

WINTER 2018 / ISSUE NO.10

\$ 12.00 | € 8.50 | 1000 RSD



HORIZONS

JOURNAL OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS
AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

THE BELT AND ROAD PLEDGE OF THE DRAGON

**BALKAN
STABILITOCRACIES**

**A WORLD IN
(DIS-)ORDER?**



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THE RISE (AND FALL) OF BALKAN STABILITOCRACIES

Florian Bieber

RECENT YEARS in the Western Balkans have been shaped by *stabilitocracies*: governments that claim to secure stability, pretend to espouse EU integration and rely on informal, clientelist structures, control of the media, and the regular production of crises to undermine democracy and the rule of law. This pattern is neither unique to the Western Balkans nor time-constrained to the last decade; nevertheless, the proximity to the EU (without the states in question being members), popular support for joining the union, and the wider crisis of liberal democracy have entrenched this particular system of rule in the contemporary Western Balkans.

Marko Kmezić and I used this term in a policy brief issued by The Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEP-AG) in March 2017 to describe the state of democracy in the Western Balkans and highlight that the problem is not

exclusively homemade. A Canadian academic, Srđa Pavlović, first used it in a London School of Economics' Blog on Montenegro in late 2016 to describe a regime in which undemocratic practices persist and "the West has [...] turned a blind eye to this while simultaneously preaching the virtues of democracy and the rule of law." A similar term ("stabilocracy") was used by Antoinette Primatarova and Johanna Deimel back in 2012 to describe Albania as a country that "provides stability externally but domestically oscillates between democracy and autocratic tendencies." Over recent months, stabilitocracy has become commonly used across the Balkans, and by many observers, to describe the current state of democracy in the region.

DESPOTIC SHADES OF GRAY

Over the past two decades, analysts and researchers have been grappling with the many shades of gray between consolidated democracies and

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Two Balkan stabilitocrats: Montenegro's Milo Djukanović and Serbia's Aleksandar Vučić

outright dictatorships, with numerous terms being used like "hybrid regimes" and "illiberal" or "majoritarian" democracies.

Nevertheless, the term "stabilitocracy" is a useful addition, as it adds the key component of external legitimacy to the understanding of these regimes. It also helps to distinguish the pattern in the Western Balkans from similar yet distinct forms of illiberal democracies inside the EU (Hungary and Poland, for instance), as well as semi-authoritarianism in countries like Turkey and Russia.

Governments inside the EU or beyond the realistic prospect of membership were less restrained in adopting authoritarian policies than those with a more realistic prospect of membership.

Paradoxically, virtually all the restraints of conditionality were removed with the awarding of full EU membership. For the EU and older members, the assumption was that new members would not only be sufficiently consolidated democracies, but would also be fully embedded in a dense network of ties with the rest of Europe; this, in turn, would prevent any relapse into illiberal democracy or worse.

As Hungarian and Polish backsliding highlights, however, such assumptions were naïve. Not only does consolidation through membership provide no firm antidote to de-consolidation, but the dense networks referred to above have proven ineffective in securing a consolidated democracy. Witness the dominant member of the ruling coalition in Hungary: the Hungarian Civic Alliance party, known by its local moniker Fidesz. The party remains a member of the conservative European People's Party, despite the outright erosion of democratic institutions in Hungary under its leader Viktor Orban, and notwithstanding its anti-Semitic, anti-Muslim, and anti-EU discourse. Ironically enough, membership in party families has rather been a protective shield, mollifying external criticism.

For the countries further outside the realm of prospective membership, the idea of liberal democracy was, at best, a temporary ideal that mobilized some citizens. In Russia, no democratic alternation of power has taken place since the end of the Cold War, and thus the Putin era is characterized less by the erosion of democracy than by the strengthening of presidential au-

thority, illiberalism, and the reduction of political space for criticism.

Turkey today shares some of Russia's features, in terms of authoritarian presidential and conservative control.

However, Turkey's democracy has declined more dramatically over the past five years, with the 2013 Gezi Park protests and the failed July 2016 coup marking two crucial turning points.

Turkey shares some features of stabilitocracy with the Western Balkans in the (declarative) aspiration towards EU accession and the sup-

port the Erdoğan regime elicited in its first decade in power for (supposed) reforms. However, Turkey's prospects for EU membership have always been more elusive than in the case of the various Western Balkans nations. Additionally, it has been less economically dependent on the EU than the countries of the Western Balkans. As a consequence, there were fewer incentives for the Turkish government to continue to seek EU accession.

WESTERN BALKAN UNIQUENESS

The point is that the stabilitocracies of the Western Balkans fit into a larger context of illiberal regimes that have established themselves within the

Western Balkan stabilitocracies combine semi-authoritarian features while claiming to be reforming democracies and receiving external support, in particular from EU member states, for the sake of the (false) promise of stability.

EU and its neighborhood, but the comparatively high influence of the EU in these countries, combined with the EU's relatively substantial support for membership of Western Balkans countries, restrains and structures authoritarian tendencies differently than elsewhere.

Western Balkan stabilitocracies thus combine semi-authoritarian features, while claiming to be reforming democracies and receiving external support, in particular from EU member states, for the sake of the (false) promise of stability. Thus, a stabilitocracy is a regime

that includes considerable shortcomings in terms of democratic governance, yet enjoys external legitimacy by offering some supposed stability. This exchange of stability for external lenience on matters of democracy can be called a "stabilitocracy." Of course, this type of transaction has characterized Western assistance and support for non-democratic regimes around the world for decades, in particular during the Cold War.

What makes the experience of the Western Balkans particular is that the offer of EU accession is based on formal equality and democracy, driven by shared norms and values. This would represent a break

with the classical understanding of foreign policy driven purely by interest and maintaining inequality between the center, such as Western Europe, and the periphery, such as the Western Balkans.

Stabilitocracy is a step back from the earlier vision of EU integration based on equality and eventual convergence, for it emphasizes geopolitical considerations over liberal democracy.

Yet stabilitocracy is a step back from the earlier vision of EU integration based on equality and eventual convergence, for it emphasizes geopolitical considerations over liberal democracy. These offers of stability by the governments of the region towards the EU, be it in making it

seem to be pacifying regional issues (such as bilateral disagreements), or in regard to external challenges (such as the flow of refugees) are in actual fact misleading, as the lack of democracy in the region is a main source of the instability the Western Balkan governments themselves claim to be overcoming. Semi-authoritarian stabilitocracies are both willing to cause and manage instability with their respective neighbors or towards an internal other—opposition or minorities—for the sake of securing continued rule. Thus, stabilitocracies cause instability, and the only stability they provide is in the (kept) promises made towards external actors.

As a result, they are based on a volatile equilibrium between external demands for stability and the need to create tensions to re-inforce legitimacy for their own existence: in a context of consolidated, stable liberal democracies, stabilitocracies have no space. In this regard, stabilitocracies are essentially a paradox: they cannot deliver what they offer without making themselves redundant. Stabilitocracies thus produce mutually conducive instability to legitimize their own continued existence.

ORIGINS AND CAUSES

Stabilitocracies have their regional antecedents in the 1990s, when both the governments of Franjo Tudjman in Croatia and Slobodan Milošević in Serbia received temporary endorsements by external actors in exchange for the offer of stability. However, at the time these regimes were neither seen as potential NATO or EU members, nor did Western governments buy into claims that their rule was democratic.

The 2000s offered an opportunity for democratization in the region and a shift away from illiberal rule toward more reformist, democratic government. The backsliding that began by the

end of that decade had both domestic and international causes. Domestically, the new democrats often failed to break with clientelist and corrupt practices of the past. This blurred the distinction between the new democrats and the old autocrats. After all, Tudjman's Croatian Democratic Community (HDZ) and Milošević's Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) lost power mostly over corruption allegations and abuse of power, not so much over their nationalist excesses.

Internationally, the 2008 economic crisis and a cascade of follow-up crises resulted in an EU and its member states that became more self-absorbed and less concerned with enlargement. Being in continuous crisis—the origins of which could be traced back to the failures of referenda on the EU constitution in the Netherlands and France—the EU lost its will and capacity to complete the enlargement process in the Western Balkans. Furthermore, the economic crisis in Greece, and later Slovenia, shattered the hope for economic convergence with the EU. This was only exacerbated by the democratic crisis in Hungary which has greatly diminished the hope for democratic convergence.

The need to generate legitimacy through crises, external support, and clientelism makes stabilitocracies regimes that are inherently unstable. This does not imply their collapse or short duration, but the difficulty of creating long-term equilibrium.

Consequently, the EU lost its shine as a project and its drive as an institution. The Union's transformative power—which had been a key assumption of enlargement—has weakened, and so has the ability of EU institutions to convince citizens and states to take on new members.

It would be easy to argue that the economic crisis that hit several of the Western Balkan countries caused the rise of stabilitocracies. However, a closer look highlights a more nuanced picture.

In the case of Montenegro, the hegemonic position of the ruling Democratic Party of Socialists (they have never lost an election) merely transformed itself in style and external alliances over time; never its dominant position.

In Macedonia, the turn towards authoritarianism began at full steam with the confrontation with Greece over the name dispute and NATO accession in 2008. The post-independence elite of Kosovo relied on strong support from external actors, in particular the United States and key EU member states, in buttressing its independence. In exchange, external actors went to great lengths to ignore domestic shortcomings in the domain of the rule of law and the fight against corruption in exchange for cooperation with Belgrade.

Serbia, meanwhile, saw the emergence of stabilitocracy with the rise to power of Aleksandar Vučić and his Serbian Progressive Party in 2012. In Albania, it was Sali Berisha's rule that was first described as a stabilocracy in 2012. While the Socialist government of Edi Rama brought in a fresh move towards reforms, the importance of a strongman and many of the structural vestiges of party patronage persist. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, a triopoly of ethno-nationalist parties have never ceased to control the country. While the dominant parties within the community shifted and many more parties benefited from clientelist and informal control, the mechanisms of eroding democratic institutions are similar.

This brief overview demonstrates that stabilitocracies were not voted into office during the most recent economic crisis. Some had uninterrupted power-bases dating back to the 1990s (like Bosnia and Montenegro), others gained power between 2006 and 2012. Nevertheless, their electoral success was not so much based on the economic crisis, but on disappointment with the incumbent governments and apparent widespread corruption.

Stabilitocrats often sought to position themselves as post-transition rulers, ending the long, and seemingly never-ending "transition" or "transformation"—in the Central European context

this has been recently described as ‘Delayed Transformational Fatigue.’ Finally, a number of these stabilitocrats were able to capture the imagination of Western policymakers by portraying themselves as relatively young, pragmatic reformers. These include Serbia’s Vučić, former Macedonian prime minister Nikola Gruevski, the president of the Bosnian entity Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik, and Montenegro’s revolving door prime minister and president Milo Djukanović. These characters’ ascent to power was thus met with approval in Western media and governments. Hence, the ability to secure domestic and external legitimacy became crucial for stabilitocracies.

HOW THEY RULE

Ruling as a “stabilocrat” is, however, as I put it in a 2015 LSE blog posting, like “dancing on the edge of a volcano.” With citizens seeking EU membership and an EU that enjoys greater leverage during the accession process than at any time before, stabilitocracy relies on its leaders either to claim to be committed reformers truly seeking EU accession, or frustrated reformers unable to advance towards the goal of EU membership due to either external (Greece

for Macedonia, Serbia for Kosovo) or internal (Bosnia) obstacles.

Authoritarian and undemocratic practices thus cannot be openly adopted, as they would come under closer

scrutiny by external actors. None of the Western Balkan stabilitocracies adopted new constitutions, as did Hungary, nor have they formally centralized power in the hands of the president, as Turkey did in late 2016. Moreover, they have not un-

dertaken legislative changes to curtail independent institutions, as has been the case in Poland.

While some of the Balkan stabilitocracies display features of nationalist and conservative ideology—examples include Dodik in Republika Srpska, with his obsessive emphasis on everything “Srpska,” and Gruevski in Macedonia, with the costly and kitschy “Skopje 2014” building and “re-decoration” spree—others (such as Serbia’s Vučić) are hermaphrodites. They can reproduce their power by being liberal pro-Western reformists and by playing to more nationalist and conservative values.

Once established in power, the real source of domestic legitimacy is less the claim to represent the nation

Stabilitocracies have established mechanisms of control informally, through party networks and patronage, not through formal legal transformation.

or to be a true European reformer, and more the ability to control the electorate. Stabilitocratic parties cannot openly campaign by stating “I will give you a job” or “if you don’t vote for me, your father will lose his job.” However, the commitment to the nation or reforms is a two-sided mirage—one that provides legitimacy to the fundamentally transactional relationship these parties have with their electorates.

Of course, this is not the only basis of legitimacy. By offering stability externally and reforms domestically, the aforementioned parties are in the business of *promising* stability, not delivering. Of course, this promise is only plausible if instability is a real threat. Ironically, stabilitocracies have to generate the constant suspension of ordinary politics and produce crises to legitimize their external support for seeking to create stability, and for not delivering on reforms domestically.

This permanent state of exception is a feature of stabilitocracies that provoke, manufacture, and induce crises they *can* resolve when necessary—usually by calling for early elections that transform the country into a permanent electoral campaigning mode. In Serbia, there have been two early parliamentary

elections since the Progressive Party took office in 2012, neither of which was based on any plausible government crisis requiring an early vote. Violent clashes in Kumanovo, Macedonia, in 2015, an alleged coup in Montenegro

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in 2016, and constant claims of a looming threat to the government or the president in Serbia are examples of incidents manufactured or instrumentalized by stabilitocracies to create an environment of exceptional circumstances. Incidents involving neighboring states, such as the rapidly escalat-

ing dispute between Serbia and Croatia over refugee flows in 2015, the provocative Kosovo-bound train sent and then stopped by the Serbian government in early 2017, or the *ad hoc* withdrawal of all Serbian diplomatic personnel from Macedonia in the midst of the 2017 summer season are just a few examples of how bilateral disputes are an easy and convenient tool for constructing crises.

Externally, stabilitocracies are able to garner support as long as their claim of producing stability remains plausible and serves more geostrategic interests than normative convergence. Various crises in recent years have helped to reinforce these claims. The closure of the Western Balkan refugee route in

March 2016, at the initiative of Austria, allowed the government of Macedonia to gain external support in a moment of crisis. It was rewarded by the support of Austria's then foreign minister Sebastian Kurz at an election rally of then serving prime minister Gruevski in early December 2016. In Montenegro, the alleged coup plot during the October 2016 parliamentary election, supposedly undertaken with Russian support, helped bolster the country's NATO accession a few months later. In Serbia, the repeated evocation of Russia as a partner helps to ensure strategic support for the government from the West (the EU, in particular), ignoring shortcomings in the rule of law or freedom of the media.

INHERENT INSTABILITY

The survival of stabilitocracies in the Western Balkans is, therefore, closely tied with the return, or, as some may call it, revenge of geopolitics in recent years. The return of geopolitics to the Western Balkans is neither inevitable nor likely to be lasting, but rather a result of the normative and structural weakening of the European Union. As the Western Balkans and its stabilitocracies are surrounded by the EU and NATO, the leverage of external actors, including Russia, is limited and the ma-

neuvering space for the region's governments is restrained. All of this makes the region's regimes dependent on a particular configuration of the international

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scene that is not necessarily enduring. Domestically, the reliance on clientelism and informal networks that need to be disguised externally create tensions that undermine the long-term stability of such regimes. The need to generate legitimacy through crises, external support, and clientelism makes stabilitocracies regimes that are inherently unstable. This does not imply their collapse or short duration, but the difficulty of creating long-term equilibrium. They can either swing towards more democratic rule or greater authoritarianism and collapse.

So far, the only experience with the end of a stabilitocracy has been in Macedonia. Here the incumbent government lost power following an inconclusive parliamentary election in December 2016 and months of coalition-building, presidential obstruction, and deadlock, culminating in the storming of parliament by violent thugs supportive of the old ruling elite in April 2017. This escalation of violence turned out to be a watershed moment that ushered a new government into

office. What triggered the collapse of the stabilitocracy was the public revelation of massive abuses in the form of "bombs," leaked wiretaps by the state intelligence agency. It took more than two years of social movements and the convergence of protest groups with the main opposition parties and international mediation to end the regime.

The case of Macedonia highlights that no single factor can bring about the demise of the system. However, what proved crucial was a strong protest movement—one that channeled non-party opposition whilst opening up the main opposition party, the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia, led by Zoran Zaev (now prime minister), to incorporate a broader range of views. Crucially, the protest movements and Zaev took a pro-European position, which allowed them to find allies within the EU and provided them with a credible reform agenda.

This combination of factors has been a challenge in several other cases, where opposition parties have adopted nationalist and anti-EU positions, undermin-

ing both potential external support, shoring up the claims of stabilitocracies being without alternatives, and lacking a normative underpinning to their political challenge.

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Beyond the demise of a stabilitocratic system in power, large challenges remain. As informal practices eroded meritocracy (if it existed) and created temptations for successor governments to tolerate or continue some of the same practices, stabilitocracy draws on and contributes to a more entrenched institutional weakness of democratization in the Western Balkans. With weak parliaments, unconstitutionally strong executives, and often subservient judiciaries, there is no established system of separation of power to which to revert. The failure to establish stable and consolidated democracies after the end of communism and after the second democratic breakthrough in the early 2000s, popular trust in democracy and its institutions is low. Therefore, even if they become a feature of the past (and a decade of weak and crises-laden EU in the Western Balkans), stabilitocracies will leave enduring traces on the region's political systems. ●