NATIONALIST POLARIZATION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS AND ITS INSTITUTIONAL CONSEQUENCES: A FATE THAT CAN BE CHANGED

Dr. Vedran Džihić
Senior Lecturer
Austrian Institute for International Affairs and Lecturer in International Politics at the University of Vienna

In Southeastern Europe, the process of democratization and Europeanization since the beginning of the 2000s has been seen as a major paradigm shift and made the international community and the EU believe that time of wars and nationalist excesses was in the past. It seemed a sure sign that all countries of the region were set to reach the membership in the European Union soon.

In terms of Europeanization and democratization, we can argue that the second decade of the 21st century has brought no substantial progress in Southeastern Europe. Rather, it has seen the region on the path of constant decline of democracy. The latest reports of Nations in Transit, the Bertelsmann Transformation Index, and other serious academic research prove the continuous trend of de-democratization in the region, with scores either falling or stagnating.[1] Weak democratic institutions often resemble empty facades. Lack of rule of law is evident, the principle has perverted into the rule by law of dominant political parties able to control the judiciary. We see huge deficits in terms of fundamental rights and values including media freedom. Just in April 2019, Reporters Without Borders published their newest ranking on the freedom of media, listing Serbia as one of the countries in Europe in which the media freedom deteriorated the most.[2]

Elections are held, but are dominated by dominant parties and are not able to generate genuine political changes. All in all, we see a mounting democratic deficit before democracy has even had the chance to become "the only game in town." On top of everything else - with the exception of North Macedonia - comes a rhetorical democratic and EU-integration mimicry from governing elites, who are also engaged in maintaining or establishing illiberal or semi-authoritarian power structures. Citizens are either disillusioned with the type of governance in their countries or generally frustrated, which results in political disengagement or the wish to emigrate. One part of the citizenry long ago adjusted to the structures and circumstances, learning to obey or to profit from the clientelist structures. Either way the spaces for political engagement and active participation have been shrinking.

Nationalist resurgence and its institutional consequences

The downward spiral of democratic development (again with an exception of North Macedonia) came hand in hand with a new rise of nationalism. Even though the nationalist polarization from the conflicts of the past has never left the region (look at ethno-politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina), we can argue that recent years have seen a dramatic rise of

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[1] Freedom House (2018) Nations in Transit, accessed at: https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/nations-transit-2018.
See also: Florian Bieber (2018) Patterns of competitive authoritarianism in the Western Balkans, East European Politics, 34:3, 337-354

[2] Reporters without Borders (2019) World Press Freedom Index. Accessed at: https://rsf.org/en

nationalist polarization. The so-called "refugee crisis" of 2015 re-opened and re-fueled old identity conflicts, thus contributing to an increase in nationalist rhetoric between Serbia and Croatia. Ever since the summer of 2015, the relationship between Serbia and Croatia has remained tense and rather hostile. The tensions and nationalist rhetoric that emerged in the fall of 2015 continued and even escalated after the final verdict (and acquittal) of Vojislav Seselj at The Hague Tribunal in March 2016.

Kosovo-Serbian relations in the last few years are another example of new tensions and nationalist rhetoric. The stalemate in the dialogue is largely self-produced by political leadership in both countries. The spiral of artificially created crisis serves internal political agendas. It would be a long list to name all the recent events that have contributed to escalation of the relationship between Prishtina and Belgrade. Some examples include the "train affair" in January 2017, the events around Marko Djuric in Mitrovica and Prishtina in March 2018, and recent clashes over the 100% tax on Serbian products introduced by the Kosovar government in late 2018. All these events create a huge amount of negative nationalist energy used internally for political purposes and contributes to further polarization.

Another telling case of nationalist re-awakening that offers good insight into the mechanics of nationalist mobilization are the politics of former Macedonian Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski. Under his reinvention of a new and specifically framed Macedonian national identity he reconstructed the center of the capital under the project "Skopje 2014." This has been an open expression of new and outspoken ethno-nationalism. The use of Skopje 2014 as a symbol of a new ethnically Macedonian nationalist narrative was divisive and contested among large parts of the Macedonian population (particularly among ethnic Albanians), yet it managed to address feelings of national pride among supporters of VMRO-DPMNE within a significant part of Macedonian Slavs. In this case, nationalism at the cost of ethnic polarization served as a unifying source within the party's power-base. The new North Macedonian government under Prime Minister Zoran Zaev is setting a new tone, but has a long way to go to get rid of the nationalist ghosts purposely re-awakened by Nikola Gruevski.

Much has been published on nationalism and the ethnopolitical paradigm in Bosnia, but not much has changed in terms of the virulence of ethnopolitics recently. Purposeful deepening of differences, maintaining tensions and utilizing 'ethnicity' for political purposes remains one of the crucial features of ethno-politics. This was on display again both during the 2018 electoral campaign as well as afterwards in the ongoing debate about new government. Bosnian ethnopolitics refer to a system where political elites use fear as a political principle to maximize their power and put aside the interests of citizens, thereby deepening polarization of the society.

Looking at these trends in the region, we can come to some general conclusions about the phenomenon of nationalism in the region and its consequences for the state and institutions. It seems that the nationalist resurgence has strengthened fear as an important element of people's collective psychology. The nationalist rhetoric in the region builds up on the self-created political landscape of fear. It constructs a new populist, "moral" common sense for "our people" by introducing a difference between "real", meaning "our people" or people that support a particular political option, and the "wrong people", meaning oppositional parties and individuals that question the dominant rule and criticize the nationalist politics. This moral hierarchy within the nation gives leaders the authority to define who belongs to the moral community and who does not. Hence, belonging to the "real people" is a political award, enabling easier access to state resources and government support. This new construction of a moral national community has helped to reshuffle society and politics. The normative power of this morally charged communitarianism has provided elites with a very powerful legitimizing tool, which operates and navigates through the political power game. I argue that this nationalist moral hierarchy also legitimizes the ruling structures and strong men to rule largely unconstrained by norms and institutions. This automatically reduces the role of parliaments in the political life; nationalism should be understood as an ultimate challenge to institutions.

Towards more democratic institutions in the Western Balkans - An incremental change

As argued above, the widespread nationalist discourses and fear-based policies are directly translated into limited space for institutions and the lack of functionality of parliaments in the Western Balkans. This means any EU-tailored approach to increase the functionality and the relevance of political institutions has to be accompanied by policies to (re-)establish democratic standards in the region based on intrinsic European values as spelled in the Article 2 of the EU Treaties. This must first of all include a rigorous EU-enlargement approach that transcends the "Stabilocracy"-approach, and insists on the rule of law and fundamental European values including freedom of the media and freedom of institutions. Drawing red lines in cases of violations of democratic standards, communicating them clearly and offensively and tailoring further policies based on those read lines would need to be an integral part of this new Enlargement package.

Secondly, in order to address the strong nationalist narratives spread by dominant political structures and leaders to deliberately produce tensions and fears, a strategy of un-hiding the politics of mimicking democracy and pro-European stances would be needed. For such a new strategy to become politically relevant and powerful new alliances and stakeholders in the region will be needed. Despite internal controversies and some problematic features, the recent wave of popular protests on the streets of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, and Albania do contain a powerful message: cronyism, corruption and clientelism will not be tolerated anymore. These protests send the mes-

sage that citizens still believe in democratic and free societies, rule of law and fundamental freedoms. Citizen engagement presents an opportunity for potential renewal of institutions and new forms of leadership. The EU should embrace this engagement by accompanying and supporting the progressive and pro-European forces on their journey. An integral part of such a policy should be also to involve civil society actors and media in order to create a more meaningful and relevant public debate on the importance of deliberation, controversial yet consensus-oriented politics and a vivid parliamentary life.

Thirdly, when addressing institutional challenges, the focus should be on the parliaments as the most important and symbolic embodiment of the will of the people and their independence. This could be achieved by simple prioritization, e.g. paying more attention to the work of the parliaments and shaping policies and programs around this new priority. This is not to say that the focus on local governance or rule of law institutions should be substituted, rather it should be supplemented by policies underlying the real and symbolic power of parliaments in any democratic society. More concretely, this would include things like visits to parliaments by EU delegations, new exchange programs, common activities undertaken by parliaments from the region with the EU parliaments, etc.

Fourthly, both the EU and local actors should rely on the evidence provided by independent research institutions and draw from previous experiences in order to design new policies as well as introduce measures to strengthen parliaments as pillars of democracy. For example, the independent research Institute CRTA in Serbia has been running a program scheme on the Serbian parliament (Otvoreni parlament – Open parliament) that includes research activities, conferences, workshops etc., where an enormous amount of relevant data and insights have been gathered.[3] The results were presented in Brussels and distributed to many other European capitals with seemingly no effect on the state of affairs in Skupstina. Some of the findings will most probably be reflected in the new report of the EU Commission on enlargement, but they still need to find their way into concretely designed policies of the EU. Another important project initiated and supported for several years by the Erste Foundation in Vienna and now taken over by the OSCE is the *Demokratiewerkstatt* (democracy laboratory).[4] The *Demokratiewerkstatt* has worked with the Parliament in Montenegro and more recently in Kosovo. Over the course of a few years, huge knowledge-transfer and exchange has taken place in the form of debates which gave younger generations an opportunity to learn about the parliaments from inside. Here again, the knowledge produced in the framework of the project and lessons learned provide many incentives in the policy formulation and implementation processes both by the EU as well as in the Western Balkans.

To conclude, there is no magic formula to prevent the region from slipping into a new crisis and further spirals of de-democratization. There is also no crystal ball to show the perfect steps that would integrate the region into the EU, as there is also no ultimate recipe for making parliaments and institutions what they need to be in a fully functioning liberal democracy.

But, as indicated above, they are fundamental policy decisions to be made by the EU, lessons to be learned, smaller steps and actions to be taken. In the end, stopping nationalist energy from spreading over the region, and reclaiming democratic values embodied by democratic institutions and exercised freely in the societies, remains the ultimate task not only for the region but also for Europe and its peace project in the Balkans. It will be only by a common effort of the EU and its member states and progressive and democratic forces in the region that will challenge the rather bleak situation of democracy in the region. It is time for the EU to embrace the opportunity, break out of its technocratic and stability-oriented slump, and forge new alliances in a troubled but still truly European region of Southeastern Europe.

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[3] www.crta.rs and https://otvoreniparlament.rs
[4] http://www.demokratielandschaft.at/