

Political Culture in Southeast Europe

Navigating between Democratic and Authoritarian Beliefs and Practices

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- The failure of the countries in Southeast Europe in the last three decades to initiate deep political and societal change that would lead them towards the goal of liberal democracy cannot be explained only by the reference to wars and internal conflicts or by external factors related to their peripheral position in Europe. We argue that political culture has to be taken into consideration to help explain the phenomenon of defective or phony democracy in the Western Balkans.
- A more forceful expression of emancipatory values by youth, along with greater action capabilities provided by economic growth, could create a more democratic political culture and leaders that are more accountable within a generation. However, it is necessary to have knowledge and understand what we want to influence, because simply supporting ›democracy‹ can go hand in hand with support for authoritarian values.
- It has to be accepted and fully realized that political conditions and practices are not part of the inherited *cultural* repertoire, but are shaped by highly complex and intertwined structural and socio-economic processes. Then we will be able to respond with adequate (political and structural) propositions and solutions that might »expand popular capacities« (in the words of Stuart Hall) and bring about the desired change in Southeast Europe.

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Introduction: The Quest for a New Political Culture

Gazela Pudar Draško and Vedran Džihic

Any process of political and wider social and political changes strongly depends on the quality of political culture. The failure of the countries of Southeast Europe (often called the Western Balkans) in the last three decades to initiate deep political and societal change that would lead them towards the goal of liberal democracy cannot be explained only by the reference to wars and internal conflicts or external factors due to their peripheral position in Europe. It is obvious that even the states of the former Yugoslavia that did not experience conflict have faced substantial difficulties in introducing a democratic political system with a core division of power, sound and transparent institutions and government, and adherence to the whole set of liberal rights and values.

We argue that political culture has to be taken into consideration to help explain the phenomenon of defective or phony democracy in the Western Balkans. We believe that we need to turn to the invisible, fluid, and often neglected notion of political culture to better understand and comprehend what has been and is going on in Southeast Europe. The focus on political culture, defined as the sum of »fundamental values, sentiments and knowledge that give form and substance to political processes« (Pye, 1995: 965) does not seek to omit the fact that there are a variety of reasons for weak(ening) democracy in the region. However, looking at political culture opens the horizon for broader analysis.

What is particularly paradoxical with the notion of political culture is that it is simultaneously seen as both the precondition as well as a consequence of democracy. The pro-democratic character of a political culture is usually based on high political participation, emancipatory values, freedom, and self-expression (Inglehart and Welzel, 2005). It is easy to come to the agreement that all of the

above are substantially lacking in Western Balkan societies. Political culture in the region is often described as predominantly passive, clientelistic, and prone to authoritarian-submissive patterns, populism, and ethno-nationalism. The region's political culture was grafted onto the parochial, patriarchal, and authoritarian culture of early 20th century and further developed during the period of self-managed socialism with emancipatory elements or, in the case of Albania, in extremely closed communism that significantly deprived citizens of any active role in society. Finally, it was stamped with the failure of the post-communist political elites to de-capture the state and strengthen democratic institutions.

Recent data from Southeast Europe show that common citizens tend to exclude themselves from political affairs and perceive politics, parties, and politicians as highly corrupted, isolated, and elitist (Fiket, Pavlović and Pudar Draško, 2017). This detachment from politics, together with widespread belief that nothing can be changed in the realm of the political, which is dominated by political parties and strongmen, can be partly explained by the failed promise of democratic transition. Transition to democracy has become a dead-end street and the promised and expected transformation of societies into democratic and free societies has not materialized. The process of Europeanisation, which was positioned as the path to a better life and to freedom, has failed to deliver on its promises. Both the transition to democracy as well Europeanisation have begun to be perceived as processes where only common people must pay the price, which has led to the loss of patience and decrease of the support for democracy and weakened support for EU integration. More importantly, the long duration of these transitional processes has negatively influenced the overall support for some of the basic democratic values that should be the core of democratic political culture.

Adding to this equation the aforementioned state capture and weak institutions common to Western Balkans countries, as well as the perception of political elites as completely detached from the needs of the citizens, we get a very bleak overall picture. The vacuum in terms of normative role models for further development, or to put it more dramatically, the lack of any meaningful vision for societies, is filled by authoritarian modes of government and political behavior and by very aggressive nationalist rhetoric operating within binary codes of »us« (being good and morally pure people) vs. »them« (the aggressive barbarian »Others«).

(Ethno)political entrepreneurs misuse these aspects of political culture in the Western Balkans to shape the new development of a solely parochial political culture, or, at best, a subject political culture.¹ This new culture rests on a new communitarian approach that builds on the values of an allegedly homogenous community. It builds on the idea that values are fixed variables and that they are strongly connected with particular cultures and their historical experiences.² Communitarians, or in our case, nationalist populists that base their argumentation on the communitarian turn, define the values shared by a community as the basic elements which hold society together and define its structure, and shape institutions, the mechanisms of socialization, the limits of freedom, etc. From a communitarian perspective, there is always some uncontroversial good like national identity, and some kind of community is essential for its acquisition and preservation. In a nationalist turn, this underlying assumption about the intrinsic value of communities is complemented by the claim that the ethno-cultural nation is the kind of community ideally suited for this task. In Southeast Europe we see increasing appeals to conservative family values and solidarity on the basis of the community, mixed with – paradoxically enough – an anti-elitist rhetoric by political elites themselves and the politics of fear (of the »other« and of the »chaos« orchestrated by political opponents). This has

resonated with parts of the population that have a feeling of losing out (the so-called »losers of transition«). The fear of disorder and a belief that only strong leadership can ensure political and economic stability has become an important element of people's collective psychology. This rhetoric has helped build a populist »moral« common sense and made it possible for leaders to appear to be with the people and against the elites and their failings at the same time (Bruff, 2014). This has enabled them to legitimize an ever-growing authoritarian rule and a political culture where values of »our community« in »times of disorder and fear« can only be protected by a strongman. In such circumstances, democratic values, rule of law, and human rights and freedoms can easily be suspended.

However, adding to the rather paradoxical picture of the region, the recent years have seen some authentic grassroots movements that engage with contentious politics and offer elements of an alternative political culture (Mujanović, 2017). They are visible in the particular character of their political action, such as the refusal to nurture or promote leaders of movements, and efforts to bring common everyday citizens' issues into focus instead of ideological struggles based on ideas. The political culture they desire and aspire to is marked by citizens' engagement and critical deliberation, and opposed to isolated political elites and the pervasive neoliberal collapse of the social state. It remains to be seen if their engagement will lead to success stories in the Western Balkans. What we can be nearly sure of is that development of a democratic political culture that would be engaged, active, and critical requires decades of work – without illusion that such a change will come or is able to come tomorrow.

Nevertheless, these emancipatory acts of engagement and action are pieces of the puzzle that are very much needed today. They do present a vivid alternative to the gloomy state of play in the region where democracy is marginalized, rhetorically misused, and stripped to the bones. Ultimately, they have the potential to shape the path towards keeping alive the vision that a free, democratic, and emancipated life is possible.

1 More on these types in the following chapter authored by Damir Kapidžić.

2 »Values are handed down from generation to generation rather than invented or negotiated« (Etzioni, 1996: 93).

The following pages present short thought-provoking essays by four younger authors from Southeast Europe, focused on political culture and its interconnectedness with the social environment, be it internal or external. We start by explaining the very concept of political culture by combining student and expert perspectives (Damir Kapidžić). Then, we offer a critical review of the European Union's efforts to transpose European fundamental political values onto Balkans by using stick and carrot politics (Dario Čepo). The role of political elites in failing to build accountable institutions based on such values is emphasized as an important exogenous factor to the reintroduction of parochial political culture. Analysis of authoritarian tendencies in Western Balkans, compared to the Central and Eastern Europe, reveals the great disillusion of citizens with what is supposed to be the »good life« for citizens after the fall of communism (Jelena Džankić). The analysis offers a tripartite picture of the obstacles to the development of a democratic political culture in the WB region. Finally, the last chapter critically reviews the tendencies to put a heavy burden on the backs of social movements in the Western Balkans by observing them as »healthy« reactions to growing authoritarianism and the withdrawal of citizens from the political arena (Jelena Vasiljević). A more nuanced and complex analysis is called upon, in line with the overall goal of this publication.

Discussing Democratic Political Culture in Southeast Europe

Damir Kapidžić

Navigating Political Culture between Beliefs and Knowledge

When I talk with my undergraduate students of political science on the topic of political culture, I start with two basic questions: 1) what do they perceive as political culture, and 2) what is the political culture of Bosnia and Herzegovina (and other Southeast European countries)? As a topic that lends itself to being examined from an everyday perspective, it makes sense to be aware of common perceptions before moving on to academic interpretations. The students have an idea what I am talking about when I mention political culture but cannot put it into words. It is one of those phenomena where you »know it when you see it«, but it is inherently difficult to describe. One student would say that it is about »acting in a civilized manner in politics«; another would counter, »No, it's also about what you believe in«; »But you can believe in one thing and still act as a primitive being if this suits your agenda«, the first would reply. Often, political culture is ascribed to political actors, party politicians, and civil servants. When asked about who it is that has a political culture, whether it is certain individuals, all citizens, or society as a whole, students are not sure where to look for it.

»Does Bosnia and Herzegovina have a political culture?« I ask them. »No!« they cry almost unanimously. What does it have then? »A political anti-culture, a primitive form of political expression,« a student replies. Really, I wonder, and ask them to give me some examples. Then we discuss the misuse of power, corruption in office, and ultimately, voters expressing uncritical support for leaders they despise. Focusing on unquestioning electoral support, we start to talk about cause and effect. In all the examples, my students list the effects of a

particular political culture but not the causes. This does not help us empirically identify and describe it. In order to do so we need to leave a »common sense« approach behind and adopt a rigorous academic view on political culture.

First lesson: when discussing political culture, it is important to be aware of the distinction between what you *think* it is and what you *know* about the political culture of a country.

Political Culture of Countries vs. Political Culture across Countries

The interaction with students that I described in the previous paragraphs could have happened in almost any setting, including with fellow academics. Just like the proverbial blind men attempting to describe an elephant, political culture is at the same time self-evident for everyone, but not knowledgeable in its entirety. In its broadest understanding it is a set of values and beliefs that give order and meaning to a political process and which underlie the rules and norms that shape a political system. Political culture thus links the private and the public, the psychological and the institutional, historical experience and current action.

Situated at the intersection of sociology, psychology, and political science, political culture is part of every discipline and none in particular. Adopting a political science perspective, Almond and Verba (1963) argued that political culture can be classified along three ideal types: parochial (traditional political structures with disengaged citizens), subject (centralized authoritarian), and participant (democratic). They use the term *civic culture* to describe an empirical (Anglo-American biased) relation between citizens and elites that is most

conducive to liberal democracy. Lijphart (1999) focuses on the interaction among elites and classifies political culture as coalitional or contradictory, focusing on examples from the Netherlands, Austria, and Switzerland.

While most early studies looked at individual cases and compared a small number of countries, this changed with the introduction of the World Values Survey (WVS) in the early 1980s. The possibility of empirically capturing and comparing citizens' values across a large number of countries led to the identification of certain sets of values that are conducive to democratic development. Inglehart (2003) focused on a set he termed *emancipative values* that include an emphasis on universal freedoms. Inglehart and Welzel (2005) developed an index of emancipative values and tested it against support for democratic institutions, economic development, and measures of quality of democracy for over 190 countries. The index focuses on segments related to child autonomy, gender equality, popular voice, and sexual emancipation.

In addition, the availability of *action resources*, made possible through a post-materialist emphasis on personal development over collective survival, creates conditions to utilize emancipatory values that motivate people in their pursuit of democracy. Action resources are socio-economic capabilities that enable people to invest time and effort to fight for their aspiration to universal freedoms and human empowerment. In effect, democracy has never established itself firmly or persistently in countries whose population did not have both action resources and emancipative values (Brunkert et al. 2018).

Second lesson: a political culture conducive to democracy is dependent on citizens' understanding of universal freedom and their ability to take action to support it.

Political Culture in Southeast Europe

There is no comprehensive academic study of political culture that covers all countries of Southeast Europe and that is based on empirical evidence of val-

ues and beliefs among the population. This makes it more difficult to relate the topic to a context my students (and academics) understand well. However, there are individual country studies and some data that can give insight, however imperfect it may be. Since all countries have been included in one or several WVS waves, we have data on their position along the axis of self-expression vs. survival values. The region exhibits a preference for survival values with a stronger emphasis on the collective rather than on the individual. This is most pronounced in Albania, and least in Croatia, which again maps neatly onto measures of the quality of democracy among countries in the region. A stronger emphasis on individual values equals a more democratic system, both in Southeast Europe and globally.

This is indicative of a political culture that does not fully support active citizen participation and democracy but instead is split between individual emancipation on the one hand and the politics of passivity and acceptance of competitive authoritarian rule on the other (Levitsky & Way 2010). Welzel (2013) would characterize Southeast European countries as examples for the model of the allegiant democratic citizen, who are more likely to give absolute support for leaders they elect. Assertive democratic citizens, on the other hand, are present in more established democracies with stronger emancipative values and demand continuous accountability from their elected leaders.

Other surveys, such as the Southeast European Youth Studies,³ are also useful to give us a glimpse into the values of younger generations (Turčilo et al. 2018). In all countries of the region, but particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina, survival values related to employment and welfare far outweigh emancipative values related to freedom and democracy among youth aged 14–29. While support for democracy and self-reported voting rates are high, there is also prevalent support for authoritarian values and the rule of strongmen.

These two seemingly contradictory findings actually build on one another. As Brunkert et al. (2018: 13) show, many people »confuse democracy with

3 Conducted with support from the Friedrich Ebert Foundation.

»benevolent« authoritarianism, understood as the guardianship of people's best interest by wise leaders to whom people owe obedience« among populations with low emancipative values.

Third lesson: political culture in Southeast Europe is marked by low emancipative values and a weak focus on universal freedom, which in turn can lead to autocratic misconceptions of democracy.

Students as active Citizens?

»Did you go out to vote in the last elections?« I ask my students, and most of them say they did. I ask them if they are satisfied with how the representatives they elected are performing. »Of course not, how can I be satisfied when they are doing nothing,« is a common reply from a student. »Well,« I wonder aloud, »did you personally try and do something about it? Such as go to a protest, sign a petition, or write a blog?« Almost none of them did. Even among students who demand a better future, democracy stops at the ballot box.

It is not enough to be critical of one's political culture, but it is necessary to be the change you want to see. What sounds like a cheap phrase holds some truth as political culture is susceptible to change, especially generational change. A more forceful expression of emancipative values by youth, along with greater action capabilities provided by economic growth, can create a more democratic political culture and leaders that are more accountable within a generation. At the same time, it is necessary to have knowledge and understand what it is you want to influence (emancipative values); and know that simply supporting democracy can actually go hand in hand with support for authoritarian values. »We want change and we'll get our opportunity ... or make one for ourselves,« a socially active student concludes. I hope that she understands what kind of change in political culture she wants to make.

European Values and the Political Culture of the Western Balkans Europe

Dario Čepo

The societies of the Western Balkans developed under idiosyncratic conditions. Political and economic, as well as religious and cultural, revolutions hit this part of the world especially hard. Peoples of the area, at the same time, lived mostly on the subsistence level, impoverished, illiterate, and with no political power. Hence, a specific mixture of domestic and imposed, general as well as specific, values developed that would help both the convergence and divergence between different local societies.

At this point, we are only interested in those values that are linked with specific political and legal cultures that developed in the countries of the Western Balkans. These are important as vehicles through which societies built themselves as temporal entities, both transposing themselves back in history, as well as building their futures. Historical narratives of our societies being such as they are because they define themselves in differentiation from the Other, hence having specific values, lead to the establishment of political and legal orders as we know them today. Future-gazing based on values is, linked, on the other hand, to the imagined society we wish to build or which we want our children to live in.

Both of these temporal narratives, although local in construction, are based on and connected to wider European narratives of what we as a continent are, what we were, and what we want to make ourselves to be. Hence, interaction of local and European narratives leads to the (re)introduction, transposition, and acceptance of values that are or will become fundamental to these societies. The processes of negotiations, Europeanization, and EU accession were meant to do exactly that: re-introduce fundamental values we once shared and build new ones based on the collective mem-

ory of past events. The main tool for facilitating these processes was conditionality, and main goal – a prize for a job well done – membership in the European Union.

However, as I will show here, using the examples of several current member states from the Central and Eastern Europe, introducing fundamental European values was the easy part of the process. Making societies embrace them as their own, and keeping political elites accountable when they break the practices based on those values, proved to be the tricky part. Hence, I conclude that that conditionality failed as a tool and that enlargement policy did not succeed in what it set out to do: that is, make liberal, representative democracy, based on the fundamental values of the European Union, the only game in town.

European Values and the European Union

What do we mean by fundamental European values? I define these as values clearly espoused by the European Union, its institutions and political actors, which are written in founding treaties as a de facto constitutional framework of the European Union. We can detect them clearly in the narratives of the European, as well as domestic, elites (using the same words but not always defining them in a similar way), from politicians and the champions of industry, to civil society organizations and local activists, including common people when they complain about the state of their societies. In short, these values are respect for human rights (particularly minority rights), freedom, democracy, equality, and the rule of law. Their main role is to safeguard liberal, representative democracy across the European continent.

Ultimately, democracy means rule based on the sovereign will of the people as a political entity, and is practically transposed as representative democracy, with certain direct democracy tools kept by the citizens as a contingency. Hence, the questions that arise are not only what kind of democracy we have in the European Union, but also what kind of democracy the European Union protects and promotes. We can define this new system as a three-pronged institution: democracy as equality, democracy as representation, and democracy as participation. All three elements are important if we want to build an inclusive, civil political culture, based on citizens that are knowledgeable on how the political system works, what their rights as citizens are, and how to make sure political elites safeguard their interests. Those citizens also need to strike the right amount of participatory democratic activities and allow their elected representatives to do the job they were elected to do.

With almost no collective memory of a democratic life, this is something the societies in the Western Balkans needed to learn from scratch. Hence, progressive forces in those societies saw the European Union and its enlargement process as the best and fastest way to transcend either parochial or subject political cultures dominant in this part of the world. The European Union provided the policy of enlargement for exactly the same reason. Stick to the reform agenda, abide by all the benchmarks set through the conditionality principle, the EU narrative went, and you will not only change your societies for the better, but you will be rewarded with membership in one of the most exclusive clubs in the world.

How was the conditionality principle supposed to work? How was it meant to introduce fundamental values to candidate countries? It was based on three interconnected elements: a focus on technical questions, financial help to overcome problems, and the carrot-and-stick approach to incentivize domestic political elites to cooperate. However, can technical instruments embed lasting change in a society? Could a short-term approach win against long-term embedded views and attitudes? As example after example in the Central and Eastern Europe show, the answer is an almost

resounding no. It seems that the combination of the short-term focus of European institutions and actors and long-term embedded values of specific national political and legal cultures, and an almost complete lack of »sticks« after accession, can only result in the failure of conditionality.

Countries as diverse as Romania, Poland, Hungary, and Croatia give enough proof for such a conclusion. Romania was a bellwether case. Plagued with the corruptive and nepotistic practices of its political and economic elite, it was only granted membership after the government hired a strong and independent public prosecutor, Monica Macovei, who started putting politicians behind bars. However, almost immediately after Romania became a member in 2007, Macovei was fired, and the government is putting pressure on current prosecutor Laura Codruta Kövesi as well. Hungary has been playing the »two steps backward one step forward« game with the European Union ever since Viktor Orban came to power. Although the complete capture of the court, media, and EU fund systems were criticized by European institutions, his support from the European People's Party (EPP) allows him to worsen situation even more with no fear of reprisal. Poland experienced a complete reversal of democratizing trends, with the Law and Justice Party capturing all rungs of power. It used the victimhood narrative to portray Poland as deserving more than the European Union provides and uses this narrative to maintain an us-versus-them climate that helps rally citizens around their positions. Croatia's dominant political party, the Croatian Democratic Union – a member of the EPP – also used membership in the European Union to reverse or curtail almost all the changes set up through the accession process. It captured independent institutions such as the Agency on Electronic Media, national television, and curtailed others, such as the Conflict of Interest Committee, and through legal means strengthened its stranglehold in municipalities and regions.

Why Not to Rely on EU?

In the end, we need to ask ourselves a fundamental question. Would the European Union help the

Western Balkans democratize and evolve a civic political culture? Could we expect the European Union to change our societies for the better, based on the fundamental values espoused in the founding treaties? The short answer is no. The longer answer is no as well, with this negative prospect based on four distinct reasons.

First, conditionality is based on accepting and transposing technical rules in specific, mostly economic, areas. This transposition is based on founding treaties and needs to take into account fundamental values of the European Union, but it is in its nature quite technical and, hence, apolitical. Therefore, it is hard for conditionality to win against both political elite's unwillingness to fundamentally change the rules that brought them to power, as well as against embedded values of local communities, some of which are directly opposite of the values the European Union is trying to promote.

Second, the institutional framework of the European Union does not help either. Although it was not envisaged as a separate institution in the founding treaties of either the European Coal and Steel Community or the European Economic Community, the European Council has emerged as the strongest European institution post-Lisbon. Neither Jean Monnet nor Robert Schuman wanted national leaders anywhere near the supranational integration, thinking – correctly, as is now obvious – that they would lead to the dominance of national, instead of community interests. However, the Lisbon Treaty empowered national leaders to not only decide on the future trajectory of the integration, but allowed them to take the reins of everyday decision-making processes as well. Hence, where European policy was once based on community interests, it is now much weakened and based on the national interests of those member states most interested in a specific question. Taking into account Bosnia and Herzegovina specifically, as well as the Western Balkans in general, that member state is Croatia. The strength of the European Council and the position of Croatian government in it allows Croatia to influence European policies that might not be in the best interests of the European Union as a whole.

However, the biggest reason why I harbour no optimism that the European Union will be able to help with embedding European values in the countries of the Western Balkans, is the European Peoples Party, especially its party group in the European Parliament. As some of my examples showed, the European Peoples Party did nothing to stop the deterioration of democracies in Central and Eastern Europe. In some countries, like Hungary, the EPP is doing everything it can to protect their anti-democratic sister party, FIDES, and its autocratic leader Viktor Orban. With the dominance of right-of-centre and right-nationalist parties in much of the Western Balkans, especially in Serbia (whose dominant party is already a member of the EPP), we can expect for the EPP to turn a blind eye to undemocratic practices as long as their sister parties remain dominant forces in their countries.

All of these elements lead to short-sighted focus on current stability in the region, with fundamental values taking a back seat. This then leads to the development of stabilocracies – façade democracies in which fundamental values of the rule of law, equality, and the respect of human (especially minority) rights are relegated and ignored as long as stability, especially economic stability, is maintained. Institutional capture of entire countries by special interests, criminal organizations, and political elites (case in point is Montenegro, but Serbia is a good example as well) is a next step, or internal paralysis of political systems with divided societies (as is the case in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, or Kosovo).

By stating that the European Union will not help the Western Balkans in adopting European values, I do not mean to say there is no way forward for these countries. I simply imply that expecting the European Union to solve all our problems once we become members is a fool's errand. Example after example show us – from Poland and Hungary, even to Italy and Austria – that the European Union has no power, nor is it willing to change a member state in such a deep and profound way. Hence, it is on the Western Balkans' states, and their citizens, themselves, to work on introducing, anchoring, and strengthening European values in their own countries and societies. Once again, this

process will need to be led according to the proverbial saying, »do as I say, not as I do.« The focus will need to be on the optimistic and sometimes utopian narrative of the founding treaties, not on the practical, Machiavellian nature of current European politics.

Great Expectations, Greater Delusions: Western Balkans' Backslide Into Authoritarianism

Jelena Džankić

A lack of civic political culture in Western Balkans is rooted in a complex interplay of a number of factors, both endogenous and exogenous to the region. When the ›Third Wave‹ gave rise to new democracies in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), most of the southeastern corner of the continent was consumed by disintegration and conflict. The experiences of the fall of communism, break-ups of federal state(s), and war varied significantly across countries. This resulted in significant divergence in the development of political systems in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia.

In the early 1990s, marked by the transition of the CEE to democracy and a market economy, many authors feared that these fragile post-communist systems, with scarce (or virtually no) familiarity with a civic political culture and an open system, would revert to some form of authoritarianism or semi-authoritarianism (Rupnik 2007). Contrary to such concerns, with the exception of Slovakia under Vladimir Mečiar's rule, the ›return to Europe‹ (Kundera 1984) of CEE countries in the 1990s was rather smooth. This can be attributed to two overarching factors, which played a major role in differentiating the Western Balkan political space from the Central and East European one. First, the newly established CEE states were largely consolidated in terms of ethno-national issues, while partitions (Czech Republic and Slovakia) or secessions (the Baltic states) played out in a reasonably peaceful environment. Second, civic political cultures in CEE emerged in an environment conducive to democratisation and were supported by the Western political institutions through the course of their transition to democracy. By contrast, the fall of the Iron Curtain brought about rather different socio-political developments in

the Western Balkans, which experienced conflict and/or slips into authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes that capitalised on grievances of the pauperised population by reverting to nationalist rhetoric.

While the dawn of the new millennium marked a departure of the region towards democracy, the process of democratization of the Western Balkans has been neither linear nor complete (Bieber 2012; Pridham 2012). In some countries, this process was difficult primarily due to corruption embedded in the system and the weak state of democracy. In others, semi-authoritarian regimes came to power, while the third group of countries saw the establishment of democracy become impossible due to internal issues involving statehood and ethnic relations. The factors inhibiting democratisation overlapped. They played out in a context influenced by both endogenous and exogenous factors – a context that further enabled the ›great delusions‹ about democracy and the backsliding of the region into authoritarianism.

Three crucial elements related to the domestic political environment posed an obstacle to democratization in the Western Balkans:

1. The absence of a political culture has resulted in low levels of governmental accountability and legitimacy, as the population and civil society could not articulate their demands to policymakers.
2. The lack of understanding of the mechanisms of democracy has caused low policy responsiveness on the side of the policymakers, who do not face strong pressures to deliver on their agendas.

3. Access to institutional and economic resources of the state (previously held by communist parties) has enabled political elites to capture the state, facilitating, in a number of cases, longevity of political rule and regression into authoritarianism (Keil 2018).

Beyond the domestic context, two exogenous factors contributed to the weakening of democracy and the backsliding into authoritarianism across the Balkan region. Due to the region's recent history of conflict, the focus of the international community has been on regional stability and relations among countries. In turn, this ›outward look‹ further facilitated state capture, as local political elites had a large margin of manoeuvre domestically as long as they maintained ›good neighbourly relations‹. Simultaneously, a broader trend of the decay of political culture in democratic states, coupled with the recent rise of populism across Europe and the Americas, has reinforced the potential for relapsing into authoritarianism in the Western Balkans. The authoritarian tendencies that we can identify in the region have different root causes and have developed differently in the different countries. Even so, as a consequence of the interplay of endogenous and exogenous factors that enabled the weakening of democracy and local stronghold on institutions, they share a number of similar traits.

First, across the Western Balkan region, we can observe a tendency among the ruling political elites to seize the economic, structural, and cultural resources of states. Economic transition and in particular the processes of privatisation have provided the political elites with the financial basis for cementing their power. A common tendency in the process of privatisation entailed rapid sales and preferential access to the state's assets to these elites or their networks. Writing about the case of Macedonia, but applicable to the entire region, Sadiku (2013) noted that a »rapid and comprehensive privatisation weakened the possibility for the formation of any resistance or political discourse that would mobilise around the defence of public good.« In a similar fashion, institutional resources have been seized not the least through patronage networks, but also through control mechanisms

that entailed even proper party members. The example of the latter was the 2015 ›wiretapping scandal‹ in Macedonia, when senior government officials placed 20,000 citizens under surveillance, including not only opposition, but also members of the ruling party (MacDowall 2015). In addition, the capture of the cultural resources has been based on a combination of fear and the ethnification of social capital, i.e. mobilisation around ethnic instead of socio-political issues.

Second, a further authoritarian tendency across the Western Balkan states has been the production and dissemination of nationalist narratives, which had the objective of blurring the lines between the good and the bad, by focusing on an imagined ›common good‹ and identifying enemies that threaten its existence. An interesting dichotomy in this respect has been that between the ›fathers of the nation‹ vs. ›enemies‹, evidenced in ethnically divided countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, and Montenegro (Subotić 2013). In Serbia, for instance, the dominant narrative has been that of ›victimhood‹ and ›abandonment‹, coupled with the production of ›traitors‹ and ›terrorists‹ especially in relation to the status of Kosovo. In both contexts, these narratives, enabled by the lack of a civic political culture and disseminated through party-dominated media, helped the local political elites to present themselves as ›saviours‹ of their national or ethnic groups and thus hold the grip on the respective states.

The third commonality of authoritarian tendencies in the Western Balkans is the use of violent means or intimidation, which include not only discrediting political opponents but also physical violence. Across the region, we can find numerous examples of how political or civil society actors have been discredited by the ruling parties. In 2015, the Montenegrin Prime Minister Milo Đukanović gave a public statement in which he claimed that Vanja Čalović, leader of the Network for the Affirmation of Non-governmental Sector (MANS), was featured in a tabloid magazine in compromising photos, which ›corrupted public morals‹ (Kažošević 2015). Over the years, Čalović's network has reported on corruption in Montenegrin institu-

tions. Most recently, media in Serbia have offered conflicting accounts of the protest ›Put a stop to bloody shirts‹, organised by the country's opposition. The protest gathered individuals dissatisfied with the violent politics of the current government, after one opposition member was physically attacked. The media close to the government reported about the ›hypocrisy‹ of the protest and reported significantly fewer numbers of protesters than actually attended the event (BBC News 2018). Such a combination of discrediting political opponents and physical violence is not only a symptom of authoritarianism, but also one of the crucial mechanisms for sustaining it.

Finally, we can see that over the past few years, democracy has weakened and authoritarian tendencies have intensified in many Western Balkan states. The rise of this new authoritarianism is not only linked to externalities such as the financial crisis, the lack of an adequate engagement by external actors, or a general populist revival that we see around the world. Rather, it has also relied on the large patronage networks that had a debilitating effect on the democratisation prospects of the region. While being primarily rooted in the lack of civic political culture, these networks pose an obstacle to citizens' dissent, keep the democratic voices structurally weak, and reinforce the vicious circle of state capture and authoritarianism.

How to »Expand Popular Capacities«? Some Critical Observations on Political Culture in the Western Balkans

Jelena Vasiljević

In Stuart Hall's 1988 essay on Antonio Gramsci and the relevance of his thought for understanding Thatcherism, Hall writes the following:

»People in their right minds do not think that Britain is now a wonderfully booming, successful economy. But Thatcherism, as an ideology, addresses the fears, the anxieties, the lost identities, of a people. It invites us to think about politics in images. It is addressed to our collective fantasies, to Britain as an imagined community, to the social imaginary (...) Without the deepening of popular participation in national-cultural life, ordinary people don't have any experience of actually running anything. We need to re-acquire the notion that politics is about expanding popular capacities, the capacities of ordinary people. And in order to do so, socialism itself has to speak to the people whom it wants to empower, in words that belong to them as late 20th century ordinary folks.«⁴

Hall 1988, emphasis mine

Even though written thirty years ago, this passage speaks to our epoch as well. Strong, authoritarian leaders attract voters not by bringing them better economic conditions, but by seemingly answering their anxieties, grievances about lost identities, and by offering pleasing and soothing images and fantasies. On the other hand, we – the ever elusive and self-righteous figure comprising of progressive intellectuals, active citizens, engaged activists etc. – are appalled; we want an end to autocracies, and a *change* in politics, and in people's hearts and minds. Some of us too, like Hall in 1988, want »ordinary people« to »expand their capacities«, and hence we generally look with enthusiasm at recently emerging protests and movements throughout the region. And we want

to »address the people whom we want to empower in words that belong to them as 21st century »ordinary folks.« Yet a couple of problems seem to arise immediately from this unclear relation, both connecting and separating »us« and »them«.

Firstly, there is the obvious paradox of thinking about, and designing top-down incentives meant to strengthen bottom-up »organic« movements. There is something inherently self-denying in an effort to answer the question »how to help people self-organize?« Furthermore, this unspoken presumption that certain (external) actors are needed for a meaningful and effective citizens' action to take place contributes to the very sense of powerlessness among citizens that usually, *post festum*, comes to be seen as a manifestation of a political culture of passivity and dependence.

Secondly, this presumption is also connected with our widespread fears of the masses, of their political illiteracy and alleged irrationality, as the specter of populism haunts academic and expert circles time and again. This fear is legitimized by accounts of poor political culture, that, the narrative further goes, desperately needs improvement and strengthening – which then brings us back to the question of *who* is the enlightening subject capable of »doing the job«.

To break this vicious circle of a never quite identifiable *them* who lack proper political culture and *us* who allegedly know the diagnosis but are uncertain about the medicine, and to properly acknowledge the fact that *we are all stuck together* in societies with deeply unsatisfying levels of democracy, I propose re-examining the very notion of *political culture* and the way it is commonly used. The claim that our societies are characterized by citizens' passivity, clientelistic behavior, receptive-

⁴ The essay can be found here: <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/2448-stuart-hall-gramsci-and-us>.

ness for authoritarian messages, etc. is hardly disputable. The question is, however, whether these phenomena are best understood, and dealt with, as manifestations of *political culture*. There is a longstanding critique of describing political processes in terms of cultural traits of any kind, as the notion of culture inherently implies *traditional ways of doing things*, shared beliefs and common practices, blurring the role of *changing* situations, actors, and contexts shaping and conditioning political attitudes and behavior (Asad 1973, Kuper 1999, Rapport 2007).

In this respect, a presumption that social and political processes *depend* on political culture, which is in turn defined as »the sum of the fundamental values, sentiments and knowledge that give form and substance to political processes« (Pye 1995: 965)⁵ is in my mind deeply problematic. Mostly because it posits that, while politics is something processual and changing, values, sentiments, and knowledge are to be understood as something fundamental. Not only that it is flawed because it ignores how values and knowledge of every society are always heterogeneous, and constantly prone to change, but it could also be argued that, in fact, the very opposite is true: it is political processes themselves that shape the values, sentiments and knowledge (of a polity/society/state).

The recent political history of Serbia provides some examples. After the regime change in 2000, and some steady initial successes of EU integration, culminating with 2009 visa liberalization, citizens of Serbia overwhelmingly supported EU integration (more than 74 %). Seven years later, in 2016, the support dropped to less than 45 %.⁶ More importantly, let us not forget that there was a period of time when finally it seemed possible to engage the greater public in the discussion about war crimes and atrocities from the 1990s wars. In 2007, on the day the Belgrade District Court sentenced the members of the paramilitary »Scorpions« unit for executing Bosniak men and boys in Srebrenica in 1995, national television aired a

documentary detailing the crimes of the »Scorpions« that reached an overwhelming audience.⁷ In 2010, the Parliament of Serbia adopted a resolution condemning the crime in Srebrenica. Indeed, during the state presidencies of Tadić and Josipović, Serbia and Croatia had the best bilateral relations, and the two presidents backed a regional agreement on the prosecution of war crimes. All of these political decisions had an impact on citizens' attitudes, ethnic distances, sentiments, and values. The change of political circumstances and leaders, the need for new political elites to set the dominant agenda differently – especially by controlling both state-owned and private media – quickly translates into prevailing narratives, values, and attitudes. Additionally, we should not look at these processes as contained within the nation-states, or even solely within the region. They are intertwined with messages and politics streaming from the EU and other political centers, having (and changing) their own vision about the desirable state of affairs in the WB.

Therefore, if we still want to talk about *political culture* – referring to the conditions enabling the emergence of both dominant political forces, and those challenging them – we need to be cautious of falling into the trap of ascribing it to mentalities and historical predeterminations (which the notion of culture often does). Instead, we must fully acknowledge complex interdependencies, internal dynamics and external factors, and the wider political constellations that this region is a part of. Only then can we also properly assess and become effectively part of the emerging forces of dissent.

To conclude, I will refer to the recent text by political scientists Ferrera and Burelli (2019, forthcoming) dealing with political and economic stability of the EU after the crisis. They develop a notion that EU needs to be considered not as sum of its parts but as a *complex adaptive system* due to »the degree of interconnection and the pressures of mutual adjustment among the parts of a collective.« Properties of such systems are irreduc-

5 This definition was also used in the argument of the workshop »Political Culture in the Western Balkans« which preceded this publication.

6 https://www.b92.net/bbc/index.php?yyyy=2018&mm=08&dd=30&nav_id=1437212.

7 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/701057.html>. On the influence of such documentary films on shaping and changing citizens' attitudes and sentiments in the region, see Werner 2016.

ible and irreversible: »Irreducibility means that it is virtually impossible to disentangle systemic from sub-systemic causal dynamics; systemic properties are non-localizable and non-aggregative. Irreversibility means that initial conditions cannot be reconstituted via decomposition.«

In a similar vein, I believe that the space of the Western Balkans has become a complex adaptive system where the degree of interconnectedness of local political elites, EU politics, economic and geopolitical interests is at such a level that it is impossible to single out *political culture* as a factor in itself, supposedly comprising of autonomously functioning sets of beliefs, values and attitudes. Only once we accept and fully realize that the political conditions and practices we want to change are not part of the inherited *cultural* repertoire, but are shaped by highly complex and intertwined structural and socio-economic processes, will we be able to respond with adequate (political and structural) propositions and solutions that might »expand popular capacities« and bring about the desired change.

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