



NEW PERSPECTIVES ON SOUTH-EAST EUROPE

The Rise of Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans

Florian Bieber

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New Perspectives on South-East Europe

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In loving memory of my mother, Karin Thimme-Bodzin (1941–2018).

PROLOGUE: ADVICE FOR THE BALKAN PRINCE

Dear Balkan Prince,

Congratulations on your recent election.

I presume that you would like to retain power for as long as possible. While this is not as easy as it used to be, it is still possible, if you follow my ten rules outlined next.

You always have to remember that being considered a democrat and a reformer is a judgment that matters more if it comes from outside, from the EU, international observers, and organizations. They might be stricter than your domestic audience, but they are also more ignorant and likely to lose interest quickly.

1. Control the elections, not on election day, but before

While some of your predecessors might have been able to just stuff ballot boxes or raise the dead to vote for you, or even better, make sure you have no opponents running in elections, this is no longer possible. You need to win elections and be also recognized by outsiders. These outsiders might be less picky in the Caucasus or Africa, but you have to look like a good democrat in the Balkans. My dear prince, this does not mean you have to be one. There are still a few ways to do well.

First, see elections as a way to get stronger. Time elections well: many and early elections can help catch the opposition off guard and also to have votes when your popularity is at its peak. Offer voters a bit of money, or forgive them their outstanding electricity bills, there are many ways in which you can get votes for just little money. Sometimes consider offering a bit of money for people not to vote (you know that they would just cast their

ballots for your opponents). It also helps to taint the opposition as being suspicious, sexually deviant, disloyal to the state, and generally dubious.

2. Control the media, make sure you have many voices, which all say the same and have your junk-yard dog

The media is what matters to retain power domestically.

Now, you don't own them anymore, like other princes before you did. However, few of the media are economically viable, and the best way to control them is to advertise only in the ones that report well on you (and don't forget, you are the largest advertiser). Many newspapers and TV stations are probably owned either by some Western media company that value profit margins over standards or a shady local businessman about whom you can certainly dig up some unpaid tax bills.

Journalists can sometimes be a bit pesky, and the best way to make sure that they are behaving well, is to threaten them a little bit, not in public, but pressure a few. Most will be happy to censor themselves.

3. Talk about the EU and wanting to join it, but make it hot and cold

You might not really care or understand the EU and this is fine, but wanting to join the EU is a must. Without this, you probably would not have got elected considering that all voters want EU membership. Furthermore, you could be left out in the dark if you don't support the EU, as forming a government requires a stamp of approval from the EU. Thus, want the EU, but throw in a dose of ambiguity. Being too pro-European these days seems like trying too hard with a partner who doesn't really want you. Thus, throw some doubt on the project.

4. Talk about fighting corruption and reforms. Talk and talk and jail a few

Who is in favor of corruption? Nobody. Thus, there is no safer topic to campaign on and talk about all the time. It is good to position yourself as a fearless fighter against corruption and to present anybody corrupt as being against your rule, thus throwing a shadow of corruption over your opposition.

Of course, it is hard to stay in power without tolerating some corruption. Make sure that you have occasional successes, some arrests, trials. Keep in mind that arrests are more important than sentences. Also get a few of your own guys. It makes you seem more serious. Reports about modest lifestyle help, and declarations of assets can be taken with some degree of creative freedom.

5. Solve problems with your neighbors to get praise and create a few to be popular

The EU and outsiders like you to get on with your neighbors, so it is worth finding time to visit them, not only because they might have better sea town resorts: talk about regional cooperation, how we all share our European future (consult my book ‘100 speeches for the right occasion for Balkan princes’).

Now, new or old problems with neighbors are very useful at home. They distract from other issues, give you an opportunity for some rallying around the flag. Nothing is better for boosting your popularity than some neighbor bashing. Thus, striking a balance between pleasing outsiders and feeding domestic sentiment is crucial here.

6. Pick different foreign friends, some will like you for what you are, some what you claim to be

The EU is your biggest investor, donor, and prospect, but don’t focus on them only. Flirting with others will make the EU a bit jealous and pay more attention to you. Plus, you can present yourself as being your own man. It is also important to consider that other investors and donors often have fewer strings attached. Thus, you can use some resources to take care of domestic political favors. However, realize that they might also be using you, so be prepared to be dropped when they stop caring.

7. Hire your voters. Fire your opponents

The best way to stay in power is to hire your voters, there are many jobs you can offer, from advisor to cleaning lady.

If it is clear that belonging to your party is what matters, this will help in terms of support for the party and votes. Many of your civil servants will recruit dozens of voters just to keep their jobs. Your opponents can always be fired, from the state administration or private jobs (after all, you probably control the largest share of funding in the state), or their fathers, mothers, sisters, brothers. There are many ways to get them to think twice about what they say about you.

8. Rule of Law, your rules, your law

The internationals will talk and talk about the rule of law. For this, dear Balkan prince, we recommend numerous action plans and strategies. However, in reality, it is important to ensure that the law is complicated enough that it cannot be universally applied, but that there is always a

shadow of illegality hanging over that can be used, when needed. Demonstrators can get fined for obstructing traffic with high fines, and other little rules can help you to remind them that your law is what rules.

9. Don't have an ideology, it can only hurt you

Don't have a clear ideology, this only commits you to certain positions that can create problems later on. Focus on broad goals, such as Europe, freedom, and prosperity and stay clear of too specific ambitions.

Now, it is in your interest to join a European or International party family, such as the Socialist International or the European People's Party as an associate member or observer. They will give you some international legitimacy and moderate some potential international criticism. However, don't confuse this with ideology—nobody will vote for you due to ideology, they will vote for you because of you and the job you got for their aunt.

10. Promise change, but make sure it stays the same

Change is what everybody wants, your voters have lived through economic crises for some 28 of the past 35 years. They want the situation to get better, so don't promise to keep things as they are, but paint a picture of how they will be. However, change is risky. So keep things the same, change is an easy promise, but a risky reality. Now, change means constant campaigning. Run your office, as if you are running for office. This will make you look energetic, have you ready to go for any early election and also make you seem like you are still in opposition, even when you are not. Thus, changing government composition, changing policy, announcing big plans are good ways to talk about change.

Dear Balkan Prince,

Ruling is like dancing on the edge of a volcano. You can only rule if you claim to be a democrat in favor of EU integration, but you can only continue your rule for a long time by not acting on these claims. Both will bring others to power and might bring you to jail. Thus, you need to walk the tight line between saying the right things to your voters and the EU, and doing something else.

Good luck, there are some who are doing well, so with some skill, you might join their club. (Bieber 2015)

When I wrote these imaginary recommendations for an unnamed Balkan autocrat for a London School of Economics blog, based on a talk

I gave there in 2015, I had no idea how popular my ironic advice would become. It was shared thousands of times, with translations into all the languages of the Balkans emerging within a few days, including a hilarious Albanian version in the style of the opening titles of a *Star Wars* movie. Over time, both victims and aides to some of the Balkan princes I thought of when I penned the lines confirmed the accuracy of this list. The list has also been used to accuse of governments of wrong doing. For example, in the Albanian parliament, Oerd Bylykbashi, an MP from the opposition Democratic Party cited from the ten rules of the Balkan prince on 7 February 2019 and called them a prediction of the behavior of the current government (Kuvendi i Shqipërisë 2019).

Of course, my advice was not a set of instructions, but rather an effort to identify how strongmen (and they are all men) rule the Balkans, pretending to be reformist, pro-European democrats, while governing informally with all the tools of an autocrat. When I wrote the *Balkan Prince*, I was frustrated how this pattern was ignored by outsiders and how Western governments and EU officials were courting the regions' autocrats, granting them legitimacy and empowering them further. Judging by the popularity of the piece and also the feedback I received, my advice hit a nerve, putting its finger on a serious problem.

Over the following years, a group of researchers from the Balkans and the EU worked on this topic the *Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group* (BiEPAG), identifying how democracy is in decline, but outsiders initially paid little attention to this trend. This led to our study on *The Crisis of Democracy in the Western Balkans: Authoritarianism and EU Stabilitocracy* in 2017 to highlights how authoritarianism is increasing as the region formally moves closer to the EU (BiEPAG 2017). The term 'stabilitocracy' was first introduced by Srđa Pavlović to describe the situation in Montenegro in late 2016, characterized by persistent undemocratic practices and external, especially Western, support (2016).¹ Since then, the term has gained wide usage to describe this fatal dynamic of local authoritarianism and external support (Bieber 2018, *Economist* 2017).

This book is the attempt to provide an academic and systematic understanding of Balkan Princes and stabilitocracies through the framework of the global rise of competitive authoritarianism.

¹Deimel and Primatarova used the term stabilocracy in 2012 to describe Albania.

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I have had the opportunity to present sections of this book at various occasions at talks and conferences and receive valuable feedback, including at University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, Columbia University, St. Anthony's College, Oxford University, London School of Economics, University of Basel, Südosteuropa Gesellschaft as well as having the opportunity of presenting the ideas in a creative way at the Science Slam 2018 in Graz.

The book explores themes I have developed first in 'Patterns of competitive authoritarianism in the Western Balkans', *East European Politics*, 34:3, 2018, 337–354, and 'The Rise (and Fall) of Balkan Stabilitocracies', *Horizons* 10, 2018. In addition, I have benefited from articulating some initial ideas and comments on my blog at <https://florianbieber.org/>. The second chapter incorporated sections from 'Belated Transitions in Southeastern Europe', Adam Fagan and Petr Kopecký (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of East European Politics* Abington: Routledge, (2017, 27–38)

and ‘Post-Yugoslav Patterns of Democratization’, in Sabrina P. Ramet, [Christine M. Hassenstab](#), [Ola Listhaug](#) (eds.), *Building Democracy in the Yugoslav Successor States. Accomplishments, Setbacks, and Challenges Since 1990* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, (2017, 38–57).

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Florian Bieber

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Introduction

Abstract This introductory chapter argues that there has been a decline and stagnation of democracy in the Western Balkans. This crisis of democracy follows larger trends but also displays regional specificities, including a history of semi-authoritarianism and complex geopolitical position outside the European Union.

Keywords Democracy • Authoritarianism • Western Balkans • European Union

The global decline of democracy has been making headlines, from challenges to liberal democracy in long-established democracies through populist candidates and parties, such as Trump's elections, Brexit, and the rise of the far-right in Western Europe, including the Lega in Italy and the Alternative for Germany. In Central Europe, conservative governments, such as in Hungary and Poland, have been eroding rule of law and democratic safeguards. Turkey and Russia have become more authoritarian, while the former has continued to hold competitive elections. In this context, the democratic decline in the Balkans is not an exception but part of a broader trend that takes on a variety of forms, depending on the regional context (Kriesi and Pappas 2015; Greskovits 2015; Plattner 2015).

This book is offering an in-depth analysis of how rising authoritarianism in the Western Balkans became possible, how they are part of the larger global trend, and what explains regional specificities. Without falling into the trap Balkan particularism, this book argues that authoritarian decade of the 1990s in the region provided an important template and structural features that facilitated the increasing authoritarianism in recent years. Much scholarship on post-Yugoslav countries during the 1990s focused on the wars and the accompanying nationalism. While this is an important characteristic of the region during that decade, the wars cannot be explained by primordial nationalist hatreds, but the selfish use and abuse by political and intellectual elites to advance their own power, influence, and wealth (Gagnon 2004; Gordy 1999). The key question in understanding the conflicts was thus how authoritarian elites were able to take and retain power, rather than interpreting nationalism as a natural force.

When discussing the renewed increase of authoritarian patterns, this book does not make the argument for Balkan exceptionalism, and many of the features identified in it are recognizable to scholars working on the crisis of democracy and patterns of authoritarianism around the world. What motivated my research on the Balkans was never the region's exceptionalism, but rather as a site to observe global phenomena. Thus, this study of Balkan autocrats is based on two foundations. First, the merit of examining the patterns and dynamics of authoritarian regimes in depth in a particular region allows this book to identify regional patterns. While there is space for global comparative research, the local context is the dimension to which this book can contribute. Second, the countries of the Western Balkans share certain features that allow one to study them together. They share a socialist and mostly a Yugoslav heritage, experienced war, or the consequences of state collapse; and the countries discussed in this book have not been able to join the European Union (EU), or in the case of Croatia, joined relatively recently (2013). To policymakers, they are known as the 'Western Balkans', a term that always seemed awkward for linking the loaded term 'Balkans'¹ with the positive association of 'Western' and grouping countries reluctant to be lumped together. As joining the EU seems also to mean leaving the term behind,

¹The term Balkans is problematic for its association with Balkanization and negative stereotypes that assume that the region is closely linked to violence, hatred, and being fundamentally different from Europe. See Todorova 1997.