

Original scientific paper

UDK: 323(497):321.6(329)

DOI: 10.5937/jrs15-24525

Received: 20 December 2019 / Accepted: 6 May 2020

Hybrid Regimes of the Western Balkans: Reflection of a Global Geopolitical Struggle

NEVEN ANDJELIC*

Regent's University London, UK

Abstract: The new global order has yet to be fully established. The process reflects not only a geopolitical struggle but also a set of competitive political models. While it is possible to determine more than two dominant models, it is a contest between the two forms of democracy – liberal and illiberal. A one-party state, or a Chinese model, is an economic model used for geopolitical purposes while Muslim political model, strongly contested within the Muslim world, is restricted to areas dominated by the population of this faith. Some of its forms are reflected in the form of authoritarianism as developed in Turkey. The faith, therefore, is of lesser significance. The regimes in the Western Balkans have been developed and are based on two models of democracy. The resulting hybrid regimes are analysed in the global context of the power-struggle and ideological contest. The question is whether the hybrid regimes of the Western Balkans are the result of dysfunctional local democracy or whether the search for global stability is resulting in a model of competitive authoritarianism which provides for global security but also supports the regime's desire to remain unchanged in perpetuity? This development might be supportive of international security but is an utterly destabilising factor for societies in the Western Balkans and a substantial obstacle to the development of liberal democracy.

Keywords: liberal democracy, illiberal democracy, authoritarianism, populism, Western Balkans

* andjelicn@regents.ac.uk

Introduction

“US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo warned against the ‘malign’ influence of Russian trolls and Chinese investment during a brief tour through the Western Balkans.”¹ The western concern over such influences shows this area is a microcosm of a global contest between the leading powers. This aim of this paper is to offer a comparative analysis of two types of democracy – liberal and illiberal, insight into populist methods of politics and to identify the major global powers that represent different political models. Spread of these models in the Western Balkans will provide elements for the conclusion of the paper. It will investigate the presence of global actors in the Western Balkans, explain their methods and struggle for dominance while providing a look at the local power structures and offer a comparative analysis of their political models.

The argument is that western domination and consequently the domination of liberal democracy is challenged by the plurality of other models. This is reflected in the geopolitics of dominant powers who support the development of similar regimes in micro-regions contested by the global actors. The regimes in the Western Balkans are shaped and influenced by external actors. The paper focusses on post-Yugoslav states that remain outside of the European Union. The common term for them in diplomatic and academic circles is “Western Balkans” or “WB6”, as Albania is considered a part of the group together with North Macedonia, Montenegro, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia and Kosovo. Therefore, the term Western Balkans will be dominantly used. The increasingly authoritarian rulers in several states reflect the rise of illiberal regimes globally and shed some lights on a crisis of liberal democracy. This study is based on research trips to all the countries of the region. The research consisted of interviews with government officials, activists, experts and international observers. Diverse theoretical debate on populist political models and empirical findings on regimes in the region, referenced in the paper, will support the overall argument that the political model resulting from multi-polar influences in post-Yugoslav space is a hybrid regime.

The theoretical analysis consisted of reviewing available literature. Participant observation occurred as part of my research trip to the region. This provides for the assessment and comparative analysis of specific states and efforts to develop a particular form of the regime. Reports by international organisations and think-tanks on the states in the region have been reviewed and provide parts of the basis for comparative analysis of the countries in the region. The dominantly qualitative methods are based upon examination of international relations that will contextualise the development of particular forms of governance in the Western Balkans.

The current global international system brings into contention several political models and powers. A comparative analysis of the particular types of political models will lead to the concluding elements of the paper that will focus on post-Yugoslav countries, aspects

1 Euractiv 2019.

of their policies and leadership. The findings will lead to a conclusion suggesting global instability is reflected in the Western Balkans by providing an opportunity for the rise of authoritarian politics. The process often results in the form of a hybrid regime. The research question is whether these regimes are the result of the increased instability between the poles of the international system or are a step in developing a stable multi-polar system?

The West and Malign Influences

Several think tanks and American politicians have expressed their concerns about Russian presence and influence in the region. The Centre for Strategic and International Studies published the brief “Russian Malign Influence in the Western Balkans.”² The Atlantic Council, meanwhile, asked: “How to push back against Kremlin’s malign influence.”³ The US House Foreign Affairs Committee heard “how far-right and other destabilizing actors are using support from Moscow to advance their agendas.”⁴ The hearing was titled “Undermining Democracy: Kremlin Tools of Malign Political Influence.” Alina Polyakova’s testimony was described as the “US efforts to counter Russian disinformation and malign influence.”⁵

The Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project stated the “US Warns Balkans of Chinese Encroachment.”⁶ The Prague Security Studies Institute published the study “Western Balkans at the Crossroads: Assessing Influences of Non-Western External Actors.” The study covers “engagement of all major non-Western actors actively present in the region – Russia, Turkey, China, the Gulf States and Iran – in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), North Macedonia, Montenegro and Kosovo.”⁷ The International Republican Institute offers report “by experts from 12 vulnerable democracies,” titled “Chinese Malign Influence and the Corrosion of Democracy.”⁸ The only two European countries studied in the report were Serbia and Hungary.

One analysis concludes: “The US National Defense Strategy articulates today’s era of great power competition clearly. That competition is playing out in the Western Balkans. In response, the United States should extend our alliances and attract new partners in this region.”⁹ This is in contrast to the European Union leaders’ statement from 2003: “The

2 Conley 2019.

3 Wemer 2019.

4 Carpenter, Michael. Testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, May 21, 2019, in Wemer, 2019.

5 Polyakova 2019.

6 Seter 2019.

7 Chrzová, Grabovac, Hála, and Lalić 2019, ed.

8 Shullman 2019, eds.

9 Wilson 2019.

EU reiterates its unequivocal support to the European perspective of the Western Balkan countries. The future of the Balkans is within the European Union.”¹⁰

Western influences dominate the region. The regimes, however, in the Western Balkans are not liberal and therefore do not reflect the western political model. Following the initial institution building in largely post-conflict societies, the refocusing of the West to other regions has provided space for other global powers to influence the region. The process has resulted in the development of democratically legitimised regimes with increasingly authoritarian leaders and their policies. The issue is whether these regimes are a result of a destabilising international order or are they a sign of the establishment of a multi-polar world.

The interactions and contest between the main actors in the international system has the potential to destabilise local regimes. However, it is possible to see the regimes as the result of a global contest being played out at the local level. The lack of a violent conflict over the last two decades might support the argument that hybrid post-Yugoslav regimes are the result of developing a stable multi-polar international system. Local regimes, instead of positioning themselves firmly as a client state of one of the dominant powers, have been developed in a way to reflect symbiosis of dominant political models. While it is possible to identify elements of western liberal democracy at work in post-Yugoslav states, it is clear that authoritarian tendencies can also be seen in those same states. Chinese state capitalism, while not being a political model, offers an economic model to rely on in the Western Balkans. Influences from various Muslim countries, primarily Turkey, are present but reliance on religious alliances restrict them to dominantly Muslim states, and even there it is its authoritarian character that is being modelled upon. Therefore, the focus in the region should be on the two political models – liberal and illiberal forms of democracy.

With the hindsight of a quarter of a century, it has become clear that Fukuyama’s “The End of History”¹¹ in its normative sense does not work as it did not work initially in its empirical understanding. The “Clash of Civilizations” by Huntington¹² might have some supporters, but this paper argues that the clashes in the world are less reliant on a diversity of civilizations and more on the differentiation of political models. Viktor Orbán described the current situation as “the great global race that is underway to create the most competitive state.”¹³ While the contest for supremacy includes economic competition, all the models are based on profit-making economies. If economic models are, in its core, similar, it is left to judge the strength of a particular power precisely on the specific model of political governance.

10 European Commission 2003.

11 Fukuyama 1989, 3–18.

12 Huntington 1993, 22–49.

13 Orbán 2014.

“The End of History”¹⁴ theory has offered a view of the future World dominated by liberal democratic societies. Throughout the 1990s, it might have seemed that continuing expansion of this political model was reconfirming Fukuyama’s idea. The West has increasingly used interventionist policies reflected in a series of interventions throughout the 1990s. Conflict resolution has become understood as intervention advocated on humanitarian grounds and led by the U.S. The interventions in the Western Balkans have offered a case for advocating neoliberal theories of International Relations. During the 2000s the failure to establish functioning and peaceful democracies following open or covert interventions by western countries in many states of Africa, the Middle East and Asia have moved a possible focus of theoretical debate from “The End of History” towards the “Clash of Civilizations.”

Several empirical global developments have prevented “the end of history” in its normative way. Francis Fukuyama, probably rightly, complained of a misunderstanding of his theory.¹⁵ Critics have been dismissing his normative conclusion by stating empirical arguments.¹⁶ Thus, they were developing a normative conclusion based on empirical evidence but with little normative understanding. Fred Halliday observed that “Fukuyama himself appears puzzled by the reception of his theses.”¹⁷ Somewhat frustrated Francis Fukuyama described that “virtually every week I read a story in the papers that contains some variant on the words, “As we can see, history has not ended but is only now beginning (...) This phrase has now been used by Margaret Thatcher, Mikhail Gorbachev, George Bush, Hosni Mubarak, Anthony Lake, and a host of lesser lights.”¹⁸

However, thirty years after the theory was developed, it is clear that the end of history did not happen even in its normative sense. While the optimistic view was based on the implosion of one of the two dominant models and expansion of the other, there was an omission of alternatives that might have been weak in the 1990s but were increasingly showing signs of ambition to become one of the poles of the international system in future. Thus, the 1990s have not been a shift from the bipolar to a unipolar world but a developing phase of the future multipolar international system.

The 9/11 attacks reflected a challenge to the western political model from other cultures. Muslim culture, many Muslims and Westerners understood, was clashing with and challenging the Western civilization that had been dominant for around five centuries.¹⁹ The initial American-led western response of interventionism has resulted often in a power-vacuum, unstable states and increased insecurity. Post-interventionist Iraq and Libya have become dictator-free countries, but they are also territories of several regimes filling

14 Fukuyama 1989, 3–18.

15 Fukuyama 1995, 27–43.

16 *Ibid.*, 28.

17 Halliday 1992.

18 Fukuyama 1995, 28.

19 Ferguson 2011.

in the space of the weak central regime. Killing rates during Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq have been lower than after his removal.

"As many as 654,965 more Iraqis may have died since hostilities began in Iraq in March 2003 than would have been expected under pre-war conditions,"²⁰ a study found. It provided several vital facts that undermine the whole concept of increasing security by deposing dictators. "Of these deaths," the researchers "estimate that 601,027 (426,369 – 793,663) were due to violence."²¹ "The overall rate of mortality in Iraq since March 2003 is 13.3 deaths per 1,000 persons per year compared to 5.5 deaths per 1,000 persons per year prior to March 2003."²² The study has covered the period "between March 18, 2003, and June, 2006."²³ The study and insights into western interventionism provide serious doubts into intentions, capacity and the will of western powers to carry out successful regime change, decrease violence and provide for stabilisation of post-dictatorial regimes.

All American drone attacks resulting in deaths took place in Muslim countries. Some "21 million Afghan, Iraqi, Pakistani, and Syrian people are living as war refugees and internally displaced persons, in grossly inadequate conditions,"²⁴ the same research claims. This encourages understanding within Muslim societies that the actual conflict is between societies based on Muslim values and the neo-colonial Western world. The same research states that "several US laws and policies, including the Patriot Act, have contributed to racial profiling targeting people of Arab and South Asian descent."²⁵ Iranian media was quick to quote the "Cost of War Project's" report and state that "America's so-called war on terrorism has killed up to 507,000 people in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan."²⁶ The report was widely reported including the leading western political magazines.²⁷

Challenges to the Western Model

Despite some interpretations of Donald Trump's policies, the U.S. remains a liberal democracy and is the only one of the top five countries, according to their military expenditure, that can be described as a political model with fully functioning democratic institutions. The U.S. tops the list followed by a single-party state China, despotic Saudi Arabia, the illiberal democracy of Russia and a populist led India.²⁸ While Russia and India

20 Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health 2006.

21 Burnham, Lafta, Doocy, and Roberts 2006, 1426.

22 Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health 2006.

23 Burnham, Lafta, Doocy, and Roberts 2006, 1426.

24 The Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs n.d.

25 *Ibid.*

26 Press TV 2018.

27 O'Connor 2018.

28 Newsweek, 2018; Brown 2018. Another source places the UK just above India with slightly higher spending estimate and introduces Japan just above France and Italy (Armed Forces n.d).

regularly exercise some democratic forms, such as elections, their leaders and policies undermine other democratic institutions and therefore do not really fit into the model of liberal democracy.

Political and economic ambitions, often backed by military spending, reflect the challenge to a once-dominant Western world. The challenge is even stronger during a period when the leading western power is in an isolationist mode and while its leader's policies are often described as populist. Furthermore, populist and illiberal political forces in other leading liberal democracies such as those placed sixth to ninth on military expenditure list, France, the United Kingdom, Italy and Germany, are also on the rise. The challenge to liberal democracy is, therefore, both external and internal. Viktor Orbán clearly stated "that a democracy does not necessarily have to be liberal. Just because a state is not liberal, it can still be a democracy."²⁹ Political scientists, however, disagree. "Real democracy," according to William Hay, "means liberal representative government under law, sustained by a political culture that accepts open disagreement and demands accountability."³⁰ Therefore it is important to acknowledge, as Damir Kapidžić defines, that "illiberal politics are sets of policies that extend an electoral advantage for governing parties with the aim to remain in power indefinitely."³¹

The periodical exercise in the voting right of citizens has now been accepted in states with different political models. What distinguishes Russia and Germany is not the right to vote but the issue of free and fair elections – liberal and illiberal values. Following Orbán's assumptions, the issue is not democracy, but the liberal values provided and secured in democracies. Thus, autarchic rule, nationalist dominance, protectionism, clientelism, spheres of influence, control of media, suppression of civil society, exist in societies that are still democracies but are not liberal. The politics is marked with the "abuse of power with regard to elections, media, rule of law and public finances."³²

The shock of 9/11 effectively announced the rise of the challenges and struggle for the international system. It coincided with several phenomena. There had been a recent change at the head of the Russian state. Several speeches by Chinese leaders during the early 2000s marked the process of changes in China which they described as "the rise of China" or "peaceful rise of China."³³ Suppression of democratic tendencies and demands for democratisation have given way to a rise of the capitalist economy and put the national economy at the forefront of Chinese foreign policies. While preserving socially conservative ideologies dominated by religious dogma and customs and supported by increasing oil revenues, several Muslim countries ambitiously positioned themselves for a place in the developing new international system.

29 Orbán 2014.

30 Hay 2006, 135.

31 Kapidžić 2020, 2.

32 *Ibid.*

33 Pan 2009, 129; Sujian 2006.

Turkey's economy, albeit not a major oil exporter, performed well in the immediate aftermath of the global financial crisis and provided its leader with the tools to transform the country from a liberal democracy, with some ineffective features, to an authoritarian type of governance that attempts to position itself as a leading force in the Muslim world. Viktor Orbán praised Turkey and Russia for economic successes during this period but also for its model of "illiberal democracy."³⁴ Authors offered their views on the performance of the Turkish economy under titles such as "Resilience of Turkish Economy,"³⁵ "Turkish Exceptionalism,"³⁶ "The Triumph of Conservative Globalism,"³⁷ "Rising Powers in a Changing Global Order,"³⁸ or "Rising Competitive Authoritarianism in Turkey."³⁹ These titles reflect a specific era during which Turkish foreign policy underlined its "Neo-Ottoman" character. The then Prime Minister Recep Erdoğan was the first foreign statesman to visit post-revolutionary Egypt in 2011, whose leaders were described as "aspiring Islamist politicians [who] often try to sell themselves as 'the Egyptian Erdogan.'"⁴⁰

Russia managed its economy through the recession years somewhat better than liberal democratic states. Its economy was described in 2014 as shrinking "for the first time in five years."⁴¹ The Economist's description of the situation asked: "what's gone wrong with Russia's economy."⁴² The country, however, was affected more by falling prices of oil and the crisis in Ukraine. With the experience of the previous Russian economic crisis of 1998, the government was "better able to manage future currency crises while simultaneously maintaining and deepening the state's underlying structural vulnerabilities as well as its patronage-based political-economic system."⁴³ International sanctions as a consequence of the Russian role in the Ukrainian crisis caused a considerable devaluation of Russian currency and difficulties for its economy. It is worth noting the sanctions have been the liberal democratic club's tool against a prominent illiberal regime. The contest is between the two concepts of democracy, liberal and illiberal and is presented in the form of the geopolitical struggle.

Viktor Orbán called himself a "regime changer" in 2014 and described a specific view of the World as "a pre-2008, let's call it a liberal world view" that he contrasted with a model of a state that Hungary has been developing under his rule. "There is a race," Orbán said, "going on to develop a state that is capable of making a nation successful." He praised Singa-

34 Orbán 2014.

35 Kılınc, Kılınc, and Turhan 2012, 19–34.

36 Öniş and Güven 2011, 585–608.

37 Öniş 2012, 135–152.

38 Öniş and Kutlay 2013, 1409–1426.

39 Esen and Gumuscu 2016, 1581–1606.

40 Kirkpatrick 2011.

41 Treanor 2014.

42 The Economist 2014.

43 Johnson and Woodruff 2017, 612–634.

pore, China, India, Russia and Turkey that offered a model Hungary should develop. “While breaking with the dogmas and ideologies that have been adopted by the West ... we are trying to find ... the new Hungarian state, which is capable of making our community competitive in the great global race for decades to come.”⁴⁴ His speech clearly shows a contest for a model that would dominate the world in a yet to be established international system.

Serbian President, Aleksandar Vučić, while not openly arguing for the illiberal model like Orbán, has developed an authoritarian regime that controls democratic institutions and faces little challenges from a fragmented opposition. In Montenegro, the regime led by Milo Đukanović faces challenges from the opposition, but the challengers are not liberals. Most influential opposition groups are looking for a patron in Russia while the ruling party has found one in Brussels. It does not mean Đukanović’s regime is liberal as a system of cronyism and control over institutions has been in place for decades. The consociational model in Bosnia-Herzegovina has not produced liberal democracy but the rule of three autarchic leaders over the three communities making up the state. Another consociational model in North Macedonia has provided security. However, some leading liberals in the EU, like Emmanuel Macron, did not see it as a full transition to liberal democracy. Kosovo has experienced the most robust western intervention in nation-building and state-building, but these efforts have not resulted in a liberal democracy.

Crisis of the West

The 2008 global financial crisis came about because the U.S. “had built an intricate financial house of cards.”⁴⁵ It was banks that were pulling down the whole economy as Blinder describes “the failures and near failures of such venerable firms as Bear Sterns, Lehman Brothers, Merrill Lynch, Wachovia, Citigroup, Bank of America and others.”⁴⁶ Policies of deregulation that western governments adopted since the 1980s, have set up markets with a position to gradually move out of control. The rise of a neoliberal form of capitalism has been instrumental in bringing down planned economies of the Soviet model. In the process, however, the markets increasingly dominate political decisions and there is little control over the powers that are benefiting the most in deregulated economies.

The U.S. Treasury bailed out banks by investing “\$200 billion in hundreds of banks through its Capital Purchase Program in an effort to prop up capital and support new lending.”⁴⁷ European response was described in an investigative report by Reuters naming over 30 banks across Europe that have been bailed out between 2007 and 2009.⁴⁸ Ideological differences between centre-left government, like in the United Kingdom, and centre-

44 Orbán 2014.

45 Blinder 2013, 87.

46 *Ibid.*, 89.

47 CNN Money n.d.

48 Reuters 2019.

right government, like in Germany, have been of very little if any importance. Thus, the beneficiaries of governments' policies in a time of crisis have been banks. Taxpayers, while suffering hardship, have provided funds for the bailouts. The taxpayers' dissatisfaction with the policies was reflected in electoral results following the crisis. A study⁴⁹ on voters' reactions following financial crises, that covers 20 leading western societies over a century, found the usual pattern of a change of government.

Angela Merkel's government in Germany offers an exception to a general tendency of a government change found in this study. The research found additional political shift further towards the right end of the political spectrum. "Politics," the study says, "takes a hard-right turn following financial crises. On average, far-right votes increase by about a third in the five years following systemic banking distress."⁵⁰ The rise of "far-right parties [who] are the biggest beneficiaries of financial crises" should partly be understood in this context. "The fractionalisation of parliaments complicates post-crisis governance,"⁵¹ especially in democracies that are not based on a bi-partisan political competition.

The crisis of the Euro that followed the 2008 global financial crisis was caused by prior irresponsible fiscal behaviour by some of the EU member states. Greece faced bankruptcy in 2010. Greek Prime Minister "Papandreou was basically announcing the end of the world,"⁵² said his finance minister George Papaconstantinou. As a member of the EU and the Euro-zone, sharing a currency at the time with 15 other European states, was no more a national problem but a pan-European issue that has affected the global economy. Portugal and Ireland shared the problems of the Greek economy. Banks and smaller states were bailed out, but ordinary people were not.

The much larger Spanish and Italian economies were in a not hugely different situation. The post-WWII order with liberal elites in power has increasingly been challenged by the voters' will or by mass-demonstrations. One should note that except for Ireland, all affected countries have been from southern Europe. Portugal, Spain and Greece came out of dictatorships in the 1970s. Italian society can still offer plenty of signs of the fascist era, including the often-visited mausoleum to fascist dictator Benito Mussolini in Predapio's graveyard.

Due to restrictions of space, this paper is unable to develop further the argument, but it is clear that the countries of southern Europe have a different historical experience, a shorter period of established liberal democracy and, importantly, are the first port of call for refugees. Their governments in the recent past have behaved irresponsibly creating huge national debts to keep the governing elites in power. Once the source of borrowing became restricted, such as during the global financial crisis, national economies and the

49 Funke, Schularick, and Trebesch 2016.

50 Funke, Schularick, and Trebesch 2015.

51 *Ibid.*

52 BBC 2019.

governments were seriously challenged. Dependence on the global economy could not be avoided and challenged, but policies towards refugees became a crucial point of debate.

“It would be wrong,” argues Jan Zielonka, “to assume that anti-migrant sentiments are all about xenophobia and racism. They are in part, if not chiefly, evoked by the dysfunctional system of handling immigration.”⁵³ It is at this point of reaction to immigration that the European Union has failed to provide a satisfactory action for citizens. Southern Europeans felt especially affected. Sheer numbers of migrants, more than a million during the 2015 crisis, their culture and religion, many were Muslims, and racial appearance have created conditions during the economic difficulties for the rise of illiberal alternative movements in liberal democracies. This attitude directly undermined the fundamental European values based on the protection of human rights.

Media and political elites increasingly used the term migrants instead of refugees, thus creating a misleading perception in the public mind. International legislation based on an outdated Refugee Convention of 1951 and Dublin Regulations of the 1990s contributed to chaotic reactions and a lack of European collective agreement. This has initiated individual actions by illiberal national leaders in Central Europe in particular. These countries have a concise history of functioning democracy. Therefore, liberal values are often the weakest in these societies.

With the exception of some successor states to Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, where nativist dogma replaced communist ideas, the changes during the 1990s have generally been in the direction of liberal democracy. However, it went almost unnoticed that it was a nationalist form of populism that brought down previous communist regimes in many countries and transformed them into increasingly liberal democratic regimes.

“In its original form,” Cas Mudde says, “populism is an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups: ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite’”⁵⁴ Democratic principles bring into power those who attract the majority of the votes, thus making populism undoubtedly one of the democratic forms. It is based on an expression of, what Mudde describes, “the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people.”⁵⁵ Yascha Mounk states ‘democracies can be illiberal’ before proceeding to acknowledge that “liberal regimes can be undemocratic.”⁵⁶ The rise of populist politics and consequently of illiberal democracies and their leaders is understood better when Mounk’s idea is supplemented by Mudde’s statement that “populism is an illiberal democratic response to undemocratic liberalism.”⁵⁷

53 Zielonka 2018, 86.

54 Mudde 2015.

55 *Ibid.*

56 Mounk 2018, 27.

57 Mudde 2015.

Liberal democracies are challenged from within by democratic means, but they also face a violent form of the challenge that can be both external and internal. In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, Fareed Zakaria drew attention to “a not-so-hidden admiration for bin Laden” in the Arab Press before noting in the “Pakistani newspaper *The Nation*: ‘September 11 was not mindless terrorism for terrorism’s sake. It was reaction and revenge, even retribution.’”⁵⁸ A series of western initiated regime-changes in the Muslim world have not resulted in orderly democracy but in power-vacuum and violent conflict. The resulting insecurity might be explained by a clash of societal values between the western and Muslim world, supporting further the argument of a necessity for the development of a different political model in the Muslim world. The major problem, however, is competitive interpretations of Islamic dogma and practical application of Muslim values in state models. Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey are showing the highest ambition in spreading their own model to other countries. There have been at least two proxy wars involving Muslim powers resulting in the destruction of Syria and Yemen.

The Illiberal Challenge

The restructuring of the Russian state under Vladimir Putin has offered a new model of an all-powerful state under the leadership of an even more powerful individual. Putin is described as “the only world leader Trump admires.”⁵⁹ Like in liberal democracies, “most Russians have access to most global news sources.”⁶⁰ However, the attraction of reality-shows and entertainment television has prevailed over the critical assessment of the news and their own lives. Peter Pomerantsev offered “diagnoses of the political and social psychology of Putin’s Russia,” by describing it as the land where “nothing is true and everything is possible.”⁶¹

Putin’s model not only challenges the West externally, but the challenge to a liberal form of democracy has become internalized through the words and actions of national leaders such as Donald Trump, Viktor Orbán, Jaroslaw Kaczyński, Matteo Salvini and many other aspiring populists in opposition in western democracies. The shift away from democratic reforms in Turkey towards a clearly authoritarian regime is aided by an ambitious foreign policy. It seeks to influence and contest democratic principles in countries with a significant Muslim population. Bakir Izetbegović, the member of the Bosnian state Presidency, even claimed that his late father and a former leader, Alija “left it to Turkish President Recep Tajjip Erdogan to ‘safeguard’ Bosnia-Herzegovina.”⁶² A report on Erdogan’s visit to Sarajevo stated that “Bosniak leaders are eager to welcome the strongman, who portrays

58 Zakaria 2001.

59 Luce 2018, 129.

60 *Ibid.*, 129–130.

61 Pomerantsev 2017, ix.

62 B92 2017.

himself as the protector of Balkan Muslims.”⁶³ Another media described him as a “powerful Muslim leader.”⁶⁴ The appeal of Erdogan’s Turkey, however, is thus restricted to regions with Muslim population because of its significant reliance on Islamic values. The rise of China and the methods of its engagement in foreign policy is different and will be addressed later.

The global financial crisis and a separate Euro-crisis exposed the wrongdoings of “corrupt elites.” The refugee crisis of 2015 further exposed the incompetence of those same elites. Some countries reversed their policies and sought a solution in populist policies. Pankaj Mishra described the contemporary U.S. and some other nations where he saw “the same tendency of the disappointed to revolt, and the confused to seek refuge in collective identity and fantasies of a new community.”⁶⁵

Masses are turning to messianic political leaders after being disappointed by alienated elites. The new leaders present themselves as one of them regardless of the facts. Due to globalization and the mass movement of people, labour market competition has never been stronger in the West thus producing a fear of others. The result is popular support for political forces that restrict this competition, discourage immigration and stop undermining the position of ordinary people.

Another critical factor is a belief in one all-powerful leader but one who is not perceived as a dictator because of regular electoral appearances and yet one who takes control of the democratic institutions and secures his prolonged power. Due to the weakness of institutions in this type of democracy and a lack of checks and balances, a powerholder offers decisiveness that, under the circumstances when people feel fear and disappointment, shows leadership and a renaissance of national myths. Nationalism has already been re-introduced in policies, and the autarchic form of governance makes the whole ideology stronger and the leader even more powerful.

This paper is concerned with populist manifestations in democracies of Europe. Leading authorities in the study of populism argue that “theoretically, populism is most fundamentally juxtaposed to liberal democracy rather than democracy per se,”⁶⁶ and “argue that politics should be an expression of the *volonte generale* (general will) of the people.”⁶⁷ During a time of crisis, “the pure people” have felt themselves being unfairly affected while “the corrupt elite” have got away with the situation that they have created. The liberal democratic model thus deals with the crisis in a way that the masses consider unjust. A radical solution to the crisis is thus sought by the disenchanting masses that have been mobilised by populist politicians who promise something that the elites are not prepared

63 Deutsche Welle 2018.

64 N1 2018.

65 Mishra 2018, 338.

66 Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017, 1–2.

67 *Ibid.*, 6.

to offer. The position of the traditional elites, liberal values and the very concept of liberal democracy are being challenged. The leaders in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia and Kosovo have positioned themselves as representatives and leaders of the masses in a struggle against the former elites or groups that are being delegitimised as not “pure” or sufficiently nationalist. The name change of North Macedonia has been challenged by forces supportive of the former authoritarian leader on these grounds.

It is likely that some of those disillusioned with the concept of liberal democracy are mistaking populism for direct democracy. Protests against the perceived corruption of liberal democracy flirted in the past with the concept of direct democracy as a means to prevent intermediaries between “good people” and just and fair policies. The intermediaries are perceived as an elite that dilutes the policies that would benefit the masses. The intermediary class is made up of political representatives that are legitimate and elected but have disappointed voters with their inability to improve the lives of ordinary people. It is irrelevant whether the intermediary class is real or imaginary because it is the perception, justified or not but widespread and present in the masses, that leads good people to switch allegiances.

The rest of this intermediary class is made of civil servants, journalists in the news media, bankers, business leaders, heads of cultural institutions and members of the judiciary whose legitimacy as the unelected class is being questioned by the “good people”. Skilful, cunning and unscrupulous politicians offer themselves as leaders of the “revolution,” provide a direct link between the people and policies and expose the intermediary class as illegitimate, corrupt and incompetent. Hence the contempt for the established media, judicial and legislative institutions promoted by Donald Trump.

Leaders such as Viktor Orbán set on personnel changes at Constitutional Court, changes to the constitution and changes of laws including electoral law. Gerrymandering is one phase of the process in calling for new elections in an attempt to bring about a bigger majority to the leader. Media is gradually brought under control while the media that resists regime’s control is under permanent investigation by the authorities and faces draconian penalties for any irregularities. The leader’s followers are appointed to head cultural institutions. They still have to win elections but, under the changed circumstances, it is an increasingly likely outcome of the process. The result is often a renewed mandate with an increased majority. Positions are earned not on merit but depend on access to the leader. The shift has been made from liberal to illiberal democracy. This hypothetical example is actually based on the Hungarian model that is often the focus of academic attention.⁶⁸

Populism is also on the rise in societies of the Western Balkans that are not liberal democracies but do have a plurality of political groups and ideologies, periodical elections and the sort of democratic institutions whose role has been gradually diminished by authoritarian rule on the verge of tyranny. It is officially legitimised by periodic elections

68 Krekó and Zsolt 2018, 39–51.

and is likely to be popular among the masses in times of crisis when radical ideologies and concepts often succeed. Timothy Snyder observed that “both fascism and communism were responses to globalization: to the real and perceived inequalities it created, and the apparent helplessness of the democracies in addressing them.”⁶⁹

Authoritarian rule might be more effective than liberal democracy. The Russian Parliament thus unanimously voted to approve President Putin’s proposed intervention in Syria in September 2015. The autocratic decision has been masked by democratic procedure as it was delivered via the *unanimity* of the parliament’s vote. The UK government’s proposal of intervening in Syria against Bashir al-Assad, however, was defeated in British Parliament in 2013 by 285 to 272 votes. Two days later, on August 31, President Barack Obama announced the US would not attack Assad’s regime and that he would seek authorisation from Congress. Domestic politics and concerns with majorities in parliaments lead decision-making processes in liberal democracies and could be perceived as less effective. Russian open intervention has saved the regime in Syria and changed the situation in the country.

The illiberal democracy might be lacking features of free expression and free will but is pragmatic and delivers fast on the same policies that liberal forms of democracy are often entangled in parliamentary procedure, going through checks and balances before being able to launch decisive action. The result in Syria is that the regime that committed documented crimes against humanity and, despite its criminal character, has remained in power, even becoming a factor that the West has to rely upon.

The solution to problems can be more straightforward in an illiberal political model than in liberal democracies. It is worth considering that the ten most populous countries in the world, according to a population list by the United Nations,⁷⁰ are not ruled by liberal democratic forces or individuals. Authoritarian President Xi Jinping leads China’s one-party system. Populist leaders head large nations like Narendra Modi in India, Imran Khan in Pakistan and Joko Widodo in Indonesia.

Donald Trump’s administration in the U.S. and the presidencies of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil and Andrés Manuel López Obrador in Mexico are established in countries that have developed democratic institutions in the past, but the current leaders are challenging these institutions and rules. Increasing confrontations of these presidents with news media, attempts to breach constitutional division of powers and impose their will over the rest of society are firmly putting these three countries with their current leaders into the group of nations governed by non-liberal populists, or illiberal democrats. Violence and vote-buying characterise elections in Nigeria while Putin’s Russia is a *de facto* autocracy.

Japan in the 11th and Germany in 16th place are the only developed and stable liberal democracies among the next ten most populous countries. Ethiopia, Philippines, Egypt,

69 Snyder 2017, 12.

70 United Nations DESA/Population Division 2017.

Vietnam, Democratic Republic of Congo, Iran, Turkey and Thailand might have had democratic episodes in their histories, but they could certainly not be put into the same category as liberal democracies today. The population size might partly contribute to the rise of illiberal regimes.

Out of over 5.3 billion people living in the 20 most populous countries, it is just 210 million that are ruled by liberal democratic regimes. One might argue the U.S. should be added to the list of stable liberal democracies as it has developed democratic institutions which are keeping in check populist attempts by the Trump administration. Even then, with the additional 325 million people, liberal democracies would amount for only 535 million people out of 5.3 billion people living in the twenty most populous countries, which is just about ten per cent. It is safe to conclude that illiberal form of democracy is reality for the majority of the global population.

Important liberal democratic institutions such as the freedom of media, the rule of law and human rights have been eroded by a rising new political model of governance. Populist leaders are using forms of democracies to secure different content – an authoritarian form of rule. The changes taking place are not revolutionary and sudden but are initially gradual and subtle until the leaders are secure enough in their rule. Only then they challenge the pre-existing norms and rules and the shift from liberal to illiberal form of democracy takes place.

Chinese Influence

Even in systems that do not offer meaningful political competition such as China, the elites still rely on public support of the regime's policies. Such a system without democratic instruments is of lesser or no appeal to the leaders and citizens of countries that have previous experience of mass democracy. While the political system and the culture, including the political one, are remote to post-communist societies of Europe, the economic strength and rise of China are appealing to leaderships of those countries. A "one-party system" is not an applicable model for countries that have succeeded in developing multi-party systems even where one party now dominates politics for prolonged periods. However, the Chinese economic model is seen by leaders in the Western Balkans as a potential source of investment and their preservation of political power.

The West has successfully developed policies of conditionality towards countries in transition in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). Popular expectations, however, have not been fulfilled and this has helped develop a sense of disappointment. The expected economic improvements did not follow the political and systemic reforms. The result was political disappointment in the western model and a rise of political apathy. Alternative models of democracy have gained support, and authoritarian leaders have emerged. "The 2008 financial crisis instilled a sense among Serbian leadership that the West is vulnerable and

that China is rising.”⁷¹ This argument is applicable throughout the Western Balkans. Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić underlined this view stating that “thirty years ago you had one, absolutely dominant military, political, and economic power,”⁷² while the rise of China is changing everything.

The 16+1 form of cooperation between China and sixteen, later seventeen, countries of CEE presents a possible alternative to conditioned western investment. “Since 2012, the 16+1 format has provided China with growing political influence in Central Europe,” the argument states, “exacerbating tendencies toward greater fragmentation in Europe.”⁷³ For many, “it is clear that the ‘Chinese way,’ which has been in full swing in Africa or South Asia, for example, is more suitable to less regulated, pluralistic countries.”⁷⁴

Western Balkans, therefore, is a perfect theatre for the “Chinese Way,” that “frequently beat[s] the often fragile financing from Russia (...) or from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and the World Bank, (...) as well as the limited pre-accession funds from the EU.”⁷⁵ The Chinese funding “has been used to launch more than a dozen projects, worth a total of about €6 billion” in Western Balkans and “links loans to the appointment of the contractor (without an open tender), and also assumes that the local government will guarantee the projects (state aid).”⁷⁶ The EU financing conditions internal political and economic reforms and financial discipline that would ultimately undermine the position of the authoritarian rule.

Examples of significant projects developed through Chinese involvement are motorways, railways, bridges, steelworks, thermoelectrical plants, copper mining and smelting complex. Key infrastructural projects have been won by Chinese companies throughout the Western Balkans, while Chinese financial institutions often provide loans for such projects thus creating a cycle of money from China to China via the Western Balkans. “The EU’s structural funds in the form of grants are larger and cheaper than Chinese loans,” but it is the conditionality of the attached EU policies and politics in the Balkans such as the “poor governance on the part of some local politicians” that shift these countries towards deals with China.⁷⁷

When Chinese companies are contracted on to a large infrastructural project, often without tender, it opens a way for local powerholders to get involved through their cronies and ultimately enrich their political parties or, more likely, their own companies and personal

71 Le Corre and Vuksanovic 2019.

72 *Ibid.*

73 Weidenfeld 2018.

74 Le Corre and Vuksanovic 2019.

75 Kaczmarek and Jakóbovski 2017.

76 *Ibid.*

77 Le Corre and Vuksanovic 2019.

wealth. The exact proofs are almost impossible to be presented as long as the same structures have a firm hold of power.

The authoritarian single-party state is not a political model that attracts CEE countries. Economic power is the attraction. However, some experts remain concerned and have warned that the “loans made by Beijing to CEE countries” might “create potential for financial instability.”⁷⁸ Experts have warned of a “(different kind of) strings attached” to these loans that should not be underestimated.⁷⁹ The situations created by strings attached have led the Western Balkans becoming “a top priority of China’s Belt and Road Initiative, on which 16+1 meetings now centre.”⁸⁰ The EU has acknowledged the contest between the two poles of the developing international system by describing China as “an economic competitor in the pursuit of technological leadership, and a systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance.”⁸¹ However, although it is hard to see any country of the Western Balkans adopting Chinese political model, some elements of the concentrated power, media control and ideological control of the institutions, while paying lip-service to democratic rules, do concern the EU.

The Bar to Boljare highway in Montenegro is likely to increase the national debt to a level of unsustainability. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Banja Luka to Mlinište highway is also associated with the 16+1 initiative. A Chinese consortium has signed the contract for upgrading the Budapest to Belgrade railway link. A Chinese bank has provided the loan for at least one section of the line in Serbia. North Macedonia was offered a loan to help build its highway. Croatia, while receiving EU funds, has awarded a Chinese company with the project to build Pelješac bridge.

The relations are complex because “interlocutors can perform multiple and contradictory roles all at the same time,” as “the evolution of China-CEE cooperation indicates.”⁸² The EU and China are contesting each other’s actions in the Western Balkans. Local countries attempt to play the external actors against each other to their own advantage. The challenge from China is geopolitical and is based on increasing economic influence that would make the CEE space more dependent on China but, unlike the illiberal model, there is no ambition of exporting their political model, but rather corrupting democratic processes in the client countries.

Weak institutions in the Western Balkans and ambition for authoritarian rule by political leaders might be compared to the Chinese “ideological tradition of Mass Line that directly connects the state with the public, often bypassing administrative regulations and

78 Eder and Mardell 2018.

79 *Ibid.*

80 Le Corre and Vuksanovic 2019.

81 High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2019.

82 Kavalski 2019.

the legal procedure, resulting in weak institutions and civic organisations.”⁸³ There is no evidence of Chinese encouragement or promotion of their model in the Western Balkans. However, there are some striking similarities in the way how some leaders in the Western Balkans operate. This quasi-democratic decision-making process creates the impression of a participatory society and might seem similar to a mass society. It organises the relationship between elites and masses, as Mao Zedong said in 1967, communicates ideas “from the masses, to the masses.”⁸⁴

This kind of relationship makes elites accessible to the masses who commit themselves to the regime who, in turn, might create the impression or ability to “correct unpopular policies and purge incompetent officials.”⁸⁵ Nevertheless “the Party leadership is central in Mao’s conception of the mass line.”⁸⁶ This form of “political socialisation in this populist authoritarian political tradition”⁸⁷ creates support for national government and dissatisfaction with lower-level leaderships what sets conditions for the creation of popular authoritarian leadership at the national level. A cult of personality is the extreme version of this kind of regime.

Conclusion in the Western Balkans

Public dissatisfaction, political apathy, corrupt officials, cronyism, widespread clientelism and impoverishment create a potential crisis of the regime in many countries. The Western Balkans is a good example of this. This is also an opportunity for a charismatic leader to create changes in society and the system of governance. Elements of the masses are bought off by regular pensions, improved public services and some monumental projects. Authoritarian leaders avoid the transfer of power to institutions despite public anger and demand for change. Instead, they offer the impression of communication between the masses and the regime, not unlike the Chinese model of the mass line. The result is public anger directed at the lower levels of authority and mass support for the leading figure repeatedly re-elected. Unlike a one-party state, some post-communist regimes often use techniques and practices of illiberal democracies, thus allowing for political competition but keeping it firmly under control. The result is always likely to be authoritarian by using some of the single-party society’s methods.

Observers have noted that the EU has “lost its will and capacity for completing enlargement in the Western Balkans,”⁸⁸ leading to a shift from a transition towards a liberal form of democracy to an illiberal version. The largest of post-Yugoslav societies has seen “the

83 Tang 2016, 1.

84 *Ibid.*, 6.

85 Tang 2016, 1.

86 Young 1980, 225.

87 Tang 2016, 11–12.

88 Bieber 2020, 31.

emergence of authoritarianism with the rise to power of Aleksandar Vučić and the Serbian Progressive Party.”⁸⁹ Tito’s policies of Yugoslav non-alignment resonate in some elements of Vučić’s foreign policy. Public appearances of a close political relationship with Russia, firm commitment to developing an ever-closer economic relationship with China and the perpetual struggle to be accepted into the western liberal family might feed into the regime’s rhetoric of development, independence and self-sustainability. However, the hardly existent independent media, weak opposition, brain-drain, party’s control over the public sector, position the regime firmly on the other side of the liberal-illiberal divide.

North Macedonia (until recently Macedonia) under the regime of Nikola Gruevski showed all the same characteristics as the regime in Serbia until Macedonians, supported by the West, forced change. The speed in which the country was adopted into the NATO structure shows that the West has acknowledged competing interests in the Western Balkans and decided to act decisively, at least in the field of security if not in the European integration process itself.

Montenegro’s NATO membership marked the process of the securitisation. The regime, however, shows the persistence of political control and economic policies that are not compatible with the ideals of Europeanization. Although Đukanović has not allied himself and his country with Putin’s Russia, it is the same model of governance in place. It has kept him effectively in power ever since 1989, either as president, prime minister or a party leader. Power is profoundly personalised and enshrined in Milo Đukanović regardless of the post he holds.

Kosovo society and politics have been transformed by the international, i.e., western presence. Nevertheless, it cannot be seen as a liberal democracy despite the strong presence of the West and its supervised sovereignty. The West has secured the territory but have yet to transform the political and economic system accordingly.

Populist mobilisation in Bosnia-Herzegovina has led to a communitarian model of democracy. The enemy of the nationalist application of the communitarian model is a multi-ethnic society. Therefore, processes have led to the establishment of three parallel societies in one state. Each of the societies has developed and affirmed a communitarian model of democracy. With the “enemies” in the immediate neighbourhood, a firm and charismatic leader is sought and repeatedly re-elected to preserve the community based on shared ethnic and religious belonging. Kapidžić observes a process of “autocratization [that] is contained within subnational arenas by dominant parties representing a single ethnic group and constrained by multi-level and cross-ethnic checks and balances.”⁹⁰ Such circumstances inevitably led to the development of illiberal forms of democracy. Its consociational structure undermines the state itself. The three parallel societies where the informal form of rule is prevalent, institutions are weak, while theocratic influences have

89 Bieber 2020, 32.

90 Kapidžić 2020, 13.

been used by autocratic leaders to restrict the opposition's potential have undermined the state even more. However, the consociational arrangement prevents, at the same time, development of the autarchy at the state level and preserves many of its democratic features.

Bosnia-Herzegovina perfectly reflects the general contest, struggle and result of the influences by leading actors. The leader of the Bosniak ethnic group organised a large meeting in Sarajevo for the Turkish President Erdoğan during the latter's electoral campaign. The Bosnian Serbs leader is a frequent visitor to Russia and President Putin. Several members of the nationalist leadership of Bosnian Croats rotate their positions between Bosnian and Croatian political institutions. The Bosnian Croat leader himself is present at all major political events staged by Croatian leadership in Zagreb. All three communities meanwhile rely on an increasing Chinese presence in the economic sphere. Thus, the major global contest is clearly reflected in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the stability and security of which also reflects global insecurity and instability. It is, as Kapidžić explains, "subnational politics and deep-rooted power structures that blend executive dominance with economic power and informal party networks."⁹¹

The Western Balkans states have developed forms of governance that are either authoritarian or are lacking elements of liberal application of democracy. The region has been described in the past within security circles as a doughnut. Countries surrounding the Western Balkans were in NATO and the Western Balkans were creating the hole within. A doughnut is no less tasty with a hole. However, everything changed with external powers "malign influences" filling the hole. The new international system has yet to be finalised, but the two, or even three, potential poles of a multipolar world have developed different forms of political governance that have been partially applied in the countries of the Western Balkans. Despite seeking patronage in one of the global poles of the international system, these countries have not developed a single particular model of democracy. The resulting regimes reflect both liberal and illiberal forms of democracy and even elements of the Chinese "mass-line" model can be detected in them. A hybrid regime of the two models of democracy is prevalent in the Western Balkans. It could be described as a dysfunctional democracy or competitive authoritarianism. The regime reflects a mixture of both authoritarian and liberal values. It is not positioned on either side of the democratic divide. When all the dominant powers have accepted the global system, the conditions will be created for the hybrid regimes to exist almost in perpetuity. Meanwhile, however, they are increasingly destabilised because of the global struggle for the new world order.

91 *Ibid.*, 17.

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