

# Election Consolidation in the Post-Communist Balkans: Progress and Obstacles

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The paper discusses some common themes in the electoral practices of the Balkan countries, yet it also acknowledges the variance of electoral developments among the different states. As with most aspects of Balkan democratization, competitive elections during the last 25 years of post-communist experience have seen notable progress as well as backsliding. The paper regards electoral politics in the Balkan states as a mixture of internal constraints and external agenda setting. It argues that despite some “pockets” of electoral instability and uncertainty, all Balkan states have now become consolidated electoral democracies with largely fair practices and with decreasing levels of fraud or violence, and an established culture of power sharing and coalition building. At the same time, this post-communist electoral consolidation has also created a pattern whereby elections are the battleground of divisive elites in the pursuit of influence, power and political clients, amid non-ideological party politics. In this weak and volatile periphery of Europe, the international community becomes engaged during electoral periods, and interferes in some form or another to monitor, set the priorities or even affect outcomes.



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Elections in the Balkans have been central for the transformation of these states into democratic polities. They have contributed to political change and post-communist pluralist continuity. As with most aspects of Balkan democratization, competitive elections during the last 25 years of post-communist experience have seen notable progress as well as backsliding. On the one hand, they introduced and sustained the new map of post-communist party politics - they brought about momentous changes from illiberal transitions in the 1990s to more inclusionary political processes in the 2000s, and they provided a common reference point in the divided societies of post-conflict, war-torn territories in former Yugoslavia. Through their regularity, they have given legitimacy to the new democratic process in all the countries of the region. On the negative side, many elections in the Balkans have been divisive, fraudulent, boycotted by some parties, contested on various occasions and linked with excessive spending or corrupt party financing.

The present paper discusses some common themes in the electoral practices of the Balkan states, yet it also acknowledges the variance of electoral developments among the different states. It argues that despite some “pockets” of electoral instability and uncertainty, all Balkan states have by now become consolidated electoral democracies with largely fair practices and decreasing levels of fraud or violence. This is a testament to the development of a more mature democratic electoral culture. At the same time, this post-communist electoral consolidation has also established a pattern whereby elections are the battleground of divisive elites in the pursuit of influence, power and political clients, amid non-ideological party politics. Almost all post-electoral outcomes in the Balkan states have led to power sharing, co-habitation or coalition-building arrangements, where most political elites and a multitude of political parties are involved in some way in the exercise of governmental authority, leaving very limited room for opposition politics. This is particularly significant in the current period of economic crisis and low public trust in politics, because all political parties are perceived as culprits for state inadequacies and the democratic deficits. Amid this Janus-faced electoral experience, there is an overall consensus on the growing importance and influence of the European Union, whereby electoral or post-electoral practices are being observed and scrutinized by the international community, and the EU in particular. Electoral politics in all Balkan states have been a mixture of internal constraints and external agenda setting.

*Internal electoral politics: Elites, parties and ideological volatility*

In advanced Western Europe, elections are traditionally fought on an ideological platform of conservative/neo-liberal/Christian democratic versus social democratic/centre-left ideas. Lately in the context of the Eurozone crisis, this division has taken the form of a dilemma of austerity versus growth. Political parties in Western consolidated democracies are elected on their ideological platforms and relevant programmatic campaigns. In most of the young democracies of Eastern Europe and South Eastern Europe, electoral issues are often more about political leaders and political practices than ideas. Because of the lack of traditional ideologically based party politics, transitions have been dominated by the local elites, and have revolved around the personalities and choices of the party leaders. This has been a typical development in South East European electoral politics, where parties are often defined by their leadership. The region has seen two types of party leadership: the type that rises fast, which is connected with public disillusionment with other alternatives, such as in the cases of ex-King Simeon and Boyko Borisov in Bulgaria,<sup>1</sup> or the “long” type of leadership which follows from a lack of alternatives or the fragmentation of the opposition, such as Milo Djukanovic in Montenegro,<sup>2</sup> Sali Berisha in Albania,<sup>3</sup> or Nikola Gruevski in FYR Macedonia.<sup>4</sup> Leaders of the latter type become embedded in power and may abuse office or state funds, and resort to illiberal practices towards opposition or media.

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Because most political formations lack the traditional right-left ideological divide, political parties competing in elections usually include extreme nationalistic, less nationalistic, reformed socialist and ethnic or minority parties.<sup>5</sup> Especially in former Yugoslavia,

1 Simeon II became Prime Minister of Bulgaria in 2001 very soon after his political return in the country, until 2005. In the elections of 2005 his party came second and participated in the coalition government. In the 2009 elections, his party received a mere 3 percent. Shortly after that, he resigned as leader of his party, “National Movement Simeon II”. Boyko Borisov was Prime Minister between 2009 and 2013, having been mayor of Sofia between 2005-2009. After his resignation in 2013, his popularity waned in the context of wider public disillusionment and a series of protests.

2 Djukanovic served as Prime Minister of Montenegro from 1991 to 1998, then as President of Montenegro from 1998 to 2002, and as Prime Minister again from 2003 to 2006, from 2008 to 2010, and again in 2012. Djukanovic is also the long-standing President of the Democratic Party of Socialists of Montenegro.

3 Sali Berisha served as President of Albania between 1992 and 1997 and as Prime Minister between 2005 and 2013.

4 Nikola Gruevski has been Prime Minister of FYR Macedonia since August 2006.

5 On party politics in the Balkans see Vera Stojarova and Peter Emerson (eds), *Party politics in the Western Balkans*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2010.

parties became nationalistic and extreme as a result of the violent disintegration and formation of new states; in Bulgaria and Romania, extreme right politics developed vis-à-vis internal minorities and based their ideological discourses on their nationalistic, “abused” and grandiose historical interpretations. Because most of these parties are also pragmatic and want to participate in coalition governments, they have to reform themselves with time and moderate their nationalistic discourse. This has been very evident in the Socialist party of Serbia,<sup>6</sup> the Serbian Radical party,<sup>7</sup> and the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ),<sup>8</sup> all of which eventually toned down their patriotic excesses in order to strengthen their governmental chances and appeal to wider audiences and the international community.

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Another category of parties, well-known in most East European polities, is that of the reformed communists who gradually adopted a more European social democratic appearance, like the Socialist Party of Albania or the Bulgarian Socialist Party. A significant proportion of political formations in all Balkan states are ethnic or minority parties, and all Balkan political landscapes include parties representing ethnic identities. Bosnian politics are the extreme form of this, where the overwhelming majority of parties represent the three dominant ethnic groups: Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats. In Bulgaria, Romania and FYR Macedonia, minority parties of Turks, Hungarians and Albanians, respectively, have been dominant and influential in electoral politics, and have been part of many coalition governments. In Bulgaria, the Movement for Rights and Freedoms, an ethnic/religious party representing the Turkish minority, has been a steady coalition partner since 2001. In FYR Macedonia, the Democratic Party of Albanians and the Democratic Union for Integration, both representing the interests of Albanians, compete with each other as minority partners of different coalition governments. Finally, in the youngest country of the Balkans, Kosovo, political parties are completely attached to political personalities, and it is hard to dis-

6 The Socialist Party of Serbia was created by Slobodan Milosevic and ruled Serbia in a semi-dictatorial way during the 1990s. Following the fall and the death of Milosevic, the Socialist Party moderated its nationalist stance and tried to develop links with other European social democratic parties. It has been a coalition partner since 2008, first with the Democratic Party and then with the current Serbian Progressive Party.

7 The Serbian Progressive party was formed as an independent party after it split from the Serbian Radical party. The latter is an extreme nationalistic party founded by Vojislav Seselj, who faced an indictment by the ICTY, accused of war crimes during the Bosnian war.

8 The HDZ went through a radical transformation after the death of its nationalist leader Franjo Tudjman in 2000, when it established itself as a Christian Democratic party with a European orientation.

cern any ideological differences. As such, the three most popular parties in post-independent Kosovo, the Democratic Party of Kosovo, the Democratic League of Kosovo and the Alliance for the future of Kosovo, have minimal ideological differences, and are defined exclusively by their leaders.

Because of these trends, electoral issues revolve around the credibility of the leaders, financial scandals and corruption, nationalist or ethnic questions. Such themes can be very sensitive, divisive and incriminatory, and usually generate passionate, fanatical or exclusionary discourses. Corruption is a constant theme in electoral campaigns with politicians accusing each other of, for instance, excessive party financing and misappropriation of state funds. This gives rise to a lack of public trust in political parties, which threatens the belief in the democratic process across the Balkans. According to Transparency International's Global Corruption Barometer for 2013, citizens in Croatia, FYR Macedonia and Serbia view political parties as the most corrupt of all public institutions assessed.<sup>9</sup> The longevity of the Bulgarian protests is the most characteristic example of how the public becomes disaffected and disillusioned by the dark side of the transition to democracy and to market economy, the side that is linked to corrupt politicians and oligarchs, organized crime, clientelism and badly organized and inefficient state mechanisms. Protests in Bulgaria started at the beginning of 2013, initially sparked by high utility bills. They subsequently spread to all major cities in the country, ultimately leading to the resignation of Boyko Borisov's centre-right government. Despite the elections and a new coalition government, protests intensified when Prime Minister Oresharski appointed a highly controversial figure as head of the State Agency for National Security. Parliament's revocation of the appointment did nothing to appease protesters, who widened their demands, speaking out against corruption and government scandals, asking for more transparency, minimum standards of fair play for the political game, a fight against organized crime and an end to the rule of 'local oligarchs'.

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Elections in most Balkan states are usually accompanied by "drama" which is very closely observed by international observers and media. In the region, which is no stranger to international publicity, electoral politics and post-electoral coalition building are seen

<sup>9</sup> "Buying influence: Money and elections in the Balkans", Transparency International, 25 June 2013, at [http://www.transparency.org/news/feature/buying\\_influence\\_balkans](http://www.transparency.org/news/feature/buying_influence_balkans)

as pivotal moments for change or stagnation. In this weak and volatile periphery of Europe, the international community becomes very interested during election periods, and interferes in some form or another to monitor, set the agenda or even affect outcomes.

*External influences: Monitoring and agenda setting*

Since the early transition years, elections in the Balkans were closely monitored by the appropriate international organizations (EU, OSCE, Council of Europe), the big member states of Europe, the U.S. and transnational NGOs, all of which were involved in the promotion of democracy from abroad and emphasized the importance of free and fair elections. The most prominent external influence came from the European Union, which linked democratic elections with the countries' progress towards EU membership. The latter enabled the EU to do two main things: first, to monitor, report and shape the way elections were conducted in all the countries of the post-communist Balkans and, second, to influence the pre-electoral agenda. For their part, regional electoral outcomes were also affected by external engagement and preferences, as a result of direct or indirect pressure from abroad.

Electoral consolidation has been the central focus of democracy promotion in post-communist Europe, with free and fair elections constituting a major pre-condition for the inclusion of all these young democracies in the institutions of the international community. In the Balkans, post-communist electoral politics have given rise to a range of political outcomes, from the illiberal politics in Romania, Bulgaria and Albania in the 1990s, to the semi-authoritarian regimes of Milosevic in Serbia and Tudjman and Croatia,

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or the ethnically divided politics of Bosnia, Kosovo and FYR Macedonia. Most international organizations were involved at one point or another in the monitoring and assessment of electoral and post-electoral practices, and their impact has varied from case to case. Bulgaria and Romania managed to gradually strengthen their electoral behaviour, and were the two countries which, through elections in the mid-1990s, renounced their communist pasts and opted for more European and liberal options. Both of them gradually accepted the inclusion of their minorities, Turkish and Hungarian respectively, in coalition governments following heavy pressure and conditionality from the European Union. Since then, the consecutive changes in governments have clearly indicated the legitimacy of the process, although most of the difficulties emerged after the elections during the formation of coalition governments or during the co-

habitation of different politicians in power. Romania has been a case in point of difficult co-habitation, with the more recent example being the battle between President Traian Basescu and Prime Minister Victor Ponta.<sup>10</sup> Bulgaria, on the other hand, a model of peaceful governmental change in the region, was recently hit by a very serious wave of popular anti-government protests, one of the most noticeable in a post-communist country since the fall of communism.

Serbia and Croatia underwent through their own electoral revolutions in 2000, which brought down the post-communist semi-authoritarian regimes of Milosevic and Tudjman. They both proceeded rapidly with the consolidation of free and fair electoral practices. In all Balkan states, electoral politics normalized substantially during the 2000s, so much so that external monitoring became redundant. The most problematic country was Albania, where external observers consistently expressed concerns about unfair practices. For a long time, the OSCE, the Council of Europe and the European Union had been voicing concerns over the democratic conduct of electoral practices and the use of electoral fraud, political violence and corruption during elections in this country. Party politics became so polarized and disruptive that in 2009, the Socialist Party refused to recognize the outcome of the parliamentary elections following allegations of fraud against the victorious Democratic Party. It boycotted parliament for a long period, plunging the country into a political crisis. The June 2013 parliamentary elections, closely monitored by international observers, resulted in the victory of Edi Rama's Socialist party over Sali Berisha's Democratic Party and were the first elections in Albania which were positively assessed, raising the prospects of Albania's EU membership.

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In the post-conflict cases, elections are seen not just as a factor for the strengthening of democracies, but as a peace-building measure to end the conflicts among warring factions. Usually, the international community proceeds with speedy elections right after the end of the conflict. On the effectiveness of elections, opinion is divided, with some arguing that early elections facilitate peace agreements, hasten democratization and contribute to post-conflict stability,<sup>11</sup> while others argue that early elections in ethnically

10 Cristina Bucur, "Romanian politics in 2012 has been marred by a rocky co-habitation between Victor Ponta's government and President Traian Basescu", *LSE blog*, 26 December 2012, at <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2012/12/26/2012-in-romanian-politics/>

11 Larry Diamond, "Promoting democracy to post-conflict and failed states", *Taiwan Journal of Democracy*, 2 (2), 2006, pp. 93-116.



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war-torn territories tend to cement ethnic divisions and polarization.<sup>12</sup> For the Balkans, the truth lies somewhere in the middle when one looks at the experiences in Bosnia, Kosovo or FYR Macedonia. In Bosnia, the 1997 Dayton Peace Accords brought about a long lasting uninterrupted peace which has also been sustained through regular electoral practices, yet the ethnic divisions along party lines continue to obstruct political normalization, the functioning of the central state and ethnic reconciliation. The latter is the view held by Paddy Ashdown, High Representative for Bosnia-Herzegovina between 2002-2006, arguing that his experiences in Bosnia and elsewhere beyond the region taught him that the immediate priority of the international community in post-conflict cases should not be immediate elections, but the establishment of the rule law.<sup>13</sup> To this day, Bosnia is divided along ethnic lines, and internal politics are dominated and manipulated by the priorities of the leaderships of the three main ethnic groups: Bosniaks (Muslims), Serbs and Croats. The progress of Bosnia's accession to the European Union has been repeatedly delayed due to the inability of the three main ethnic communities to, among other things, reform their electoral law to make it more inclusive for other minorities, and for citizens from minorities to be able to stand for President, as demonstrated by the Sejdic and Finci case before the European Court of Human Rights.<sup>14</sup> In Kosovo, the international community has emphasized free and fair elections in an effort to preserve the multicultural character of the new country, and links the success of elections with the participation of Kosovo Serbs from the north in the local and general elections. The role of Serbia and the latter's non-recognition of independence of Kosovo has been crucial in this, and following the normalization agreement between Serbia and Kosovo in May 2013, the EU put a great deal of pressure on Serbia to exercise its influence in the Serbian north and convince the Serb population in Kosovo to participate in the local elections of November 3, 2013.<sup>15</sup> In FYR Macedonia, the externally designed

12 Dawn Brancati and Jack Snyder, "Time to kill: The impact of election timing on post-conflict stability" *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 00 (0), 2012, pp. 1-32.

13 Paddy Ashdown, *Swords and Ploughshares; Bringing Peace to the 21<sup>st</sup> century*, Widenfeld and Nicholson, 2007

14 The Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina provided that only ethnic Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats can be elected members of Presidency and House of Peoples of BiH. Sejdic and Finci, being a Roma and a Jew respectively, contested these provisions and took their case to the European Court of Human Rights, which found in their favour in 2009. The EU has since then added this clause as a condition for Bosnia's association process.

15 These local elections were the first elections in which the Serbs of Northern Kosovo participated since the unilateral declaration of independence in 2008; they were monitored because they generated



Ohrid Agreement, which ended the brief war in 2001, adopted proportional representation, which compelled parties cooperate in order to form a government. Despite the overall peaceful coexistence of the Macedonian majority and Albanian minority parties, elections and inter-ethnic coexistence are regularly monitored by foreign embassies, given the tense relationship and the occasional eruption of limited violence. Furthermore, in FYR Macedonia, concerns over the abuse of power and fraudulent electoral practices have also been a point of contention between the Macedonian nationalist, conservative party (VMRO-DPMNE) and the social democratic party, and until lately international observers have been noting some voting irregularities.<sup>16</sup>

Elections in the post-communist Balkans, as in other parts of Eastern Europe, are usually perceived from abroad in the context of a reform versus anti-reform agenda. Reform requirements are translated into specific conditions and criteria laid down by the European Union, which facilitate progress towards EU membership. External actors, including the international media and the academic community, usually distinguish party and electoral politics in terms of pro-and anti-reform forces. The pro-reform camp includes parties and their leaders who profess a European orientation, democratic progress and market oriented changes. The anti-reform forces are usually those with a nationalist agenda, the more introverted, Eurosceptic and radical, often those who were involved in the conflicts in Yugoslavia, or other extreme forces of the nationalist right. With this division in mind, the European Union's main actors (European Commission, European Parliament and some major EU member states) may favour or side with those they consider to be more loyal to the pro-reform agenda. This approach may pay off, but it can also backfire, and efforts by outsiders to support and reward parties they consider non-nationalistic and more Europeanist may fail when the are put to popular vote.<sup>17</sup> One recent example includes Serbia's 2012 presidential and parliamentary elections, where the EU was on the side of Tadic's pro-European and accommodating Democratic

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strong reactions in the Serb majority areas of northern Kosovo.

16 Election observers who monitored the 2013 local elections testified to a particularly tense atmosphere in Skopje's key Centar municipality, where the election was marred by reports of group voting, voters being escorted to the polls by unidentified persons and pressure on NGO observers.

17 Susan Woodward, "Is democracy possible in the Balkans? On preconditions and conditions in Bosnia, Kosovo and Serbia", Report for the National Council for Eurasian and East European Research (2007), p.19

Party, and sceptical of Nikolic's Serbian Progressive Party, whose nationalist, Russophile and populist past rhetoric were feared and rejected by the EU. Contrary to external pressure and support for Tadic, Serbs punished the Democratic Party in the elections for its dismal economic record and voted for Nikolic. The formation of the new coalition government, which included both the Serbian Progressive Party and Ivica Dasic's Socialist party, was enough to send shivers down the EU spine. Yet to the surprise of all, this government was the one that chose to cooperate with the EU on the normalization of relations with Kosovo and the adoption of an economic program designed by the EU and the IMF. The fact that the new leadership chose to overcome its past rhetoric and revamp its European profile is an indication of the pragmatic approach which most parties in the region opt for when they are close to political power. It is also an indication that the EU can misjudge and underestimate the alternative options in the internal politics of some of these countries.

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Overall, the relationships that parties and governments' have with the EU vary from country to country, showing that despite an overwhelming preference for European integration, which is evident across parties and across countries, the political will, capacity and ability of the governments to deliver on their reform promises has twists and turns. But it may also be the EU that is to blame for the lack of progress, either because it puts too much pressure on policies which are excessively anti-social and neo-liberal in their nature, or because of its own enlargement fatigue. During the last few years, the Eurozone crisis has had a negative impact on all the Balkan states, which have become economically and politically more vulnerable. The electoral fortunes and political choices are closely linked with the EU influence, and what these countries perceive their future to be within the European Union. It is a paradox that even in moments of economic crisis and

European neglect, when the EU's popularity is at its lowest, the governments of Serbia after the 2012 elections and Albania after the 2013 elections have chosen to cooperate closely with the European Union in order to address their perennial problems of internal corruption, good neighbourly relations and democratic reforms.

## **Conclusion**

The Balkans is a "Janus-faced" region of political normalization through electoral consolidation on the one hand, and post-elec-

toral stalemates and party volatility on the other. It is a region of national variance and regional interconnectedness. Along with a broad diversity of national political outcomes, the region shares some common trends in its electoral and political performance, not just because the countries share similar historical backgrounds, structural and behavioural features, but also because they are connected with one another and developments in one country affect internal developments in its neighbours. In the wider regional electoral frame, there is by now a well-established culture of coalition building and power sharing among leaders who are forced to cooperate with each other, yet they are often resentful of having to share the benefits of political office. What is also common in the region - and also a wider phenomenon in the periphery of Western Europe - is the increasing public disillusionment with politics and elections. This is due to a rising economic disenchantment, which is in turn linked to rising unemployment and increasing poverty. As in other parts of the post-Soviet world, it is also linked with the way the post-communist transition has evolved in an unequal and unjust way. Seen from this perspective, election periods become defining and often dramatic moments, when citizens have the opportunity to express their disapproval and disaffection with the deficits of political and economic transitions.