THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE BALKAN HEARTLAND: THE GEOGRAPHICAL PIVOT OF THE BALKANS

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ABSTRACT

The "geographical pivot of history", a concept introduced by Sir Halford Mackinder, represents a central idea and the cornerstone of geopolitics as a scientific discipline. Mackinder argued that the key to global power lies in the control of the Eurasian landmass, which he termed the "World-Island," thereby developing the theory of "geographical inertia", defined as the dependence of a state's spatial development on its geographical position and on the natural–historical tendencies of global development. The aim of this paper is to define and theoretically ground the concept of the Balkan Heartland, modeled after Mackinder's theory of geographical inertia. The central hypothesis rests on the claim that the Balkan Heartland, central region of the Balkans, constitutes the pivotal and core area of the Balkan Peninsula—an attractor of all significant and decisive historical and geopolitical events in the region. Establishing a parallel between the geographical pivot of world history and the geographical pivot of the Balkans requires isolating three key pillars of Mackinder's theory, which will serve as the foundation for formulating the concept of the Balkan Heartland. These three pillars are 1. Natural–physical characteristics; 2. Historical influence and migrations of Asian peoples; 3. The dualism of land and sea powers. This paper seeks to answer a single question: Can the Balkan Heartland be conceptualized as the pivotal zone whose strategic position has shaped the major historical and geopolitical turbulences of the region? Using the historical–geographical method, the paper applies the central postulates of Mackinder's theory as a basis for developing a new theory of the "geographical pivot of the Balkans."

Keywords: Balkan Heartland; Geographical Pivot; Geopolitical Inertia; Balkan Geopolitics.

INTRODUCTION

The process of adequately transferring a theory (or context) from one spatial setting to another involves systematic adaptation rather than mere copying. Moreover, it is crucial to identify the principles and mechanisms through which the original theory operates and then adapt them to the specific variables of the new environment [4]. The transfer of the theory of the "geographical Pivot of History"[1] to the space of the Balkan Peninsula[2] will proceed through several steps: 1. identifying the key concepts and assumptions of the original theory; 2. analyzing the new context by understanding the specific characteristics and dynamics of the new environment and assessing their compatibility; and 3. adapting and elaborating the theory [1]. The specific tasks to be addressed in this case include

[1] In the following text, the Heartland theory
[2] or just the Balkans

adding new analytical components unique to the Balkan Peninsula, constructing "bridges" by identifying connections between existing knowledge and new observations, and temporal extending the theory[3]. The study will employ the historical-geographical method—a multidisciplinary approach to the analysis of geographic characteristics and the causal relationships arising from the central position of the Balkan Heartland. Through an analysis of historical events that unfolded within the territory of the Balkan Heartland and its immediate surroundings, the historical significance of this area will be established. In order to more clearly determine the parallel between the world's "geographical Pivot of History" and the "geographical Pivot of History" of the Balkan Peninsula, it is necessary to single out three fundamental pillars of Mackinder's theory, on the basis of which the theory of the Balkan Heartland can be constructed. These pillars may also be interpreted as a methodological framework within which Mackinder conducted his research. They represent interrelated principles that guide how space, power, and historical processes are comprehended as a whole. The author of this paper defines these three pillars through an analysis of Mackinder's key texts, and they will be used in the paper as an instrument of "theory transfer," that is, as a means of translating Mackinder's core geopolitical assumptions from their original geographical and historical context to the Balkan Peninsula. In this sense, three key pillars are distinguished:

1. Physical-geographic characteristics;
2. Historical influence and migrations of Asian peoples; and
3. The sea-land power dualism.

By following these pillars, the paper seeks to answer the question of whether there exists a region on the Balkan Peninsula that can be characterized as a "piedmont" or "pivot" decisive for the turbulent developments that have accompanied it throughout history.

PHYSICAL-GEOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

In his book The Balkan Peninsula and the South Slavic Lands (1921), Jovan Cvijić identified the principal characteristics of the Balkans: the feature of connection and interpenetration, which facilitates the circulation of various movements (atmospheric, biological, and human), and its opposite—the feature of isolation and separation4. These components have shaped the historical and political landscape of the Balkans since the earliest times. Furthermore, with regard to natural regions, Cvijić distinguished two major geographical units (macro-regions) of the Balkans, separated based on morphological characteristics: the continental block and the Aegean region [14]. According to their features, Cvijić further divided the continental block into the Eastern (Balkan) region, the Central (Morava–Vardar) region, and the Western (Dinaric–Pindus) region. In that sense, the peninsula can be divided into approximately equal regions, one would obtain a single central region (the Morava–Vardar region) and three peripheral regions (the eastern—Balkan region, the western—Dinaric–Pindus region, and the southern—Aegean region) [14].

[3] By temporal extension, this paper refers to an analysis of global conditions at the time of the theory's emergence, the factors that led Halford Mackinder to formulate the Heartland theory, the subsequent critique of the theory, and examples of its practical application.

[4] According to Jovan Cvijić, there are three principal factors underlying the characteristic of connection and interpenetration: peripheral penetration, valleys and longitudinal routes, and gorges, mountain passes, and transversal routes. By contrast, the two main factors underlying the characteristics of isolation and separation are mountain massifs and the fragmentation of the relief into local basins [14].

The Morava–Vardar valley, which by its course connects the north and south of the Balkans and by its tributaries links the east and west, has often been described as the backbone of the Balkans. The Central region (or the Balkan Heartland) is bounded by the cities of Niš, Kosovska Mitrovica, Skopje, and Sofia. This region connects the two major natural areas of the Balkans identified by Cvijić—the Aegean region and the continental block. The Central Balkan region is linked via the Vardar River and its tributaries to the Aegean region, including southern Greece, Thessaly, Thrace, Epirus, and Macedonia. On the other hand, through the Morava River it is connected to the continental block, the Pannonian Plain, and the basins of the Sava and Danube rivers. Moreover, the Morava and Vardar rivers, together with their tributaries, connect rivers from three different drainage basins—the Adriatic, the Black Sea, and the Aegean—thus emphasizing the central position of this area within the Balkans.

The central Morava–Vardar region exerts a strong gravitational pull even on areas lying outside the drainage basins of these two rivers. This influence extends to the Dinaric Mountains and Croatia in the northwest, Herzegovina and Montenegro in the west, Epirus in the southwest, Thessaly and southern Greece in the south, the valleys of the Maritsa and Struma in the southeast, and the Black Sea in the east [14]. Throughout history, all major pedestrian, caravan, and wagon routes passed through this valley, as did later road–railway and pipeline corridors[5]. The most important transport routes of the Balkan Peninsula from antiquity to the modern era have been concentrated in this central region: the Roman *via militaris*, later restored as the Tsarigrad Road, connected Constantinople with the northwestern Balkans, while at the beginning of the twentieth century key routes of the Orient Express to Istanbul and Athens also passed through this area. Today, this same spatial axis is reflected in the routes of Corridors IV, VIII, and X. The two main nodal points of the Balkan Peninsula, Belgrade and Istanbul, are located at diametrically opposite ends of the peninsula, on its periphery, and their connection through the Central region has always been of crucial importance [5].

The parallel drawn between the global theory of the "Geographical Pivot of History" and its Balkan counterpart (the Central, Morava–Vardar region) lies in the fact that both share the characteristics of connection and interpenetration, as well as isolation and separation. The territory of the Central Balkan region occupies approximately 10% of the Balkan Peninsula[6], and the global Heartland encompasses around 10%—of the world's total landmass. In Heartland theory, the Arctic Ocean is described as "frozen," and Mackinder emphasizes that the Heartland lacks access to warm seas or oceans. Likewise, the Central Balkan region has no direct access to the seas surrounding the Balkan Peninsula. High mountain ranges, steppe plains, and the valleys of major rivers appear in both theoretical constructs. Particular attention is devoted to the favorable geographical characteristics of the North European Plain, which enabled unobstructed and large-scale migrations of Asian nomadic peoples into Europe. The Central region constituted a key corridor in the southward pressure of Asian peoples penetrating the Balkans and further into Central Europe. From antiquity to the modern era, this space has served as a link between two

[5] The Danube–Morava–Vardar–Aegean Sea Canal is an initiative dating back to the early twentieth century that envisages the creation of an artificial navigable waterway with a total length of 655 km (488.5 km consisting of existing riverbeds and 166.5 km of newly excavated canals). Its geopolitical and geostrategic significance for the continental countries of the Balkans and Central Europe would be immense, which is why this idea has attracted the attention of China and its Belt and Road Initiative [12].

[6] The approximate area of the Central region is comparable to that of present-day North Macedonia.

worlds (*catena mundi*).



Figure 1. Political-ethnographic sketch of Macedonia and Old Serbia; Source: Macedonia and Old Serbia, a work comprising selected texts from Jovan Cvijić's three-volume study Foundations for the Geography and Geology of Macedonia and Old Serbia, edited by Borislav Čeliković [15];



Figure 2. The Balkan Heartland
Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Balkans, author's adaptation

HISTORICAL INFLUENCE AND MIGRATIONS OF ASIAN PEOPLES

At the beginning of the middle Ages, Slavs and Bulgars settled in the Balkan Peninsula (and thus also in the Central region), becoming the two largest population groups in the Balkans, beside the Greeks—a situation that has largely persisted to the present day. In the centuries that followed, conflicts among the Serbs, Bulgars, and the Eastern Roman Empire over dominance on the peninsula were frequent. The borders of these three states were often located precisely within the territory of the Central region, owing to its favorable geographical position. With the arrival of the Nemanjić dynasty to the Serbian throne, the Central region gained increasing importance and became the gravitational field of Serbian state expansion. The subsequent conquests of the Nemanjić dynasty were directed almost exclusively toward the acquisition and control of the Central region.
During the thirteenth century, the great Mongol conquests began, driving numerous peoples across the world into flight. Advancing along two main routes—through the "gates of the Peoples" and via Asia Minor—the Mongols, accompanied by Cuman, Turkic, Tatar, and other tribes, invaded and devastated Eastern and Southeastern Europe. They entered the Balkan Peninsula from three directions: from the north through Hungary, from the southeast via the Bosporus and the Dardanelles. This marked the beginning of a period of intrusions, conquests, and control of the Balkans by Asian peoples that would last until the early twentieth century. The Ottoman advance triggered migrations and metanastatic movements of the Orthodox population across the northern rim of the peninsula and into parts of Central Europe. In Balkan history, the Central region once again played a decisive role, this time in the expansion of the Ottoman Empire into

Europe. By controlling the Central region, the Ottoman Empire secured dominance over most of the peninsula for nearly five hundred years [13].

The concept of civilization is essential for understanding historical processes within the Central region. Cvijić's "zones of civilization" reveal the overlap of several civilizational types in the Central region—modified Byzantine and patriarchal as the dominant ones, alongside influences of Middle Eastern, Central European, and Western European civilizations (primarily in towns and cities), as well as the Turko-Oriental civilization [14]. As a cultural space where European and non-European influences intersect, the Balkans essentially constitute a culture of crossroads, of crucial importance for the formation of Balkan geopolitical horizons and worldviews. These have often remained insufficiently understood, misinterpreted both by neighboring peoples, and by the "great" powers [8]. One of the main critiques of Samuel Huntington's civilizational lines concerns their insufficient precision in defining civilizational boundaries in the Balkans. V. Dvorniković described Balkan civilizations as follows: "This colorful mosaic of peoples, indigenous and immigrant, found itself on such a windswept and dangerous geopolitical bridge between Europe and Asia that only perhaps the great 'gate of peoples' between the Urals and the Caspian Sea can be compared to the Balkans in this regard." [10].

Mackinder emphasized that the ideas forming a nation, as opposed to a mere aggregation of people, are usually adopted under the pressure of shared adversity and the common necessity of resisting an external force. He argued that Europe owes its civilization and its persistent need for unity to the pressures made by barbarians throughout history. He also viewed Europe and European history as subordinate to Asia and Asian history, since European civilization is, actually, the product of resistance to Asian invasion [3]. Progress and expansion in Europe, he believed, were driven by the need to respond to pressures emanating from Central Asia. Accordingly, the Heartland functioned as the pivot of all geopolitically transformative processes of historical magnitude within Eurasia [2]. A similar fate befell the Balkans, whose civilizational patterns emerged under strong Asian influence; however, unlike Europe, this region remained markedly heterogeneous and did not respond to external pressures by forming a unified pattern or unity. For the Balkans to overcome the perception of being merely a transitional zone or bridge between Europe and Asia, it is necessary to position itself autonomously as a supranational cultural region or to constitute itself as a unified geopolitical space.

THE SEA-LAND POWER DUALISM

In geopolitical terms, the Balkan Peninsula is situated within the global Rimland (or Inner Crescent). Historically, it has functioned as a "buffer" zone between great powers and represents an extension of Eastern Europe in the context of Mackinder's formula: "1. whoever rules Eastern Europe commands the Heartland; 2. whoever rules the Heartland commands the World-Island (Eurasia); 3. whoever rules the World-Island commands the seas (and thus the entire world)" [6]. Mackinder's Heartland theory, complemented by Mahan's Rimland theory, is still used after almost one hundred and twenty years as one of the principal geopolitical and geostrategic doctrines in the distribution of global power. According to Mackinder, the main historical axis of geopolitical confrontation unfolds along the line of struggle between maritime and land powers—between mobile, thalassocratic empires and stationary, land-based tellurocratic states [3].

The Balkan Heartland has historically been a site where the geopolitical rivalries of great powers intersect along the main axes of geopolitical confrontation. These include Germany's geopolitical vector toward the southeast (*Drang nach Osten*, extending toward Basra in Iraq and the Persian Gulf), Russia's geopolitical vector toward the southwest (seeking access to the Adriatic Sea), Turkey's vector toward the northwest (seeking access to the Central Europe), among others [12]. Through control of the Balkan Heartland, these forces seek to dominate all key points within the security belt oriented toward the East. For NATO, the Kosovo and Metohija and Balkan Heartland areas serves as a stronghold for trans-Balkan penetration from the Ionian and Adriatic Seas toward the Black Sea. By controlling all major geopolitical routes, NATO leaves limited room for the expansion of Russian and Chinese influence in the Balkans [11].

It is particularly significant that the Balkan Heartland has also been affected by the process of Balkanization as part of a broader historical–geopolitical process that covered the entire Balkan Peninsula. In general, the concept of "to Balkanize" signify the fragmentation of a unified space or political entity into smaller, often mutually antagonistic units, through process of violent disintegration into smaller, conflict-prone, and structurally fragile entities. Today, parts of the Balkan Heartland are integrated into the NATO alliance (those located in North Macedonia and Bulgaria). In addition, the territory of Kosovo and Metohija is de facto under NATO and KFOR jurisdiction, given that one of NATO's largest military bases outside the United States, Camp Bondsteel, is located there, also within the Balkan Heartland. The portion not included in NATO structures—the Serbian part of this area—can be easily observed and controlled from surrounding positions. The contemporary presence of NATO in certain parts of the Balkan Heartland can be interpreted as part of a broader strategy of stabilizing and controlling key communication and security nodes in the region, which simultaneously contributes to maintaining the existing geopolitical configuration and limiting alternative influences.

Jovan Cvijić was the first scholar to clearly emphasize the importance of communication lines linking Central Europe with the Balkans and Asia Minor, which also represent the shortest overland route to the Suez Canal. These routes not only connect the periphery with the center but also possess exceptional strategic significance both for Europe, as a space of power, and for the Balkans, as a zone of expansion. Consequently, the valleys of the Morava and Vardar rivers function as the internal center of the peninsula, organizing its geographical and political space [9]. Precisely for this reason, Cvijić was aware of the extremely complex geopolitical position of the Balkan Heartland, which has repeatedly generated destabilization processes throughout history, since the geostrategic role of the Morava, Nišava and Vardar valleys was permanently and structurally crucial [5].

From a military-strategic perspective, the Balkan Heartland is located within the European battlefield, i.e. the Balkan regional battlefield. When analyzing the situation, it is also necessary to consider the important communication beams that pass through the geospace of the Balkan Heartland. These include the bundle connecting Western Europe with the Middle East (linking Berlin, Vienna, Budapest, Belgrade, Niš, Sofia (Skopje), the Bosporus (Thessaloniki), Istanbul, and Basra); its close connection with the 45th-parallel bundle (connecting Marseille, Milan, Zagreb, Belgrade, Bucharest, and Rostov); and the bundle that is the Danube navigable route [7]. In addition, two further concepts should be incorporated into this analysis. The first is the Balkan geopolitical node—a dense network of geopolitical vectors of major global and regional powers whose bundles converge and intersect in the Balkans, with the Balkan Heartland being the point of

greatest density of this convergence. The second is the Balkan geopolitical arc—the axis of NATO's action on the Balkan Peninsula during the civil wars and the NATO intervention in the 1990s. This arc was realized along two directions: 1. "the Dinaric stronghold" (Dinarides), and 2. the Central region (with auxiliary access routes via the Pannonian Plain, the Adriatic Sea, and the Black Sea) [12]. Control of the entire Balkan Heartland enables control over the Morava–Vardar valley as the most significant meridional natural corridor in the Balkans, as well as the entire central maneuver space with its key communication nodes [7].

CONCLUSION

We live in a time of expressed uncertainty, in which what was considered indisputable until yesterday may already be called into question tomorrow. International relations, like other social sciences, is a discipline that faces the constant challenge of interpreting a complex and dynamic international environment, while possessing only limited capacity for reliable prediction of outcomes. For this very reason, history serves as a relatively stable point of reference for scholars of international relations, because although the present and the future are uncertain, the past is known to a greater extent—at least in those aspects that are not the subject of scholarly dispute. It is therefore no coincidence that the key theories of international relations were formulated and empirically tested precisely based on historical events. Although complete certainty regarding current and future global processes is unattainable, the analysis of historical patterns makes it possible to identify long-term trends and provides a framework for understanding the conditions under which these trends produced specific outcomes in the past.

In this sense, it is necessary to analyze existing phenomena through a different analytical and theoretical lens, one that allows for the reassessment of established interpretations and dominant narrative frameworks. Such an approach can contribute to the formulation of new answers and to the identification of potential solutions to the challenges facing an already structurally complex and persistently turbulent environment such as the Balkan Peninsula, particularly in the context of contemporary geopolitical and international dynamics.

The initial hypothesis of the paper, according to which the Central Morava–Vardar region represents the geographical pivot of the Balkan Peninsula, found support within the three distinguished pillars of Mackinder's theory. The natural-physical characteristics, the historical role in migratory and conquering movements of Asian peoples, as well as its position within the axis of confrontation between land and sea powers, indicate that this space does not function as a mere transit zone, but as a structural node in which key geopolitical processes of the Balkans are concentrated. In this sense, the Balkan Heartland can be conceptualized as a regional geographical pivot whose role is enduring rather than historically contingent. The concept of the Balkan Heartland does not imply a mechanical transposition of Mackinder's model to the regional level, but rather its functional and analytical adaptation within the limited geopolitical system of the Balkans. Therefore, the Balkan Heartland does not represent an equivalent of the global Heartland in terms of scale and reach, but an analogous position within regional relations of power, communication, and strategic accessibility.

By introducing the concept of the Balkan Heartland and applying the method of theory transfer, this paper seeks to contribute to the expansion of classical geopolitical thought through its adaptation to regional contexts. This approach opens the possibility for other

regions to be analyzed, with further empirical verification of the role of central communication zones in shaping long-term political and security dynamics. Future research may deepen this concept through comparative analyses of the Balkans with other geopolitically fragmented regions, thereby further testing the analytical utility of the Balkan Heartland concept.

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