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# Migration, borders, and the EU's geopolitics

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# Introduction

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During the Cold War, citizens of the Balkans enjoyed relative ease of movement across Europe, at least compared with Poles or Hungarians. But since then, the tables have turned. Poland and Hungary became part of the Schengen Area, whereas the Former Yugoslavia and Albania increasingly found themselves on the wrong side of a 'new Iron Curtain' (Karajkov, 2007). The terms 'Central Europe' and 'Western Balkans' showed the difference of fate: Poles and Hungarians chose the term 'Central Europeans' for themselves, as their accession to the EU and Schengen moved them from the 'East' to the heart of Europe; the 'Western Balkans' had the label chosen for them as they were cut off from their neighbours.

Central European and Western Balkan states have therefore retained a keen sense of the EU's power, albeit from these rather different perspectives (Guzzini, 2012): they saw how, in a supreme act of geopolitics, Western Europeans

pushed their borders outwards with each Schengen enlargement (Lavenex, 2006). But in the old Western core of the EU, it has become quite common to hear arguments like those made in the foreword to this volume: that the EU was founded to end geopolitics; that the EU's institutions subsequently lack geopolitical DNA; that geopolitics did finally end with the cessation of Cold War hostilities; that geopolitics is now back after a 30-year hiatus; and that the EU must somehow find a way to embrace power.

Interestingly, amongst the people most convinced of this argument are foreign policy experts – people who really ought to recognise geopolitics. Their blind-spot concerning the EU is not so surprising. They have always been slightly estranged from the core of EU power, from the European Commission and line ministries. This is certainly true of borders and migration policy: power is exercised primarily by the Commission's DG HOME, interior ministries and

agencies like Frontex. And they express a different problem: for them, the EU has too much geopolitical DNA; it struggles to cling to a single strand. These actors know that Schengen and border control are geopolitical, but they struggle to consolidate, classify or communicate this.

So what do we actually mean by 'geopolitics'?

When commentators speak of 'the return of geopolitics', it is often with reference to phenomena like the 'weaponisation of migration' (Franke and Leonard, 2016) – the way Russia aided small numbers of Afghans and Indians to enter Finland, trying to destabilise the EU; how it used refugee flows to punish Turkey for downing one of its jets in Syria. Commentators describe as 'geopolitical' the way both Russia and Turkey exploited migration to further their territorial aims (e.g., by creating safe zones); to engineer a more favourable domestic situation (offering citizenship to refugees, diluting ethnic strongholds); and to discredit their rivals (using migration for hybrid warfare).

And yet, this is not geopolitics – it is too opportunistic, too messy.

Properly speaking, geopolitics is territorial statecraft. A highly-codified practice, it describes the way each state lays claim to and manages national resources – natural and human; and how it regulates international access rights. Geopolitics amounts to a language: it is the java code of international relations. Each power is expected to explain how it organises and controls its territory, as well as to communicate its expectations for how other powers control theirs. This expectation did not go away in 1991. But an assumption did arise that the world was now converging on the same basic form of statecraft – that trade between states would fuel liberal democracy and international cooperation. It is this assumption which is now breaking down.

Viewed in this way, Turkey and Russia were not using migration for the purposes of geopolitics. The reverse: they were responding to the breakdown of geopolitics. They responded

opportunistically to misunderstandings about territorial statecraft in order to make de facto gains. Importantly, they may even have been responding to what they saw as deviant geopolitics by the EU. Speak to Russian or Turkish officials, and they perceive that the EU is the one that has been weaponising migration. They ask: “isn’t Europe’s deployment of counter-migration operations in the Aegean and Central Mediterranean a form of weaponisation?” Or: “isn’t EU visa liberalisation just Russian-style ‘passportisation’?”

## Common challenges in migration

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With this in mind, the task for Europeans – for both the EU and its Western Balkan neighbours - is to define and communicate their shared geopolitics, their chosen territorial statecraft. For the EU specifically, this means picking a coherent geopolitics - one capable both of uniting the member states and being clearly communicated abroad. For the countries of the Western Balkans, the task is slightly different – it is about establishing themselves as active subjects of European geopolitics rather than objects. Europeans have three obvious codes of geopolitics to choose from, the three strands which are encoded in the EU’s DNA: Liberalpolitik, Realpolitik, Europapolitik (Smolnikov, 2009). Each relates centrally to borders and migration:

*Liberalpolitik.* *Liberalpolitik* has been the West’s dominant geopolitics for 30 years.

It sounds like an open-borders policy, but is the opposite. Liberals grid the world into neatly-bordered nation-states. They use trade and investment to grow middle classes; and they maintain strict border controls so the middle classes stay home and build democratic political institutions. A liberal EU is one with tight borders. It uses trade and aid to reform the 'root causes' of migration, and to reduce the 'push' and 'pull' factors of different political and economic regimes. When the EU took the unusual step of opening its borders and liberalising visas for the Balkans and Eastern Europe, this was to harness the middle classes there vis-à-vis their own governments.

But there has been a backlash in the EU against Liberalpolitik: EU citizens complain that 'liberal over-reach' has made them less secure. Migration is felt to be one such area, as exemplified by the practice of lifting visas. In the 1990s, the EU was confident of its capacity to remove the root causes of disorderly migration: the EU was becoming the world's largest economy, and Brussels reasoned that its neighbours - and their neighbours -

were going to converge with its own style of liberal government. The EU therefore opened up Schengen and the European labour market to them, and came to rely on third countries for border control. Today, the EU finds itself surrounded by unstable and authoritarian countries.

**Realpolitik.** If *Liberalpolitik* aims at principled state-building and international cooperation, *Realpolitik* is the opposite – a relic of imperialism and 'might is right'. It divides the world not into neatly-demarcated nation-states but into power centres and fuzzy peripheries. The EU's own fuzzy peripheries are useful for four stratagems: defence in depth, forward defence, connective security and power projection. Defence in depth is practised via a 'buffer-zone', an area which can be sacrificed to defend a core territory. Forward defence – via a 'front-line' or highly militarised line pushed close to a rival power. Connective security – via a modern commercial border, getting goods flowing and giving big outside powers a stake in Europe's security.

Commentators already see shades of

these border stratagems on the EU's major flanks. On its eastern flank: a 'buffer' to Russia in the form of Western Ukraine, Belarus (Buras, 2014). To its south: a 'front-line', where an EU naval operation presses up to North Africa (Bevilacqua, 2017). In the northwest, commercial air and seaports plug the world's big economies into Europe. As for the southeast, in the Balkans, the EU is applying its border standards and deploying border operations as if they were on EU territory. Commentators say this echoes the stratagem of power projection (Coman-Kund, 2020): the relevant imperial border template is a protectorate – a means through which to project power without formally holding territory (Curzon, 1907).

***Europapolitik.*** Both *Liberalpolitik* and *Realpolitik* were codified in the first decade of the 20th Century in an era of aggressive competition in Europe. *Europapolitik* was developed half a century later as an alternative and remedy (Maas, 2017, p.85-86). The playful new geopolitics of European integration involved using economic links,

infrastructure and technical cooperation to soften old barriers and build cross-border connections, first inside Europe and then abroad. This 'third way' was somewhat neglected by the EU in the 1990s, subsumed by the idea that trade globalisation marked the 'end of borders'. But it was kept alive by Frontex and national border professionals: Schengen is its great exemplar.

This is 'networked geopolitics', and Frontex is using it to strengthen all of Europe's frontiers. It works across even the tensest of borders – Finland-Russia or Greece-Turkey. Frontex creates close contacts between professionals on both sides of the fence so they can pick up the phone to each other when the political temperature rises. In the Western Balkans, Frontex is developing it to the full. DG HOME is seeking status agreements with Western Balkan governments to permit Frontex to deploy executive operations. This is not about the EU projecting power, as students of *Realpolitik* may believe. It is about making these countries an integral part of Frontex's professional networks (Nechev and Trauner, 2019).

# The way ahead for our shared European future

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Given the existence of these three strands of DNA, how would a more concerted EU geopolitics look? When it comes to migration and borders, a ready test-ground can be found along the so-called 'South-Eastern Route'. This is the name for the migration route which links the EU to Turkey and the turbulent Middle East and Horn of Africa. Its existence has clarified the stakes for the EU in dealing with that whole region. And it has transformed the way Brussels thinks of the Western Balkans – less as a source of irregular migration, more as a transit zone within the EU and Schengen Area, sitting between Greece and Hungary.

Each strand offers a different approach:

*Liberalpolitik*. If European *Liberalpolitik* has overreached in the past three decades, then nowhere more so than Turkey. President Erdogan rose to power with Istanbul's pro-European middle

classes. But he lost faith in the EU in the wake of the financial crisis and the 'Arab Winter'. Today he is happy to practise a zombie version of liberalism. He can use his country's humanitarianism to demand international standing and extort a recognition from the EU that Turkey does not itself produce political refugees. He can use the migration flows to establish a more amenable electorate, diluting Kurdish strongholds and pushing minorities into Europe. He can use the crisis to polarise Turkish society and guarantee himself 51% of the vote.

But Europe's *Liberalpolitik* isn't dead. Indeed, the EU's impulse to strengthen its outer border, to focus on European integration, and to direct trade and aid at the 'root causes' of migration abroad, marks a return to basics. This renewed *Liberalpolitik* can be seen in the Balkans. The EU has sharpened its focus on making Europe a more united and neatly-demarcated territory. This means lifting Schengen border controls towards EU members Romania and Bulgaria (European Parliament, 2018). It also means helping Western Balkan states respond to the migration crisis and the

tensions with Turkey by trying to resolve their own outstanding border disputes and deepen cooperation.

**Realpolitik.** As for the EU's *Realpolitik*, it is much less concerted than its critics suggest. The South-Eastern Route is a case in point: the EU is accused of turning the Balkans into 'protectorates' but, in truth, it has at most established 'micro-protectorates' - the Commission runs refugee camps on the Greek Islands, where it projects power but eschews responsibility. Greece itself is trying to create a 'front line', hoping the Aegean will be viewed as their first line of defence by other EU governments. But they, for their part, use one another as 'buffers', slowing the passage of migrants. So this leaves Turkey with an ace card – connective security: Turkey keeps Syrian refugees trickling into Greece's overfilled camps, plugging Europe into its own security situation.

If Europeans did embrace *Realpolitik* (unlikely), this would require them to combine those four defensive stratagems – projecting power, buffering, and so on - in a concerted way. In the south-east,

the main thrust would be power projection - using Turkey as a base to exert influence over Syria, Lebanon and Jordan. But to achieve this relationship with Ankara, Europe would leverage Turkey's own need for 'connective security' - for trade, visas and military mobility from Europe (every time Turkey opens its borders it jeopardises these things). It would make Ankara understand that Turkey sits on a civilizational 'front-line' and must actively choose to belong to the West. And it would treat Turkey less as a bridge to the Middle East, more as a buffer.

**Europapolitik.** The Schengen Area is the prime exemplar of *Europapolitik* and so this is the most natural approach when it comes to borders. Schengen reflects the notion that people should be able to choose their geography - that there are ways to cooperate which prevent societies becoming trapped by their geography. This has been described as 'geo-politics', applying political choice to geography. If the EU did revive this third form of geopolitics along the south-eastern route, it would focus on strengthening links to Turkish border guards so as to undercut the political posturing in Ankara. It would

also help the Turks forge links of their own with Africa. In short: exploit border guards' professional pride and the shared stake in cross-border networks.

Turkish border guards have already discovered the uses of Schengen's 'networked geopolitics': they are seeking contacts to Frontex and to border organisations like ICMPCD in Vienna (Aydogan, 2018). This is because, whenever Erdogan funnels migration towards the EU, Turkish border guards lose control: 'Gülenists' sneak out amid the chaos, Africans flock into Turkish airports hoping to transit to Europe, and Iranians, Iraqis and Syrians press across Turkey's other land borders. Last March, a rumour went out that Erdogan was opening the border to the EU. 30,000 Syrians and Afghans responded by moving across Turkey towards Greece; but more than a million Syrians moved towards the border with Turkey. Turkey needs its Schengen contacts.

So which, if any, of these three models ought to win out?

For the EU, choosing the best form of geopolitics is important; but choosing a geopolitics is vital. After all, a lack of clarity about a state's geopolitics (rather than the form of geopolitics itself) is what lies at the heart of most international tensions. That is why it is so damaging when foreign policy experts argue that the EU has no geopolitics – it is so far from the truth, that suspicious rivals take the worst interpretation. If the EU chooses *Europapolitik*, these experts will have to acquaint themselves with something truly unfamiliar and technical.

For Western Balkan countries, the stakes involved in this choice are perhaps higher – they must choose the geopolitics which gives them an active part. *Liberalpolitik* offers the most attractive aims: the Balkans would be properly integrated into the EU and Schengen, no longer an 'undigested morsel in the EU's stomach' (Šljivić et al., 2017). *Realpolitik* is perhaps more in tune with realities, messy and unpleasant, but grimly predictable. But *Europapolitik* offers the best opportunities for the Balkans to become active players.

*Europapolitik* is a non-hierarchical networked geopolitics which runs on expertise. Western Europeans, following years of exporting their border standards to the east and south-east now find themselves at a loss. They were not ready for phenomena like 'hybrid warfare'. Central Europeans have embraced the new demand for their expertise. Western Balkan countries too have significant expertise in these fields. And, thanks in part to years of EU network-building in the region, are capable of communicating across borders.

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## About this contribution

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This contribution builds upon the panel discussions of the [2020 Think Tank Forum Western Balkans Skopje 'Stimulating strategic autonomy - Western Balkans' contribution for a shared European future'](#), organized within the 2020 joint Presidency of the Republic of North Macedonia and Republic of Bulgaria with the Western Balkans Summit Series.

## Information about IDSCS

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IDSCS is a think-tank organisation researching the development of good governance, rule of law and North Macedonia's European integration. IDSCS has the mission to support citizens' involvement in the decision-making process and strengthen the participatory political culture. By strengthening liberal values, IDSCS contributes towards coexistence of diversities.

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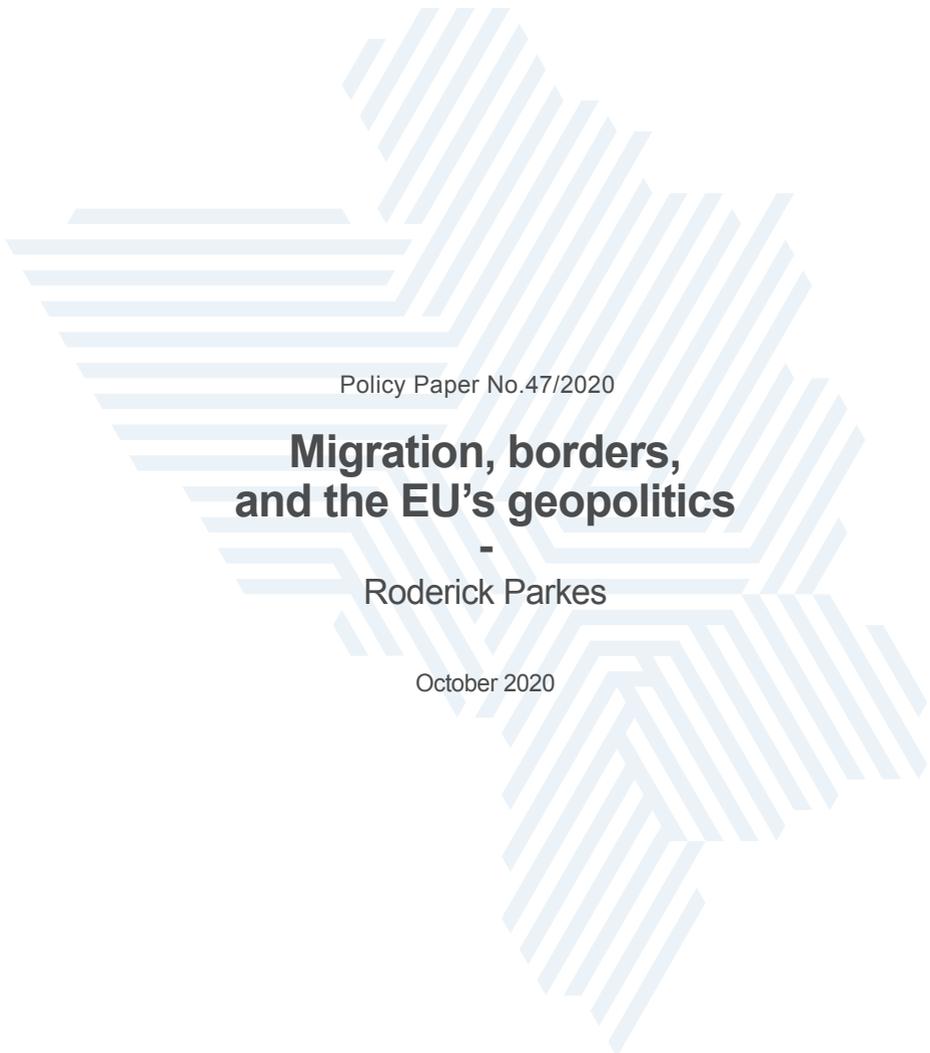
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