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**Powerful Presidents:
Obstacles or Catalysts in the Democratic Transition
and Consolidation of Southeastern Europe?**

In the early 1990s, the collapse of existing socialism in Europe signaled the onset of post-communist political and economic transition for the countries of the former Eastern Bloc that had been under Soviet influence for almost half a century. The Eastern Bloc was split into Central Europe and the Balkans in terms of the path these groups of countries followed for transition. In Central Europe, despite the turmoil of the initial years after the collapse of the socialist regimes, liberal and social democratic values have emerged. This is obvious by their subsequent accession to the European Union, which had set a political criterion for membership. This was not the case in the Balkans. In Southeastern Europe, where the communist parties claimed greater political influence, the former elites maintained their authority. The economic stabilization policies and reforms were not radical at all, privatization stalled, and the reformed Party promised painless economic and social transitions. However, the old political elite never managed to shed its authoritarian mannerisms. Even when the Communists were eventually defeated in subsequent elections and replaced by self-proclaimed democrats, the new regime inherited this authoritarian legacy of the past. In essence, the commencement of the democratic transition and consolidation process was characterized by a form of populist authoritarianism and a personalized style of government. Eventually, this political transition path that the Balkan countries followed was reflected on their generally poor economic performance and the failure of economic restructuring. The lack of ambitious programs of reforms were mainly due to concerns raised by the ruling elites about the social consequences of radical change but also through their need to sustain the state-run mechanism for political and economic rewards.

Generally speaking, the onset of post-communist political transition in Southeastern European countries has been characterized by a weak party

development, a failure to make a clean break from the past political elites, the domination of old apparatchiks in the political machine and the lack of a mature civil society ready to accept the transition to democracy and its consolidation. The purpose of this article is to examine the extent to which powerful presidential figures have placed an obstacle in the rapid and smooth transition to democracy for the Balkan post-communist states. Thus, the first section defines democracy and democratic consolidation from a political science perspective. The second section observes the choice of presidential systems over other forms of democratic governance and the threats this system presents to the political stability of a country. The third section examines the democratic transition of the Balkan countries and their response to democracy under the influence of strong presidential figures. Finally, the article comes to the conclusion that within the Balkan Peninsula, the evaluation of the presidential role varies widely. Overall, strong presidential figures cannot be regarded as fully responsible for the lack of democratic consolidation in Southeastern Europe, but rather a combination of the lack of a mature civil society and democratic tradition, and the domination of authoritative presidents.

Democracy: Transition and Consolidation

Democracy, in modern terms, is the political system where the leaders of the government are chosen by the political basis via regular, free and fair elections based on multiple candidates from the whole of the political spectrum, secret balloting and universal suffrage. Nevertheless, democracy depends upon the provision of civil liberties, defined as “freedom to form and join organizations, freedom of expression, and access to multiple and competing sources of information”¹ protected by a chart of rights or a constitutional document. As a form of government, democracy has been defined in terms of sources of authority for government, purposes served by government and procedures for constituting government. In the Schumpeterian tradition the democratic method is “that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a

1. Dawisha, Karen, *Democratization and political participation: research concepts and methodologies*, in Dawisha, Karen and Parrott, Bruce, editors, *Politics, Power and the Struggle for Democracy in South-East Europe*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997, p. 41.

competitive struggle for the people’s vote ².”The governments resulting from elections may prove inefficient, corrupt, dominated by lobbies, or making policy decisions against the public good. However, they cannot be considered undemocratic. Thus, democracy as a concept needs to be separated from other characteristics of the political system. Moreover, the leaders produced under democratic conditions may not exercise real power, or may set themselves in danger of personalizing their power and office. Finally, the characterization of a system as democratic does not guarantee its stability. Thus, the concept of a consolidated democracy should include criteria to judge its durability and resistance to other forms of government.

The causes of democratization differ considerably from country to country and from one time to another. According to Huntington, democratization in each country is a result of a combination of causes. He argues that the nature of the authoritarian regime cannot fully explain the transition to democracy and he identifies a few patterns that are pertinent to the Eastern Bloc. The first pattern concerns countries that tried to introduce democratic measures, which were unsuccessful and that brought back the authoritarian regimes. Eventually, after the collapse of those regimes, the second chance democracy received, created successful condition for democratic consolidation. A second pattern is the direct transition from a stable authoritarian system to a stable democratic system either through gradual reforms or a rushed break of the former regime by another. However, the stability of the democratic regimes is at risk should the country lack previous democratic experience ³.

When we refer to democratic transition we identify a stage of regime change starting at the moment when the previous totalitarian regime crumbles and, with a new constitution, ‘the democratic structures become normalized and the political elites adjust their behavior to liberal democratic norms⁴.’ In addition, democratization requires a triple transition in political, economic and social systems. The first set of free and fair elections for national-level positions delineates the starting point of the democratization process. These elections have to incorporate the provision of civil liberties and political rights, and the establishment of political institutions and the rule of law⁵. In

2. Schumpeter, Joseph A., *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, Harper, New York, 1947, p. 269.

3. Huntington, Samuel P., *The Third Wave: Democratization in the late twentieth century*, University of Oklahoma Press, 1993, pp. 38-44.

4. Pridham, Geoffrey, and Tatu Vanhanen, *Democratization in Eastern Europe: Domestic and International Perspectives*, Routledge, London, 1994, p. 2.

5. Dawisha, *ibid.*, p. 42.

the 1980s, the free and fair elections were judged by international groups of observers on whether they were conducted properly. However, by 1990 when the first elections were held in the democratizing Eastern Europe, a legitimate result was proclaimed only if the electoral process was observed by experienced and unbiased teams of international observers, and only if these observers certified the outcome as meeting the minimum standards of fairness and freedom.

The democratization process includes the transition to a liberal democracy and its consolidation, without which the success of the process is questionable. A consolidated democracy is one in which the social groups expect that the leaders will be chosen through competitive elections, and the political institutions based on representation will become the main intermediaries between the political basis and the state. It is usually a longer process with wider and deeper effects: removing uncertainties of transition and institutionalizing the new political system, internalizing the rules and procedures of the democratic polity and diffusing democratic values to the civil society of the country. For democratic consolidation to take place, a “virtuous circle” needs to appear: politics creates all preconditions for a prosperous market economy and economic growth accelerates social transformations. In other words, newly emerging democracies need to make daring cuts and administer ambitious economic reform programs in order for the general public to recover their trust towards the political institutions. This leads to the harmonious coexistence of democratic politics, a stable market economy and post-industrial society⁶.

The development of political parties in these types of emerging democracies needs to be rapid. After the introduction of parties opposing the previous regimes, a new line of political conflict needs to be developed along the axis of left and right dimensions as traditionally defined by economic terms –that is to say, state-controlled economy and free-market economy. Often, the general public in these countries is concerned with the material values of democracy such as taxes, social security, unemployment and financing of health care and education. Thus, the battle lines among political parties after the collapse of the old regime progress along the field of material values and shift between authoritarian and individualistic party character. However, as democracy begins to stabilize new dimensions appear in party competition

6. Ágh, Attila, *Emerging Democracies in East Central Europe and the Balkans*, Edward Elgar Publishing, Cheltenham, UK, 1998, p. 11.

such as the post-material orientation. In other words, material goods no longer have first priority and the public turns to spiritual, ethical and aesthetic needs. This situation gives way to the introduction of parties concerned with social and environmental protection, as well as with the improvement of the quality of life for citizens, rather than strictly material goods. The new important axis that forms in modern politics cuts across two dimensions: the authoritarian-individualistic and the material-post material. European politics have generally been shifting across the authoritarian-material and the individualistic-post material axis—where the issues are clear-cut and highly visible. Therefore, we can argue that the left-right dimension incorporates today many types of conflict lines that have different meanings for different voters⁷.

In measuring a country’s democratic consolidation, four conceptual tests can be conducted. The two-turnover test measures the interchange of political parties in the occupation of office in the government. Low public support for anti-system parties or groups creates a facilitating environment for the weakening of extremist movements and tendencies. Another essential test is the high public commitment to the fundamental values of democracy and the procedural norms of democratic politics. Finally, elite consensus about institutionalizing and legitimizing those norms and values is critical for the normal operation of the democratic polity and consolidation⁸. In Central and Eastern Europe, the evolution of party systems generally involved the distinction between the extent of state intervention in the economy and free-market rules. However, the distinction shifted to individualistic versus authoritarian style parties—in this case contrary to Western Europe, the social democratic parties appeared at the authoritarian end, whereas the liberal democratic parties held an individualistic stance. The final shift from material to post-material, which has increasingly become imperative in Western Europe, is of little relevance in Central and Eastern Europe—even less so in the Balkan countries. Given the economic transition problems of high unemployment and inflation and slow recovery, post-material parties face difficulties emerging into the political spectrum. Moreover, the previously restrained ethnic minorities in these countries have created their own political parties along regional or ethnic dimensions—for example the Hungarian minority party in Romania and Slovakia or the Turkish minority party in Bulgaria.

7. Knutsen, Oddjorn, Value Orientation, Political Conflicts and Left-Right Identification:

A comparative study, *European Journal of Political Research*, Vol. 28, 1995, p. 87.

8. Dawisha, *ibid.*, p. 44.

Evans and Whitefield (1993) are correct in emphasizing and predicting the volatility of Central and Eastern European party systems. As proved by subsequent elections, the strength of individual parties varies greatly from election to election and mergers or splits of parties are quite frequent. This of course, creates hindrances in the formation of party tradition and of a stable election platform. Evans and Whitefield stress three factors in the party system formation: success of marketization, ethnic homogeneity and anti-Western nationalism—i.e. blaming the West for all tribulations⁹. The combination of these three factors produced diverse patterns across Central and Eastern Europe. The most secure and controllable party systems appeared in countries where the transition to a market economy was successful, ethnic minorities had no self-determination tendencies and anti-Western nationalism appeared at low levels: key examples of that were the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland.

For countries experiencing democratic transition, there are six main factors conducive to the consolidation of the democratic political institutions and culture as identified by Huntington¹⁰. First of all, prior democratic experiences create more favorable conditions for the success of democracy rather than no experience at all. Second, more industrialized developed countries with an educated civil society have better prospects for a stable democracy. Third, when the international community and other foreign actors support a democratic changeover they can exercise greater influence in transitioning countries. Fourth, we must consider the so-called spillover effect that may occur when many countries democratize at the same time; that is to say, when there is a number of countries that change to a democratic regime simultaneously, it is more likely that other countries will follow. Such was the case in Eastern Europe after 1989. Fifth, it is more likely that consensual and less violent transitions provide better circumstances for the democratic consolidation (Poland, Czechoslovakia) rather than violent conflicts (Romania). Finally, the consolidation of democracy is a function of the number and the depth of major socio-economic issues like the control of political elites, the development of a sound civil society, the involvement of the previous regimes in the economy, the external debt et al.

9. Evans, Geoffrey, and Whitefield, Stephen, Identifying the Bases of Party Competition in Eastern Europe, *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 23, 1993, pp. 521-548.

10. Huntington, *ibid.*, pp. 270-279.

However, democratic consolidation also depends on the nature of the established democratic institutions. To that extent, a parliamentary system may be more successful than a presidential system because it eliminates dangers of personalization of government, usually requires a broad coalition of parties for a stable cabinet and balances the offices of the head of state and head of government. Two assumptions can be made on the democratization of post-communist countries: first, the more and longer a country has been subjected to antidemocratic and totalitarian attitudes the less likely is democracy successful; second, a prior tradition of democracy and civil society along with a period of communist reforms increase the chances for democratic success and faster transition. In the Balkans, the resurgence of civil society in the initial stages of transition was “halted or slowed down by ‘demobilization’ through parties and elites.”¹¹

The Post-Communist Choice of a Presidential System

The choice of the form of government between presidential, parliamentary and semi-presidential systems plays an important role in the progress of the transition to democracy, as well as, in the efforts of making a clean break with the past and turning a new page in the political legacy of a country. As argued above, the parliamentary systems tend to require a more consensual basis for the exercise of power and create the circumstances for a clear separation of legislative and executive powers avoiding personalized style politics. On the other hand, there are two main characteristics in the presidential system of governance: a strong claim to direct democratic legitimacy and a fixed term in office. It is these two elements in particular that pose threats to the democratic success and consolidation in a presidential system. Juan Linz in his well-known article The Perils of Presidentialism identified six explicit threats pertinent to such forms of governance¹².

Although presidential systems create strength and stability in the executive branch, they create some suspicion of the personalization of power: the tendency for the person and the office to merge due to under-institutionalization. In other words, due to the ill-designed democratic institutions the

11. Ágh, *ibid.*, p.21.

12. Linz, Juan, *The Perils of Presidentialism*, *Journal of Democracy*, Volume 1, issue 1, 1990, pp. 53-58.

identification of a person with the office of the president suggests a totalitarian style of governance. Presidential systems operate under the “winner-take-all” rule, creating a ‘zero-sum game’ caused by the fixed term in office: winners and losers are demarcated during the entire period—that is to say that the clear winner is the President and all other political powers stand in the field of the losers. This second threat can accentuate the tension and polarization of the society during election periods. In two-candidate rivalries, broad coalitions are more likely to be formed in which extremist parties can gain influence, something that can fragment and polarize the electoral basis. Therefore, the third danger can jeopardize the party system creating loose coalitions only necessary for electoral victory. In that sense, we experienced the rally of the French voters behind President Chirac when he competed against Le Pen in the second round of the presidential elections in 2002—a rally that brought under the same umbrella communists, socialists and liberals only to secure victory. Although this was necessary to prevent an extremist politician from coming to power, there may be times when opposing parties come together to eliminate another candidate—i.e. liberals and communists together against a social-democratic candidate.

The complexities of the presidential system lead to the ‘problem of legitimacy’: the parliament, as the legislative branch, may have different opinions from the executive branch, i.e. the president and his supporters. No democratic standard exists to resolve disputes between the executive and the legislature which may both represent the public opinion and will. In these cases, the president may be enticed to rally the people against the legislative branch in order for him to claim the sole and true democratic legitimacy and oust the opposition. Such effort may require that the president use ideological arguments to disgrace his enemies and the legitimacy conflict may lead to a dangerous deadlock, sometimes threatening to reverse the democratization process. Finally, the element of the fixed term in office strains the political system to produce capable political leaders to succeed the outgoing president which may turn into a challenge more disruptive than parliamentary elections. To that extent, the current president needs to be careful with second-in-rank members of his cabinet that may undermine his work for personal benefit. Because of the system’s temporal rigidity the final threat is that presidentialism leaves little room for political maneuvers in consensus-building and coalition shifting.

All of the above characteristics were present at one time in the Balkans during their democratization processes. However, it seems that the Balkan states had fallen victim to their own choice of political systems in combination with the lack of a democratic political culture and civil society. Whether a presidential or parliamentary system was chosen in the Balkans depended on the depth of the ‘relations of the first democratically elected president and the legislature, on the political ambitions of the members of the new elite ensconced in different branches of the government, and on the prevailing consensus about the desirability of strong leadership or of checks and balances¹³.’ As Jon Elster emphasizes, ‘bargaining among political interests, such as the roundtable talks... was crucial to subsequent developments¹⁴. In other words, the conclusion of the negotiations between the political forces right after the collapse of the previous regimes was based on a weighted game in which the most powerful groups tailored the new system to their own needs. Moreover, in some states, the specific decisions, concluded by interest groups in the institutions, were taken preferentially to one system. The ‘talks’ were first, compromising over the electoral system; second, the nature of the legislative system that could favor the old regime; and third, because of a certain fear that the communists would be a minority in parliament, they demanded to hold the presidency for their candidates. Potentially however, the powers attributed to the parliament may have had greater weight in the governance of the country than the ones of the president’s office.

For the final design of the country’s system of governance, various actors were involved: older and experienced politicians, opposition leaders, intellectuals, interest groups and even foreign players, all organized under roundtable talks or political assemblies. To that extent, Elster gives three important interest forces in the shaping of post-communist presidencies, to which I will agree for the purposes of this article. Individual interests of the officials from the old regime tried to manipulate the rules of the president’s office to maximize its power, and the type of election in order to increase the likelihood of keeping it. Group interests were also involved: those of the communists in preserving some power, and those of the opposition parties in excluding them. Finally, institutional interests included the interests of the

13. Taras, Raymond, *Separating Power: keeping presidents in check*, in Taras, Raymond, editor, *Postcommunist Presidents*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997, p. 16.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

constitutional assemblies in maximizing the power of the legislature to the detriment of the executive and the judiciary. As he emphasizes, “no post-communist constitution-makers have engaged in genuinely impartial discussion to choose the regime that would best serve the interests of their country.¹⁵”

The role of strong presidential figures in the democratic transition of the Balkans

The democratic transition in the Balkan countries began roughly at the same time as in the rest of Central and Eastern Europe. However, the commencement of democratization in the Balkans was highly influenced by the people that were selected to run the president’s office. Some presidential figures in Southeastern Europe manipulated the political transition paths for personal gains or to retain the status quo in their countries, such as in Albania or the former Yugoslavia. It is interesting to observe that even countries that did not choose a presidential system of governance appealed to their presidents as a means of keeping the country together and of promoting the country’s status in the region. Nevertheless, not all presidencies should be regarded as hindrances to the democratization and the consolidation of democracy in the Balkans. From that point of view, it seems that the role of a strong or of a popular president was crucial for the survival of Slovenia, FYROM and Bulgaria, whereas it proved detrimental for the progress (at least in the initial stages) of Serbia, Croatia, Albania and Romania.

Slovenia and FYROM: The case of popular political figures

The first republic to secede from the federal state of Yugoslavia in 1990 was Slovenia. This is probably the only case of a successful transition and democratic consolidation in the post-communist Balkans and is due to many factors. Slovenian democratic transition can be characterized as a completely autonomous process from the rest of the federation and was established on sound institutional changes from the very beginning. Political modernization

15. Elster, Jon, *Afterword: the making of postcommunist presidencies*, in Taras, Raymond, *ibid.*, p. 236.

was well under way in the 1980s and had created a basis for the civil society to emerge. The first multiparty elections were won by the opposition forces in 1990, and an opposition leader, Milan Kučan, was elected president by popular vote. The new president enjoyed great popularity during the democratic transition period and his role was crucial in ensuring a peaceful and rapid transition to democracy¹⁶. Kučan managed to unite all democratic forces under his office and make a clean break with the previous communist political elites. In this case, the election of a new figure as the president of the country and the existence of some political culture created a momentum for the success of democratization in Slovenia.

Evaluating the democratic transition in Slovenia against the criteria set by Huntington we can observe the following. Although Slovenia lacked previous democratic experiences, the economic development of the country proved useful in consolidating the newly established democracy. Slovenia was the richest of the former Yugoslav republics, it was highly industrialized and the economic reform programs had created a certain financial autonomy. The external environment was quite conducive for the country, since the republic was recognized almost immediately as independent by strong international players, like Germany. Moreover, the secession and the commencement of transition took place at a time when the rest of Central and Eastern Europe had commenced their processes and thus, civil society was highly influenced by the international circumstances in their will for change. Finally, the transition to independence and consequently to democracy took place with a relatively low level of violence, also due to the high ethnic homogeneity of the country. We can even argue that apart from the short intervention of the Yugoslav Army, Slovenia got off scot-free compared to the other republics of former Yugoslavia. However, it was the political culture that developed after the election of Kučan to the presidency that played the most important role, as it helped established a distinct move to the right in subsequent local and national elections.

Although geographically located at the heart of the Balkans, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia did not fit comfortably into the paradigm of Balkan politics. FYROM was hastily established as a country, though peacefully, due to the general self-determination trends which were present in former Yugoslavia at the time. Hence, the country had to form its political institutions from scratch, since no previous experience had been prevalent¹⁷.

16. Ágh, *ibid.*, p. 173.

17. Ágh, *ibid.*, p. 211.

FYROM followed a soft semi-presidential system with the president not being a dominant figure in the political system. However, the thrice elected president, Kiro Gligorov, was definitely a key figure in the political transition of the country. Gligorov, with his moderate approach and the fairness he exhibited towards all nationalities, established him as the “father of the state”¹⁸. The introduction of a pluralistic democratic system and his activities quickly put the government in the shade as he became synonymous with the country’s quest for statehood.

The heterogeneous nature of the country that included a substantial Albanian minority was and still remains threatening for the survival of the country. The Albanian issue was present from the very beginning of FYROM’s statehood. The role of Gligorov on the issue proved crucial for the peaceful transition to democracy. After the 1994 elections the president included representatives of the Albanian minority Party for Democratic Prosperity in the newly appointed government¹⁹. Moreover, the president showed special interest in providing access to higher education for ethnic Albanians and in particular in their proper language. After the end of his third term as president, the issue of the Albanian minority became present especially after the resurgence of irredentist tendencies from Albania proper. However, we can safely argue that Gligorov was yet another case of an unintended powerful president whose personality and political role provided an impetus to a successful start of the democratization of the country, given its non-existent democratic past.

Bulgaria: The return of the Communists

Early in 1990, roundtable talks began between the Communist Party and the opposition forces resulting in the preparation of the first free and fair elections and the provision of a bill of rights. Before the actual change of regime in Bulgaria, the Party had removed Zhivkov from the presidency. Hence, the communists had launched a preemptive attack to the opposition that gave them much stronger legitimacy over the other Communist Parties in the Eastern Bloc. In other words, the Party appeared conciliatory and friendly towards democratic reforms by initiating a self-expiation of the old bureaucrats, and

18. Perry, Duncan M., *The Republic of Macedonia: finding its way*, in Dawisha and Parrott, *ibid.*, p. 246.

19. Swain, Geoffrey and Swain, Nigel, *Eastern Europe since 1945*, Palgrave, 1998, p. 223.

brought a moderate socialist, Mladenov, to the forefront. Moreover, due to Soviet-friendly feelings in Bulgaria, Communists were never perceived as traitors²⁰. The package deal of the talks was a president elected by National Assembly with one-year term in office and limited competencies. The agreement was made under the assumption that Mladenov, who enjoyed significant popular support and had ousted Zhivkov, would be the new president.

Nevertheless, the newly formed Union of Democratic Forces (UDF), as an opposition party, launched an attack against the communist past. Not considering the wide support that the old regime enjoyed in Bulgaria, their attack back lashed: The elections of 1990 were won by the Communists but produced a prolonged political stalemate, because the party was unwilling to promote the necessary political and economic reforms that would bring a clean break from the past²¹. Under popular pressure Mladenov was forced to resign from the presidency and after four unsuccessful rounds of voting, Zhelev, the UDF leader, was elected President. However, both sides had miscalculated their gains from the roundtable talks: the opposition forces demanded a weak presidency assuming it would be occupied by a communist, but when Zhelev was elected, he had no significant capabilities. The communists on the other hand, insisted on a strong president fearing they would be a minority in parliament; instead, they had gained the majority.

The first UDF government did not last long. Despite its forced victory, it initiated a program of stripping down the communist party of its assets and removing bureaucrats from key positions. However, what destroyed the new government was its commencement of the redistribution of land, that demolished the socialist cooperatives and recreated innumerable small farming lots—something that proved highly counter-productive and thus, quite unpopular. By October 1992, UDF had lost its confidence and was forced to resign. However, while the next elections were won by the transformed Communists they were met with opposition by the UDF which initiated an attack against their own President Zhelev for agreeing to the change of government. Zhelev accused the UDF of subverting the constitutional order²².

20. Elster, *ibid.*, p. 232.

21. Bell, John, *Bulgaria*, in White, Stephen, et al., editors, *Developments in East European Politics*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 1993, p. 90.

22. Swain and Swain, *ibid.*, pp. 220-221.

This act, that brought back the communists into power, showed that despite his restricted competencies, Zhelev, due to his non-partisan personality, played a key role in the early years of democratic transition. In this case, the dual legitimacy gap led to political rigidity as shown in the short-lived subsequent governments, which in addition to the political disarray and miscalculations of the opposition, brought the state back to the poorly transformed Communist Party.

Albania: the doctor that became president

The communist experiment had fallen short of its expectations in Albania as well. The isolative foreign policy that it followed during the years of communism, along with the disruption of its relations with the Soviet Union had brought the country to the verge of disaster. For 45 years, state ownership dominated with the virtual absence of private property. It had become a meticulously centralized economy that had replaced all potential market mechanisms. The third particular characteristic of the Albanian case had been a policy of national self-sufficiency as its main orientation of economic policy that had led to complete deficiency²³. The democratization scheme of Albania followed the general trend of all Balkan countries. By 1990, the last communist leader of the country, Ramiz Alia, initiated a cautious international opening and some domestic reforms. His initial proposals indicated that he was not fervent in allowing significant changes but he was forced to modify his position after the student protests in 1990²⁴.

The first elections were won by the Worker's Party of Alia, but the opposition forces that grew out of this process managed to reverse the climate and win the 1992 elections. After the resignation of Alia, the road to democratization was open and the physician Sali Berisha was elected president. He introduced new repressive measures—more obvious than what President Milosevic had introduced in Serbia²⁵. Although his Democratic Party had won a clear majority in the elections he had not mustered the 2/3 major-

23. Muço, Marta, Albania, in Veremis, Thanos, and Daianu, Daniel, editors, *Balkan Reconstruction*, Frank Cass Publishers, London, 2001, p. 120.

24. Pano, Nicholas, The process of democratization in Albania, in Dawisha and Parrott, *ibid.*, p. 308.

25. Ágh, *ibid.*, p. 292

ity required for a change of constitution and this became an obsession for Berisha. Unable to promote his own version of a constitution, he launched a campaign of communist crackdown: between 1993 and 1994 many political figures of the previous regime were arrested and placed behind bars. Even his main opponent, the chairman of the Albanian Socialist Party, Fatos Nano, was arrested on grounds of corruption in July 1993.

The significant electoral victory of 1992 had offered Berisha the chance to become a central figure with huge concentration of power in the presidential office, making it quite difficult to initiate a democratic transition. Moreover, despite the huge rallies and the outrage that the imprisonment of former officials had caused, Berisha wanted to consolidate his political powers by promoting his own version of a Constitution, which he placed in a referendum to the electorate in 1994. His failure in winning the referendum showed that his popularity was fading away. However, this did not stop him from winning the 1996 elections. A certain law, the “Law of Genocide” had banned all former communists from participation in public life until 2002, and this was used as a means to break any form of opposition from the ASP. During the elections, the irregularities of the electoral system and forms of votive intimidation used against the electoral had made it clear that democracy was still far away in Albania. Pano considers this as both a triumph and a tragedy for Berisha and the democratic transition in Albania²⁶. However, although fears for a paralysis of the electoral system and a potential authoritarian regime became apparent, Berisha was overthrown by the financial scandal of the pyramid-selling schemes in 1997. The lack of political culture in Albania was the reason for the prolonged democratic deficit, rather than the president himself, which allowed him to become powerful.

Romania: the ‘stolen’ revolution

The main feature of the Romanian transition politics was that the communist authoritarianism of Ceausescu collapsed without the democratic system managing to emerge immediately. The survival of the old regime governance was strong and persistent despite creating a ‘democratic façade’. After the execution of Ceausescu in 1989 the political revolution was in essence

26. Pano, *ibid.*, p. 340.

‘stolen’ from the people by the newly transformed old leadership²⁷. The National Salvation Front of Ion Iliescu seized power by the end of 1989 as a temporary formation to allow for the transfer of power and was received with popular support. After the creation of an electoral system and negotiations with the civil partners, the power would be transferred to a newly elected government. However, the electoral system that was placed in Romania was a strong presidential system. Due to its peculiarities, the NSF –though transformed– managed to stay in power until 1996.

With the new electoral system in place, the elections that took place in May 1990 handed the presidency over to Iliescu with an overwhelming 85% majority. The outcome indeed secured the legality of the NSF government; however, its legal authority was arguable. Due to a non-reconciliatory gap between the old elite and the popular basis, the new government was lacking in legitimacy. The NSF had promised a series of reforms; however, it never considered the popular demand for the type of reforms. Moreover, the popular basis had been excluded from the newly formed government and from any official posts—the members of the former elite had been reinstated.

Throughout his presidency, Iliescu showed some authoritarian behavior, unwillingness to promote market reforms and quite fond of state socialism²⁸. The new constitution provided increased powers to the president with an absence of checks and balances. Thus, it allowed Iliescu to mass a series of political powers that provided him with the chance to manipulate the political system for his own ambitions and benefits. Moreover, this system created a weakened parliament that was also controlled by the NSF. The elections at the end of 1992 gave victory to Iliescu’s party, then transformed into the Social Democratic Party of Romania. However, the victory was not clear: though the strongest in popular vote, he was forced to make alliances from various sides of the political spectrum. Though he proclaimed himself as committed to economic reforms, the fragility of his coalition had not left him with a lot of space for maneuver. He used this fact as an excuse to delay further reforms and stressed the need to limit the social cost of the transition process, and he limited his extremist assertions to appease any pressures from the United States and the OSCE²⁹. Therefore, his strategy of instilling fears and phobias

27. Ágh, *ibid.*, p. 263.

28. Tismaneanu, Vladimir, *Romanian exceptionalism?*, in Dawisha and Parrott, *ibid.*, p. 406.

29. Swain and Swain, *ibid.*, p. 218.

to workers and peasants about the nature of the political and economic reform had suppressed the emergence of a civil society in Romania. Until 1996, that the opposition managed to overthrow Iliescu, Romania had been reduced to a ‘semi-presidential system with weak parliament and a divided opposition’³⁰. When his successor, the liberal Emil Constantinescu assumed power he announced a new and ambitious program of social democratic political and economic reforms, the IMF made different recommendations and pushed for macroeconomic discipline. Iliescu’s presidency had left a legacy from which Romania would have to struggle in order to escape. The powerful presidency concentrated powers in the palace rather than in the legislative and, along with the strong personality of its first president, it proved a strong obstacle for Romania’s successful democratic transition.

Serbia and Croatia: nationalism as a victim of the political elites

Tito’s Yugoslavia had been the most developed communist state of Southeastern Europe. With the presence of some elements of a market economy, a more liberal political system of extended autonomies, independence in international relations, and some form of direct democracy and political decentralization due to the federal status³¹, Yugoslavia was in a relatively easier position to start its democratic transition than its Balkan counterparts. Democratization however, took a bad start due to the developments in the different republics. Important differences existed among the Yugoslav republics regarding trade orientation, openness, level of development and relative economic weight within the federation. The initiation of self-determination movements was based upon the difference in wealth that existed within the federation. The grave economic circumstances in Yugoslavia gave momentum to political polarization between federalists pushing radical economic reforms and the republican leaders and governments trying to “protect” sovereignty and “national” interest³².

30. Tismaneanu, *ibid.*, p. 426.

31. Goati, Vladimir, *Peculiarities of the Serbian Political Scene*, in *ibid.*, editor, *Challenges of Parliamentarism; the case of Serbia in the early nineties*, Belgrade, Institute of Social Sciences, 1995, p. 16.

32. Woodward, Susan, *Balkan Tragedy: Chaos and Dissolution after the Cold War*, The Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C., 1995, p. 73.

These conflicts led to the slow breakdown of the Old Order and the rise of republican politicians who brought up issues of nationalism. Moreover, because of Serbian resistance against all political modernization, the political split within the country came due to different political traditions that existed among the republics even during the years of Tito.

When the political transition began in Yugoslavia, a system of collective presidency was suggested which created political paralysis³³. Due to the peculiarities of the system, the suggested reforms by Croats and Slovenes in 1990 left the federal government with only consultation powers, and thus, left the Serbian minorities in other republics unprotected. Since 1987, due to Milosevic's schedule of purging the old communist elites in Serbia first, then in Slovenia and Croatia, the republics began regaining legitimacy through a change in their ideological image. The pursuit of power by national political elites created conflicting nationalist ideologies that resulted in the conflict over the control of territory which each one claimed for its nation. The political elites were claiming that they were "simply fulfilling the destiny of their nations in fighting for the freedom from foreign domination"³⁴. The new leaders of the national elites failed to agree on specific procedures to resolve the conflicts. The clash between the Serbian and Slovenian party leaderships created a certain dynamic: since Milosevic had managed to gain four federal votes by installing new communist leaders in Kosovo, Vojvodina and Montenegro, the Slovenian leadership was seen as the only balancing actor gathering Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and "Macedonia" into a coalition³⁵. The political deadlock spilled over into the republic elections of 1990 which experienced a sudden victory of nationalist parties led by ambitious politicians pledging independence or autonomy from the federal state.

In Croatia, after the 1990 election, the presence of a powerful president became crucial for the progress of any efforts for democratization. Two years after the abolition of the extended autonomy of Kosovo, Croatia elected for president the nationalist leader, Franjo Tudjman. His first action was to clean-up the Croatian bureaucracy from the Serbs that Tito had placed after 1971. With the help of his party, the HDZ, and his government he managed

33. Dragnich, Alex, *Yugoslavia's Disintegration and the Struggle for Truth*, East European Monographs, Boulder, 1995, p. 19.

34. Pavkovič, Aleksandar, *The Fragmentation of Yugoslavia: Nationalism and War in the Balkans*, Palgrave/MacMillan, London, 2000, p. 99.

35. Lampe, John R., *Yugoslavia as History: Twice there was a country*, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 344.

to concentrate all powers. His well-staged victory and the vast majority he enjoyed in parliament allowed him not to negotiate or compromise with other political forces or with the social partners³⁶. According to Cohen, he had a strong personality and an early political socialization in the military bureaucracy of the communist state. He transformed himself and appeared as a “self-proclaimed democrat”, who once in power, was not inclined to endorse pluralistic political developments³⁷. What was indicative of Tudjman’s authoritarian style regime was the increase of intelligence services and police under his personal control, the limitations set on the judiciary and the rule of law and the manipulation of the media³⁸. In addition to his strong presidency, the constant struggle of nation-building against Serbia until 1995 proved a major hindrance to the completion of the Croatian democratic transition process. Croatia, despite its will to escape from its Balkan heritage and to identify itself with Central Europe remained under the influence of the authoritarian relics of Tudjman.

Serbia faced a similar situation with President Milosevic. He was the classic ‘nomenklatura nationalist’ whose transformation from a communist apparatchik to a nationalist political boss was hardly noticeable. Milosevic, even before the break-up of the country, launched a forceful nationalist campaign and reorganized the League of Serbian Communists with militant Serbian nationalists. By 1988, he refused to negotiate with the leaders of the other republics and tried to impose direct Serbian control. In the first multiparty elections in 1990, his renamed Serbian Socialist Party managed to secure maximum number of seats with a minimal amount of votes. The continuity of power of the former regime was thus secured within a framework of free elections. However, the ‘democratic façade’ was very thin and the elements of personal dictatorship were quite obvious³⁹. Milosevic’s manipulation of the democratic transition limited its success in Serbia due to the creation of a democratic transition process based on ethnic nationalist terms; the limits set to the opposition due to the Party’s financial capacities, political experience and control of the media; the projection of Milosevic as the protector of Serbs outside Serbia; and the marginalization of non-Serbs in the political process⁴⁰.

36. Ágh, *ibid.*, p. 178.

37. Cohen, Lenard J., *Embattled Democracy: postcommunist Croatia in transition*, in Dawisha and Parrott, *ibid.*, pp. 84-85.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 86.

39. Ágh, *ibid.*, p. 178.

40. Miller, Nicholas J., *A failed transition: the case of Serbia*, in Dawisha and Parrott, *ibid.*, p. 179.

Recent Developments towards Democratic Consolidation

By 1996 most of the Balkan countries had managed to overcome the hindrances of the initial years of democratic transition that were posed by the presence of strong presidential figures. However, the relics of the totalitarian heritage most presidents left for these countries continued to influence the political scene even after 1996. The tampered electoral results of Albania in 1996 signaled the failure of the pyramid-selling scheme that led to the corrosion of the credibility of the state to provide the primary goods to its citizens. The inertia of the Bulgarian political transition process along with the slow economic transition programs created a certain hesitation on behalf of the civil society for the deployment of subsequent schemes for institution-building and brought back personalities like the former king to the political scene. In FYROM, the marginalization of the Albanian minority from public life after the end of Gligorov's term in office reinforced autonomist tendencies that were fueled by the Kosovo war. After the election of Constantinescu, Romania was forced into an economic discipline program imposed by the IMF, which strengthened the role of the parastate in the political scene of the country. In Serbia, Milosevic's regime had destroyed every sign of a healthy civil society which only managed to reemerge after he was overthrown in 2000. Finally, Croatia remained under the influence of the bureaucratic heritage that Tudjman left. The public demonstrations in the streets of the Balkan cities between 1996 and 1997 revealed the weak basis of democracy in these countries. The involvement of the United States which offered support to self-proclaimed non-communists led to the generation of political leaders that constructed a totalitarian style of government and proved that democratic consolidation needs time in countries with little democratic experience. The transition to democracy was characterized by the increased use of secret police, the clientelistic relations of the bureaucracy with the citizens and the restraints on the media that were deployed for the satisfaction of the personal ambitions of the presidents.

Concluding Remarks

At the onset of the political transition process in the Balkans, the communist ruling elites inherited a certain political legitimacy and maintained the upper hand in the choices for institution-building. Many of the former apparatchiks maintained their positions in the state apparatus and even emerged as presidents in their respective countries. While the political transition process was inert in the early 1990s, the deliberate standstill of the economic reforms necessary for a transition to a market economy created a certain rhetoric used by the leaders promising a painless change of both economy and society. However, the transformed communists were not able to abandon their authoritarian charade: masked under a democratic façade, they manipulated the state and the civil society to retain their power for the longest possible time period. Nevertheless when the time for change came due, the Balkan politicians did not successfully manage to overcome the legacy of the authoritarian mentality of the former communists.

Although democratic consolidation is long overdue in the Balkans, serious steps have been made. It seems that the choice of political system had no significant application in the outcome of the democratic transition. In essence, all Balkan countries faced a serious lack in political culture and a delay in the emergence of a healthy civil society. The choice of the systems of governance only intensified this problem. The presidents that emerged from the early democratic transition years became powerful due to these characteristics and the prolonged failure to eliminate the old regime and make a clean break with the past. The evaluation of strong presidents as hindrances to or facilitators of the democratization of the Balkans varies from country to country. On the one hand, Slovenia and FYROM benefited from the presence of strong statesmen to consolidate their nationhood. Had these figures been absent, then the future of Slovenia and FYROM as independent and self-sufficient states would have been arguable. On the other hand, the rest of the Balkan states were trapped between strong presidents emerging from the old regime and the lack of coordination among opposition leaders. The membership of Slovenia and the upcoming memberships of Bulgaria and Romania for the EU show that these countries have made serious steps towards their democratic consolidation. The EU applications of Croatia and FYROM as well as the acceptance of the rest of the Balkans in the most important international organizations show that these countries have managed to exit the democratic transition process. As a final remark however, the end of their democratic consolidation is still vague in the horizon.

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