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Overcoming the Democratisation Deficit in the Western Balkans: A Road to (No)Where?

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■ The internal weaknesses of the process of democratisation in the Western Balkans ensue from reinforcing a system where (ethno)politics and (ethno)political entrepreneurs use all available strategies to deprive citizens of any political agency, thus working towards obedient democracies while keeping real political power within closed circles. The conscious deepening of differences, maintaining negative tensions and instrumentalising – predominantly ethnic – identities for political or other particular purposes are some of the crucial features of (ethno)politics in the Western Balkans.

■ The promise of Europeanisation is losing its ability to mobilise citizens as it faces a two-fold challenge: 1) No Push – while it is clear that progress in the accession process is extremely slow, even those steps which have been completed with success are left without meaningful recognition that could revive the ambition to join the EU; 2) No Pull – The support of political leaders displaying all the characteristics of illiberal and even authoritarian rule is maintained for the sake of stability in the region.

■ The trend of strengthening right-wing and even extreme organisations of civil society adds another worrying dimension to the Western Balkans' complex, socio-political situation. Illiberal NGOs nowadays use a different vocabulary and new strategies to disguise their illiberal claims and policies as human rights discourse. An increasing mainstreaming of their image and key messages builds on the lessons learnt exactly from liberal civil society. They flourish in the context of the apparent weakness of the leftist political forces which are seeking inspiration and possible mass mobilisation in the new community-based social movements.

Content

1. Introduction: The *Way Out* to a *Realist* Utopia
Vedran Džihić, Gazela Pudar Draško

The second decade of the twentieth century has brought no progress in terms of the Europeanisation and democratisation of the Western Balkans (WB). Rather, it has put the region on the path of a constant decline in democracy: Weak democratic institutions that sometimes resemble empty facades, a lack of the rule of law, huge deficits in terms of fundamental rights and values such as media freedom, elections dominated by dominant party centres, a passive and fairly obedient citizenry – a mounting democratic deficit even before democracy has been able to become "the only game in town" in the region. And on top of this - with the exception of Macedonia – comes a rhetorical democratic and EU-integration mimicry performed professionally by WB governing elites, which are at the same time engaged in maintaining and sustaining old or establishing new illiberal or semi-authoritarian power structures.

Normative linear development and the assumption of democratisation, closely related to the post-1989 liberal era, is simply not valid any more. What we see in the WB, in a post-conflict, semi-peripheral zone of Europe, is more an interregnum in terms of normative visions for the future, with democratic values and norms still predominant and promoted by the EU but with a substantial turn towards illiberalism and different shades of semi-, competitive, and new authoritarianism.

Recent developments in Europe have been encouraging this anti-democratic turn. Democratic standards and fundamental democratic values and rights have been challenged in several EU states and quite openly in the US. The rule of the majority (the new majoritarianism) is used to substantially weaken the core pillar of democracy – the separation of powers, through rampant strengthening of executive power.

Moreover, we are actually witnessing a new illiberal and authoritarian convergence in Europe, with an almost direct transfer of populist nationalism and authoritarianism from Hungary, Turkey or Russia

to the Balkans. Illiberal tendencies, in its own backyard, are biting at the very European flesh that took decades to nurture and sustain. European fragility at times resembles that of the Balkans, tortured from within, unable to transcend divisions and forge a common vision. Democratic values lie at the core of the EU project and they need to be revived with new breath to survive and for the Balkans to become an integral part of a world – still - the most prestigious club of states. The ultimate fate of the European Union will ultimately affect political systems and practices in the Western Balkans. Therefore, bringing EU politics to citizens and reconstructing it towards a more united diversity, solidarity and shared responsibility is a must if we want to see a similar process in the WB region. The more the Union rebuilds itself in the next few years, the more predictable the Balkans' future will be.

In addition to the inner EU weaknesses, geopolitics is back in the Western Balkans arena, if it ever disappeared, with Russia or the USA hardly playing a European game anymore. After years of technocratic business-as-usual, the refugee crisis in 2015 – Ivan Krastev describing it as Europe's 9/11 – has brought the Balkans back onto the European radar. Europe's "soft underbelly" is pulsating again. The refugee crisis has revealed a particular form of Christian, white nationalism. The words of Hungarian Prime Minister, Victor Orban, spoken in his inaugural speech in May 2018, that "rather than fix a liberal democracy that has run aground, we will build a 21st Century Christian democracy", actually resonate with the stance of almost all governing structures in the Western Balkans.

In the countries of the European semi-periphery (such as Serbia, Turkey, Macedonia etc.) but also those closer to the centre (Hungary, Poland, Austria) identity-based communitarianism has replaced the class struggle and represents a solid base of populist narratives. The new communitarianism based on neoliberal rationality comes with nationalist identity politics or – to put it differently – the new populist nationalism centred around "the people". Paradoxically, at first glance, calling for the people's will and exploiting it for the benefit of the

elites is the pillar of democratic deficits. And not only in the Western Balkans. The core claim of populism is that only some people are the real people (Müller, 2016). "Populism as an ideology that separates society into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, "the pure people" and the "corrupt elite," and that holds that politics should be an expression of "the general will" of the people" (Mudde, 2007: 25). "The people" can be understood as a bounded collectivity, a collectivity that is discursively constructed and often instrumentalized by populist elites.

Populism itself is a morally and politically charged term. Even though populism is not necessarily antidemocratic, it is illiberal, as it disregards minority rights, pluralism, and finally the rule of law. This "populist type of communitarianism", which has always included the justification of the rule with symbolic national references, represents a new type of populist nationalism that we can observe in the European periphery and that is attached to an illiberal and authoritarian form of rule. "Expanding the "personal, protected sphere" and curtailing the reach of democracy in the name of freedom develops a new ethos of a nation, one that replaces a public, pluralistic, secular, democratic, national and imaginary with a private, homogenous, familial one. The former features commitments to modest openness, the rule of law, and cultural and religious pluralism. The latter, especially in its traditional form, is exclusionary, walled, homogenous, unified, and hierarchical. It may even be authoritarian." (Brown, 2018)

However, whichever definition we take, populism always includes an attempt to turn the symbolic and emotional level into a political – nationalist – project. National and ethnic/cultural boundaries are usually formed in opposition to a similar Other, other structured groups. Such a process ultimately results in putting borders and demarcation lines – both in terms of discursive as well as territorial/material borders – at the forefront. This is to say that we are witnessing not only internal democratic deficits in the Western Balkans states, but increasingly a worrying rise in the designating ethnic/national Other. Failure to build solid democratic institutions has actually left a gap for

populist ethnic-based communitarianism in a region that has still not recovered from the violent conflict of the 1990s.

This is a period when we are again seeing that "reifying groups, by treating them as substantial things-in-the-world, ethno-political entrepreneurs may, as Bourdieu notes, 'contribute to producing what they apparently describe or designate'" (Brubaker 2002: 7). It is precisely the process of mobilising, energising and utilising differences for (authoritarian) power purposes of gaining and retaining power in society and creating borders as lines of distinction between "our" group and the "other" that can be defined as the new – major - horizon in the European periphery.

It is obvious that the linear and normative democratisation assumption – do your homework and reform and you will join the club of European democracies – hardly seems valid anymore. Particularly when the homework was not focused on "consolidating democracy beyond the creation of formal institutions" which "must be at the heart of EU strategies towards the Balkans, by ensuring that democratic institutions function in practice and that societies are fully able and free to participate in the democratic process" (Balfour and Stratulat, 2011: VII).

Democracy in the Balkans has been hijacked by politicians who hide behind "their" notion of democracy and "popularly" instrumentalise it for particular interests. Citizens hide from politics in private niches (Fiket et al, 2017) allowing the political elites to capture the state, deepening further the democratic deficit of the region. Or, as seems to be an integral part of the problem in the WB, they form a silent and yet obedient citizenry, which accepts and partly cherishes the rule of the strong man and the dominant power centers while being the somewhat passive and depoliticised recipients of the regime's rhetoric and propaganda. In fact, we globally turn to a system where the only difference is in the degree of protection of liberal rights, while depoliticisation becomes the rule with real power concentrated within closed, elite circles harming democratic institutions. The only difference, when it comes to the Western

Balkans states, is that their starting position with weak institutions and the principle of the rule of law, transformed into the concept of the rule by law, and with various forms of hybridity in terms of the form of regime, is simply a different and more difficult one which can hardly be characterised as a consolidated democracy which is surviving a backlash. The persistent democratic deficit in the region – both in terms of normative foundations and values valid in society, as well as in terms of democratic institutions and procedures – is fundamentally undermining and destroying democratic and emancipatory potentials.

Why is this happening? We ask. Leaving aside the (very important) legacy of illiberal, authoritarian societies, we believe that the fundamental problem lies in the fact that both Europe and the notion of democracy have lost their imagination in the Western Balkans. The Europe of today is not the same one that wholeheartedly promised peace, security, democracy and liberal values to the region in 2000. Furthermore – looking in the other side of the mirror – in the region the trend to "fake" Europeanisation has increased without sanctions. On the contrary, EU officials and key political figures of Member States even support those very political elites that dominantly contribute to the status quo characterised by democratic deficit. The infinitely prolonged interregnum accession to the EU is combined with a rise of the so-called "stabilocracy", a type of government where the EU is de facto ready to turn a blind eye to authoritarian, populist and anti-democratic Balkan leaders as long as they vouch for political stability in the fragile region (Kmezić and Bieber, 2017). Finally, the transition to democracy, whose burden is placed solely on the common people, is now particularly welcomed by them. The longevity of the transition and failure of the EU to provide a durable optimism for membership has endangered overall support for basic democratic values.

We are aware that EU enlargement in the Balkans – despite the current (in)famous target goal of 2025 – will probably not materialise any time soon. And it is obvious that in many WB countries, those internal capacities to push reforms which would build stronger institutions accountable to their ci-

tizens are hardly recognised. Therefore, there is an urgent need to return to very fundamental questions in all of the WB societies – how do we escape from a devastating trend of an "obedient democracy", where individuals are depoliticised and remain passive in terms of active participation in matters important for the formation and maintenance of society and of the political? Do WB countries have the internal capacities to flourish and take us away from the depressive present? Could we expect the European Union to support those forces that strive for true democracy? In a nutshell, how can citizens be activated to resist this populist ethnic-based communitarianism that is hiding distorted, neoliberal practices and policies preventing any significant economic development?

In order to tackle these questions, we invited three authors from the Western Balkans to provide us with some insights into the phenomenon and try to offer answers and possible solutions. In the following chapter, Sead Turčalo turns to political (ethnic) entrepreneurs and their capture of state institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is by incentivising clientelism and corruption in the state system that political elites manage to keep their interest at the cost of citizens who feel increasingly detached from politics and unable to contribute to real political change.

The third chapter, by Klodiana Beshku, describes the role of the European Union in sustaining the democracy deficit in the Western Balkans. As she rightfully points out, The Western Balkans' road to the EU began with the Thessaloniki Summit (2003) and officially pronounced "the European perspective" of the region. Since then, the EU passed down the road of "lessons learned" through "learning by doing" to finally arrive at "come what may", where everything is allowed as long as European stability and security are not threatened.

Finally, Ivan Cerovac dares to challenge the notion of the inherent value of social movements and contentious politics in the region, exposing the rightist movements that advocate illiberal ethnic-based communitarianism. This is a crucial issue that must be tackled amidst the general

excitement around the emerging movements that could be recognised as emancipatory ones. How to shape new political forces allied to progressive European ones and connect them into trans-regional alliances that will bring about a true democratic turn is a question that remains to be answered. In answering this, we must pay attention to their illiberal, conservative counterparts which are growing across the region, forging strong alliances with their international siblings.

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To conclude this introductory chapter, we believe that a positive utopian horizon in the region is missing. The way out from the dilemma posed in the title must emerge with a realist utopian view and perspective based on intrinsic liberal values, human and fundamental rights and on addressing the burning social issues of inequality, poverty and deprivation as well as the brain drain that are haunting the region. This must become a new common goal for progressive and emancipatory movements and individuals both in the region as well as in the EU. We need to invent and to fight for a new (perhaps social) democracy that will win again the hearts of common people in the Western Balkans and make them feel empowered to take control of their destinies by stepping into politics and engaging with the political, not only every four years in the somewhat regime-dominated elections, but rather permanently and in all possible spheres of public and social life.

2. Ethnopolitical Entrepreneurship as an Internal Obstacle to Democratisation: The Case of Bosnia and Herzegovina
SeadTurčalo

The starting point for an interpretation of the permanent crisis of the EU integration process for Bosnia and Herzegovina is to determine the actors that bear constitutive responsibility for the structural problems and challenges of the country on its path to the EU, as well as the strategy employed by them. Much has been published on the ethnopolitical paradigm and its power elites in Bosnia. Ethnopolitics, as a dominant form of the politics in Bosnia since Dayton, is defined as politics seeking to meet the particular interests of the political and economic elites defined along ethnic lines and to protect ethno-national 'reserved domains'. In the context of this kind of politics, a preference for collective representation strips the category of citizenship of any legitimacy and focuses solely on maintaining power. A conscious deepening of differences, maintaining negative tensions and therefore utilising 'ethnicity' for political purposes is one of the core features of ethno-politics. Ethnopolitics refers to a system where political elites use fear as a political principle to maximize their power and leave aside the interests of citizens. Ethno-nationalist mobilisation is inconceivable without social mobilisation and the consequent politicisation of communities (Senghaas, 1994: 83).

This kind of ethno-nationalist mobilisation is fundamental to maintaining and stabilising power in the long run. What we see in the Bosnian grey zone between democracy and authoritarianism, and what nurtured the permanent political crisis in Bosnia, is a certain form of ethnopolitical machine politics. Scott (1969: 1144) highlights that the "machine is not the disciplined, ideological party held together by class ties and common programs that arose in continental Europe. Neither is it a typically charismatic party, depending on a belief in the almost superhuman qualities of its leader to insure internal cohesion. The machine is rather a non-ideological organization interested less in political principle that in securing and holding office for its leaders and distributing income

to those who run it and work for it". In that it relies rather on what it accomplishes for its supporters than on what it stands for, the machine party can be more accurately compared to a business or a lobbying group.

In Bosnia "machine politics" has been combined with a leadership cult, ethno-religious discourses and – mostly relevant to our analysis – the promise of Europeanisation in parallel with all these elements in place in order to replace any strict ideology.

2.1 Ethnopolitical Elites and EU stake holders as Part of the (Same) Game

We observe local actors of "machine politics", Bosnian ethnopolitical elites, on the one hand, and stakeholders of the European Union both in Brussels as well as in Bosnia itself, on the other, in an analytical relationship. Searching for their mutual interdependence and the discursive game of both actors may provide at least a partial explanation for the permanent political crisis in Bosnia and the fact that Bosnia is effectively stagnating and even backsliding in terms of EU integration.

Each interpretation of this kind begins as a kind of political archaeology that addresses the political past as the key problem of the country's present. The 1992 - 1995 war and its legacy remains a constant reference point used while elaborating the causes and reasons of the in-limbo-state of the country. The focus of this short analysis will be on the actors and their strategy rather than on discussing past events.

An important methodological point for avoiding the trap of a mono-paradigmatic interpretation is to accept the complex interdependence of those actors. So we start from the complex interdependence of the ethnopolitical elites and EU bureaucrats regarding EU integration and the different notions of Europe as the means to shape the political agenda in Bosnia and Herzegovina. How can the assumption be proved that there is a complex interdependence between those two actors?

Firstly, complex interdependence is the main pillar of the entire Peace Agreement on which Dayton–Bosnia and Herzegovina is based. As a consequence of the agreement, the entire period post-Dayton political existence of the country has been characterised by the interdependence between local stakeholders and those international powers and institutions that brokered the Dayton Peace Agreement and took over the responsibility for its implementation. The international factor is simply inscribed into the tissue of post-war-Bosnia.

Secondly, this interdependence can be exemplified even by a cursory analysis of the discourse of both actors, in which, very often, Europe/EU integration and related terms e.g. European values, have been used to legitimize their (political) actions. The discursive use and abuse of Europe and EU-integration as a legitimizing tool is more pronounced within the Bosnian internal realm, where Bosnian political elites have built parts of their legitimation by referring to the needs and objectives deriving from the EU-integration processes. Often the reference was and is purely rhetorical without resulting in any concrete policy steps or even reforms. There are many telling episodes in this regard, from the notorious police reform back in the 2000s to constitutional reforms (Sejdic-Finci) to the very recently debated issue of delivering answers to the EU's questionnaire as one of the major steps towards the status of EU Candidate Country for Bosnia. The constant delay and postponing by local institutions and political elites to deliver final answers provoked, at 2017's end, a harsh reaction from EU Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighborhood Policy, Johannes Hahn. During his visit to Sarajevo Hahn lost patience during the press conference telling the media that the talks held behind closed doors were a major disaster and that there was an urgent need to stop the presentation of local stakeholders on "almost" delivering reforms. The visit certainly came at a bad time as the three constituent people and their political representatives (in the case of the Bosnian Croats and Serbs aligned with their respective "brother-nations" in Serbia and Croatia) following the ICTY's decision (Mladić, Prlić et al) were engaged in one of the worst nationalist and revisionist cam-

paigns in the recent past. Čović, for example, was contemplating blocking Bosnia's EU path because of the judgment at The Hague. The new climate of hatred and exclusion came on top of the already heated political situation in Bosnia, which contributed to the very slow response from the Bosnian authorities to the EU's questionnaire. Hahn rightly showed his frustration at the constant promises of the Bosnian authorities to "almost" deliver answers in the "next few weeks". This "almost" with no result could have been understood in Brussels as it was obviously meant – we, the Bosnian political elites, do not care about EU integration, and this is why we are pretending and buying time. Immediately after Hahn's visit Milorad Dodik, president of Republika Srpska, publicly announced that there would be no final answers to the Questionnaire while there was no major political compromise over major issues (like the results of the census). The paradoxical moment here was that the person asking for political compromise was the very same person engaged in destroying any chance of compromise. The result was again a "zero sum game".

Ethnopolitical elites have been employing Europe/EU integration as a mechanism for dual legitimacy. On the one hand, Europe has been used to legitimise their actions (i.e. devastation of any trace of a social safety net), while on the other, Europe is used within the ethnopolitical paradigm as if to stress an (self)imagined Europeanness of its own ethnic group over the others. In that discourse the ethnical Other is presented as less European (meaning almost barbarian, primordial, not modern, etc.) than the Own ethnic group. For example, the slogan of being a "bearer of European values" has become a customary slogan among followers of the leading Croat political party in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the HDZ [Croatian Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina]. This process of imagining the "other" as the opposition to the "in-group" is intrinsic to nationalism. The construction of this „uniqueness and exclusivity" is only possible through massive and deliberate manipulation and the mythologising of history and the present as well as a radical form of exclusion of the other. Generally, at the core of this narrative, one's own ethnic group is a better, stronger, more resistant

and superior exclusive „we" group different from the "other" groups perceived and constructed as a threat.

2.2 The EU's Power of Attraction as Part of the Problem

EU bureaucrats have been utilising the notion of Europe/European integration as a symbol that should, by the mere mention of it, emanate the power of attraction for the citizen of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and represent an ideal which should be pursued by the ethnopolitical elites.

Although these discourses seem to be different they are dialectically complementary, and create the basis for the whole political dynamic of the country. Both actors are aware that EU integration still has an influence on B&H citizens, as a recent public survey shows that three-quarters strongly (49%) or to some degree (26%) support this process. Simultaneously, they cleverly employ EU integration discourse as a substitute for concrete political reforms by creating purportless political events (i.e. structural dialogue on the judiciary) which are used by both actors for a mutual transfer of responsibility.

Ethnopolitical elites have been deliberately obstructing the implementation of any reforms that would bring about a change in the existing ethnocratic order in the country (e.g. constitutional reforms based on the judgment of the European Court of Human Rights – Sejdic – Finci Case, Pilav Case, Zornić Case etc.). EU reaction to this obstruction remains within the explicit and repetitive discourse of the "democratic" character of these ethnopoliticians. Even in cases of more direct criticism, as exemplified by Johannes Hahn's critique of the politics of "almost", there was no change of the overall discourse of the EU and important EU-states as a follow up. The EU's stakeholders are generally caught up in the dilemma of the "democratic legitimacy" of elected officials in Bosnia, even though serious questions about the democratic legitimacy of Bosnian elections – see the recent debate on the reform of the electoral law – have been raised. By emphasising the "de-

mocratic" character in an ethnocratic system, the EU is contributing to the maintenance of the *status quo* in the country. Furthermore, the notion of the democratic character of the ethnopolitical elites is used as an argument to justify to them the externalisation of the whole responsibility for the deadlock in EU integration without questioning the very nature of the political system that fosters and nurtures the ethnonationalistic character of political parties in the country.

2.3 The "Democratic" Character of the Bosnian State as a Trap

Furthermore, the emphasis on the "democratic" character of the state and its political elites reveals that the EU Commission and the EU in general is simply puzzled and has no answer to the Bosnian permanent political crisis. Hahn's above-mentioned frustration might be read as an invitation to engage very broadly in a new offensive thinking about Bosnia that goes beyond the ethnopolitical conundrum. Bosnia is a major piece of the puzzle in the Western Balkans. There will be no stability in the region without a solution for BiH and so it urgently needs to be placed very high on the EU's agenda. Additionally – as a new policy turn – a new and very offensive action plan for Bosnia would be needed. Such a plan would need to start with a new and very blunt form of communication from the EU to the local political elites by passing on a message to Bosnian politicians that the politics of "almost" and fooling the EU and citizens of Bosnia in terms of EU integration do not deliver any more. Directly blaming those responsible for the "politics of almost" is necessary. The course of these changes should be accompanied by an offensive promotion of democratic values and by drawing red lines if major fundamental rights or democratic values are violated. In such a strategy, obviously, one would need to look for pragmatic technical tweaks (like opening chapters 23 and 24, or creating a new chapter 35 called "state functionality") and accompanying them with financial support if compromise occurs. Furthermore and generally, one would also need to learn the lessons from Macedonia, increase political pressure on politicians, engage with oppositional parties

and pro-European forces in the country beyond the ethnopolitical political elites and by doing so refocus on the real partners in civil society and among citizens.

As long as the EU cannot and is not willing to undertake any major shift of its policy of focusing almost solely on local ethnopolitical entrepreneurs, the vicious circle of permanent crisis in Bosnia will remain functional and will continue to produce yet more crisis.

3. The EU Approach towards the Western Balkans: From "Lessons Learned" and "Learning by Doing" to "Come What May"
Klodiana Beshku

After Romania and Bulgaria joined the EU club in 2007 and following the economic crisis of 2008 as well as the inclusion of Croatia in 2013, the EU has gradually changed its attitude towards the WB by bringing the idea of a "regional approach" to another level. The remaining Balkan countries started to be considered as a single region made up of similar problems and phenomena, baptised with a new terminus technicus: the WB6.

The European Union has made many efforts to transform the region. Despite certain pitfalls and challenges, the perspective of EU membership has served and continues to serve as "a strong driving force for domestic reform and change in many countries" (Keil and Arkan, 2016: 4). Such a context creates an environment where, at least theoretically, EU conditionality is supposed to be the strongest possible tool for the democratisation and Europeanisation of these countries.

In fact, the EU has fostered and sometimes even imposed certain important initiatives that have reformed political and social life in the Western Balkans. They were made possible through the more or less strict application of the 'conditionality' principle, be it within the framework of the Stabilisation and Accession Process (SAP) or later on in the framework of negotiations on membership. To name just a few of them: the promotion of a pro-European agenda in Montenegro; the political dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo; the installing of a Special Court for War Crimes in Croatia, BiH and Serbia; the improvement of relations between Albanians and Macedonians within the FYR of Macedonia; the solution of the name question between the FYR of Macedonia and Greece; and justice reform in Albania.

The EU in the Western Balkans is also still conside-

red as a pole of attraction, a role model and a future shelter under which several internal problems could be solved. The positive normativity of the EU, perceived as a 'transformative power', is still able to make countries undergo reforms which they would never have done if not under the conditionality push of EU integration.

The objectives of the EU as a *norm entrepreneur* (Pace, 2007) seem clear, but results on the ground in WB6 are not always consistent with those objectives. The reforms usually do not come to life properly or they create "a parallel formal reality", meaning that compliance with the EU's normative demands in the Western Balkans is not always in line with their content. These compliances can range from "non-compliance", "fake" and "partial" to "imposed ones", according to the level of challenge from the domestic actors of these countries to the EU's norms (Noutcheva, 2007). Corruption is still at a very high level and it is more the norm rather than the excep¬tion in the region (Stratulat, 2017). The democratisation of these countries has experienced a considerable backslide in recent years (especially in Montenegro and Serbia)[1] and nationalism is still called up for duty by Balkan politicians any time they want to enforce a national consensus.

All the described factors point to a discrepancy between the expectations of the European Union on the one side and effective outputs in the WB6 on the other. This paper attempts to focus on the EU side of the Europeanisation process in the Western Balkans. Therefore, the EU enlargement approach is re-examined here from the nineties onwards, with the aim of identifying the misleading ways of spreading concepts such as democratisation or Europeanisation to Western Balkans countries, through examining some paradoxes that characterise the process.

3.1 The Transformation of the EU's Approach Towards the Balkans Since 1990: From "Lessons Learned" to "Learning by Doing"

The EU's approach to the Balkans since 1990 could described as being structured along three

1. According to the Freedom House Reports (2018). Nations in Transit. Confronting illiberalism, at: https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/nations-transit-2018 (last checked in July 2018).

major phases: 1) *lessons learned*, 2) *learning by doing* and 3) *come what may*. The first one failed to avoid subsequent ethnic conflicts in the region following the wars of the 1990s, the second created the "one size fits all" Europeanisation approach, and the third, which seems to be the most troublesome, has given life to the "one step forward, three steps on stand-by" approach. It has revealed that the Union is prone to tolerate any illiberal and autocratic political elite in the region for the sake of false stability (stabilitocracy).

Without getting into the familiar details of the recent past of the region, the first phase of the nineties was marked by conflicts and the subsequent failure of the *EU's attempts to pacify the region.*

The next decade saw the creation of two specific instruments – the Stabilisation and Association Process and the Stabilisation and Association Agreement, both reinforced by the Thessaloniki Summit in 2003. After a while, different paths were envisaged for each WB country, as obviously *the one size fits all*[2] principle was impossible to apply (Börzel and Risse, 2004). Considering these countries, "en blocque" proved itself not the best of ways to deal with them.

The accession of Romania and Bulgaria in 2007 revealed a bitter reality – welcoming these countries into the EU appeared to be a political decision as they turned out to be unprepared to handle the fiscal and economic pressure coming from the EU. After this experience, the EU introduced a *more muscular* approach to the remaining Western Balkan countries (Pridham, 2007). The European

Commission presented an attentive screening process and a benchmarking procedure that each candidate had to complete. The main aim was not to become entrapped into making the same mistakes as those made in the case of Romania and Bulgaria and thus to be extremely strict in measuring progress and allowing countries to take the next step in their EU integration.

The third phase can be observed after 2008, a year marked by the internal political, economic and societal crisis of the EU and increasing European and EU-enlargement *fatigue*. Soon it became obvious that the EU had taken steps backwards in the democratisation and the Europeanisation of the region through prioritising *stability* over democratic values (Kmezić and Bieber, 2017). In this regard, the third phase seems to have become that causing the most concern, since it has brought back the overall feeling that reality in the Balkans can be so muddy and fluctuating that it might rupture from one moment to another.

3.2 The "Come What May" Approach

Though the principle of regional cooperation has been continuously repeated as the main conditionality element for the WB since the late nineties, during the third phase of the EU's approach towards the region, this principle was encoded into the term of "good neighbouring relations", especially under the Berlin Process (2014-2018). The Vienna Summit in 2016 reinforced it in a declaration stating the need that the WB countries "would not let bilateral disputes obstacle each country's way to the EU"[3], but nothing changed. The European Council itself has, until July 2018, refused to introduce visa liberalisation to Kosovo despite the fact that the demarcation agreement on the border with Montenegro was signed[4]. In the same trend, Serbia would not be allowed to progress along EU integration until relations with Kosovo are stabilised[5].

Because of this and many other reasons, scepticism has embraced the Berlin process, baptising it with the term *the waiting room* (Flessenkemper, 2007) or considering it as a way of "keeping the

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2. Tanja A. Börzel, Thomas Risse (2004), "One Size Fits All! EU Policies for the Promotion of Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law," Paper prepared for the Workshop on Democracy Promotion, Center for Development, Democracy, and the Rule of Law, Stanford University October 4-5

3. Final Declaration by the chair of the Vienna Western Balkans Summit, 27 August, 2015, at: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/pdf/policy-highlights/regional-cooperation/20150828_chairmans_conclusions_western_balkans_summit.pdf (last checked in July 2018).

4. European Commission, Press Release (2016), at: http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-16-1626_en.htm (last checked in July 2018).

5. European Commission (2018). Strategy for the Western Balkans, February, at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/news/strategy-western-balkans-2018-feb-06_en (last checked in July 2018).

region in Europe, but outside of EU structures"[6]. The Berlin Process, which began with great enthusiasm in 2014, has significantly lost its ability to produce a real political consensus within the domestic political elites of the Western Balkan countries and hope within these countries' societies. "The Berlin process is in shambles. However, this is not due to the Western Balkans, but the EU members that are participating"[7]. They accept whatever may come out of the region, stability prevailing over democracy.

Within the "come what may" approach, another minor strategy, or better, lack of strategy, can be identified and may be called the "one step forward, three steps on standby". The EC Strategy towards the WB (February 2018) seemed to be a right positive step forward, setting 2025 or 2028 as possible years for joining the EU. However, this step forward was very soon annulated by the EU-Western Balkans Summit in Sofia (May 2018), where mention of a clear time frame was once more avoided. After the Sofia Summit, the region kept all eyes on June 2018's Council meeting and forthcoming decision, expecting further advancement of the WB regions towards the EU. It turned out that the meeting resulted in being the next step on standby. The opening of negotiations for Albania and Macedonia were prolonged for one year, despite the efforts of these countries in reforming and reaching important milestones in their domestic and foreign policies[8]. It is evident that EU Summits have turned out to be hubs where Western Balkans political representatives are continually faced with real Brussels' skepticism and where the "opened doors" expressed in various EU papers and reports are being closed.

6. Abazi Enika (2018). EU's Balkan Test. https://www.europenowjournal.org/2018/06/25/eus-balkans-test-geopolitics-of-a-normative-power/ (last checked in July 2018).

7. Florian Bieber (2018). It is time to ditch the Berlin Process, Op-ed, European Western Balkans, 10.07.2018 at: https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2018/07/10/time-ditch-berlin-process/ (last checked in July 2018).

8. Council Conclusion on Enlargement and Stabilization and Association Process, 26.06.2018 at: http://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/35863/st10555-en18.pdf (last checked in July 2018).

9. Official Declaration of Trieste Summit, 2017 at: http://wb-csf.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Declaration-by-the-Italian-Chair.pdf (last checked July 2018).

3.3 Three Paradoxes of the EU's Attitudes towards the WB

The European integration process is characterised by three main paradoxes that could help in better understanding the discrepancies and misperceptions of the EU's attitude towards the WB6 and the reasons for the compliances failures that stand behind them.

The first one has to do with the promotion of liberal democracy through the "good governance" principle. While the EU demands reforms and high standards in policy- making from WB6 countries, it does not mean that it will effectively praise them. The EU has elevated the promotion of 'good governance' since 2003, "starting 'at home' and spreading to the adjacent regions of the enlarging Union – and beyond" (Lange et al, 2017), but the principle does not always fit the reality. The already mentioned cases of Albania and justice reform and Macedonia with the achievement of an agreement with Greece on name dispute are evidence of this point. Delay of the opening of negotiations with these countries for one year demonstrates a lack of acknowledgment of huge efforts by some WB countries in order to overcome internal difficulties and forge political consensus for reaching such important political changes. This lack of appreciation and tangible rewards for reform successes can contribute to the rise in EU skepticism in the Balkans.

The second paradox concerns the economic sphere. The EU is demanding neo-liberal measures from the WB6, measures which have been put into question by the EU's financial hubs themselves in the last decade. While neoliberal measures are being criticised within the EU member states reality, the WB states are conditioned to apply such measures within their national area. During the Trieste Summit in 2017, a Regional Common Market was proposed for the WB6 region[9], without clear rules and without clarifying its relations with CEFTA, at a moment when EU member states themselves are demanding more protectionist measures. In a region of quite intensive-agriculture, where competitiveness is not secured because of the weak institutions and a difficult business

environment, a common market area could be harmful because national production and goods would be exposed to a free market space, without protection in their long-term competitiveness. In this context, innovative ideas should be considered as long as the region has a high diversity of economic activities and economic reforms have prevailed over the building of the rule of law. For example, at the beginning of the Berlin Process, EU representatives and WB countries talked about an Energy Security Strategy[10], but this was omitted in the following negotiation. The ideas of reinvigorating energy security or deepening the connectivity agenda are definitely more important for the Western Balkans than promptly opening the fragile markets of the WB countries.

The third paradox relates to geopolitics. The EU appears to be anxious about the intervention of Turkey, Russia and China in the region of WB6, but it does not really possess any concrete strategy of preventing strengthening Eastern influence in the region. As Abazi rightfully claims, "keeping Western Balkan countries tied to a reinvented EU" has turned into "a precondition for their turning their backs on Europe and moving towards either Russia or Turkey, or towards authoritarian powers that do not currently uphold [European] values"[11]. This has created the ground for *Balkan leaders* to recall past alliances with Russia or Turkey whenever they want to draw the attention of *mother EU* or play the nationalist card in order to raise the internal consensus.

3.4 Conclusions

It has been almost three decades that the Balkans and EC/EU have not been on the same wavelength, which is evident in the discrepancies and misperceptions mentioned above. First of all, it should be kept in mind that the Western Balkan countries must consolidate their liberal market and democratic institutions first, before switching to the neoliberal measures and policies demanded by the EU.

Another discrepancy relates to the EU Enlargement approach in the region. Since 1993, much has changed, but the Copenhagen criteria have remained the same. Their essence is fundamental, but their concrete application in regions like the WB has to be adjusted to the fast-forward changes and WB6 reality. The EU continues to place more and more importance on Balkan youth and civil society, which is important. But at the same time, the EU is apparently neglecting the fact that in the Balkans the major responsibility rests on their national politicians. The EU tries to support alternatives through civil society and youth cooperation, avoiding interfering directly into the political power sphere, in a region where "a sort of neo-feudalism has developed, in which citizens do not count" (Kraske, 2017). A lack of sanctions is noted on those politicians in the region who nurture autocracy and nationalism or dangerously flirt with the great powers outside the EU. The April 2018 reports of the Commission for each WB country failed to address clearly the responsibility of the ruling elites, giving probably the wrong idea that the EU Council is going to *welcome what may come out* from the countries of the Western Balkans. All the 2018 reports stated that corruption and capture of the state were highly present in the region but still left the door open to accession. On the other hand, all these reports emphasise youth and civil society cooperation, as if these sectors were the real *responsible agents* for the current state of things or their possible change in the region. There are reasons to strongly believe that the EU should forcibly demand the changing of the political attitude of the political elites in the Western Balkans to minimize state capturing, corruption and reinforce the rule of law. The other side

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10. Western Balkans Summit (2015). Final Declaration of the chair at: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/pdf/policy-highlights/regional-cooperation/20150828_chairmans_conclusions_western_balkans_summit.pdf (last checked in July 2018).

11. Abazi Enika (2018). EU's Balkan Test. https://www.europenowjournal.org/2018/06/25/eus-balkans-test-geopolitics-of-a-normative-power/ (last checked in July 2018).

of the coin of this phenomenon is that the political elites of the WB states are expected to follow the EU directives but in the end, real recognition of their achievements is missing. This is evident in the failure to support Albania and Macedonia by opening the next phase of their accession process, despite certain success with a very difficult reform of the justice system in Albania and finally reaching a compromise with Greece on the name dispute for the FYR of Macedonia. Praising and rewarding positive changes and reforms should be more prominent and drawing red lines and sanctioning negative actions and policies of the Western Balkans' politicians placed more prominently in the EU's toll-box. A similar situation occurs with the blocked processes in the region demanding new energies or approaches such as the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue or moving towards an effective democratic regime in Montenegro or in Bosnia and Herzegovina– no real sanctions are used to boost these processes. The last summit of the Berlin process in London, July 2018, again reinforced the importance of civil society and youth, also emphasising the issue of missing persons and war tribunals. Yet, no clear message was delivered to the politicians in the WB6[12]. All this tells us that the EU does not really learn a great deal from the lessons of the past and is still learning by doing or accepting whatever may come out in order to preserve peace and security, *c'est à dire* the status quo in the Western Balkans. What remains is to hope for a stronger EU restrained approach towards the Western Balkans, especially towards their political representatives. Such an approach could limit room to manoeuvre for corrupt elites and reinforce those political and civil society forces blocked by the immense power of the captured state[13] in the Balkans.

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12. Joint Declarations of western Balkans Summit, London (2018) can be found at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/724294/180710_WBS_Joint_Declarations.pdf (last checked in July 2018).

13. Heinrich Böll Foundation (2017). "Captured States in the Balkans", Perspectives - Political Analysis and Commentary, Issue 3, September.

14. A detailed discussion on the value of political participation can be found in Flanders (2013).

4. The Dark Side of Civil Society in the Western Balkans: Conservative NGOs and Liberal Democracy the Case of Croatia
Ivan Cerovac

Civil society, consisting of many forms of organisation which citizens use to express and advance their will and interests, is usually seen as an excellent tool for participatory democracy. Since the majority of citizens are usually not members of political parties and other organisations that shape the formal political sphere, civil society can rightfully be seen as a good tool for fostering wider political participation in decision-making processes. Furthermore, it can play a key role for the political participation of many marginalised and disadvantaged (minority) groups, who are already disenfranchised and politically underrepresented in the formal political sphere. The American civil rights movement can be seen as an excellent example: a politically marginalised and oppressed population was empowered to change social and political norms. Through a well-organised and persistent group action, the movement promoted the ideas of social and political equality, especially with regard to equal opportunities for political participation in the formal political sphere. Civil society thus enables the broad participation of various stakeholders in the process of handling public and political issues - participation that is compatible with modern representative democracy.

Wide political participation can be valuable for two reasons[14]. It can be considered valuable because of its *intrinsic* properties, i.e. it can be seen as the proper way of doing politics. Nobel laureate Amartya Sen (1999) holds that citizen participation is (at least in part) intrinsically valuable since it represents a key component of human capability. Participating in one's development through open and non-discriminatory processes is integral to one's well-being and quality of life. However, participation can also be considered valuable because of its *instrumental* properties, i.e. it can be seen as a favourable means for achieving a desired outcome. Participation in decision-making procedures can thus contribute to the realisation of some other valuable ends - better public policies, more

accountable government and so on. Civil society, through which participation happens, is thus often seen as a corrective mechanism for democracy, one that can reduce democratic deficits but also help protect human, civic and minority rights.

However, the rise of various illiberal and extreme NGOs in the US, and their consequent spread to Europe, represents a threat not only to the participative element of these democracies but also to liberal democracies as such. These organisations have begun using the mechanisms of participatory democracy, combining them with populist and anti-establishment narratives and polarised social media to limit or reduce the rights and liberties of marginalised minorities. They thus show that civil society can have a dark side and threaten the participatory potential of democratic regimes. Such organisations can easily be identified in the Western Balkans and here we will focus on Croatian cases. The NGOs observed have adopted an appropriate vocabulary to meet the dominant human rights discourse. They no longer use terms that are usually linked to racism or nationalism, but instead shape their political messages using positive non-ideologised terms or liberal terms whose meaning has been changed or deformed. This new vocabulary, among other things, differentiates them from some older movements and organisations which promoted the same aims, but were less efficient in attracting popular support.

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15. For a detailed discussion on the causes and consequences of the rise of radical parties and movements in Europe, see Muis and Immerzeel (2017). Swain (2002) gives a detailed, though somewhat outdated, account on the rise of radical (nationalist) organisations in the United States.

16. Human rights setting scope to the list of topics that can be legitimately discussed, something like ‚rights as trumps' (Dworkin, 1984).

17. Many liberal thinkers agree that the family is a basic institution and should be protected by the state. Famous liberal thinker John Rawls (2001) introduces the idea of „The Family as a Basic Institution" as the title for Section 50 of Justice as Fairness: A Restatement. In the Croatian context, Nebojša Zelič (2013), one of the leading intellectuals arguing against the referendum on the constitutional definition of marriage, explicity stated that „the constitution shoud emphasize the protection of the family, for it is indeed a very important component of every society".

4.1 A New Strategic Approach

There are many reasons that explain the surge in popularity of extreme and radical right-wing parties, movements and organisations, and no simple analysis can give us a final and comprehensive answer[15] . One of the reasons is, doubtless, the success of such organisations in „mainstreaming" their image and message (Talisse, 2009). The dominant liberal narrative, which used to marginalise extreme political and civil organisations by imposing human rights discourse[16] and censorship of hate speech, seems to be unable to continue doing so in the new millennium. These new organisations are characterised by „new tactics, new symbols, and new language designed to allay the fears of citizens repelled by more extreme approaches" (Swain, 2002: 25). This new methodology places strong emphasis on semantics – the aim is to translate the old values and objectives in terms that will be more appealing to the majority of the citizenry. The content and the agenda of radical right-wing organisations are thus rewritten and undesirable terms are replaced by more acceptable ones. In the United States, racism and nationalism are cast as „pride", hate as „awareness" and white supremacy as „civil rights" (Swain and Nieli, 2003; also Talisse 2009). In Europe, radical right-wing civil society associations use human rights discourse, liberal rights and the value of diversity to support and legitimise their objectives (Butler, 2006; Burack 2008). The same goes for Croatia, where, for example, parental rights are used to influence and change school curricula (Petričušić, Čehulić and Čepo, 2017).

This approach is successful in, at least, two aspects. Firstly, it encourages many citizens to embrace the ideas and policies in question, while simultaneously making the position immune to the most obvious criticism by opposing activists. After all, not many would oppose the idea that parents should have some say in the education of their children, or the idea that the state should, *to some extent*, protect and promote family through its laws and policies[17]. Secondly, it allows traditional liberal institutions (e.g. the supreme or constitutional court) to become entrusted with safeguarding civil and human rights powerless

to continue doing so. Again, illiberal NGOs use liberal procedures and human rights declarations to advance restrictive policies, thus keeping their proposals outside of the juridical boundaries of supreme (or constitutional) courts.

4.2 The Croatian landscape of Illiberal NGOs

The extreme and illiberal NGOs[18] of this 'new wave' began to emerge in Croatia from 2006, resulting in almost twenty such organizations active in 2018. Sharing similar traditional (Catholic) values, they promote pro-life ideas and restrictive laws regarding abortion and combine them with many other conservative ideas, including anti-gay views (only monogamous heterosexual couples should have the right to marry, to adopt children and to enjoy special protection by the state), and a strong appeal for parental (parents should be able to raise their children as they see fit, to determine what their children will be taught in schools, without much interference from the state and state-appointed experts) and religious rights (religious pharmacists should not be required to make contraception available to citizens). Finally, some NGOs have begun promoting active citizen participation in the decision-making processes, both by organising referendums and pressure groups and by making appeals to change the electoral law.

Probably the most (in)famous association of this type in Croatia is *In the Name of the Family* (U ime obitelji). Generally speaking, the organisation is dedicated to promoting traditional values and lifestyles, fighting against same-sex marriage and non-religious sexual education, but also against special political rights for ethnic minorities (Petričušić, Čehulić and Čepo, 2017). This is also the association that led most of the citizen-initiated

referendum initiatives, including the successful initiative for a referendum on the constitutional definition of marriage and initiatives for referendums on the reduction of political rights of ethnic minorities and the change of the electoral law. The latter initiatives will very likely be successful considering that the organisers managed to collect significantly more supporters' signatures than was needed.

The *Vigilare* association is mostly oriented towards promoting pro-life values, including strong opposition to abortion and contraception, but also euthanasia, and the advancement of restrictive policies that severely limit or prohibit such practices. Interestingly, Vigilare also has a strong neoliberal economic component, advocating against welfare state policies and state interventionism, thus further stressing their affiliation to American neo-conservative (and not European Christian democrat) world views.

The *Voice of Parents for Children* Organization (Glas roditelja za djecu) is one of the first illiberal NGOs, famous for its (successful) activism against the introduction of a sexual education curriculum in schools (Bijelić, 2008). It strongly promotes the Catholic division of gender roles and advocates in favor of an abstinence-based sexual education program, based on Catholic views on family and sexuality (Petričušić, Čehulić and Čepo, 2017).

There are many other conservative NGOs that go beyond the scope of this paper[19], including the *Croatian Alliance for Life - CRO VITA*, the 'Blessed Alojzije Stepcinac' Association for Promoting Family Values*, the *Center for Natural Family Planning* and the *Center for the Renewal of Culture*, but also extreme civic initiatives such as *I Was an Embryo Too and 40 Days for Life* (Bartulica, 2013; Petričušić, Čehulić and Čepo, 2017). However, this brief review would be incomplete without mention of the political parties *Croatian Growth - HRAST and HRAST - Movement for a Successful Croatia,* both strongly affiliated with the most conservative and extreme NGOs in Croatia (Petričušić, Čehulić and Čepo, 2017). Despite huge successes in mobilising citizens through civil society organisations, these two parties have had very limited political

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18. Though many of the associations in question promote conservative and traditional views, they are framed as 'extreme' to differentiate them from older conservative associations affiliated with traditional Christian democratic parties and worldviews in well-organised societies. The differences can be seen both in the scope of values and corresponding policies the associations wish to promote and in the methods these associations use to advance their (political) aims.

19. There is not much scientific literature on these relatively new associations and initiatives in Croatia. Interested readers should look for Petričušić's, Čehulić's and Čepo's (2017) analysis of the conservative religious-political movement in Croatia for a more comprehensive overview.

success, with most citizens holding conservative worldviews (who otherwise supported initiatives from these NGOs) voting for the mainstream conservative (Christian democrat) party the *Croatian Democratic Union*.

4.3 The Values and Positions of Illiberal NGOs

The Croatian case is characterised not by a single association dominating the informal political arena, but by a number of different NGOs using different strategies and specialising in different areas, but holding a common central view. This part of the paper discusses four important claims advanced by the associations in question. These claims are not always explicitly stated, but there are good reasons to believe that they represent an important part of these associations' ideological background. Finally, these claims offer valuable material for further theoretical discussion and imply some far-reaching implementation methods and policy proposals.

(I) Most of the associations in question implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) endorse the idea that a traditional way of life and traditional values are what keeps the nation united, strong and independent (Petričušić, Čehulić and Čepo, 2017). Liberal worldviews that undermine traditional ways of life, traditional (gender and social) roles and Catholic moral values endanger not only the well-being of conservative and religious citizens, but the well-being of the entire political community. All citizens will suffer great harm if society disintegrates and the traditional ties that keep it together are broken. This seems to be a public argument, advocating for a certain public good, not just for the good of the majority. It might even meet some *formal* liberal criteria - the argument does not appeal to any particular comprehensive (religious or moral) doctrine of the good, but is instead formulated in a way that can be acceptable to various reasonable citizens[20].

The argument resembles that which Patrick Devlin used to respond to the Wolfenden report. Devlin held that society will disintegrate when no common morality is observed, and also claimed that the first stage of disintegration is often the loosening of moral bonds and traditional values. Society is therefore justified in taking the same steps to preserve its traditional moral code as it does to preserve its government (Devlin, 1968). Just like homosexuality in Devlin's case, liberal values and worldviews are, according to conservative and extreme NGOs, threats that loosen the bonds that hold a society together. Defending traditional and conservative values through state action is thus seen not only as following the will of the majority, but as protecting society from disintegration.

(II) Another important idea that characterises some (though not all) illiberal NGOs is the claim that mainstream politics is dominated by minority and anti-Croatian interests, sponsored by the EU. There is a serious democratic deficit, with political elites making laws and policies that promote the interests of ethnic, cultural and religious minorities (and financial elites, of course), while disregarding the interests of the majority of the population[21]. The EU is limiting the sovereignty of the people by defining political issues (e.g. human rights and court independence) that cannot be changed by the democratic majority. These liberal rights and procedures protected by the EU are simultaneously seen as serving foreign or minority interests, against the interest of the democratic majority.

This brings about a fascinating shift in interest/value terminology, which is completely turned around. Extreme NGOs are active to represent values, while minority organisations are active to promote their narrow interests.

(III) Civil society, according to such extreme NGOs, is as corrupted as the government is. Liberal NGOs are (relating to the first and second points) paid to undermine traditional values and disintegrate society[22]. This can be resolved by

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20. For more information on the liberal criterion of legitimacy, successfully used in the second part of the 20th centruy to block religious arguments in the public sphere, see Rawls (2001).

21. There are many cases that support this rhetoric. For example, consider Batarelo (2017).

22. Consider, for example, U ime obitelji (2018) and the claim that „Miletić sees as the central problem political elites and parapolitical civil society organisations financed by the state".

cutting government funding for civil society[23]. Civil society organisations should be financed by private donations[24]. This will result in civil society promoting the interests of the majority, and not of the minority. It is very important to emphasise how this type of argumentation differentiates between the extreme NGOs of the 1990s and those extreme NGOs of the ‚new wave'. While the former argued in favour of government generously supporting civil society organisations promoting traditional values and the worldviews of the majority, the latter are more sympathetic towards minimal government that appears to be neutral with regard to different systems of value. However, the end goal is the same - civil society organisations will not be oriented towards improving the living standard of marginalised minorities, but will instead address the problems affecting the majority of the population.

(IV) Some of the extreme NGOs see the laws and policies protecting liberal rights from the majority rule as leading enemies of democracy. Citizens should be free to decide how they want to shape their political community, and experts and politicians sharing some liberal worldview should not be able to block democratic legislation against the will of the people. At the national level, this is directed against the supreme/constitutional court, minority representation in the parliament, but also against election thresholds that have kept extreme parties out of the parliament for decades. (Political) Power should belong to the people, not to the elites. Instruments of participatory or even direct democracy (e.g. the referendum) are thus employed to close any future discussion and to settle the issue in question in accordance with the will of the majority (White and Ypi, 2016).

4.4 What Is Wrong with Illiberal NGOs?

The scope of this paper does not allow for a detailed analysis of the problems related to the activities of conservative and extreme NGOs in Croatia. Therefore, just a few problems (not necessarily the most important ones) are briefly discussed in this part of the paper.

Extreme NGOs insist upon national unity based on a single identity not everyone shares - instead of seeking to construct political unity in common political institutions and welfare state mechanisms, these NGOs argue in favour of national unity by appealing to ethnicity and religion, elements not all citizens share (Zelić, 2017).

Though the civil society organisations in question rarely (or never) speak of the reduction and denial of liberal rights, and though they are reluctant to endorse the idea that the majority should be authorised to enter the private sphere of individuals, they still hold that the majority should be able to make decisions about matters that have for long been considered out of its legitimate influence. This is primarily related to purely scientific matters, where scientific theories are considered ideologised and are therefore seen as promoting the private interests of small elite groups (Cerovac, 2016).

Finally (though this need not be their intention), extreme NGOs promote polarisation and animosity within society. They provoke conflicts between majority and minority, reduce social trust and bring into question the authority of both the state and science.

4.5 Conclusion

The rise of conservative and extreme NGOs in Croatia and in Europe seems to be a phenomenon that cannot easily be stopped. In the Croatian case these ideas are still underrepresented in the formal political sphere (except for referendums), but in the rest of Europe they correspond with the rise of right-wing populist parties (most notably in Poland and Hungary, but also in France, Germany

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23. This can be seen from a proposal supported by the association (and later political party) „In the Name of the Family", suggesting that the state should stop financing the activities of NGOs and redirect the funds to support the role of the family as a social institution (Politika+, 2015).

24. Consider Luka Popov's (from the Vigilare Association) claim that „[…] our association is financed exclusively by the citizen donations… [...] Our values are recognized and supported in society and we do not need any funds from the state, EU or the local administration" (N1, 2016).

and Italy).

It is difficult to recommend a way forward, considering the seriousness of the situation and the limited political power of left-wing parties in most of Europe. Liberal and left-wing NGOs seem to lack both the political influence and the mechanisms to organise and mobilise citizens - this does not imply that liberal NGOs are useless, but it warns that they cannot hold the conservative revolution at bay on their own. On the other hand, liberal and left-wing parties also seem to lack political influence in the formal political arena, but (even if they are in a position of power) further risk making the extremists' thesis on the oppression of the democratic majority apparently true.

Mass political mobilisation, something like Jeremy Corbyn's reform of the Labour party, might be a way forward. Contemporary social movements in the region (e.g. *Let's Not Drown Belgrade and Justice for David*) might be good examples of such mass mobilisation, but they lack organisational structure, internal hierarchy and influence in the formal political sphere. Instead, left-wing political parties should themselves be transformed, thus initiating the process of their political regeneration. Alternatively, it seems that the left will have to count on help from moderate conservative (Christian democrat) parties that also oppose initiatives by extreme civil society organisations.

5. Instead of an Ending

A vast number of studies, policy analyses and recommendations have been written, promoted and debated in the last almost two decades since the beginning of the EU integration processes, drawing attention to the open socio-political issues in the Western Balkans and offering a variety of ways, tools and advice as to how to tackle them. The entire digital library of analyses and studies is available in all Friedrich Ebert Stiftung offices across WB countries whose focus is to support democratisation in different policy fields. Of course, we need adequate, independent, sound and solid policy work, but what we desperately need nowadays is to look for ways and means as to

how, where and with whom to implement them and to start engaging and acting against illiberal and authoritarian tendencies and for democracy, prosperity, justice and equality.

The brief analysis offered in this study exactly pinpoints a lack of action, the missing step in the politics that leads us all further along the de-democratization path. There are no innocents in this process, as we have tried to spotlight here. Closing eyes in the European Union accompanied by corrupt and nationalist political elites at home and the rise of conservative and illiberal social movements take away any agency from citizens, leaving them in the apolitical limbo that is harming their wellbeing and abolishing any positive vision of the future.

"The new," Hannah Arendt teaches us "always appears in the guise of a miracle." Six Western Balkan countries as members of the EU anytime soon would, from today's perspective, amount to a miracle. This is exactly why we need to turn to internal emerging political forces, hoping that they can reinstall democracy and bring (back) a decent life to citizens before they all emigrate in the marked flow of the brain drain.

Therefore, instead of offering our recommendations that can only echo those already written, we call for democratic political engagement and the coordinated action of those political and civil forces that still believe that the Western Balkans have a European perspective and that the European Union will remain the most successful peace project of our times.

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