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Democracy in the Western Balkans: slipping towards a model of managed democracy?

(Sources: Lucia Vesnic-Alujevic, 'European Integration of Western Balkans: From Reconciliation To European Future?', Centre for European Studies, 2012; Lenard Cohen & John Lampe, 'Embracing Democracy in the Western Balkans: From Post conflict Struggles toward European Integration', John Hopkins University Press, 28 October 2011; Ivan Krastev, 'The Balkans: Democracy Without Choices', Centre of Liberal Strategies, Sofia, 3 July 2002; Rosa Balfour and Corina Stratulat, 'The Democratic Transformation of the Balkans', EPC Issue Paper n°.66, European Policy Center, November 2011; Jelena Milić, 'The Russification of Serbia', published on the website of the 'Policy Association for an Open Society' (pasos), 5 September 2014.)

The Balkans: synonym of a distorted region?

Throughout history, the Balkan¹ region has encountered manifold **ethnic, social, cultural and religious influences**, making this one of the most characteristic regions in terms of ethnic diversity, language, traditions, customs and political views. However, it developed a negative connotation mainly associated with the term '**balkanisation**', which means fragmentation and hostility. Its current reincarnation is the widely used term "the balkanisation of the internet". Even today's separatist tendencies (Scotland, Catalonia etc.) are called "balkanisation".

Political instability, ethnic division, economic and social crisis, the rise of neighbouring fascist states, and upcoming communism marked the Balkan region in the last century. During the 20th century, the Balkans **destabilised Europe**; the first time as a result of the assassination of the Archduke of Austria-Este Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo that ignited World War I and turned Europe into a massive battlefield. The second time, when the dissolution of the Yugoslav Federation started a series of politico-civil conflicts between the remaining parts of the former republic.

After the last of the conflicts – the one on Kosovo*² and with the removal of the Milosevic-regime, the last remnant of the authoritarian regimes – the region seemed to embark on the road to democracy and Western values with the 2003 Thessaloniki commitments giving a promise of EU membership.

Is the image of the Western Balkan countries compatible with Western European values?

Once despised by Bismarck as being "not worth the bones of a single Pomeranian grenadier" and described by Churchill as "producing (i.e. the Balkans) more history than they can consume", the region of the Western Balkans is constantly on the agenda of European politics, mainly due to the stalled political development in Bosnia Herzegovina and the Kosovo-Serbian tension.

¹ 'Balkan' is a Turkish word which means 'mountain' or 'mountain forest' referring to the **Balkan Mountains** east-west across Bulgaria and the **Rhodope Mountains** along the Greek-Bulgarian border.

² All references to Kosovo, whether to the territory, institutions or population, in this text, shall be understood in full compliance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 and without prejudice to the status of Kosovo.

Despite all the progress, the Balkan region does not enjoy a good image with other European citizens – at least in the EU member states which have had little contact with them. In many EU member states, these small countries are **loaded with preconceived ideas** – as they are “too complicated or too violent” – and this distorts the impression and the interest that a portion of public opinion might have. The Balkans regularly suffers from an **image that matches a reality of the past**. However, this is rather simplistic; i.e. the Balkans rhyme with war criminals, mass graves, mafia and ethnic conflict. It is difficult with labels such as these to raise any positive interest.

In addition to their external image, the **situation in the Balkans is difficult**: endemic unemployment (the official unemployment rate - just like the unofficial one - is all the more daunting), difficult living conditions, and mass emigration. In 2011, the unemployment rate in Bosnia-Herzegovina, for example, was estimated at between 40 and 45% while that of Serbia totals nearly 17%. The Balkans lag far behind EU national levels (with the exception of some EU countries affected by the recent crisis).

The **acceptance of European values** is still not very marked, even though an extremely motivated civil society is now emerging. Although the conflicts are now part of the past, a poor interpretation of those years of suffering continues to influence several areas of society, feeding resentment, bitterness and (mutual) misunderstanding.

Accession of Western Balkan countries to the EU: is the EU itself interested?

Amongst the post Yugoslav conflicts in the early 1990's, the Bosnian civil war has revealed **the EU's limitations** and has proved how weak it was in its lack of unity and inability to prevent and manage the conflict. The end of the conflict - after firm action by the USA that led to the Dayton Agreements - was the turning point in the perception of the Balkan region by the EU.

From that period onwards, the **Balkans became one of the EU's priorities** for several important reasons. First, a war in the region would destabilise the EU because it would occur on its borders. Secondly, a ‘near to the border’ conflict would reveal just how weak the European Union is because it had not been able to maintain peace in its own “backyard”. Finally, the Western Balkan region is the sole remaining ‘island’ with some non-EU states located at the heart of Europe. Its inclusion into the European Union would complete the unification of Europe, and thereby the European Union could then be regarded as a capable and strong actor able to solve critical problems.

Unfortunately, the attempts to integrate the Western Balkans were not treated as an immediate objective. Priorities were identified elsewhere even though the financial effort involved in the integration of a zone comparable in population to that of Romania (i.e. 20 million), and the cost would not have been more than 8 to 10 billion euros. The EU enlargement fatigue is considered in the region to be a sign of a lack of sincere interest. The recent declaration by president Juncker (echoed by Commissioner-designate Hahn) that there will be no EU enlargement in the next five years was received in the region with disappointment but with no surprise.

The integration of the Western Balkans is **not or is no longer a priority**. Thus the EU has lost its “magnetic” power, and the prospect of integration is no longer used in the region as an incentive for deep (including political) reforms.

Stability, democracy, human rights: political aspects of EU integration

Currently, all the Western Balkan countries (including Serbia, Montenegro and “The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”) are all representative democracies showing higher or lower levels of applied democratisation.

The demands made by the EU on the countries in the region are extremely strict. Having learnt the lessons of previous enlargements with community *acquis* that were not quite *acquis* in terms of policing and justice, notably in Romania and Bulgaria, Brussels has tightened its requirements and now wants to integrate strong states that fall scrupulously in line with the **Copenhagen Criteria**³ which defines the terms of membership. There is no longer any question of planning for reform – this must now have occurred prior to membership.

Risks of slowing down the EU integration process

The EU integration process has become increasingly difficult. **Sixty five points** demanding the unanimous agreement of all the member states can be vetoed by any one of them. Some argue that the strategy used by Slovenia with regard to Croatia and by Greece against “The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” might comprise the use of the integration process to settle issues that do not involve the community, but are rather of a bilateral nature. The Western Balkan countries are especially facing a tremendous amount of work as regards their accession to the EU, due to the fact that they are young, post-communist states emerging from strict – even totalitarian – regimes and a period of war.

The governments of these respective states are in principle ready to **accept the EU conditions, objectives and criteria**. However, many issues must still be addressed. The legacy of the Yugoslav wars, manifested above all in extreme nationalism, is still present in some countries.

Deferred EU negotiations combined with ‘a carrot and a stick’ mentality on the EU-side, and the still existing latent tensions between some countries and/or regions in the Western Balkans, lead to another – more ominous – effect: the **recrudescence of a ‘nationalist related’-democracy** in which strong and rather authoritarian political leaders develop their own rules and habits and use values which do not embrace the above-mentioned EU values and norms. This leads to political decisions taken in order to preserve a maximum of control over state activities conducted by one leader and/or a small political group often related by political or family ties.

Undoubtedly, most of these activities have a **major societal impact on daily life**, allowing deliberate prosecutions and condemnations by - respectively - prosecutors and judges mandated and nominated by the leaders in power; increasing the strong hold over media and blocking social media;

³ The **Copenhagen Criteria**, laid down at the June 1993 European Council in Copenhagen, are the rules that define whether a country is eligible to join the European Union. Besides economic criteria (like a functioning market economy) and legislative alignment with the ‘*Acquis Communautaire*’, the following political criteria are of primary importance: democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and the respect for and protection of minorities.

nominating political 'allies' to crucial (political and financial) positions; expansion of the power of state lead (secret) police forces and militias, and so on, are reminiscent of the dark age of totalitarian regimes⁴ before they were overthrown by citizens - sometimes ending in bloodshed – in their quest for democracy.

This model of governance⁵ - can be a real challenge to the whole Western Balkan region, not only for the states and regions concerned, but also to the neighbouring countries and the EU as a whole. Today, it seems that – not only political leaders, but also civil society from the region are well aware to what extent this progress can lead, especially should the EU remain reticent in its current position towards potential candidates from this region.

Towards an illiberal model of governance for the Western Balkans?

This specific governance model claims state authoritarianism as indispensable for economic prosperity, growth, order and stability. **Forced patriotism** by different means, especially broadcasts reaching millions of adepts even beyond state borders, fosters a distorted image of the country's image and power based on (so-called) historical facts (and legends). This is often accompanied by a 'personality cult'.

At the same time, it fosters a **decrease in political and other types of freedom**, such as that of the media, thus ascertaining a correlation between both phenomena. Unfortunately, and on the contrary, authoritarianism and accompanying measures such as increasing control over media (including social media), reducing autonomy of regional and local power, muzzling national and foreign NGO's and replacing elected representatives by appointed substitutes, do not necessarily lead to the above-mentioned goals.

Today, some countries in the Western Balkan region run the risk being influenced by so-called '**managed democracy**'⁶, which is in fact nothing less than the governance model described above. For example, many accuse the current leadership in some countries of the region of creeping authoritarianism, nationalism, corruption and putting pressure on journalists.

In some countries, as checks and balances have been eroded and power has been conferred to the hands of officials whose extended terms of office allow them to long outlive current and future governments, fundamental **basic human rights are at stake**, especially in a post-war, ethnically and

⁴ For example, the Ceausescu-regime in Romania which fell as a result of the 'Romanian Revolution' in 1989.

⁵ Several scholars, experts and even diplomats describe it as "**putinisation**" or "**putinism**". For example, **Jelena Milic**, Director of the Belgrade-based think tank Centre for Euro-Atlantic Studies, states that "Putinisation as a model of governance is the process that is on-going here and glorified as well. But, it separates us from the EU because EU principles are opposite -- institution strengthening and democratisation jeopardise non-transparent governments and non-transparency is a main characteristic of Putinisation and it is one of the biggest threats for Serbian EU integration" (Quote, South European Times, 12 March 2014). **Hajardin Somun**, former ambassador of Bosnia and Herzegovina to Turkey, even spoke of a widening tendency of "putinisation" throughout Europe's political society, referring specifically to Serbia, Hungary and Turkey.

⁶ "**Managed Democracy**", or "**Guided Democracy**", is a term for a democratic government with increased autocracy. The concept of a "guided democracy" was developed in the 20th century by **Walter Lippmann** in his seminal work "Public Opinion" (1922) and by **Edward Louis Bernays** in his work "Crystallizing Public Opinion".

politically vulnerable region. The political stagnation discourages the youth from a more active role in society.

(Not only) Europe has a role to play

In several cases, history has shown that the best way to avoid or to prevent war is by embracing (potential) belligerent countries into a **stable community**. The accession of Western Balkan countries to the Council of Europe⁷ has certainly weakened impulses of aggression and conflicts by introducing the core values of the Council of Europe into society and helping these countries to combat various forms of abuse in different sectors.

At the same time, a lot of progress must be made to solve still existing issues: Kosovo* that is waiting to be recognised universally and admitted to the CoE and the OSCE; Bosnia and Herzegovina waiting for a new constitutional arrangement; Serbia trying to establish internationally acceptable borders (Kosovo*); “The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” waiting for international recognition of its national identity and name, and so on.

Although the situation is much better than 10 to 15 years ago and hostile feelings are slowly being overcome, public opinion surveys show that Western Balkan populations still **consider neighbouring nations and regions as their biggest enemies**. Ethnic conflicts can still flare between Serbs and Croats, Serbs and Kosovar-Albanians and Serbs and Muslims. **Ethnic reconciliation** should be the first indicator of the increasing democratic maturity of Western Balkans societies, banning and condemning all sorts of ethnic, racial, religious, nationalist and extremist forms of hatred in daily life. The resurging conflict at the barricaded bridge connecting the Serbian and the Albanian communities in Mitrovica (Kosovo*) on 23 June 2014, separating ethnic Serbs and Albanians for almost 3 years, is a sign that ‘time does not always heal wounds’ and further (even drastic) measures still must be taken.

This is the moment when the Balkan region must continue to pursue **intra-reconciliation and to combat ‘state-specific’ situations**, like corruption by the (local) political elite, ineffective state administration and a civil society that fails to react properly to the changes that have been generated from abroad. The ‘Europeanisation’ of the Western Balkan region, introducing a European dimension into national arenas of politics and policy, represents “a process of a) construction, b) diffusion and c) implementation of formal and informal rules, procedures, policy paradigms, styles, “ways of doing things”, and shared beliefs and norms which are first defined and consolidated in the EU policy process and then incorporated in the logic of domestic discourse, identities, political structures and public policies”⁸.

Yet other developments, such as the recent Ukrainian-Russian conflict, overshadow the gravity of the West Balkan conditions.

⁷ Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Montenegro joined the Council of Europe respectively in 2002, 2003 and 2007.

⁸ C. Radaelli, ‘Whither Europeanization? Concept Stretching and Substantive Change’, European Integration Online Papers 4/8 (2000) - <http://eiop.or.at/eiop/texte/2000-008a.htm>.

This process is being hindered and delayed, thus blocking further negotiations to EU accession with a view to integration, and could see some Western Balkan countries concerned (*inter alia*, Serbia) lose interest in EU membership and therefore focus their attention **on other partnerships**, even beyond the European remit. In the worst case, the remaining (not EU) Western Balkan countries could finally **turn away from the EU-space and -values**, and finally accept a 'managed democracy'. Unfortunately, this barrier may have already been crossed by some of them.

Threats to Western Balkan democracy warrant more decisive action by the CoE. Reinforced field presence looks like one of the most pressing options.

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