2, 3, and 4, which explore the geopolitical, geoeconomic, and

geostrategic factors influencing political processes in North Macedonia. These theoretical perspectives serve as a basis for formulating questions in surveys and interviews aimed at measuring the influence of the United States, China, and Russia, as well as the role of local political actors in mediation processes.

**Methodological challenges** include limited willingness of respondents to discuss sensitive topics, low awareness of Chinese influence, and limited access to transparent data, which necessitates careful interpretation of proxy indicators.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **US INFLUENCE IN THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA**

**Chapter Two** of the dissertation, operationalizes and further develops the theoretical framework presented in the first chapter, which examines specific aspects of US influence in the context of the Western Balkans, with a focus on the Republic of North Macedonia. The United States follows a multi-pronged approach to strengthening its political influence in the Balkans, combining soft power, economic support, power projection, and strategic alliances.

The Western Balkans region is located on the periphery of the Heartland and serves as a strategic corridor between Russia and Western Europe. Due to its geographical location, the Balkans play a key role in American geopolitical interests, especially through its connections to the Aegean and Adriatic Seas.

In this regard, the United States promotes democratic values and open market economies through agencies such as USAID, which provide financial and technical support to strengthen democratic institutions and civil society. This model is an expression of economic diplomacy aimed at stability and development, but also at promoting Western values.

Economic assistance is in fact a central instrument through which partnerships are strengthened with countries such as Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia, with an emphasis on economic reforms, good governance, and the fight against corruption. In addition to economic support, the US strategy in the region also emphasizes security stability through NATO integration and strengthening regional defense capabilities. NATO integration is a top priority for the United States, with the aim of stabilizing the region and reducing external influence, especially Russian. On the other hand, the presence of US military troops within the framework of UN missions in the 1990s and the defense partnerships between the two countries constitute a

projection of power, guaranteeing the sovereignty of North Macedonia and limiting Russian and Chinese influence in the region.

The United States has actively supported the political processes in the country, including the 2001 Ohrid Framework Agreement, which is considered the basis for multi-ethnic governance. This approach reflects the micro-geopolitical dimension of American strategy.

Cultural diplomacy, as part of soft power, is achieved through programs such as American Corners, Fulbright scholarships, academic exchange programs, and study visits, which form a network of young professionals who embrace Western values. These forms of cultural diplomacy are a tool for long-term strengthening of pro-American attitudes in the country. In addition, media literacy and support for independent media are aimed at strengthening democratic capacity and combating disinformation.

The 2018 Prespa Agreement, achieved with significant diplomatic engagement on the part of Washington, demonstrated the symbolic geostrategy of the United States, stabilizing the region and paving the way for NATO membership. It also strengthened North Macedonia's strategic depth. This step limited Russian influence and positioned the country as part of the Western security mechanism. In addition, the memorandum of understanding on cooperation in the field of 5G technologies is considered key in the security field, especially in countering Chinese technologies.

American influence is also reflected through sanctions against individuals accused of corruption, especially in the upper echelons of government, who directly influence the political processes in the country, which is a form of power projection. In this regard, political elites generally support the American presence. Their support is often based on expectations of economic development and Euro-Atlantic integration, but in some cases it is also used for domestic political manipulation.

The research conducted as part of the dissertation showed differences in attitudes according to ethnicity, age, and level of education. It was noted that some respondents refused to comment on the United States, indicating political sensitivity and polarization in public discourse.

According to the observations presented in the expert interviews, American influence is perceived mainly as aimed at stabilizing and supporting Euro-Atlantic processes. At the same time, some of the interlocutors point out that this influence is sometimes tied to certain political and ethnic structures, which can lead to a sense of inequality.

## **US influence on the Western Balkan countries**

American influence in the Western Balkans is exercised through direct political relations, security alliances and economic support, as well as through the strategic role of NATO. Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has significantly increased its presence in the region, especially through military interventions in Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina. There are different views in academic circles regarding NATO's role in the Western Balkans. Some authors see it as a key factor in stabilizing the region and preserving the liberal international order, while others criticize its military presence as a violation of international law, especially in the case of Kosovo, where the intervention was carried out without the approval of the UN Security Council. However, the general opinion is that NATO's presence in the region has strengthened regional security and prevented further conflicts.

In this regard, the US administration played a key role in ending the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina through the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement, which is the basis for the country's current constitutional structure. As for Kosovo, some authors consider the United States to be the "architect" of modern Kosovo, especially after the NATO military intervention in 1999. The intervention marked the end of the conflict and paved the way for Kosovo's independence in 2008, supported by the White House. Albania has also enjoyed strong political and economic support from Washington since the country's democratization. American influence is visible through assistance for Euro-Atlantic integration and military cooperation, including Albania's membership in NATO since 2009. The American presence in Montenegro has increased since its declaration of independence in 2006. With strong commitment from the White House, Montenegro joined NATO in 2017, which was seen as a strategic move to strengthen the security of Southeast Europe. American support is visible through programs to modernize the army, fight organized crime, and promote media freedom. Relations between the United States and Serbia have gone through a turbulent period, especially after the NATO bombing of 1999. However, after 2000, the United States renewed its diplomatic and economic presence in Serbia. Despite Serbia's military neutrality, cooperation under the Partnership for Peace program has allowed for increased military exchanges and security programs. Washington also remains active in the process of normalizing relations between Belgrade and Pristina, especially through mediation and economic programs.

## CHAPTER THREE

### The place of the Republic of North Macedonia in the geopolitical interests of the People's Republic of China after the renaming period

**The third chapter** analyzes China's strategy in North Macedonia through the concepts of critical geopolitics, economic diplomacy, soft power, and network geopolitics. The focus will then shift to the Western Balkans, where the regional specificities of Chinese influence through health diplomacy, media strategy, and cultural diplomacy will be examined. These concepts are key to understanding China's long-term strategies in the region, which combine economic power, cultural influence, and infrastructure investments to solidify its geopolitical position.

China was one of the first countries, along with Russia, to recognize Macedonia under its constitutional name, confirming its strategic orientation towards supporting new states in the multipolar international order. This is an example of critical geopolitics through which Beijing articulates its foreign policy interests in the region. Although bilateral relations are stable, they were disrupted when North Macedonia recognized Taiwan, but were later normalized with the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding and Strengthening Economic Cooperation. Since then, China has supported North Macedonia in numerous areas, including economy, education, culture, and technology.

China sees the region as an important point for its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), with North Macedonia a key corridor on the route from Athens to Budapest.

China's economic diplomacy in North Macedonia began with large infrastructure projects, such as the Kičevo-Ohrid highway, financed with a \$580 million Chinese loan. Through such capital projects, Beijing has consolidated its economic influence, creating long-term dependence of local governments on Chinese loans. In addition, projects such as the Kozyak hydroelectric power plant and the Raiko Zhinzifov primary school are examples of Chinese presence in critical infrastructure sectors, often without public and transparent procurement procedures. Huawei's initiatives in digitalization and e-education complement China's economic engagement in the country.

Furthermore, Beijing projects influence through soft power by investing in health diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, and educational programs, especially through the Confucius Institute and scholarships for Macedonian students.

Health diplomacy has proven particularly important during the Covid-19 pandemic, when China donated medical equipment and vaccines to North Macedonia. Chinese influence, although minor, has also sought to extend into the media, where Beijing has presented a successful fight against the pandemic and humanitarian aid, which has strengthened its positive image in the country. This strategy is implemented through symbolic geostrategy, network geopolitics and economic diplomacy, which allow for the long-term strengthening of Chinese presence in the region.

North Macedonia remains part of the 17+1 initiative, with Prime Minister Zaev expressing gratitude at the 2021 summit for China's assistance during the Covid-19 pandemic. This positive stance signals that despite political changes, North Macedonia remains open to economic cooperation with China.

With these tools, Beijing is trying to consolidate its positions in the region, which represents a long-term strategy for geo-economic influence and strengthening soft power.

Surveys show that the Macedonian public perceives Chinese influence positively, especially in the context of economic development and infrastructure projects, although there are reservations about transparency and possible corrupt practices. The survey data show that a significant part of the respondents is not sufficiently informed about the Chinese presence or perceive it neutrally. At the same time, some respondents' express reservations about the transparency of Chinese projects, the lack of social engagement and difficulties in communication due to language and cultural barriers.

### **The influence of the People's Republic of China on the countries of the Western Balkans**

After a detailed analysis of Chinese influence in North Macedonia, this section reviews the broader regional dynamics in the Western Balkans, with the aim of identifying common patterns and China's specific approaches in different countries. This section will examine China's strategies for economic and political influence through projects under the Belt and Road Initiative, the 17+1 framework, health diplomacy, and media support.

China initially established diplomatic relations with countries in the region, supporting Serbia in its attempt to block the recognition of Kosovo's independence, marking a new diplomatic engagement in the region. In 2011, Beijing initiated the "16+1" framework, which later became "17+1" (now 14+1), which allowed China to invest in capital projects through a \$10 billion credit line. Regional infrastructure projects, such as the Bar-Bojare highway in Montenegro and the

Pelješac bridge in Croatia, are part of a strategy for geo-economic presence that is often accompanied by accusations of corruption and lack of transparency. In addition, projects in Serbia, such as the Belgrade-Budapest railway, are considered part of Beijing's strategy to create strategic transport corridors in Europe.

Chinese economic diplomacy in the Western Balkans is in fact characterized by a combination of economic and political activities, where economic initiatives often serve political goals. According to Heath (2016), the aim is to manipulate economic relations, with political activities being used only if they provide economic advantage. Some authors believe that it is difficult to distinguish state influence from the activities of private Chinese companies.

Another group of advocates argue that the Western Balkans are strategically important for the Belt and Road Initiative because the region is a key transport route to Europe. Chinese investments in infrastructure and energy are part of a long-term strategy to expand trade routes and economic influence in the EU. But in reality, China's strategy is adaptive and dependent on local conditions. In some cases, the focus is on short-term economic gains, while in others, the goal is long-term geopolitical influence. This approach allows China to maximize its presence through economic investment, creating a basis for political influence.

China's strategy is also characterized by health diplomacy, which was visible during the Covid-19 pandemic through donations of medical equipment and vaccines, presenting Beijing as a reliable partner in times of global crisis. Beijing took advantage of the lack of European support during the pandemic to increase its activity in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro. Through these health initiatives, China has solidified its image in the region, especially in Serbia, where it has been portrayed as a "savior" in the media. Through the media, China has been strengthening its influence in the region, using CRI and CGTN to spread narratives that present it as a global leader and a trusted partner. Partnerships between Chinese and local media provide a platform for positive promotion of Chinese politics and economics. In addition to the media, China also uses cultural platforms, such as the Confucius Institutes, which promote cultural exchange and Chinese language learning in several capitals in the Western Balkans.

Beijing is using these networked geopolitics to strengthen its relations in the region, especially through cultural events and educational programs that create positive attitudes towards China. In this context, health diplomacy and media strategy rely on the concept of soft power, where China positions itself as a "global benefactor" while simultaneously consolidating its

economic and political influence. While this economic and cultural influence has increased the dependence of some Balkan countries on Chinese capital, it has also raised concerns among the European Union and the United States about the potential deviation from European standards and the impact on political stability.

Through a geo-economic approach and soft power, China has successfully consolidated its presence in the Western Balkans, which represents a long-term strategy to strengthen its geopolitical position on the periphery of Europe.

#### **CHAPTER FOUR**

##### **Russia's influence on political processes in the Republic of North Macedonia after the country's renaming**

The influence of the Russian Federation on the political processes in the Republic of North Macedonia is analyzed in the fourth and final chapter. If the previous two chapters operationalized and further developed the theoretical framework presented in the first chapter and examined the specific aspects of the influence of the United States and China in the Western Balkans, with a focus on the Republic of North Macedonia, this chapter does so with a focus on Russian influence.

Russia was the first major power and member of the UN Security Council to recognize Macedonia, which is considered a strategic step against Western influence in the region and an example of critical geopolitics.

Russian influence in North Macedonia is characterized by a limited and fragmented presence, which is aimed at causing instability and hindering Euro-Atlantic integration. This influence is manifested through political interference, economic dependence, disinformation, and cultural and religious activities. Although Russia does not have a long history of geopolitical interest in North Macedonia, it openly opposes the country's membership in NATO. Russia's political interventions in North Macedonia aim to destabilize the country and prevent its Euro-Atlantic integration. Moscow supports pro-Russian political parties such as Yanko Bachev's United Macedonia, which publicly advocates for North Macedonia's entry into the Eurasian Economic Union. This type of relationship is an example of network geopolitics, in which Russia creates local political networks for influence. Some authors believe that VMRO-DPMNE, under Nikola Gruevski, had pro-Russian positions, and cooperation with Russia was visible through

support for the TurkStream pipeline. This is part of a geo-economic strategy in which Russia uses energy dependence as a political lever for influence.

Moscow's influence is also evident in the events surrounding the Prespa Agreement. Through propaganda narratives and support for pro-Russian parties and nationalist groups, Moscow used the referendum to strengthen its influence. Russian propaganda, through information warfare, supported media outlets that criticized the agreement, and the Russian ambassador to Macedonia openly welcomed the referendum's failure. Russia uses these mechanisms of soft power projection, geo-economic leverage, and network geopolitics to consolidate its influence.

In the economic sphere, Russian presence in North Macedonia is limited, mainly in the energy sector through Lukoil and several smaller companies. Large Russian companies are almost completely absent from the Macedonian market, and cooperation on the TurkStream project was suspended after the change of political leadership in 2017. Economic investments are minimal, but Russia continues to use its energy power as political leverage. On the other hand, attempts to take control of Makpetrol through Balkan Petroleum Holding were blocked and influence remained limited. Russian economic influence in North Macedonia is most visible through Sergey Samsonenko, a Russian businessman who has invested in sports clubs (FC Vardar and handball clubs) as well as bookmakers since 2006. Although SDSM is strategically oriented towards the West, the doors for Russian corporate interests remain open, which calls into question the view that SDSM is entirely pro-Western and VMRO-DPMNE is a nationalist and pro-Russian oriented party.

Russian media influence is significant through support for media channels and portals that promote pro-Russian narratives and criticize North Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic integration. Serbian media are often used as a platform for broadcasting pro-Russian content, which further strengthens Russian propaganda in the country. This type of media influence is part of Russia's broader strategy of disinformation and manipulation of public perception. Through coordinated campaigns on social media and local portals, Russian narratives spread rapidly, creating polarization and distrust of Euro-Atlantic institutions.

According to the results of the anonymous survey, a significant proportion of respondents perceive Russia neutrally or negatively, but there are clear differences between ethnic groups, generations and educational categories. The surveys also show that many of them are not

sufficiently informed or avoid speaking openly, which indicates the controversial and politically sensitive nature of the topic.

The experts interviewed describe the Russian strategy as “long-term but absent,” that is, as a form of quiet, symbolic influence that exploits public ambivalence and insufficient institutional capacity. Some interlocutors emphasize that Russia acts by supporting marginal political parties and organizations that are critical of the West. These organizations use rhetoric of neutrality, anti-globalism, and defense of traditional values. Some of them openly quote Russian positions on NATO, sanctions, and even the conflict in Ukraine.

### **Russia's influence has spread to the Western Balkan countries**

Russia's geostrategic interests in the Western Balkans are manifested through political, economic, and cultural ties, although the region is not central to Russian foreign policy. Moscow has managed to build stable relations with Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, using them to increase its influence. Russia creates “political proxy” groups promoting narratives based on traditional values and pan-Slavism. The strategic location of the Balkans provides access to important economic and energy resources, and Russia's strategy relies on energy dependence, cultural ties, and political alliances to counter Western influence.

Russian influence in the Western Balkans is based on this, with the aim of countering Western influence, especially NATO. According to Mark Galeotti, Russia uses "political warfare" - a combination of diplomatic, economic, informational and military tactics - to achieve its goals without open conflict, while adapting to local political conditions. In contrast, Gordon Hahn and Bobo Lowe believe that the Russian strategy is long-term and aimed at creating lasting alliances and economic dependencies, with the aim of undermining Western influence and establishing hegemony.

In addition to political and economic tools, Russia actively uses media influence through networks such as RT Balkan and Sputnik, especially in Serbia. These media serve to spread Russian narratives and criticism of Western integration. Through local media, Russian messages are also transmitted to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and North Macedonia. Media influence is complemented by cultural diplomacy, relying on the Orthodox religion as a mechanism to strengthen its position in the region.

Russia's strategy in the Western Balkans is not as institutionalized as that of the EU or NATO, but is based on bilateral relations and economic dependence. Russia was implicated in the

attempted coup in Montenegro in 2016, which aimed to prevent its membership in NATO. Although the trial ended in convictions, the case was remanded for a new trial due to lack of evidence. After joining NATO, Montenegro was placed on Russia's list of "hostile" states, but Moscow has maintained its influence by funding pro-Russian parties. Real estate investments and the Golden Passport program have allowed Russian businessmen to have a significant presence in the coastal parts of the country.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Russian influence is concentrated in Republika Srpska, where leader Milorad Dodik is one of Moscow's closest allies. Russia also supported a referendum to mark January 9 as Republic Day, despite opposition from Bosnia and Herzegovina's judiciary. Gazprom plays a dominant role in Republika Srpska's energy sector, while Serbia is a center of Russian influence, with deep historical, cultural, and energy ties.

Russia supports Serbia's non-recognition of Kosovo and regularly uses diplomatic channels at the UN to block its international recognition. Gazprom's investment in Naftena Industrija Srbije (NIS) provides strong political leverage. Although Belgrade declares military neutrality, cooperation with Russia continues through military exercises and security initiatives.

In Albania, Russian influence is minimal due to the country's pro-Western orientation and NATO membership. Following Russia's aggression in Ukraine, Albania expelled two Russian diplomats, bringing relations between the two countries to an all-time low.

Russia is using Kosovo's status to achieve its geopolitical goals in the region, supporting Belgrade's position and using its veto power at the UN to block its recognition. Through energy deals, political alliances, media narratives, and cultural diplomacy, Russia seeks to maintain its presence in the Balkans and thwart Western influence.

## **CONCLUSION**

The dissertation analyzes the role of the three great powers – the United States, China and Russia – in the political processes of the Republic of North Macedonia and the Western Balkans region. The research is based on empirical data and the theoretical concepts presented in the first chapter, which operationalize the explanatory framework of geopolitical and geostrategic influence.

The United States of America (USA) is a dominant geopolitical actor in the region, especially through NATO, where North Macedonia's membership has brought political stability,

economic development, and enhanced security. The US supports the country's Euro-Atlantic path, and its influence is particularly visible in stabilizing political processes and economic opportunities.

American support for Kosovo, as well as attempts to normalize relations with Serbia, strengthen regional stability, while cooperation with Albania serves as a model for Euro-Atlantic integration. Albania's membership in NATO has further strengthened regional security and opened the way for a strategic partnership between the United States and the Western Balkans.

China projects its influence through economic diplomacy and infrastructure projects under the Belt and Road Initiative and 17+1. Key projects, such as the Kichevo–Ohrid and Miladinovci–Stip highways, demonstrate long-term strategic intentions, although they are associated with risks of corruption and debt. Cultural diplomacy through the Confucius Institute contributes to China's soft power, but political influence remains limited due to North Macedonia's strategic orientation towards the EU and NATO.

Russia uses hybrid methods of influence, including disinformation, cultural-religious ties, and support for pro-Russian political formations. Its influence is aimed at destabilizing Euro-Atlantic processes, especially in the context of North Macedonia's constitutional name change and NATO integration. Although Russia's economic presence is limited, it uses the energy sector and the media for political influence.

The influence of the three powers is different in nature: the US dominates through security mechanisms and political instruments, China through economic strategies, and Russia through hybrid methods. North Macedonia remains a space of clashing interests, where the political elite plays an active role in filtering and adapting these influences. According to expert interviews, the US has the greatest influence, while the Russian influence is considered destabilizing, and the Chinese influence is limited in economic terms. The high level of corruption and institutional weakness make the country susceptible to these influences, which requires strengthening institutional capacities.

## **OVERVIEW OF THE MAIN HYPOTHESIS**

Based on the above, it can be said that the influence of the great powers in the Republic of North Macedonia is aimed at realizing geopolitical interests, implemented through a wide range of tools that affect the political situation, prospects and security of the Republic of North

Macedonia. This set of tools includes: geopolitical: classical; new - symbolic geopolitics, network geopolitics, ethno-geopolitics or micro-geopolitics; critical; geostrategic geoeconomic theories, economic diplomacy, soft power, hybrid warfare, power projection, buffer states and post-colonial geopolitics. The hypothesis is not a theoretical assumption, but is supported by analyzed empirical data, specific examples and political contexts, which are discussed in all chapters of the dissertation. The hypothesis was tested by cross-referencing the data obtained from the field with anonymous surveys, interviewing relevant experts and systematizing specific examples of external influence. The analysis did not confirm the existence of a unified model, but showed that each of the three countries acts selectively, in accordance with its own interests and the specifics of the political system and social context in North Macedonia. This makes the impact variable, dynamic and dependent on local receptivity.

## **OVERVIEW OF THE ELEMENTS OF THE HYPOTHESIS**

The central hypothesis of this study is developed into a series of three key elements, which are tested in detail through the analysis of relevant empirical data, expert observations and specific case studies. An identical analytical review of each of them follows, in line with the content and final conclusions of the dissertation.

### **1. The influence of the great powers in the Republic of North Macedonia is aimed at achieving their geopolitical interests in this part of Southeastern Europe.**

Washington seeks to strengthen North Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic integration by supporting its membership in NATO and the EU, which ensures regional stability and limits Russian and Chinese influence. US efforts include diplomatic and financial support for reforms and security, as well as promoting transparency and fighting corruption.

Beijing is using its economic power through initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative and 17+1 to increase its influence in infrastructure projects and trade. China's interest is linked to expanding markets and creating a strategic presence in the region, which often contradicts EU norms.

Moscow seeks to undermine North Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic integration and maintain influence through disinformation campaigns, political support for nationalist groups, and cultural

and religious ties. Russia seeks to prevent NATO and EU expansion in the region, using historical and ethnic dividing lines.

**2. The Republic of North Macedonia faces an ongoing political crisis during its renaming, among other reasons, due to conflicting external influences on its political processes.**

The Republic of North Macedonia faces an ongoing political crisis following the renaming period for several reasons, but also because external influences on its political processes have had a contradictory impact. The influence of the United States, China, and Russia on North Macedonia creates a dynamic field of competition. The United States supports Euro-Atlantic integration and stability, China focuses on economic projects without setting political conditions, while Russia uses hybrid methods to destabilize and reinforce anti-Western narratives. This interweaving of influences leads to a polarization of society and internal political tensions, which hinders the stable development of the country.

**3. The Macedonian political class uses external influence in various ways - sometimes in line with national interests, and sometimes in contradiction to them.**

The third element is confirmed by analyzing the political behavior of different parties and leaders, who in different contexts call for support from the US, China, or Russia, depending on their current goals. The Macedonian political class uses external influences in various ways, sometimes in harmony with national interests and sometimes in contradiction to them. They often use external influences and leverage as a tool to consolidate power or undermine opponents, which often leads to conflict with national interests. Pro-Western parties rely on the support of the EU and the US to consolidate reforms and strengthen the country's integration, while populist and nationalist forces use the support of Russia or China's economic initiatives to resist pressure from the West. The level of corruption and impunity creates an environment in which politicians manipulate public opinion by spreading fake news aimed at discrediting their opponents and diverting attention from their own failures. This not only deepens internal polarization, but also makes the country vulnerable to external influence, which often undermines its long-term strategic goals.

## **OVERVIEW OF THE MAIN RESEARCH QUESTION**

The central research question formulated within this doctoral dissertation is: "What are the mechanisms and degree of influence of external geopolitical actors - the USA, China and Russia - on the political processes in the Republic of North Macedonia under the Prespa Agreement and in the context of the Western Balkans?"

The question arises from the need for a systematic and comparative study of external influence in a transitional, multi-ethnic and geopolitically vulnerable country like North Macedonia. The research aims to identify the specific instruments of action – political, economic, symbolic or hybrid – that different actors use in conditions of limited sovereignty and strong external competition.

The question posed aims to overcome the West-East dichotomy and offer a nuanced picture of the real forms of influence mediated by domestic actors and the regional context. The defense of this formulation is based on the topicality of the topic, the insufficient study of the parallel action of multiple forces on a small state, and the need for a theoretically grounded, empirically supported, and geopolitically meaningful answer to the key question of the directions of Macedonian political stability and foreign policy.

## **SCIENTIFIC CONTRIBUTION OF THE DISSERTATION**

The dissertation represents a significant contribution to the development of political science, with a particular emphasis on the subdisciplines related to international relations, geopolitics and political sociology. The research opens up new possibilities for understanding the way in which great powers project their power over small states, using the case of North Macedonia as a concrete and relevant case study. This work not only analyzes the influence of the United States, China and Russia, but also depicts it as a complex, dynamic and multifaceted process that manifests itself through various instruments, strategies and intermediary structures.

The first and most important contribution of the work lies in the extensive application of a combined empirical methodology, which includes a quantitative survey with 302 respondents and semi-structured interviews with 20 experts. In the academic literature in the region, one can rarely find studies that deeply interpret and simultaneously include public perceptions and expert opinions regarding the influence of foreign actors on domestic politics. At the same time, the

questions asked in the survey were designed in such a way as to open up space for in-depth interpretation and identification of structural differences in attitudes according to ethnicity, education and geographical origin. This strengthens the scientific validity of the study and makes it useful as a basis for further research.

The second significant contribution is related to the integration of several different theoretical approaches into a common framework: geopolitical, geostrategic and geoeconomic theories, economic diplomacy, soft power and hybrid warfare. This interdisciplinary approach allows for a deep understanding of the different mechanisms of influence and their adaptation to the local political and social context. The theory is not presented only as an abstract framework, but is operationalized and tested through a series of practical examples, questions (anonymous surveys and expert interviews) and analytical tools throughout the work.

The third contribution concerns the expanded geographical and political scope of the study. Although the main focus is on the Republic of North Macedonia, the analysis also includes examples from other countries in the Western Balkans, which allows for the formulation of parallels, the observation of regional patterns, and the assessment of whether the influence of these three countries follows a broader geostrategic logic. In this way, the article moves from a national to a regional perspective, thereby contributing to the development of Balkan studies and comparative political studies.

In addition to its academic contribution, the research also has practical application in identifying relevant conclusions for public policy-making, improving media literacy, and developing institutional mechanisms for resistance to destabilizing external influences. In this way, the work also contributes to strengthening democracy, transparency, and long-term political stability in North Macedonia and the region.

Finally, the dissertation can be seen as a platform for further research, including by expanding the geographical scope (e.g. by including EU countries, Turkey or the Middle East as participants), by thematic expansion (media impact analysis, cultural diplomacy, economic dependence) or by linking with other disciplines (sociology, international law, security studies). This confirms the enduring scientific relevance and flexibility of the research model.

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