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# Belgrade Confluence: Geographical Predispositions and Geopolitical Significance

## Abstract

Geotectonic descent along the Sava fault caused the obliquity of the Pannonian Basin to the southeast, and consequently, the orientation of more river flows towards that zone. At its centre is Belgrade, the place of confluence of the Sava and Danube, and the focal point of a wider area where even more of their important tributaries flow in, the Drina, Kolubara, Morava, Mlava, Tamiš, Tisa, Begej ... Along their river valleys the communications have been routed, linking the Central European Pannonian, Carpatho-Balkan, Vardar-Aegean and the Dinaric-Adriatic entities, and flow into the Belgrade region. The same directions have routed the continuous migration flows, civilization contacts and economic trends. Thus, the area of the Belgrade confluence have become a zone of multidimensional concentration of - population, settlements, roads, economy, trade, education, culture, political power. The Belgrade confluence area is characterized by distinctive geopoliticity because it is located at the contact of large strategic entities and hub of key strategic vectors. Traditionally,

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the primate had a northwest-southeast direction, which, at the same time, barged a competitive northeast-southwest direction. The valleys of the Danube, Sava and Velika Morava are the primary „axis“ of these directions and their geopolitical function is complemented by secondary passages, which also gravitate toward the southeastern of the Pannonian rim and Belgrade (Tisa, Drina, Kolubara ...). It is the geographical basis of forming *the Balkan geopolitical hub* – the historically continuous crossing of interests of the great powers. Therefore, the area of the Belgrade confluence has always been the subject of struggle for military-political-economic control. Along the Danube-Sava axis, there was a long fluctuation of the imperial transgression-regression frontier, but there was also formed a central territory with the capital of the restored Serbia. Will the area of the Belgrade confluence remain the *centre* of the Serbian state and southeast of Europe or will again turn into a postmodern limes-split *periphery* of refeudalized Europe – this will be a key issue of its geopolitical future.

Keywords: convergence of rivers, Pannonian-Balkan contact, strategic areas, geopolitical vectors, Belgrade.

## Introduction

In Serbian thesaurus of physical geography, there are different names for a place where two watercourses meet. These names mostly depend on the size of a watercourse, and thus a place where two stream, streamlets or small rivers meet is called *sastavci*, a place where two medium-sized rivers meet is called – *sutoka*, and a place where two large rivers meet is called – *stava*. For a place where one watercourse flows into another (or a sea or lake) usually one name is used – *ušće* (*confluence*) (Dukić, Gavrilović 2006: 71). A meeting of two river flows usually occur in one, more or less stationary point, however it is not rare that it moves under the influence of natural factors (tectonic movements, sediment accumulation, landslides, climate disasters, floods...) or anthropogenic activity (diverting of the river course, damming of a river, draining a terrain...).

A specific geotectonic and geomorphological assembly can cause gravitation of more river flows not towards one point, but towards one smaller geographic area or zone. That is how a „swarm“ (system) of river confluences occurs at a relatively small distance. There is no adequate term for this phenomenon in the categorical apparatus of the Serbian physical geography (primarily potamology). *Porečje* or *višerečje* denote an area of high concentration of watercourses, but not their convergence towards one point or smaller area. From a logical-linguistic point of view, the most adequate Serbian term

would be *sutok(a)*, however, it has already been used for the joining of two medium-sized rivers – therefore, for the bifluvial phenomenon. Hence, for the spatial gravitation of more river flows (multifluvial phenomenon) the term *confluence* (lat. *con* – to, towards; *fluvio* – river) would be most adequate, although in foreign glossaries it is used for both bi-fluvial and multi-fluvial convergence.

There are not many examples of significant, major and multiple confluences in the world: in North America, in the city of St. Louis converge the Mississippi, Missouri and Illinois rivers...; in South America, towards Manaus are oriented the Amazon, Rio Negra, Madeira, Purus rivers..., and towards Buenos Aires the Parana, Uruguay, Negro rivers...; in Asia, enormous spatial and hydrographic proportions has the Indus, Bengali and Punjab confluence (many rivers that converge towards the Indus, Ganges, Jamuni, Brahmaputra...)... In Europe, there is no hydrographically more distinctive, historically more turbulent, anthropogeographically more complex and geopolitically more significant confluence than the Belgrade confluence. From geological, physical and geographical point of view, the Belgrade confluence was formed as a result of tectonic descent along the Sava fault, the obliquity of the Pannonian Basin to the southeast, and the Internal Dinarides to the north. Consequently, the orientation of more river flows of different quantitative and qualitative features was logically directed towards that area, where the altitudes are lowest.

In the centre of that contact geographical area is Belgrade, a place of the Sava and Danube rivers confluence, but also a focal point of a wider area, where their larger tributaries flow in, such as the Velika Morava, Drina, Tisa, Tamiš, Begej, Kolubara, Mlava and Bosut rivers. The existence of confluence is the key physical and geographic determinant of the complex continental (European) and regional (Balkan) position of Belgrade, however it has not received a scientific and expert value judgement so far, nor has it been practically geopolitically and geoeconomically valorised. As a rule, the micro position of Belgrade in the northern part of the *Šumadijska greda* has been asserted, along the confluence of the Sava into Danube river on one side, and the macro position at the contact of the two major European entities, the Balkan Peninsula and Pannonic Basin, on the other. However, the meso-position as a chain of micro and macro positions, which is exactly the result of the complex Belgrade confluence, has been neglected.

Convergence of large rivers, as Belgrade's comparative advantage in relation to other cities in the Central and Southeastern Europe, was not taken much into account by the spatial planning of its position and development. This significance has mostly been embedded in the idea of the Belgrade metropolitan, but its projected spatiality is considerably larger. In some phases of spatial plans designing, the importance of the confluence for the future development of Belgrade has been pointed out. Thus, it has been stated that there are predispositions for achieving the status of „Belgrade as one of the more important cities of Europe“ (Vučićević 2002: 107), emphasising that Belgrade is „located in the centre of the zone of extreme convergence of important European rivers (the Danube, Sava, Tisa, Tamiš, Velika Morava, Drina rivers), whose role through the history oscilated from integrative to barrier“ (Vučićević 2002: 107). However, the final spatial planning visions were not based upon these properties, but, since at that time conjuncturally laced with the EU phanaticism, they almost entirely only pushed for the Danube axle in the documents (Vučićević 2004: 10).

### Historical and Anthropogeographical „Magnetism“ of the Belgrade Confluence

Although Serbian ruler Stefan Lazarević found Belgrade „destroyed and abandoned“ at the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, he called it „the most beautiful place since ancient times“. More than five centuries later, the glorius Le Corbusier<sup>3</sup> characterised it as the „ugliest city in the world at the most beautiful place on earth“. Its *ugliness* is a paradoxical consequence of *the beauty of the place* which it is situated at. The history of conquests or defeats, destruction or chaotic reconstruction, status of the centre or a border posts, results from its *developmental place* – a unique phenomenon consisted of interdependence of a social and political surrounding and a territory that it occupies.<sup>4</sup> Although physical and geographic properties do not define the position of Belgrade deterministically, but possibilistically, they are the key predisposition – from sacral and geographic foundations to geopolitical complexity.

3 *Le Corbusier* is a pseudonym of the famous French architect (originally from Switzerland), whose real name was *Charles-Édouard Jeanneret-Gris* (1887-1965).

4 One of the founders of the Russian geopolitics P. N. Savicki (Петр Николаевич Савицкий) by the term *developmental place* (*месторазвитие*) defined the historical function of the space, considering that it arises from the specificity of the geographic position (*place*) and its influence on social processes (*development*) (see Савицкий 1927: 219-232).

However, they should not be considered separately but in comparison with predispositions of the positions of other, rival cities (of similar size and importance) in the Pannonian Basin and the Balkan Peninsula.

Which city along the Vienna-Bratislava-Budapest-Belgrade-Niš-Sofia-Constantinople axis is comparable with Belgrade? On one side, it is not Constantinople on a potamological („river-like“) Bosphorus Strait, which is considered to be „the empress of cities“, „the mistress of the world“, „the eye of the Universe“<sup>5</sup>, whose position of the Balkan-Asia Minor, or European-Asian „buckle“ cannot be compared to any city in the world. On the other side, it is neither Sofia nor Niš, built along the small river flows, with a transit and junction role of only the Balkans rank. It cannot be the border city of Bratislava, or Budapest, to which only one part of the Pannonian Basin gravitates, although both are the Danube cities. A multi-dimensional antipode to Belgrade can only be Vienna. (*Map 1*)



Map 1: Vienna and Belgrade „gateway“ – physical and geographic predispositions.

5 In the context of historical continuity, Istanbul (Constantinople), according to the majority of indicators, is considered a city with the best geographic position in the world during its long-time historical duration. A Byzantine writer Maximus Planudes called it „the empress of cities“ and „the mistress of the world“, and one of the most famous minds of the Byzantine world, John Eugenikos, „the eye of the Universe“. D. Vukić used Evgenikos's lyrical syntagma for the title of his book *Constantinople – the eye of the Universe* (Vukić 2010).

- *Vienna* is situated along the „beautiful, blue Danube“ breaking through the outermost eastern slopes of the Alps (Vienna Woods) and the western hillsides of the Carpathians (the Little Carpathians). Between them is the Viennese „gateway“, as a passage that controls the Danube connection between the German northwestern Europe and mainly Slavic-Ugric part of the Pannonian Basin. The Viennese gateway is the place of contact of identity symbols of the continental (telurocratic) sacral and geographic duality – of the Pannonian „Plain“ and „Steppe“ in the southeast, and the Alpine-Carpathian „Mountains“ and „Forests“ in the northwest.
- *Belgrade* is „at the confluence of two rivers, under Avala“, where, in its wider area, two large mountain masses converge – Carpathian–Balkanides in the east and Dinarides (Internal) in the southwest. That confluence of the mountain ranges forms the Belgrade „gateway“, which is situated in the area where the Danube river valley is joined by the Sava river valley from the west and, a little further up, by the Morava river valley from the south. The Belgrade „gateway“ is also in the continental (telurocratic) sacral and geographical contact analogue to the Viennese „gateway“, however, it is inversely positioned – the Pannonian „Plain“ and „Steppe“ is in the north, and the Balkan „Mountain“ and „Forest“ is in the south. Belgrade is a paradigm of duality of not only Serbian sacral and geographical, but also geopolitical identity<sup>6</sup>.

The Vienna - Belgrade axis routed military crusades, territorial conquests, epidemics of deadly diseases, expulsion of population and attempts of religious and national conversion, but also traffic, trade, economic migrations, cultural influences... Penetrations of the steppe, cavalry and nomadic people and warriors from the inland Asia could not reach further than the Viennese „gateway“, however, for the German „*Drang nach (Süd)Osten*“ they were always wide open. In contrast to that, the Belgrade „gateway“ was much more passable on both sides and through them would usually blow the „historic draft“. Belgrade remained the synonym not only for „the character of isolation and separation“, but also „the traits of connection and permeation“ (Cvijić 1991: 25,31) even when the deposited border of allochthonous (non-Balkan) empires and civilisations along the Sava and Danube rivers were forcibly established.

Passability and „magnetism“ of Belgrade were predisposed by two key geographic characteristics of the Balkan Peninsula that make

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6 Duality of the Serbian geopolitical identity is the result of a long action and interaction of many natural and social factors (see Stepić 2012a: 11-40)

it essentially different from the other two large southern European peninsulas:

- *The first* differentia specifica is that the Iberian and Apennine Peninsulas end as a „dead-end street“ („*blind alley*“) in the south, i.e. with relatively wide straits, on the African side of which, after a narrow Mediterranean belt, arises the endless and inhospitable Sahara desert. The origination of the Balkan Peninsula is not only Constantinople, with the narrow, passable and in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, bridged straits of Bosphorus (660 m) and Dardanelles (1.300 m), but the southeastern vector continues further, to the centre of the old civilisations, holy places of the great world religions and largest planetary oil fields.
- *The second* difference is that the Iberian and Apennine Peninsulas are separated from the „thorso“ of Europe by a barrier of high mountain ranges of the Pyrenees and Alps, whereas the connection of the Balkan Peninsula and the rest of Europe is transient, contact – it consists of slightly ruffled hillsides, which in the north becomes the great Pannonian Basin. Furthermore, the Balkan Peninsula „neck“ between Trieste and Odessa is a lot wider even than the eastern European (Odessa-Kaliningrad), central European (Trieste-Szczecin; Trieste-Hamburg) and western European (Marseille-Rotterdam) continental narrowing. It causes polemics among geographers even today whether or not the Balkan Peninsula is a peninsula at all.<sup>7</sup> Valleys of Sava and Danube, the rivers which outline the Balkan – Pannonian touch, together with the valleys of their tributaries as integral parts of the Belgrade confluence system, are physically and geographically predisposed for axes of political and territorial integration and multidimensional concentration (population, settlements, economy, traffic routes, capital, investments, overall power...), and not for barriers, as it often happened throughout history.

## Geopolitical Aspects of the Belgrade Confluence

Position and significance of the geographic area in which the Belgrade confluence is situated, arises from a set of geopolitical

<sup>7</sup> The specifics of the Balkan Peninsula compared to the Iberian and Apennine Peninsulas demand a detailed explanation, being the only way possible to understand the complex history and geopolitics of the Balkans (see Stepić 2012c: 13-15).

constants and variables. Among main and unchangeable facts falls its Balkan – Pannonian contact, which has a physical and geographic as well as anthropogeographic dimension. The other, important and unchangeable characteristic is the continentality (distance from the sea) of the space to which converge the Danube, Sava, Velika Morava, Tisa, Tamiš, Begej, Drina, Kolubara, Mlava and Bosut rivers. Along their river valleys traditionally operate communication corridors, connecting the Central European-Pannonian, Carpathian-Balkan, Vardar-Aegean and Dinaride-Adriatic entities, confluenting in Belgrade. Along the same routes continuously move migration and economic flows. According to that, the area of Belgrade confluence has always had a distinguished gravitation capacity.

Interests of the great powers are also constant, whose vectors networked the entire Balkans. They are especially thick and intersected in the territory of the central Balkan state – Serbia. Constant is also the epicentre of that „Balkan geopolitical knot“ – Belgrade. However, the intensity of geopolitical, geoeconomic and geostrategic influence is historically changeable. It most frequently and strongly came from the northwestern (Germanic-Hungarian „block“) and southeastern sector (Turkish-Islamic „block“), but it never ceased to be exerted in a specific way from the western hemisphere as well (Roman Catholic „block“). They are united by the newer vectors of the western maritime forces (earlier France and Great Britain, and now the USA), which battling for the European, Euro-Asian and global domination, are trying to prevent the penetration from the northeastern sector, i.e. the Russian „block“ (Stepić 2001: 99-101). The Belgrade confluence is an object of obsession, symbol and „key“ of the struggle for dominance of the great powers in the southeastern Europe, but also the aim of Serbs to position their capital city in such „bleakness“, to get involved in the international processes and become more of their active subject than manipulative object.

According to „the first law of geopolitics“ (Dugin 2004: 139), relating to mutual confrontation of the „sea power“ (thalassocracy) and „land power“ (telurocracy), positioning of the Belgrade confluence, at first sight, should not be problematic. It should, according to its continentality and belonging to Serbia as one of only 44 states in the world (out of 193 UN members) without access to the sea, logically have telurocratic geopolitical identity. Moreover, not only to Belgrade, but all of Serbia

and all the Serbian countries as a „vent“ for LLC-complex<sup>8</sup> served a big „land water“ – Danube itself, which has often been self-deceptively proclaimed „the Serbian sea“.

However, the already mentioned continentalistic, telurocratic code of the Belgrade confluence has been relativized owing to the wider geographic context, which gives to all of Europe, as a large western peninsula of the Euro-Asia mega continent, a maritime character. It is particularly evident when „the second law of geopolitics“ is applied (Dugin 2004: 143), relating to historical-geographic urge towards territorial expansion and formation of strategic blocks. Thallasocratic transatlantic western integration under the leadership of the USA, formed and successively expanded after the World War II (NATO-EU), proved to be especially expansive after the end of the Cold War. With the joining of (besides other countries) Hungary, then Romania and Bulgaria, and finally Croatia, it completely surrounded Serbia and Belgrade confluence in its composition. Although it has (still) not shown clear intentions to “absorb” it in the near future, transatlantism does not hide its interest to have the full control of it, at the price of fragmenting it for that reason.

Historical and geographical peculiarity of the Belgrade confluence area is the oscillation between being on the border and centrality. Its status as well as its geopolitical function depends on it:

*Fragmentation phase* began when the border along the Sava and Danube rivers was traced. Instead of a geographic, demographic, economic, traffic and culturally logical cohesive role, militaristically and politically imposed fracture of the Belgrade confluence causes peripherality both of the part north and south of the Sava and Danube rivers. Even if the border was formally abolished, its relict influence would stay visible in the anthro-landscape and collective mental

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8 *Land locked country* (LLC) is a term used in geopolitics to define a country of a handicapped position due to the lack of access to the sea. That deficiency is reflected in a reduced volume and level of diversification of the traffic activity, trade, tourism and fishing, in lagging behind in modernisation processes and scientific and technological progress, country's sensitivity to economic and political blockade and marginalisation in international relations, especially in the post-Columbian period of the world's history. Confronted with continuous prevention to participate at sea, both in the ethno-spatial and state-territorial sense, the Serbian factor has started to treat the maritime orientation even as „sour grapes“, and to seek the alternative in the Danube river as a trans-European, integrative „spine“. Because of that induced, however justified „fear of the sea“, Serbs have changed litoralisation with fluvialisation, concentrating more on the Danube, Sava, Drina, Una, Morava basins... (see Stepić 2004: 165)

map of the population for a long time. It happens despite the fact that on both sides of the (former) border are Serbian countries and people as a „buckle“ that connects the peninsular and Pannonian space, i.e. the one that transforms physical-geographic Balkan Peninsula into geopolitical Balkans. (Stepić 2001: 161). Even today, the attempts are not given up to split the Belgrade confluence area by reviving the old, long non-existent border between the Islamic Otoman and Roman Catholic Habsburg (Austro-Hungarian) empires. Ideas have been actualised that, along the Sava and Danube rivers, through integral Orthodox Serbian space, a geopolitical „fissure line“ is nostalgically activated between the (Neo)Mitteleurope<sup>9</sup> and (Neo)Orient. Immediately after the end of the Cold War and bipolar order, western theorists of civilisations, as the intellectual logistics of creators of the unipolar, globalistic „new world order“, hurried to promote the necessity of reinstalling the border between the Western and Orthodox civilisations right on the Sava and Danube rivers, although it is, in reality, much further north and west.<sup>10</sup>

*Integrity phase* involves politically-territorial position of the Belgrade confluence area within the borders of one country. After

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9 Term *Mitteleuropa* was first used by the famous German geographer Carl Ritter in the 1820s, however he did not precisely define it. Pioneers of the *mitteleuropa* concept were Friedrich List and Karl Ludwig von Bruck in the 1840s, however it is mostly linked to Friedrich Naumann, who elaborated its settings in the book *Mitteleuropa* (Berlin, 1915.). There were traditional however different geographic views of *Mitteleurope*, dominated by German and Austrian views. Compromised due to its aggressive, militaristic politics of Vienna and Berlin, the idea of integrating the heterogenic Central European space into pro-German sphere of interest in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was pushed aside. Furthermore, there were attempts (truth to be told unsuccessful attempts) to use more neutral terms of the Central Europe (*Zentraleuropa*) or Internal Europe (*Zwischeneuropa*) as well. From 1980s, especially after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the birth of the unified „German giant at the heart of Europe“, the idea of *mitteleuropa* experienced a renaissance, and the German (Berlin-Viennese) ambitions of the great sphere of interest with the Danube river as an axis became increasingly apparent reality (see Orel 2012: 152-155; 322-337).

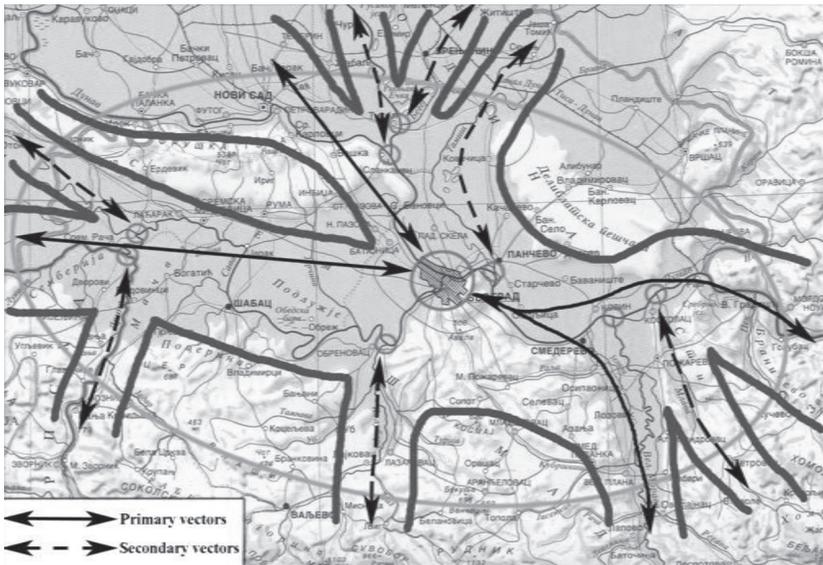
10 According to Huntington's (Samuel Phillips Huntington) concept of „the clash of civilisations“, there is a contact of three out of eight or nine world civilisations in the Balkans, however the border between the Orthodox and Western civilisations (Slovenia and Croatia are in the Western, whereas the rest of the Balkan countries are in the Orthodox civilisations) is of crucial importance. In his famous article (Huntington 1993: 30), followed by the book (Huntington 1996: 26-27), he uses the map taken from the book *The Transformation of Western Europe* by William Wallace published in 1990, which was, before the collapse of the Soviet sphere of interest in the Eastern Europe, disintegration of the USSR and the war-shattered breakup of Yugoslavia, was interpreted as a proof of the pre-projected partial engagement of the West. The map shows the border dividing Belarus, Ukraine and Yugoslavia and joins its western parts to the Western civilisations (including Vojvodina, which it separates from Serbia).

the World War I, it was within a few variants of the complex Yugoslav state formation, then from the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century again the independent Serbia as a residual post-Yugoslav country. Only if it is integral, non-fragmented by borders and part of one state territory, the Belgrade confluence integrates the northern edge of the Balkan Peninsula and southern edge of the Pannonian Basin, and gives an opportunity for its physical and geographical predisposed potential to be maximally used. Today it is „the heart“ of the central Serbian territory – the elliptical areal comprising Novi Sad in the north, and Kragujevac in the south, composed of the referential statehood points of the modern Serbia (places of uprisings, the most important battlefields for the liberation and defence of the country, religious and cultural centres, traffic hubs, economically most developed regions, capital city...) (Vučićević 2002: 111)<sup>11</sup>. The Belgrade confluence partly belongs to the Administrative area of the City of Belgrade (so-called Statistical region of Belgrade) with 17 municipalities, it is partly located in the constitutional and legal amorphous central Serbia and partly in the more and more centrifugally disposed AP Vojvodina, while the western edge enters even into Semberija in the Republic of Srpska (the left side of the lower Drina river basin). Such spatial organisation is projected by numerous suggestions of transforming Serbia into a regional state. However, there are those who promote the idea of slightly expanding the Belgrade region and its constitution into „the capital city district“ (Stepić 2003: 21-33), which would, with one trans-Sava (in the west) and trans-Danube (in the east) region not only encompass almost entire area of the Belgrade confluence, but also contribute to the reintegration of the Serbian state territory (Stepić 2012b: 25, 33).

The Belgrade confluence is a contact areal for three strategic zones (Stepić 2001: 150), the significance of which reaches not only regional, but also continental (European) and transcontinental (Euro-Asian) proportions. One is the *Pannonian zone*, which is often called the „Pannonian fan“ for its radial bifurkation of strategic direction – until the fall of the Berlin Wall in the function of the Warsaw Pact, and now in the NATO service. The other is the *Dinaride zone*, in the capacity of mountainous strategic stronghold and the mediator between the Pannonian and Adriatic basins, which is why it is treated as the „Dinaride fortress“. The third is the *Central zone of the Balkans*, with the Morava – Vardar valley as a strategic pivot, and Cvijić's „Central

11 See map „City of Belgrade – core in the territory of Serbia today“, p. 112.

region“ and „Territorial core of the Balkan Peninsula“ (Cvijić 1987: 112)<sup>12</sup> in its composition. Through them penetrate, integrate and connect to the further strategic zones, vectors traced by river valleys forming the Belgrade confluence. But, they have different importance and hierarchical level (*map 2*):



Map 2: Belgrade confluence and key geopolitical vectors

- *Primary vectors* are Danube, Morava-Vardar and Sava vectors. Their river flows are largest, and their valleys are widest, longest and cut the strategic zones connecting them with other river flows. They already have historically confirmed geopolitic significance and trans-European (Euro-Asian) rang. Along them for centuries were oriented great military crusades, constant geopolitical ambitions of the great powers, (trans)national and great state projects, economic interests, traffic corridors, trade routes and cultural influences, but also established front lines, borders, quarantines, economically-political blockades, and „spring bords“, bridgeheads and transgressional frontiers for further conquests. Trans-European Corridors 7 and 10 are determined along these vectors today as well, connecting the continental Central Europe with its south-eastern part.

<sup>12</sup> See map at the back of Cvijić's book.

- The Danube vector has the highest significance as it allows integrative connections with many Europe regions. It does not have only terrestrial character, but the Danube river, together with the Rhine River and the Rhine-Main-Danube canal, presents the navigable “spine” of Europe connecting different, yet complementary outcomes on the shores of the North Sea and Black Sea.<sup>13</sup> Traffic and geopolitical importance of that diagonal is huge, primarily for the interests of the powerful Germany. Back in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, its south-eastern interests were projected with the *only justified direction – to the Danube river basin* (F. List). A hundred years later, those interests were precisely designed and in the World War II (unsuccessfully) applied. However, its actuality is witnessed by projects and plans at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>14</sup>
- Morava-Vardar vector is an extension of the Danube vector to the south and the Aegean basin. It is the best physically and geographically predisposed trans-Balkan passage, however it is not without an alternative. The Post-Cold War expansion of the NATO

13 The channel from Rotterdam (the biggest European port) at the confluence of the Rhine river into the North Sea to Sulina at the confluence of the Danube river into the Black Sea is about 3.500 km long, significantly shortened by the Romanian channel from Cernavoda (on the Danube river) to Constanta (a port on the Black Sea). The important vector of that transversal, connecting 11 countries, is in Serbia (588 km) with its centre in Belgrade. The digging of the Rhine-Main-Danube Canal was a very expensive and complicated project, however, the integrative significance of the navigable European diagonal will be invaluable in the future (see Foucher 1993: 286).

14 A comprehensive plan of the Nazi Germany's expansion to the east and southeast of Europe aimed at „encompassing the space as a whole“ (Ristović 1991: 271-289). Inter alia, it implied the regulation of waterways system in the Danube river basin, that would serve not only for military but also economic purposes (transportation of ore, oil, agricultural products...). Digging of the Rhine-Main-Danube, Danube-Morava-Odra-Baltik, Danube-Sava (Vukovar-Šamac), Danube-Morava-Vardar-Aegean sea (Smederevo-Solun) canals was planned, regulation of the Drava, Tisa, Begej, Sava rivers valleys, and the lower flows of the Sava river right tributaries valleys... (in the above-mentioned Ristović's book, between pages 280 and 281, see the map „Die Wasserstraßen des Donauebietes und der Nahe Osten“ from 1941). The most important of these ideas „the European Germany“ realized immediately after the fall of the Berlin Wall and unification – in 1992 the digging of the Rhine-Main-Danube canal was finalized (the European Canal or RMD Canal). By 16 locks, the boats are lifted from 231 mamsl on the Main at Bamberg to the watershed at 406 mamsl, and then lowered to 336 mamsl on the Danube at Kelheim. The canal is 171 km long, 55 m wide and 4 m deep. Also, in Croatia, the digging of the canal between Danube at Vukovar and Sava across Šamac (in the Republic of Srpska) is starting, by which a mediation position of the Belgrade confluence would be avoided not only in the traffic sense of it, but also geopolitical. As one of the most important projects of the Government of Serbia (in 2012-2014 mandate) to launch the Serbian economy, building of the Danube-Morava-Vardar-Aegean Sea canal was publicly promoted.

and EU, i.e. inclusion of Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria and Croatia, actualized the competitive Corridors 4, 5 i 8, which are longer, more expensive and more unfavorably traced, however preferred because they bypass Serbia.

- Sava vector from the west joins the Danube-Morava-Vardar vector. After the breakup of SFRY, it became international, but its handicap is that it connects mutually confronted countries, including Slovenia and Croatia in the NATO and EU, and excluding Bosna and Hercegovina and Serbia. Therefore, for now it cannot maximally develop all its potentials (especially navigable and integrative).
- *Secondary vectors* are the Drina, Kolubara, Mlava, Tisa, Tamiš, Begej and Bosut vectors. These rivers are smaller, their valleys are narrower, shorter, connecting a few countries (1-3) and only partly cut the strategic zones. They are not navigable for larger ships and do not have the trans-European transit role. However, they are important for linking the Balkan-Pannonian contact zone and for geopolitical integration of the eastern part of the Serbian countries.
- The Drina and Kolubara vectors join the Sava vector from the south, from the direction of the Dinarides. Although the Drina vector has better natural predispositions (longer river valley, goes deeper into the Dinaride range, higher hydropower potentials...), the Kolubara vector is more important as it is closer to Belgrade and there is no border traced along it.
- Kolubara vector connects the southeastern parts of the Pannonian and Adriatic basins, and along that route the road and railway corridor Belgrade–Bar was traced (potential Corridor 11).
- Tisa, Tamiš and Begej vectors complete the Belgrade confluence from the north and northeast, from the eastern – Pannonian direction (Banat). They mediate between Serbia, eastern Hungary and western Romania, whereas by extending the Belgrade –Bar direction to Temisvar, the potential Corridor 11 would not only integrate itself with the network of trans-European (it would connect with the Corridor 4), but it would also become important for the Russian southwestern („warm waters“) interests directed towards the Adriatic and Mediterranean Sea. In the future, along this corridor, forming of an integral vector, whose hierarchical level would turn into primary, is possible.
- Mlava and Bosut vectors are less significant, however their potential is high. The Mlava vector is a link with the Carpathian–Timok

Serbia and further with the lower part of the Danube basin. The Bosut vector is directed towards the Serbian parts in the western -Srem, eastern Slavonia and Baranja parts of Croatia (eastern part of the former Republic of Serbian Krajina).

### **Instead of a Conclusion: Geopolitical Future of the Belgrade Confluence Area**

The Belgrade confluence area has always been geopolitically dynamic. In the future as well, its position and role will depend upon the processes at the national and international level.

Within Serbia, the Belgrade confluence area could keep its current role of a multi-dimensional centre and junction, with the administrative border of AP Vojvodina that cuts through it, but does not have a high degree of a barrier. In case the process of centralisation and concentration continues, Belgrade will become a hypertrophied city („big head on a small body“). However, such condition can change. If centrifugal trends in Vojvodina continue to strengthen, or aspirations towards the federal status or the separation from Serbia, and even a separatist incorporation in another country or integration (EU), its southern administrative border will become a political border. In that case, the role of the border as a barrier will increase. The area of Belgrade confluence will become fragmented, and the halo-effect of the border will inevitably influence functional atrophy of not only Belgrade but Pančevo, Smederevo, Kovin, Stara Pazova, Sremska Mitrovica, Obrenovac, Šabac as well... In geopolitical sense they might, like until a hundred years ago, become vulnerable border cities. In another case, if Serbia transforms itself into a more integrated unitary or regional state (without autonomous provinces), the significance of the Belgrade confluence will be more expressed. According to that, it will be very important how, in the territorial and status sense, the administrative unit will be organised, and what will be its relation to other units in Serbia (especially to those in the Danube and Sava basins).

At the international level, the future of the Belgrade confluence is linked to the geopolitical future and status of Serbia. Should Serbia remain outside military, political and economic supranational integrations (primarily NATO and EU), Belgrade would not be able to use some advantages of its membership neither. However, both Serbia and

Belgrade would thus avoid the growing problems those organisations face as a whole, as well as, even more, their poor members with their capital cities. Despite that, the Belgrade confluence area will not remain isolated and marginalised. Even if Serbia should be admitted in the so-called Euro-Atlantic integrations, it will belong only to the third or fourth hierarchical level and periphery spatial „ring“. In that case, Belgrade will have a role as one of the centres of the group of poor countries. It will build its position in the competition with Zagreb, Budapest, Bukurest and Sofia. If geopolitical and geoeconomic evolution of „Europe of different speed“ goes towards creation of few macro-units or a more highlighted fragmentation, regionalisation and refeudalism, the Belgrade confluence has all predispositions to become gravitational centre for political and territorial space constitution in the middle Danube basin, i.e. central and western parts of the Balkans. At the same time, on geopolitical „magnetism“ of the Belgrade confluence count also anti-atlanticist, continentalist, telurocratically oriented concepts. In the variants of reshaping the world from unipolar into multi-polar, some concepts of the Pan-Orthodox, neo (Bizantine) and neo (European) integration perceive Belgrade as one of the strongholds.

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