



## The Reproduction of Peripherality during the Covid-19 Pandemic An Analysis of Bosnia and Herzegovina

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### Abstract

*This article situates itself in the theoretical space between world-systems theory and postcolonial theory, exploring how the state of peripherality and concomitant dependency is reproduced in Bosnia and Herzegovina during the Covid-19 pandemic. The dependent position of the Bosnian protectorate in the world-system, its heritage of colonial rule and peripherality, as well as post-colonial influences of Pax-Americana on state constitution and state capture, have all contributed to the inability of the divided state to adequately respond to the pandemic. This article reveals a multifaceted dependence of Bosnia and Herzegovina on the Western core economies in relation to aid, equipment and vaccines as well as its gradual move towards China as a new opportunity. The pandemic also becomes the stage for competition between the Eastern and Western companies for mining concessions needed to secure the green transition in the respective economies, as a new wave of primitive accumulation ravages the European periphery. As a result of this new scramble for the Balkans, and amidst the global shift towards multipolarity, we see a stable reproduction of peripherality in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Western Balkans, and re-emergence of ethnic conflict in previously disputed areas, where ethnic groups identify with the interests of their respective hegemons.*

**Keywords:** World-System, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Competing Cores, Peripherality, Shatter Belt, Pandemic



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While the social-scientific research on the Covid-19 pandemic revealed important facts on the state of inequalities in the global North, including the experiences of marginalized groups, the emergence of novel global hegemonies in the context of the pandemic has been less apparent. However, two key global trends are deserving of academic attention. On the one hand, we are faced with the overall failure of neoliberal economies to tackle the Covid-19 related crisis, indicating the now apparent weakening of the Western core, including the gradual deterioration of the seven decades-long U.S. hegemony (Wallerstein 1982; Jones and Hameiri 2022). On the other hand, the pandemic has reaffirmed the now indisputable rise of Eastern state capitalist economies, including China, which has used the pandemic to strategically assert its influence in the global periphery (Jacques 2012; Kurlantzick 2016; Spechler, Ahrens, and Hoen 2017; Gerbaudo 2021). Indeed, with these growing global tensions, analyzing and stabilizing global shatter belts such as Asia-Pacific or the Western Balkans is necessary. This is due not only to their role as areas of strategic interests in the processes of imperial expansion, but also to their potential to trigger distant seismicity and breakdown of socio-political order in remote geopolitical areas (Holling 2001; Bremmer 2013; Raffield 2021). As this article will demonstrate, the geopolitical neglect of the European periphery by the Western core, including the United States and the EU, contributed directly to the increased influence of centralized Eastern economies and development of new dependencies in the region (Cohen 2002; Raffield 2021). In the Western Balkans, the peace accords established after the ethnic wars of 1992–95, facilitated via the political and legal mechanisms of Pax Americana, can no longer be relied on as the interference of clashing global linkages and leverages is reigniting local group tensions.

The growing influence of the Sino-Russian alliance translates here into emboldened claims of Serb nationalists who demand secession, and therefore also a possible end in sight to the Bosnian state as we know it. In other words, while the impact of Chinese mask and vaccine diplomacy has transformed the roles some Western Balkan states play on the global stage, particularly in relation to the re-emergence of Serbia as a new pivot, for others, this influence brings a less favorable change. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, whose internal structure and constitution have been defined and implemented entirely by the U.S. political elites, and who depends on the perpetuation of U.S. hegemony for maintenance of peace and survival of the fragile post-war state, changes in the global order are particularly dangerous. In other words, it is a crucial moment in time, where the reality of the American exceptionalism and its impact on global politics can be reversed; a moment where a crisis rewrites history (Hogić 2020; Leigh 2021; Mirjanić and Šukalo 2021; Leonard 2023).

This article is rooted theoretically in world-systems theory (Frank 1967; Rodney 1972; Wallerstein 1974; Frank 1975; Arrighi 1986; Arrighi 1999; Wallerstein 2013; Bartlett and Prica 2016; Nagy and Timar 2017), which offers a complex understanding of asymmetrical power relations on the global stage and their political-economic causes over the *longue durée*, whilst simultaneously attempting to deepen its engagement with the concept of coloniality (Mbembe 2001; Bhabra 2020). The article's contribution to the existing body of theory is twofold. Firstly, it brings world-systems theory and postcolonial theory closer together, to deepen our understanding of the reasons behind the historical perpetuation of peripherality. Secondly, it

applies the existing world-systems theory onto a very specific peripheral context, thereby offering an insight into the current geopolitical turbulations from the subaltern point of view.

Indeed, the historic stability of the periphery is closely related to the existence of previous colonial experiences and persistence of colonial structures and identity categories through time (Rodney 1972; Arrighi 1986). The reason why a previously semi-peripheral state, such as China, is unlikely to descend into a peripheral scenario is precisely because it is characterized by a history of self-determination, something Wallerstein deemed a “high civilization” or even a center of the previous (Afro-Eurasian) world-system (Frank 1975; Wallerstein 2013). Middle Eastern or Eastern European shatter belts, on the other hand, which have been historically determined from the outside through a long history of clashing colonialisms and retain only superficial levels of autonomy, are much less likely to be able to renegotiate their position of peripherality. This is both because of the unfavorable geopolitical climates, but also because of their fragile and torn statehoods (Rodney 1972; Kursad 2022).

Indeed, the perpetuation of peripherality is closely related to its colonial roots, given that colonialism is the context through which global peripheral regions entered the world-system (Rodney 1972). While it might be accurate that the roots of the liberal capitalist world-system should be traced back to the Westphalian sixteenth century, its final shape is only observed when it emerges as a fully interconnected system realized through industrialization, colonialism, and slave labor. Indeed, colonial capitalism had a fully transformative impact on the colonies, modelling economies based on the needs of the core and destroying kinship-based lines of production in the process. Not only did these extractive systems of direct and indirect rule channel the surplus towards the core, they also designed legal and educational systems to prevent the emergence of local competition<sup>1</sup> (Frank 1967; Rodney 1972; Mamdani 2018; Balorda 2021). Therefore, colonialism is not just a global structure through which the current world-system came into being, it is also an entanglement of material and ideological legacies which legitimize the world-system power dynamics (Rutazibwa and Shilliam 2018; Kucuk 2022).

In this sense, the differences between colonialism proper and the postcolonial world-system based on Pax Americana are differences in name only and the colonial scramble for the Balkans in the early twentieth century is very much reflected in the contemporary clashes between the dominant world core and its civilizational Sino-Russian challenger. For this purpose, I will here use the term “competing cores,” instead of the classical world-systems division into a cohesive core and a scattered periphery<sup>2</sup>, reflecting a growing body of literature which describes the current

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<sup>1</sup> In many former African, particularly sub-Saharan, colonies, the colonial distinction between customary and civil law remains institutionalized to this day (Mamdani 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Just as the idea of a cohesive core can make little sense in an increasingly multipolar world, similarly, it can make sense to talk about layers of periphery. According to Bartlett and Prica (2016) while Greece, Italy, Portugal, and Spain can be seen as European inner periphery, Eastern European countries, like Bulgaria, which are members of the EU but have not adopted the currency, can be referred to as the outer periphery. Finally, countries in the Western Balkans, which are neither EU nor Eurozone members but are similarly affected by the status of the European currency are here referred to as the super-periphery, which, in spite of the high level of euroization of households and companies, is unable to use devaluation as means to improve competitiveness.

world order as multi-polar, with increasingly important roles played by pivots (Bremmer 2013; Abazi 2021; Kassab 2022; Leonard 2023; Spektor 2023). To some extent, China has here managed to mirror the U.S. recipe for global supremacy in relation to its use of debt to exert control over the periphery, taking on the role of a global mediator and pursuing leadership in multilateral institutions. On top of this, however, China also has a well-developed strategy for imperialist expansion—the Belt and Road Initiative—whereas the United States has lacked clear vision in the recent decades. Indeed, Chinese state-led centralized economy and industry make it well placed to realize the goal of a single “world empire” that could enforce system-wide policies (Wallerstein 1974; Arrighi 1999; Kassab 2023; Leonard 2023). The nature of the clashes of the competing cores in relation to the periphery in Africa, Latin America, and Eastern Europe will become apparent in this article as we look at the evidence from the Western Balkans where, in spite of the hopes that the “Chinese Wisdom” path might bring new opportunities for shatter-belt countries like Bosnia and Herzegovina, we instead see an emergence of new dependencies and a stable reproduction of peripherality (Jacques 2012). This will illustrate that although world-systems theorists might be right to conclude that we are witnessing a hegemonic transition and an end of this world-system as we know it, whatever brave new world is to emerge from this it is unlikely to be less exploitative for the world periphery.

In the first part of this article, “Setting the Stage,” the postcolonial Bosnian state is analyzed in relation to its history of colonialism and the legacy of peripherality. We will here observe Pax Americana as a post-colonial order, which framed the divided nature of the Bosnian state and enshrined its lack of self-determination and dependency on foreign institutions into law. In the second part “The Pandemic in the Postcolonial Periphery,” we will analyze how this post-colonial state is affected by the pandemic, focusing primarily on its dependency on remittances and tourism as well as its technological dependence in relation to vaccines and medical equipment. The Covid-19 crisis will be revealed here as a shock scenario in which the competition between global cores is reflected in the race to secure the flow of raw resources for the green transition from the periphery (Klein 2008). The Bosnian state thus becomes a site of conflict between the liberal core of the current world-system and its Sino-Russian global challenger, which results in a further entrenchment of the ruptured nature of the periphery and a re-emergence of ethnic conflict.

### **Setting the Stage: From Post-Socialism to Post-Colony**

The term “shatter belt” describes the Western Balkans region best, as characterized by cycles of instability and turmoil deeply entangled with processes of colonialism and postcolonialism (Cohen 2002; Ethridge 2006; Raffield 2021). Feudal Bosnia was subject to the rule of the Ottoman Empire from 1463–1908, which governed it through a group of local elites who converted to Islam (Imamović 2006). This type of indirect colonial rule is well known in the colonial literature as an example of the “divide and conquer” ideology which typically results in difficult and often violent relationships between ethnic groups (Crowder 1964; Mamdani 2018). It was, however, the annexation of Bosnia by Austria-Hungary in 1878 that introduced the region to the European

modernization project, driven by extractive capitalism and harsh bureaucratic rule. Most infrastructure that was built in Bosnia during this time of rapid “underdevelopment” was intended for the purpose of transport of significant regional resources including minerals, metals, coal, and wood towards Budapest and Vienna, where they were used to help industrialize the European core (Rodney 1972; Wallerstein 1974; Ruthner 2018).

Austria-Hungary afforded Bosnia the status of *corpus separatum* with its own parliament, albeit of limited jurisdiction. It largely maintained the existing Ottoman system in order to pacify the expansion of Serb nationalist influence in the region and the growing pan-Slavic anti-imperialist sentiment. In this sense, the landownership and agrarian relations remained largely the same with preservation of existing Muslim-Orthodox class division. But while the Habsburgs guaranteed the freedom of religion to all, the Catholic influence markedly increased with state governors of mostly German or Croatian descent. Furthermore, Austrian Shutzkorps militias mobilized local Muslims to entice fear and maintain tensions between the groups, sometimes through sponsorship of violent atrocities against local Serbs (Kapidžić 1958; Okey 1992; Džaja 1994; Tomasevich 2001). Even though the Austrians brought with them the promise of self-governance and democracy instead, their legacy is one of capitalist exploitation and ethnic conflict. Indeed, the heritage of colonialism has followed the south Slavic people throughout its modern history, regardless of the type of state they found themselves in.

The competing interests of Serbs, who won the Balkan wars, overthrowing the Ottoman empire and who possessed the first nation state and military in the region, and Croats who considered themselves the protectors of the European modernization project characterized both the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and its subsequent socialist incarnation. For both these groups, Bosnian Muslims remained an unfortunate heritage of the absent colonizer, which was to be either subdued, annihilated, or converted back to some sort of original pre-Ottoman Christianity (Sells 1998; Anzulović 1999; Balorda 2020). In either case, power-sharing did not come easily to these groups, as fragile nationhoods bitterly fought for in colonial contexts did not tolerate multiethnicity, or Federalism, for that matter. Organic nationalism then imposed itself logically, not only because the so called “national awakenings” took place in the context of struggles for independence, but also because the continuing peripherality of the region in the world-system left it vulnerable to other predatory influences, both regional and European (Bennett 1995; Mann 2005; Balorda 2014).

Ironically, by the end of the twentieth century, Bosnia and Herzegovina found itself in a situation not dramatically different from that which was facilitated through the Austro-Hungarian annexation, its peripherality re-entrenched. While Yugoslavia in the 1990s was no longer needed to perform its world-systems role of a buffer towards the Soviets, riddled with debt and conditional aid the socialist project began to crumble (Hayter 1976; Richards 1977; Woodward 1995; Zimmermann 1996). The conditions that led to the emergence of the Balkan wars in the 1990s were twofold. On the one hand, there are the internal factors, including the difficult heritage of conflicting group identities, a result of indirect rule colonialism and peripherality. On the other hand, there were undeniably also external factors: the OPEC-manufactured oil crisis of 1973, indebtedness and loan conditionality the latter being intimately linked to the American century

cleansing itself of the socialist political-economic interference (Bennett 1995; Balorda 2014). While the socialist non-alignment initially sought to keep Yugoslavia in a position of neutrality in relation to the global poles, a sort of an external area in the world-system, its gradual decentralization and liberalization achieved under the patronage of the Western core undoubtedly also played a part in its demise (Kukić 2017). In other words, the new global political economic challenges which arose in the 1970s, and which were the precedent for the wider turbulences and wars in the world-system, are not an extension of some novel set of circumstances but are merely a continuous part of the process through which the liberal centrist world-system regenerates itself by reproducing global peripherality (Wallerstein 1974; Arrighi 1986; Cohen and Dragović-Saso 2008; Marolov 2013; Yagci 2019).

The consequences of the fall of Yugoslavia were a re-entrenchment of the region in the state of peripherality. This is what Jessop (2010) refers to as system transformation: a slate wiped clean through devastation, destruction of existing industry and infrastructure, as well as the mass exodus of educated workers. The very nature of dependency, which is at the heart of this state of peripherality, is not just about the uneven dynamics of power in which the core shapes and exploits the periphery, but crucially about the maintenance of the periphery in a perpetual state of need, whether it be the need for loans, for technology or the technological knowhow, the need for manufactured goods, or the need for foreign investments. (Merhav 1969; Wallerstein 1974; Castells and Laserna 1989; Wiradanti, Petit, Potter, and Abouarghoub 2018).

From a world-systems point of view, while the semi-peripheral Yugoslavia was able to depend on its industry and military to maintain sovereignty, even if this was later eroded through loan conditionality, the newly formed states which came out of its demise via internalization of the values of Pax Americana did not. Due to the lack of technological capacity, Bosnia can now only export raw materials and allow cheap concessions to foreign investors who capitalize on its resources, while often leaving ecological catastrophes in their wake (Merhav 1969; Rodney 1972; Wallerstein 1974). In this sense, the key characteristics of the modern Bosnian state are a broader manifestation of the space-producing logic of capitalism but also demonstrate the links between peripherality and post-coloniality (Nagy and Timar 2017).

The Bosnian state functions only superficially and is divided according to ethnic, colonially established groups. Indeed, the periphery is typically characterized by weak indigenous states, ranging from nonexistence (colonial situation) to those with very low degree of autonomy (postcolonial situation) (Wallerstein 1976; Hogić 2020). The economy is characterized by colonial drain, where the surplus is continuously re-directed towards the core. The post-war class structure consists of a large and poorly educated peasantry, a significant reserve army of labor, and an urban comprador bourgeoisie, allied with foreign investors, multinational corporations, and global banks. According to Baran (1957), this particular type of underdevelopment is linked to a decaying monopoly capitalism, which instead of social progress, creates social backwardness (Baran and Frank 1967; Caporaso 1978; Mandel 1985; Patnaik 2017).

The region is a strong example of structural distortions, a result of postcolonial restructuring of the country's political economy in line with the interests of the global core (Caporaso 1978).

This has been achieved in Bosnia through the externally designed constitution and strict loan conditionality (Bartlett and Prica 2016). After the war-induced systems transformation, Bosnia was de-facto deindustrialized, meaning that it now relies on the export of raw materials and is entirely technologically dependent on the core (Merhav 1969). According to Marichal (1989) the link between the debt crisis in peripheral countries and the financial cycle in central countries is postcolonial in character. This is best illustrated by examining the spillover of the Eurozone 2009 and 2012 recessions which was dealt with by setting up additional loans for the Western Balkans countries to absorb the surplus of manufactured goods from Europe. However, while this subordinate financialization eventually stabilized the Eurozone aggregate demand, it also resulted in a double dip recession in its periphery (Baran and Sweezy 1966; Bartlett and Prica 2016; Bonizzi, Kaltenbrunner, and Powel 2024).

The superficial resolution of the war and concomitant peace reflect the values of Pax Americana and the victory of U.S. neoliberalism over other political economic systems (Reményi, Végh, and Pap 2016). In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the novel political elites maintain close links with Western—particularly American—decision makers who played a key role in the design of the new state and steered the course away from a centrally planned economy and workers' self-management. A direct impact of the Western political elites on the post-war Bosnian state is achieved through the so-called Office of the High Representative (OHR), as well as American and Western embassies, Western and UN civil society actors, and stakeholders. The Bosniak (Muslim) constituencies in particular rely on their political ties with the West, in order to secure political continuity, while the Orthodox political elites, many of whom nurture secession aspirations, have to be coerced and at times disciplined into cooperation by the international community, maintaining an illusion of a cohesive, multi-ethnic state (Fočo 2001).

The authority of the OHR derives its power from the Bonn agreement of the Peace Implementation Council from 1997 in which it is stipulated that the institution has the authority to adopt binding decisions, the power to remove public officials from office and the power to veto the decisions made by local political elites. The Bosnian state has therefore sometimes been referred to as a Western Protectorate, due to its extremely limited level of self-determination (Ivanov 2020). While the modern Bosnian state cannot be described as colonialism *stricto sensu*, the postcolonial dynamic is apparent in the decisive influence of international political actors, who not only guarantee the state's legitimacy, but also determine its position of economic and political dependency (Mandel 1985).

In fact, the U.S. political elites directly designed the post-war Bosnian constitution, the so-called Dayton agreement, which imposed a *sui generis* federal constitutional and political order, enshrining in law the country's post-war division into two entities: the Muslim-Croat Federation and the Republika Srpska (Hogić 2020). This fragile power sharing agreement between the three major ethnic groups has fixed the state permanently in the condition of peripherality, with weak state institutions and prolonged political instability, including a further marginalization of political and ethnic minorities (Džankić 2018; Ivanov 2020). In fact, the Bosnian state is a mixture of presidential and parliamentary systems, where the Federation is organized as a decentralized

parliamentary system with 10 administrative cantons, while the Serb Republic functions as an indivisible, centralized presidency. Given the fact that both entities have been subject to ethnic cleansing, the Dayton agreement and the preceding Washington agreement have enshrined the idea of two systems under one roof, and permanent international patronage, in law (Mirjanić and Šukalo 2021; Petrović 2021).

There are three consequences of the Dayton agreement that are relevant to academic debates on the geopolitical climate in the Western Balkans. First is the fact that the new constitution legalized the war-related division of the country, thereby excluding non-nationalist political influences from the cycle of power and preventing any real political progress (Svrtinov, et al. 2020). In other words, the Dayton agreement did not resolve the conflict that produced the war but rather institutionalized the result of ethnic cleansing through legitimization of the dividing forces and further marginalization of unifying trends. The second consequence is that its application requires an administration so complex that it drains the resources of the post-war state entirely. As a result, the Bosnian state is dramatically over institutionalized with multiple ministries of culture, sports, and the like on the level of the state, on the level of entities, and on the cantonal level (Fočo 2001). The third consequence of the Dayton agreement is that the state's political economy is also enshrined in the constitution, specifically to ensure economic growth through the protection of private property and the role of the single market, determining its post-war neoliberal state-building path (Caporaso 1978; Bartlett and Prica 2016). This transition from centralized to market economy in the region included rapid privatization and an opening of the market to foreign investment with little scrutiny (Džankić 2018; Becker 2020). In practice, this meant a direct transfer of the state-owned property into the hands of both the local and global political elites, or what Wallerstein simply refers to as plunder (Wallerstein 1974). According to Fočo (2001), the process of privatization exhibits particularly devastating consequences in transitional societies because the transition relates mainly to the economic sphere, without a political and social liberalization first (Mirjanić and Šukalo 2021).

The war destroyed or seriously damaged a significant part of the Bosnian industry. But those companies that survived the war often disappeared through privatization, including pre-war giants such as Energoinvest, TAS, Šipad, and Hidrogradnja. Those that were sold to foreign investors, like ArcelorMittal from Zenica, often retained outdated technologies and dangerous working conditions while increasing production and environmental damage, and others were sold mainly for parts (Fočo 2001; Kovačević 2012). Examples of the latter include the former Chlor-alkali Power Plant HAK from Tuzla, which, after being sold to Polish Organika in 2000, entirely stopped mercury waste treatment, leading to chemicals infiltrating underground waters and the local water supply (Arsenijević 2021). While bringing wealth and status to individuals and simultaneously bypassing the interests of the state, this comprador-facilitated privatization introduced another phase of primitive accumulation in the Western Balkans, achieved through colonial-like processes. For example, privatization of telecommunications has resulted in the dominant role of Deutsche Telekom, by far the biggest telecommunications operator in the region and owner of several

regional state operators including Hrvatski (Croatian) Telekom, Makedonski (Macedonian) Telekom, and Crnogorski (Montenegrin) Telekom (Deutsche Telekom 2024).

This post-war political-economic restructuring established a system which placed the Bosnian state in a specific peripheral and dependent position on the global market, driven by consumption rather than production and with multinational corporations being afforded easy access to cheap natural resources, including metals, minerals wood and water (Prebisch 1950; Wallerstein 1974; Gadžić and Jurić 2021). In 2024 the government of the Bosnian Federation entity excluded state institutions from debates on forest concessions, giving the British company Adriatic Metals unencumbered access to public resources, a direct result of which was a dangerous increase in levels of cadmium in the drinking water of the region (Kurić 2024). Without a functional state to restrict and regulate the market, the state has existed in a kind of permacrisis, characterized by mass unemployment, poverty, brain drain, and high levels of corruption (Becker 2020; Vanhercke, Sabato, and Spasova 2022).<sup>3</sup>

Given that linkages in the region, in relation to the political and economic ties with transnational actors and cross border flows are vastly inferior to leverages, defined as vulnerability of governments to external pressures, these peripheral Balkan post-colonies remain dependent on the bigger players to guarantee independence and legitimacy (Abazi 2021). The countries that are contested by ethnic groups internally, like Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Macedonia, and externally by the kin states of local minorities, tend to be more vulnerable to postcolonial influences. As a result of the inherent weakness of postcolonial states, and a general lack of internal mechanisms of accountability, small economic elites were in the Western Balkans able to use the history of ethnic conflict and disorder, to influence political decision making, thus capturing the state for their own gain and making the state machinery the primary source of wealth accumulation (Baran 1957; Caporaso 1978; Džankić 2018). State capture is, in the Western Balkans, obvious in two major examples, firstly in relation to the links between party membership influences and composition of public administration and secondly, as we have seen, through the use of the privatization of state assets for accumulation of private wealth (Bieber 2010; Džankić 2018).

Therefore, the Bosnian protectorate, entered the pandemic in a wholly undesirable condition; torn, challenged, and delegitimized in two parallel processes. Firstly, through postcolonial influences enshrined and maintained through the constitution and perpetuation of dependency on the global market. Secondly, through state capture by local political elites and their foreign investor partners from within, both of which are directly related to the post-war organization of the Bosnian state and its inclusion in the Pax-Americana world order (Caporaso 1978; Bieber 2010; Reményi, et al. 2016). The de-facto lack of statehood, including the lack of cooperation between entities and their conflicting geopolitical leanings, made the already fragile Bosnian state extremely vulnerable in a state of emergency.

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<sup>3</sup> It is worth noting that the level of dependency on external authorities is not the same in all Western Balkan states, with Serbia retaining some of its industry and therefore some degree of self-determination, despite the significant pressures by multilateral organizations and core states.

### **The Pandemic in the Postcolonial Periphery**

The policies in most Western Balkans states related to transmission of contagious disease at state level are very similar and attempt to define the criminal zone, criminal liability of perpetrators, and the nature of sanctions imposed, while criminalizing non-compliance with state-containment measures (Vankovska 2020). The postcolonial Bosnian state, however, due to its de-facto lack of statehood and lack of cooperation between entities did not possess the legal framework for policies that might have helped contain the pandemic, resulting in the rapid spread of the virus and the third highest Covid-19 mortality rate in the world (Đurović 2020; Petrović 2021; Statista 2022). Furthermore, the vulnerability of the Western Balkan states in the context of the pandemic is closely related to their dependency on the core, in relation to technology first of all, but also a heavy reliance on tourism and remittances, which took a dramatic dip as a result of the Covid-related destabilization and rising unemployment in the core economies (Đurović 2020; Ivanov 2020; Janković, et al. 2020; Svrtinov, et al. 2020). The regional battle to procure vaccines and avoid high death tolls is particularly important here as no Western Balkan state other than Slovenia had the infrastructural and technological capacity to develop vaccines, revealing a high level of technological dependence<sup>4</sup> (Baran and Sweezy 1966; Merhav 1969). Given that the Dayton Agreement devolved all health-related matters to entities, there could be no attempt to procure vaccines at the level of the state or to negotiate directly with manufacturers. The bleakness of peripherality becomes here particularly apparent, as technological advancement is deemed both necessary for countries to exit peripherality and also functions as a vehicle through which peripherality is reinforced (Merhav 1969). The technological dependence of the Balkan countries in relation to the vaccines made for a nerve-wracking waiting game, as the pandemic took on an “every man for himself” scenario.

Given that the Bosniak-dominated and Western-oriented Federation relied mostly on the COVAX initiative and the support of the European Union, ordering 1.1 million and 900,000 vaccines from both suppliers respectively, it received support much later than Republika Srpska which relied on the support of Serbia and Russia. Serbia was by far the best performing country in the region, thanks to its role as the stronghold of the Chinese influence, having procured over 1 million doses of the Sinopharm vaccines, and having begun mass inoculation before the end of 2020 (Gadžo 2021). The country then extended its outreach by including all health workers from Republika Srpska in its inoculation program around mid-February 2021, and unofficially to other citizens of the neighboring republics regardless of ethnicity (Georgievski 2021). This allowed Serbia to re-emerge as a regional pivot for the first time since the Yugoslav era.

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<sup>4</sup> The importance of technology for the world system and the power dynamics within it cannot be overstated, as technology has played a central role in both how the world system has developed and how it is perpetuated (Wallerstein 1974).

In contrast, inoculation in the Bosnian Federation only started at the end of March 2021 when the first 50,000 doses of COVAX vaccines finally arrived<sup>5</sup>, which was followed by 50,000 Sinopharm vaccines donated by China and another 30,000 Sinovac vaccines delivered by Turkey. (Radioslobodnaevropa 2021; United Nations Bosnia and Herzegovina 2021). Due to the growing dissatisfaction with the efficacy of the COVAX mechanism and the lack of announced support from the European Union, Balkan states gravitated quietly from their pro-Western position of “China as a threat” to a more pragmatic “China as an opportunity” (Al Jazeera 2021; Gadžo 2021; Georgievski 2021; Janković, et al. 2021; Leigh 2021; Reuters 2021).

On March 11th, 2021, nine EU prime ministers acknowledged the growing influence of the Sino-Russian alliance in the region, stating that “other actors were more effective in presenting their support and thus undermining our reliability, credibility and perception of our solidarity” (Leigh 2021). But the turn towards China was also a result of the overall dissatisfaction with the European Union’s role in the Western Balkans, including the role of the European Investment Bank, the prolonged and inefficient ascension talks, the initial ban on exports of medical supplies, and—also in March 2021—the ending of the exemption of Balkan countries from the EU’s vaccine export controls (Bartlett and Prica 2016; Becker 2020; European Commission 2021; Ioannides 2021). By the end of the pandemic, Bosnia had received over 1 million vaccines made by the Chinese state-owned Sinopharm, half a million of which were ordered by the Bosnian Federation in July 2021. The company further penetrated the region by providing medical equipment, building hospitals, and even a vaccine factory in Belgrade, as a part of its Health Silk Road (Gašmi and Prlja 2020; Leigh and Cameron 2020; Becker and Kulić 2021; Leigh 2021; Leonard 2023). Indeed, the strategic importance of the Balkans for the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is crucial, as it offers an entry point into Europe, which is why Chinese companies have been quick to grab major infrastructural projects in the region, including the geopolitically significant Pelješac Bridge in Croatia (EU Parliament Think Tank 2022).

This brings to focus the seeming advantages of the subsidized Chinese state-capitalism in tackling the pandemic, which has left an impression on the peripheral states, many of whom have started to recognize interventionism as a useful compromise between socialism and dependency (Kurlantzick 2016; Sperber 2019). However, while the BRI revolved around non-conditional loans, which, from a peripheral point of view might seem like a welcome change to neoliberal conditionality, it has often resulted in territorial loss of infrastructure, mines, and ports (Roy-Chaudhury 2019). On the other hand, the rising influence of the Sino-Russian alliance in the Balkans’ periphery during the pandemic clearly necessitated a firm reaction by the current world hegemon, the United States, and a rapid reversal of the regional neglect, which has characterized most of the twenty-first century. Various measures have been put in place for this purpose, including slap-dash agreements which aim to banish Chinese products from European markets, an

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<sup>5</sup> Bosnia and Herzegovina has received a total of just over 80000 vaccines through the COVAX programme out of 1.2 million ordered and paid for (Reuters 2022).

illustration of the nature of the competition between the global cores during the Covid-19 pandemic and its effect on the periphery.

### **Peripherality in Between the Competing Cores**

In late October 2020, all Western Balkan countries except for Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro signed the U.S. declaration on the protection of 5G networks, called “Clean Path,” which insists on cancellation of “untrusted” IT vendors such as Huawei and ZTE, which are required to comply with directives of the Chinese Communist Party (U.S. Department of State 2020). The pandemic has seen another controversial slap-dash agreement signed between Kosovo and Serbia in 2020, which was achieved under the U.S. leadership as a means of developing a new frontier in the formation of a firm Balkan front against major trade competitors, such as China and Russia (Qermi in Becker and Kulić 2021). In order to facilitate this uneasy alliance, Washington used loan conditionality to force through a deal which would lead to economic normalization of the Serbia-Kosovo relationship, thereby ensuring stability in the region and per extension a perpetuation of the U.S. hegemony (Becker and Kulić 2021). Ironically, while the core countries encouraged the fragmentation of the Western Balkans in the 1990s, it is here attempting to reverse this trend and re-assert a regional unity needed to resist the Russian and Chinese economic and military spread in the region. The Western core is thus attempting to resolve a geopolitical conundrum it itself has helped to create, as the post-colonial countries like Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, which are weak and internally divided, are most prone to outside political and economic interference. In the same vein, in a dramatic turn away from its “enlargement fatigue” position, the end of the pandemic has seen the European Union reopen accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania, and also, after decades of waiting, award candidate status to Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2022 (Shehaj 2020; Wunsch 2020). The Marshall Plan aid package of €3.3 billion has finally been made available to the Balkan states to reassure the sceptics and ensure alignment and compliance with the union’s long-term objectives, a welcome gesture in spite of the fact that most of the financial support in the package has come in the form of conditional loans (Hayter 1976; Richards 1977; Latal 2020). Finally, despite the setbacks, many Bosnians still wish to be a part of the EU, which in their eyes offers significant protection and living standards, meaning that culturally and ideologically the Western core is seen to offer a more plausible opportunity for this part of the world in relation to its civilizational challenger.

This current structure of the world affairs, with the weakening of Western influence and legitimacy in the world and the rise of the Chinese counter-hegemony, has been predicted by world-systems theorists who have argued that the financialization of capitalism is, in itself, a sign of the demise of the world-system and its inability to deal with over-accumulation. Arrighi (1999) describes a hegemonic transition, and particularly its chaotic progression, as characterized by escalating conflicts and a collapse of predominant rules and norms. These developments, including the diminishing legitimacy of the dominant core and clash between the financial dominance of the current hegemon and the productive dominance of the civilizational challenger, are all apparent in the global state of affairs; but this does not necessarily mean the end of the liberal centrist world-

system per se. However, although the United States has been using the regional conflict in the Middle East to demonstrate its continuing grip on power, the impulsivity of its decisions alongside its longstanding lack of appropriate leadership only contributes to the global impression of an imperial sunset (Arrighi 1999; Robbins, Amaney, and Tessler 2024).

There are, however, other effects of the Covid-19 pandemic in the Western Balkans that are also explicitly related to its place in the world-system. A significant number of early theoretical works on the Covid-19 crisis point towards the pandemic as an impetus towards a more statist approach to government, characterized by neo-Keynesianism and reintroduction of hard borders (Gerbaudo 2021). However, this is clearly not the case in the European periphery, where prioritization of the interests of foreign capital over human life necessitated the maintenance of relatively loose border policies, allowing uninterrupted flows of capital, people and commodities (Kurlantzick 2016; Vankovska 2020). In contrast, Germany implemented various subsidies and protectionist measures during the pandemic in order to support domestic production, with particular attention paid to green energy producers (Deutsche Welle 2020; International Energy Agency 2023). Many companies that have turned towards countries like Bosnia and Herzegovina during the pandemic to secure materials necessary for the green transition are state-owned, such as Saudi-Arabian oil giant Aramco, Chinese Baoshan Iron & Steel Ltd, and Donfang Electric, contributing directly to the economies of their respective states while draining the periphery (Službeni List BiH 2024). In other words, the issue here is not just that the Western Balkan states lack sovereignty and protection but that during the pandemic, they have again become the primary stage for a new phase of primitive accumulation, which is a continuous characteristic of the capitalist world-system, precisely because it is colonial in nature (Wallerstein 1974). In relation to lithium mining in the Balkans, which is hoped to enable the EU to realize all its needs for lithium through import in the next 30 years, popular protests have emerged across the region, raising a voice against “green imperialism” (Pedregal and Lukić 2024).

For Bosnia and Herzegovina, the geopolitical turbulence related to the competition of the cores and the overall weakening of the U.S. global hegemony is of great importance, as it means that the survival of the fragile state is, again, at stake. While Serb nationalists are emboldened by the rising geopolitical roles of Russia and China and keen to reignite the passions behind the project of “Greater Serbia,” the Muslim majority in the Bosnian Federation fears the rise of the Serbian influence in the region. For them, an Orthodox geopolitical victory would constitute a direct threat to survival, as the present power dynamics in the region call to mind the political tensions of the early 1990s. Indeed, the fragility of post-colonial states, their dependent, peripheral role in the global economy, including contested statehoods, make for a dangerous cocktail of ingredients in the context of a global geopolitical crisis and a contemporary shift towards multipolarity.

As far as the peripherality of the Bosnian state is concerned, it is clear that a change in colonial overlords is unlikely to bring balance back to the region. The trade deals Chinese state companies have made have often been secretive, non-profitable for the locals and enforced state capture leaving behind a network of multifocal dependencies. In other words, extraction colonies like Bosnia will almost certainly retain their peripheral status until a global ideology that promotes the

interests of the dependent nations unites those that are currently unaware of their commonality. Until then, the postcolonial nature of the world-system will ensure that seismic global turbulence is felt disproportionately in the peripheries, accentuating the links between the global political economy and ethnic conflict.

### Conclusion

This article demonstrates a reproduction of peripherality and concomitant dependency in Bosnia and Herzegovina during the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic takes place in a period of hegemonic transition, a temporal-spatial context that is, despite hopes, unlikely to provide an opportunity for the peripheral economies to exit their state of subordination. The history of coloniality plays a crucial part here because it results in weak state institutions and conflicting group identities, but other factors are also integral to this argument. The underdevelopment of Bosnia and Herzegovina is being maintained both through a complex structure of meanings, including the imposed political-economic ideology, but also through a network of dependencies such as: the dependence on flows of remittances, people and products from the core, technological dependence, and dependence on conditional loans and aid, which have also proven themselves disastrous for the region in the past. The pandemic presents itself here as a shock scenario, in which the core states are strengthened through subsidies and political empowerment while the periphery is simultaneously drained of both resources and political impetus. It functions as a stage for a new scramble for the Balkans in which the competing cores clash over access to raw materials necessary to ensure a low carbon future. The green transition is therefore here seen not as a progressive development but merely another colonial context in which the competing cores struggle for supremacy, while the environmental costs of this race are externalized to the periphery. This clash also unfolds physically in the periphery through participation of local nationalist proxies, which are enabled and legitimized through postcolonial influences of Pax Americana. This article shows that the neglect and exploitation of the periphery by the dominant core has turned the Western Balkans into the Achilles' heel of the liberal capitalist world-system, which will likely face a rapid decline if its periphery remains permanently disempowered. In other words, the continuing perpetuation of the world-system is directly proportionate to the state of its periphery.

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