Post-1989 Political Change in the Balkan States: The Legacy of the Early Illiberal Transition Years

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Abstract

The Balkans remain one of Europe's more unstable and varied political landscapes, with mixed and diverse national trajectories. What we see today in the Balkan political space is largely the outcome of the type of transition that these countries experienced during the 1990s, the early years of political change from one party rule to multi-party political pluralism. This paper argues that the Balkan states developed some common traits in their first decade of transition: firstly, they maintained continuity with their communist past; secondly, they pursued an illiberal start dominated by domestic elites and top-down politics; and, finally, they underwent a collapse of their early illiberal competitive order before moving into more mainstream politics. Since then, democratic politics in the Balkans have experienced many improvements as a reaction to this illiberal start, but they have also sustained some democratic deficits which have a direct link to the initial illiberal years of the transition.

Key Words

Balkans, post-communist transition, democratisation, political elites, illiberal politics.

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Introduction

In the third decade following the fall of communism, the Balkans remain one of Europe's more unstable and varied political landscapes, with mixed and diverse national trajectories. Some countries are more politically stable than others, some still face legitimacy problems, and some are still struggling with divisive ethnic politics. What we see today in the Balkan political space is largely the outcome of the type of transition that these countries experienced during the 1990s, the early foundation years of political change from one party rule to multi-party political pluralism, when the first 'political pacts' were made and the first political, economic and social conflicts developed. Looking at the Balkan countries' early experience from communist totalitarianism to Western-inspired democracy, when the first foundations were laid, we are able to better appreciate both the current democratic progress and the consolidation of some democratic deficits.

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The remainder of this paper argues that, despite significant national variations, the Balkan states shared some common traits in their first years of political transition during the early 1990s: firstly, they all maintained continuity with their communist past; secondly, they all pursued an illiberal start dominated by domestic elites and top-down politics; and, finally, they all underwent some kind of collapse of their early illiberal competitive order before 'recharging' with reformed ideas and more 'mainstream' discourses. Many of the features of these early years are still evident today in the way domestic elites conduct their political 'deals', in the way citizens react through elections or protests, and in the way the international community exercises its authority from abroad.

> Transition is a historical sequence of political events usually associated with the last stages of authoritarian/ totalitarian regimes through to the introduction of a more liberal pluralist system.

It is crucial to understand the early stages of transition to post-communist politics after a long period of totalitarianism and one-party rule, because it is at this stage that the foundations are laid for the sustainability, longevity and quality of the democratic process. As with the previous democratising waves of the 1970s in Southern Europe and the 1980s in Latin America, continuity or rupture with the recent past, the elite's choices, their calculations and miscalculations, and the institutional designs were central to how new democracies were born and subsequently developed.[1] Similarly, the early years of transition in Eastern Europe from communism to democracy entailed a remarkable variety of post-communist developments along regional or national lines, which helps explain why some countries developed a more stable democratic process, while others were more fragile and turned to new forms of authoritarianism. There is, for instance, a linkage between Poland's ensuing democratic and economic consolidation and the initial rupture with its communist past and the policies that were adopted successfully in this particular economy. Similarly, democratic advances and losses in other parts of Central Europe and the Baltics are related to the type of choices that were adopted during the initial years of their political and economic transition. Some transitions were more successful than others; some were more dramatic and contested.

Comparing the various post-communist cases, one sees enough

'drama'- to use Laurence Whitehead's term[2]- in the Balkan countries, where the transitions have been described as a deviation from the expected norm, or from the usual type of democratic 'transition and consolidation'; these have been defined often in derogatory ways as 'defective',[3] 'delayed',[4] 'incomplete',[5] 'double' (post-communist and post-conflict)[6] transitions, or as the 'laggards'[7] of transition. Transition from authoritarianism can have different meanings and symbolism, and has been the object of much discussion and criticism since Rustow's analysis, when it became a central concept for understanding political change and democratisation.[8] From a simple chronological perspective, transition is a historical sequence of political events usually associated with the last stages of authoritarian/totalitarian regimes through to the introduction of a more liberal pluralist system. From a more deterministic and teleological perspective, transition is seen as a process that leads to the consolidation of democracy, when the latter becomes the only game in town. Transition can also be seen as a Western hegemonic discourse of parliamentary democracy and (neo-) liberal reform propagated and imposed on the new democracies, and which in most cases legitimises some degree of external control and interference.[9] With

all this in mind, this paper adopts a more parsimonious approach to transition as an uncertain process that takes place during the formative years of change from one party rule to a pluralist competitive context. This is a time when the elites, as government and opposition, have the political space and the opportunity to shape the new environment, when societies hold high expectations for the future, and when the international community is testing the waters for its engagement and commitment.

> The Balkan communist history was far from a homogeneous regional experience, and entailed various types of national communisms.

The following discusses three particular themes of the early transition experience in the Balkans and their national variations: firstly, the moment of breakdown; secondly, elite politics and the early illiberal years; and thirdly, opposition, mobilisation and crisis of post-communist illiberalism. This is a common pattern, which was expressed differently in the various Balkan states during the first years of transition, leaving a long-lasting imprint on how new democracies developed thereafter and what they are now. The subsequent

consolidation of electoral politics, advances in many areas of freedom and democracy, and the discrediting of authoritarian practices have their roots in this first period of change. Moreover, the resilience of personal politics, the ephemeral nature of party ideologies, the consolidation of ethnic politics, the impact of external dependency and the lack of trust from below are largely due to these crucial illiberal formative years of transition and post-communist change.

1989: The Moment of Breakdown and Regional Diversity

Looking back at the initial stages of post-communist transition, we note that while the moment of communist breakdown coincided chronologically in all the Balkan states, the communist regimes did not collapse uniformly, but were instead affected by their prior national communist experience, including the degree of communist ideological orthodoxy, the extent of the party control on the society, the intensity of dissident politics or the control of the Soviet Union over internal matters. The Balkan communist history was far from a homogeneous regional experience, and entailed various types of national communisms. As a matter of fact, the Balkan countries became not only the

political and ideological battleground between the capitalist West and the communist East but, most significantly, within the communist East itself. Each Balkan state developed its own national brand of communism, where the control of the communist party and ideology varied, from the totalitarian all-encompassing cases of Albania to the nationalistic Romania, to the "orthodox" communist Bulgaria, and to the more liberal, open to the West, Yugoslavia. The 1989 revolutionary moment was therefore a different experience in each national environment, violent or anarchic in some, less dramatic and more peaceful in others.

Romania's national communist experience is best remembered for the harshness of Ceausescu's regime, which sought to distance itself from the control of the Soviet Union and refused to integrate fully in the East European, Soviet-dominated economic union. Ceausescu's harsh policy at home, resembling a type of 'national Stalinism', developed a blend of centrally planned economy with the idea of national uniqueness and the cult of the leader. His 'cultural revolution' and his unique social-engineering experiment in Bucharest and the countryside eventually alienated the Romanian people, who were forced to submit to a nationalist/ totalitarian philosophy. By 1989

Romania had 4 million party members, more than double the average percentage of members per capita in the region. In effect Romania had no organised opposition, but simply widespread hatred for the regime,[10] which became all too obvious during the Romanian revolutionary moment, with a violent uprising in Timişoara which spread elsewhere and to Bucharest, ending with the trial and immediate execution of Ceausescu and his wife.

Bulgaria's post-war communism replicated the Soviet prototype and under Soviet supervision suppressed any cultural, ideological or ethnic expressions, adopting a highly centralised system of state control over the economy, and agricultural collectivisation. The Bulgarian communist leadership developed its own brand of Bulgarian patriotism and xenophobia, and through a 'regenerative process' pursued a policy of harsh exclusion of the Turkish minority, when the latter were ordered in the mid-1980s to change their names into Christian-Slavic names and those who refused to do so were demoted. In 1989 the Bulgarian government expelled 370,000 Turks, half of the total Turkish population of Bulgaria. Partly as a result of this oppressive behaviour, Bulgaria saw the emergence of some opposition and the first dissident movements during the 1980s in the form of public

discontent with the socio-economic crisis and environmental degradation, the most famous of these movements being 'Ecoglasnost'.[11] The Bulgarian communist regime followed the fall of its Soviet prototype, and the revolutionary moment was relatively peaceful and orderly compared to its Romanian neighbour. It included an internal coup and a change of leadership from within, but no violent overthrow from below.

Yugoslavia was an original experimental mix of the Cold War ideological competition: a country that was socialist but non-Soviet; that abandoned central planning and adopted 'self-management'; that introduced decentralisation and some form of confederalisation of the political system under the guidance of Yugoslav 'unity and brotherhood'; that experimented with liberalisation of its foreign trade, closer links with the capitalist West and opening its borders for Yugoslav citizens to go to the West.[12] Within the communist party itself, there was increasingly a division between 'liberals' and 'conservatives', and the question of reform and democratisation was often explicitly or implicitly part of the Yugoslav political debate. Yugoslav dissident politics and ideologies were mostly filtered through national concerns and priorities of different nationalities and ethnic minorities within Yugoslavia, while any attempts at decentralisation

under communism failed to satisfy different national interests. Yugoslavia's socialist experiment allowed for the application of innovative economic projects, yet its political system wavered between unitarism and decentralised federalism. The leadership after the death of Tito in 1980 pushed for more economic liberalisation and ideological pluralism, but the widening differences among the republics and provinces of Yugoslavia could not contribute to the success of this policy, and the country suffered a severe economic decline. The economic decay of the 1980s and the policy failures contributed to the gradual elimination of unity and solidarity.[13] The 1989 change towards political pluralism and electoral competitions in all the Yugoslav republics led to a speedy and violent disintegration of the country.

> The region entailed different types of communist breakdown, varying from Romania's popular revolutionary uprising to Bulgaria's internal coup, Yugoslavia's disintegration and Albania's anarchic and disorderly change.

At the south-eastern corner of the communist Balkans, Albania kept itself completely isolated from all its neighbours, fearful of Yugoslav or Greek foreign policy intentions, and initially depended on Moscow's patronage until the death of Stalin, when the leadership developed an alliance with Chinese communism. Hoxha's brand of Albanian communism had a strong element of xenophobia and a perception of threat from the two world powers and the regional neighbours, and as a result developed an ideology of fear, totalitarian control of the state, and kept the country in a constant state of defence. Contrary to the liberalisation movements in other parts of Eastern Europe, Albania pursued its own totalitarian cultural revolution and proclaimed itself as the world's first 'atheist state' (closing churches and mosques and persecuting Catholics) with a strong anti-Western philosophy. Albania had no dissidents, and Hoxha's fear of domestic enemies made his regime ruthless in suppressing any potentially opposing view.[14] After his death, the party leadership was divided between 'hardliners', guided by Hoxha's wife, and 'pragmatists' guided by Ramiz Alia in the context of the isolationism of the previous leadership.[15] Albanian communist politics were the most anti-democratic in Eastern Europe, suppressing the people for a sustained period of 45 years. The moment of breakdown involved protests and growing dissent and was more anarchic

than in any other Balkan country. For a brief initial period of radical change, Albania lacked any law and order, marked by the unruly massive exodus of exasperated Albanians to Italy and Greece.

The region, therefore, entailed different types of communist breakdown, varying from Romania's popular revolutionary uprising to Bulgaria's internal coup, Yugoslavia's disintegration and Albania's anarchic and disorderly change. The type of revolutionary change that occurred in each state affected the course of illiberalism which dominated the initial transition years, the degree of continuity with the past, and the role and impact of the domestic elites during this crucial period.

Transition to Political Pluralism

The most prominent political change in all these countries after the breakdown of communist party monopoly was the emergence of political parties and movements ready to compete in the electoral arena. All post-communist Balkan states abolished the primacy of the communist parties and provided constitutional guarantees for the introduction of new parties within the political process. For the most part, former communists in the Balkans were not purged, but were allowed to find their way into the new system. The political formations which emerged in the years following the collapse of communism were unreformed or slightly reformed communist parties, along with anti-communist electoral alliances, resurrected parties from the past and new political groups.[16]

The adoption of presidential or semi-presidential systems allowed personal politics to develop and strong leaders to emerge with formidable power to control and often abuse the system.

In the Central European countries the rupture with the past was clear-cut, communist politicians were discredited and new opposition elites came to power, but in all Balkan countries parts of the past political elites, who were better organised and more efficient in manipulating and dominating the transition from authoritarian to competitive politics, continued to dominate party politics and state apparatuses. Alongside reformed or not-so-reformed communist parties, a new generation of parties grew in the early years of transition,

challenging the established elites in the context of an increasingly polarised and confrontational political environment between the former communists and the united or not-so-united anti-communist opposition.[17] The latter would eventually become governmental alternatives.

The adoption of presidential or semi-presidential systems allowed personal politics to develop and strong leaders to emerge with formidable power to control and often abuse the system. The foundation years of post-communist Balkan politics are primarily remembered as the years of Milošević in Serbia, Tuđman in Croatia, Iliescu in Romania, Berisha in Albania, Đukanović in Montenegro, Karadžić and Izetbegović in Bosnia, all of whom left their personal marks on the illiberal and often informal practices that were pursued in the exercise of political power. All these states would be stigmatised by the excesses and abuses of their leaders for years to come.

Romania was the most hard-pressed case of ridding itself of its communist past, because of the endogenous and idiosyncratic nature and the harshness of the Ceausescu regime. In Romania, the National Salvation Front under the leadership of Iliescu, first as a provisional government and then as the winner of the elections, dominated the first part of the 1990s. The first government of Romania was composed of former members of the party *nomenklatura* who had at one point or another fallen out of Ceaușescu's favour.[18] Continuity with the previous regime was also evident in the adoption of nationalism, whereby the new constitution defined the state as a nation-state based on the unity of an ethnically defined Romanian nation.[19] The regime formed governments in alliance with smaller ultranationalist parties and pursued restrictive and exclusionary policies towards the minorities, for which it was harshly criticised from abroad. Well into the mid-1990s the image of the regime was one of populism, corruption and continuity with the previous communist establishment. In the opposition the main contender was the Democratic Convention of Romania, united by its anti-Iliescu stance, which gradually grew in power and influence under the leadership of Emil Constantinescu. For its part, the Hungarian minority was organised around party politics and sought political alliances with other opposition parties, an alliance which defeated the Iliescu government in 1996.

The first period of post-communist politics in Bulgaria was marked by a fight between the new socialists and the united democratic opposition, and saw a number of short-lived and unsuccessful governments. The Bulgarian Socialist

Party (BSP) was an ex-communist party of unreformed socialists who initially chose to resist westernisation and neo-liberalism and to cultivate the historical links with Russia. By the mid-1990s the BSP elites were bragging that they had defied the imperialism of the IMF, the 'Washington consensus', and were the champions of social reform.[20] The opposition of the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF), which formed just before the demonstrations helped topple the communist dictator Todor Zhivkov, proved unable to unite on a positive agenda against the BSP. Founded by Zhelyu Zhelev, the UDF was a collection of upstart environmentalists, human rights activists, and trade unionists, many of who were uneasy with political power. The first years of post-communist political life in Bulgaria seemed stuck in an electoral choice between still-powerful former communists on the one hand, who were liberalising nominally, and weak and ineffective opposition contenders on the other;[21] it was a time of ineffective government rule, oligarchic capitalism and corrupt economic practices. On the issue of minority, contrary to Romania's exclusionary policy, Bulgaria reversed its prior policies of ethnic assimilation and allowed Muslims to choose their names, practice their religion and speak their language.[22]

In Albania, following the initial failed attempts of some former communists to convince the public that they were different from previous totalitarian rulers, the Democratic Party (DPA), under the leadership of Sali Berisha, was elected for the first time in March 1992. Yet Berisha's style of politics, despite his anti-communist urge, entailed illiberal policies, attacking and recriminating non-DPA politicians, controlling non-government media and the opposition press, and carrying out strict surveillance and control of the Greek minority in the south of the country. In addition, Berisha tried to manipulate the constitution to strengthen the (his) position of the President even further, infuriating the opposition and the public at large – a referendum which he eventually lost. Under the pretext of a break with the communist past, Berisha's first period of rule proceeded with exclusionary politics and imprisonments of political opponents.[23] International observers of the Albanian elections pointed out one irregularity after another, and Albania was criticised for fraudulent electoral practices and double-voting. Electoral malpractices and polarising politics would continue to affect Albanian politics well after the initial transition years and all subsequent elections would be closely monitored by international observers.

In the former Yugoslavia, Croatian and Serbian semi-authoritarian politics surpassed and outlasted all other Balkan illiberal transitions; their leaders pursued extreme nationalist agendas in pursuit of their expansionist visions for a Greater Croatia or a Greater Serbia. Both regimes survived for a full decade through manipulation of political and economic resources, control of the media and alleged defence of the national interest; they both received international criticism and the freezing of association or assistance from the European Union; but they largely survived due to a fragmented opposition.

Milošević dominated politics through the manipulation of the media, effective nationalist propaganda and control of security forces and of economic resources.

In Croatia, the new party *Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica* (HDZ) dominated the 1990s, in the context of the Yugoslav Wars, the involvement in the Bosnian War, and through successful manipulation of the nationalist sentiment. The leader of the party, Franjo Tuđman, a previously communist atheist politician, was transformed into a nationalist Catholic leader. He initially won power on the basis of an anti-communist expression of Croatia's identity, and even made some open references to Croatia's fascist *Ustaša* past. The Church, after years of suppression and persecution by the communists, embraced Tuđman with relative ease.[24] A significant part of the HDZ support rested on the Croatian diaspora, but also on Croats living in Bosnia – the latter benefiting from financial help.[25] The HDZ's role in Bosnia and its support for the extremist Bosnian Croats confirmed the Croatian elites' nationalistic and conflict-prone choices beyond the country's borders. While the HDZ was the party that led Croatia to independence, it also led the country to international isolation for its human rights violations, authoritarian nationalism and xenophobia. The regime survived through the manipulation of nationalism, and the constant reminder that it was defending Croatia from Serb aggression, as well as through the manipulation of the media and economic cronyism. Under Tuđman, the bulk of the communist political, military, economic and judicial *nomenklatura* had joined the HDZ. The opposition to HDZ, the Croatian Social Liberal Party (HSLS) and the Social Democratic Party remained fragmented and disorientated

until 2000, when the death of Tuđman led to the end of his personal rule.

The 1990s' politics in Serbia was dominated by Milošević's Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), which formed coalition governments for the most part with the assistance of other smaller parties (except for the first 1990 elections in which it won the overall majority). His party appealed to socialist conformists and Serbian nationalists and was stronger outside Belgrade in the Serbian heartland.[26] Milošević dominated politics through the manipulation of the media, effective nationalist propaganda and control of security forces and of economic resources. His regime survived for a decade throughout regional wars, international isolation over the harsh treatment of Kosovo Albanians, economic sanctions and internal opposition, yet at a high price of delayed economic development, external military intervention and the loss of Kosovo. Like Croatia, the opposition to the government remained for the most part fragmented throughout the 1990s, despite some attempts to unite under single umbrella coalitions (DEPOS in 1992, Zajedno in 1996, DOS and Otpor in 2000). The government responded with electoral frauds and a refusal to accept the victory of the opposition, as was seen in the local elections of 1997 and in the 2000 national elections. The

transition period in Serbia was managed by an authoritarian government, which preserved elements of the previous communist *status quo*, infiltrated society with a fanatical nationalist discourse and pursued its market reform in a context of favouritism and nepotism.[27]

Another illiberal stream of the 1990s' Balkan politics was that of divided countries, where ethnic politics and parallel structures dominated the broken territories. In Bosnia, after the communist party was discredited, new parties were formed on the basis of ethnic criteria, and included the Party of Democratic Action (PDA, a Muslim Party), the Serbian Democratic Party (SDS) and the Croatian-inspired HDZ. The Party of Democratic Action represented the majority Muslim population of Bosnia and became the advocate of a unitary state. The Serbian Democratic Party advocated a separate state for the Bosnian Serbs, creating its own parallel politics in the forms of a separate Serbian National Council and a Serbian National Assembly, and gained popular support from Serbia. The Croatian Democratic Union allied with the Muslims against the Serbs, but only for a short tactical period, given that they too claimed authority over the Croat-populated areas, while the most extreme nationalists went on to create a parallel state of Croats, the Republic of

Herzeg-Bosnia, hoping for an eventual unification with Croatia, and enjoyed the support of the Croatian government of Tuđman (Herzeg-Bosnia was formally dismissed in 1996). Early transitional Bosnian politics were conducted in the context of war, ethnic cleansing and genocidal politics.

FYR Macedonia,[28] following independence from Yugoslavia, adopted a multi-party parliamentary political system and a constitution focusing explicitly on the formation of an independent national identity for its majority Macedonian Slav population.[29] The first split was between reformed communists and nationalists,[30] with the former winning the electoral battle and guiding the post-Yugoslav republic through the initial liberalisation phase. The Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDU) dominated politics between 1991 and 1998, and during its tenure fostered clientelistic patronage, cronyism and insider privatisation.[31] The same pattern continued under the nationalist party government IMRO-DPMNE, which succeeded the SDU and formed an unlikely alliance with the Democratic Party of Albania. While all governments were coalitions and multi-ethnic in character, majority (Macedonian Slav) excesses and minority (Albanian) exclusions were a central feature of the country's domestic politics. From the

beginning and throughout the 1990s, the Albanian political parties mounted growing campaigns for the establishment of equal rights to all inhabitants of the state. They also complained that they were excluded from the public sector and from the privatisation process and had to rely on their own internal dynamic and remittances from abroad.

The early transition in the Balkans entailed three streams of illiberal politics, including competitive illiberalism in Romania, Bulgaria and Albania, semi-authoritarian nationalist illiberalism in Serbia and Croatia, and exclusionary ethnic illiberalism in Bosnia and FYR Macedonia. They all shared common features with respect to the polarisation between government and opposition, popular mobilisation and external pressure. All of them generated international concerns over the misconduct of public affairs, the politics of economic liberalisation and privatisation, and ethnic and minority issues.

The Crisis of the Illiberal Order

All Balkan countries underwent major crises of their initial post-communist illiberal, nationalist/semi-authoritarian or ethnically divided orders. In the cases

of illiberal competitive politics, it led to dramatic downfall of the governments and the electoral victory of the oppositions; in the cases of nationalist/semi-authoritarian competitive politics it led to the breakdown of the regimes through 'electoral revolutions'; in the cases of ethnically divided politics, through external intervention and the imposition of power-sharing arrangements supervised by international administrations.

An approximate pattern developed in Romania, Bulgaria and Albania, all three having experienced the excesses of illiberalism and abuses of political power, leading to severe political and economic crises and upsurges in mass discontent and electoral mobilisation of the political oppositions. Romania's electoral breakthrough took place in 1996, with the victory of the Democratic Convention in the parliamentary elections and Constantinescu winning the Presidency over Iliescu.[32] This change was an internal reaction to the bad economic record of the Iliescu regime, as well as to external outcry from the European Union about problematic political concerns, and to increasing complaints from the Hungarian minority. The Convention was an umbrella of 18 organisations under the leadership of the Christian-Democratic National Peasants' Party. One of the most important moves

of the new government was to put an end to the official national communist discourse and to enrol the Hungarian party into the coalition government.

Bulgaria went about its electoral breakthrough in the winter of 1996-7. It started as a protest against the collapse of banks, hyperinflation and disappointing standards of living. During 1996 Bulgaria had faced a major financial crisis including the collapse of its currency, soaring prices and food shortages. The demonstrators, angry at this economic decline, besieged the parliament and trapped the socialist deputies inside, compelling them to dissolve the legislature and vote for early elections. In the next election, the UDF won a clear majority against the discredited socialists. For the next four years, the UDF followed a consistent neo-liberal policy, a clear pro-Western foreign policy agenda and a pro-reform path designated by the IMF, the World Bank and the European Union (currency board, privatisation and austerity). The economic collapse had affected Bulgarian minds so deeply that people were ready to embrace the Western inspired tough measures pursued by the new government.[33]

Albania went through its first post-communist mobilisation in 1997, following the collapse of the financial

'pyramid' scheme,[34] when many Albanians lost their life savings, leading to widespread unrest, especially in Tirana and the south. There was also a reaction to the abuses and political excesses and the manipulation of the electoral process by the Berisha regime. The state of emergency imposed by Berisha provoked such widespread disorder that the country became ungovernable for a brief time. The situation was normalised with external political interference and OSCE presence in the next elections, which led to the victory of the socialist party. The socialist party which succeeded, winning an overwhelming electoral victory, pursued some progress but remained a hostage to clientelism, corrupt politics and scandals, and itself suffered from internal fighting.

The semi-authoritarian and nationalist regimes experienced more dynamic and dramatic political and popular reactions. In Serbia, the 2000 uprising was a genuine popular outburst against the excesses of the Milošević era, and had the ingredients of a revolution aiming at a radical break with the past. It was the outcome of ten years of Serbia's democratic political opposition and civil society,[35] which kept its contact with the West and in the final stages of the regime received significant support from the international community. The opposing electoral coalition consisted of 18 parties

that came under the leadership of the moderate nationalist Vojislav Koštunica. The Serbian case was by far the most widespread electoral uprising, in that it reacted to a particularly harsh regime that had refused to recognise the outcome of the national elections. External military intervention, international isolation and the defeat over Kosovo contributed to the delegitimisation of the Milošević regime. In Serbia, the collapse of Milošević's rule was the result of a widespread democratic coalition of parties, which was short-lived and split over national issues and personal feuds. The loss of Kosovo dominated internal politics and the country's relationship with the West thereafter.

In Croatia, the death of Tuđman significantly weakened the governing party and provided an electoral opportunity for the opposition to win power. Within weeks of Tuđman's death, in the parliamentary elections of 3 January 2000, voters fed up with the corrupt practices and extreme nationalism of the HDZ and with high unemployment voted out a party that had ruled in an authoritarian manner for a decade. Ivica Račan, the leader of the non-nationalist coalition of the Social Liberals and the Social Democrats, won the parliamentary election and Stipe Mesić won over the presidential candidate of the HDZ. After the death of Franjo

Tuđman, Croatia's party politics moved away from extreme political positions, and its nationalist politics of territorial-ethnic cleavages shifted to more conventional national politics of centre-right vs. centre-left parties. The Social Democratic Party (SDP), a successor of the reformed communist party, became the party in the government with a pro-EU orientation until 2003, when, due to infighting in the SDP, the HDZ regained power under a new, more enlightened and pro-European, leadership, which projected itself as a conservative party that had broken with its nationalist past, that signed agreements with national minorities, cooperated with the International Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in the Hague and adopted judicial reform. The HDZ was transformed from a nationalist party to a European Christian Democratic party of the European Right. It gradually distanced itself from its recent extreme nationalist and more distant fascist past.

The third stream of the 1990s' Balkan politics was that of the divided countries, where ethnic issues and parallel structures dominated the political space. In Bosnia-Herzegovina and FYR Macedonia, direct external intervention put an end to war and ethnic fighting, forcing the domestic elites to adopt power-sharing arrangements. External interventions brought about the Dayton and Ohrid peace agreements, both of which became 'constitutional' points of reference for the post-conflict era, and allowed for the direct or indirect presence of international administrations.[36] The main aim of the Dayton accord was to end the fighting and establish a constitutional framework that would guarantee peaceful coexistence of the territorially divided three nationalities of Bosnia. Carl Bildt, the first High Representative, increased the authority of the international administrator and succeeded in assigning himself the 'Bonn powers' of imposing laws and ordering summary dismissals of local politicians, a prerogative which was repeatedly used by succeeding High Representatives.[37] Yet electoral politics have since hardened the ethnic identification of the main political parties. Bosnia remains deeply divided between its two entities, the Bosnian Serb Republic and the Muslim-Croat Federation, with the latter being divided between its two constituent nationalities. Despite efforts to build up the powers of the central state, both entities are still highly autonomous, with separate political, police and financial structures, while the Muslim and Croat officials who run the Federation tend to look to their own ethnic agendas.

In FYR Macedonia, the international community (EU and NATO) intervened to end the crisis in 2001, and from

then on it has consistently been asking the central government to be more responsive to the demands of the Albanian minorities. The constitutional amendments of the Ohrid Agreement provided greater democratisation of politics at the local level and increased participation of minority parties in the political process. The Ohrid Agreement succeeded in offering Albanians a stake in the political system and more rights in the fields of language and education. Unlike in Bulgaria or Romania, where there is a single minority party of Turks and Hungarians, in FYR Macedonia the Albanian parties themselves are politically divided and participating in different government coalitions.

The Legacy of the Transition Period

The impact of the formative transition years on the current political landscape of the Balkan post-communist states is still evident. From a positive perspective, competitive politics have been normalised and institutionalised and they constitute the indisputable rules of the game. Elections and political parties are at the centre of political competition and, with a few exceptions, governmental changes are happening without disruptions or challenges to the outcomes. Ethnic politics are 'fought'

and managed in the electoral arena and not through wars, destruction and mass expulsions. One important legacy of the transition period is the rejection of illiberalism, authoritarianism and bloody ethnic wars. The post-2000 period of the Balkan politics can be described as a period of 'normalisation' of political pluralism, peaceful alternation of governments, reformed nationalist parties, emergence of new political elites, a wide array of political parties across the political spectrum, pro-European consensus, and more moderation in politics. Some political elites of a nationalist or communist orientation had to reform themselves and their parties' discourses; Iliescu and the social democratic party in Romania, Sanader and the HDZ in Croatia, Nikolić and the Radical Party in Serbia, are indicative examples. The European Union, as the most influential external actor engaged constructively, pursued membership for Bulgaria and Romania, and the Stabilisation and Association Process for the Western Balkans. Valerie Bunce defines this period as a 'second transition' from the political extremism of the 1990s to a political moderation, with the electoral victory of more liberal parties in power and the reformation of previously nationalistic parties.[38] This second phase of the normalisation of competitive politics has also been a

period of democratic engagement with the media, human rights, minority issues, political checks and balances, and some form of transitional justice and cooperation, though limited, with the ICTY.

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Yet there is also a contested legacy of the transition period, whereby normalisation of competitive politics has been accompanied by a consolidation of democratic deficits, dysfunctional practices and attitudes, some of which have their origins in these formative years of transition. Today most states carry the legacies of the 1990s in five main areas:

Personal feuds

Due to the failure to establish strong and indisputable institutions from the beginning, politics in all Balkan countries continued to be personal, with many feuds and competitions among prominent leaders with personal ambitions and undefined ideological agendas. Resorting to populist discourses, irrespective of ideological background, has been a constant feature since the early years of transition. The establishment of presidential or semi-presidential political systems and the limited impact of checks and balances allowed personal politics to develop and root themselves firmly in the political process of most countries, with the result that power-sharing arrangements and cohabitation became a struggle for personal power and political survival. Politics in the Balkans have been haunted by personal disputes; in Romania, President Băsescu is at odds with Prime Minister Victor Ponta; in Serbia, Nikolić of the Radical Party is at odds with Tadić of the Democratic Party; in Albania, Prime Minister Sali Berisha is at odds with the leader of the opposition Edi Rama.

Nationalist and ethnic agendas

Nationalist sentiments have not subsided in Croatia or Serbia, and ethnic politics have consolidated in Bosnia and FYR Macedonia. The former countries are still coming to terms with a nationalist and authoritarian past, and the dominant parties, such as HDZ in Croatia and the Socialist and Radical parties in Serbia, although changing and reforming, are always remnants of the 1990s conflictual context. In Bosnia-

Herzegovina and FYR Macedonia ethnic parties continue to dominate the electoral platform, and the two peace agreements continue to provide constitutional rules of forced power-sharing as well as division. Ideologies along the left-right continuum come second in the preferences of the voters, who continue to vote according to nationalistic and ethnic agendas.

> The early years of transition in the Balkans are remembered as a period of distorted democratisation, of gains and deficits that are still affecting current political practices and discourses.

High-level corruption

The political and economic transformation undertaken since the early years of transition provided incentives for those holding power to engage in rent-seeking behaviour outside legality. One common scenario was that Balkan political leaders seized the opportunity to fill the vacuum created by the fall of communist regimes by rewriting the rules of the economy and the state to benefit their own interests.[39] The early transition years set the bases for a climate of corruption that has continued to dominate politics at the highest level. In Croatia, the reformist Sanader was sentenced to imprisonment on charges of financial misappropriation and bribes from a Hungarian energy company and an Austrian bank; in Romania, former prime ministers and ministers have been charged for corruption, including Adrian Năstase, who is jailed, and the Justice Minister Tudor Chiuariu; in Montenegro, Đukanović has been associated with cigarette smuggling. Corruption, informal politics and inefficient public administration continued to be closely associated with formal politics in all the countries of the region. And while the issue of corruption is constantly on the agenda of electoral discourses, politicians win elections by accusing each other of corrupt practices.

Popular discontent

All of the above have generated a level of popular mistrust and discontent concerning the existing democratic deficits, the informal practices, the incompetent elites, dysfunctional institutions and even the anti-democratic practices and excesses of external actors. Voter turnout for parliamentary elections has dropped dramatically compared to the initial 1990s elections. Governmental changes at every election are a constant

feature in all Balkan politics, and it is extremely rare that any government can win a second term in office. Public disaffection has been at the centre of political change since the early transition years. It was initially expressed as revolution against the communist order and led to the collapse of totalitarianism in the Balkans and the disintegration of communist Yugoslavia. It continued as political and electoral mobilisation against a deformed transition which had betrayed the initial hope and optimism. It then developed into voter apathy when it was realised that the consolidation of competitive politics entailed abuses and corruptions by all political actors. The early years of transition in the Balkans are remembered as a period of distorted democratisation, of gains and deficits that are still affecting current political practices and discourses.

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