



COMMENTARY

The Balkans Ahead of the New European Parliament: A Change of Paradigm?

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In his March speech at German Council for Foreign Relations in Berlin, the Montenegrin President Milo Djukanovic, who is himself among targets of ongoing Balkans' protests, said that he: "recognized a common line in all protests which are happening in the region. This is an idea to change the power beyond the electoral process."¹

Apparently, Mr Djukanovic implied that Balkans protests are somehow leading in revolution. Assuming he is right, it could be only a bourgeois revolution – an admission that Balkans' societies are inherently feudal. When Professor Florian Bieber, back in 2017, coined terms "*stabilocracy*" and "*stabilocrats*" it appeared to be a little more than yet another example of academic imagination.² Professor, of course, referred to the specific type of political regimes common to Western Balkans and profile of leaders embedded in such regimes, respectively.

Of course, one can argue that many other countries in the World – to start with Hungary and Poland and not to finish with Turkey and the USA – are in recent years sharing some common features with Western Balkans "*stabilocracies*".

However, there remains a paradox which is indeed endemic in Western Balkans. It is more or less overt support extended by the European Union to policies and leaders which are both inherently anti-European. While the EU itself in 2018 coined the term "captured state"³ - which refers exactly to Bieber's "*stabilocracies*" - its officials continued to provide vital political support to the same political elites which are ultimately responsible for it.

The end of 2018 and the beginning of 2019, however, brought new dynamic into Western Balkans quagmire: massive popular protests that quickly engulfed Serbia, Albania and Montenegro.⁴ Protests occasionally appeared in the countries which are technically not part of Western Balkans, but apparently share same or similar problems: Hungary, Bulgaria and Romania. While immediate reasons remain different for each country, there are still two powerful denominators which appear common for all of them: deep political discontent with ruling elites and protest against what is being widely perceived as European complicity with such elites.

At this point, we think that the European reader needs a brief reminder: with exception of Northern Macedonia (which, indeed, is the first example of successful popular revolt against "*stabilocracy*") all other Western Balkans political elites are still the same as they were: bastards of the 1990s ethnic wars and organized crime which flourished afterwards. This dark legacy has had a deep and enduring impact on public opinion, social structures, dominant symbols, and values in all Balkan countries. It remains one of the key factors that still shape social elites and keep them locked in what is basically an oriental and ahistorical mindset.

¹ <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2019/03/19/dukanovic-perspective-western-balkans-can-european/>

² *BiEPAG in EP: The Crisis of Democracy in the Western Balkans – Authoritarianism and EU Stabilocracy* <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2017/03/28/biep-ag-in-ep-the-crisis-of-democracy-in-the-western-balkans-authoritarianism-and-eu-stabilocracy/>

³ A CREDIBLE ENLARGEMENT PERSPECTIVE FOR AND ENHANCED EU ENGAGEMENT WITH THE WESTERN BALKANS, p. 3. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/communication-credible-enlargement-perspective-western-balkans_en.pdf

⁴ See for example: Peter Munch, Es brodelt auf dem Balkan, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 8 March 2019. <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/proteste-serbien-albanien-balkan-1.4359141>

All of them intimately want to keep their respective societies locked outside of Europe for as long as possible. All of them know very well that inspiring ethnic hatred and fears of new wars still remain their best chances of survival against modernity, European values and, ultimately, their own peoples. All of them are also aware that the criminalized elites in the country they presently lead are utterly incapable of building up societies around core European values. All of them—to cut a long story short—remain deeply enthroned in Oriental despotism, as defined by the likes of Gibbon, Montesquieu, Marx, and Wittfogel.

What are most important effects of a decade-long European flirting with such model of political regime?

Firstly, fundamental European values - such as the rule of law, human rights, free media, secular state, anti-fascist heritage, etc. - substantially eroded throughout the Balkans. At the same time, a lot of Western Balkans administrations are involved in different corruption schemes, and more than a few of them, according to credible Western intelligence reports, remain dangerously close to transnational organized crime networks—both within and beyond the region.⁵

Secondly, the interference of the non-EU powers, such as Russia, Turkey or China, is increasing. The EU appears to be losing the battle for hearts and minds of its fellow Europeans in the Peninsula; the Balkans allegiances are now being shared between East and West. The ground which the EU has left was quickly taken by its political, intelligence, cultural and economic adversaries.⁶

Thirdly, while the EU was supporting elites which have been formatted around deeply anti-European traditions and sentiments, it forfeited the trust of liberal and pro-European sections in each of Balkans' societies. By doing so, Europe swapped deep and sincere support for one which, in the best case, was always – and still remains - shallow and insincere.

The underlying motive behind this irrational policy, at least initially, appeared to be rational: by extending support to illiberal politicians in Balkans, Europe expected to buy regional stability and resolve the long outstanding regional issues. Was this appeasement tactics correct? Or it was rather the Munich capitulation of 1938, repeating itself once again?

As a matter of fact, the only regional issue which has been successfully resolved up to now – one between Northern Macedonia and Greece – was eventually resolved only after the Macedonian “stabilocrat” Gruevski was ousted. The remaining two issues – the relationship between Serbia and Kosovo and the internal architecture of Bosnia and Herzegovina – are now far more complicated than they have been before the “*stabilocracy*” era started.

It seems, however, that – even with the generous EU support – regimes in Serbia, Albania and Montenegro can now hardly preserve even the perception of their internal stability. Massive popular unrests, therefore, threaten not these regimes only, but the remaining EU influence in the region as

⁵ Andrej Vucic, brother of Serbian president Aleksandar Vucic, is believed – for some time already - to maintain relationships with figures from criminal underworld. The last such report was published on 15 April 2019 by KRIK, the Serbian member of the OCCRP network: “Serbian President’s Brother Met With Infamous Criminal”. <https://www.occrp.org/en/investigations/serbian-presidents-brother-met-with-infamous-criminal> Serbian Foreign Minister (former Prime Minister and Minister of Interior) met two times with Balkans drug lord Rodoljub Radulovic: “New Videos Show Crime Boss Meeting Top Serbian Police” (7 September 2015). <https://www.krik.rs/en/new-videos-show-crime-boss-meeting-top-serbian-police/>

⁶ See for example: Mathieu Duchatel, EU-China relations face a bumpy road in the year ahead, South China Morning Post, 5 Jan 2019. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/2180817/eu-china-relations-face-bumpy-road-year-ahead>

well. Recent headline in *Le Monde Diplomatique* put this in simple manner: “*Europe’s eastern margins rebel*”.⁷ Indeed, all protests throughout the South East Europe already made their common hashtag on social networks: #BalkanSpring.

The incoming European Parliament and Commission, therefore, will have no other choice but to include the Western Balkans among the key regional priorities in their respective agendas. Otherwise, they could repeat mistakes of the outgoing ones: by sacrificing values for stability, at the end of a day, both will be lost. As Benjamin Franklin put it: “*Those who would give up essential Liberty, to purchase a little temporary Safety, deserve neither Liberty nor Safety.*”⁸

The outcome of forthcoming European elections in May will, of course, shape key policies on the Continent, including policies toward the European fringes – such as the Balkans are. The outcome of the protests in Balkans will shape future societies on the Peninsula. Both might be substantially changed compared to what they are now. Both outcomes might, but might not, bring new people in charge.

If recent EU actions undertaken in order to ensure compliance by Hungary⁹ and Poland¹⁰ with the core EU values will be thoroughly followed in the no-man-land on the south-east, then the whole process will get the external impetus it desperately needs.

The watershed, however, seems pretty clear: the Balkans cannot remain governed by a model of an *enlightened absolutism*¹¹ - as German *Auswärtiges Amt* seems to have been believing in the last decade. Firstly, it was not *enlightened* at first place – tens of thousands of young, ambitious and educated professionals left the Balkans countries every year for Western Europe, thus leaving the managerial elite filled up by party *aparatchiks*. Secondly, it is not even an *absolutism* any more: the prevailing political model relies on hysterical production of fake news and instruments of mass deception; under such circumstances, the model itself became increasingly incompetent to ensure stability – just opposite to what it initially claimed to be.

From this point onwards, there are two highways which are leading in opposite directions

The first one is to make a breakthrough and dramatically enhance implementation of the fundamental European values in all Balkans societies. This refers to both those Balkans countries already being the EU members and others which are still stalled somewhere in the middle of the accession process.

⁷ *Le Monde Diplomatique*, 8 March 2019. <https://mondediplo.com/2019/03/08east-europe> See also: Belgrado, Tirana e Sarajevo: le nuove “primavere” dei Balcani, *Il Giornale*, 15 April 2019. <http://www.ilgiornale.it/news/politica/belgrado-tirana-e-sarajevo-nuove-primavere-dei-balcani-1679481.html>

⁸ This was first used by Franklin for the Pennsylvania Assembly in its “Reply to the Governor” (11 November 1755). <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-06-02-0107>

⁹ The European Parliament started sanctioning Hungary for flouting EU rules on democracy, civil rights and corruption in September 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-eu-hungary/eu-parliament-pushes-hungary-sanctions-over-orban-policies-idUSKCNILS1QS>

¹⁰ Frans Timmermans, European Commission first vice-president, announced fresh action against Warsaw over its overhaul of Poland’s judiciary, on 3 April 2019. He also warned Romania over moves to scrap senior politicians’ corruption convictions. <https://www.ft.com/content/cbdf93e-5621-11e9-91f9-b6515a54c5b1>

¹¹ *Enlightened absolutism* (also called *enlightened despotism* or *benevolent despotism*) refers to the conduct and policies of European absolute monarchs during the 18th and 19th centuries who were influenced by the ideas of the Enlightenment, espousing them to enhance their power. See more: Perry, Marvin; Chase, Myrna; Jacob, James; Jacob, Margaret; Daly, Jonathan (2015), *Western Civilization: Ideas, Politics and Society*, Volume I: To 1789, p. 442.

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In order to be successful, this highway would require not only much more aggressive criteria applied in evaluation of the compliance process, but also an active role and assistance in building up of new liberal elites in each particular country – ones which would understand the irreversible path of the European integrations and magnitude of changes necessary to be undertaken. The latter task would need not only the substantial changes in the mechanisms of hard power – detaching of judiciary, police, secret and security services from control of politicians – but also an active EU role in shaping of the soft power: media outlets, culture and education facilities.

This highway also requires completely different and pro-active strategy in distributing the pre-accession and accession funds to particular states: merit-based criteria should be worked out and funding made available to particular projects, civic society, independent media and entrepreneurs directly - instead using governmental agencies as conduits. This would enable European taxpayers to get more transparent insight in using of their money, but would also give the EU a powerful instrument to reward successful projects and people, prevent corruption throughout the process and send the message that embracement of fundamental EU values eventually pays off.¹²

The last but not the least, such strategy would require completely new people in charge of each Balkans country - those who have not been involved in pursuing of failed policies before. In order to have a trust in policies, people need to have a trust in their leaders first.

The second highway is leading to the past. It reverts an old Victorian narratives about Balkans as something too distant from the European mainland to justify major efforts to be fully integrated.¹³ This highway would inevitably lead to further devastation of European spiritual and cultural values in Balkans: short-term alliances with autocratic regimes, sacrificing substantial interests for illusion of stability and occasional regional meetings with photo opportunities, artificial focusing on so-called regional affairs instead on in-depth reforms.

Such choice, however, would only make the ongoing entrophy faster and deeper than it has been so far: all Balkans countries are already tired of the “fake Europe” which has been presented to them for far too long time. As we have already said, such approach would only alienate fundamental European values from sections of population which were educated on, and accepted them, as their own. At the same time, any benefits given to the populists will not make the latter closer to European values – populists' leaders and their followers would no doubt continue to consider the EU as a milking cow, which all but deserved to be abused.

People throughout the Balkans expect the forthcoming European elections to send a clear message from Europeans, by and large – which highway they see the Balkans on. This message does not necessarily need to ensure their own accession faster or easier, but at least needs to stop endorsements of anti-European policies in their countries. Because, as the old saying goes, success has a thousand fathers but failure is always an orphan.

¹² “A major challenge in raising public awareness of the EU’s financial support for the Western Balkans is that the preaccession funds are predominantly used for capacity building, rather than for specific projects that speak more directly to the people, such as new roads, schools or hospitals.” (Roundtable “EU enlargement policy and the European future of the Western Balkans – challenges and way forward for public communication“, Brussels, 31 March 2017. https://www.kas.de/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=f277f24d-23b0-9852-9c82-1997ddfb3628&groupId=281902

¹³ In the late 19th century, George Bernard Shaw angered Bulgarians with his play “Arms and the Man” by depicting the people as ignorant and borderline barbaric. Mary Edith Durham, a Brit who travelled across the region at the turn of 20th century, described Serbs as “vermin” and called for all enlightened nations to raise up against “the Balkan Slav” and his “haunted” Christianity. See more: Srdjan Garcevic, Westplaining the Balkans, Balkan Insight, 15 September 2017. <https://balkaninsight.com/2017/09/15/westsplaining-the-balkans-09-11-2017/>

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