

**Between Latin America and Western Democracy - Transformation in the
Balkans**

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Abstract

The main aim of this paper is to indicate the main factors determining the development of the political systems of the Balkan countries over the last quarter of a century. While critically assessing some of the terminological and methodological aspects, the paper relies on Jennifer McCoy's observations concerning the democratic transformation in Latin America as a point of reference for the pursuit of analogies between the two regions. The paper also underlines the distinctive internal and external factors influencing the specific character of the democratization process in the Balkans. Based on the findings the dilemma introduced in the title will be addressed.

During the protests in Sofia, a person was carrying a poster:

– “I am not paid, I hate you (the authorities) for free!”

Introduction

This paper will aim to analyze the internal and external factors beyond the democratic slowdown in Southeastern Europe based on a comparative analysis of the existing political trends in the countries of the region. Particular attention will be paid to the process of local political elites formation, the dominant priorities among them, their role in the agenda setting and policy implementation.

A quarter of a century is a period long enough to provide material for the observation of path dependent tendencies explaining the political developments in particular societies. Especially that the existing practices and patterns of behavior can be juxtaposed with the political expectations expressed/identified by the overwhelming majority of the population at critical juncture points.

In the countries being the subject present analysis, these expectations were clearly defined during the critical juncture point - that is the collapse of the communist regime and the pursuit of transition to democracy. Although, the Balkan Peninsula countries had essentially diverging experience over the last twenty five years, they operate in a rather “peculiar set of options for political change” environment. This argument requires three clarifications. Firstly, there is a general confusion in the literature what the Balkan peninsula is and how it should be defined. Without, trying to resolve this debate here, the term will embrace the countries of former Yugoslavia and the former Soviet bloc in the Balkans. Secondly, the specific historical experience of the Western Balkans (former Yugoslavia) which went through a process of violent disintegration during the last decade of the XX century and the first decade of the XXI century contrasts with the Eastern Balkans peaceful transition since 1989.¹ Although, these facts cannot be ignored, as it will be later argued, the attempts to explain the process of transition through this historical fact are often too simplistic and does not correspond with the relevant data concerning the levels of quality of democracy such as rule of law, human rights, freedom of speech and transparency indexes.² Thirdly, “the peculiar set of options for political change”, means that the scope for the establishment of alternative post-communist political systems was narrow and varied between nationalist based

¹ The argument means that in the Eastern Balkans there was no process of forceful disintegration like in the former Yugoslavia and not that there was no bloodshed during the overruling of the communist regime as was the case in Romania.

² For a detailed analysis of these statistics see: S.Domaradzki, Rule of Law and Human Rights in Southeastern Europe, pp.11-28, [in:] A.Balcer, S.Domaradzki, M.Szpala, The Challenge of Freedom in the Southeastern Europe, OSW, July 2015, http://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/raport_the-challenge-freedom.pdf

authoritarianism and a process of democratization aiming towards establishing liberal democracy. Despite certain attempts, in practical terms the countries from the region rejected such options as the return of monarchy, the establishment of neo-totalitarian, or religiously dominated political systems. This “peculiar set of options for political change” was shaped **externally** by the alternative political orientations offered by the geopolitical actors with strongest influence in the region – the West (the EU and the US) and the Russian Federation. **Internally** (At national level), the ultimate shape of the post-communist political system was determined by the popular expectations for prompt *catch-up* with the West in political and economic terms and genuine rejection of the Soviet political and economic model in the post-Soviet satellite states. Reversely, the newly emerging post-Yugoslav independent states went through a war driven nationalist consolidation and authoritarian twist followed by political democratization and pursuit of integration with the West.

Regardless, of the Eastern and Western Balkans alternative experiences, for all the countries of the region, the EU remains the most attractive political and economic option. To understand the EU’s soft power it is suffice to say that even the Serbs hold alternative attitudes towards the two western institutions. Bombed by NATO in 1999 and still holding a very sound negative attitude towards the Alliance, Serbs are generally enthusiastic about becoming part of the EU.³

Ultimately, the countries from the Balkan peninsula headed towards democratization and pursuit of a catching-up process that will achieve levels of political stability and economic prosperity as observed in the imagined “West”. However, the question remains where the region is on the democratization path after quarter of a century? Whether the political trends and tendencies in the Balkans overlap with the experience of other regions going through democratization? Ultimately, can we argue that the regional developments still pursue the same goals or we are facing growing hurdles for the process of democratization?

The Latin American experience

While exploring the Latin American process of democratization Jennifer McCoy succinctly summarized the political trends during the third wave of democratization. The initial step was the adoption of the formal procedures of democracy and the achievement of consensus around

³ See: S.Brankovic, S.Brakus,B.Jevtic, Public opinion on the EU and European integrations February, 2014, TNS Medium Gallup, www.tnsmediumgallup.co.rs, Z. Atanasovic, Public opinion of Serbiaon joining NATO, Western Balkans Security Observer, UDK 327.51:32.019.5 (497.11)"2003/2005", pp.22-30

economic liberalization.⁴ The same process was observed in every one of the countries from the Balkans.

According to McCoy, during the second stage *“citizens—particularly the urban poor and indigenous groups—are striving to move beyond the broadly established political rights of electoral competition in order to also enjoy civil rights (freedoms and access to justice) that are incompletely and inconsistently applied, and social rights (providing the basic capabilities to citizens to make free choices) that are woefully underprovided. Middle class groups are insisting that their governments perform better, deliver promised services, and represent broader societal interests.”*⁵ This apt observation of the trends in Latin America serves as an interesting point of reference for comparative analysis of the developments in the Balkans. In other words, can we argue that the societies in the Balkans, reached a turning point in their post-communist experience? Does the transformation achieved its ultimate stage of political stabilization or it has failed to satisfy the popular expectations and as such will lead to new political turbulences in pursuit of more reliable political system?

However, before I will elaborate on the essence of the second stage dynamics in Southeastern Europe, a paragraph of terminological clarifications is needed. Instead of civil rights as used by McCoy, I will use the term civil liberties, which corresponds with the U.S. Bill of Rights and mostly overlaps with Karel Vasak’s first generation of rights (including civil and political ones). The term “social rights” is even more ambiguous, since McCoy expects these rights to *“providing the basic capabilities to citizens to make free choices”*. I assume that the author means, what Karel Vasak calls the “second generation” of human rights including social, economic and cultural rights. Regardless of this semantic debate, McCoy accents on the very important and acute question of political responsibility and accountability, which seemed secondary to the political priorities during the early days of the critical juncture point.

Just as in the case of Latin America, the Balkan peninsula observes very similar trends of social frustration related to the application and execution of law that is supposed to be considered as the cornerstone of the democratic system. Its inconsistent and incomplete application generates pathologies that swiftly cumulate corruption, clientelism and exploitation of opportunities dependent on professional position for own benefit, thus undermining the rationale of social relations and societal cohesion.

⁴ Jennifer L. McCoy, *Democratic Transformation in Latin America*, [in] *The Whitehead Journal of Diplomacy and International Relations*, Winter/Spring 2008, p.19 available online:

<https://www.ciaonet.org/attachments/14361/uploads>

⁵ Ibidem

McCoy's observations concerning the demographic trends and tax conditions also require brief commentary. The dry statistics of the International Organization of Migration reveal that over 20 million citizens of Latin America and the Caribbean moved outside their countries in pursuit of better life.⁶ This makes less than 3% of the total population of Latin America and the Caribbean. Similar, but much more acute trends can be observed in the Balkans.

Internal factors

The demographic plague

The last quarter of a century can be described as a demographic plague that went through the Balkan peninsula.⁷ Indeed, the western part of the Balkans traditionally constitutes source of labor force for the Western economies and the wars in former Yugoslavia conjured large migration and refugee movements.⁸ However, as T. Lukić admits after the International Labor Organization, the contemporary emigration waves from the region are not only related to the war, conflict and human rights violations, but they are a consequence of the deteriorating economic situation and the lack of labor matching the skills of the people with middle and higher qualifications.⁹

Census results on the Balkan peninsula				
Country	1991/199	2001	2011/Bosnia 201	%
BG	8487317	7928901	7364570	-13.23%
HR	4784265	4492049	4456096	-6.86%
SRB (witho	7822795	7498001	7259000	-7.21%
BiH	4377033	n/a	3791622	-13.37%
GR	10259900	10964020	10816286	5.42%
RO	22810035	21680974	20121641	-11.79%

The situation is even more alarming in the countries that have not experienced wars after the end of communism. Today, in comparison to 1991 Bulgaria and Romania lost over 13% of their populations. The figures, are comparable only with the situation in Bosnia where the war killed around 100 000¹⁰ and a substantial refugee wave led to a similar in percentage

⁶ Organization of America States, "Towards the Fifth Summit of the Americas," 114. [in:] Jennifer L. McCoy, op.cit. p.21

⁷ My findings on the demographic trends in the Balkans were already published in the OSW report on the Challenges for freedom in Southeastern Europe in a more succinct form. See footnote 2 infra.

⁸ Lukic T.-Stojasavljevic R.-Durdev B.-Nad I.-Dercan B./ European Journal of Geography 3 2 6-23 (p.18) http://www.eurogeographyjournal.eu/articles/Lukic,%20Stojasavljevic%20et%20al,%20Depopulation_FINAL.pdf

⁹ Ibid. p.18

¹⁰ See, J. Zwierchowski, E. Tabeau, The 1992-95 War in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Census-Based Multiple System Estimation of Casualties' Undercount, available online: http://www.icty.org/x/file/About/OTP/War_Demographics/en/bih_casualty_undercount_conf_paper_100201.pdf

numbers shrinking of the population. In comparison, in Croatia which also suffered from military conflicts on its territory the decrease of population is only 7,2%. In Serbia the decline is 8,3%.¹¹ According to the Bulgarian National Statistics Institute in the decade between 2001-2011 the population of the country shrunked by 564 331 people. 1/3 of this number (175244) are cases of emigration to a foreign country. Another important aspect of the regional characteristics is the fact that today all Balkan states does not need visa to travel to the Shengen zone (except Kosovo). However, the citizens of the western Balkan states still apply for asylum in the EU. Since the visa requirements were abolished, the asylum applications grown to roughly 70 000 applications per year.¹² According to the Economist the explanation lies in the people's tiredness of waiting for the living standard to improve.

Table 1.

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McCoy's argues that "the high rates of poverty and inequality are a factor in social exclusion and prevent the construction and consolidation of social cohesion, understood as a "sense of belonging" to a common and inclusive national enterprise."¹³ Despite the lack of clear evidence that there is an ongoing process of disintegration of the "sense of belonging" in the Balkans, it is apparent that there is a direct connection between the rising social polarization and the catastrophic demography. Especially, while having in mind that by 1990 the Bulgarians were expecting the 9th million citizen to be born. The acuteness of the problem was also confirmed by the World Population Prospects report of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, which predicts that five of the ten worst performing countries in demographic terms will be from the region with Bulgaria being

The Center for Justice and Accountability provides a number as high as 350 000, <http://www.cja.org/article.php?id=247>

¹¹ Lukic T.-Stojavljevic R.-Durdev B.-Nad I.-Dercan B./ European Journal of Geography 3 2 p.10

¹² Quitting Dreams, chasing Dreams, The Economist, 21.3.2015, s.23-24

¹³ Statement by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean in OAS (2007), 32 [in]: Jennifer L.McCoy, op.cit. pp.21-22

worst.¹⁴ However, what requires particular attention is the fact that the reasons for the deteriorating demography are not only connected to economic migration, but also to the decreasing quality of health services, general impoverishment and inappropriate sanitary conditions at places.

The social impact on democratization

The assessment of social rights performance is subject to strong ideological bias. Nevertheless, in the case of the Balkans, the regional social framework requires contextualization. The essential difference of the regional democratization process was that it was also “anti-social”. The omnipresent socialist states were providing an expanded catalogue of social and economic rights securing each individual’s development “from the cradle to the grave”. Even if the main reasons for the abolishment of the communist systems were mainly economic and political, the natural consequence was the backtrack of the state and thus opening space for the free market. Among the main weaknesses of this process was its abrupt and spontaneous character, resulting in popular confusion and feeling of collapse. Built on the debris of omnipresent state structures, the free market services, driven by the cost-benefit principle, were unable to satisfy the popular expectations remembering the previous system. The lofty expectations for “higher quality services”, were replaced by the experience of “no services at all” or uneven access to them.

Furthermore, the transformation “winners” often saw the acquisition of former communist assets, as an opportunity for predatory exploitation of resources to their limits, rather than as an asset that can be developed by professional management. Secondly, the states in the region never capitulated from their social programs, but they suffered in terms of quality and relevance as the process of economic transition led to reevaluation of the state capabilities to provide social services. Last, but not least, the social and economic rights ticket is not the winning one in the national political scene. The left wing parties in the region are in defeat, because in order to join the post transformation political main stream they abandoned the socialist principles and were unable to create appealing social dimension of the free market relations.

Finally, what constitutes the major point of overlapping trends between Latin America and the Balkans is the emerging pressure on governments to “*perform better, deliver*

¹⁴ The remaining countries from the region are Romania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Croatia. For more details see: - UN: Bulgaria Faces World’s Bleakest Demographic Prospects by 2050, 25.8.2015, <http://www.novinite.com/articles/170524/UN%3A+Bulgaria+Faces+World%E2%80%99s+Bleakest+Demographic+Prospects+by+2050#sthash.ScBrQUxY.dpuf>

promised services, and represent broader societal interests.”¹⁵ However, the Balkan countries observe also the dangerous and growing trend of political apathy and decreasing reliance on the mechanisms of political change in democracy. This leads to social activism on matters of local importance and largely apathetic majority unwilling to defend any cause linked to the political parties. The arguments for paid protests largely discredit the protest as a crucial indicator for popular assessment of government actions. Hence, the question remains, what are the factors that shaped the political conditions in the Balkans?

The misunderstood democratization in the Balkans

The transition phases in East Central and Eastern Europe (including the Balkans) can be summarized in a similar albeit specific way. Indeed, with different pace and dynamics in all the countries from the region the formal democratic provisions were established and the economic liberalization was introduced. This process was accompanied by an abrupt abdication of the state from nearly all roles played during the previous system.

Thus, the second phase was concentrated around the need to adopt to the reality, in which societies previously completely dependent on the overwhelming presence of the state for several decades had to go through a process of rapid accommodation to the new conditions of transformation through rapid privatization and economic liberalization, which in practical terms meant shrinking of the state. This is also the turning point where the vastly equal (in material terms) society went through a process of rapid stratification. Those, who were able to swiftly accommodate to the changing reality became the transformation winners, whereas the vast majority, lost in the genuine instability and uncertainty of the period, became the transformation losers. Paradoxically, the division between winners and losers had nothing to do with the moral dimension of the communist period social division into “oppressors” and “victims” of the system.¹⁶ On the contrary, it became a common practice that the process of economic transformation was captured by those people who were previously in charge either as company’s directors or Communist party representative to the site. The meager or completely inexistent process of de-communization and lustration in the countries from the region, was unable to oust those in power from securing their position also in the new

¹⁵ Jennifer L. McCoy, op.cit.

¹⁶ By “oppressors”, I define all those, taking advantage of the communist system denunciation and repression practices in order to obtain the maximum possible perks.

system.¹⁷ The consequence was the emergence of a completely new phenomenon of deep social division between the winners and the losers. The state capitulation from healthcare, social needs and economy followed by protracted and often futile reforms only exacerbated this process. Hence, the essence of political and economic transformation was lost at the outset.

Another aspect of this second phase is related to the post-communist security peculiarities. The collapse of state security apparatus had different faces in the Eastern Balkans and in former Yugoslavia. In the former, the security vacuum was filled in by the jobless wrestlers, amnestied criminals and former secret service agents who largely kept their connections despite the disbandment of the communist security structures. While providing security services in unsecured times, these structures swiftly entered into interplay with the official authorities, thus establishing mutually beneficial connections. In the latter, the paramilitary organizations during the wars in Yugoslavia exemplified the symbiosis between the belligerents willingness to achieve certain political goals while circumventing the legally accepted methods of the civilized world. After the wars these organizations established the backbone of the organized crime network operating under the umbrella of the political regime. However regardless of the reasons for their origin, in both cases the connection between the political umbrella and the mythologized organized crime led to the establishment of alternative reality which exists simultaneously with the official pursuit of democratization, Europeanization and westernization. This alternative reality, is grounded in the application of ruthless power, domination and material superiority nurtures clientelism, shadow economy, corruption and informal dependencies. Simultaneously, its practical existence is much more visible, than the values pursuit during the process of democratization.

The new perspectives for the old system

One of the substantial peculiarities is the specific role of the post-communist left in the countries from Southeastern Europe. Despite the fact that in all the countries from the region, the communist parties were directly associated with the dire economic situation that led to the collapse of the system and for the political repressions during the previous regime, the cost of the bloodless transition from communism to democracy was their acceptance to the new political system. Thus, the promptly renamed communist parties entered the main-stream

¹⁷ On the challenges of lustration in Romania, Andreea Maiorean, *The Unbearable Burden of Forgetting*, Institute for Human Sciences, <http://www.iwm.at/publications/5-junior-visiting-fellows-conferences/vol-xxviii/andreea-maiorean/>

political life during the transition period. Despite the fact that the multiparty system was promptly established, these parties retained substantial role, since they inherited and exploited the existing communist nationwide political structures. In times of urgent and frequent elections (potentially data on elections dynamics in the countries from the region) these parties became key players directly impacting the transition process. Paradoxically, the name changes, often from communist to socialist party, were not followed by any deeper reflection on the essential difference between the post-communist and western European nature of socialism. Reversely, these parties substantially contributed to the slow-down of necessary urgent reforms and embraced a nationalist-populist rhetoric.

In a very distinct way from the counties of Central Europe, the former communist parties in the Balkans continue to play substantial role in the political life of the countries, even if most often as the most important political opposition. Despite their officially declared pro-European orientation, these parties often push forward political and economic initiatives that overlap with the Russian geopolitical interests in the region, a topic that will be discussed further.¹⁸

The “new” national elites

Another important factor, shaping the process of transition was the emergence of the new national political elites. Unlike the countries of Central Europe, the Balkan countries lacked dissident movements with longer history. The contestation of the system in former Yugoslavia was concentrated around the particular constitutive entities emancipation towards Belgrade, rather than ideational conflicts. In Bulgaria and Romania the secret police repressive machinery was skillfully eliminating the seeds of any openly expressed alternative. Even after such oppositions were formed, after the end of communism it became apparent, that they were profoundly infiltrated by the secret services. Thus, the transition process in the particular countries had to rely much more on the former communist elites, that themselves declared the end of communism, and to build up new political elites and conduct economic and political transition at the same time.

At least two examples can be considered as instructive about the general trends in the Balkan politics. The Bulgarian prime minister Boiko Borisov and his Serbian counterpart

¹⁸ The most recent example confirming the existing bonds between various high ranked politicians was the resignation of General Rumen Radev from the post of Chief Commander of the Bulgarian Air Forces and his subsequent nomination as the candidate for President of the Bulgarian Socialist Party led coalition of left wing parties during the forthcoming presidential elections. His resignation was demonstratively handed to the Prime Minister Boiko Borisov as an example that he is not a real patriot able to defend the country.

Aleksandar Vucic well exemplify the irrelevance of political changes in times of transition. The former was a bodyguard to the Bulgarian communist leader Todor Zhivkov. After the collapse of the communism Borisov was an owner of a security company. His political career started as a secretary of the Bulgarian Police, subsequent mayor of Sofia and ultimately already a prime minister for a second time. The latter was a minister of information during the Milosevic era, and right hand of Voislav Seselj, accused and subsequently acquitted by the International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia in the Hague. Seselj and Vucic's party was known for its hard line nationalism and unequivocal support for Milosevic's policies. During his political career Vucic managed to impose ban on media critical to Milosevic and to threaten journalist, that was subsequently murdered. Recently, just like Borisov, Vucic became a prime minister by winning second elections on the ticket of membership to the EU. The two politicians are considered to be reliable and recognized partners by the US, EU and NATO.

However, their political careers reveal the obscure nature of the political transition on the Balkans. Linked to the former political elites, connected with the worst characteristics of the transition period –Borisov with organized crime and Vucic with the regime of Slobodan Milosevic, these politicians seem to be the most reliable partners for the key western players and as the last elections reveal, have no political alternative on the national political scene. Naturally, their role and actions have far reaching consequences for the quality and perception of the political system.

Such models of political careers undermined the essential values on which the political transformation was embedded. They became the strongest arguments for political apathy and disguise. Since, both revealed the importance of strong and unreliable political connections that go beyond the political divisions and alleged political platforms; where the arguments are just an empty rhetoric for the sake of the day, which can be changed in every single moment and the political career is not dependent on popular accountability, but on appropriate adaptability, it is not surprising that the alternative would be a ruthless return to the perception of political action through the lenses of uncontrolled and unreliable political system requiring deep changes. What is even more concerning is the political elites ability to replicate its patterns of political behavior. Once socially approved by the democratic vote, political elites obtain the mandate to reproduce the patterns of political action, which secured their success. Having in mind the described above political careers, it will be naïve to believe, that politicians with decent ethical standards can suddenly become drivers of change in the region.

Although, the role of the European Union will be discussed below, it is necessary to underline that Brussels plays crucial role in the nurturing of such political pathology. The successful absorption of EU funds constitutes the strongest argument for government's efficiency. Interestingly, the external financing becomes the reason and the consequence of the government's efficiency.

External factors

The role of the European integration on the quality of democracy

The perspective of joining the process of European integration quickly became the most attractive alternative for countries development in Central and Eastern Europe. However, for the countries of the Balkans, the road to the EU was (and for some still is) much more difficult than for the countries of Central Europe. Until today, the Balkans remain the most diversified part of Europe in terms of relations with the EU.¹⁹ Nevertheless, the European Union is the most tangibly present regional player, deeply involved in close cooperation with every single country from the Balkan peninsula. In their essence the relations between the European Union and the countries of the Balkan peninsula constitute the quintessence of the EU's emancipation as a dreamed global actor. The end of the communism and in particular the collapse of former Yugoslavia required a joint European approach. Abandoned by the United States in the preliminary stage of the conflicts, the European Communities claimed the role of a regional peacemaker in cooperation with the UN. Despite the numerous proposals and efforts the EC/EU-UN tandem ultimately failed to provide feasible solution and even more importantly, to prevent the atrocities of the Bosnian war and to provide a stable resolution of the conflict. Nevertheless, after the Dayton agreement it became apparent that the EU needs a comprehensive and multi-track policy towards the Balkans. Although, in practical terms the policy towards the Western Balkans differed from the one towards Bulgaria and Romania due to the legacy of the wars, the EU policy was embedded in the principle of conditionality. Rooted in the Copenhagen criteria, the expected outcome of the EU enlargement and neighborhood policies was to expand the area of western democratic political order. In its essence, the establishment of this order was a precondition for the integration of the post-communist countries economies to the EU market. The popular expectation around the perspective of membership in the EU is that the imposition of

¹⁹ Greece is the oldest member since 1981, followed by Slovenia, which was the sole country to join the EU in 2004 during the largest EU enlargement. Bulgaria and Romania joined in 2007 and Croatia became a member in 2013. Serbia and Montenegro started official negotiations, whereas Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina are still waiting to obtain their candidate state status.

European norms and regulations, known as *acquis communautaire*, will foster the introduction of western political practices including transparency, rule of law and predictability. This popular belief was associated with the EU political institutions. Until today, the level of trust in the EU institutions is much higher than towards the national ones. The image of the EU bodies in the Balkans remains sacrosanct regardless of the political trends in the Union itself.²⁰ The paradox is even stronger having in mind the democratic deficit in the EU.

However, a quarter of a century after the abolishment of communism the Balkan countries still substantially lag behind the EU member states and even in comparison to the Central European states in all relevant indexes.²¹ On one hand, these countries continue their rapprochement towards the EU. On the other, they contain much less enthusiasm to *catch-up* in terms of political values and quality of democracy. Firstly, the EU's internal difficulties like the Greek economic crisis, the Brexit and unresolved migrant crisis undermine the validity of the claimed values. Secondly, once becoming members of the EU, the national political elites are covered by the shield of "European values", regardless of their practical performance at national level. The vague definition of EU values and unclear division of competences between the EU and the nation states leave wide margin for the interpretation of what constitutes a threat to these values. Hence, good relations with Brussels elites secure a free hand concerning political practices at national level.

Framing the dilemma of democracy in the Balkan peninsula

The human rights and rule of law situation in the region is specific. The new EU member states of Bulgaria and Romania are still subject to the unique internal EU Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM), whereas Croatia, which joined six years later in 2013 is not part of it. In its essence the mechanism aims to foster the implementation of reforms in the areas of judicial independence and fight against corruption, which remain far behind the EU standards. This awareness of the remaining EU countries, led to the practical existence of "second rate" member states, which cannot join all possible integration initiatives, like the Schengen zone for example, because they are unable to secure reliable partnership and access to the EU system regulating internal affairs. Although Romania substantially improved its record through institutional changes and judicial proceedings, the CVM is still binding for the

²⁰ See S. Domaradzki, *Balkański dylemat Brukseli. O europeizacji Bułgarii czy bułgaryzacji Unii Europejskiej*, [in:] *Poziomy analizy stosunków międzynarodowych* red. Edward Haliżak, Marek Pietraś, Tom I, Wydawnictwo Rambler, Warszawa 2013, pp. 423-446

²¹ See Transparency International, human rights watch, Rule of Law index, the Economist Intelligence Unit, Freedom of the Press index, etc

two countries. The freedom of speech also raises substantial concerns. The accumulation of media in the hands of local tycoons and the open support for pro-government media recall the authoritarian rather than democratic direction of transition.

The remaining countries from the Western Balkans still pursuing their membership in the EU are not in a better position. Corruption, violations of the freedom of speech, lack of transparency, weak judiciary and deepening inequality led to social protests during the last several years in all the capitals of the region. Even if some of them being considered as “steered from abroad”, the fact is that the structural flaws and dissatisfaction with politics create a fertile ground for protests no matter whether national or inspired from abroad.²² This paradox is probably best exemplified by the Macedonian opposition refusal to go to elections, during the recent political crisis.²³ A position supported by the overwhelming awareness that the mechanism of democratic elections is nothing but a tool to confirm the ruling position of these in power. There is probably no stronger argument than the contestation of the rationale behind democratic elections that the mechanisms introduced by the democratic transition does not hold strong credibility.

The role of Russia

Since the late 1990s and particularly after Putin’s coming to power, Russia started pursuing more assertive role in the international relations and steady rebuilding its position and spheres of influence.²⁴ Important role in this geopolitical comeback plays the Balkan peninsula. Being a primary target of the Russian expansionism for over two centuries, the unstable region in transition provided new opportunities for Moscow. Some of the countries from the region are strongly dependent on Russian nuclear energy, natural resources and other strategic supplies.²⁵ Moscow skillfully connects this dependence with alternative gas pipelines projects creating the feeling of unique opportunities and irresponsible governments.

Paradoxically, the Kosovo crisis created also unique opportunities for Russia to strengthen its influence in Serbia and Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Relying on the catchy argument of the defense of the Slavs/orthodox population (Serbs in this case) Belgrade paid high price for the Moscow support of the Serbian position at the UN allowing

²² Such arguments could be heard during the protests in Montenegro in 2015 and in Bulgaria in 2012.

²³ Macedonia Opposition to Boycott June Elections, Balkan Insight, 7.4.2016, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/macedonia-opposition-announces-boycotting-june-elections-04-07-2016>

²⁴ For more on the relations between the West and the Russian Federation see: N. Boyadjieva, Russia, NATO, and the Security Environment after the Cold War 1989-1999 Part 1. Daniela Ubenova Publishing House, Sofia 2013.

²⁵ Like for example parts for military equipment.

Russian companies to privatize important branches of the Serbian economy. At the same time, the political support by Moscow for the Serbian resistance to Kosovo's independence has also another paradoxical consequence, since there is a general conviction in Serbia that the closest ally and the largest provider of assistance is namely Russia.²⁶

Russia also tries to actively impact the national political scene in the countries from the region. Apart from proposing alternative integration projects like a union of Serbia, Belarus and Russia, Moscow supports far right wing parties and movements embracing the rhetoric of besieged nation by external and internal enemies. In its essence the accent is not so much on closer relations with Russia, but anti-European.²⁷ Regardless of the marginal political success of these political initiatives, they have a devastating impact on the national political systems. In the conditions of fragile political stability, growing social stratification, permanent ethnic and minority tensions and deteriorating living conditions, the Russian inspired arguments additionally undermine and bend the national laws, thus revealing the inconsistency of the existing political order.

With the time Russia disengages from the image of backwardness and economic midget that dominated the region during the 1990s. Instead it offers new and alternative political and economic models, providing a trade off of western values for prompt enrichment and backing of the political elites. While preserving political and economic footprint in most of the countries from the region, Moscow should be considered an important factor directly impacting the political developments and thus the quality of the political systems in Southeastern Europe.

Conclusions

Over the last five years the global wave of social protests has not spared the Balkans. Since the emergence of the global economic crisis virtually every country from the region faced social protests. From Greece to Romania and from Bulgaria to Croatia the popular dissatisfaction emerged with different intensity. Although articulating the economic impoverishment all the protests were united by the shared perception of political elite's overt arrogance that no longer cares for the wreckage of decency in shaping the political reality. The protests ranged from civil disobedience, flash mobs, peaceful marches and happenings to overt confrontation with the government and even acts of self immolation in Bulgaria, but

²⁶ M.Szpala, Rosja w Serbii – miękka siła i twarde interesy, Komentarze OSW, 29.10.2014, <http://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/komentarze-osw/2014-10-29/rosja-w-serbii-miekka-sila-i-twarde-interesy>, also Footnote 1 infra.

²⁷ Ibidem.

they had little to no impact on the development of the political systems in the region. The dominant perception of the political life in the Balkans entails the corrupted nature of politicians, directly linked with organized crime groups and oligarchs, focused solely on the complete control over the economy. The cornerstones of the political system constitute corruption, nepotism, dysfunctional judicial system, shattered economy and exposure to external pressure. Politicians treat their fellow citizens merely as a source of legitimization for the consumption of power and the consolidation of the political, economic and organized crime realities.

Among the main problems of the transition period was the establishment of pathological relations, typical for stateless societies, when the lack of clear security and development perspectives naturally presupposes clientelism. The newly emerging political elites, even if unequivocally pro-western, understood transition only as an institutional process. Once the relevant structures were established, the transition process was considered to be complete. Instead of emphasizing on the adaptation of the political and civil habits that constitute the bloodstream of the political body, the new structures were contaminated by the old practices and the existing opportunities of the day. The new political elites completely misunderstood the meaning of elite change. Mentally rooted in the former political system, they fostered patron/client dependence that produces new faces of the same system without bringing any fresh blood to the political system. Therefore, the notions of peaceful political change, political responsibility and accountability disappeared.

From present day perspective, the political systems in the Balkans efficiently eliminated numerous institutional safeguards of the democratic regime. Social protests were discredited as paid and unreliable gatherings of politically apathetic mercenaries. The legal and technical manipulations prior to every elections led to a growing mistrust in their validity. The instrumentalization of the judiciary demoralized the societies and provoked the emergence of corruption and clientelism. The patterns of political behavior regardless of the political party decreased the standards of public behavior and strengthened the conviction that there is virtually no difference who is in power. Hence, the natural consequence is a growing political apathy and social fragmentation.

Among the unique features of the political perception in the Balkans is the sacrosanct believe in the healing power of EU membership. However, its practical influence on the quality of the political system is meager, since the EU competences are limited by the principles of subsidiarity and respect for national sovereignty. Furthermore, the decade long effect of EU funding will come to an end and there is no guarantee that the current purely

rational support for the European integration will be replaced by the vaguely defined common values. Adding to this picture the role of Russia and Turkey in the region, we can return to the question raised in the title.

The political trends in Latin America and the Balkan peninsula reveal numerous similarities. Despite the substantially different historical experiences, similar trends of social stratification, mass impoverishment, negative demographic trends and growing popular frustration are present. Having in mind the growing obstacles for the smooth functioning of liberal democracy in the Balkans, it seems that regardless of the EU, the region is closer to Latin America than to Brussels.