

# Explaining Democratic Stagnation in the Western Balkans

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Understanding the democratisation process in the successor states of the former Yugoslavia is of key importance for the European integration of these countries and their stabilisation, after the violent conflicts in the 1990s. The Western Balkans remain of key importance for the Mediterranean, because they link South Eastern Europe with Asia, and their political development over the last 20 years has been at the centre of world affairs, from the violent break-up of socialist Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, to NATO's intervention in Kosovo in 1999, and the unilateral independence of the former Serbian province in 2008. Lately, they have been used as successful examples of democratic revolutions, citing the end of Slobodan Milosevic as Serbian President in 2000 as a result of mass demonstrations and Croatia's consolidation as a democratic country after 1999 as examples for the changing political systems in North Africa and the Arab world (Bieber 2011).

## **The Political Development of the Western Balkans Since the Early 1990s**

The major social and political changes in Eastern Europe in the second half of the 1980s also had an impact on Yugoslavia. The country witnessed an economic crisis that was followed by a political crisis, following Slobodan Milosevic's rise to power in Serbia. In the late 1980s, discussions among the Yugoslav elites focused on the future of the federal states. Two camps could be identified. One was represented by Slovenes and Croats and argued for

further decentralisation of decision-making to overcome the economic crisis and ensure stability. The other camp, including Milosevic and his allies in Montenegro and the two Serbian autonomous provinces, Vojvodina and Kosovo, argued for more centralisation to overcome the economic crisis. Because no agreement was reached by 1990, Slovenia and Croatia opted for independence and Macedonia and Bosnia followed their example. The result was the outbreak of violence, first in Slovenia and Croatia and later in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Yugoslavia ceased to exist in 1991, but the political situation in the area remained unclear until 1995, when the Dayton Peace Agreement ended the conflicts in Croatia and Bosnia. As a result of this agreement, five states eventually established themselves on the territory of the former Yugoslavia. These were Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Yugoslavia (now consisting of Serbia and Montenegro) and Macedonia. In 2006, Montenegro declared its independence and Kosovo, which had been administered by the United Nations (UN) since 1999, followed in 2008. Today, there are seven successor states of the former Yugoslavia – although Kosovo is not a member of the UN.

Since the violent break-up of the country, the successor states have developed very differently. While Slovenia established a democratic government relatively quickly and joined the European Union (EU) in 2004, the other successor states found it much harder to establish democracy and recover from the break-up and the war. Croatia remained under the authoritarian regime of Franjo Tudjman until he died in 1999, and his Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) lost the elections in 2000. In the same year Slobodan Milosevic had to step down as President of Yugoslavia (Zakoek 2008). While Croatia was able to consolidate democracy and engage in a deeper dialogue and accession negotiations with the EU

relatively smoothly, Serbia's transition to democracy is proving to be much slower and more complex. Bosnia remained a contested country after the war and although international actors remained present in the country, major reforms were only implemented after 2000, through impositions by international representatives. Macedonia remained on the sidelines of the Western Balkans. Until 1993 its very existence continued to be questioned by Greece and Bulgaria, and in 2000 and 2001 violent unrest broke out between Albanian separatists and Macedonian security forces. While this did not result in a full-scale war, the country remains fragile and interethnic relations remain critical. The ongoing name dispute with Greece has not helped to consolidate the state or advance Macedonia's progress towards EU integration. Montenegro, which became independent in 2006, has undergone a significant process of stabilisation and consolidation and was awarded EU candidate status in December 2011, only five years after the country's independence. Kosovo, which declared its independence unilaterally from Serbia in 2008, struggles to gain international recognition and internal control over all of its territory. While an initial agreement was reached between Serbia and Kosovo, in February 2012, on border controls and Kosovo's representation in regional organisations, the country remains structurally weak and dependent on international assistance.

### **Explaining the Lack of Democratic Progress and Consolidation in the Western Balkans**

There are a number of reasons for the stagnation of democratisation in the Western Balkans. Three shall be discussed in this section, namely the importance of historical legacies, the lack of consolidated statehood in a number of countries and the problematic role of international actors in the successor states of the former Yugoslavia.

Historical legacies play a key role in the process of state-building and democratisation (Linz and Stepan 1996). It has been argued that one of the reasons why the countries in Eastern and Central Europe consolidated democracy relatively quickly was the importance of historical legacies, namely experiences of democratic governance after 1918 (Offe 1997). The countries of the former Yugoslavia never had these advantages. While the first Yugoslavia, created after World War I in 1918, held free elec-

tions regularly, the political system itself was characterised by a dominance of Serbia in the new State, and after 1928 the Serbian monarch established a royal dictatorship. The political conflict in the first Yugoslavia, as in the later years of socialist Yugoslavia after World War II focused on the relationship that the different peoples in the State had with one another and with the State. While the first Yugoslavia was characterised by the dominance of Serbs in the administrative and political system, the second Yugoslavia focused much more on a "balance of power" model, particularly after the Constitutions of 1963 and 1974 (Ramet 1992). The political discussions focused on inter-ethnic relations, national equality and power-sharing. There were no developments towards a pluralist party system among the traditional left-right spectrum, so it came as no surprise when nationalist parties won the first free elections in all Yugoslav republics in 1990. Until today many states lack a party system that focuses on the traditional separation between conservatism, liberalism and socialism/social democracy. Instead, the Bosnian party system remains dominated by nationalist parties exclusively representing Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims), Serbs and Croats. In Serbia, there is a sharp contrast between radical-conservative forces and more moderate parties, particularly the Democratic Party (DS) of President Boris Tadic. However, it is only very recently that these parties have slowly positioned themselves on a left-right spectrum, and they all remain united on the central political issue, namely the status of Kosovo. In Montenegro, the party system has also been developed along the ethnic divide, with the Democratic Party of Socialists of Montenegro (DPS) of Milo Djukanovic mainly representing Montenegrins and the main opposition parties representing Serbs in Montenegro. These nationalist parties have often focused on reaping benefits for themselves. Discrimination of other ethnic groups and minorities has been a key feature in a number of countries and was attributed as one of the primary reasons for the violence in Kosovo in 1998 and 1999, and in Macedonia in 2001. The dominance of ethnic parties also represents another key feature of the political systems in the Western Balkans. Many states remain internally and externally contested. Bosnia and Herzegovina continue to stagnate and the representatives of the Bosnian Serbs have threatened to initiate a referendum on the independence of the Republika Srpska (the Serb dominated entity in Bosnia) on numerous oc-

casions. At the same time, Bosnian Croats have established forms of illegal self-governance in 2000 and again in 2011, because they feel that they are discriminated within the Bosnian state. In Kosovo tensions remain high in the north, where local Serbs have established road blocks and barricades to avoid any representatives of the Kosovo government, security services and the international community to enter the region. The Serbs in Northern Kosovo demand their re-integration into Serbia and do not recognise Kosovo as an independent state. They are supported by Serbia, which also rejects Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence.

### **Democratic governance in multinational societies requires a willingness to live together and to come to consensual decisions. However, because of a history of interethnic violence and the results of recent wars in the region this willingness does not exist**

Lately, however, there have been some important moves by the Serbian government to come to an agreement with Kosovo, although the Serbian representatives abstain from recognising Kosovo officially. In Macedonia there has been a new rise in ethnic tensions between ethnic Macedonians and Macedonian Albanians. This is connected to the continued name dispute between Macedonia and Greece, which has resulted in Greece vetoing Macedonia's entry into NATO and blocking any chances of Macedonia advancing in its EU integration process. Macedonian Albanians are more and more frustrated with the Macedonian government and its increasingly nationalist rhetoric. They have been arguing for a renegotiation of the 2001 Ohrid Framework Agreement for some time and demand the recognition of territorial autonomy for Albanians in Macedonia, which the Framework Agreement explicitly denied them. Because these states are not consolidated and remain internally and externally contested, politics remains focused on interethnic issues and is seen as a zero-sum game. Additionally, it is important to point out that Bosnia, Kosovo

and Macedonia apply different forms of power-sharing in their institutional settings, which prolongs decision-making and increases the number of veto players in the system (Bieber and Keil 2010). Democratic governance in multinational societies requires a willingness to live together and to come to consensual decisions. However, because of a history of interethnic violence and the results of recent wars in the region this willingness does not exist. Consequently, we could conclude that there is a lack of a democratic political culture in many countries of the Western Balkans.

This lack of a political culture that favours democratic decisions, tolerance and compromises is furthermore demonstrated by the ambivalent role of international actors in the region. International actors, particularly representatives of the EU and the US play a key role in decision-making and conflict resolution in a number of countries. President Tadic and his party the DS have the support of the EU and have won the Serbian elections in 2008, primarily because they were able to lay claim to advances in the EU integration process as their success. However, this has led to a situation in which Tadic has become the most important actor in the Serbian political system, and he has changed the balance in the parliamentary system. In Bosnia and Kosovo, there are international representatives who can control legislation, veto it and dismiss local officials if they obstruct the guidelines of the international community. Particularly in the years after 2000, this has been used extensively in Bosnia to centralise the State and strengthen Bosnia's major institutions. However, this has led to a culture of dependency, in which local actors fail to agree on any decisions, because they rely on international actors to take these decisions for them. Since the international community stopped its intervention in Bosnian affairs in 2006, the country has been at a standstill. While international actors have abstained from massive intervention in Kosovo, the country's politicians continue to rely on international support because they lack legitimacy and a monopoly of power throughout Kosovo's territory. EU representatives also play a key role in Macedonia, where they are the main mediators between Macedonian and Albanian parties. These interventions of international actors, however, have not strengthened the states or the democratic forces in the countries. Instead, new cultures of dependency, changing power-relations and undemocratic impositions have been counter-productive for

the development of democratic governance structures and a democratic political culture.

### **The Future of the Western Balkans: War, State-Building and the EU**

Since democratic governance, respect for the rule of law and minority protection are fundamental elements of the EU's accession criteria, it can be argued that further integration of the countries of the Western Balkans will automatically lead to a strengthening of democratic governance. However, the development of a democratic political culture is a long process. Indeed, Croatia's integration process demonstrates how EU accession can serve as a tool to further democratisation. Nevertheless, developments in Romania (corruption) and Hungary (press freedom) demonstrate that even the more stable democracies in Central and Eastern Europe have been challenged of late. The key to the strengthening of democracy in the region of the former Yugoslavia is a focus on a critical civil society, which holds politicians accountable and offers political education and political alternatives to the population. Civil society organisations should therefore be at the centre of EU assistance and should be directly involved in the EU integration process of these countries. Furthermore, key conflicts, such as the situation between Serbia and Kosovo, Bosnia's constitutional crisis and the Macedonian-Greek name dispute need to be solved as quickly as possible. The European Union and other international actors can play a productive role in the solution of these conflicts, but they must reach agreements that are accepted by all sides involved. This will ensure the sustainability of these agreements and their implementation. If the democratic consolidation of the Western Balkans, indeed Europe's backyard, fails, this could have severe consequences for the Mediterranean and the wider world.

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